

STRONGHOLD

Written by Neil Murphy

The screen is black as a voice comes in. A voice that is calm, reserved and intellectual - it belongs to ARTHUR.

ARTHUR (O.S.)

There is a quote I've come back to throughout my life when I talk about the problems in the world. Here it is: "Let me issue and control a nation's money and I care not who writes the laws."

(beat)

If you don't know who said that, look it up - learn something.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

CLOSE ON: A mouth in front of a microphone - pink lips damp with saliva. A salt and pepper neatly trimmed beard surrounds the mouth which continues to speak.

ARTHUR

Now I don't buy into the New World Order conspiracy theories. When you start ranting about shadow governments and Illuminati, that's when people check to see if you're wearing a tin foil hat.

(beat)

But I would argue that the power of those at the top has expanded and unified in the last several decades. You've got about 6,000 people, the richest of the rich, who make up what I'll call the "superclass" on Earth. Out of that group maybe 500 to 1000 people, the crème de la crème among them, make the majority of the decisions in the world. 500 to 1000 people deciding the course for the other 7 Billion of us.

CUTS as we time jump to different points in Arthur's podcast.

CUT:

The room is crammed with stacks of books, loose piles of papers and file cabinets. Despite the lack of open space, the room appears well organized.

Arthur sits at a desk facing away - a small figure engulfed by the clutter.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

The 2 party system is an illusion of choice. Both major political parties in this country are subservient to the same corporate dictators.

(beat)

So rather than democracy where politicians are elected by the people, there exists an oligarchy which selects candidates they know will advance their interests.

CUT:

CLOSE ON: a tired pair of blue eyes behind glasses - the eyelids heavy and wrinkled.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

You know the only thing that the system wants from you? Obedience. Sit or stand and do the little job you were trained to do in the way you were told to do it.

CUT:

CLOSE ON: Arthur's mouth once again.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Mass media programs you from the time you are born. It teaches you to be sexist, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, ageist, and classist.

CUT:

The view has shifted to behind Arthur's head. His graying hair is roughly cropped as though he cuts it himself.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I left academia because ultimately all the administration wanted was for me to turn my students into a bunch of little parrots. Contrary to their stated goals - the University I quit didn't want students to think, to question, and to challenge.

(sarcastic)

Because apparently that created too many problems.

CUT:

The living room windows have had large pieces of plywood nailed over them and the edges duct taped so that no light gets in or out. A small lamp on the desk is the only light source - making the time of day unclear.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

An educated, healthy population with a survivable standard of living is harder to control. So you have a population that is deliberately kept insecure and shackled with debt. Then they have to do what they are told in order to survive.

(beat)

And to deal with this - people turn to anti-depressants, alcohol, drugs, and junk food to relieve their stress. They are kept distracted by mass entertainment, celebrities, sports, and other bread and circuses.

CUT:

CLOSE ON: A Glock 19 Handgun resting on a stack of newspapers.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I know most of you are already aware but for those of you who are not - they are predicting that this American generation, coming of age now, will be the first that has a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

CLOSE ON: Arthur's wrinkled hand as it runs over pages of yellow legal pad filled with handwritten notes he references.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Echo31 wrote something in the messageboards and I'd like to share it if you didn't spot Echo's post:

CLOSE ON: Arthur's mouth, he licks his lips.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

"It's like we're cells of this giant organism that no longer have any say in the direction we are going. Because we're not the brain cells making the decisions. We're some cluster of cells in the intestine, performing a job we hate and we have no way to get out."

CUT:

The view has now switched, fully revealing Arthur up close for the first time. He is an older man (67) sitting hunched over a laptop computer at the desk - his mouth in front of a microphone as he records his podcast.

Arthur is thin and fit looking, dressed in an old button down shirt and a pair of jeans with work boots.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

As always I welcome feedback if any of you want to post about anything I've talked about. I'll respond as soon as I am able.

A large husky dog has entered the room and nuzzles up to Arthur's leg. Without turning away from the microphone, he begins petting the dog's head.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I'm always interested in what you have to say. Thank you very much as always for listening. Catch everyone next time.

Arthur hits the space bar on the laptop to end the recording. He leans back in his chair and gives a long SIGH.

The husky now licks Arthur's hand, he looks down at the dog.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Hungry? Me too.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

CLOSE ON: a dog bowl as kibble is poured into it. The husky buries his face in the food.

Arthur places the bag of dog food back in a cabinet and goes over to the stove where a pot boils.

Like the living room, the kitchen windows have also been boarded up.

Arthur turns down the heat on the burner and lifts off the lid to stir the rice inside the pot.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Arthur sits at the kitchen table with a small plate of rice mixed with beans, lentils and spinach in front of him. He eats slowly, savoring the simple meal. He stops to take a sip from a cup of tea next to his plate.

