

You Can't Lose

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

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Anyone who starves in this country deserves it. Really. Almost anybody who is dumb enough to want to work can get a job without any back-breaking effort. Blindies and crips haul in twenty-five bucks an hour bumming the Times Square district. And if you're like me—able-bodied and all, but you just don't like to work, all you got to do is use your head a little. It's simple.

Of course, before you all throw up your jobs, let me explain that this routine has its limitations. I don't eat caviar, and East Third Street is a long way from Sutton Place. But I never cared much for caviar, and the pad I have is a comfortable one. It's a tiny room a couple blocks off the Bowery, furnished with a

mattress, a refrigerator, a stove, a chair, and a table. The cockroaches get me out of bed, dress me, and walk me down to the bathroom down the hall. Maybe you couldn't live in a place like that, but I sort of like it. There's no problem keeping it up, 'cause it couldn't get any worse.

My meals, like I said, are not caviar. For instance, in the refrigerator right now I have a sack of coffee, a dozen eggs, and part of a fifth of bourbon. Every morning I have two fried eggs and a cup of coffee. Every evening I have three fried eggs and two cups of coffee. I figure, you find something you like, you should stick with it.

And the whole thing is cheap. I pay twenty a month for the room, which is cheap anywhere and amazing in New York. And in this neighborhood food prices are pretty low, too.

All in all, I can live on ten bucks a week with no trouble. At the moment I have fifty bucks in my pocket, so I'm set for a month, maybe a little more. I haven't worked in four months, haven't had any income in three.

I live, more or less, by my wits. I hate to work. What the hell, what good are brains if you have to work for a living? A cat lives fifty, sixty, maybe seventy years, and that's not a long time. He might as well spend his time doing what he likes. Me, I like to walk around, see people, listen to music, read, drink, smoke, and get a dame. So that's what I do. Since nobody's paying people to walk around or read or anything, I pick up some gold when I can. There's always a way.

By this I don't mean that I'm a mugger or a burglar or anything like that. It might be tough for you to get what I'm saying, so let me explain.

I mentioned that I worked four months ago, but I didn't say that I only held the job for a day. It was at a drugstore on West Ninety-sixth Street. I got a job there as a stock and delivery boy on a Monday morning. It was easy enough getting the job. I reported for work with a couple of sandwiches in a beat-up gym bag. At four that afternoon I took out a delivery and forgot to come back. I had twenty shiny new Zippo lighters in the gym bag, and they brought anywhere from a buck to a buck-seventy-five at the Third Avenue hockshops. That was enough money for three weeks, and took me all of one day to earn it. No chance of him catching me, either. He's got a fake name and a fake address, and he probably didn't notice the lighters were missing for a while.

Dishonest? Obviously, but so what? The guy deserved it. He told me straight off the Puerto Ricans in the neighborhood were not the cleverest mathematicians in the world, and when I made a sale I should shortchange them and we'd split fifty-fifty. Why should I play things straight with a bum like that? He can afford the loss. Besides, I worked one day free for him, didn't I?

It's all a question of using your head. If you think things out carefully, decide just what you want, and find a smart way to get it, you come out ahead, time after time. Like the way I got out of going into the army.

The army, as far as I'm concerned, is strictly for the sparrows. I couldn't see it a year ago, and I still can't. When I got my notice I had to think fast. I didn't want to try faking the eye chart or anything like that, and I didn't think I would get away with a conscientious objector pitch. Anyway, those guys usually wind up in stir or working twice as hard as everybody else. When the idea came to me it seemed far too simple, but it worked. I got myself deferred for homosexuality.

It was a panic. After the physical I went in for the psychiatric, and I played the beginning fairly straight, only I acted generally hesitant.

Then the Doc asks, „Do you like girls?“

„Well,“ I blurt out, „only as friends.“

„Have you ever gone with girls?“

„Oh, no!“ I managed to sound somewhat appalled at the idea.

I hesitated for a minute or two, then admitted that I was homosexual. I was deferred, of course.

