

The Good Samaritan

By René Saldaña, Jr.

I know he's in there, I thought. I saw the curtains of his bedroom move, only a little, yes, but they moved.

Yesterday Orlie told me, "Come over tomorrow afternoon. We'll hang out by the pool."

I rang the doorbell again. Then I knocked.

The door creaked open. The afternoon light crept into the dark living room inch by slow inch. Mrs. Sánchez, Orlie's mom, stuck her head through the narrow opening, her body hidden behind the door. "Hi, Rey, how can I help you?"

"Ah, Mrs. Sánchez, is Orlando here?" I tried looking past her but only saw a few pictures hanging on the wall. One of the Sánchez family all dressed up fancy and smiling, standing in front of a gray marble background.

"No, he's not. He went with his father to Mission."

"Oh, because Orlando said he would be here, and told me to come over."

"They won't be back until later tonight," she said. "You can come by tomorrow and see if he's here. You know how it is in the summer. He and his dad are always doing work here and there. Come back tomorrow, but call first."

"It's just that he said I could come by and swim in your pool. Dijo, 'Tomorrow, come over. I'll be here. We'll go swimming.'"

"I'm sorry he told you that, but without him or my husband here, you won't be able to use the pool," me dijo Mrs. Sánchez.

"Okay," I said.

"Maybe tomorrow?"

"Yeah, maybe."

But there was no maybe about it. I wouldn't be coming back. Because I knew that Orlando was in the house, he just didn't want to hang out. Bien codo con su pool. Plain stingy. And tricky. This guy invited me and a few others over all summer to help his dad with some yard work because Mr. Sánchez told us, "If you help clean up the yard, you boys can use the pool any time you want so long as one of us is here." And we cleaned up his yard. On that hot day the water that smelled of chlorine looked delicious to me. And after a hard day's work cleaning his yard, I so looked forward to taking a dip. I'd even worn my trunks under my work clothes. Then Mr. Sánchez said, "Come by tomorrow. I don't want you fellas to track all this dirt into the pool."

"We can go home and shower and be back," said Hernando.

"No, mejor que regresen mañana. I'll be here tomorrow and we can swim. After lunch, okay. For sure we'll do it tomorrow," said Mr. Sánchez.

The following day he was there, but he was headed out right after lunch and he didn't feel safe leaving us behind without supervision. "If one of you drowns, your parents will be angry at me and..." He didn't say it, but he didn't need to. One of our

parents could sue him. And he needed that like I needed another F in my Geometry I class!

Or, we figured out later, he could have just said, “I used you saps to do my dirty work. And I lied about the pool, suckers!”

I don’t know why we hadn’t learned our lesson. Twice before he had gypped us this way of our time and effort. Always dangling the carrot in front of our eyes, then snatching it away last second.

One of those times he promised us soft drinks and snacks if we helped clean up a yard across the street from his house. It wasn’t his yard to worry about, but I guess he just didn’t like to see the weeds growing as tall as dogs. What if he had company? What would they think? And he was angling for a position on the school board. How could a politico live in such filth!

Well, we did get a soft drink and chips, only it was one two-liter bottle of Coke and one bag of chips for close to ten ofus. We had no cups, and the older, stronger boys got dibs on most of the eats. “I didn’t know there’d be so many of you,” he said. “Well, share. And thanks. You all are good, strong boys.”

The next time was real hard labor. He said, “Help me dig these holes here, then we can put up some basketball rims. Once the cement dries on the court itself, you all can come over and play anytime since it’s kind of your court too. That is, if you help me dig the holes.”

And we did. We dug and dug and dug for close to six hours straight until we got done, passing on the shovel from one of us to the next. But we got it done. We had our court. Mr. Sánchez kept his word. He reminded us we could come over to play anytime, and we took special care not to dunk and grab hold of the rim. Even the shortest kid could practically dunk it because the baskets were so low. But we’d seen the rims all bent down at the different yards at school. And we didn’t want that for our court.

