

Cleveland in My Dreams

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

Published: 1999/2002



„So,“ Loebner said. „You continue to have the dream.“

„Every night.“

„And it is always without variation yet? Perhaps you will tell me the dream again.“

„Oh, God,“ said Hackett. „It’s the same dream, all right? I get a phone call, I have to go to Cleveland, I drive there, I drive back. End of dream. What’s the point of going through it every time we have a session? Unless you just can’t remember the dream from one week to the next.“

„That is interesting,“ Loebner said. „Why do you suppose I would forget your dream?“

Hackett groaned. You couldn't beat the bastards. If you landed a telling shot, they simply asked you what you meant by it. It was probably the first thing they taught them in shrink school, and possibly the only thing.

„Of course I remember your dream,“ Loebner went on smoothly. „But what is important is not my recollection of it but what it means to you, and if you recount it once more, in the fullest detail, perhaps you will find something new in it.“

What was to be found in it? It was the ultimate boring dream, and it had been boring months ago when he dreamed it the first time. Nightly repetition had done nothing to enliven it. Still, it might give him the illusion that he was getting something out of the session. If he just sprawled on the couch for what was left of his fifty minutes, he ran the risk of falling asleep.

Perchance to dream.

„It's always the same dream,“ he said, „and it always starts the same way. I'm in bed and the phone rings. I answer it. A voice tells me I have to go to Cleveland right away.“

„You recognize this voice?“

„I recognize it from other dreams. It's always the same voice. But it's not the voice of anyone I know, if that's what you mean.“

„Interesting,“ Loebner said.

To you perhaps, thought Hackett. „I get up,“ he said. „I throw on some clothes. I don't bother to shave, I'm in too much of a hurry. It's very urgent that I go to Cleveland right away. I go down to the garage and unlock my car, and there's a briefcase on the front passenger seat. I have to deliver it to somebody in Cleveland.“

„I get in the car and start driving. I take I-71 all the way. That's the best route, but even so it's just about two hundred fifty miles door to door. I push it a little and there's no traffic to speak of at that hour, but it's still close to four hours to get there.“

„The voice on the phone has given you an address?“

„No, I just somehow know where I'm supposed to take the briefcase. Hell, I ought to know, I've been there every night for months. Maybe the first time I was given an address, it's hard to remember, but by now I know the route and I know the destination. I park in the driveway, I ring the bell, the door opens, a woman accepts the briefcase and thanks me—“

„A woman takes the briefcase from you?“ Loebner said.

„Yes.“

„What does this woman look like?“

„That's sort of vague. She just reaches out and takes the briefcase and thanks me. I'm not positive it's the same woman each time.“

„But it is always a woman?“

„Yes.“

„Why do you suppose that is?“

„I don't know. Maybe her husband's out, maybe he works nights.“

„She is married, this woman?“

„I don't *know*,“ said Hackett. „I don't know anything about her. She opens the door, she takes the briefcase, she thanks me, and I get back in my car.“

„You never enter the house? She does not offer you a cup of coffee?“

„I'm in too much of a hurry,“ Hackett said. „I have to get home. I get in the car, I backed out of the driveway, and I'm gone. It's another two hundred fifty miles to get home, and I'm dog-tired. I've already been driving four hours, but I push it, and I get home and go to bed.“

„And then?“

„And then I barely get to sleep when the alarm rings and it's time to get up. I never get a decent night's sleep. I'm exhausted all the time, and my work's falling off and I'm losing weight, and sometimes I'm just about hallucinating at my desk, and I can't stand it, I just can't stand it.“

„Yes,“ Loebner said. „Well, I see our hour is up.“

„Now let us talk about this briefcase,“ Loebner said at their next meeting. „Have you ever tried to open it?“

„It's locked.“

„Ah. And you do not have the key?“

„It has one of those three-number combination locks.“

„And you do not know the combination?“

„Of course not. Anyway, I'm not supposed to open the briefcase. I'm just supposed to deliver it.“

„What do you suppose is in the briefcase?“

„I don't know.“

„But what do you suppose *might* be in it?“

„Beats me.“

„State secrets, perhaps? Drugs? Cash?“

„For all I know it's dirty laundry,“ Hackett said. „I just have to deliver it to Cleveland.“

„You always follow the same route?“ Loebner said at their next session.

„Naturally,“ Hackett said. „There's really only one way to get to Cleveland. You take I-71 all the way.“

„You are never tempted to vary the route?“

„I did once,“ Hackett remembered.

