



# CAN I HELP YOU?

By

*Julian Hudson*

**WHY I LIKE IT:** *Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes... Julian Hudson's, "Can I Help You?," exists in the same vein as Douglass Adams or Etgar Keret; wry humor that borders on the slapstick, the surreality of the unbelievable becoming believable, or the quirkiness within the back and forth of dialogue that gives the probable in improbable more credence, Hudson uses these tools to demonstrate the craft.*

*A man with a rash, a fish n' chips shop owner, the need for cod or a bicycle, all seemingly disconnected and yet slammed up together in a moment of coincidence, hilarity, and disbelief.*

*In reading, "Can I Help You?," it would be a perfectly acceptable response to go, "what the hell?" and then keep on diving in for more. At no point in time does the absurd detract from the entertainment, from the meaning, to remind us, as Dali often did and still does, that the images in our dreams are oftentimes more palpable than the realities that surround us.*

*I like this story for the way in which Hudson creates a tale out of simplicity, one that on the surface seems farcical and yet, as you swim down deeper in the depths, becomes more poignant as we discover the life of the mind.*

*Enjoy.*

### **QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)**

In a feverish gesture of restitution, the shop keeper generously presents the man with the rash a bike as a gift – a green dragster with tassels on the back of the speckled seat that flicker and race about in the wind like headless mini serpents at speed. The man and the piece of cod – which by now has a smiling face and functioning limbs – both mount the bike and they ride off into the sunset like long lost friends. On a green dragster. With tassels on the back seat. The cod is doing the peddling as he has the longer legs out of the two.

Can I help you?

It's a cracking summer's day along the strand. A man with a patchy red neck pops into the local fish 'n' chips shop.

"Afternoon", says the shop keeper, raising his head to meet that of the stranger's. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, I have this rash on my neck", he replies. "You see it here?" twisting slightly sideways to show the affected area.

"Yeah, right", acknowledges the shop keeper with a polite look. "But can I help you? Do you want to place an order?"

"I dunno, do you think fish would help?"

"Are you hungry?"

"No, I mean for the rash."

"I can't help you with the rash. But if you want something to eat, I could definitely help you."

"Well... I suppose I could eat a little something. I'll take a small California roll, can of Coke and two steamed dumplings. Pork."

"Except this is a fish 'n' chips shop – we don't sell sushi and dumplings."

“But they might go well if you did.”

“Maybe so, but – “

“– then you could’ve at least helped by selling me something to eat. I mean you did ask if you can help me, without firstly specifying any semantic parameters.”

“Well, this is a fish ‘n’ chips shop, so that logically should’ve helped to set the context and therefore scope of my question for you.”

“Really? People assume so much these days. They expect so much of others in an increasingly complex world.”

“Well, I still can help you but only with the food we have on the menu. So, can I help you?”

“Yes, I’ve got this rash on my neck”, he says leaning forwards. “You see it? And on top of that now I’m hungry. I’ll have battered cod, two potato scallops with extra vinegar and salt, and a pineapple fritter. Pineapple fritters are the best. A little bit of tropical sweetness to contrast the saltiness and highlight the summer’s sunshine.”

He stops looking up at the huge order board in front of him, then drops his head back down and stares blankly into the face of the shop keeper.

“Oh, good choice!” lied the shopkeeper. “Although, I’m going to need your help”, he confessed with an air of light and crispy embarrassment.

“What’s that?”

“I’m out of fish. Do you think you could duck over to the fish shop in the arcade up the road, and pick up a nice piece of cod for me?”

“Duck. Fish. The road. And pick. Plus a bunch of prepositions. Why should I have to do all this?”

“I’ll give you a discount!” he sprouted, clawing back some cheap ground.

With the prospect of saving money, aware he was yet to buy some sort of cream to relieve his rash, the man with the rash darts out and hurriedly walks over to the fish shop in the arcade.

In the meantime, the fish ‘n’ chips shop keeper magically transforms his shop. He changes it into a bicycle shop from the past. When the man returns brandishing a fine specimen of fresh cod, the shop keeper looks awkwardly to the side where the deep fryers used to do their work – like bubbling, stainless steel, scaled down waterbeds with baskets in them – and says, “Sorry, I don’t sell fish ‘n’ chips anymore.”

In a feverish gesture of restitution the shop keeper generously presents the man with the rash a bike as a gift – a green dragster with tassels on the back of the speckled seat that flicker and race about in the wind like headless mini serpents at speed. The man and the piece of cod – which by now has a smiling face and functioning limbs – both mount the bike and they ride off into the sunset like long lost friends. On a green dragster. With tassels on the back seat. The cod is doing the peddling as he has the longer legs out of the two.

At this stage, both parties are somewhat bewildered and notice a creeping sensation of dissatisfaction and foreboding. Unfortunately, the cod begins to lack oxygen and starts desperately gasping for air, and his legs badly tire and feel like they're burning on the inside. He knew all that muscle-building protein powder was a load of bullshit. Why did I buy it? he pondered with a frown in the shape of regret. Well everyone else seemed to be, he muttered to himself with a tone of resignation and a flippant shrug.

As for the shop keeper, he begins to lament having opened up a bike shop as a wave of realisation sweeps over him, his eyes opened wide. Cooking really is his thing after all – not bicycles. Not to mention looming guilt that he could possibly have mistreated the man with the rash. Can I help you? You've gotta follow through if you say that to someone, he reflects. Not just dish out compensatory

gifts. The world truly is becoming ever complex – and people should stop oversimplifying how they interact with others. It's contradictory to what's really happening out there. With the extra complexity, people could try tailoring or modifying their expectations of others a little more. The same for their responses to others. Is that too much to ask? he counselled himself.

Thankfully, it was at this moment that the cod awoke and realised the whole series of events had been a weird dream. The fish 'n' chips shop, the shop keeper, the man with the rash and the green dragster from the 70s. Everything. Even the pineapple fritters, which he thought was a strange food to eat now that he was fully conscious. Kelp patties make so much more sense, he thought. Spanning his fins out to their max and most stiff, he flapped himself upwards from the sandy, sunlit, shallow seabed before propelling his little cod-bod forwards to catch up with the other cod in the school.

“Hey, Jeremy, can I help you?” Asks a brotherly cod, looking back at him.

“Yeah, can you all just wait up a minute while I catch up?”

End

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *Primarily, I write memoir and had received numerous rejections to recent submissions. Although I also had some fiction pieces up my sleeve, so randomly I decided to submit this one. What'll be the worst, another rejection? In this piece I wanted to write the kind of free-wheeling thoughts I have, to demonstrate the surreal, boyish nature I value. But I wanted to highlight that as the world becomes more complex, we are leaving ourselves and our humanity*

*behind. Our social fabric is being snipped away at. In the end, a simple fish reminds us how simplicity (but not oversimplification) and helping one another is important. Writers who influence me include Salvador Dali, Ernest K. Gann, Zane Grey, the Monty Python gang and Spike Milligan, yet so many others.*

**AUTHOR BIO:** Julian Hudson was born in Sydney (Australia) – just in time to celebrate his first birthday one year later. In 2014, Julian had short story “Slow Down and Hurry Up About It” published in the anthology *Writers 2 Watch - Manly Edition* (Lime Books, Sydney). During 2016, he wrote scripts for stand-up comedy that he delivered for “open mic” nights at a local bookstore. In 2019, *Tropic Magazine* published Julian’s article “Power of Language in the Digital Age”.

Additionally to writing, Julian draws with acrylic pens, enjoys the consumption of cocoa based products and contemplates how increasingly misanthropic he is becoming – the chocolate helps to pacify him...