

**goodjob**

You are losing 5-0 in FIFA 2008 against Quique's dad—he always snatches the good controller first, the camouflage one he bought Quique for his eighth birthday, and lets you and Quique pass the sh\*t red one with the sticky X button back and forth—when three knocks as deep as your grandmother's heartbeat plant themselves into the deadbolted front door. Then, a high-pitched, muffled voice: police.

The controller, the unreachable acorn in *Ice Age*, cracks the the hardwood floor as it slips from Big Quique's hands, which jolt up and down like the Terminator's as he flees to his mother's room and hides in her junk-filled closet. The fault in the floor rips its way all the way to the kitchen, exposing the underworld—catching the Spanish, *Valentina*, Tamale breath, and toenail clippings from seconds ago—until Mema, Quique's abuela, sews it shut. José, Big Quique's big brother, the eldest, the one who got Big Quique to try coke for the first time back in '94, the apple the pigs are hungry for, finds a different (equally gross) closet, lest he be the second bird hit with the same stone.

Five more knocks. Your dimple deepens. Quique does not have a dimple; instead, his eyebrows raise exactly as they did the time the two of you, dripping sweat, were sent out of Mrs. Blanco's for snorting and convulsing as the black body on the classroom TV screen was crushed like a test dummy under the unforgiving force of a white firefighter's water hose. This time, the both of you are frozen bodies tarred to the couch, staring at the rattling door.

Mema's frail feet creak the floor, and then her fingers twist the plastic door knob. A blue eye in the crack. May we speak with José Barrientos?

You've never seen a cop in person before (excluding the time your father got a speeding ticket on your way to Jack's Christmas Trees and told himself *What the f\*\*k* and told you *Hide behind my seat* because your brother had called Shotgun and the back seats of your minivan had been removed to create space for the tree. Or that other time when you were crammed in a brand new rental 2005 Toyota Camry in Panama with eight extended family members—including your white then-sober foster sister—and were pulled over by a stubby brown man who let you go after your father slipped him a twenty.

NoJoséhere, says Mema. *No*, the one word José Barrientos Sr. never liked to taste on her lips, excluding *stop* and *enough*. *José*, the most alive dead man she's ever known. *Here*: the phlegmy word, a flopping fish squirming its way from the wooden deck. The blue-eyed officer grabs it before it escapes to its family and kills it with his dead grandfather's pocket knife.

Ma'am, step aside, says the officer. Mema is an obstacle. She must be eliminated. Elimination is simple. Plant the right, soft palm into the front-door window. Extend the left, muscular arm, and push her into the wall on her right. She will move easily. She learned to resist resisting men thirty-five years ago, shortly after she met José Barrientos Sr.

It is revealed to you that there are two officers, not one; four blue eyes, not two; eight pockets, not four; ten belt loops, not five. You and Quique become statues and pray that the officers won't notice your breathing. Usually, they don't. Today, however, they have little time to waste. One, the one with brown hair, has recently received news that his baby girl was impregnated by that bea\*er he told her to stay away from; the other, after extensive research, has discovered that his wife has known about his year-and-a-half affair with her co-worker all along. The brown-haired officer kneels at the couch and examines Quique in the same way that his own great-great-grandfather examined a black body for sale. Quique shivers, sweats. Being the test dummy, you figure, is much less appealing.

Excuse me, boy, the officer asks of Quique, his voice smoother than a pilot's consolation or your grandmother's cheek. His breath reeks of your father's mouthwash. Your dad flosses, brushes, and rinses his mouth six times a day: before breakfast, after breakfast, before lunch, after lunch, before dinner, after dinner, after dinner, after dinner, after dinner; no mouth is cleaner.

Quique says nothing. He has seen his father in similar situations, and he has learned well. *Don't you ever be a snitch, hijo.* Don't snitch.

Have yuh seen a man named José Barrientos in this home? he asks Quique. Maybe he's your uncle, he adds. We just need to speak with him for a moment. The officer speaks as if he's JFK, as if José Barrientos is his older brother with whom he only needs to speak briefly to share and contemplate feedback on a few speech ideas.

No, Quique says. His breath is cold. He knows better. You do not.

The officer sighs, turns to you. Yuh do understand that we just wanna discuss a few things with Mr. Barrientos, right?

His voice, so soft, how could you not believe him? You nod.

And that if yuh don't help us out a bit, we'll have tuh take uh look around the house for him, right?

You nod.

And that if yuh don't give us a hand, your grandma'll have tuh do some *cleanin* to get this house back in the tip-top shape it's in right now, right?

You nod.

Now, yuh wouldn't want your tired grandma tuh have tuh do more work around the house than she already does, would yuh?

You shake your head.

That's what I thought, he says. So listen here, he says, resting his arm on the couch, cause all I have is one more question for yuh. Do yuh love your country?

You nod.

Do yuh wanna serve your country?

You nod.

Then, if yuh truly love your grandma, and if yuh truly love your country, you'll do the very simple thing I've asked of yuh. *Is José Barrientos in this house, and if so, where is he?*

You point to the room just beyond the kitchen doorway. The man's knees crack as a he stands up. His partner follows him into the kitchen.

You hear a faint sound from the other side of the house, an underwater scream, and then Quique's uncle is brought back into the living room in cuffs. His head is bowed, and his shirt is wet. Mema weeps at blue eyes that are no longer soft. You and Quique remain motionless.

Big Quique hears the muffled sobbing. He does not move.

The blond-haired cop leads Quique's uncle out of the open front door.

The brown-haired cop kneels by you and rests his heavy hand on your left shoulder. He is pressing you into the couch with all of his weight plus the weight of his house and his neighbors' houses and his wife's heart and his own badge, and the couch does not give, the floor does not give, your back does not give, yet you are sinking, sinking into firm cushions and hard wood and somewhere far away, you can hear his words bouncing around like the little soccer ball on the melting TV screen: *Good job, buddy. You did the right thing. . . the right thing.*