

# **And Miles to Go Before I Sleep**

**Enough Rope collection**

**by Lawrence Block, 1938–**

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When the bullets struck, my first thought was that someone had raced up behind me to give me an abrupt shove. An instant later I registered the sound of the gunshots, and then there was fire in my side, burning pain, and the impact had lifted me off my feet and sent me sprawling at the edge of the lawn in front of my house.

I noticed the smell of the grass. Fresh, cut the night before and with the dew still on it.

I can recall fragments of the ambulance ride as if it took place in some dim dream. I worried at the impropriety of running the siren so early in the morning.

They'll wake half the town, I thought.

Another time, I heard one of the white-coated attendants say something about a red blanket. My mind leaped to recall the blanket that lay on my bed when I was a boy almost forty years ago. It was plaid, mostly red with some green in it. Was that what they were talking about?

These bits of awareness came one after another, like fast cuts in a film. There was no sensation of time passing between them.

I was in a hospital room. The operating room, I suppose. I was spread out on a long white table while a masked and green-gowned doctor probed a wound in the left side of my chest. I must have been under anesthetic—there was a mask on my face with a tube connected to it. And I believe my eyes were closed. Nevertheless, I was aware of what was happening, and I could see.

I don't know how to explain this.

There was a sensation I was able to identify as pain, although it didn't actually hurt me. Then I felt as though my side were a bottle and a cork was being drawn from it. It popped free. The doctor held up a misshapen bullet for examination. I watched it fall in slow motion from his forceps, landing with a plinking sound in a metal pan.

„Other's too close to the heart,“ I heard him say. „Can't get a grip on it. Don't dare touch it, way it's positioned. Kill him if it moves.“

Cut.

Same place, an indefinite period of time later. A nurse saying, „Oh, God, he's going,“ and then all of them talking at once.

Then I was out of my body.

It just happened, just like that. One moment I was in my dying body on the table and a moment later I was floating somewhere beneath the ceiling. I could look down and see myself on the table and the doctors and nurses standing around me.

I'm dead, I thought.

I was very busy trying to decide how I felt about it. It didn't hurt. I had always thought it would hurt, that it would be awful. But it wasn't so terrible.

So this is death, I thought.

And it was odd seeing myself, my body, lying there. I thought, you were a good body. I'm all right, I don't need you, but you were a good body.

Then I was gone from that room. There was a rush of light that became brighter and brighter, and I was sucked through a long tunnel at a furious speed, and then I was in a world of light and in the presence of a Being of light.

This is hard to explain.

I don't know if the Being was a man or a woman. Maybe it was both, maybe it changed back and forth. I don't know. He was all in white, and He was light and was surrounded by light.

And in the distance behind Him were my father and my mother and my grandparents. People who had gone before me, and they were holding out their hands to me and beaming at me with faces radiant with light and love.

I went to the Being, I was drawn to Him, and He held out His arm and said, „Behold your life.“

And I looked, and I could behold my entire life. I don't know how to say what I saw. It was as if my whole life had happened at once and someone had taken a photograph of it and I was looking at that photograph. I could see in it everything that I remembered in my life and everything that I had forgotten, and it was all happening at once and I was seeing it happen. And I would see something bad that I'd done and think, I'm sorry about that. And I would see something good and be glad about it.

And at the end I woke and had breakfast and left the house to walk to work and a car passed by and a gun came out the window. There were two shots and I fell and the ambulance came and all the rest of it.

And I thought, Who killed me?

The Being said, „You must find out the answer.“

I thought, I don't care, it doesn't matter.

He said, „You must go back and find the answer.“

I thought, No, I don't want to go back.

All of the brilliant light began to fade. I reached out toward it because I didn't want to go back, I didn't want to be alive again. But it all continued to fade.

Then I was back in my body again.

