

That Joke Isn't Funny Anymore – Chapter 11

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CHAPTER 11

Archie couldn't comprehend what had been said to him, let alone reply.

The Old Man motioned to Black Ski Mask to haul their captive to his feet.

Black Ski Mask picked up a stunned Archie like he was a ragdoll.

Archie certainly felt like a ragdoll with all his stuffing knocked around like a little girl had grown angry at him and had flung him around the room. He was hesitant to tell his new best friends that they were the little girl in this simile. He feared what they would do to him, perhaps toss him around the room again. He knew they wouldn't tuck him in a warm bed for the night.

Archie shook his head and as his attention returned to the room. He was stood on his feet now. He could feel his legs trembling. He was acutely aware that Black Ski Mask was holding him in place.

The Old Man shuffled over to him once more, cane in hand. He shook the head of the cane at Archie as he spoke. "My million dollars." The Old Man coughed and tugged at the ski mask over his face. "Where is it?" His eyes burned in to Archie's skull.

Archie blinked several times as water escaped from the corner of his left eye. "I don't know." Archie coughed. As Black Ski Mask was holding him by the arms he had no way of preventing a few flecks of phlegm from landing on the disguise of the Old Man. The Old Man's right eye twitched. Archie tried to apologise, "I'm so-" he began, but was cut short by Silver Ski Mask punching him in the left arm. If the vice-like grip of Black Ski Mask hadn't deadened his arm already, Archie was sure that

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the punch would definitely have done the job. He yelled in pain anyway. Just on the off chance they decided to do worse thinking he was acting tough.

The Old Man stared at Silver Ski Mask.

From behind his ski mask everyone in the room could tell that Silver was hesitating. He pivoted from facing the Old Man to looking at Archie. It was almost as though he were asking Archie what he should do.

Before Archie had a chance to answer, and even without thinking all that clearly Archie knew to be a good thing, Silver Ski Mask unloaded another punch to Archie's arm. Archie dropped his head forward in pain. Silver Ski Mask turned and made a motion to wipe the phlegm from the Old Man's ski mask.

The Old Man batted away Silver Ski Mask's hand and struck him on the hand with his cane. "Don't be stupid."

Archie would have found this exchange funny if he had been aware of it. Silver Ski Mask looked at Archie again and rubbed his knuckles. It hadn't been Archie's soft flesh that caused his knuckles to hurt. The Old Man could be vicious when he wanted to. Hell, he hadn't got to his current position by playing with puppies and teaching kids to read. They all knew that. The trade off with working for such a sadistic man was the large sums of money that they were all getting. Well, they were until the deal went south.

"Where is my money?" The Old Man rasped.

Archie said nothing. His chin was resting on his chest. His eyes closed.

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The Old Man jabbed him in the chest with his cane.

Still nothing.

“Wake him up.” The Old Man ordered.

Black Ski Mask loosened his grip and shook Archie.

Silver Ski Mask unscrewed the cap from a bottle of water he produced from one of the pockets in his coveralls and poured some over their captive's head.

“You're getting me all wet.” Black Ski Mask protested.

“That's what she said.” Silver retorted.

The Old Man coughed in annoyance. “Settle down ladies.” He pointed to Black Ski Mask. “Shake him again.”

Archie mouth hung open and the force of being shaken caused his teeth to rattle together. Archie stirred and felt something fall out of his mouth. A spittle covered piece of filling from his left molar. Archie sucked in air and was immediately in pain from the air being pulled across his teeth. “You wouldn't happen to have any Colgate would you?”

They didn't answer, which led Archie to believe that either they didn't have any to hand or they had never heard of that particular brand of toothpaste. He thought that the second option was unlikely as it was a global brand so he figured that his oral hygiene wasn't of their utmost importance. Archie wondered if they had ever heard the very old proverb, *you get more cavities with honey than with Crest.*

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Okay, perhaps he was asking for a different brand but in didn't seem to make any difference. "If I can't have any toothpaste, can I at least have some of that water?"

