

The Tragedy of Stevie-Jay

“Hello, Stevie-Jay,” the coffee-shop owner called out from his doorway when he saw his next-door neighbor approaching from across the street. “Fine morning, isn’t it?”

“Ah, good morning, my friend,” Mr. J. said in his Portuguese accent, cheerful despite how business was going.

No one in the entire neighborhood could pronounce his real name, Estevão Joalheiro, so they called him “Stevie-Jay” or just “Mr. J.” But he didn’t mind—it made him feel more like an American.

Between the coffee shop on the left and Mr. J.’s modest watch-and-jewelry shop on the right, someone had parked a motorcycle on the sidewalk. Perhaps the owner was having a cup of brew at his neighbor’s place.

Mr. J. pushed the button on the remote to raise the roller shutter over his store front, then unlocked the door, entered, and switched off the alarm that Wednesday exactly as he had every workday at 8:45 for the last thirty-two years. First item of business: read the mail delivered yesterday just before closing. Most of it was junk, but one letter caught his attention.

Dear Mr. Joalheiro:

We regret to inform you that, owing to the high incidence of crime in the area where your store is located and to the nature of your business, we find ourselves forced to cancel your dealer inventory insurance. Enclosed is a check reimbursing your premium for the remainder of the quarter. We apologize for any inconvenience this action may cause and wish you the best for the future.

Sincerely yours,

The Friendly Neighbor Insurance Company

Mr. J. had been robbed twice at gunpoint in the last twelve months, and the police never recovered his merchandise, so he had to find a new policy immediately. But what company would take a risk with him in this neighborhood? And even if one did, how could he afford the premiums, which were sure to be higher? He had to start calling insurance agents during his lunch hour.

At precisely 9:00, Mr. J. flipped the window sign to “Open” and began spraying and wiping down the three glass counters housing his collection of wristwatches and pocket watches, rings and bracelets, necklaces and earrings. He might not have a customer all day, but he wanted to show his wares to their best advantage.

Just as he was finishing, he looked down and saw his right shoe was untied. He bent down to tie it, but the shoelace snapped when he pulled on it. Fortunately, Mr. J. had a back-up pair in a drawer of his desk in the back room. He picked up his cleaning supplies, went to set them down on the desk, and took the spare laces out of the drawer. Leather this time. He held one end of the laces in each hand and gave them a good tug. Ah, these will never break, he thought. They could support my entire body weight. Mr. J. was a man who appreciated quality, even in shoelaces.

As soon as he had put in and tied the new laces, the bell rang, and the door swung inwards. A customer!

Mr. J. came out to greet the prospective buyer and saw two young men wearing black ski masks and leather gloves, pointing handguns right at him.

“Freeze, old man.”

While one held a gun on him, the other smashed the countertops with the butt of his pistol and filled a black bag with the watches and jewelry.

“Open the safe,” the first commanded.

“No, I-I can’t.”

The first stepped behind the counter and pistol-whipped him, breaking his nose. No sooner had he slumped to the floor than the robber started kicking him in the ribs so hard he could hear them crack. The young thug then yanked him up by the arm, stuck the muzzle in his face, and shouted, “Open the damn safe, or I’ll blow your head off.”

His whole body aching, his fingers trembling, Mr. J. opened the wall safe behind the counter, scarcely remembering the combination. The second robber emptied the contents—several stacks of cash and four high-end watches left from more prosperous times—into his black bag.

As soon as they turned to flee, Mr. J. grabbed the gun he kept beneath the counter. The second robber spun around and fired, hitting the old man in the left shoulder.

Knocked against the wall, but still on his feet, Mr. J. struggled out the door, aimed at the rear tire of the motorcycle speeding off, and shot, but missed. He squeezed the trigger again . . . and again . . . and then collapsed on the sidewalk.

Just before the motorcycle rounded the corner some forty yards away, the young man seated behind fell off, clutching the black bag, and landed half in the street, half on the curb. The driver screeched to a halt, stomped down the kickstand, and sprinted to his accomplice. Jerking his arm to pull him to his feet, he met only dead weight. He snatched the black bag, raced back to the motorcycle, and bolted off.

Evidently someone had called 911. When the paramedics raised Mr. J. to his feet to help him into the ambulance, the merchants, customers, and passersby assembled there applauded. Down the street a man from the coroner's office was zipping up a body bag.

* * *

Buz Starek, the Channel Seven assignment-desk chief, hung up the phone. "Where's Williams?" he yelled.

"State Capitol," someone answered.

"How about Johnson?"

"Same place."