„We almost lost you,“ the nurse said. Her smile was professional but the light in her eyes showed she meant it. „Your heart actually stopped on the operating table. You really had us scared there.“

„I'm sorry,“ I said.

She thought that was funny. „The doctor was only able to remove one of the two bullets that were in you. So you've still got a chunk of lead in your chest. He sewed you up and put a drain in the wound, but obviously you won't be able to walk around like that. In fact it's important for you to lie absolutely still or the bullet might shift in position. It's right alongside your heart, you see.“

It might shift even if I didn't move, I thought. But she knew better than to tell me that.

„In four or five days we'll have you scheduled for another operation,“ she went on. „By then the bullet may move of its own accord to a more accessible position. If not, there are surgical techniques that can be employed.“ She told me some of the extraordinary things surgeons could do. I didn't pay attention.

After she left the room, I rolled back and forth on the bed, shifting my body as jerkily as I could. But the bullet did not change its position in my chest.

I was afraid of that.

I stayed in the hospital that night. No one came to see me during visiting hours, and I thought that was strange. I asked the nurse and was told I was in intensive care and could not have visitors.

I lost control of myself. I shouted that she was crazy. How could I learn who did it if I couldn't see anyone?

„The police will see you as soon as it's allowed,“ she said. She was terribly earnest. „Believe me,“ she said, „it's for your own protection. They want to ask you a million questions, naturally, but it would be bad for your health to let you get all excited.“

Silly bitch, I thought. And almost put the thought into words.

Then I remembered the picture of my life and the pleasant and unpleasant things I had done and how they all had looked in the picture.

I smiled. „Sorry I lost control,“ I said. „But if they didn't want me to get excited they shouldn't have given me such a beautiful nurse.“

She went out beaming.

I didn't sleep. It did not seem to be necessary.

I lay in bed wondering who had killed me.

My wife? We'd married young, then grown apart. Of course she hadn't shot at me because she'd been in bed asleep when I left the house that morning. But she might have a lover. Or she could have hired someone to pull the trigger for her.

My partner? Monty and I had turned a handful of borrowed capital into a million-dollar business. But I was better than Monty at holding onto money. He spent it, gambled it away, paid it out in divorce settlements. Profits were off lately. Had he been helping himself to funds and cooking the books? And did he then decide to cover his thefts the easy way?

My girl? Peg had a decent apartment, a closet full of clothes. Not a bad deal. But for a while I'd let her think I'd divorce Julia when the kids were grown, and now she and I both knew better. She'd seemed to adjust to the situation, but had the resentment festered inside her?

My children?

The thought was painful. Mark had gone to work for me after college. The arrangement didn't last long. He'd been too headstrong, while I'd been unwilling to give him the responsibility he wanted. Now he was talking about going into business for himself. But he lacked the capital.

If I died, he'd have all he needed.

Debbie was married and expecting a child. First she'd lived with another young man, one of whom I hadn't approved, and then she'd married Scott, who was hard-working and earnest and ambitious. Was the marriage bad for her, and did she blame me for costing her the other boy? Or did Scott's ambition prompt him to make Debbie an heiress?

These were painful thoughts.

Someone else? But who and why?

Some days ago I'd cut off another motorist at a traffic circle. I remembered the sound of his horn, his face glimpsed in my rearview mirror, red, ferocious. Had he copied down my license plate, determined my address, lain in ambush to gun me down?

It made no sense. But it did not make sense for anyone to kill me.

Julia? Monty? Peg? Mark? Debbie? Scott?

A stranger?

I lay there wondering and did not truly care. Someone had killed me and I was supposed to be dead. But I was not permitted to be dead until I knew the answer to the question.

Maybe the police would find it for me.

They didn't.

I saw two policemen the following day. I was still in intensive care, still denied visitors, but an exception was made for the police. They were very courteous and spoke in hushed voices. They had no leads whatsoever in their investigation and just wanted to know if I could suggest a single possible suspect.

I told them I couldn't.

