

## Episode 9: The Milk

So there I was...standing under an awning in the rain with the retired professor Florsham. My brain was racing. I'd just had one of the most terrifying experiences of my short life with the milkmen underground and that awful slobbering animal...and I'd run away, which was not good. Aaand I'd kissed Stormy, which *was* good!

But right now, I had to focus on the sneaky professor. It was time for one of my crafty interrogations.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Howie. But...maybe you need some help. With your nights. To sleep better."

"And what kind of help would that be, then?"

"I can't say as I'd be the best one to talk to...clearly I'm not the best sleeper myself. But Dr. Barrett has given me certain tinctures and remedies in the past. They might work for you."

“They might, Mr. Florsham, they might.”

“Particularly with the sleepwalking. You could hurt yourself again, you know.”

“What? What do you mean, sleepwalking?”

“I’d just assumed...no one’s ever told you you sleepwalk?”

“Not at all.”

“Ah. When you told me about the dog biting you, you weren’t making a lot of sense. And look at your uniform, son - you’re a mess. I would talk to the doctor.”

...

“Did you talk to the police about me?”

“What? No. Why would I talk to the police about you?”

“About Billings - the *murder* of Billings?”

“Heavens, no.”

But then he gave me a sort of strange look. Like the wheels were spinning a bit faster. By turns there was fear and then defiance in his eyes.

“If you’re not sleepwalking, what exactly are you doing out here? It must be two or three in the morning. No umbrella...uniform torn.”

He took half a step back...he’d clearly been a good-sized fellow in his prime. Bigger than me. But hovering around 70 by now...I could probably knock him over if I had to. There was a big puddle by a storm drain beside the shop. That’s where I’d aim if I had to.

“You did speak to the police, didn’t you? What did you say?”

He shook his umbrella back open and stepped out into the street.

“I’ve got to be getting home, Howie. Goodnight.”

He walked away...I was trying to decide what to do...

If he’d already spoken to the police, there was nothing I could do about it now...

I was trying to decide if getting one hour of sleep would be better or worse than getting no sleep at all when Frank found me. He had an umbrella.

“Hey buddy. What’s going on?”

He collapsed the umbrella and joined me under the awning.

“I was just...I couldn’t...”

I didn't know what to say. I started to shake again...maybe from the cold or just from everything that had happened.

“I told you it might get a bit tense down there. Listen, Howie - hey. It's all right. Look, no one was expecting her to go after you like that. It's a lot to take in. I get that. Corwin gets that. We all see a lot of potential in you, kid. It'll all make sense after a while. But the one thing you can't do - you can't just run off...that makes everyone nervous, okay? Cause if you take off like that, we don't know where you're going or what you're gonna do. Right?”

I nodded...

“Right.”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and looked me hard in the eyes.

“Hey - we're way past the point where I have to tell you not to mention this to anyone, right?”

I looked back - right in his eyes so he'd believe me.

“Of course. But Frank. What the heck is going on down there?”

There seemed to be a shadow of doubt in his eye still.

“I'm gonna leave it to Corwin to get into that. Just know that you're...safe...down there. When you're with us.”

I didn't respond.

“Why don't you go home and clean up. If I were you, I'd go see Corwin after your shift. Let him know you're still onboard...that there's nothing to worry about. Right?”

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Back at my place, I put the wet uniform on the radiator by the window hoping it would dry off a bit before I had to go. The rain was slowing down outside.

I laid down on my bed - I was so tired...but every time I closed my eyes - I would see that thing and jumped awake.

In the morning I was the first milkman at the station. I wanted to get on the road a bit early...get out of town and out into the open air where I could think a bit. The rolling of the truck seemed to soothe my mind...With the red stars all around before the dawn, it was like being in another world...

I kept going over and over what had happened underground. Now, I've had my spells...Dr. Barrett told me they're all in my head... Travis had some religious explanation I didn't quite understand...I thought I'd seen creatures during my spells. But I'd never seen anything like that creature. I'd heard about them, of course...they pop up sometimes in sinkholes...but in the past ten years the numbers have dropped off for reasons no one knows. There were so many questions swirling around, I didn't even know where to start.

Why were the milkmen going down there? What could they want? And why were they bringing bulls underground? What was the green stuff? And what was it Corwin saw in me that he wanted me to be in on whatever they were doing?

I didn't think I could really ask Corwin or Frank, never mind any of the others...but maybe I could ask Travis...he seemed to know a lot about these things and he was eager to talk about them too.

When I came within sight of his cottage, I could have sworn I saw...perched on the house...dark winged shadows...staring at me...But as I got closer, they sort of disappeared into the chimney smoke.

Then I heard a scream - It was Naomi's voice. She sounded terrified. The lights in her room were on. I stopped the truck and ran to the door - But Travis opened it before I could knock.

"Howie. You're early."

