

Arthur

A psychological thriller by JF

Prologue:

It was a sunny afternoon when Leo was playing in the garden. He was driving around with his new bike, which he got from his mother. Glad and proud, his mother had been, when Leo could drive without extra wheels. First falling a lot, then almost as if automatic, he biked through the street. But that afternoon, something had changed. Fall was announcing itself, the wind playing softly with the colored leaves. It had been raining for a few days, but Leo wore a yellow coat to keep himself dry. He biked towards the end of the street, just as he had done the whole summer, but now something caught his attention. He saw an old man, sitting on a bench, looking poor and wearing savaged clothes. Leo didn't understand why he wore a cap, for he didn't deem it cold enough for that. He biked cautiously closer, looking at the old man with enough curiosity to win it from his common sense. His mother had told him over and over again that it wasn't safe to approach strangers, but Leo thought that he was old enough to do what he wanted. "Hello, sir.", he said in his friendly tone. He approached the man and looked him right in the face. The man looked kind, and it felt like Leo had known him for years. "Hi, little boy. You want to sit next to me? I'm a little lonely today." Leo nodded, threw his bike to the ground, and jumped on the bench. The old man looked at him, puzzled. "Where's your mother?" "She's inside, I thought I was big enough to bike through the street." The man smiled, as if remembering his youth. "Well, why haven't you biked out of the street? Discovering new alleys, doesn't that sound interesting to you?" Leo looked at him, interested in this strange man. His fear began to grow, yet his curiosity grew too. "Can you look after me while I leave the street? My mom said that there always needs to be an adult watching me, for some reason." Leo's eyebrows frowned; he felt the rage boiling his blood. Oh, how much he wanted to be on his own! Flying through the streets, biking to his grandparents to have an extra candy. "Of course, if you ask it so kindly.", the man stood up, helped Leo jump off the bench and walked with him out of the street. A few minutes later, the man said: "What would you think of going there?" He pointed at a dark alley, one that was a little dirty and really needed his mom. Leo walked towards the alley and began spontaneously cleaning it a little bit. He threw a few leaves towards the bin and looked satisfied. "Now, it's proper.", he said, while he clapped in his hands. The man pushed him a little closer to the darkness. "I don't want to go there, I'm afraid of the dark." "Don't worry, poor kid, I'll be there for you." The man pushed him and lifted him up. "Let me down!" The man refused to listen, put his hand against the kid's mouth and pushed him into an invisible car. He slowly closed the door, making sure to make no noise. "Now, you can be as free as you want", the old man said.

Chapter 1:

"Come in.", a loud, deep voice said. John entered the room, opening the door. "Hello sir." "Good morning, John." The officer was an old man with graying hair, his face full of ripples and holes. A little beard was beginning to form on his cheeks, although the officer didn't like that. The officer was looking at a file, typed out by one of his assistants. "Why did you call me, sir?", he asked in a polite voice. "I've understood that you know this case?" The officer pushed it forward, close enough so John could read it. "Of course, I'm informed by the newspapers, sir." He nodded, breathing out a curse. He sat himself on the table, crossed his arms and looked him straight in the eyes. "Let us be serious. Already 3 children have vanished, it gives us a bad reputation." He came closer, John could feel his warm breath. "You'll find these children and arrest the person who's behind this, agreed?!", he almost spat these sentences at John. "Yes, sir." He backed off and held his hand on the handle. "I know someone who could be able to help you.", the officer continued. "Who?", John said. "It's a man so manipulative that even I can't be with him for a few minutes. However, he's helped with solving a few cases before. His name is Arthur." John's hands shook, terrified by the name alone. "Is that really necessary?" "Yes, John. In cases such as these, all hints are welcome. What're you even doing here?" John opened the door and left the office.

John opened the door of his car, stepped in, and laid the files next to him. He drove back home, opened the door of his apartment, and laid the files on the table. He read every page, marking important words hither and thither.

The next day, he knocked on the door of a house. The sun was shining, no clouds disturbed the beautiful blue sky. A small gush of wind blew, enough to identify itself, yet too weak to have any impact. A red car rode past, but John only focused himself on the house. It was a large house, with a door right in the middle, and two windows at each side of the door. The white chalk walls were covered by green vines, climbing higher and higher. It broke the symmetry of the house, yet it still looked good. A woman opened, looked at him, seeing his police outfit and let him in. She was a very big woman, around 6 feet tall, and had probably type 1 diabetes. Trying not to prejudice, he offered the woman his hand. "Hi, my name is John Clark.", he said with a soft voice. The woman looked at his hand and gave him a shaking hand. "My name is Cathy.", she almost whispered the words, probably taking over by emotions of loss and guilt. "I'm sorry for what happened to your son, but I'll try to find him."

