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UNLIMITED

NOEL LOOMIS



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# PARKING, UNLIMITED

NOEL LOOMIS



TINY WINDOWS

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I could have taken that three hundred dollars and gone to school for a year, by washing dishes two hours a night. I had worked for that money, too; shocking wheat for twelve hours a day in the August sun is no vacation. But Slim Coleman convinced me that we could run that three hundred into enough to take us both for four years.

I hadn't even had time to get a haircut—and I did want a haircut; now it was pretty shaggy.

But Slim, diplomat that he is, didn't even seem to notice my hair. "I've got a real deal," he said, and his deep eyes were shining with enthusiasm. "Have you got any money?"

"Some," I said cautiously.

"It takes three hundred. Have you got that much?"

I had intended to say no, but Slim has a way of fixing his deep, somber eyes on you that gives ineffable dignity even to a touch. "Okay," I said hopelessly. "What's the bite?"

"Well, you see, it's like this." We went into a drug store and ordered cokes, and Slim characteristically insisted on paying for them when he probably couldn't have bought a package of cigarettes. I let him pay, too. I had three hundred and one dollars, and I had no intention of parting with a nickel of it—except a dollar for a haircut.

"I was using the brain-finder and I ran across the owner of this unused garage in the Loop. His name is Richard LaBombard and he's got a lot of parking lots through the Loop, and you know what he's doing?"

I saw the waitress stare at me. I swallowed and tried to listen to Slim. "No."

Slim was staring at the waitress. "He loads them up with used cars every day so those who are hunting a parking place can't get in," he said absently. "You know what he wants?"

"Well, no." I never could figure those things, but Slim could see the angles a mile away. He was always good at that.

"He's made an application for a permit to build a parking ramp that will cover a solid block down in the middle of the Loop. Now, if he can build a place to park eight or ten thousand cars, naturally that one spot is going to be the best business spot in the city. And Richard LaBombard holds leases or options on half the store space around that block. He stands to make millions."

"Where does my three hundred come in?"

Slim ignored the acidulousness in my voice. "Well, as I say, I followed him with the brain-finder and found him holding hands with the mayor's wife at a skating rink—and the next day I—ah—persuaded him to give me an option to lease this building on the edge of the Loop."

"You mean you blackmailed him."

"That's a harsh word. I prefer persuaded myself. After all, he wouldn't want something like that to come up just when he's finagling for that permit, would he? Anyway, I paid five dollars for the option."

"That's unusual. You've got some of your own money in this deal."

Like a gentleman, Slim ignored that thrust. "Tomorrow is the first. I've got to raise two hundred and fifty for a month's rent. We'll need fifty more for deposits on light, heat, and power. We'll make a million within a month. We split fifty-fifty."

"How do you make the million?"

Slim looked around. Nobody was near; he leaned close and whispered. "This is the invention of the century. We can solve the parking problem of the entire city. You know how it is—you can't even get into a parking lot after ten a.m. Lots of businesses are threatening to put branches out in the suburbs."

"Yes?"

"The parking problem must be solved if the city is to survive," Slim said dramatically.

"Okay, but how can you make any more out of an old building than anybody else?"

He whispered again. "I can create a magnetic field that will slow electrons down to almost zero velocity. A car will shrink to about four inches long." He stared at me intently. "Do you see what that will mean?"

I sighed. "I'm afraid I do. If it works, you can pack a million cars in a space that ordinarily would hold about a thousand." I tried to stop my enthusiasm, but it was too late. The idea was taking hold. "And that garage is right across the street from Newton's, the biggest department store in the city."

"The parking problem was intensified last week when they abolished parking on the street so the afternoon traffic could get through. Boy, this is the spot for us!" Slim said.

"Will it take all of three hundred dollars?" I asked Slim.

He nodded gravely, "Every cent. And then it will be a shoestring."

"Wouldn't two hundred and ninety-nine be enough?"

"No," said Slim. He looked back at me. He had always been that way; he never compromised with my money.