"Got an early start...is everything okay? I heard - -"

"It's okay, Howie, nothing to worry about. Naomi's...she's sick. But she'll be fine."

"Are you sure? She sounded..."

"I'm sure, Howie...listen...we can talk about this another time. We *should* talk about this another time. But I've got to get back."



“Okay, I’ll drop off the milk...I just wanted to ask, though...Last night...I wanted to ask about what you were telling me the other time...Have there ever been any...sinkholes on the island? Have you heard of anyone...going down there?”

He was really looking at me now - piercing with those blue eyes.

“Howie. I’m glad you’re coming to me about this. No one is allowed underground. But I’m telling you - you Howie, must never ever go underground. Do you understand me? It’s not the same for you. And now —

SCREAM

“I have to go, Howie - come back on Sunday. We’ll talk more. Just be careful - and don’t trust anyone who tells you to go underground.”

With that he shut the door...I dropped off the milk and started driving back to town.

But now I was even more confused than before. Surely I could trust the milkmen. I supposed I'd have to wait until Sunday to figure out what he meant.

When I got over the hill where my engine had stopped a few weeks ago, I slammed on the brakes.

Up ahead - there was a police car stopped on the side of the road. And there, standing beside the car, was the man in the black coat. He was just standing there facing me. There wasn't much I could do. There was no other road back. Maybe I could just drive by fast and leave him there.

I put the truck in gear and started moving...picking up speed. As I got closer, I tried to make out his features, but couldn't in the morning glare...but he was waving his arms - and then I saw - it wasn't a man. It was a woman. And she was shouting for help.

I stopped the truck a little ways past the police car. I looked back and saw her running up to my truck.

"I've got a flat tire. I'm going to have to ask you to drive me back to the police station in town."

I did some quick calculations and realized that taking her to the police station would throw me way off schedule. Especially with covering part of McMyrtle's old route.

"I can drive you back to town, but the station's pretty far out of my way."

I pointed at all the milk in the back.

"Pretty tight schedule. Because of the milk."

She hopped in beside me.

"This is official police business."

She took out a shining gold badge.

"Superintendent Mowbray. Mingsbight Police Service. We'll go to the station."

I figured I was already in enough trouble with the police and Mowbray seemed pretty serious. So off we drove.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Coxwell. I’ll speak to your boss, Mr. Corwin, about this and make sure you’re not penalized.”

“How do you know my name?”

“I came out here to talk to you. I knew this was your first stop and that you’d be coming back this way. I don’t like interrogation rooms. Too impersonal. This way we can relax. Chat.”

I didn’t know what to say...but I was feeling less and less relaxed.

“What part of Mingsbight are you from, Mr. Coxwell?”

“I’m from county Buckle.”

“Nonsense. I know that you lied on your application to become a milkman. That’s not why I’m here.”

“Are you here about Billings?”

She looked over at me. I was sweating like crazy and I could feel my face going red.

“We’re just chatting now, Mr. Coxwell. Just getting to know each other. So how do you like being a milkman?”

“It’s great.”

“So you deliver milk. Do you have any other duties?”

“I was a fly sprayer for a while.”

“Yes. I always marvel at how clean and efficient modern milk stations are. Do you have any other duties there?”

“No. Just delivering milk.”

We sat in silence for a while...she just looked out over the sea.

“All this fresh air must have been a shock for a boy from a factory slum.”

“That’s for sure. I deliver to the fisherman first because it’s so nice to be out here when the sun comes up.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“So tell me about your boss, Corwin. He arrived shortly after you did, correct?”

“That’s right. There’s not much to tell. He’s a good boss.”

We were getting into town at this point, and I was really looking forward to dropping her off.

“I don’t know if you knew this, but Corwin’s from Mingsbight too. He was quite high up in the department of lactic affairs. And then they transferred him here. Not sure if it was some sort of punishment. If he made some sort of mistake — “

“No chance.”

“No?”

“No way. Mr. Corwin’s the most impressive man I’ve ever known.”

She studied me a bit after I’d said this. Which I probably shouldn’t have.

“I mean he’s the best boss I ever had here. I mean anywhere.”

“I see. ”

Again, we rode in silence through the town. Just before we got to the station, she said,

“Mr. Coxwell, I’m sure we’ll be speaking again. But if you happen to notice anything unusual going on with your colleagues, I’d like you to come down to the station and let me know. It’ll be just between you and me.”

“Okay, but I don’t think I’ll notice anything unusual happening.”

As she was getting out at the station, she stopped and turned -

“One last thing, Mr. Coxwell. You seem like a nice young fellow. Just remember that being a milkman is a job. Nothing more. Milkmen are not above the law. No matter what anyone tells you.”

I kept thinking about what Mowbray had said the rest of my rounds. It was clear that she was after me because of Billings.