You'd think that everybody who really wanted to avoid the army would try this, but they won't. It's psychological. Men are afraid of being homosexual, or of having people think they're homosexual. They're even afraid of some skull doctor who never saw them before and never will see them again. So many people are so stupid, if you just act a little smart you can't miss. After the examination was over I spent some time with the whore who lives across the hall from me. No sense talking myself into anything. A cat doesn't watch out, he can be too smart, you know.

To get back to my story—the money from the Zippos lasted two weeks, and I was practically broke again. This didn't bother me, though. I just sat around the pad for a while, reading and smoking, and sure enough, I got another idea that I figured would be worth a few bucks. I showered and shaved, and made a half-hearted attempt at shining my shoes. I had some shoe polish from the drugstore. I had some room in the gym bag after the Zippos, so I stocked up on toothpaste, shoe polish, aspirins, and that kind of junk. Then I put on the suit that I keep clean for emergencies. I usually wear dungarees, but once a month I need a suit for something, so I always have it clean and ready. Then, with a tie on and my hair combed for a change, I looked almost human. I left the room, splurged fifteen cents for a bus ride, and got off at Third Avenue and Sixtieth Street. At the corner of Third and Fifty-ninth is a small semi-hockshop that I cased a few days before. They do more buying and selling than actual pawning, and there aren't too many competitors right in the neighborhood. Their stock is average—the more common and lower-priced musical instruments, radios, cameras, record players, and the cheap stuff—clocks, lighters, rings, watches, and so on. I got myself looking as stupid as possible and walked in.

There must be thousands of hockshops in New York, but there are only two types of clerks. The first is usually short, bald, and over forty. He wears suspenders, talks straight to the lower-class customers and kowtows to the others. Most of the guys farther downtown fit into this category. The other type is like the guy I drew: tall, thick black hair, light-colored suit, and a wide smile. He talks gentleman-to-gentleman with his upper-class customers and patronizingly to the bums. Of the two, he's usually more dangerous.

My man came on with the Johnny-on-the-spot pitch, ready and willing to serve. I hated him immediately.

„I'm looking for a guitar,“ I said, „preferably a good one. Do you have anything in stock at the moment?“ I saw six or seven on the wall, but when you play it dumb, you play it dumb.

„Yes,“ he said. „Do you play guitar?“ I didn't and told him so. No point in lying all the time. But, I added, I was going to learn.

He picked one off the wall and started plucking the strings. „This is an excellent one, and I can let you have it for only thirty-five dollars. Would you like to pay cash or take it on the installment plan?“

I must have been a good actor, because he was certainly playing me for a mark. The guitar was a Pelton, and it was in good shape, but it never cost more than forty bucks new, and he had a nerve asking more than twenty-five. Any minute now he might tell me that the last owner was an old lady who only played hymns on it. I held back the laugh and plunked the guitar like a nice little customer.

„I like the sound. And the price sounds about right to me.“

„You’ll never find a better bargain.“ Now this was laying it on with a trowel.

„Yes, I’ll take it.“ He deserved it now. „I was just passing by, and I don’t have much money with me. Could I make a down payment and pay the rest weekly?“

He probably would have skipped the down payment. „Surely,“ he said. For some reason I’ve always disliked guys who say „surely.“ No reason, really. „How much would you like to pay now?“

I told him I was really short at the moment, but could pay ten dollars a week. Could I just put a dollar down? He said I could, but in that case the price would have to be forty dollars, which is called putting the gouge on.

I hesitated a moment for luck, then agreed. When he asked for identification I pulled out my pride and joy.

In a wallet that I also copped from that drugstore I have the best identification in the world, all phony and all legal. Everything in it swears up and down that my name is Leonard Blake and I live on Riverside Drive. I have a baptismal certificate that I purchased from a sharp little entrepreneur at our high school back in the days when I needed proof of age to buy a drink. I have a Social Security card that can’t be used for identification purposes but always is, and an unapproved application for a driver’s license. To get one of these you just go to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles and fill it out. It isn’t stamped, but no pawnbroker ever noticed that. Then there are membership cards in everything from the Captain Marvel Club to the NAACP. Of course he took my buck and I signed some papers.

