

Spring 5-1-2020

Squatter's Guide to Empire

George Kennett
College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation

Kennett, George (2020) "Squatter's Guide to Empire," *The Prairie Light Review*. Vol. 42 : No. 2 , Article 49.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol42/iss2/49>

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There's about a seventeen-day window from the time a raid takes place, to the time they find a new renter for the apartment. You know this because you've timed it. In some neighborhoods, it's more like nine days, and in others, it's more like twenty-five. But here, in the industrial district, it's seventeen. On about the eighteenth day, a sanitation team comes in and cleans all the debris out, maybe fixes a broken window or a few bullet holes in the drywall. On about the twentieth day, the new guy moves in. So you've got about sixteen days, give or take, to get what you came for, and get out.

You're not going to find anything good. All the valuables got snatched by the cops when they came and busted the place up. Anything else worth taking, like food and medicine, was probably looted by the neighbors before you got there. But there are other ways to get food in this city, and you wouldn't have made it this far if you didn't know how. No, all you came for was the place itself. Because for sixteen glorious days, you have a roof over your head, running water, and a bed to sleep in.

Your biggest issue when you get inside is the door. Usually, it's just lying on the floor in front of its frame, the aftermath of a nasty battering ram entrance. It's easier for you to get in then, but of course, there's a big, rectangular hole in the wall for all manner of rain, cold, stray dogs and looters to get in. Sometimes, you find that they came in through a window, which is much easier to board up or barricade. Sometimes you'll get lucky, and the lock on the front door is the only thing that's busted, so you can just prop it shut with a chair.

Today, it was the latter. Lucky you. After you're done wedging the chair in between the floor and the doorknob, you try to flip the light switch. Nothing. Typical. You click on your flashlight and walk into the living room.

Ain't much to it. An overturned recliner, some broken bottles on the floor, a couch with the cushions all ripped open. You scan

the wall and see an empty spot where the TV probably used to be. You can't really tell the colors of the wallpaper in this light, but the design looks ugly. Like something you'd see in an old folks home. You refuse to believe stripes were ever in fashion. You turn one of the cushions over and set it ripped-side-down on the couch.

You plop your gear bag beside you and sit down. The seat isn't too comfortable, but you've been on your feet all day. You shouldn't take your boots off here, what with all the glass on the carpet. You do it anyway. Slowly, you nod off to an uneasy sleep.

That first night is when you have the most to worry about. Maybe some looters had the same bright idea you had. Maybe there's a raccoon or a bird hiding in the cupboard, riddled with rabies and God knows what else. Maybe the cops left a camera behind, and they mistake you for someone they're looking for. Hell, maybe they're looking for you. Maybe it's just a bad neighborhood, and the gunshots and sirens keep you from getting any shuteye. Once you've had time to work with your surroundings, you can handle just about anything. But that first night, before you get acquainted with the place, it's all down to luck.

Sometimes, on boring days, you might try to piece together what happened. How many cops came through here? How many people were in the place when it happened? Did they try to escape? Did they fight back? Sometimes you can see bloodstains on the carpet or bullet holes in the walls. Spent shell casings and kitchen knives where they have no business being.

You might even figure out why it happened. At one apartment, you might find UV lamps and empty potting planters in a back room. At another place, you might find gun racks with empty hooks on them, or empty packages of fertilizer and detergent in the trash bins. And if you look hard enough, you might find a pamphlet tucked away in the back of a bedroom closet.

The pamphlets are hard to come by, because the cops look so hard to find them, but you know one when you see it. There are lots of groups out there, with all sorts of different names and

ideas, but the pamphlets always look about the same. Same color patterns, same symbols. A raised fist, or stars, or birds, or photos of dirty, hungry children. Maroon on grey is a popular color scheme. Sometimes you open it up and find that you agree with what you're reading. You might even think to bring it along with you. But no, you know what they'll do to you if they catch you with one. You see the aftermath of it every day of your life. And they hassle you enough on the street as it is. Better to flush it down the toilet and pretend it was never there.

The only place you haven't searched yet is the closet where they put the washing machine. You look in the dryer, and there's a bright blue parka sitting there. You pull it out.

It's a name brand. You wonder how the cops left it behind until you try it on and realize it's a women's maternity size. Even so, it's a lot nicer than the ratty piece of shit you've got on, so you decide to ignore how baggy it is. It's still warm from the dryer.

You look out the window. You hear the beeping and shouting of the morning commute. That corner store with the busted security camera should be open by now. You feel in the pockets of your new coat. They're not too big, maybe only big enough for a granola bar or two. Maybe a bag of jerky, if you can squeeze it in there quick enough. With a nice jacket like this, maybe the clerk won't be watching you like a hawk this time.

You open the front door and close it behind you. As you walk out the door, you grin. It almost looks like the apartment you grew up in. Home sweet home.

For the next fifteen days, at least.