My nurse turned white as paper.

„You're not supposed to be out of bed! You're not even supposed to move! What do you think you're doing?“

I was up and dressed. There was no pain. As an experiment, I'd been palming the pain pills they issued me every four hours, hiding them in the bedclothes instead of swallowing them. As I'd anticipated, I did not feel any pain.

The area of the wound was numb, as though that part of me had been excised altogether. But nothing hurt. I could feel the slug that was still in me and could tell that it remained in position. It did not hurt me, however.

She went on jabbering away at me. I remembered the picture of my life and avoided giving her a sharp answer.

„I'm going home,“ I said.

„Don't talk nonsense.“

„You have no authority over me,“ I told her. „I'm legally entitled to take responsibility for my own life.“

„For your own death, you mean.“

„If it comes to that. You can't hold me here against my will. You can't operate on me without my consent.“

„If you don't have that operation, you'll die.“

„Everyone dies.“

„I don't understand,“ she said, and her eyes were wide and filled with sorrow, and my heart went out to her.

„Don't worry about me,“ I said gently. „I know what I'm doing. And there's nothing anyone can do.“

„They wouldn't even let me see you,“ Julia was saying. „And now you're home.“

„It was a fast recovery.“

„Shouldn't you be in bed?“

„The exercise is supposed to be good for me,“ I said. I looked at her, and for a moment I saw her as she'd appeared in parts of the picture of my life. As a bride. As a young mother.

„You know, you're a beautiful woman,“ I said.

She colored.

„I suppose we got married too young,“ I said. „We each had a lot of growing to do. And the business took too much of my time over the years. And I'm afraid I haven't been a very good husband.“

„You weren't so bad.“

„I'm glad we got married,“ I said. „And I'm glad we stayed together. And that you were here for me to come home to.“

She started to cry. I held her until she stopped. Then, her face to my chest, she said, „At the hospital, waiting, I realized for the first time what it would mean for me to lose you. I thought we'd stopped loving each other a long time ago. I know you've had other women. For that matter, I've had lovers from time to time. I don't know if you knew that.“

„It's not important.“

„No,“ she said, „it's not important. I'm glad we got married, darling. And I'm glad you're going to be all right.“

Monty said, „You had everybody worried there, kid. But what do you think you're doing down here? You're supposed to be home in bed.“

„I'm supposed to get exercise. Besides, if I don't come down here how do I know you won't steal the firm into bankruptcy?“

My tone was light, but he flushed deeply. „You just hit a nerve,“ he said.

„What's the matter?“

„When they were busy cutting the bullet out of you, all I could think was you'd die thinking I was a thief.“

„I don't know what you're talking about.“

He lowered his eyes. „I was borrowing partnership funds,“ he said. „I was in a bind because of my own stupidity and I didn't want to admit it to you, so I dipped into the till. It was a temporary thing, a case of the shorts. I got everything straightened out before that clown took a shot at you. They know who it was yet?“

„Not yet.“

„The night before you were shot, I stayed late and covered things. I wasn't going to say anything, and then I wondered if you'd been suspicious, and I decided I'd tell you about it first thing in the morning. Then it looked as though I wasn't going to get the chance. You didn't suspect anything?“

„I thought our cash position was light. But after all these years I certainly wasn't afraid of you stealing from me.“

„All those years,“ he echoed, and I was seeing the picture of my life again. All the work Monty and I had put in side by side. The laughs we'd shared, the bad times we'd survived.

