

When I brought this hungry child into my office, she didn't dare to eat. The child looked at the chocolate on the table, as if touching it would be one more charge for her. She was wearing a mismatched pair of shoes: a blue sneaker and a pink flat.

I told her that the chocolate was "for you," and she could have more if she wanted. I also told her she could have some milk if she liked. She ferociously swallowed what was on the table, but she didn't ask for milk.

I placed the "evidence" on the table. It is a damaged camera—a classic 50s Autocord—and there is no need to figure out who broke it when you see the evasive expression in the child's eyes. I do, however, want to know why.

The camera's owner is a blind man. To be specific, Mr. Van der Walt has cataracts. I met him after speaking with the child, and he was glad that a private detective like me could help him. The camera was stolen from his store last weekend, just as he was about to sell it to afford his eye surgery. On that day, workers hired to ship goods left the door unattended. Shortly afterwards, a tiny, stealthy figure was spotted, who panicked and dropped the camera as the workers were hunting her down. The way Mr. Van der Walt addressed her was quite brutal. He claims that this is definitely a "conspiracy," and the child was nothing but an "interest-motivated little bastard." I also noticed his bookshelves.

"Mr. Van der Walt, I am intrigued. What brings you to the camera business? Forgive me for being curious. Many books you have are about urban design and Robert Moses. You've surely sold more than cameras."

He giggled. He said I am observant, and he surely looks satisfied to see that someone is interested in his past. "Ah, I plan houses. I was working for the Bakerville Real Estate."

I started encouraging him to share more about his past as the manager of the real estate company, which began the renewal construction a few years back. He was really surprised by how well I knew his project, given that his company went bankrupt 5 years ago. He had never been wealthy after his "good old days".

But a part of his story is missing, and I can fill it in. I was working for his company as one of the hired security officers. During the renewal, my colleagues and I received an order to demolish the old neighborhoods in the east—a “slum,” as some might call it—full of people who had nowhere else to live. It was the coldest winter I’ve ever been through, and all of my colleagues were still shivering while wearing the thickest trench coats we’ve ever worn. The protestors, however, were merely covered in thin fabric.

A Cadillac pulled by, said to be one of the company’s managers. I went up to receive the car, but the man stayed inside. “Those poor little bastards just want to be compensated, but nobody cares.” He just sat in the car, gave me the order to fire at the crowd. I didn’t know his name yet at that time. My heart has been torn since the moment I chose to follow this order.

I asked Mr. Van der Walt if, if he could go back in time, there is anything he would have done differently. He said maybe he would consider stopping smoking and drinking, so he wouldn’t get cataracts. After the bankruptcy, he picked up photography as a new hobby, though cataracts prevented him from pursuing it for long. “Sometimes you just have to accept how it is. Never look back.” The blind man then became very curious about how I knew so many details, and I told him I was a security officer. He looked shocked for a brief moment. Then he started defending himself.

It didn’t take me long to find the little suspect. After all, the local orphanage had only one child missing since that night.

I asked her why she did it, and it turns out it was about the old church—the only building left in the new town that had stood there before the renewal. That’s where the child grew up, listening to the bells every day as early as she can remember. Next week, the new urban development plan will erase that church from the town forever, and everyone will be attending the new one built just two blocks away.

That day, when I was ordered to fire, the child's parents were among the local protestors objecting to the renewal plan, and they were among the several victims of a deadly stampede that subsequently took place among the panicked crowds. She has been an orphan at Bakerville's Home for Children since then.

She wants to take a picture of that church, for it is the only thing that testifies to her memory.

"Don't you think this town has indeed become a better place without that slum? Sometimes things are meant to go away, ma'am. We both know that."

"Mister, maybe one day, all of the churches and houses in this town will be torn down for another renewal, but I will remember it well."

Mr. Van der Walt grew more and more evasive about his proud past of replanning the town. When I took off, it almost felt like the room became quiet on its own. I don't know what to do next. Maybe tomorrow I will start collecting evidence against him and hand it to the court, or I might leave him be. At least I know his name now.

"Madam Sleuth, I know this is not right...are you gonna lock me in the confinement room?" said May, the child. Her voice carries fear and hope at once.

I denied that possibility with a smile on my face. She doesn't know I was there when she lost her loved ones, and to be honest, I wish she would never know. I have my own camera and know how to develop negatives, so I went to the church and took some photos after I sent her back. When I bring her the copies tomorrow, I hope she won't thank me. I don't deserve that.

If not for May's failed theft, Mr. Van der Walt could have hidden his past forever, and I wouldn't have met the girl, either. The trigger I pulled that day during the protest was the reason why she stole.