A Hesitant Helping Hand

Synopsis: Jerome, a vending machine owner, is forced to become an unwilling assailant when he gets kidnapped while servicing one of his machines.

Jerome Francis never considered himself to be anything more than an “average white guy.” A mid forties divorcee, who would tell you that one time he had a good idea: investing in Google. He parlayed his initial investment into an impressive portfolio, which he and his then wife turned into a lucrative business owning a dozen vending machines around their hometown of South Bend, Indiana. After the divorce, he decided to keep the vending machines going. Life is simple for Jerome: he daytrades in the mornings and afternoons, takes a break to watch *Jeopardy*, and then shifts his attention to the vending machine business. When necessary, he goes out and restocks the machines himself.

Tuesday February 17, 2015 starts just like any other day for Jerome. He is riding high after getting the “Final Jeopardy” answer right, whereas all of the contestants got it wrong (California Cities was the clue, Palo Alto the answer). His good spirits don’t last long though, as he begins checking up on his machines and realizes that he is going to have to go restock the two machines at his *least* favorite spot: the Wooden Indian Motel.

The first motel in South Bend, the Wooden Indian was built overlooking the St. Joe River. The motel’s brown, wooden exterior conveyed its cheap and cozy nature back then; now, however, the Indian is just another cruel reminder of a city and a time that has moved on. Jerome wouldn’t hate the rundown motel so much if it wasn’t for the shady clientele that it attracted. *I know there are some honest, down on their luck people there too*, he thinks to himself, *but man does that place give me the creeps.* Nevertheless, the Indian is good for his business, and so Jerome begrudgingly agrees to go.

After a little bit of a delay due to the inclement weather *and* slipping in the snow while loading up his box truck with the restock supplies, Jerome rumbles across the Indian’s pothole littered driveway and pulls up as close as he can to the machines. He takes a quick look at the

dashboard clock: 4:41 P.M. *Later than I would have liked, and darker out too* he thinks. The two vending machines stand outside next to a man-sized, discolored wooden Indian statue and an empty notice board. He lets out a sigh, hops out of the truck, and heads around the back to begin restocking the machines.

The first machine he restocks is the pop machine. Jerome opens the machine, removes the coin/cash locker first, dumps the locker into an orange Home Depot bucket, then loads up the machine with new 12 oz cans of pop. Once he finishes with that machine, he locks it back up and hops into the back of the truck to grab the boxes of chips and candy for the other machine. Suddenly Jerome hears a loud BANG, like the sound of glass breaking somewhere behind him. Startled, he swings around to see a young-looking Latino kid being chased by two much bigger men in ski caps. The kid, lightning fast, reaches the driver's side door of Jerome's box truck, opens it, and hops inside before Jerome can fully assess what is happening.

"Gimmie the fucking keys man!" The kid, breathing heavily, shouts at Jerome and reaches into his coat pocket, partially pulling out something shiny. Jerome quickly tosses the keys towards the dash, then reverts his attention back to the men who were chasing the kid. The men are now mere feet away from the doors! Jerome lunges at the doors, slamming them within seconds of the men reaching them! Jerome watches as they begin pounding on the glass windows of the truck; the kid starts the truck, throws it into gear, and takes off. Jerome sees one of the men pull out a gun and begin shooting at the truck! Jerome goes flying from one end of the truck to the other as it peels out of the parking lot, the sound of bullets bouncing off of metal ringing in his ears.

Jerome regains his composure quickly, electing to remain on the floor but sitting up as the kid continues driving away.

“What the shit is going on!” Jerome’s heart is beating hard against his chest. The kid ignores Jerome, driving like a bat out of hell, maneuvering around slower cars. Jerome begins fumbling around his coat pocket, reaching for his phone. The kid notices Jerome through the rear-view window.

“Hey man! Knock off whatever you’re doing back there or I’ll crash this shitwagon!”

“Christ,” Jerome whispers as he stops fumbling for his phone. “Look… just take the truck and drop me off, I want no part of whatever this is!”

“Too late man, you’re already in it!” the kid’s breathing sounds exceptionally calm for having just been shot at. After a few more minutes he pulls into a McDonald’s parking lot and puts the truck in park. He turns towards Jerome. “Give me your phone and your wallet!”

Jerome hesitantly hands over the items and watches as the kid stuffs them in his coat pocket.

“You’re going to drive me a few places,” the kid continues. “And then I’ll get out of your hair, swear it. Come get up front.”

By now Jerome’s adrenaline has calmed down some and he is simply annoyed, but he decides that it is probably best to do what the kid asks if he wants to make it through this ordeal safely. Jerome gets out of the truck and comes around to the driver’s side as the kid hops over to the passenger seat, telling Jerome he will guide him.

The car is silent except for when the kid gives out directions. Jerome silently curses the entire situation. His mind is racing, contemplating what he can do to get out of this jam. *I could just try to ditch this guy. Only problem with that is he has my wallet and my phone, so he will know where I live and come after me-*

“Pull into this complex and park,” the kid’s sudden directions knock Jerome out of his internal scheming. Jerome does as he is instructed, staring at a tall, dark gray, three story apartment building.

“So what,” Jerome asks. “Am I just supposed to sit here and wait?” The kid surveys the surroundings before answering.