Piercing though all the hints she dropped, her theory seemed to be that I killed Billings because I thought that as a milkman, I was above the law and that Corwin was the one who put that thought there.

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After my shift, I went to see Corwin. In his office, I was about to sit down like last time.

“You can stand, Howie. This won’t take long.”

“Yes, sir. About last night. I’m sorry for running away like that, I just...I didn’t mean to...”

I was actually hoping he would interrupt me and say, ‘That’s okay, Howie. Happens to everyone. Don’t give it a second thought.’

But he just sat there staring at me.

“It won’t happen again. I mean if you want me to go down there again. Which is up to you, of course. I didn’t know what to expect - and that...mamifa...looked like it was going to attack me.”

“Anything else you wanted to mention?”

“No, that’s what I wanted to mention.”

“Okay, then, Howie. I’ll speak to you later.”

I just sat there expecting more.

“Okay, Howie. I’ll speak to you later.”

He was repeating himself which I interpreted to mean that he wanted me to get out. Which I did.

Just as I stepped out, I remembered that I’d forgotten to mention the police superintendent who was asking about him. But I thought he’d be annoyed if I knocked again, so I just left it.

I had this terrible sinking feeling as I left...like I'd disappointed my own dear dad through some act of cowardice. I knew he believed in me and I had to think of a way of restoring that proud glint I'd once seen in his eye.

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I was completely exhausted when I was done with Corwin. I knew Stormy would be expecting me at the drug store. So that's where I went. Hopefully I wouldn't bump into any more people who wanted to ask a bunch of complicated questions or just stare blankly at me.

She was really happy and excited to see me. She was telling me all about her day...the garden and the cooky things her dad had been up to. But I just kept thinking about that monster coming at me... and about Corwin's curtness.

To my horror, as Stormy was talking, I watched Professor Florsham come in. He spotted me at the bar. He went to the druggist and handed him a paper...a prescription, I imagined. But he kept looking nervously at me the whole time he was waiting.

“...and I thought, if you don't have to work for the weekend, maybe you could come with me?”

I'd only been half listening.

“Come with you?”

“To Skaw! When I visit my aunt next.”

“But...where would I stay?”

“I told you - I'd sneak you into the guest house. My aunt doesn't go out much anymore so she'd never notice!”

My mind turned to Stormy..the guesthouse...the possibilities...

“I'd love to!”

But then I saw Florsham...looking right at me. He was talking to the druggist, who was also looking right at me. I didn't like this at all.

“Stormy. Will you come with me? I have to talk to you about something.”

She gave me a big smile. “Of course!”

I didn't really know what I was going to tell her. I wanted to tell her everything. But I didn't know if she'd believe any of it.

What was really scaring me now, though, was going to jail..I didn't know what to do about the policewoman...

It was a bit warmer today after the rain, so Stormy and I sat on a bench in front of the town hall.

“How come you seem so distant?”

“Oh...I just came from seeing Corwin...Last night I kind of screwed up with something, and now he doesn't want to talk to me so much.”

“Does that mean you won't get a red badge?”

I winced.

“It might. But on top of that...I think the police are after me. You remember when that milkman was killed? Billings?”

“Yes.”

“I think professor Florsham has been...telling lies about me. To the police. Saying I had something to do with it.”

Her eyes got wide.

“And did you?!?”

“No!”

I decided to come clean with her.

“Sometimes, I...sleepwalk. And I think I was sleepwalking the night Billings died...and I must have bumped into Florsham.”

“Sleepwalking...so that’s probably why you were walking up and down my street that night? After you stood me up?”

I blushed...

“Probably. That makes sense. But now the police have brought over some superintended. They think I killed Billings and that the milkmen made me do it.”

“Is that what happened?”

“No! I don’t think so. But I’m pretty sure Florsham’s been talking and that’s why they’re after me.”

She thought for a minute.

“Did you tell Corwin that Florsham’s been saying things about you to the police?”

“No. What if Florsham’s r....I mean...I don’t want Corwin to be even more annoyed with me.”

“But if the police think Corwin told you to do something like that, don’t you think he’d appreciate knowing about it?”

“That’s true. But they might...I don’t know what they might do to Florsham. He seems like a nice man.”

“Do to him? What are the milkmen going to do to Florsham? Look, Howie. You have to look out for yourself. If you tell Corwin about Florsham, you’ll probably impress him. And you’ll prove your loyalty. What if Corwin finds out that you knew about all this and didn’t say anything? Then you definitely won’t be getting any promotions. I say you do what you have to do to get ahead. It’s not



your fault that Florsham is spreading lies...but you can't let yourself get in trouble because you're worried about Florsham or what Corwin might think. You should tell Corwin right away."

"Maybe you're right."

"You should go right now. Do you think Corwin's still at the station?"

I nodded.

She hopped up and held out her hand to me.

"Come on. Let's go."

