

THE GOOD CITY PEOPLE

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All that was left of the corner bodega on West 165th was a burnt, steel skeleton. Officer Katz brushed a piece of ash from his shoulder, displeased to see a coffee stain on his breast pocket. Heat still radiated from the site of the fire, prompting a slow sweat from his armpits that would soak through in a matter of minutes. Smelly, sweaty, and stained all before nine a.m.

He supposed things could be worse. He could be Mr. Ortiz standing on the corner, shoulders hunched, watching the firefighters put out the last of the blaze. Katz cleared his throat, rehearsing his lines.

Where were you this morning at 3 a.m.?

Do you have any enemies, anyone who'd want to hurt you?

Well, there has been a lot of gang violence in the area...

Katz crossed the sidewalk, wiping sweat from his forehead as he approached the small business owner. Black ash sprinkled Mr. Ortiz's creviced face, settling between his wrinkles. Two wet streams traveled down each cheek into his thick, greying mustache.

"Mr. Ortiz?"

The man wrapped his arms around his shoulders as his gaze met the golden badge on the officer's chest. "Yes?" He spoke in a thick Spanish accent.

"Mr. Ortiz," Katz began in his most formal voice, "I'm terribly sorry for your loss." He always sensed his sympathies felt empty to the receiver, even when he meant them the most. It was important not to get emotionally involved on the job, but sometimes he couldn't help it. He knew the Ortiz family. He knew this bodega. He knew just how devastating this was to not just the old man, but his children and grandchildren.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions." Gentle, but firm, just as he'd been taught. The subject must not feel cornered or pressured, but compelled to provide information willingly. Mr. Ortiz gave Katz a respectable nod.

"Where were you this morning at 3 a.m.?" The question was ridiculous. Anyone who knew Mr. Ortiz saw him sweeping the bodega stairs by 5, brewing the coffee by 5:15, and patting newspapers into organized piles in his outdoor wire baskets. He beamed with pride as he washed his windows, dusted his counters, and flipped on his electricity.

"Asleep," answered Mr. Ortiz, his stare vacant. "At home, three blocks away." Katz's stomach growled uncomfortably. He hated that he'd had to ask. Protocol. He'd document this on a piece of paper to be filed away.

"And, do you have any enemies? Anyone who'd want to hurt you?"

"None."

"Well, there has been a lot of gang violence in the area..." Katz's voice hollowed as he trailed off. He waited for a response. Mr. Ortiz hung his head, giving the officer a small nod to show he understood. There was no fixing what had been lost.

"I'm very sorry," Officer Katz offered once more, softly, as though he was afraid the Chief might hear.

He crossed the street towards his cruiser, wincing as his stomach rolled; an uncomfortable reminder he'd had coffee without breakfast. In search of a breath away, he leaned up against the passenger side door and closed his eyes.

Well, there has been a lot of gang violence in the area...

Katz ran a hand over his sweaty face, pinching the bottom of his nose. He hadn't helped the poor man. He'd given no sense of solace, no reason, no tangible solution to work with, just questions and excuses. The gangs. He'd joined the force in an attempt to make things better. To help the good city people avoid things like this.

He looked over his shoulder, back at the burnt bodega, at Mr. Ortiz who seemed to be standing in the same spot, staring at the same pile of ash.

Then, he heard it. A break in the firefighter's water pressure. A pause between the city noise. Faint, yet unmistakable; a pained whimper.

Officer Katz straightened, ignoring another wave of nausea as he searched for a clue. Two dark shopfronts stood before him, a restaurant and a barber, with a small dark space between them. It came again, this time louder. A choked sob.

Pushing away from the cruiser, Katz approached the thin alley, fumbling in his pocket for his flashlight. He held his breath, heart racing, clicking it to life before shining it between the small space. The light bounced side to side, bobbing over bricks and pavement. And then, there it was, something tanned and thin, the tip of it reflecting in his light. He bent his knees, leaning forward before he gasped, nearly tumbling over in surprise.

A fingernail.

He followed his lead, the fingernail to a hand, which

turned into an arm that was attached to a small shoulder. A body: small, skinny, and reddened. Flakes of skin curled into burnt edges, exposing raw, bloody flesh beneath. Katz swallowed coffee-flavored bile but kept his flashlight steady.

“Hello?” His voice shook.

The cry came once more, hoarse but with an edge of confidence. Officer Katz’s adrenaline surged and he jumped to his feet, turning where he stood.

“Help!” he shouted across the street, waving his arms wildly. “We need help over here!”

Office Katz sat in the sterile waiting room, feeling slightly too large for the plastic chair. Doctors and nurses carried on across the hall, rushing from emergency to emergency. The boy the paramedics pulled from the alley had been badly burned with probable smoke inhalation. Still, Katz had a duty to follow up on all leads, even if they were badly injured, little boys.

