

THE GAS STATION

John Boston

Miles was none too happy. His parents had decided to take a trip at 8:00 at night. They had to go see his Aunt in Boise. He had only been there once. He suspected that something might be *askew* at his aunt's house but, none of that really mattered. All that mattered was him sleeping and his dear old dad had decided to stop at a gas station in the middle of nowhere and fill up. His dad was a hulking individual, who was cool but could be mean if he was provoked. Mom was.....mom. He didn't dare piss her off, cause he would have to deal with the wrath of his father and that wrath could be downright unpleasant....if not frightening.

His father pulled into the gas station into one of the empty spots next to the pump and shut off the ignition. Miles had decided to simply say: *fuck it* and go to sleep. He simply did not do tired and cranky. He wanted no part of this insanity.

He looked over at his watch. It was 1:10 AM. No one in their right mind should be awake at this hour. Even the flies were sleeping.

"I'll be right back." said his old man.

His mother just continued to play on her phone. Once in a while, she would let miles use it. They didn't give him a phone. He had a wristwatch. That was about it. When he asked his mother why he couldn't have a phone like everyone else, she simply responded:

"Because you aren't like everyone else."

That was it. That was the end of the discussion. No more was ever said about it. He may as well have been living in 1990.

He actually had the same video game systems his father had when he was his age. The damn thing still worked flawlessly. Played the same games his father did. That was life in a nutshell for Mr. Miles. A very *rectangular* existence.

Miles was in and out of consciousness for a few minutes. A few minutes became almost twenty. His mother had dozed off as well. He was dreaming about giant mice when he suddenly woke up. He figured they would be back on the road right now but, no, they were still at the gas station. He looked over at his watch. It was now 1:40 AM. This was madness. He had to put a stop to this at once.

"Mom," he said shaking his mother.

"MOM!" he said shaking her again. She came to and sat up in the seat.

"Where's your father?"

"I don't know mom. Maybe you should go in and check up on him," he said

"Did he get lost or something? Jesus, it's the middle of the night."

"I hope he's alright."

"You know your dad. Mr. social butterfly. He talks to everybody. I'll go and get him." she said and opened the car door.

"Can you get me a soda?"

His mother just looked at him and gave him a sour look. So much for the soda. He sat back in his seat and looked out the window. He wasn't awake for more than five minutes before he was dozing off again. He heard another car pull up to the pump next to him. Miles had checked out. They could wake him up when they got to Boise.

He was officially over this shit.

He was dreaming about arguing with a giant cracker when he opened his eyes. He assumed that by now, they would be back on the road, on their way to Boise. No such luck, however. Still at the gas station. He looked down at his watch. It was now 2:20 AM.

Jesus guys, how long does it take to pay for gas?

He was more than just a little annoyed right now. He was becoming angry. Fueled by a severe lack of REM sleep, he could explode at any moment. Where the hell were his parents? This situation was becoming very unacceptable for eleven-year-old Miles. Something simply had to be done and done quickly.

He looked over and saw the car that had pulled up next to him had come and gone. They had simply paid at the pump like any normal person would do. Not his father though. He did everything in cash.....just like he did back in 1990.

He only had his eyes closed for a minute when he heard the gunshots. His window was rolled down and he clearly heard them. They were unmistakable.

Pop, pop, pop, pop.

They sounded like firecrackers going off in the store. Miles sat straight up and looked at the store. Suddenly, he got scared.....very scared. What kind of madness was going on in there? What kind of shit show did his parents just walk into? Were they okay?

Miles got out of the car and looked at the giant windows of the store. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary. From a distance, everything appeared as it should. So why did he hear the unmistakable sound of gunfire? What the hell had happened in there? He got back in the car and

locked the doors. He waited for a moment and then poked his head out to get a look. He still could see nothing.

Miles had a very unpleasant thought. What if something horrible did happen to his parents in there? What if the bad guys needed a getaway vehicle?

What if they didn't want to leave any witnesses? That left Miles in a very difficult position. The car would be a death trap for him. Perhaps he ought to put a little distance between himself and the store, in case he needed to make a quick getaway. He got out of the car and began walking around the outside of the store. He made certain not to go anywhere near the front doors. If the bad guys came running out, he wanted to be able to get out of harm's way. This was simply way too much for an eleven year to process. He walked around the back of the store. He didn't see anything out of the ordinary. He continued walking until he was back at the front again. He saw the family van parked in the same spot. It hadn't moved an inch. His parents were nowhere to be found. The madness was only getting worse.