"Then where's Browning?"

"Down at City Hall."

"And Rutgers?"

"At the Convention Center."

"Hell, who's left?"

"Young."

Starek sighed a late-middle-aged sigh. "Get him in here."

A minute later Reese Young appeared before him. "Yes, sir," he said.

“I just got a call that an armed robbery went bad down on Cross Street in the old commercial district.”

“As opposed to all the armed robberies that go well?”

“Get your smart ass down there and find out what people are saying. I want it on the news at noon. Here’s what we know so far.” Starek scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Young.

“I’m on it, Buz.”

“That’s Mr. Starek,” he said as the novice reporter left the room. “Hey, Greg. You go along. Keep an eye on the kid. Don’t let him get out of line.”

Greg Abner, an assistant editor from Buz’s generation, nodded. “Will do.”

Twenty minutes later the news team arrived at the scene, shortly after the ambulance had left. The crowd had not yet dispersed. While the cameraman hurried to set up, Young positioned himself, microphone in hand, immediately in front of them. The cameraman gave the signal, and he began:

“Thirty years ago this commercial district on the edge of downtown catered to the well-to-do. Today, after decades of white flight to the suburbs, the bars on the windows and the roller shutters over the doors tell a different story—a story about poverty and the crime it breeds among the hopeless. One of those crimes took place this morning just feet from where I am standing, when a merchant, Mr. Joalheiro, shot and killed a nineteen-year-old boy who had allegedly robbed him. Let’s see what these people have to say about the tragedy. Ma’am, can you tell me about the shopkeeper?”

An overweight woman wearing a blue smock with her name stitched on it in white answered, “Mr. J.’s a real nice man. Always friendly to everyone. Everybody likes him.”

“And what can you tell us, sir, about what happened here today?”

“Stevie-Jay did what we’ve all been afraid to do,” a burly mechanic said, still wiping the grease from his hands on a red rag. “He stood up to those punks. Every shop owner on this block has been robbed at least once. He’s sixty-seven years old, but was he afraid of them? No way.”

“That’s right,” a man wearing a butcher’s apron chimed in. “They shot Stevie-Jay in the shoulder, but he still went after those damn criminals. He was protecting all of us. He’s a hero.”

Reese Young turned back towards the camera. “It’s a sad day in America when a teenage boy is gunned down in the streets and the people support vigilante justice—”

“Cut!” Greg yelled from behind the cameraman. “Put a Band-Aid on that bleeding heart of yours. You’re a reporter, not a social commentator. Take that last part from the top, and stick to the facts this time.”

* * *

Mr. J. suffered no bone or vascular damage from the gunshot wound, though the kicks to his side cracked his seventh and tenth ribs. When he awoke in the hospital room after surgery, his wife and son were sitting at his bedside.

“*Como estás, meu amor?*” his wife asked with tears hovering on her eyelids.

“*Estou bem.*” He groaned from a sharp pain in his side as he propped himself up on his right elbow—a sling immobilized his left arm—and immediately fell back down.

“Dad, everyone in the neighborhood is calling you a hero,” his adult son said, beaming. “You really showed those crooks this time.”

Just then the door opened, and two men in gray suits entered.

“Mr. Joalheiro, I’m Detective Lex. This is Detective Cosmo.”

“Did you catch the other robber? Did you recover the stolen property?” Mr. J. asked in a tone that blended anxiety and hopefulness.

“We’re here to question you in connection with the shooting death of Robin Latro. You have a right to have an attorney present.”

“What? Me?” Mr. J. was shocked. “But I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“This is outrageous,” his son exclaimed.

“Are you willing to answer our questions now?” Detective Lex continued without acknowledging the son’s outburst.

“Uh . . . no. Not without a lawyer,” Mr. J. said, full of apprehension.

“The doctor will release you in forty-eight hours. We’ll take you down to the station for questioning then.” Turning, they left as abruptly as they had entered.

“Ay, *Deus meu*,” Mr. J. moaned as much from apprehension as from the pain in his side. This turn of events was not at all what he had expected.

Shaking their heads, his wife and son gave each other a look of utter bewilderment.

* * *

“Well, I guess this is your story, Young. Here’s the address of the family of the kid who got shot. I want an interview for the ten o’clock news.”

“Right, Buz.”

“Mr. Starek.” The assignment-desk chief eyed Greg Abner, who nodded and rose from his seat.

About thirty family, friends, and neighbors were standing in the yard holding candles when the news van pulled up at the modest house just after sunset. A blown-up picture of an angel-faced Robin before he started shaving stood on an easel in front of the house.