One day, we wanted to playa little three on three. After knocking on the different doors several times and getting no answer, we figured the Sánchez family had gone out. We decided that it’d be okay to play. We weren’t going to do anything wrong. The court was far enough from the house that we couldn’t possibly break a window. And Mr. Sánchez had said we could come over any time we wanted. It was our court, after all. Those were his words exactly.

A little later in the afternoon, Mr. Sánchez drove up in his truck, honking and honking at us. “Here they come. Maybe Orlando and Marty can play with us,” someone said.

Pues, it was not to be. The truck had just come to a standstill when Mr. Sánchez shot out of the driver’s side. He ran up to us, waving his hands in the air like a crazy man, first saying, then screaming, “What are you guys doing here? You all can’t be here when I’m not here.”

“But you told us we could come over anytime. And we knocked and knocked, and we were being very careful.’

“It doesn’t matter. You all shouldn’t be here when I’m not home. What if you had broken something?” he said.

“But we didn’t,” I said.

“But if you had, then who would have been responsible for paying to replace it? I’m sure every one of you would have denied breaking anything.”

“Este vato!” said Hernando.

“Vato? Is that what you called me? I’m no street punk, no hoodlum. I’ll have you know, I’ve worked my whole life, and I won’t be called a vato. It’s Mr. Sánchez. Got that? And you boys know what—from now on, you are not allowed to come here whether I’m home or not! You all messed it up for yourselves. You’ve shown me so much disrespect today you don’t deserve to play on my court. It was a privilege and not a right, and you messed it up. Now leave!”

Hernando, who was fuming, said, “Orale, guys, let’s go.” He took the ball from one of the smaller boys and began to run toward the nearest basket. He slowed down the closer he came to the basket and leapt in the air. I’d never seen him jump with such grace. He floated from the foul line, his long hair like wings, all the way to the basket. He grabbed the ball in both his hands and let go of it at the last moment. Instead of dunking the ball, he let it shoot up to the sky; then he wrapped his fingers around the rim and pulled down as hard as he could, hanging on for a few seconds. Then the rest of us walked after him, dejected. He hadn’t bent the rim even a millimeter. Eventually Orlie talked us into going back when his dad wasn’t home. His baby brother, Marty, was small and slow, and Orlie wanted some competition on the court.

Today was it for me, though. I made up my mind never to go back to the Sanchezes’. I walked to the little store for a Fanta Orange. That and a grape Popsicle would cool me down. I sat on the bench outside, finished off the drink, returned the bottle for my nickel refund, and headed for home.

As soon as I walked through our front door, my mother said, “Mi’jo, you need to go pick up your brother at summer school. He missed the bus.”

“Again? He probably missed it on purpose, , Ama. He’s always walking over to Leo’s Grocery to talk to his little girlfriends, then he calls when he needs a ride.” I turned toward the bedroom.

“Come back here,” she said. So I turned and took a seat at the table. “Have you forgotten the times we had to go pick you up? Your brother always went with us, no matter what time it was.”

“Yeah, but I was doing school stuff. Football, band He’s in summer school just piddling his time away!”

She looked at me as she brushed sweat away from her face with the back of her hand and said, “Just go pick him up, and hurry home. On the way back, stop at Circle Seven and buy some tortillas There’s money on the table.”

I shook my head in disgust. Here I was, already a senior, having to be my baby brother’s chauffeur

I’d driven halfway to Leo’s Grocery when I saw Mr. Sánchez’s truck up ahead by the side of the road. I could just make him out sitting under the shade of his truck. Every time he heard a car coming his way, he’d raise his head slightly, try

to catch the driver's attention by staring at him, then he'd hang his head again when the car didn't stop.