As we walked to the station, hand in hand, a feeling of pride welled up inside me. I had a girl who really cared about me. Who would stick up for me. And who knew what to do. I felt like we were a team and together we'd build the future I'd spent so much time dreaming about.

I was a bit nervous when we got to the station. But with Stormy standing there, I had to knock.

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“Yes, Howie? What is it?”

And then I spilled the beans in a big heap - all about Florsham and the police superintendent Mowbray, and even about my sleepwalking.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Florsham...and he was there when you were standing guard? The night we brought the bull down?”

“Yes.”

“You should have told me all of this earlier, Howie. But we’re still in time. This is good work. You go on home. I may have something for you to do tomorrow.”

I walked out with my chin held high. I told Stormy that it had gone well, and we walked back to her house feeling invincible.

By the time I got home, though, I just about collapsed from exhaustion. I ate half the fish sandwich I’d bought on the way home and fell into a deep dark sleep.

LOUD BANGING

I opened the door. I had no idea what time it was.

Frank was there.

“Hey buddy. Uniform on. We got a job to do.”

He came in and sat on my bed while I got dressed. He flipped through my magazines.

“So what’s this about?”

“You’ll find out.”

So off we went....It looked to be about 11 at night. A few people were out and about. Not many. But I did notice a few wary glances at us milkmen. It must have been a bit strange to see us in uniform walking around at this hour. But no one stopped to ask us about it. We went through a neighborhood I’d never been to before...pretty nice houses. Some a little worse for wear. Sort of like where Mr. Pyman lived, but everything was a bit more run down. We knocked on the door of one house. I didn’t bother to ask whose it was.

To my great surprise, Beaver answered the door. He didn’t say anything. But Frank walked right in and I followed.

In the living room, I froze at the scene in front of me. It hit me all at once - this was happening because of what I’d said earlier... these were real live consequences.

There was Corwin in an easy chair, looking quite at ease.

I caught the tail end of what he was saying,

“And according to him, every sovereign executes his office of supreme pastor by immediate authority from the gods?”

And there was professor Florsham sitting opposite him in another big leather chair. He was sweating and I thought maybe he was shaking. The room was lined with bookshelves - all sorts of ancient tomes.

“Yes, that’s right...” Florsham managed to get out.

“And this is one way the sovereign avoids having any power bases form besides himself?”

“Theoretically, yes.”

“Fascinating. Howie! I’m glad Frank found you. So the professor here was speaking to the police about you?”

Florsham looked at me - shocked and afraid. I swallowed hard. I knew if I sounded wishy washy now, there's no way I'd have any future with the milkmen. I remembered what Stormy told me: 'you've got to watch out for yourself.'

"Yes, that's right," I said. "He's the only one who could have known about...me being out that night."

"What about it, professor?" Corwin asked.

"No! It's not true. That's what this is about? I never spoke to the police. To tell them what?"

"You knew about the dog bite. You think I killed Billings!"

"I do not! I never thought any such thing!"

"Professor, we're sure Howie here had nothing to do with Billings' death. But I'm also sure that once the police make up their mind about someone, they'll do everything they can to force a round peg

into a square hole. And if they're getting their theories from you, and if you're the only supposed witness...well, I'm afraid we have to look out for our own."

"But it's just not true. None of it!"

He looked really agitated now and Beaver went and stood beside him. I guess to prevent him from jumping up or anything.

Corwin studied Florsham.

"I'm going to take Howie's word on this, professor. And furthermore, I don't believe you. Beaver?"

Beaver put his big fat hands on Florsham's shoulders. Frank went over and helped restrain him.

Corwin had a bag beside him I hadn't noticed. From it, he took a milk bottle. But the milk was a brownish color...with chunks floating in it...and some sort of scum on the top. Corwin popped the top off.

He held the bottle out to me.

“Howie? This is your problem. And now you can solve it.”

I was half-frozen with fear. Like as if I was on a stage in front of hundreds of people all of a sudden. My vision narrowed and I felt heavy and light all at the same time. I forced my legs to walk over and take the bottle. It was heavier than it should have been.

Corwin, Beaver, Frank and Florsham were all looking at me. I took a step towards Florsham. Then another. He was struggling now, but it was no use...

When I was a kid, I'd sometimes get lost in Mingsbight. I'd go for long walks after school, just daydreaming about this and that...and if the wind was blowing too hard or cold down one street, I'd just turn in another direction and see where I ended up.

At this moment, I felt like the wind had just blown me in here to Florsham's living room and I was all of a sudden really awake for the first time in a long time - maybe ever. I had the bottle...Frank was holding Florsham's mouth open...and Florsham was struggling - looking me right in the eye - I could see his fear ... his disbelief - and his sadness that all that knowledge he had in his head ...all those books he'd read...places he'd been and things he'd done - it was all about to disappear - choked out of him while us milkmen watched.



