

Kiko's Quest

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Kiko waits for his master to come home every day. His master would always come home before dark, and they would always play in the park. His master is never late.

Today should be no different. Kiko sits before their front gate, his head sticking out between strips of rusted metal. All around him, slippers and shoes litter the cemented yard, soil and dried leaves spilling from potted plants. He tilts his body, bathing his brown-and-white fur in the last bits of golden sunlight. He sniffs the air, but he doesn't smell his master's musky scent.

In front of him, people walk to and fro on the busy street. Even from a distance, Kiko can hear their labored breathing behind their cloth masks and face shields. Their uniforms—medical scrubs, collared shirts, and work pants—all look frayed and dirty. In their eyes, Kiko sees hints of weariness. He fights back the urge to jump at them and lick their faces, a trick that works so well whenever his master is feeling tired or angry.

It's getting dark now. But as Kiko strains his ears, he still can't hear the familiar tapping of his master's blue shoes. Kiko's heart starts to race. Where is his master? He's never been late before.

Kiko goes inside the house to check, but he finds that the rooms are dark and empty. In the small living room, the television that usually relays news of recent rallies is off. Kiko also notices that the life-sized effigy is no longer sitting on the floor. About a week ago, when his master was still working on the paper sculpture, Kiko stared up at it in wonder.

"This man could kill you," his master said while instructing Kiko to do the *play dead* trick. "Stay away from him."

Kiko never dared to go near the effigy again.

Kiko checks the bedroom, and the scent of wet paint hits him. When Kiko jumps onto the

bed, he realizes that the painted placards, which used to fill every space, are missing. The only proof that they had once been there is the overpowering smell coming from the open paint cans beside the cluttered school books on the table. Where is his master?

Kiko finally goes to the small dining room. The newspaper on the table reminds Kiko of all the days that his master sat there, reading, clenching his fists at every page turn. He remembers how his master would drink from the yellow plastic cup, followed by a *tsk tsk* sound now and then. Memories from the past. His master still hasn't come home today.

Anxiety fills Kiko's body. He goes back outside and paces around the rectangular front yard. Getting lonely, he howls and cries, and he barks and whines to get his master's attention from wherever he is. He bangs his thick paws on the gate and scratches his long nails against the rusted steel. When that doesn't do him good, he grinds his teeth against the brass lock, gnashing his teeth as if the metal is just a piece of chicken bone. He chews and chomps until the padlock comes off. He slams his body against the gate, steps outside, and sets off into the night.

Kiko goes to the park where they used to play, but the park is dark and empty. Kiko can't detect anyone who might have been here for the past few hours. No kids are sitting on the rusted swings. No other dogs are running around the playground. He searches for any hint of a musky soap—nothing. He pads around until he gets close enough to the square plaza. Then, he hears loud voices shouting in unison from a distance. He smells lots of people, too.

Kiko is not allowed to go beyond the park. When he insists, his master would tell him a firm no, followed by a tug on the leash, a signal that they should return home.

But what if his master is in there?

Hesitantly, Kiko leaves the comfort of the park and follows the noise.

When Kiko reaches the edge of the square plaza, what he sees leaves him disoriented. Chaos is everywhere. People are screaming and shouting, while others are running away from the scene. Big and bulky masked men in blue push against the people with protest placards. Some protesters throw their placards back at them, while others merely flee in panic. In the middle of the square, while a familiar effigy is burning, the scary mask-protected men throw cans of tear gas at the angry mob. The protesters bend down, coughing; the cloth masks on their faces all fail to keep their lungs protected. Even from a distance, Kiko's eyes tear up as an overpowering peppery smell fills the air. At one point, a loud bang rings in his

ears. He remembers the times when lights would explode in the sky, and his master would take him in his arms. But not today. His master isn't here with him now.

Stressed, anxious, and barely breathing right, Kiko whimpers. He crawls his way under the few trees surrounding the square. He stays hidden there for what seems like hours.

The rallies that his master watches on TV are often peaceful, but this one is clearly not. Why? What's so different this time?

There are only a few people left in the square when Kiko emerges from the trees. To his right, people are crying. Far up ahead, a car with blue and gray flashing lights is parked. Kiko's senses tell him to avoid it. The big bulky men with scary masks are still in there.