I slowed down as I approached. Could he tell it was me driving? When he looked up at my car, I could swear he almost smiled, thinking he had been saved. He had been leaning his head between his bent knees, and I could tell he was tired; his white shirt stuck to him because of all the sweat. His sock on one leg was bunched up at his ankle like a carnation. He had the whitest legs I'd ever seen on a Mexican. Whiter than even my dad's. I kept on looking straight; that is, I made like I was looking ahead, not a care in the world, but out of the corner of my eye I saw that he had a flat tire, that he had gotten two of the lug nuts off but hadn't gotten to the others, that the crowbar lay half on his other foot and half on the ground beside him, that his hair was matted by sweat to his forehead.

I knew that look. I'd probably looked just like that digging those holes for our basketball court, cleaning up his yard and the one across the street from his house. I wondered if he could use a cold two-liter Coke right about now! If he was dreaming of taking a dip in his pool!

I drove on. No way was I going to help him out again! Let him do his own dirty work for once. He could stay out there and melt in this heat for all I cared. And besides, someone else will stop, I thought. Someone who doesn't know him like I do.

And I knew that when Mr. Sánchez got home, he'd stop at my house on his walk around the barrio. My dad would be watering the plants, his evening ritual to relax from a hard day at work, and Mr. Sánchez would mention in passing that I had probably not seen him by the side of the road so I hadn't stopped to help him out; "Kids today" he would say to my

dad, "not a care in the world, their heads up in the clouds somewhere." My dad would call me out and ask me to tell him and Mr. Sánchez why I hadn't helped out a neighbor when he needed it most. I'd say, to both of them, "That was you? I thought you and Orly were in Mission taking care of some business, so it never occurred to me to stop to help a neighbor. Geez, I'm so sorry." Or I could say, "You know, I was in such a hurry to pick up my brother in La Joya that I didn't even notice you by the side of the road."

I'd be off the hook. Anyways, why should I be the one to extend a helping hand when he's done every one of us in the barrio wrong in one way or another! He deserves to sweat a little. A taste of his own bad medicine. Maybe he'll learn a lesson.

But I remembered the look in his eyes as I drove past him. That same tired look my father had when he'd get home from work and he didn't have the strength to take off his boots. My father always looked like he'd been working for centuries without any rest. He'd sit there in front of the television on his favorite green vinyl sofa chair and stare at whatever was on TV. He'd sit there for an hour before he could move, before he could eat his supper and take his shower, that same look on his face Mr. Sanchez had just now.

What if this were my dad stranded on the side of the road? I'd want someone to stop for him.

"My one good deed for today," I told myself. "And I'm doing it for my dad really, not for Mr. Sánchez."

I made a U-turn, drove back to where he was still sitting, turned around again, and pulled up behind him.

“I thought that was you, Rey,” he said. He wiped at his forehead with his shirtsleeve. “And when you drove past, I thought you hadn’t seen me. Thank goodness you stopped. I’ve been here for close to forty-five minutes and nobody’s stopped to help. Thank goodness you did. I just can’t get the tire off.”

Thank my father, I thought. If it weren’t for my father, you’d still be out here.

I had that tire changed in no time. All the while Mr. Sánchez stood behind me and a bit to my left saying, “Yes, thank God you came by. Boy, it’s hot out here. You’re a good boy, Rey. You’ll make a good man. How about some help there?”

“No, I’ve got it,” I answered. “I’m almost done.”

“Oyes, Rey, what if you come over tomorrow night to my house? I’m having a little barbecue for some important people here in town. You should come over. We’re even going to do some swimming. What do you say?”

I tightened the last of the nuts, replaced the jack, the flat tire, and the crowbar in the bed of his truck, looked at him, and said, “Thanks. But I’ll be playing football with the vatos.”

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Questions:

1. What are your thoughts and questions about the story? You might reflect upon the characters, their problems, the title, or other ideas about the story.
2. How does Rey change from the beginning of the story to the end? What do you think causes this change?
3. What does this story say about people in general? In what ways does it remind you of people you have known or experiences you have had? You may also write about stories or books you have read, or movies, works of art, or television programs you have seen. Use examples from the story to explain your thinking.
4. How successful was the author in creating a good piece of literature? Use examples from the story to explain your thinking.

Lexile score: 770