

# **A Blow for Freedom**

**Enough Rope collection**

**by Lawrence Block, 1938–**

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The gun was smaller than Elliott remembered. At Kennedy, waiting for his bag to come up on the carousel, he'd been irritated with himself for buying the damned thing. For years now, ever since Pan Am had stranded him in Milan with the clothes he was wearing, he'd made an absolute point of never checking luggage. He'd flown to Miami with his favorite carry-on bag; returning, he'd checked the same bag, all because it now contained a Smith & Wesson revolver and a box of fifty .38-caliber shells.

At least he hadn't had to take a train. „Oh, for Christ's sake,“ he'd told Huebner, after they'd bought the gun together. „I'll have to take the train back, won't I? I can't get on the plane with a gun in my pocket.“

„It's not recommended,“ Huebner had said. „But all you have to do is check your bag with the gun and shells in it.“

„Isn't there a regulation against it?“

„Probably. There's rules against everything. All I know is, I do it all the time, and I never heard of anyone getting into any trouble over it. They scope the checked bags, or at least they're supposed to, but they're looking for bombs. There's nothing very dangerous about a gun locked away in the baggage compartment.“

„Couldn't the shells explode?“

„In a fire, possibly. If the plane goes down in flames, the bullets may go off and put a hole in the side of your suitcase.“

„I guess I'm being silly.“

„Well, you're a New Yorker. You don't know a whole lot about guns.“

„No.“ He'd hesitated. „Maybe I should have bought one of those plastic ones.“

„The Glock?“ Huebner smiled. „It's a nice weapon, and it's probably the one I'll buy next. But you couldn't carry it on a plane.“

„But I thought—“

„You thought it would fool the scanners and metal detectors at airport security. It won't. That's hardly the point of it, a big gun like that. No, they replaced a lot of the metal with high-impact plastic to reduce the weight. It's supposed to lessen recoil slightly, too, but I don't know if it does. Personally, I like the looks of it. But it'll show up fine on a scanner if you put it in a carry-on bag, and it'll set off alarms if you walk it through a metal detector.“ He snorted. „Of course, that didn't keep some idiots from introducing bills banning it in the United States. Nobody in politics likes to let a fact stand in the way of a grandstand play.“

His bag was one of the last ones up. Waiting for it, he worried that there was going to be trouble about the gun. When it came, he had to resist the urge to open the bag immediately and make sure the gun was still there. The bag felt light, and he decided some baggage handler had detected it and appropriated it for his own use.

Nervous, he thought. Scared it's there, scared it's not.

He took a cab home to his Manhattan apartment and left the bag unopened while he made himself a drink. Then he unpacked, and the gun was smaller than he remembered it. He picked it up and felt its weight, and that was greater than he recalled. And it was empty. It would be even heavier fully loaded.

After Huebner had helped him pick out the gun, they'd driven way out on Route 27, where treeless swamps extended for miles in every direction. Huebner pulled off the road a few yards from a wrecked car, its tires missing and most of its window glass gone.

„There's our target,“ he said. „You find a lot of cars abandoned along this stretch, but you don't want to start shooting up the newer ones.“

„Because someone might come back for them?“

Huebner shook his head. „Because there might be a body in the trunk. This is where the drug dealers tend to drop off the unsuccessful competition, but no self-

respecting drug dealer would be caught dead in a wreck like this one. You figure it'll be a big enough target for you?"

Embarrassingly enough, he missed the car altogether with his first shot. „You pulled up on it," Huebner told him. „Probably anticipating the recoil. Don't waste time worrying where the bullets are going yet. Just get used to pointing and firing."

And he got used to it. The recoil was considerable and so was the weight of the gun, but he did get used to both and began to be able to make the shots go where he wanted them to go. After Elliott had used up a full box of shells, Huebner got a pistol of his own from the glove compartment and put a few rounds into the fender of the ruined automobile. Huebner's gun was a nine-millimeter automatic with a clip that held twelve cartridges. It was much larger, noisier, and heavier than the .38, and it did far more damage to the target.