He walks to the middle of the square, distinguishing anything sound by sound, scent by scent. Pepper. Salt. Iron. People are still crying and talking in hushed voices. His tail perks up as he gets a whiff of his own saliva. He follows the scent, walking past the scattered placards, slippers, and shoes. As he looks up, he sees a blue canvas shoe on the asphalt. His master's sneakers!

He retrieves it, holds it between his teeth, and trails after the lingering smell. It's getting stronger now. He continues to pad around, but he doesn't realize that he's getting close to the parked car.

"Kiko?" A familiar voice calls. "Kiko! Here!"

Kiko looks up. There he is!

Kiko runs towards the parked car, towards his master inside. When he's near enough, he starts leaping and jumping. He licks his master all over his face. His tail and his fluffy ears dance in happiness. His master is finally here!

"Listen," his master says in between Kiko's licks and kisses. "Master will be away... behave... eat... drink... okay?"

Kiko barely hears him. He's too happy! Why is his master reminding him to behave and eat? He keeps jumping around, oblivious to the two bulky men talking near them.

"Understood? Good dog!" His master says. He reaches out to pat Kiko's head.

A bit calmer now, Kiko sees that something binds his master's hands. He sniffs it. Metal. Like the padlock. Kiko suddenly grinds his teeth into the metal...

Then, everything seemed to happen all at once. One moment, Kiko is jumping around, kissing his master, and chewing on the cuffs that bind his master's wrists. Then, the next thing he knows, two men in blue are standing beside him. They're not wearing their scary masks anymore, so Kiko can see their faces. Both men are old and wrinkled. Both of them are clearly annoyed at the disruption that Kiko's presence has caused them.

Standing in front of the car door, Kiko growls to keep the scary men away from him and his master. But the two men do not seem to fear anything. They draw their batons from their belts as if they're threatening to hit Kiko in the head. Kiko, scared, backs down and anxiously walks until he's far enough from the men. He watches as they pull out the driveway, taking his master away from him. Kiko can only stare helplessly as the car becomes nothing but a speck.

Kiko spends the night waiting in the square plaza. He watches as the tired and bruised people from the rally clear out one by one. He stays as the moon climbs overhead and as the humid hot air turns chilly. When he becomes hungry and sleepy, he traces his way back home.

His master's blue shoe remains unreturned and forgotten, resting on the pavement along with empty spray bottles, wrecked banners, and mismatched shoes.



In the morning, Kiko sits once again in front of their gate. Although his eyes droop and the built-up dirt on his fur is noticeable in the morning sun, he faithfully waits. He waits until all the uniformed workers have gone to their minimum-wage day jobs. He remains patient until the students have started their morning classes online. Kiko waits and waits and waits. Until suddenly, a young man, half-barefoot and wearing only one blue shoe, turns up at their gate.

"Kiko?"

Kiko's eyes light up, and he lets out an excited bark. His master! He's finally home!

"Oh! Kiko," his master says between his jumps and kisses and dance. "You've been a good boy!"

Good boy? Of course he is!

Kiko dances around his master's legs and runs around the rectangular yard. His master is finally here! They can play now! He jumps and hops over the house plants. He leaps and springs over the few good shoes that his master has left near the door. Kiko repeats his little dance for a long time, overjoyed at his master's arrival. After a while, when gravity pulls down his tongue and saliva drips onto the ground, Kiko goes back to his master's arms. His master still smells like pepper, but his face is light, and no more metal binds his hands.



Everything seems to change after the night when his master did not go home. Since then, they've been spending most of their time indoors. Instead of going out, his master now paints new placards at day and double-locks the doors at nightfall. Kiko almost never lets his master out of his sight. Once, he even insisted on coming with his master to do errands at the art supplies store.

The TV is currently on in the living room, and it's showing news footage of the recent rally. Kiko still does not like the smell of wet paint; so, he lies on his belly far away.

Kiko's mouth and paws clutch his master's blue shoe—the one remaining, the only shoe that survived. The shoe that his senses sought out on the night when the men in blue took his master away; the clue left on the plaza that pointed him in the direction of where his master could be; and the symbol of joy that he saw when his master finally turned up at their gate that morning, finally safe.