“This is Reese Young reporting live from the Latro residence, home of the teenage boy mercilessly shot to death in the streets yesterday morning.”

Greg almost interrupted. Instead he gave him a hand signal to tone down the rhetoric.

“Let’s hear from the grieving mother. Mrs. Latro, what does this outpouring of support say about your son, Robin?”

“He was a good boy. Everyone loved him. But he needed money. His girlfriend was pregnant, he didn’t have a job, and no one would hire him because of his record. What else could he do? He was just riding by on a motorcycle, and that man tempted him with all those nice things in his window. Maybe my boy made a mistake, but everybody makes mistakes. I mean, everybody steals something every now and then, right? He didn’t deserve to die just for that.”

The pregnant girlfriend took the cigarette out of her mouth. “That bastard shot my boyfriend down like a dog. Only a coward shoots you in the back. What kind of man does that? He’s not even American. And who’s going to pay for my child? I hope he rots in prison.”

At that point an imposing, silver-haired gentleman in a dark-blue suit stepped forward, took the microphone out of Reese Young’s hand, and faced the camera squarely.

“I am Rhett Conrad, lawyer for the Latro family. We are bringing a wrongful death suit against Mr. Joalheiro in the amount of two million dollars to cover eighteen years of child support, forty-five years of lost wages, and his family’s emotional pain and suffering. Robin had trouble in school, but the schools didn’t help him. He had problems with the law, but the juvenile-justice system failed him. He looked for work, but the workplace refused him. He was crying out for help, but society turned a deaf ear. Now he’s dead, and someone has to pay.” He handed the microphone back to the reporter.

“A grieving family is seeking justice against the cold-blooded murderer who—”

“Cut!” Greg shouted. “How many times do I have to tell you? Leave the editorials to the editors. You report the facts. Just the facts.”

* * *

When the police took Mr. J. into custody late Friday morning, word spread through the neighborhood faster than celebrity gossip. The other merchants banded together to organize a march on Sunday afternoon in support of their comrade. As soon as he heard, Campbell Sheuster, a conservative running for the district’s city-council seat, volunteered to speak at the rally. Working-class anger and fear filled the air with the sweet smell of votes.

With the news crew in place, Greg Abner grabbed Reese Young by the lapels.

“Look, kid, don’t screw up again. Got it?”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it.”

The rookie reporter stood ready, holding his microphone. As the throng of marchers approached, the cameraman signaled.

“This is Reese Young reporting live from Cross Street. Less than twenty yards from me a crowd of demonstrators advances, carrying banners that read ‘Free Stevie-Jay’ and chanting, ‘Stevie-Jay leads the way’. . . Excuse me, sir, can you tell me why you’re marching here today?”

“To support Stevie-Jay. We’re taking the streets back from the criminals. This is *our* neighborhood.”

“And you, ma’am. Why did you come out today?”

“Because I’m sick and tired of the crime and violence. If the police won’t protect us, we have to protect ourselves. Stevie-Jay is leading the way. He showed us how.”

Another woman added, “We’re putting the criminals on notice: you come to our neighborhood, you die.”

The crowd continued their march to the end of the street, where a makeshift platform stood. When they stopped in front of it, Campbell Sheuster stepped up to the microphone and looked out at some fifteen hundred faces.

“The namby-pamby liberals in City Hall tell us we should understand criminals and feel sorry for them. I say we introduce them to the joy of breaking rocks.”

The crowd cheered.

“Are we going to coddle the criminals?”

“No!” they roared.

“Are we going to pamper the street punks?”

“No!”

“Are we going to humor the hooligans and hoodlums?”

“No!”

“Are we going to baby the bandits and burglars?”

“No!”

“Or are we going to gang up on the gangsters?”

“Yes!” the crowd screamed in a frenzy.

“Crack down on the crooks?”

“Yes!”

“Fight back at the felons?”

“Yes!” The alliteration was working its magic.

“Stevie-Jay sits in a jail for doing what the cops are too cowardly to do.” Sheuster raised his right fist in the air and cried, “Free Stevie-Jay!”

“Free Stevie-Jay!” the crowd echoed with fists raised as well.

On YouTube someone posted an amateur video of the rally, which scored two-and-a-half million hits in two days. The national news picked up the story. The next day a Facebook page entitled “Support Stevie-Jay” counted 1.6 million “likes.”

* * *

When two officers led Mr. J. to the interrogation room that Monday, Detectives Lex and Cosmo were standing in the corner waiting, while Mr. Schirmer, the court-appointed defense attorney, sat at the table. Across from him sat Mr. Klaeger, a representative from the district attorney’s office. A harsh light hung from the ceiling above the table, washing out the pale gray walls of the barren room.