„Got a whole lot of stopping power," Huebner said. „Hit a man in the arm with this, you're likely to take him down. Here, try it. Strike a blow for freedom."

The recoil was greater than the .38's, but less so than he would have guessed. Elliott fired off several rounds, enjoying the sense of power. He returned the gun to Huebner, who emptied the clip into the old car.

Driving back, Elliott said, „A phrase you used: *Strike a blow for freedom.*"

„Oh, you never heard that? I had an uncle used that expression every time he took a drink. They used to say that during Prohibition. You hoisted a few then in defiance of the law, you were striking a blow for freedom."

The gun, the first article Elliott unpacked, was the last he put away.

He couldn't think of what to do with it. Its purchase had seemed appropriate in Florida, where they seemed to have gun shops everywhere. You walked into one and walked out owning a weapon. There was even a town in central Georgia where they'd passed their own local version of gun control, an ordinance requiring the adult population to go about armed. There had never been any question of enforcing the law, he knew; it had been passed as a statement of local sentiment.

Here in New York, guns were less appropriate. They were illegal, to begin with. You could apply for a carry permit, but unless there was some genuine reason connected with your occupation, your application was virtually certain to be denied. Elliott worked in an office and never carried anything to it or from it but a briefcase filled with papers, nor did his work take him down streets any meaner than the one he lived on. As far as the law was concerned, he had no need for a gun.

Yet he owned one, legally or not. Its possession was at once unsettling and thrilling, like the occasional ounce or so of marijuana secreted in his various living quarters during his twenties. There was something exciting, something curiously estimable, about having that which was prohibited, and at the same time, there was a certain amount of danger connected with its possession.

There ought to be security as well, he thought. He'd bought the gun for his protection in a city that increasingly seemed incapable of protecting its own inhabitants. He turned the gun over, let the empty cylinder swing out, accustomed his fingers to the cool metal.

His apartment was on the twelfth floor of a prewar building. Three shifts of doormen guarded the lobby. No other building afforded access to any of his windows, and those near the fire escape were protected by locked window gates, the key to which hung out of reach on a nail. The door to the hallway had two dead-bolt locks, each with its cylinder secured by an escutcheon plate. The door had a steel core and was further reinforced by a Fox police lock.

Elliott had never felt insecure in his apartment, nor were its security measures the result of his own paranoia. They had all been in place when he moved in. And they were standard for the building and the neighborhood.

He passed the gun from hand to hand, at once glad to have it and, like an impulse shopper, wondering why he'd bought it.

Where should he keep it?

The drawer of the nightstand suggested itself. He put the gun and the box of shells in it, closed the drawer, and went to take a shower.

It was almost a week before he looked at the gun again. He didn't mention it and rarely thought about it. News items would bring it to mind. A hardware-store owner in Rego Park killed his wife and small daughter with an unregistered handgun, then turned the weapon on himself; reading about it in the paper, Elliott thought of the revolver in his nightstand drawer. An honor student was slain in his bedroom by a stray shot from a high-powered assault rifle, and Elliott, watching TV, thought again of his gun.

On the Friday after his return, some item about the shooting of a drug dealer again directed his thoughts to the gun, and it occurred to him that he ought at least to load it. Suppose someone came crashing through his door or used some advance in criminal technology to cut the gates on his windows. If he were reaching hurriedly for a gun, it should be loaded.

He loaded all six chambers. He seemed to remember that you were supposed to leave one chamber empty as a safety measure. Otherwise, the gun might discharge if dropped. Cocking the weapon would presumably rotate the cylinder and ready it for shooting. Still, it wasn't going to fire itself just sitting in his nightstand drawer, was it, now? And if he reached for it, if he needed it in a hurry, he'd want it fully loaded.

If you had to shoot at someone, you didn't want to shoot once or twice and then stop. You wanted to empty the gun.

Had Huebner told him that? Or had someone said it in a movie or on television? It didn't matter, he decided. Either way, it was sound advice.