He sat himself in the seat and accepted a cup of coffee. He stirred his coffee and drank a little. "Tell me, where did you see your son for the last time?" Cathy, shocked by his directness, answered with gaps: "He", the expression on her face changed, she looked as if she needed to think very deeply, "was cycling to the end of the street, but more I don't know." They were in a very clean room, with only two seats standing in it. In the middle, there was a wooden table. At their right, he saw a window through which they could see the street. There wasn't much traffic, for it was Sunday. He saw a little dog walking, pulling a man with him. The dog sniffed everywhere; every tree was being suspected by him. He didn't like the scent, so he ran to the next. Then, he asked the woman that was once a mother: "Is there anyone who could do this for revenge?" Cathy said nothing, probably ignoring his question. She stirred her coffee and looked outside. She saw nothing, for she didn't want to see. Then, she answered very slowly, weighing her words every time: "I've no enemies, nor am I

divorced. My son was kidnapped, and all you do is looking outside.” She had to hold her tears, for she missed her son more than ever. John drank a little of his coffee, recognizing the passive-aggressive stand she took. He looked at her, trying to comfort her. Then, he said as clearly as possible: “Tears won’t save him, ma’am. I’ll ask my officer if there are any cameras around here.” He excused himself and left Cathy alone with her loss.

He looked around, trying to find any clues. The man put his hands in his pocket, hoping not to look out of place. Sitting on the same bench, the whole street was visible. A man was walking out of one of the shops. Seeing the sign, John thought that it was a grocery. Next to the grocery, there was a drugstore. On the windowsill of this shop, there were several flowers: harmony of red, green, and blue. Was it even a harmony? John didn’t want to know it, for the difference between discord and harmony is thin. Next to the drugstore, there was a little alley, which seemed so dark and out of place. Several leaves were pushed by the wind, a dog was walking out of it. He immediately had an idea, yet it could be too far fetched. Sometimes, something as small as this, could save lives, even the inexperienced John knew that.

He crossed the street, strolled cautiously towards the alley. He was keeping an eye on the shops, for he didn’t want to be seen by anyone. He saw two tracks of wheels, as if a car wanted to get out very quickly. “Got it.” He took a picture with his phone, called the officer, and asked if he could watch the videos of the security camera.

An hour later, he sat before the computer. A bureau lamp was lit, shining its spare light on the several sheets of paper that laid in discord on the table. The officer noticed this and approached him. He didn’t like chaos, nor discord. John thought him slightly autistic, but never said something about it. “John, have you got any clue?”, the officer started, looking at the papers that were spread across the table. “It’s a farfetched one, but I think I got one.” The officer frowned his eyebrows, looking puzzled at him. “He’s vanished in broad daylight, this means that this dark alley”, John pointed at the screen,” is the only logical location where the boy could be kidnapped. Can you give me that tape, sir?” “Of course.” The officer opened the archives and gave the tape to John. “Thank you. Now, we’ll focus on the alley.” He pushed a few buttons, and the video zoomed in. The alley came in front of the screen, he was even able to make out what garbage laid on the ground. It didn’t take long, ere a child of 7 or 8 walked with an old man into the alley. The man’s face was covered, and John couldn’t make out anything, apart from his clothing. The man wore a white jean and a leather jacket with a lion on its back. Almost immediately after, a pickup left the alley. The car was black, and the sunscreen prohibited them from seeing the face of the driver. John’s curse was covered by his breath, for he almost thought that another clue would have followed. He paused the tape, wrote down the license plate and gave it to the officer. “Will you check on this plate, sir? Meanwhile, I’ll pay Arthur a visit. See if you’re right about him.” The officer nodded and immediately went to work.

John entered the prison, afraid but determined to get any clues. The officer had sent him a reminder about Arthur’s manipulation. “Don’t give him any details about yourself”, was written in capital letters in the email. John decided to listen, and he wore his black suit, trying to hide anything that defined his person. “Give him no details”, he repeated the words, for he didn’t want to forget them.

The iron door was opened automatically, and a half-lit hall opened itself. He saw that there were three cells, each one habited by a criminal. "Sir," the warder was running to tell him something. When he finally reached John, he was out of breath. The man wore a typical police outfit, almost identical to the one John needed to wear on the academy. "Before you enter this hall, remember not to come closer than 2 feet. The previous man wouldn't listen, you can probably guess where he's now." The man hoped to find some approval, yet John was puzzled. What would be there, so dangerous that you need to keep 2 feet away of the bars? John nodded, his curiosity raising and not wanting to have the warder worried over him. "May I ask you something, goaler?" "Call me Ed if you want.", Edd said, holding the door with one hand. "Could you have the door ajar, for I don't want anyone to listen to what I'll say." He looked at John, puzzled and confused by this act of bravery. He murmured something, but he put the door ajar and sat himself on a chair next to the door. "Good luck", he mouthed through the window, hoping not to clean any corpses that day.

Slowly but steady, John strolled through the hall. He held his hands in his pocket, trying to look as casual as possible. In the first cell was an elder man, holding a bar and swinging it into the air. He almost stumbled over his own bed but could maintain his balance. Something humorous filled John, yet he knew that laughing would be his death. The man wore an orange prisoner suit, one that was copied from the series John tended to watch as a child. "Open the door or this", he swung with the iron bar to make it clear what he meant, "will be somewhere you don't want it to be.", he said the threat with an already loud voice, trying to seem polite, yet he repeated it louder and louder. Suddenly, he sissed, as if impersonating a snake. John didn't even think him worth a sight or word, for he needed to walk towards the end of the hall.