Still in pain, his left arm in a sling, Mr. J. shuffled to the table and took his seat next to his lawyer.

“Mr. Joalheiro, we’re charging you with manslaughter, which carries a maximum sentence of twenty years,” Mr. Klaeger said.

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m the victim here,” Mr. J. said, squinting from the harsh light.

“You shot a man in the back and killed him.”

“It was self-defense.”

“He was on a motorcycle almost forty yards away and posed no further threat to you.”

“We are prepared to argue in court,” Mr. Schirmer interjected, “that by stealing his livelihood the robbers *were* threatening his life. They got away with approximately one hundred twenty thousand dollars’ worth of cash and merchandise. Everything my client had was invested in that inventory. He just lost his insurance, and, with no cash, he can’t replace it. He has no way to earn a living, pay his rent, or buy food.”

“Your client should have let the police do their job. They are there to arrest criminals and recover stolen property,” Detective Lex said, stepping forward from the corner.

“But they didn’t do that the first two times I was robbed,” Mr. J. protested.

“My client has a point,” Mr. Schirmer said. “The police aren’t keeping him safe. He has to protect his livelihood. That boy had quite a record. What was it, some fourteen priors?”

“Law enforcement is not a matter for private citizens,” Detective Cosmo piped in from the corner, leaning against the wall. “This isn’t the Wild West. We can’t have him playing cowboy.”

“I see from the case file that they found the getaway vehicle abandoned by the side of a road,” Mr. Shirmer said. “A slug was lodged in the tailpipe. They found another slug in the asphalt. That proves my client was trying to shoot out the back tire of the motorcycle. The death was an accident.”

“Your client doesn’t have a permit for a firearm,” Mr. Klaeger said, “and the gun was unregistered. Anytime you discharge a weapon on a street with pedestrians and motorists, you are willing to kill whoever the bullet happens to hit. The slug the coroner retrieved from the victim’s body proves that. What if he missed and that bullet hit a child?”

“Let’s not talk in hypotheticals. My client was seriously provoked. They broke his nose, cracked two of his ribs, and shot him in the shoulder. He acted in a state of extreme emotional disturbance.”

“That’s why we’re charging him with manslaughter instead of murder.”

“He has enormous public support. He’s a kind of folk hero. Maybe your district attorney should think about that come election time.”

“The election isn’t for another year, and the public has a very short memory.”

“But twenty years in prison? He has no prior record. He poses no threat to the community. He regrets the boy’s death and is willing to express his regret publically. He’s a hard-working small-businessman as well as a family man. He’s highly respected in the community.”

“We’ll seek the maximum only if we have to go to trial.”

“What are you offering?”

“Three to five years in prison followed by five years probation and three thousand hours of community service.”

The attorney whispered in Mr. J.’s ear. Nodding, Mr. J. whispered back.

“My client is sixty-seven years old. Twenty years is a death sentence. He’ll take the plea.”

“We’ll draw up the papers.”

Soon the two officers returned and led Mr. J. back to his cell. His head hanging low, Mr. J. shuffled slowly along. He couldn’t believe what was happening: his life was over—his business ruined, his money gone, a civil suit filed against him for two million dollars.

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t do anything wrong,” he kept repeating, near the point of tears, to no one in particular.

Night fell on a broken man. Thirty-two years in this country, and all for nothing.

The next morning they found Mr. J. hanged to death in his cell. Had they known, they would have removed his shoelaces.

Glossary of Names

Estevão: crown (Portuguese from Greek)

Joalheiro: Jeweler (Portuguese from Latin)

Buz: contempt(uous) (Hebrew)

Starek: old man (Slavic). Buz Starek is an older man contemptuous of the younger generation.

Greg: vigilant (Greek)

Abner: “my father is a light” (Hebrew). Greg Abner is the vigilant father figure.

Reese: enthusiastic (Welsh)

Young: youth. Reese Young is the enthusiastic youth.

Lex: law (Latin)

Cosmo: order (Greek). Together the two detectives represent law and order.

Robin: = robbin’

Latro: thief (Latin). Robin Latro is one of the thieves who robs Mr. J.

Rhett: advice, counsel (Dutch)

Conrad: brave (*con*) counsel (*rad*) (Germanic)

Campbell: crooked mouth (Scottish)

Scheuster: shyster (a spurious eponym)

Schirmer: defender (German)

Klaeger: prosecutor (German)