A few days later, he saw a movie in which the hero, a renegade cop up against an entrenched drug mob, slept with a gun under his pillow. It was a much larger gun than Elliott's, something like Huebner's big automatic.

„More gun than you really need in your situation,“ Huebner had told him. „And it's too big and too heavy. You want something you can slip into a pocket. A cannon like this, you'd need a whole shoulder rig or it'd pull at your suit coat something awful.“

Not that he'd ever carry it.

That night, he got the gun out of the drawer and put it under his pillow. He thought of the princess who couldn't sleep with a pea under her mattress. He felt a little silly, and he felt, too, some of what he had felt playing with toy guns as a child.

He got the gun from under his pillow and put it back in the drawer, where it belonged. He lay for a long time, inhaling the smell of the gun, metal and machine oil, interesting and not unpleasant.

A masculine scent, he thought. Blend in a little leather and tobacco, maybe a little horseshit, and you've got something to slap on after a shave. Win the respect of your fellows and drive the women wild.

He never put the gun under his pillow again. But the linen held the scent of the gun, and even after he'd changed the sheets and pillowcases, he could detect the smell on the pillow.

It was not until the incident with the panhandler that he ever carried the gun outside the apartment.

There were panhandlers all over the place, had been for several years now. It seemed to Elliott that there were more of them every year, but he wasn't sure if that was really the case. They were of either sex and of every age and color, some of them proclaiming well-rehearsed speeches on subway cars, some standing mute in doorways and extending paper cups, some asking generally for spare change or specifically for money for food or for shelter or for wine.

Some of them, he knew, were homeless people, ground down by the system. Some belonged in mental institutions. Some were addicted to crack. Some were layabouts, earning more this way than they could at a menial job. Elliott couldn't tell which was which and wasn't sure how he felt about them, his emotions ranging from sympathy to irritation, depending on circumstances. Sometimes he gave money, sometimes he didn't. He had given up trying to devise a consistent policy and simply followed his impulse of the moment.

One evening, walking home from the bus stop, he encountered a panhandler who demanded money. „Come on,“ the man said. „Gimme a dollar.“

Elliott started to walk past him, but the man moved to block his path. He was taller and heavier than Elliott, wearing a dirty army jacket, his face partly hidden behind a dense black beard. His eyes, slightly exophthalmic, were fierce.

„Didn't you hear me? Gimme a fuckin' dollar!“

Elliott reached into his pocket, came out with a handful of change. The man made a face at the coins Elliott placed in his hand, then evidently decided the donation was acceptable.

„Thank you kindly,“ he said. „Have a nice day.“

Have a nice day, indeed. Elliott walked on home, nodded to the doorman, let himself into his apartment. It wasn't until he had engaged the locks that he realized his heart was pounding and his hands trembling.

He poured himself a drink. It helped, but it didn't change anything.

Had he been mugged? There was a thin line, he realized, and he wasn't sure if the man had crossed it. He had not been asking for money, he had been demanding it, and the absence of a specific threat did not mean there was no menace in the demand. Elliott, certainly, had given him money out of fear. He'd

been intimidated. Unwilling to display his wallet, he'd fished out a batch of coins, including a couple of quarters and a subway token, currently valued at \$1.15.

A small enough price, but that wasn't the point. The point was that he'd been made to pay it. Stand and deliver, the man might as well have said. Elliott had stood and delivered.

A block from his own door, for God's sake. A good street in a good neighborhood. Broad daylight.

And you couldn't even report it. Not that anyone reported anything anymore. A friend at work had reported a burglary only because you had to in order to collect on your insurance. The police, he'd said, had taken the report over the phone. „I'll send somebody if you want,“ the cop had said, „but I've got to tell you, it's a waste of your time and ours.“ Someone else had been robbed of his watch and wallet at gunpoint and had not bothered reporting the incident. „What's the point?“ he'd said.

But even if there were a point, Elliott had nothing to report. A man had asked for money and he'd given it to him. They had a right to ask for money, some judge had ruled. They were exercising their First Amendment right of free speech. Never mind that there had been an unvoiced threat, that Elliott had paid the money out of intimidation. Never mind that it damn well felt like a mugging.