We looked at each other, and a great deal of feeling passed between us. Then he drew a breath and clapped me on the shoulder. „Well, that's enough about old times,“ he said gruffly. „Somebody's got to do a little work around here.“

„I'm glad you're here,“ Peg said. „I couldn't even go to the hospital. All I could do was call every hour and ask anonymously for a report on your condition. Critical condition, that's what they said. Over and over.“

„It must have been rough.“

„It did something to me and for me,“ she said. „It made me realize that I've cheated myself out of a life. And I was the one who did it. You didn't do it to me.“

„I told you I'd leave Julia.“

„Oh, that was just a game we both played. I never really expected you to leave her. No, it's been my fault, dear. I settled into a nice secure life. But when you were on the critical list I decided my life was on the critical list, too, and that it was time I took some responsibility for it.“

„Meaning?“

„Meaning it’s good you came over tonight and not this afternoon, because you wouldn’t have found me at home. I’ve got a job. It’s not much, but it’s enough to pay the rent. You see, I’ve decided it’s time I started paying my own rent. In the fall I’ll start night classes at the university.“

„I see.“

„You’re not angry?“

„Angry? I’m happy for you.“

„I don’t regret what we’ve been to each other. I was a lost little girl with a screwed-up life and you made me feel loved and cared for. But I’m a big girl now. I’ll still see you, if you want to see me, but from here on in I pay my own way.“

„No more checks?“

„No more checks. I mean it.“

I remembered some of our times together, seeing them as I had seen them in the picture of my life. I was filled with desire. I went and took her in my arms.

She said, „But is it safe? Won’t it be dangerous for you?“

„The doctor said it’ll do me good.“

Her eyes sparkled. „Well, if it’s just what the doctor ordered—“ And she led me to the bedroom.

Afterward I wished I could have died in Peg’s bed. Almost immediately I realized that would have been bad for her and bad for Julia.

Anyway, I hadn’t yet done what I’d come back to do.

Later, while Julia slept, I lay awake in the darkness. I thought, This is crazy. I’m no detective. I’m a businessman. I died and You won’t let me stay dead. Why can’t I be dead?

I got out of bed, went downstairs, and laid out the cards for a game of solitaire. I toasted a slice of bread and made myself a cup of tea.

I won the game of solitaire. It was a hard variety, one I could normally win once in fifty or a hundred times.

I thought. It’s not Julia, it’s not Monty, it’s not Peg. All of them have love for me.

I felt good about that.

But who killed me? Who was left of my list?

I didn’t feel good about that.

The following morning I was finishing my breakfast when Mark rang the bell. Julia went to the door and let him in. He came into the kitchen and got himself a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove.

„I was at the hospital,“ he said. „Night and day, but they wouldn’t let any of us see you. I was there.“

„Your mother told me.“

„Then I had to leave town the day before yesterday and I just got back this morning. I had to meet with some men.“ A smile flickered on his face. He looked just like his mother when he smiled.

„I’ve got the financing,“ he said. „I’m in business.“

„That’s wonderful.“

„I know you wanted me to follow in your footsteps, Dad. But I couldn't be happy having my future handed to me that way. I wanted to make it on my own.“

„You're my son. I was the same myself.“

„When I asked you for a loan—“

„I've been thinking about that,“ I said, remembering the scene as I'd witnessed it in the picture of my life. „I resented your independence and I envied your youth. I was wrong to turn you down.“

„You were right to turn me down.“ That smile again, just like his mother. „I wanted to make it on my own, and then I turned around and asked for help from you. I'm just glad you knew better than to give me what I was weak enough to ask for. I realized that almost immediately, but I was too proud to say anything, and then some madman shot you and—well, I'm glad everything turned out all right, Dad.“

„Yes,“ I said. „So am I.“

Not Mark, then.

Not Debbie either. I always knew that, and knew it with utter certainty when she cried out „Oh, Daddy!“ and rushed to me and threw herself into my arms. „I'm so glad,“ she kept saying. „I was so worried.“

„Calm down,“ I told her. „I don't want my grandchild born with a nervous condition.“

„Don't worry about your grandchild. Your grandchild's going to be just fine.“

„And how about my daughter?“

„Your daughter's just fine. Do you want to know something? These past few days, wow, I've really learned a lot during these past few days.“

„So have I.“

„How close I am to you, for one thing. Waiting at the hospital, there was a time when I thought, God, he's gone. I just had this feeling. And then I shook my head and said, no, it was nonsense, you were all right. And you know what they told us afterward? Your heart stopped during the operation, and it must have happened right when I got that feeling. I knew, and then I knew again when it resumed beating.“

When I looked at my son I saw his mother's smile. When I looked at Debbie I saw myself.