I shuddered when I saw my hair in the mirror as we left. But, I knew I'd better keep the dollar for cigarettes....

We paid the first month's rent; I put up the deposits, and Slim brought a bunch of wire and stuff from his basement, and we worked till one o'clock winding gadgets and building a regular stall to run a car into. This garage had a ramp going to the basement floor, and we decided to use that floor. Also, there was an old freight elevator up to the second and third floors, and we could park a few on the main floor and send a few upstairs when we had time, because of course we didn't want the secret to get out.

Slim tried the squeezer-upper when he got it finished. He set a couple of old saw-horses inside and, turned on the juice. It was uncanny to see those things shrink. You could even hear the legs scrape on the concrete floor as they pulled together. In just about three seconds the saw-horses were an inch high. Then Slim reversed the current and they expanded to normal size again. All this in about one breath.

"But look," I said, suddenly stricken with a horrible thought. "What if you don't get a car back exactly the size it was at first? Then new tires

wouldn't fit, new parts wouldn't fit—oh, my goodness!" I was abruptly overwhelmed with the enormity of such damage.

"That's all taken care of," he assured me. "The electrons in any given object seem to have a tendency to resume their former orbits if they get a chance. In other words, if I expand a car to almost its normal size and then cut off the power, the electrons will sort of coast into their original orbits and the car will resume its exact former size. Sort of a quantum jump, I suppose."

I breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"Of course, if you go too far, you'll have an oversize car, but you could reduce it again," said Slim. "Now in the morning we'll hang out a parking sign and let them drive onto the main floor. You run the cars into the basement, and we'll have this thing down under the ramp, out of sight." Slim's deep eyes were glowing. "We'll make a million," he said, rubbing his hands.

Well, by the end of the next day it began to look as if we had, indeed, solved the most urgent problem of modern civilization—the parking problem. We had a sign out that said, Parking All Day 50c—No one Turned Away, and by the end of the day we had taken in nearly five hundred dollars.

But it was a mankiller. I handed out claim checks and drove cars to the basement. Slim reduced them and hauled them across the room to a lineup. That was funny—seeing a car shrink to three or four inches long. It was an irresistible impulse to pick it up, but when you tried, you changed your mind. The cars were practically as heavy in their small size as in their big size, and that made it something of a problem to get them moved around.

We had borrowed a toe-and-heel, a sort of crowbar with rollers on it, and with the reduced friction from the extremely small tires of the cars, it wasn't too hard to move them, but it was still a mankiller to move a thousand in one day, and move each twice. We took turns at the reducer. I could handle them best by catching them under the front axle, but we decided to make them six inches long so it would be easier. The metal in its smaller size seemed as tough as it had been normally, but the parts

were pretty small to get hold of with anything strong enough to handle them.

Slim solved this problem the second day when he put a long piece of gas-pipe on the heel-and-toe and shrank it considerably. The second day, too, we had two men working upstairs. The third day we had a gadget made so that we could roll a car's front wheel on it and then pull the car anywhere. That was when we began to get our breath. The other way had been tough. I don't know how Slim stood it at all; if I hadn't worked in the wheat-fields all summer I would have fallen from exhaustion.

We had two of those gadgets made and then we tilted the reducing stall a little. We'd block the wheels with a two-by-four after we had a car inside, then reduce it, take out the block, let the car roll onto the gadget and haul it away. We arranged them on the concrete floor in rows about four feet apart. When somebody came back to get their car out we had to pinch-bar the car back up on the gadget and wheel it to the stall.

The second week we had two stalls, one reducing and one expanding, and Slim was talking of having a new sloping floor put in to help in handling. By that time we were handling two thousand cars a day; you can do your own arithmetic.

On the last day of the month, LaBombard came in to collect his next month's rent. He was all eyes and he said he didn't see how we could do it. "You took in twenty-two hundred cars yesterday and this building won't hold over six hundred," he said, his eyes darting all around. "You must have a fast turnover."