I made it next to Louie’s shop at Thirty-fifth and Third. Louie and I know each other, so there’s no haggling. He gave me fifteen for the guitar, and I let him know it wouldn’t be hot for at least ten days. That’s the way I like to do business.

Fifteen bucks was a week and a half, and you see how easy it was. And it’s fun to shaft a guy who deserves it, like that sharp clerk did. But when I got back to the pad and read some old magazines, I got another idea before I even had a chance to start spending the fifteen.

I was reading one of those magazines that are filled with really exciting information, like how to build a model of the Great Wall of China around your house, and I was wondering what kind of damn fool would want to build a wall around his house, much less a Great Wall of China type wall, when the idea hit me. Wouldn’t a hell of a lot of the same type of people like a Sheffield steel dagger, twenty-five inches long, an authentic copy of a twelfth-century relic recently discovered in a Bergdorf castle? And all of this for only two bucks post-paid, no CODs? I figured they might.

This was a big idea, and I had to plan it just right. A classified in that type of magazine cost two dollars, a post office box cost about five for three months. I was

in a hurry, so I forgot about lunch, and rushed across town to the Chelsea Station on Christopher Street, and Lennie Blake got himself a post office box. Then I fixed up the ad a little, changing „twenty-five inches“ to „over two feet“. And customers would please allow three weeks for delivery. I sent ads and money to three magazines, and took a deep breath. I was now president of Cornet Enterprises. Or Lennie Blake was. Who the hell cared?

For the next month and a half I stalled on the rent and ate as little as possible. The magazines hit the stands after two weeks, and I gave people time to send in. Then I went west again and picked up my mail.

A hell of a lot of people wanted swords. There were about two hundred envelopes, and after I finished throwing out the checks and requests for information, I wound up with \$196 and sixty-seven three-cent stamps. Anybody want to buy a stamp?

See what I mean? The whole bit couldn't have been simpler. There's no way in the world they can trace me, and nobody in the post office could possibly remember me. That's the beauty of New York—so many people. And how much time do you think the cops will waste looking for a two-bit swindler? I could even have made another pick-up at the post office, but greedy guys just don't last long in this game. And a federal rap I need like a broken ankle.

Right now I'm 100 percent in the clear. I haven't heard a rumble on the play yet, and already Lennie Blake is dead—burned to ashes and flushed down the toilet. Right now I'm busy establishing Warren Shaw. I sign the name, over and over, so that I'll never make a mistake and sign the wrong name sometime. One mistake is above par for the course.

Maybe you're like me. I don't mean with the same fingerprints and all, but the same general attitudes. Do you fit the following general description: smart, coldly logical, content with coffee and eggs in a cold-water walk-up, and ready to work like hell for an easy couple of bucks? If that's you, you're hired. Come right in and get to work. You can even have my room. I'm moving out tomorrow.

It's been kicks, but too much of the same general pattern and the law of averages gets you. I've been going a long time, and one pinch would end everything. Besides, I figure it's time I took a step or two up the social ladder.

I had a caller yesterday, a guy named Al. He's an older guy, and hangs with a mob uptown on the West Side. He always has a cigar jammed into the corner of his mouth and he looks like a holdover from the twenties, but Al is a very sharp guy. We gassed around for a while, and then he looked me in the eyes and chewed on his cigar.

„You know,“ he said, „we might be able to use you.“

„I always work alone, Al.“

„You'd be working alone. Two hundred a night.“

I whistled. This was sounding good. „What's the pitch?“

He gave me the look again and chewed his cigar some more. „Kid,“ he said, „did you ever kill a man?“

Two hundred bucks for one night's work! What a perfect racket! Wish me luck, will you? I start tonight.