A loud BUZZING sound comes from the next room. Arthur checks his watch and stands up, he leaves the kitchen as the BUZZING continues.

INT. FRONT HALL - CONTINUOUS

Arthur moves next to the front door where there are several monitors displaying closed circuit cameras around the outside of the house.

The displays show that the house and surrounding property are more like a compound with a tall fence running the border.

Resting on a rack in the corner is an AR-15 assault rifle.

Arthur comes up to the monitors and focuses on one which shows a pickup truck stopped at a gate. A woman, MADISON, stands outside the fence pushing a button on an intercom box.

Arthur presses a button on the intercom on his side.

ARTHUR
(into intercom)
Hey - you're earlier than I
expected.

MADISON (V.O.)
(over intercom)
Yeah I left early this morning and
traffic was light. You blocked the
driveway?

EXT. OUTSIDE FENCE - CONTINUOUS

Madison (30s) stands next to her truck parked in front of the gate. She is a little overweight, plain looking with a strong frame and a sunburnt face. She wears a dark brown pair of overalls and a long sleeve shirt.

Madison looks through the fence and now we see that the property is an old farm with several buildings all surrounded by the chain link fence topped with barbed wire.

A few feet in front of the gate - 2 large concrete jersey barriers block the driveway to a vehicle but with enough space left at the edge for a person to walk around.

ARTHUR (V.O.)
(over intercom)
Yeah - blocked it off last week.

Madison turns her attention back to the intercom box.

MADISON
Well I brought you vegetables, you want to come out and give me a hand carrying them up to the house?

INT. FRONT HALL - CONTINUOUS

Arthur stands next to the intercom. He presses a button and the gate next to Madison on the monitor opens.

ARTHUR
I was just sitting down to eat.
Come on up, I have tea. We'll empty your truck in a bit.

MADISON (V.O.)
(over intercom)
Okay.

ARTHUR
You can just walk up to the house -
I'm turning everything off.

Arthur watches Madison step through the gate. He looks down at a makeshift switch panel cobbled together with a small light next to each switch.

He FLICKS each switch down the row into an off position and the lights go out on the panel.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Madison walks up the long driveway to the house. At multiple spots the earth has been recently dug up and filled back in leaving small mounds. Madison avoids stepping on these.

INT. FRONT HALL - DAY

Arthur watches on a different monitor as Madison reaches the porch of the house. He FLICKS the switches back on and the row of lights return.

The husky dog comes running and BARKS excitedly as he hears someone else on the other side of the door.

Arthur steps away from the monitors and opens the front door to reveal Madison. She steps inside.

Arthur wraps his arms around Madison in a bear hug, she hugs him back.

MADISON

Hi Dad.

The husky YIPS at Madison's legs, she kneels down and embraces the dog - ruffling its fur.

MADISON (CONT'D)

Hey Davey!

Arthur shuts the door and LOCKS it again. This seems to startle Madison slightly and she stands back up.

MADISON (CONT'D)

You've turned this place into a bunker.

Arthur gives a small smile.

ARTHUR

I'm guessing this all looks pretty crazy?

MADISON

Yeah... kind of.

Arthur stares at Madison who looks a little tense.

ARTHUR

You okay? Everything all right?

MADISON

Yeah I'm fine. Just really tired. Jeff has an ear infection so he was up half the night crying - it's still pretty nasty.

ARTHUR

You go to the Doctor?

Madison nods as she SIGHS.

MADISON
Yeah he's on antibiotics.

ARTHUR
Was that necessary?

MADISON
Yes, don't worry. I double-checked,
antibiotics are appropriate for a
bacterial ear infection which is
what this is.

Arthur nods approvingly.

ARTHUR
Alright. Well let me know how he's
doing.

He motions towards the kitchen.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
Come sit down.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Madison sits on the opposite side of the table from Arthur's
spot with his plate of half eaten food.

Arthur brings over a glass teapot and fills a mug in front of
Madison with hot water.

ARTHUR
I have every kind you like - just
stocked up.

Madison opens a wooden tea box on the table and selects a tea
from the various brands. She steeps the bag as she looks
around the kitchen at the boarded up windows.

Arthur sits back down and begins eating again - he follows
Madison's gaze to the windows.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)
It makes all the rooms pretty ugly
I know - I boarded up the whole
house 2 weeks ago.

MADISON
Why?

Madison looks at her father with concern. He stares calmly back at her as he continues to eat.

ARTHUR

I'm not sure if I should tell you what I'm doing or not. I've been debating it.

