

It Took You Long Enough

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938-

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When the telephone rang she was sitting on the couch in a flannel robe struggling with a double-acrostic. The television set was on but she wasn't paying any attention to it. She turned the volume down before she picked up the phone.

"Shari? This is Howard Messinger."

"And so it is," she said.

"Shari?"

"What a stroke of luck," she said. "You're probably the only person I know who can tell me who commanded the Austrian forces at the battle of Blenheim."

"Prince Eugene."

"I somehow knew you would know that."

"Did you? The reason I called..."

"Only it doesn't fit."

"It has to."

"Three words."

"Eugene of Savoy."

"Just a minute."

"Shari..."

"Just a minute. Ha! It fits."

"Shari?"

"Yes. The reason you called."

"I'd like to see you."

She took a breath. "I don't think so," she said.

"I know what you're thinking. But it's important. I have to talk to you."

"What about?"

"I don't want to go into it over the phone. Christ, I'm in a booth, it's noisy here..."

"You sound a little shaky, Howard."

"I *am* a little shaky. Please?"

"I suppose so."

"I can be at your apartment in ten minutes."

"Well, don't. Give me at least a half hour. Have a drink or something. Or is that a bad idea?"

"Huh? Oh, am I drunk? My dear, I am so sober that it hurts."

"Well, have a drink and give me a half hour. Oh, if you want something to drink here you'd better pick up a bottle. I only have things like cr me de banana."

He gave her forty minutes, and she used almost all of them to dress and straighten the apartment. She put on a little makeup, decided against perfume.

This is Howard Messinger. Always the announcement, always his full name. As if she could fail to remember the voice.

He called her every now and then. The calls always surprised her, although by now she felt she ought not to be surprised. He was likely to call every three or four months, usually late at night, usually after he'd had a great deal to drink. He would talk with her for a few minutes and then hang up and it might be months before she heard from him again. This pattern had established itself over the past five years and she supposed that she should have grown used to it by now.

But he had never before asked to come up. And she had never before heard this urgency in his voice.

He buzzed from the vestibule. She buzzed back to unlatch the downstairs door. He climbed the stairs, knocked on her door. She opened it, stepped back and motioned him inside. He took off his coat and looked around for a place to put it. She took it from him and hung it in the closet.

He said, "Stand still a minute. Let me look at you. You look the same."

"The hell I do."

"You do. When did you cut your hair?"

"God! Years ago."

"I liked it better long."

“I don’t even remember what made me cut it. You’re looking very good yourself, incidentally.”

And indeed he was. His face was drawn, but he had the sort of dark good looks that were enhanced by stress. He had lost a bit of hair in front and his face had a few new lines in it but there was no denying that she still found him attractive. She was both pleased and distressed to discover this.

“I picked up a bottle of scotch,” he said. “I don’t know what you’re drinking these days.”

“Scotch’ll do. How do you want it? Rocks?”

“Fine.”

She made drinks. He took his and sat down in an armchair. She seated herself on the couch. She thought of several cute things to say and left them unsaid.

He said, “Thanks, incidentally.”

“For letting you come over? You didn’t give me much choice.”

“Thanks all the same. Well. The only way to say it is to say it. My marriage is over.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Well, that wasn’t what I expected. I don’t know what I did expect but certainly not that.”

“You’re not the only one.”

“I don’t suppose I am. Well, it took you long enough, Howard.”

“Took me—oh. No, that’s not the way it was, I’m afraid. I didn’t do anything. It got done.”

“Lynn left you?”

He smiled. “I suppose I should be flattered that it surprises you. Yeah, she went and walked. For better than a dozen years I did not quite leave her. I kept wanting to and kept not doing it, until I reached the point where I even stopped leaving the woman in fantasy. And now she has flown de coop.”

“She’ll be back.”

“No.”

“Of course she will.”

He was shaking his head. “No. No way. Damn, this turns out to be hard to say. The old macho pride.”

“Oh.”

“Uh-uh. She didn’t just leave me, she left me for another guy.”

“Somebody you know?”

“No, thank God.”

“Is he married?”

“Divorced. She met him through the fucking PTA, if you can believe that. I think I need another drink.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

She stayed an extra moment in the kitchen after replenishing his drink. She scrutinized the palm of her left hand. A couple of years ago someone had taken her to a pricy restaurant on First Avenue where a palmist had given her a reading. “Your head rules your heart,” the palmist had told her, among other things. She

studied her hand and hoped the old woman had spoken the truth. Just now would be a very bad time to let her heart get the upper hand.

When she was seated again on the couch she said, "Then it's definitely over?"

"No question. She wants to marry him, he wants to marry her, and I think we should raise our glasses to the happy couple."

"How do you feel about it, Howard?"

"That's the question, all right."

"Do you have an answer to go with it?"

He shrugged. "I always thought I did. Before it ever happened. When I used to think about leaving her, and when I began to reach the point where I knew it was never going to happen, I managed to dream up a lovely little scenario in which she fell in love with somebody else and so informed me, and I manfully accepted my fate while secretly rejoicing."

"Because you knew that was the only way you would get out of it."

"Right."

"But now you're not secretly rejoicing."

"I'm still rejoicing, damn it. But I'm also, I don't know, a little shaky. I don't know how much of this is wounded male pride. I've tried to allow for that and I still seem to feel something else."

"Not a question of suddenly realizing you love her?"

"Christ, no. But a sense of loss. And what the hell did I lose? A bad marriage to a woman who bored me to tears? I'm lucky to be out of this."