A dwarf was sitting on his bed in the second cell. He had two different eye colors and looked at John. "You got any wine?" The dwarf wore a brown, leather jacket, with golden stitches. He touched his buttons, looked at the glass, and picked it up. As if cupping it to have it filled, he approached the bars. "Please?", he said in a questioning voice. His face became sterner and sterner, realizing that his visitor didn't have any wine. "No, I'm sorry." Enraged, the dwarf threw away the cup, jumped on his bed, took 2 bars with his hands, keeping himself one meter off the ground, as if he were an ape in a tree. "Give me wine!", his voice filled the hallway, but John wasn't impressed. He showed his teeth, trying to get hold of John with one hand. John quickly walked away, trying to forget the dwarf. If they're seen as mediocre criminals, and mediocre, mad men, how bad mustn't Arthur be in reality?

John had read a lot about him, when Arthur was caught, it was front page news. It had been 8 years since, and his officer still bore the signs of the knife cuts that Arthur gave him. He often showed it to the trainees, telling them to beware of mad men. Usually, an hour-long explanation of how Arthur had cut him, how mad Arthur was, would follow.

The third cell was surprisingly empty. There was a bed on the left side, and in the middle, there was a man. The man looked at John, while he was eating his favorite meat. He was eating a chicken leg, slowly taking in John. John tried to find his words, but Arthur held his hand in the air, as if saying that he needn't try. He laid the chicken on the plate and said: "Hold on a second, I'm going to finish dinner. I'm rather fond of my visitors.", he said with a smile. He wiped off his mouth and looked with his blue eyes at him. "Tell me, what have I done to be honored with your visit?" A chair was set right before the glass. "My officer sent

me.” “Name please?”, he said it with an irritated voice, his accent sounding quite British. “My name’s John.” Arthur’s hand hit the table, shaking the plate and making the chicken jump one last time. “I don’t like people that are intellectually inferior to me. Yet, I’m still here, in the company of a eunuch, who’s a dwarf, and an old man crazier than my uncle. Let me get this straight, my uncle was rather odd, he ate his chickens alive. Now, tell me the name of your officer, that’s what I asked. If I need to repeat myself one more time, you can leave. Understood?” John nodded, not understanding why everyone called him manipulative. “My officer’s name, I don’t know that”, John admitted. He felt the blue eyes of Arthur on his shoulders, almost looking at him as if he were a failure. In his eyes, John thought, everyone’s a failure.

Arthur’s eyebrows raised, and he giggled, almost hysterical. John looked at him as if he’d seen a ghost, and again, Arthur was irritated by his ignorance. He sighed, but said as charmingly as possible: “Ah,” John heard the sarcasm fill his voice “, the bureaucratic system. I do love it. Instead of being efficient,` he raised from his chair, making a very sharp sound, “they’re always making it more and more complicated. Tell me, why did this anonymous man send you? Didn’t he want you to recognize his own existence? Weren’t you allowed to have some power over him?” John looked puzzled, not knowing what to say. He heard a loud sound, as if the dwarf had finally come down from the bars. “Excuse me, John.”, Arthur raised his voice, hoping that everyone would hear it, “With all these idiots around here, I can’t philosophize. Can you, at least, be quiet, Travis? I’m trying to work for god’s sake!” Out of the second cell, a sound of disapproval came. “Where were we?”, he said with a smile, as if apologizing for his roommates.

“We haven’t discussed anything yet. You said something about a name, that’s all. How can we be somewhere without talking to each other?” With his hands on his back, a little smile formed on the face of Arthur. “I don’t know, maybe you could tell me. Nowhere is still somewhere, John. Returning to the subject “names”, you really need to understand that names possess a certain ability, it confirms your power and influence on them. If I’m not mistaken, it is the reason our parents give us names, to confirm our existence and our lifelong, obliged loyalty to them. Tell me, what’s the name of your officer?” Not amused by the rhetorical question of his opponent, John looked at the ground, searching for the right words. “My officer,” Arthur immediately interrupted him, asking him again for a name. John sighed and began again. “Leonard said you could help me.” “His name isn’t Leonard”, Arthur stared at John, almost shocked by the lie he had told. John felt his guilt growing, yet he didn’t want to admit it. Arthur sighed, as if he forgave his pupil, and continued his monologue: “and you can’t help me. Perchance, this hypothetical Leonard can help me?” John sighed, irritated by Arthur’s obsession for the name of his officer. “I want you to help me with a certain case. I’ve heard that you’ve done this in the past.” Arthur moved aside his table and held the bars of his cell. “Tell me, who do you serve?” John threw away his chair, his patience was done. “Lives of children are on the line! Don’t you want them to be safe!”

Arthur answered, not one second losing his patience: “They call me a psychopath for a reason, John. Following the definition, I shouldn’t be able to feel empathy for anyone. Until you know the name of whom you serve, I won’t help you. Class dismissed.” He turned around and laid himself on the bed. John walked away; he didn’t even care to look at the monstrosities behind these bars.