(holds up his hand)

It's not because I don't trust you. But I don't want you to get in trouble because of me.

Madison takes this in uncertainly.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Do you want to know what is going on?

(somber)

You'll have to deny it later. Say you didn't know what was going to happen for your own protection.

MADISON

I guess?

ARTHUR

I think I need for you to be sure you want to know.

Madison stays silent.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

The only reason I want to be the one to tell you is that I don't want everything getting twisted later when other people talk to you. Or if you hear things about me that aren't true. I want you to understand what I did. I know that's selfish but...

(gestures to himself)

I guess I'm selfish.

MADISON

(hesitates)

Okay. Tell me.

Arthur sips his glass of tea.

ARTHUR

Let's finish our tea then I'll show you.

INT. STEEL FRAME SHED - DAY

Arthur leads Madison down a hallway and into a larger room which is actually a farm vehicle shed with 3 garage doors that is connected to the house by the hallway.

Arthur and Madison stop and look out across the large open space which is mostly dark except for ambient light from the hallway.

The windows and skylights of the building have been boarded up and taped over just like those in the house.

ARTHUR

Let me get the lights.

Arthur moves over to the wall and FLICKS a switch - several banks of fluorescent lights HUM to life on the ceiling.

To one side of the room are about twenty 55 gallon drums. Some of them are empty with the tops left off. But about five of the drums appear to be full with the tops on - these drums have a flammable symbol on the side.

A long fold out table with 2 bathroom scales and a few buckets is set up in the center of the room.

On a work bench in a corner of the room are a box of blasting caps, plastic tubing, a spool of fuse and several long sausage like strings of Tovex sticks.

Neatly stacked against the opposite wall is an enormous pile of ammonium nitrate fertilizer bags - well over a hundred bags at least 20 pounds each, they are partially covered by a blue tarp.

Arthur watches as Madison takes this all in.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Do you know what you're looking at?

Madison looks grave but not all that surprised.

MADISON

You're making a bomb.

Arthur walks forward and lifts the tarp up on the pile of fertilizer bags.

ARTHUR

It's almost finished. We're going to try to get some more ammonium nitrate, spread the purchases out among different farming permits.

(MORE)

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

(beat)

But we're planning to be ready in a few weeks.

MADISON

Who's we?

ARTHUR

Some other people are with me on this... but I can't share their names.

Madison looks down at the floor - a pained expression on her face. Arthur moves closer to her.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

What are you feeling?

MADISON

I don't know.

ARTHUR

I didn't think this was something you'd condone but I wanted you to know - for context after the fact.

MADISON

(distraught)

You've never wanted to hurt anyone.

ARTHUR

(reassuring)

We're going to be very careful about the target. I won't go through with it if innocents are at risk, this will be very controlled.

Madison looks up at Arthur.

MADISON

You used to say that violence was ultimately pointless.

ARTHUR

There are many different kinds of violence. Why is it that economic and cultural violence by an establishment are tolerated but-

MADISON

(cuts him off)

This isn't an academic paper.

Madison holds Arthur's gaze.

MADISON (CONT'D)

Do you know what will happen to you?

ARTHUR

That doesn't matter to me. Whatever happens to me after this is irrelevant.

MADISON

I don't know who you've been talking to or what they've convinced you of.

ARTHUR

I think you know that I couldn't be talked into something like this.
(gestures to himself)
The change was in me!

They are both silent, Arthur lets out a small SIGH.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I had a lot of hopes for you.

MADISON

(confused)
What?

ARTHUR

When I imagined how things would turn out for you. Your future. I thought it would be a lot better.

MADISON

You're disappointed?

ARTHUR

Not in you. You never got the chance you deserved and now you're trapped. You work a job you can barely stand but are afraid to leave because of money.
(beat)
You've been made dependent; mortgage payments, student loan payments, credit card payments. The world is taking it out of you. You look tired and overweight -

MADISON

(hurt)
Dad-

Arthur takes hold of Madison's hands gently.

ARTHUR

I'm not criticizing you. You can't control all the negative factors that have been placed upon you. There are architects in this world that have shaped your path. People without good intentions. And watching that happen to you...
 (his voice darkens)
 ...it makes me angry.

MADISON

(upset)

I never wanted you to do anything like this for me. I don't want you to do this.

Madison closes her eyes and seems to shrivel.

ARTHUR

It's not just for you. It's for all those people who have it worse than you, and those that come after you.
 (beat)
 I've concluded that my beliefs have to be put into action or I am complicit. Nothing I have done in my life has made any real difference.

Arthur gently hugs Madison and holds onto her, she starts to quietly CRY.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I'm sorry I upset you. It was just important to me that you understand. Do you understand?