First Amendment rights. Maybe he ought to exercise his own rights under the Second Amendment—the right to bear arms.

That same evening, he took the gun from the drawer and tried it in various pockets—unloaded now. He tried tucking it into his belt, first in front, then behind, in the small of his back. He practiced reaching for it, drawing it. He felt foolish, and it was uncomfortable walking around with the gun in his belt like that.

It was comfortable in his right-hand jacket pocket, but the weight of it spoiled the line of the jacket. The pants pocket on the same side was better. He had reached into that pocket to produce the handful of change that had mollified the panhandler. Suppose he had come out with a gun instead?

„Thank you kindly. Have a nice day.“

Later, after he'd eaten, he went to the video store on the next block to rent a movie for the evening. He was out the door before he realized he still had the gun in his pocket. It was still unloaded, the six shells lying where he had spilled them on his bed. He had reached for the keys to lock up and there was the gun.

He got the keys, locked up, and went out with the gun in his pocket.

The sensation of being on the street with a gun in his pocket was an interesting one. He felt as though he were keeping a secret from everyone he met, and that the secret empowered him. He spent longer than usual in the video store. Two fantasies came and went. In one, he held up the clerk, brandishing his empty gun and walking out with all the money in the register. In the other, someone else attempted to rob the place and Elliott drew his weapon and foiled the holdup.

Back home, he watched the movie, but his mind insisted on replaying the second fantasy. In one version, the holdup man spun toward him, gun in hand, and Elliott had to face him with an unloaded revolver.

When the movie ended, he reloaded the gun and put it back in the drawer.

The following evening, he carried the gun, loaded this time. The night after that was a Friday, and when he got home from the office, he put the gun in his pocket almost without thinking about it. He went out for a bite of dinner, then played cards at a friend's apartment a dozen blocks away. They played, as always, for low stakes, but Elliott was the big winner. Another player joked that he had better take a cab home.

„No need,“ he said. „I'm armed and dangerous.“

He walked home, and on the way, he stopped at a bar and had a couple of beers. Some people at a table near where he stood were talking about a recent outrage, a young advertising executive in Greenwich Village shot dead while using a pay phone around the corner from his apartment. „I'll tell you something,“ one of the party said. „I'm about ready to start carrying a gun.“

„You can't, legally,“ someone said.

„Screw legally.“

„So a guy tries something and you shoot him and you're the one winds up in trouble.“

„I'll tell you something,“ the man said. „I'd rather be judged by twelve than carried by six.“

He carried the gun the whole weekend. It never left his pocket. He was at home much of the time, watching a ball game on television, catching up with his bookkeeping, but he left the house several times each day and always had the gun on his person.

He never drew it, but sometimes he would put his hand in his pocket and let his fingers curl around the butt of it. He found its presence increasingly reassuring. If anything happened, he was ready.

And he didn't have to worry about an accidental discharge. The chamber under the hammer was unloaded. He had worked all that out. If he dropped the gun, it wouldn't go off. But if he cocked it and worked the trigger, it would fire.

When he took his hand from his pocket and held it to his face, he could smell the odor of the gun on his fingers. He liked that.

By Monday morning, he had grown used to the gun. It seemed perfectly natural to carry it to the office.

On the way home, not that night but the following night, the same aggressive panhandler accosted him. His routine had not changed. „Come on,“ he said. „Gimme a dollar.“

Elliott's hand was in his pocket, his fingers touching the cold metal.

„Not tonight,“ he said.

Maybe something showed in his eyes.

„Hey, that's cool,“ the panhandler said. „You have a good day just the same.“ And stepped out of his path.

A week or so after that, he was riding the subway, coming home late after dinner with married friends in Forest Hills. He had a paperback with him, but he couldn't concentrate on it, and he realized that the two young men across the car from him were looking him over, sizing him up. They were wearing untied

basketball sneakers and warm-up jackets, and looked street smart and dangerous. He was wearing the suit he'd worn to the office and had a briefcase beside him; he looked prosperous and vulnerable.