Slim kidded him. "We put 'em on the roof," he said, and paid him and pushed him out. I didn't like the look in that man's eyes as he left.

"Well," said Slim exuberantly to me, "we're sitting on thirty thousand dollars. Think you can get through college on that?"

"I hope I can take time off to get a haircut," I said fervently. It was embarrassing to have people look at me and suddenly snicker and turn away to hide their faces. The trouble was, we didn't dare turn the reducing over to anybody else, and so we both worked like robots.



By the beginning of the second month we had a moving ramp. The boys upstairs put the car on the ramp, the car came downstairs and went through the reducer, came out on the other side and onto a platform. We had a tow-truck that just backed up, reached down a steel platform under the front axle, and walked away. It was funny to see that two-ton truck hauling a toy car across the floor.

Yes, we had a deal. Late at night, after we'd closed up and had time for some coffee, Slim would talk about how we were going to build a chain of parking ramps across the country.

"We'll make billions," he said, his deep eyes shining with a far-away fanaticism that only Slim Coleman can exhibit, "and we'll be known as the saviors of civilization. We'll call ourselves Parking Unlimited."

Then one night the building inspector came. We were just resting for a moment, with no cars in sight, when we looked around and there he stood. It startled us, because absolutely no one was allowed in the basement.

"What do you want?" Slim asked, and just then a car appeared on the ramp, coming down to the reducer.

"I'm the building inspector. I'm checking on the weight you're putting in this building. It's an old building, you know." And all the time his eyes were darting everywhere.

"Did LaBombard send you?" asked Slim. The car was halfway down.

"Well, not exactly; we're interested in this from the safety angle."

A second car's nose showed around the curve. I began to sweat.

"Okay," said Slim. "Look us over. We do the parking upstairs."

"What do you do down here?" The inspector stared at the reducing stall.

"That's a new-fangled washing apparatus."

"What are all these toy cars on the floor down here?"

I practically swallowed my tongue. I had known that was coming.

But Slim said casually, "Oh, we're making Christmas presents in our spare time." The first car was about to enter the reducing stall.

The inspector stared at the two thousand cars on the basement floor. "They look plenty real."

I held my breath. If he should ever try to pick up one of those cars, it would be all over for us. I could just imagine what two thousand owners would say if they should find out their cars had been reduced to six inches. People are not too broad-minded about such things.

But Slim had him by the elbow. With the savage shake of his head at me and the reducing stall, he said, "I'll take you up and show you around." They rode the ramp upstairs.

Right then I wanted to lie down and pass out with sheer relief, but the cars were beginning to pile up. I worked like a horse for half an hour, doing double duty. Then Slim came back with a haunting sadness in his eyes, and a faraway look that was not encouraging.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "He knows too much. Too many parking-lot people are putting on the heat."

"You mean he knows how we are packing them in?"

"No, but he knows that we are taking in as many as three thousand cars a day, while half the parking lots in town are begging for customers."

I sighed. "When are we leaving?"

Slim's eyes were looking far away. "At the end of the week," he said. "We've got enough money in the bank to pay all our bills. We've got a couple thousand in the safe, and we'll take in three or four more. Tomorrow's Friday. The next day will be Saturday and we should handle four thousand cars. We blow Saturday night. We'll go to the coast."

"Will I have time to get a haircut?" I asked hopefully.

"No. Get your hair cut in L.A." He went on dreamily, "We should have five thousand. We can start up again, and this time we'll start off right, so we can run indefinitely without anybody catching on. We've got some capital to work with now."

Friday was a good day. Slim only chuckled when I told him there was a man sitting across the street with a pad of paper and a pencil, tallying the cars that came in and those that went out.

"We're good for tomorrow," said Slim, "then they can have it. I've got plane reservations for two a.m."

He didn't say so, but I think he was getting as tight inside as I was. We were close—thirty hours from five thousand dollars—enough to go through college in good shape.