“Here’s the scoop: my name is Sonny, I’ve been involved with these guys since I was sixteen. It started out as just stupid gang banger shit: selling drugs, stealing shit, beating up assholes, whatever. But now they are talking about kidnapping kids and I’m not cool with that-”

“So you kidnapped a grown man instead?” Jerome cuts him off. Jerome’s question catches Sonny off guard. “That’s what this is: you’re holding me hostage, forcing me to drive you around!”

“Uh… yeah I guess that is what this is. Look, call it the wrong place at the wrong time, I don’t know. What I do know is I have some cash inside my apartment right there,” Sonny nods towards the building. “I’ll be right back,”

“What makes you think I’m going to sit around and wait for you?”

“I guess that’s your call,” the kid responds. “Think about it like this: those guys are dumb, and it will definitely take them a while to figure out who you are, but they are eventually going to figure it out. I’m assuming you own the vending machine you were at, and there is some way to trace it back. I had to ditch my car back there, so if you leave then I guess we'll just see how it plays out. I’ve got your wallet. You can leave, and if they get me, you can assume they will have your address immediately. Help me get out and I’ll help you.” Jerome grumbles as Sonny gets out of the car. Jerome reverses the truck into a spot looking at the building.

This is completely mental Jerome thinks to himself. *How can you even be sure that what this kid is telling you is the truth? What if after all of this he just kills you anyways?* He sits and lets his mind race, not paying much attention to anything else. He takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself, and stares out the window at the apartment building. Finally, Sonny appears at the entrance of the building, holding a large, black, Nike duffle bag. He flashes a small smile as he realizes that his getaway car and driver are still there. Suddenly though, out of the corner of his eye, Jerome sees two guys charging at Sonny from out of nowhere; he recognizes them as the same two from before, and they are both armed. His fight-or-flight response kicks in immediately, and Jerome puts the truck into drive and hits the gas. Neither man has time to turn around before they are both turned into hood ornaments bouncing off the front of the truck.

Jerome slams on the breaks as soon as he makes contact with the bodies of the men. His heart is beating out of his chest again. *Holy shit! I just hit those guys!* Sonny hops over one of the downed men and jumps into the passenger seat.

"Holy shit!" Sonny exclaims. "That was awesome!" Jerome quickly reverses, watching the men writhing in pain on the ground, and drives off.

Unable to fully process what just happened, both men sit in silence for a bit. Jerome can't help but notice Sonny has a giant smile on his face.

"Uh…" Jerome breaks the silence. "So where are we going?" Sonny lets out a chuckle.

"You a real one man," Sonny says, still laughing. "I tell you what: I said I would help you if you helped me, and I meant it. Let's go swing back by the Indian and we are going to make sure that there's nothing on your vending machines that they can use to trace back to you." Sonny reaches into his pocket again, pulling out Jerome's wallet and phone and handing them back to him. Jerome lets out a sigh of relief, and then agrees to go back by the motel.

They make their way to the motel post haste, hopefully avoiding any further run-ins with Sonny's former associates. They pull up to the vending machines and Sonny hops out. He approaches the vending machines and scans them, quickly finding the tags that denote who to call in case of any problems with the machines. He rips the tags off. As he walks back to the car, Sonny sees the Home Depot bucket and picks it up.

"Bad news man, the bucket is empty," he says as he gets back in the car. He instructs Jerome to drive up a little to see if his own car is still in the lot. "Ah man, they killed my tires!" Jerome looks at Sonny's car, a gray Subaru Forester, the tires completely slashed.

"Need anything out of it?"

"Nah," Sonny says. "Gonna miss it though. Can you take me one last place?"

"Alright."

"Take me to the Airport."

"Where are you going to go?"

"That's a good question," Sonny responds, pulling out his phone to check flights. "Can you drive us past the Golden Dome? I'd like to see it one last time."

Jerome obliges Sonny's request to drive past Notre Dame's campus. Though overcast and dark, the Golden Dome still shines brightly. Sonny puts his phone down as they drive past, taking in the view.

"Isn't she something," Sonny asks.

"Hmmm…" Jerome grumbles. He glances over at the Golden Dome, feeling a newfound appreciation for it. "I used to hate Notre Dame…" The response elicits another laugh from Sonny.

"You hate Notre Dame but you live in South Bend? That's crazy bro!"

The rest of the ride takes them fifteen minutes, which they drive in silence. Jerome assumes Sonny found a flight, but doesn't bother to question. Sonny continues staring out the window for the duration of the drive once he finishes with his phone. Jerome thinks he sees Sonny wiping tears out of his eyes at one point, but doesn't ask about that either. He pulls up to the departures terminal at the airport and puts his hazard lights on so Sonny can get out. Sonny looks at Jerome.

"I'm truly sorry man," Sonny says as he opens the door. "But thank you. You saved my life." Without another word, Sonny exits the car.

Jerome drives away feeling a sense of relief. *What a day*. He turns on the radio to channel 88.9.

"You're listening to WSND, the Sound of Notre Dame," the radio announcer chimes in. "Up next we have a medley of classic rock hits, starting with what I consider the best song title based on the name of the band: here is "Bad Company"." Jerome can't help but laugh out loud when he hears this, acknowledging that the universe has a sense of humor. He sings the song as loud as he can as he drives home.