

Funny You Should Ask

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938-

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ON WHAT A less original writer might deign to describe as a fateful day, young Robert Tillinghast approached the proprietor of a shop called Earth Forms. “Actually,” he said, “I don’t think I can buy anything today, but there’s a question I’d like to ask you. It’s been on my mind for the longest time. I was looking at those recycled jeans over by the far wall.”

“I’ll be getting a hundred pair in Monday afternoon,” the proprietor said.

“Is that right?”

“It certainly is.”

“A hundred pair,” Robert marveled. “That’s certainly quite a lot.”

"It's the minimum order."

"Is that a fact? And they'll all be the same quality and condition as the ones you have on display over on the far wall?"

"Absolutely. Of course, I won't know what sizes I'll be getting."

"I guess that's just a matter of chance."

"It is. But they'll all be first-quality name brands, and they'll all be in good condition, broken in but not broken to bits. That's a sort of an expression I made up to describe them."

"I like it," said Robert, not too sincerely. "You know, there's a question that's been nagging at my mind for the longest time. Now you get six dollars a pair for the recycled jeans, is that right?" It was. "And it probably wouldn't be out of line to guess that they cost you about half that amount?" The proprietor, after a moment's reflection, agreed that it wouldn't be far out of line to make that estimate.

"Well, that's the whole thing," Robert said. "You notice the jeans I'm wearing?"

The proprietor glanced at them. They were nothing remarkable, a pair of oft-washed Lee Riders that were just beginning to go thin at the knees. "Very nice," the man said. "I'd get six dollars for them without a whole lot of trouble."

"But I wouldn't want to sell them."

"And of course not. Why should you? They're just getting to the comfortable stage."

"Exactly!" Robert grew intense, and his eyes bulged slightly. This was apt to happen when he grew intense, although he didn't know it, never having seen himself at such times. "Exactly," he repeated. "The recycled jeans you see in the shops, this shop and other shops, are just at the point where they're breaking in right. They're never really worn out. Unless you only put the better pairs on display?"

"No, they're all like that."

"That's what everybody says." Robert had had much the same conversation before in the course of his travels. "All top quality, all in excellent condition, and all in the same stage of wear."

"So?"

"So," Robert said in triumph, "who throws them out?"

"Oh."

"The company that sells them. Where do they get them from?"

"You know," the proprietor said, "it's funny you should ask. The same question's occurred to me. People buy these jeans because this is the way they want 'em. But who in the world sells them?"

"That's what I'd like to know. Not that it would do me any good to have the answer, but the question preys on my mind."

"Who sells them? I could understand about young children's jeans that kids would outgrow them, but what about the adult sizes? Unless kids grow up and don't want to wear jeans anymore."

"I'll be wearing jeans as long as I live," Robert said recklessly. "I'll never get too old for jeans."

The proprietor seemed not to have heard. "Now maybe it's different out in the farm country," he said. "I buy these jeans from a firm in Rockford, Illinois—"

"I've heard of the firm," Robert said. "They seem to be the only people supplying recycled jeans."

"Only one I know of. Now maybe things are different in their area and people like brand-new jeans and once they break in somewhat they think of them as worn out. That's possible, don't you suppose?"

"I guess it's possible."

"Because it's the only explanation I can think of. After all, what could they afford to pay for the jeans? A dollar a pair? A dollar and a half at the outside? Who would sell 'em good-condition jeans for that amount of money?" The man shook his head. "Funny you should ask a question that I've asked myself so many times and never put into words."

"That Rockford firm," Robert said. "That's another thing I don't understand. Why would they develop a sideline business like recycled jeans?"

"I suppose there are," said Robert.

An obsession of the sort that gripped Robert is a curious thing. After a certain amount of time it is either metamorphosized into neurosis or it is tamed, surfacing periodically as a vehicle for casual conversation. Young Robert Tillinghast, neurotic enough in other respects, suppressed his curiosity on the subject of recycled jeans and only raised the question at times when it seemed particularly apropos.

And it did seem apropos often enough. Robert was touring the country, depending for his locomotion upon the kindness of passing motorists. As charitable as his hosts were, they were apt to insist upon a quid pro quo of conversation, and Robert had learned to converse extemporaneously upon a variety of subjects. One of these was that of recycled blue jeans, a subject close at once to his heart and his skin, and Robert's own jeans often served as the lead-in to this line of conversation, being either funky and mellow or altogether disreputable, depending upon one's point of view, which in turn largely depended (it must be said) upon one's age.

One day in West Virginia, on that stretch of Interstate 79 leading from Morgantown down to Charleston, Robert thumbed a ride with a man who, though not many years older than himself, drove a late-model Cadillac. Robert, his backpack in the backseat and his body in the front, could not have been more pleased. He had come to feel that hitching a ride in an expensive car endowed one with all the privileges of ownership without the nuisance of making the payments.

Then, as the car cruised southward, Robert noticed that the driver was glancing repeatedly at his, which is to say Robert's, legs. Covert glances at that, sidelong and meaningful. Robert sighed inwardly. This, too, was part of the game, and had ceased to shock him. But he had so been looking forward to riding in this car and now he would have to get out.

The driver said, "Just admiring your jeans."

"I guess they're just beginning to break in," Robert said, relaxing now. "I've certainly had them a while."

"Well, they look just right now. Got a lot of wear left in them."

"I guess they'll last for years," Robert said. "With the proper treatment. You know, that brings up something I've been wondering about for a long time." And he went into his routine, which had become rather a little set piece by this time,

ending with the question that had plagued him from the start. "So where on earth does that Rockford company get all these jeans? Who provides them?"

"Funny you should ask," the young man said. "I don't suppose you noticed my license plates before you got in?" Robert admitted he hadn't. "Few people do," the young man said. "Land of Lincoln is the slogan on them, and they're from Illinois. And I'm from Rockford. As a matter of fact, I'm with that very company."

"But that's incredible! For the longest time I've wanted to know the answers to my questions, and now at long last—" He broke off. "Why are we leaving the Interstate?"

"Bypass some traffic approaching Charleston. There's construction ahead and it can be a real bottleneck. Yes, I'm with the company."

"In sales, I suppose? Servicing accounts? You certainly have enough accounts. Why, it seems every store in the country buys recycled jeans from you people."

"Our distribution is rather good," the young man said, "and our sales force does a good job. But I'm in Acquisitions, myself. I go out and round up the jeans. Then in Rockford they're washed to clean and sterilize them, patched if they need it and—"

"You're actually in Acquisitions?"

"That's a fact."

"Well, this *is* my lucky day," Robert exclaimed. "You're just the man to give me all the answers. Where do you get the jeans? Who sells them to you? What do you pay for them? What sort of person sells perfectly good jeans?"

"That's a whole lot of questions at once."

Robert laughed, happy with himself, his host, and the world. "I just don't know where to start and it's got me rattled. Say, this bypass is a small road, isn't it? I guess not many people know about it and that's why there's no other traffic on it. Poor saps'll all get tangled in traffic going into Charleston."

"We'll miss all that."

"That's good luck. Let's see, where can I begin? All right, here's the big question and I've always been puzzled by this one. What's a company like yours doing in the recycled jeans business?"

"Well," said the young man, "diversification is the keynote of American business these days."

"But a company like yours," Robert said. "Rockford Dog Food, Inc. How did you ever think to get into the business in the first place?"

"Funny you should ask," said the young man, braking the car smoothly to a stop.