Saturday was a bell-ringer. By six o'clock in the evening we had parked over four thousand cars, and they were still coming. The safe was full of tens and twenties, all nicely wrapped and labeled, and our two suitcases were beside it. Still the money was pouring in. Nine cars a minute. One every seven seconds. Two hundred and fifty dollars an hour. It was better than a mint. The basement floor was beginning to fill up.

At six-thirty Slim was bringing a car back to full size and saying to me, "Watch this one. This is the building inspector's car; he's trying to get a clue."

At that exact moment a voice spoke behind us. "I beg your pardon, gentlemen." It was one of those clear, soft voices with little tinkling bells in it. Know what I mean?

Slim turned and stared. "Madam," he said, "don't you know the sign says 'No Admittance'?"

She looked repentant. "I'm sorry." She looked hurt. "I didn't think you gentlemen would mind." She turned as if to go.

I saw Slim melting down. I didn't blame him. That girl could have melted tungsten. Yes, I recognized her from her pictures in the society section—the mayor's wife.

Slim was apologizing. "I beg your pardon, Madam. It's quite all right. Your loveliness and radiant beauty just startled us. We—"

While Slim was laying it on thick, the building inspector's car was expanding. Now it became considerably too big for the stall and split it like a stick of dynamite going off in a shoe-box. It split it into a thousand pieces and then stood there, a passenger car seven feet tall.

The mayor's wife gave a little scream of delight. Slim gave a horrified gasp. I tried to faint.

"Oh," she said, "such a big car!"

Slim moaned. "Please, Madam, will you leave now?"

She looked hurt again. "Yes, but will you please put this package in my car?"

"I will," said Slim, through tight jaws. "But—"

"Why, that looks just like the building inspector's car," she said, wide-eyed. "It's his number, too."

"Madam," begged Slim, "you're no dummy; please leave now and let us get on with our work."

She walked upstairs dubiously. Slim was studying the enormous car with a hopeless look on his face. Orders for cars to be taken out were pouring down the chute.

"What are we going to do now? We can't run that car into the other stall, because it's too big. It will take all night to build another stall, and no doubt the inspector is waiting up there with a squad of cops, hoping something will happen. After all, we're costing LaBombard a million bucks." His eyes opened suddenly. "I'll bet he sent the woman down here to spy on us."

A car came down the ramp and went into the reducing stall, and Slim automatically set the dial.

The telephone rang, and I could hear the voice from where I stood. "The building inspector wants his car."

"Coming right up," Slim said.

Then he looked at me. I looked at him. "Get that safe open," he jerked out. I dived for it.

I was spinning the combination when I heard the voices. The building inspector was riding the ramp down to the basement. Then I heard more voices and saw the bottom half of two cops and Richard LaBombard on the freight elevator.

Slim hissed to me. "Make it snappy!"

I was trying to, but I couldn't get the thing open. Five thousand dollars in that safe and I couldn't get it. I spun the dial frantically and started over.

But now the ramp was filled with people. The cops were getting off the elevator. I jumped up and ran over to where Steve was standing.

The building inspector was staring bug-eyed at his huge car. Somebody went around the stall and saw the six-inch car crawling out. Somebody else took hold of the stall and shook it. "Where's my car? What's going on?"

Well, a mob is a funny thing. In about half a minute there were eight hundred people in that basement, and all of them tearing apart the reducing stall.

Slim and I hesitated no longer. We ran up the stairway and sifted out through the crowd....

At three o'clock in the morning Slim said to me, "You think that brakeman will kick us off?"

The brakeman came to us, sitting up there in the fresh night breeze on top of a carload of lettuce going east from California. He looked at me and then, as if he didn't believe it, he held his lantern up and examined my head all the way around.

"Why don't you go back to the farm? This ain't no life for you," he growled.

"I am considering that very seriously," I said with as much dignity as I could.

THE END

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**N**oel Loomis (April 3, 1905 – September 7, 1969) was a writer, principally of western, mystery and science-fiction, in the middle of the 20th century. Born and raised in the American West, he was sufficiently familiar with that territory to write a useful history of the Wells Fargo company.



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