MADISON

(disbelief)

You're going to kill people.

ARTHUR

(quietly)

They deserve it.

INT. FRONT HALL - LATER

Arthur flips off the switches on the makeshift control panel and all the lights in the row go off.

ARTHUR

Is there a lot in the truck? I could bring the cart down so we could do it in one trip.

Madison stands behind him, her eyes are puffy and red as she dabs them with a tissue but she looks calmer - having collected herself.

MADISON

There isn't that much.

Arthur smiles at her and picks up his AR-15 rifle, he holds it lightly in one hand. Madison looks surprised.

ARTHUR

I carry it whenever I'm outside - part of my new protocol.

Arthur WHISTLES and Davey the husky comes running.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Davey! Let's go for a walk!

Arthur unlocks and opens the front door as Davey runs out. He holds the door open for Madison and then follows.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

They walk down the driveway - Madison is careful to avoid the dug up patches of dirt. Arthur sees this.

ARTHUR

Don't worry it's safe - you can step on them.

Arthur INHALES the fresh air as the late afternoon sun falls on his face.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

I'd like to come up and see you and the kids before this all happens.

Madison seems off in another world.

MADISON

Sure.

ARTHUR

It's probably better that you don't come back here again.

MADISON

Yeah.

They reach the end of the driveway and walk around the jersey barriers to the gate then out to Madison's pickup truck.

EXT. OUTSIDE FENCE - CONTINUOUS

The truck is parked at the end of a rural road in the middle of nowhere. Madison goes to the back of the truck and opens the bed door.

Davey darts around the truck excitedly SNIFFING.

Arthur leans over the side of the truck bed and looks at 3 wooden boxes of vegetables - tomatoes, carrots, and beets.

ARTHUR

These all came from your garden?

Madison nods.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Good job!

Arthur smiles appreciatively at Madison.

ARTHUR (CONT'D)

Certified organic. Um Um good.

Arthur slides the AR-15 over his shoulder on its strap and lifts up one of the boxes, he turns and walks back toward the gate.

Davey runs up next to Arthur and begins to BARK at the treeline.

Arthur looks at him with a puzzled expression.

MADISON

Dad...

Arthur turns back to look at Madison, the box still in his hands. She looks devastated - her face fallen.

MADISON (CONT'D)

They came to me.

(beat)

I just didn't want you to get hurt.

AGENTS in bulletproof vests and helmets with FBI insignia on their backs and assault weapons in their hands swarm out from the trees on both sides of Arthur.

AGENT ONE
FBI - don't move! Stand still.

Arthur tenses - his eyes dart quickly around. He looks over at Madison.

5 Agents close in around Arthur - one aims his gun carefully at Arthur's head.

MADISON
(screams)
Please don't hurt him! Please don't hurt him!

An AGENT IN CHARGE wearing a shirt and tie under his bulletproof vest moves next to Madison. He takes hold of her to keep her from running forward.

AGENT ONE
(to Arthur)
Don't move Mr. Larsen! Just stand perfectly still until we tell you otherwise.

AGENT IN CHARGE
(to Madison)
He's not going to get hurt as long as he does what they say. It's alright!

Another Agent firmly takes hold of the AR-15 rifle over Arthur's back - the Agent undoes the clasp on the strap and lifts the rifle clear away from Arthur.

AGENT ONE
You got it?

AGENT TWO
Got it.

Davey circles the agents BARKING and GROWLING. He grows more aggressive and scared for Arthur.

AGENT ONE
Get the dog.

Agent Three moves towards Davey and sprays a short burst of pepper spray into the dog's face. Davey YELPS and runs away into the distance.

AGENT ONE (CONT'D)
Alright. Now Mr. Larsen, very slowly put the box down.

Arthur slowly lowers the box to the ground.

AGENT ONE (CONT'D)

Good. Now lie down on the ground.

Arthur lays down and Agent Two climbs on top of him. He places Arthur in handcuffs and pats him down.

INT. FBI SUV - LATER

Arthur sits handcuffed in the caged back of an FBI vehicle. He's dazed, one of his eyeglass lenses is splattered with mud from lying on the ground.

Outside the car, FBI agents as well as local law enforcement are abuzz with activity. Several men in bomb squad gear confer with each other.

Arthur looks over through the SUV window and sees Madison sitting in the front seat of another car - the door is open and the Agent in Charge and a FEMALE COUNSELOR stand over Madison trying to console her as she cries.

Madison looks up and makes eye contact with Arthur then places her head in her hands and the Female Counselor puts her arm over Madison's shoulder.

Arthur looks away - staring forward, his gaze is a million miles off. He is completely crushed.

CUT TO BLACK:

THE END.