

## **Chapter Ten, "The Gas Station"**

Not long after Wendy was meeting with Papa's enemy, Arthur watched a line of ants advance from the edge of the sidewalk to the wall of a building, and then beyond, up the wall, and marveled at their ingenuity, their physical prowess. He was kneeling down on the sidewalk outside of a gas station, one of those all night affairs. He was waiting for Curry, but mainly he was gazing up at the sky, looking down on the ground, at the ants, just admiring God's work. "Hi," a voice behind him said.

Arthur reluctantly tore his gaze away from the ants and looked behind him. He was still knelt down, not bothering to move any muscles below his neck, not wanting to give this interloper any more than the minimum amount of attention.

It was the gas station attendant. His name tag read, "Joe". Behind him, the doors to the gas station stood open, its horrible fluorescent light cascading out into the street, marring God's work. Arthur could hear a radio inside the gas station. Bowie's "The Jean Genie" was playing. Evil music.

"Hey, Joe," Arthur said, "what do you know?"

He smiled a hideous smile at the young man. Joe was perhaps twenty, his face still marked with considerable acne. He had longish brown hair tucked under an old ball cap. The hair was long enough to stick out wildly on the sides but not long enough to pull back in a pony tail.

"Hi, sir," Joe said. "You mind me asking you what you're doing?"

"I do not mind," Arthur said. He finally stood up and took a few steps towards Joe, hands folded behind his back. "So happens that I am enjoying God's great creation. Do you take the time to find greatness in His work?"

"Are you okay?"

"I am better than okay, young man. I was a servant of God."

Joe's eyes narrowed. "I meant your face. That wound looks like it hurts."

Arthur made a dismissive gesture towards his face; he wore an eye patch that matched the color of his pants. It concealed most of the wound but the redness around his eye was still visible. "Pain is simply a test, Joe. Something that must be endured. You'll understand this as you get older. You see,

God puts things in your way, little obstacles for you to overcome. He's testing you, seeing if you're worthy."

"That looks like more than just an obstacle."

Arthur shrugged. The young man was impudent but – despite the evil music he was listening to on the radio – not demonic, Arthur had decided. He would let him live.

"Just wanted to know if you were okay, is all," Joe said.

"I'm fine, thank you."

A car pulled into the gas station and a young woman got out to fill up. It was a self-serve, so she got the gas going herself. While it was pumping, she walked up to Joe. She was wearing a revealing, low-cut dress. "Excuse me. Can you give me the directions to 237 Ocean Parkway? I have no idea where I'm going."

Arthur opened his mouth, ready to give her perfect directions and a lesson on feminine modesty under the watchful eyes of God, but he didn't have the opportunity. Joe immediately took over. His eyes seemed to gloss over as he spoke, almost in a monotone. "Yes. Here, I'll draw you a map."

He pulled a pad of paper and pencil out of his back pocket and drew a map while explaining where she would be going. Arthur watched and listened, perplexed.

"Thank you," the young woman said as Joe finished drawing the map and explaining the directions to her. "Could you ring me up for that?"

Joe handed her the piece of paper with the map on it and, when he did, his whole demeanor changed. He was back to normal.

"Sure," he said brightly and the two of them went inside the gas station to finish their transaction.

A few moments later, the young woman went back to her car. Arthur approached her.

"Miss," he called. "Excuse me, miss?"

She put the nozzle away and started to get in her car. She didn't seem to want to let him get close to her.

"Sorry to bother you," Arthur said, "but that young man there gave you terrible directions. It won't get you close to where you're going at all. I don't know what his problem is but he must not be from around here. The address you want is three blocks from here, right around the corner, practically."

"Thank you," she said much too quickly.

She closed the door on him and drove out of the gas station, going the wrong way. Arthur shook his head in frustration. Maybe it was his eye patch. Must have scared her off.

He started to walk towards the gas station, ready to give the young man a piece of his mind, when he saw Curry approaching. He had someone with him, a sniveling, twitchy little green demon, dripping in

ectoplasm. The twitchy little demon walked behind Curry, eyes darting left and right rapidly. Arthur unconsciously touched the gun tucked into the back of his pants.

