

A Slow Wednesday Night

Brad went through the motions of wiping the counter while staring at nothing in particular. He didn't look to see if the counter was clean because there was no need to look. He'd cleaned it at least ten times since the last customer checked out. Now there were only two customers in the store. An old lady was intently reading the nutrition information on a box of cereal, and a teenage boy was reading a car magazine from the magazine rack. Brad knew his boss would have chased the kid away while shouting "This ain't a public library!" but what was the point? The kid didn't have the money to buy the magazine, so they weren't losing a sale. The kid just needed to come in off the street for a few hours to warm up and build dreams. Who knew? Maybe the magazine would inspire him to get a job in a body shop and work his way up to the point where he could build a hot rod like the ones he was reading about.

A quick glance out the window showed there were no cars at the pumps. Brad looked at his watch. 11:19 pm. Two minutes since the last time he'd checked the time. Forty one minutes until he could lock the door and go home for the night. Even for a Wednesday, this was a slow night.

A flash of headlights caught his attention as a car turned into a parking spot near the door. Brad was instantly uneasy when he saw a hooded driver get out of the car. He knew hooded sweat shirts were a popular style, but still it made him uneasy when he couldn't see a face. This customer seemed to be wearing an especially large hood, pulled forward as far as it would go. Not a trace of his face was visible. Brad's worst fears were realized when the customer walked through the door and pulled a gun out of his pocket. He ordered everyone to the front of the store.

Brad tried to memorize details, but it was tough because he was scared. He'd been too startled when the man walked through the door to check his height against the ruler marked on the doorframe. Maybe he could check that when the man left. It was a man's voice, he was certain of that, but beyond that he didn't have a clue. When the man turned and looked straight at him Brad saw that he was wearing a ski mask under the hood. Obviously the fuzzy images from their cheap security camera weren't going to give the police much to work with.

The two customers obediently walked to the front of the store. Brad noticed the kid stuffed the car magazine into his pants before he came forward. "Jesus!" Brad thought. "Who thinks about shoplifting at a time like this?" Brad obediently opened the cash register and put all the money into a plastic bag. The robber was obviously angry that there wasn't more money, so Brad explained that they weren't allowed to keep large amounts of cash on the premises. Brad offered to add a couple bottles of whiskey to the loot and the man barked out the brands he wanted. "At least I can tell the police *something* about the robber" Brad thought.

“Excuse me.” Everyone was startled by a voice at the door. Brad looked up from the loot bag and saw Bottle Bob leaning in through the door. Bottle Bob was a homeless man who lived somewhere in the area. Everyone called him Bottle Bob because he went through trash cans, looking for cans or bottles he could turn in for the deposit. He often redeemed them while Brad was on duty, and he always bought food with the money. Brad had begun putting one trash can around the corner of the building, in an inconvenient location so very few people threw trash in it. Any time Brad found a bottle lying around the store he put it in that can for Bob, and sometimes he brought his empty bottles and cans from home and left them in the can. Bob seemed like a nice guy, but he couldn’t have picked a worse time to drop by.

“Excuse me” Bob repeated, now that he had everyone’s attention. “I just thought you’d want to know that I overheard some guy at the gas pump call 911 as he drove off. I think the police are on their way.”

“Get in here!” the gunman ordered.

“Hey, I’m just trying to help you out,” Bob protested as he stepped into the store. “The police ain’t never been a friend to me. I figured they weren’t no friends of yours, either.”

“Go stand with the others!” the gunman shouted.

“OK. OK. Don’t shoot.” Bob muttered as he slowly walked over to the counter. “I’m just trying to help you out. Don’t bother saying ‘thanks’ or nothin.”

“Face down on the floor” the gunman ordered.

Brad and the others started to lie down, but Bob remained standing.

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather stand up.” Bob spoke with remarkable calmness. “Been too many hold-ups round here already where people lay down, the robber tied them up, and then he shot ‘em while they were helpless so they couldn’t talk to the police.”

“Lie down or I’ll shoot!” the gunman screamed.

“You wanna go down for murder?” Bob asked. “Like I said, the police have already been called. If I’m gonna be shot, I’d rather be shot standing up. Least then the others got a chance a grabbin’ you.”

Brad took the hint and stood next to Bob. The others stood up too, forming a semicircle around the gunman. He glared at Bob for a moment, then grabbed the money bag and backed out the door. His car disappeared into the night amid a squeal of tires.

As soon as the robber left, Bob's confident demeanor vanished and he sagged visibly with relief. In fact, he sagged to the point where Brad put his hand around him to make certain he wasn't going to collapse. As Brad steadied him he noticed Bob was breathing hard and trembling with fear.

"Call 911" Bob gasped.

"I thought you said they were on their way," Brad answered.

"I made that up" Bob said. "I saw the robber through the window and I knew I had to do somethin to help. Otherwise he'd a tied you up and shot you. You see that roll a tape in his pocket? That's how he ties people up."

When the police arrived, Bob was able to give them a better description of the robber than any of the other witnesses. Eye color, gold tooth, and type of shoes were all details that had escaped Brad's attention, but not Bob's. Bob had also memorized the thief's license plate number before he came into the store, so the police had high hopes of catching him. Brad called his boss while the police were interviewing Bob, and once he assured his boss that the incident would make the nightly news his boss authorized him to promise Bob a substantial reward. When the police were ready to take a statement from the kid in the magazine aisle, though, Bob realized the kid had disappeared. Then he remembered seeing him stuff the magazine into his pants. "That thieving bastard!" he chuckled. Given everything else that had happened that night, the loss of one magazine didn't seem like a big deal.