The car was almost empty. There was a derelict sleeping a few yards away, a woman with a small child all the way down at the other end. One of the pair nudged the other, then turned his eyes toward Elliott again.

Elliott took the gun out of his pocket. He held it on his lap and let them see it, then put it back in his pocket.

The two of them got off at the next station, leaving Elliott to ride home alone.

When he got home, he took the gun from his pocket and set it on the nightstand. (He no longer bothered tucking it in the drawer.) He went into the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror.

„Fucking thing saved my life,“ he said.

One night, he took a woman friend to dinner. Afterward, they went back to her place and wound up in bed. At one point, she got up to use the bathroom, and while she was up, she hung up her own clothing and went to put his pants on a hanger.

„These weigh a ton,“ she said. „What have you got in here?“

„See for yourself,“ he said. „But be careful.“

„My God. Is it loaded?“

„They're not much good if they're not.“

„My God.“

He told her how he'd bought it in Florida, how it had now become second nature for him to carry it. „I'd feel naked without it,“ he said.

„Aren't you afraid you'll get into trouble?“

„I look at it this way,“ he told her. „I'd rather be judged by twelve than carried by six.“

One night, two men cut across the avenue toward him while he was walking home from his Friday card game. Without hesitation, he drew the gun.

„Whoa!“ the nearer of the two sang out. „Hey, it's cool, man. Thought you was somebody else, is all.“

They veered off, gave him a wide berth.

Thought I was somebody else, he thought. Thought I was a victim, is what you thought.

There were stores around the city that sold police equipment. Books to study for the sergeant's exam. Copies of the latest revised penal code. A T-shirt that read *n.y.p.d. homicide squad, our day begins when your day ends*.

He stopped in and didn't buy anything, then returned for a kit to clean his gun. He hadn't fired it yet, except in Florida, but it seemed as though he ought to clean it from time to time anyway. He took the kit home and unloaded the gun and cleaned it, working an oiled patch of cloth through the short barrel. When he was finished, he put everything away and reloaded the gun.

He liked the way it smelled, freshly cleaned with gun oil.



A week later, he returned and bought a bulletproof vest. They had two types, one significantly more expensive than the other. Both were made of Kevlar, whatever that was.

„Your more expensive one provides you with a little more protection,“ the proprietor explained. „Neither one’s gonna stop a shot from an assault rifle. The real high-powered rounds; concrete don’t stop ‘em. This here, though, it provides the most protection available, plus it provides protection against a knife thrust. Neither one’s a sure thing to stop a knife, but this here’s reinforced.“

He bought the better vest.

One night, lonely and sad, he unloaded the gun and put the barrel to his temple. His finger was inside the trigger guard, curled around the trigger.

You weren’t supposed to dry-fire the gun. It was bad for the firing pin to squeeze off a shot when there was no cartridge in the chamber.

Quit fooling around, he told himself.

He cocked the gun, then took it away from his temple. He uncocked it, put the barrel in his mouth. That was how cops did it when they couldn’t take it anymore. Eating your gun, they called it.

He didn’t like the taste, the metal, the gun oil. Liked the smell but not the taste.

He loaded the gun and quit fooling around.

A little later, he went out. It was late, but he didn’t feel like sitting around the apartment, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. He wore the Kevlar vest—he wore it all the time lately—and, of course, he had the gun in his pocket.

He walked around, with no destination in mind. He stopped for a beer but drank only a few sips of it, then headed out to the street again. The moon came into view, and he wasn’t surprised to note that it was full.

He had his hand in his pocket, touching the gun. When he breathed deeply, he could feel the vest drawn tight around his chest. He liked the sensation.

When he reached the park, he hesitated. Years ago, back when the city was safe, you knew not to walk in the park at night. It was dangerous even then. It could hardly be otherwise now, when every neighborhood was a jungle.

So? If anything happened, if anybody tried anything, he was ready.