A door at the far end of the hall opened and a tall, stern-looking woman wearing a white lab coat walked purposefully towards Katz. He stood. It wasn’t his first time in this position. Often he found there was an unspoken irritation at police officers in hospitals. They were in the business of healing, while officers were in the conflicting business of questioning.

“Officer Katz?” Her sharp voice cut through the background noise. “He’s ready for you.”

“Did you get a name?” Katz wondered aloud as she led him to the room.

“Mateo Ortiz.”

Katz took a sharp inhale of breath, nearly stopping in his tracks. Mr. Ortiz’s grandson? But, why? Even as he walked

the length of the hallway, he couldn't get his head around the idea of the culprit being anyone other than gang hoodlums.

The stern doctor pushed open the door for Katz, who entered, pulling his cap from his balding scalp. The small boy looked up and even beneath the bandages, Katz watched his face crumple. The officer made his way towards the boy's hospital bed, standing just beside the detachable arm. Mateo refused to look up but held both of his trembling wrists in the air.

"Hi, Mateo. I'm Officer Katz."

The little boy hung his head, lifting his arms even higher — a show of submission. The officer's heart sank. Katz placed his chubby fingers against the boy's wrists, pressing down so they fell back into his lap. The boy looked up, bottom lip trembling, his wide brown eyes confused and brimming with tears.

"I'm not going to arrest you, if that's what you're thinking," Katz continued. "I just need to ask you a few questions."

"You should arrest me," the boy said, his voice strained, a tinge of accent clinging to the edges. "I started it all."

The confession hit Katz square in the chest. "You?" His voice rose an octave. "Why would you do that, Mateo?"

"It was a mistake," the boy cried, hunching his shoulders, as though he were trying to curl into himself. Katz studied the boy's heat-blemished face, his jaw covered in white dressings, and his right eye which was missing nearly all of its eyelashes. The kid was lucky to be alive. "My abuelo's birthday is this weekend, and birthdays mean cake, but we didn't have enough for the supplies." He shook his head and winced, reliving his painful memory.

"I thought I could sneak some from the store. Just some cocoa, maybe a packet of sprinkles. He had them there, I've seen them, but I couldn't buy them myself and ruin the surprise. So I snuck in, last night. With a candle."

The rest of the story was easy to deduce. An accident. All this devastation, pain, and heartbreak hadn't been the city gangs at all. Just a sweet grandson trying to do right by his grandfather.

"Mateo," Katz said softly. "Thank you for telling me."

Mateo's shoulders quivered as he tried to unsuccessfully keep himself from crying. "Are you going to arrest me now?" he wailed, tears spilling over.

"Absolutely not," Katz answered, careful to keep his voice level. "You told me the truth, and that's very honorable."

"I've ruined Abuelo's birthday, though."

"You've done no such thing." Mr. Ortiz's voice carried over Katz's head, and both the officer's and Mateo's gaze shifted to take in his grandfather's small figure in the doorway.

"Mi hijo." The bodega owner came around the side of the hospital bed, carefully sweeping up his grandson into an embrace. Katz removed himself from the room silently, having all the pieces of the puzzle to consider this a closed case. It would be labeled a success for the Captain, a solvable crime wrapped up in a pretty little bow for their end-of-year statistics.

But the circumstances clung to Katz even after he returned to the station and scarfed down his lunch, even after he'd gone home that afternoon and popped the tab of his Miller Lite. He tossed and turned in bed, and for once, his sore lower back wasn't the thing keeping him awake.

He knew Mr. Ortiz would wake the next day, lingering in those moments between sleep and awake, perhaps not even remembering the tragedy until his brain found focus. He'd remember and care kindly for Mateo, the stress of the bodega nagging him all the while, still with a smile on his face. Katz could barely find a glimmer of happiness in his

mediocre life and he'd never lost something nearly as devastating as the Ortiz family.

And so, for the next week, Katz gathered donations and volunteers, pooling every resource he could when he was off the clock. The outpouring of support for Mr. Ortiz was overwhelming, but not surprising, and by the time the old man's birthday rolled around and Officer Katz called him down to the site of the bodega, he felt something that reeked of accomplishment and pride.

When Katz revealed their plan to help him rebuild, Mr. Ortiz fell to his knees — this time, his tears were a show of gratitude.

"One more thing," the officer whispered to Mateo, whose face had already begun to heal. The little boy watched Katz as he dipped into his cruiser, pulling out a carefully packaged chocolate birthday cake. It was store-bought, but Katz figured it was better than nothing.

He'd been right. The moment Mateo Ortiz saw what Katz was carrying, he burst into tears, wrapping his arms right around his middle, forcing the officer to lift the cake up high as he laughed in surprise, fearing he may cry himself. Later, Mr. Ortiz served Katz the first slice which he happily accepted.

This was better than solving any crime. This was why he joined the force — to help the good city people.