"You don't need to convince me. I thought you should have left her years ago."

"Nine years ago."

She forced herself to meet his eyes. "Nine years ago," she said.

"I wonder if it would have worked."

"No."

"You're awfully positive, Shari."

"Uh-huh."

"How can you be so sure?"

She thought for a moment. Then she said, "Do you know the story about the violinist? Once upon a time there was a great violinist who held a concert, and after the concert a young man came backstage for advice. He explained that he was studying the violin, that he had been told he had great talent, but that before he committed himself to a life on the concert stage he wanted to know if he had the potential to become truly great, as he didn't want to waste his life if he was doomed to be second rate. So the great violinist listened to him play, and then he said to him, 'Young man, your technique is excellent, you play very pleasingly, but you will never be truly great because you lack the fire. You just do not have the fire.'

"So the young man was crushed but he bore up manfully, thanked the great violinist for his candor, and left. He put his violin in the closet and applied himself to the business world where he was very successful. Many years later he met the great violinist at a benefit concert and told him that he owed all his success to him.

"How can that be?" asked the great violinist. 'Because I once came to you and played for you, and you told me I didn't have the fire, and so I gave up music and

went to work in the widget business.’ ‘Ah,’ said the great violinist. ‘But one thing I always wondered,’ said the businessman. ‘How could you tell that I didn’t have the fire just by listening to me for a few minutes?’

“The old violinist shrugged. ‘I could tell nothing,’ he said. ‘In fact I barely listened to you. Whenever a young person plays for me I tell him the same thing. I tell him he does not have the fire.’”

“The businessman was stunned. ‘But that’s terrible! I could have been a concert performer, I could have been a virtuoso! All my material success, it’s nothing to me compared to the life I dreamed of, and I could have had it except that I believed you!’”

“The old man smiled a sad smile. ‘But that is everything,’ he said. ‘Don’t you see? I told you you did not have the fire. And you listened to me, you believed me. But if you *had* had the fire you would not have paid any attention to me.’”

She had kept her eyes upon Howard Messinger while she told the story, but as she approached the end she looked away. Now she forced herself to seek his eyes again.

“I get the point,” he said.

“Uh-huh. I’ve always liked that story.”

“I’ll bet you have. I don’t think it’ll ever be one of my all-time favorites. If you and I really had something I would have left her then and there. And since I didn’t, *we* didn’t.”

“Something like that.” She got to her feet. “I’m going to have some coffee. Would you like some? Or would you rather have another drink?”

“No, I’d rather have coffee.”

A little later she said, “I’m sure you must be seeing someone these days.”

“Am I that predictable?”

“I can’t believe you suddenly embraced fidelity. That might add poignancy to all of this but it seems wildly out of character.”

“It’s comforting to see you’re still a bitch.”

“You’d hate me if I weren’t. You’re seeing somebody?”

He nodded. “A dancer. Lives on Horatio Street. She’s awfully young.”

“Most people are these days. A question comes to mind.”

“Why am I here and not on Horatio Street?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, it’s a good question. You are not the first person in this room to have thought of it.”

“And?”

“I don’t think I’ll be seeing much more of her.”

“Because Lynn left you.”

“Right.”

“The dancer was good enough for you while you were married, but not when you’re single again.”

“It’s not that simple,” he said. “But it amounts to pretty much the same thing. Let’s say she’s been a diversion, and now that I don’t have anything to be diverted from—”

“Uh-huh.”

She knew he was going to ask if he could stay the night. When he did she said she didn't think it was a good idea.

"I just don't want to be alone, Shari."

"And I just don't want us to sleep together."

"Let me stay on the couch, then."

"Oh, Howard."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

"I really don't want to go back to that hotel room."

She put out a cigarette. She said, "Once a man has slept with a woman, he always believes he can have her again anytime he wants her."

"Come off it."

"Or so I've been led to believe."

"That's not it at all."

"You know what I wish? I wish I could figure out just what role I play in your personal mythology. Drunken midnight phone calls every few months. A visit when your marriage breaks up. Just what are we supposed to be to each other?"

"Very good friends?"

"Maybe."

"Or maybe I'm still in love with you."

"Oh, Howard," she said. "Now you don't believe that any more than I do, baby."

She let him sleep on the couch. She had known all along that she would. She brought him a pillow and a blanket. "Don't come knocking on my door," she said. "I mean that."

She lay awake for a long time before slipping into a light and tentative sleep. She was awake before the alarm could sound. She showered and dressed, and when she entered the living room he had gone. There was a note on the arm of the couch. *I didn't come knocking on your door. But not for lack of wanting to. Thanks for the couch and the coffee. And mostly for being you.*

She tore the note in quarters and put the scraps in a wastebasket. She had been waiting for that knock. She had lain awake hoping it would not come, but knowing that she would not be able to deny him. If she had played a curious role in his personal mythology, so surely had he in hers. For years she had not really wanted to speak to him on the telephone, yet whenever he'd called, she had conversed willingly. She had let him come to her apartment last night, she had let him sleep on her couch, and she would have taken him into her bed if he had persisted.

But he had not, and now he would never have that power over her again. She knew this with a sudden assurance, and the knowledge was as frightening as any fresh liberation. They might indeed become friends, it was not impossible, but they would never again be whatever it was they had been. It had taken her nine years to get over him and one uneventful night had made all the difference.

Later that day, sitting at her desk, she burst abruptly into tears. But she got control of herself almost immediately. No one noticed a thing.