As the two of them got closer, Arthur saw that the twitchy little demon had changed his aspect, worked its unholy magic to make itself more presentable. Now, it looked like a man with blond hair, probably twenty-five or so. He was still twitchy, stilling looking left and right constantly. He held a briefcase in one hand.

It was the briefcase that did it. Arthur suddenly remembered why he was here, why Curry and the demon were meeting him in this God-awful place. He walked back to the sidewalk in front of the gas station, away from the pumps. He had a briefcase of his own, which he had left unattended, just leaning against the wall of the gas station.

"What the fuck, man?!" the demon that looked like a man said. "You just left that sitting by the fucking wall?! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with *me*," Arthur said.

He casually picked up the briefcase, and fiddled with the sleeve of his jacket with his free hand. Curry and the demon now stood in front of him.

"Arthur," Curry said, "you remember Greg, don't you?"

"Of course," Arthur said.

In actuality, he didn't remember the demon at all, but that was true of a lot of things lately.

"I can't believe we're meeting here," Greg said, "right out in the open."

"Under God's watchful eye," Arthur said. "What better place to conduct such business."

"You're fucking crazy, man."

Arthur simply shook his head.

"Just so you know," Greg said. "I brought protection."

He lifted up his shirt to show them that he was armed, a gun tucked into his jeans. He lowered the shirt.

"So no funny business," he said.

"But this whole thing is funny business, isn't it?" Arthur said.

"What do you mean?"

Arthur smirked. "I mean all the hubbub of this and that, money exchanging hands for a worthless powder. What does it all matter in the long run?"

Greg opened his mouth, closed it. Seemed to think about it for a moment before speaking. "I still don't follow you."

"I mean," Arthur said, taking a step towards Greg, who took a step back, "that when your number's

up, you won't have anything but yourself when you have to answer to God. Now, in the spirit of fair play, I oughta let you know that I am also armed, son. So, no 'funny business' from you, either."

"You think you could draw before me?" Greg said. "Is that it? I think you're out of your depth, old man."

"We'll see."

Greg huffed and did a little turn in place. Green smoke billowed out of his nostrils. "How do I know the stuff's in there? I wanna see it."

"If you insist," Arthur said.

He opened the briefcase to show the demon its contents. Multiple baggies filled with white powder.

"Okay," Greg said. "Here's the money. Let's get this over with."

He offered his own briefcase as Arthur closed the one he was holding. Curry looked at Arthur incredulously.

"Aren't you going to ask him to show you the money, as well?" Curry asked.

"I suppose," Arthur said. "That's the cliché, I guess."

Greg opened the briefcase he was holding, revealing row upon row of stacked cash. Arthur was bored with the affair, truth be told. He wanted to get on with it.

"This is Devil's powder, son," Arthur said as Greg passed him the briefcase with the money in it.

"Yeah, yeah," Greg said. "Hand it over, old man."

Arthur saw him for what he was again, a green-skinned demon dripping foul fluid all over the ground, covering the ants desperately trying to survive on the sidewalk. Arthur took a look at the ants for a moment before returning his attention to the demon.

"Of course," he said.

He handed the briefcase to Greg. The moment Greg's hand touched the briefcase, Arthur fiddled with the sleeve of his jacket with his free hand. A small, wicked blade dropped out of his sleeve and into his hand. Arthur immediately plunged it into Greg's hand, pinning it to the briefcase.

Greg screamed in pain and grabbed his gun with his free hand. The noise brought Joe running from the gas station. The young man pushed open the doors to see what was going on.

Greg pulled the trigger just as Arthur kicked his hand, pushing the gun away from him. The gun went off, the bullet hitting Joe in the chest. There was a red cloud of blood and the young man fell to the ground, dead.

"Jesus!" Curry said, taking a few steps away from the others.

Arthur stepped on Greg's gun hand as he pressed down on the knife, driving it further through the demon's hand. Greg continued to scream as he let go of the gun.