Archie looked at the bottle of Desani and licked his lips.

Silver Ski Mask unscrewed the cap again and poured the remaining liquid on the ground. "That is for my homies." He said with a laugh.

Archie had no idea what a homie was, but since he didn't get any water, he gathered that he wasn't one. It was a shame. The word had a nice ring to it. Or may be it was just that he associated the word with water.

The Old Man slammed the cane down on the ground in an attempt to attract the attention to himself, not just of his hostage but the two goons that were in charge of the hostage. "I don't have time for any of this fucking shit." He coughed. The dust was getting to him. He pulled at the ski mask covering his face getting more air to his lungs.

"Do you want some water, boss?" Black Ski Mask said. He turned both himself and Archie towards Silver Ski Mask. "Go get the boss some water."

Silver Ski Mask though about this for a second and was about to leave when the Old Man extended the cane across Silver's chest, blocking his path.

"Don't bother on my account." Archie said, trying to lighten the mood. Perhaps they would get him some water now, if the boss was getting some too.

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The Old Man seemed to grin at Archie from underneath his ski mask. “There will be plenty of time for refreshments later, when we have all got what we want.” There seemed to be a hint of playfulness to his voice that had been missing before.

“What do you want?” Archie asked. He coughed to try to clear his throat. There was no way that he could put his hand over his mouth like his mother taught him, so he bowed his head. At least he was being treated nicely now.

“Look up at me when I am talking to you, you snivelling piece of shit.” The Old Man jabbed Archie in the chest with his can again, the harshness had returned to his voice.

Archie raised his head and continued to cough. “What do you want from me?” Archie repeated when he was done. “What can I do for you to let me go?”

“Don’t play games and tell us where the money is.” Black Ski Mask shook Archie again. “The boss is waiting. Now play nice and don’t make us ask again.” He shook Archie for a second time for emphasis.

“I don’t know what money you are talking about.” Archie looked directly at the Old Man’s eyes. “I’m sure that my daughter didn’t have any thing to do with it.” Archie paused to clear his throat. He felt like he had cotton in his mouth.

The Old Man interrupted him before Archie could continue. “So you know what happened?”

Archie was stunned. “You’re – you’re not listening. Neither one of us has anything to do with this.”

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Black Ski Mask was about to shake Archie again when the Old Man waived him off with the flick of his wrist. The Old Man pondered the top of his cane. “You see Archie.” He said with an eerie calm in his voice. “I’m trying to establish just exactly what has happened to my money. And since your daughter has been lying bitch-”

Archie struggled to reach out for the Old Man but his captor’s vice like grip was too much for him. “Nobody says that about-” but Archie couldn’t finish his protest as the Old Man jabbed him in the stomach with the tip of his cane again, knocking the wind out of him.

The Old Man let the cane drop loosely to his side before he continued. “As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted.”

“That was you.” Silver Ski Mask pointed and jabbed at Archie in the chest, to try to stress his position as enforcer.

The Old Man chose to ignore this outburst and began speaking for the third time. He would deal with that oaf later. “You’re daughter lied to me many times, Mr Morgan, and there is no reason to think that she didn’t inherit that compulsive liar trait from her father.”

Archie said nothing. He couldn’t find the right words. He dropped his head and closed his eyes in the hopes that it would all go away.

“Well, Mr Morgan, I’m waiting.” The Old Man stabbed the cane into the ground and scraped the tip through the dust in the floor.

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The sound of the cane made Archie wince. It was almost as bad as nails on a blackboard. Archie coughed as a few particles of dust found themselves irritating his throat. “She would never do anything like that.”

“I can assure you that she would.” The Old Man lifted the cane from the floor and weighed it in his palm. “But let us get away from all that ‘she would never do that’ crap.” The Old Man took a few steps away from his captive and turned on his heels. “So let’s play a hypothetical game. If she were to take the money.” Archie opened his mouth to speak, but the Old Man raised his hand and waived him off. “Hypothetical, Mr Morgan, hypothetical.” He leaned in as though he were expecting an answer.

