

Paper House

by Walter Bjorkman

“What you do if they are wavering is pull this out.” Scanio held up an origami contraption made to look like a house, shuttered windows and chimney included.

“Because if they're wavering, it's about the coin, always about the coin. You already got them agreeing that they would be doing a disservice to their brats if they don't buy, so the only other reason is the green, the green.”

“So how does some cheap-ass mock-up of their house gonna do that?”

Eddie was already dubious about this whole deal, getting people on a normal week night to open their doors to a stranger and give them six-hundred bucks for an encyclopedia, even with the respected Collier's name on it. Eddie was used to going the library when growing up and now in college, for any subject matter after the letter 'L'. His folks had bought a World Book when he was young, once a month the next letter volume would arrive in the mail, and he was half-way through the 'A' when the 'B' would arrive. Then his Dad died when he was nine, and he had no problem giving it up in order to save a few bucks. As a result, if he needed information on Descartes or Euclid, he could spend a night in. Milton or Voltaire meant a trip to the library. Scanio was buying the beer after this last of three training days, so Eddie was willing to listen. He did wonder why his new boss waited to show this final ruse in the Irish bar across forty-ninth street instead of in the gleaming new offices on the eleventh floor of the headquarters.

“Easy, kid. See this here on the roof, whaddaya see?”

"A hole, a slot." Eddie smiled at what was coming.

"So you give them a line that all they have to do is drop in a quarter a day 'you spend that on coffee, right?' — wait for an answer — in that slot and someone will come out once a month to pick it up, no mail, no billing, just receipts."

Eddie quickly knew that this was Scanio's scam, not Collier's, and why it was recited in the bar — far from the ears of superiors.

"So to earn our ninety-six buck cut, we gotta commit to going around once a month every month to pick up?"

Scanio, and Eddie to an extent, gave Mitch a look at his innocence. Mitch got Eddie into this gig and was gung-ho. Sell just one a week working from 5-9 pm and you're making twice the average summer job wage, paid the next Monday after the sale. Eddie already had his reservations, seemed too good.

"Kid, you tell them I'm the collector, but in the hundreds of times my guys have done this, not one has opted for it. It's just a way to get them to buy the damn books! Hate to be the one that breaks it to ya, kid, there is no Sanny Claus, no Easter Bunny and no Collier's Collector, I'm not eating up my gas just to pick up a lousy seven bucks every month. Now I gotta go, got me a Chica from across the Gowanus I'm taking to Bananafish Garden for some dancin' tonight."

Scanio, some five years older, slapped down a fiver on the bar. "Manny, take care of these guys until that's gone, and here's a few for you. Got a feeling these kids are gonna pay me back in spades." Scanio, as team leader, got the same ninety-six for each one any of his team sold.

“Meet me here no later than four forty-five tomorrow. Late, the bus leaves, and don't show up the next day.”

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“We're starting in the toughest sell in my territory, I wanna see what you kids are made of. Hop in the bus. Thursday, tough night, people thinkin' about the weekend too.” The bus was a beat up Old's Super 98 that had an easy time fitting Eddie and Mitch and the three others.

“Where's that at?” Mitch, with his unapologetic enthusiasm, had become the perfect foil for Scanio.

“Forest Hills. You'll have trouble even getting someone to answer the door, if you do, they won't listen, and if they listen they won't buy and if they buy, they'll want the damn house to put the damn quarters in and I'll have to talk them outta it.”

“Why such a tough sell the first night?” Eddie was more dubious than ever.

“I wanna cut out the chaff, boys, cut out the chaff. If two of you even show up tomorrow, I'll be surprised. I can't be drivin' any panties around, I gotta pay for the wheels outta my take.”

Scanio picked up the team on the arranged street corner sharply at 9 pm. Eddie saw that Mitch had that ‘just swallowed a canary’ look as they approached from opposite sides.

“Alright, get in boys, not a word, tell me all about it back in Manhattan. Scanio peeled rubber as if he were lamming from a bank heist and cranked up a Frankie Valli cassette.

“Scanio!” Eddie yelled over the falsetto coming from the speakers. “What about that roly-poly guy Belvin, he didn't show yet,

you gonna leave him there? — he's never been outta Brooklyn or Manhattan!”

“..Kid, four forty-five at Kelly's, nine pm where I say. Like I said, no room for panties....”