"You demonic piece of filth," Arthur said. "Joe here may not have been the sharpest tool in the box but he wasn't a fucking Devil like you."

Arthur pulled his own gun and pressed the barrel against Greg's forehead.

"I'm sending you back to Hell, you fuck," he said and pulled the trigger.

The sound of the .357 Magnum going off was deafening. Greg's head burst open, his brains splattering everything around him. Several chunks hit Curry and the pawn shop owner suddenly became a dainty germ freak, trying to shake the flesh off his clothes. There was a horrific screech as the demon that was hiding in Greg's head was visible for a moment before fading into the air like smoke.

Arthur pulled his knife out of the demon's hand and kicked the body and it fell to the ground in a heap next to Joe.

"Degenerate," he said and grabbed both briefcases and put them aside.

"Have you lost your mind?" Curry said.

"I have never been more sane, my friend," Arthur said.

"Greg was a good client. He paid."

"Never suffer a demon to live. I believe the original phrase refers to a witch but it comes to the same thing."

"The police will be here in a few minutes."

Arthur felt a holy fire building up inside him. "Let them come. I'll tell 'em the truth."

Curry shook his head. "And what is that?"

"That I killed a demon, righteously. This is a good act."

"You have lost your fucking mind. I heard that Mel's got all shot up. Seven people dead. You go to Mel's. All the time. That was you. You killed all those people."

Arthur sighed. "Demons, not people."

"Jesus!" Curry said, spinning around in shock. "It was you! Holy shit. What happened to you?"

"I saw the face of God," Arthur said, his voice full of power. "And I was changed."

"At the expense of everyone else."

Arthur was silent for a moment. "Yeah, I guess so. But what's happening in this town is evil. And it has to be stopped, no matter what the cost. Shame about Joe, though. He wasn't so bad."

That was when Joe stood up between the two of them, his eyes a milky white, head cocked unnaturally to one side. He was dead, that much was true, but that fact didn't change anything: he was still moving.

The possessed Joe grabbed hold of Curry's arm. His dead mouth opened wide, wider than it had any right to open. The tendons in his jaw screamed as they were extended. The flesh of his lips stretched

and split. Big, hideous cockroaches streamed out of his mouth and onto Curry's arm.

Arthur shook his head, opened and closed his one good eye. "This really happening? Can't... Can't quite be sure anymore..."

Curry began to scream as the cockroaches ate away at the flesh of his arm. He swatted at them, beat at Joe's arm but it wouldn't budge.

Arthur was stunned into inaction for a moment but soon shook it off. He raised the .357 Magnum and fired twice into Joe's head. He was at point blank range and both bullets found their marks. Joe's head disintegrated, splattering flesh, blood, skull, brains and cockroaches onto the pavement. Arthur backed away quickly, making sure that none of the cockroaches touched him.

Joe let go of Curry, who fell to the ground. The cockroaches covered his body and he shrieked in pain as they ate him.

Joe's body fell over, a few more cockroaches darting out of the stump where his head used to be. Arthur fired once more into the young man's body. It twitched for a few moments before finally remaining still.

"Fucking familiar," Arthur said. "Some puppet of a greater evil! A witch or...a werewolf. This thing must have worked for the wolf bitch. Yeah, he sent young, impressionable women her way to be corrupted by her. That's why he must have given that woman the wrong directions. Curry, do you--"

He broke off when he saw that he wasn't going to get an answer out of Curry. The cockroaches had killed him, ate him down to the muscle, leaving a bleeding, grotesque corpse in their wake. Arthur saw them, darting off in every direction, into the streets of the town.

"Jesus, give me strength," he said.

He grabbed the briefcase with the money in it, figuring it might come in handy. He left the briefcase with the Devil powder in it. As he walked out of the gas station parking lot, a police car pulled up, lights flashing.

Arthur saw it for what it really was, a fiery chariot from Hell. He shot both of the Devils inside it before they could get out and cause more trouble.

He had work to do.

To Be Continued...

*Copyright 2022 Brian Flynn*