He looked inside the store. It was brightly lit. Almost too bright. He had to shield his eyes from the light. He couldn't see anything. He didn't see his parents or the clerk that would be working behind the register. No one was inside. It was a ghost town. Miles couldn't stand the thought of something happening to his parents. All sorts of terrible thoughts began racing through his eleven-year-old mind at the speed of light. Something was not right. He was convinced that something horrible had happened to his parents. What if he was now an orphan? That was not a very pleasant thought, not at all. The only family they had were his aunt and his dad's brother, who lived in California. He didn't really like either one of them. Being an orphan was simply not an option. They might not be the best parents in the world but, they were his parents and he wasn't about to trade them in any time soon.

Against his better judgment, he went inside the store. He opened the front door and slowly walked inside. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. So, where the hell was the clerk? Where the hell were his parents?

He walked up and down the aisles expecting to see dead bodies. Nothing. Everything was as it should be. He walked by the coolers and was sorely tempted to grab a Pepsi but decided against it. He walked slowly up to the counter and jumped over. Nothing. Everything was normal, but there was no clerk. He was hoping that another car would pull up and there would be someone else here to share this insanity. He continued walking around the store until he got to the doors to the backroom. This was it. There was no going back now. The backroom was poorly lit. This was not some giant travel plaza owned by a faceless conglomerate. This was a mom-and-pop operation and mom and pop had to skimp on a few things to be able to pay the bills. He didn't want to go back there. He didn't want to open those doors and see his parents laying dead on the ground. He didn't want to be scared forever. He could see something coming in the darkness. He knew he should run but his legs wouldn't move. His whole world was suddenly put into focus. He could almost hear his own heartbeat.

The doors swung open and his parents both walked out. They seemed very shocked to see him standing there. His parents looked uncomfortably at one another.

"Hey squirt.....why aren't you in the car?" asked his father.

"I.....I was worried about you guys."

"Why?" asked his father, putting something in his jacket pocket.

"We've been here for over an hour. Where are the workers?" asked Miles.

"He was having a problem with his ac compressor. He would have lost everything in the cooler. I got it restarted for him. He gave me a little tip." said his dad waving some money around.

"I thought I heard gunshots."

"No, that was his generator. They lost power earlier and are running the coolers on a generator. Not smart but, it's all he had." said his father.

"Oh.....so where is he?"

"He's in the back. Come on, let's go. We still got a lot of road between us and Boise."

Miles said nothing as he and his parents walked slowly back to the car. His mother said nothing.....as in not a word. She was usually the talker. The boisterous one, the life of the party. Not tonight. No, mom was as quiet as a mouse. Miles just assumed she was tired and probably angry at her husband for wasting so much time. Mom had another look on her face. Miles had only seen it once. This was unmistakable. He was old enough to recognize it but still too young to comprehend it.

Mom had been crying.

Yes, she most certainly had. Her eyes were red. She walked back to the car in silence. Not a word was spoken. His dad, however, seemed in a very good mood. He was the quiet one. The one who nobody wanted to piss off, including Miles. This was an odd change. His dad was in one of his *cool moods*. He liked this version of his dad. He could get used to this. His father filled up their van and drove away. Miles looked back at the little gas station. It glowed brightly in the barren desert sky, like a star in the heavens. They drove for a while until Miles could no longer keep his eyes open and he fell asleep. His dreams were odd, as are most dreams. In this one, he is standing in the store holding a *Pepsi*, waiting to pay for it and his father is standing in line in front of him. He is tempted to grab a bag of chips as well. He watches his dad pull out a gun and point it at the clerk's head. He is talking to the clerk who is handing over the money in the drawer to his father. His dad looks back at him and smiles. He reaches over the counter and grabs the clerk, pulling him over the counter and throwing him on the floor. He pushes the clerk into the backroom. Then he hears the gunshots. He can hear the clerk screaming. He drops the *Pepsi* and chips and covers his ears. That horrible sound of gunfire and death. It is the worst sound on the planet. He closes his eyes and when he opens them, he's back in the van. He's away from a horrible place. He doesn't ever want to have a dream like that ever again. The man doing those horrible things was not his father. No way, no how. His father was a good man.....most of the time. He would never just walk into a store, rob it and then shoot the clerk, not his old man.

Good thing it was only a dream.