Archie breathed out heavily. “Okay.”

“So just imagine that we have searched all the places that one would normally search.” The Old Man continued, “but it seems that you daughter didn’t have that many friends. Her regular hangouts turned up nothing and that shit hole of an apartment that she lived in over in the Village with her *artist* of a boyfriend has turned up nothing. Even following them didn’t turn up anything. And well, the boyfriend isn’t exactly in a position to offer clues any more.” The Old Man took another step forward. His eyes grew wide as he pinched Archie’s left cheek between his thumb and forefinger. “So then, Daddy. If you were your little girl, where would you hide the money?”

Archie’s head was swimming. He had just learned a lot about his not so little any more girl, and he needed a moment to process it all. He knew it couldn’t be true.

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He just knew. He'd been to her apartment, and he knew that even though it wasn't the most spectacular place, he wouldn't exactly call it a shit hole. He wondered why she had never told him that her boyfriend had moved in. And what ever happened to that other girl? That oh... He racked his brain trying to remember her name, but for the life of him, though that was probably a poor choice of words – just as well he wasn't speaking aloud – at that moment he couldn't remember. It could be on the tip of his tongue, but in all likelihood if he showed his tongue to the Old Man, the Old Man would probably take it as some sort of act of defiance. He didn't want that. He just wanted to get his daughter back to her apartment just a few blocks east of the Park, pack her stuff and then get the hell back to England, never darkening America's doorstep again.

“I don't know.” Archie said. It was as the words left his mouth that he realised what the Old Man had actually said. Her apartment. His daughter didn't live in the village. When she had first arrived, they had talked about it, but it was too expensive. He was giving her money to help pay the rent as it was, but he couldn't stretch that extra amount just so she could live in the trendy part. “Wait.” He said with rising panic. “You've got the wrong girl.”

The Old Man's eyes grew wide behind the ski mask. “That isn't possible.” He reached into a pocket and produced an ID with a photo on it. “This is her, isn't it?” The Old Man pushed the ID into Archie's face.

It was her driving licence. There she was, his daughter, staring at him, and yet not. No fear on her face. He wondered just how frightened she was right now. If it

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was anything like the level of fear that he was feeling... His thoughts drifted away from her. He couldn't bear to think about it.

Archie nodded at the Old Man. "That's her."

"I thought so." The Old Man dropped the ID back into his pocket. "We're not stupid."

"But she doesn't live in the village." Archie told him. He shifted his gaze from Silver Ski Mask to the Old Man and back again, hoping to gauge their reaction to what they had just heard. They looked a little stunned. Perhaps they were that stupid after all. Maybe, just maybe this would all be over with soon.

"Now you're just pissing me off now. Don't lie to me. It won't help you." The Old Man threw his cane across the room and it bounced a few times on the floor for good measure. He nodded to his henchman to proceed.

Silver Ski Mask adjusted the glove on his left hand and looked like he was going to inflict some damage on someone.

Archie guessed that he was the recipient. "I assure you it is. It's completely true." Archie said. "The village was too expensive, so she lives uptown, east of the Park. You know, Central Park."

Silver Ski Mask took a step forward. His eyes creased in the corners as though he were grinning under the mask.

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The Old Man put a hand out and waived off Archie's would be attacker. "Of course I know what park you mean." He shook his head at the tourist. "Just give me the address."

Archie recited the address from his memory.

The Old Man coughed and pulled at the ski mask to allow a little more air into his system. "Well, Mr Morgan, if we find what we are looking for then this will all be over, and you can go back to your life as it was before." He turned on his heels and walked out of the room.

The Ski Mask twins dumped Archie to the floor, and after a quick beating (it seemed like there was always time for a beating with these two), they followed their boss out of the room, closing the door behind them.

The Old Man ripped off his ski mask and took a big lungful of air. "Get up there and check it out. Then we can get the money and dispose of all this before we get out of here."

As his henchman moved off down the hallway, the Old Man smiled to himself knowing that Archie would never see the sun again.

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