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“They don't even have kids! How old are they, kid?” Scanio was beaming. He had dismissed the remaining two until the next day, knowing he wouldn't see them back, and reluctantly let Eddie join him and Mitch at the bar.

“About sixty, sixty-five or so.”

“How'd it go after that?” Scanio's team never had one sale the first night, let alone two, but he was hoping.

“That was the only place I went. They agreed to buy it after an hour, but then had to fix me coffee and cake and have me tell them all about myself, I think they are lonely. I almost didn't make it back in time.”

“Well kid, I confirm my sales on Saturday, if they are solid you got a cool ninety-four on Monday for one night of tea and crumpets at granny's. How's that for a deal! I'm buying tonight, but keep it up, you'll be buying for us.”

“Wait a minute, Scanio, Mitch is too hyped, but I caught that ninety-four. We're contractors, supposed to be ninety-six, no deductions, what's that about?”

“Uh,” Scanio looked to the bottles behind the bar, “that's a fund.”

“A fund? For what?”

"Bail, kid."

"Bail?" Eddie was now sure this was a scam. "We are illegal?"

"Well . . the books out on that. Some neighborhoods have 'no soliciting' laws, none ever held up in court."

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Eddie was about to pack it in, but he agreed with Mitch to give it a try for a week, so he did. The second night, on his last attempt, he made a sale to a construction worker's family that was rolling in new found money, six kids all under age ten running around. The guy and his wife agreed with every question so readily about the need for the books for the kids that the deal was sealed within ten minutes. He laughed at the paper house-bank, and even agreed to pay the whole six hundred upfront in cash. Eddie figured they just wanted something to get the kids out of their way until the pool out back was finished. This was after one couple, both sociology professors at Hofstra, agreed to let Eddie give the whole thirty minute spiel, all the while saying they weren't buying, but go ahead anyway. He felt like a case study, and vowed not to do another night, Mitch be damned. Then the sudden sale, the celebration at Kelly's and the paycheck coming in three days.

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By the next Wednesday, which was a week after the first night on the streets, both Eddie and Mitch had been skunked the rest of the time. Mitch was still willing, but less enthusiastic. Eddie was going to ditch it if nothing more happened. One of the others from a new group, Scanio was right, the original others never came back, sold one his first night out and was Scanio's new Golden Boy. They were now buying their own beers and hanging out nights with the sleeze Scanio instead of using their new money on the ladies back in their own yard. By the weekends, all of the lovelies had been scarfed up by their friends during the week, and this was supposed to be their summer, college kids just back in town with money.

That night the group was working the Elmont area, near Belmont Racetrack, just next to the Nassau County border. Eddie skilled his way into another sale to a very sympathetic couple that Eddie poured his heart out to over his dilemma. But now, a hundred eighty-eight in five nights of work, all of a sudden it didn't look so bad. He decided to just walk the neighborhood for the last hour, going over the plus and minuses.

"Kid" Eddie turned, expecting to see Scanio, instead the voice came from an unmarked car behind him.

"What are you doing out here all alone?"

The cop stayed inside the car, Eddie's oversized bookbag revealing his purpose.

"Get in the back, kid."

"Hey Scanio, I get this one call. Get out your bail fund, I just got busted for solicitation, and that just set off the holding cell, thinkin' I'm a gay ho."

"Sheet man, you didn't, damn!" Scanio was more concerned with forking over the one hundred fifty it would take than Eddie's plight. "Alright, where are you?"

"Elmont station."

"Elmont — they don't have one, sure you don't mean Hollis or Queens Village?"

"Nope, Elmont. Says right here, Nassau County Police, Elmont station."

"Sorry, kid, Nassau County don't cut it, you went out of our territory, you're on your own."

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Eddie got out the next day, posting the hundred fifty himself, and took a cab straight to the Forresters, the couple he made his last sale to, making a stop at a library with a blank Collier's stationary.

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"Mr. Scanio?"

"Yes, this is me."

"A very nice boy, Eddie, came by last night and offered us your excellent volumes. He said you'd be contacting us to finalize."

"He did?" Scanio had hung up on Eddie in jail, hadn't a clue. "Oh, yes, I'll be out this Saturday. Will you be taking the one-year installment, or pay in entirety?" Scanio was sure he could glom Eddie's cut as well.

"Actually, we decided to go with the cute little bank. Eddie came back with the form today and we signed it with our attorney. I guess we'll be seeing you every month for the next seven years or so."