„And another thing I learned, and that's how much people need each other. People were so good to us! So many people called me, asked about you. Even Philip called, can you imagine? He just wanted to let me know that I should call on him if there was anything he could do.“

„What could he possibly do?“

„I have no idea. It was funny hearing from him, though. I hadn't heard his voice since we were living together. But it was nice of him to call, wasn't it?“

I nodded. „It must have made you wonder what might have been.“

„What it made me wonder was how I ever thought Philip and I were made for each other. Scott was with me every minute, you know, except when he went down to give blood for you—“

„He gave blood for me?“



„Didn't mother tell you? You and Scott are the same blood type. It's one of the rarer types and you both have it. Maybe that's why I fell in love with him.“

„Not a bad reason.“

„He was with me all the time, you know, and by the time you were out of danger I began to realize how close Scott and I have grown, how much I love him. And then when I heard Philip's voice I thought what kid stuff that relationship of ours had been. I know you never approved.“

„It wasn't my business to approve or disapprove.“

„Maybe not. But I know you approve of Scott, and that's important to me.“

I went home.

I thought, *What do You want from me?* It's not my son-in-law. You don't try to kill a man and then donate blood for a transfusion. Nobody would do a thing like that.

The person I cut off at the traffic circle? But that was insane. And how would I know him anyway? I wouldn't know where to start looking for him.

Some other enemy? But I had no enemies.

Julia said, "The doctor called again. He still doesn't see how you could check yourself out of the hospital. But he called to say he wants to schedule you for surgery."

Not yet, I told her. Not until I'm ready.

„When will you be ready?“

When I feel right about it, I told her.

She called him back, relayed the message. „He's very nice,“ she reported. „He says any delay is hazardous, so you should let him schedule as soon as you possibly can. If you have something to attend to he says he can understand that, but try not to let it drag on too long.“

I was glad he was a sympathetic and understanding man, and that she liked him. He might be a comfort to her later when she needed someone around to lean on.

Something clicked.

I called Debbie.

„Just the one telephone call,“ she said, puzzled. „He said he knew you never liked him but he always respected you and he knew what an influence you were in my life. And that I should feel free to call on him if I needed someone to turn to. It was nice of him, that's what I told myself at the time, but there was something creepy about the conversation.“

And what had she told him?

„That it was nice to hear from him, and that, you know, my husband and I would be fine. Sort of stressing that I was married, but in a nice way. Why?“

The police were very dubious. Ancient history, they said. The boy had lived with my daughter a while ago, parted amicably, never made any trouble. Had he ever threatened me? Had we ever fought?

He's the one, I said. Watch him, I said. Keep an eye on him.

So they assigned men to watch Philip, and on the fourth day the surveillance paid off. They caught him tucking a bomb beneath the hood of a car. The car belonged to my son-in-law, Scott.

„He thought you were standing between them. When she said she was happily married, well, he shifted his sights to the husband.“

There had always been something about Philip that I had not liked. Something creepy, as Debbie put it. Perhaps he'll get treatment now. In any event, he'll be unable to harm anyone.

Is that why I was permitted to return? So that I could prevent Philip from harming Scott?

Perhaps that was the purpose. The conversations with Julia, with Monty, with Peg, with Mark and Debbie, those were fringe benefits.

Or perhaps it was the other way around.

All right.

They've prepared me for surgery. The doctor, understanding as ever, called again. This time I let him schedule me, and I came here and let them prepare me. And I've prepared myself.

All right.

I'm ready now.