„Oh?“

„I took I-75 to Dayton, I-70 east to Columbus, and then I picked up I-71 and rode it the rest of the way. I wanted to do something different, but it was the same boring ride on the same boring kind of road, and what did I accomplish? It's thirty-five miles longer that way, so all I really did was add half an hour to the trip, and my head barely hit the pillow before it was time to get up for work.“

„I see.“

„So that was the end of that experiment,“ Hackett said. „Believe me, it's simpler if I just stick with I-71. I could drive that highway in my sleep.“

Loebner was dead.

The call, from the psychiatrist's receptionist, shocked Hackett. For months he'd been seeing Loebner once a week, recounting his dream, waiting for some breakthrough that would relieve him of it. While he had just about given up anticipating that breakthrough, neither had he anticipated that Loebner would take himself abruptly out of the game.

He had to call back to ask how Loebner had died. „Oh, it was a heart attack,“ the woman told him. „He just passed away in his sleep. He went to sleep and never woke up.“

Later, Hackett found himself entertaining a fantasy. Loebner, sleeping the big sleep, would take over the chore of dreaming Hackett's dream. The little psychiatrist could rise every night to convey the dreaded briefcase to Cleveland while Hackett slept dreamlessly.

It was such a seductive notion that he went to bed expecting it to happen. No sooner had he dozed off, though, than he was in the dream again, with the phone ringing and the voice at the other end telling him what he had to do.

„I wasn't going to continue with another psychiatrist,“ Hackett explained, „because I don't really think I was getting anywhere with Dr. Loebner. But I'm not getting anywhere on my own, either. Every night I dream this goddamned dream and it's ruining my health. I'm here because I don't know what else to do.“

„Figures,“ said the new psychiatrist, whose name was Krull. „That's the only reason anybody goes to a shrink.“

„I suppose you want to hear the dream.“

„Not particularly,“ said Krull.

„You don't?“

„In my experience,“ Krull said, „there's nothing duller than somebody else's dream. But it's probably a good place to get started, so let's hear it.“

While Hackett recounted the dream, sitting upright in a chair instead of lying on a couch, Krull fidgeted. This new shrink was a man about Hackett's age, and he was dressed casually in khakis and a polo shirt with a reptile on the pocket. He was clean-shaven and had a crew cut. Loebner had looked the way a psychiatrist was supposed to look.

„Well, what do you want to do now?“ Hackett asked when he'd finished. „Should I try to figure out what the dream means or do you want to suggest what the dream might mean or what?“

„Who cares?“

Hackett stared at him.

„Really,“ Krull said, „do you honestly give a damn what your dream means?“

„Well, I—“

„I mean,“ said Krull, „what's the problem here? The problem's not that you're in love with your raincoat, the problem's not that they potty-trained you too early, the problem's not that you're repressing your secret desire to watch *My Little Margie* reruns. The problem is you're not getting any rest. Right?“

„Well, yes,“ Hackett said. „Right.“

„You have this ditsy dream every night, huh?“

„Every night. Unless I take a sleeping pill, which I’ve done half a dozen times, but that’s even worse in the long run. I don’t really *feel* rested—I have a sort of hangover all day from the pill, and I find drugs a little worrisome, anyway.“

„Mmmm,“ Krull said, clasping his hands behind his head and leaning back in his chair. „Let’s see now. Is the dream scary? Filled with terror?“

„No.“

„Painful? Harrowing?“

„No.“

„So the only problem is exhaustion,“ Krull said.

„Yes.“

„Exhaustion that’s perfectly natural, because a man who drives five hundred miles every night when he’s supposed to be resting is going to be beat to hell the next day. Does that pretty much say it?“

„Yes.“

„Sure it does. You can’t drive five hundred miles every night and feel good. But“—he leaned forward—„I’ll bet you could drive half that distance, couldn’t you?“

„What do you mean?“

„What I mean,“ said Krull, „is there’s a simple way to solve your problem.“ He scribbled on a memo pad, tore off the top sheet, handed it to Hackett. „My home phone number,“ he said. „When the guy calls and tells you to go to Cleveland, what I want you to do is call me.“

„Wait a minute,“ Hackett said. „I’m asleep while this is happening. How the hell can I call you?“

„In the *dream* you call me. I’ll come over to your place, I’ll get in the car with you, and we’ll drive to Cleveland together. After you deliver the briefcase, you can just curl up in the backseat and I’ll drive back. You ought to be able to get four hours’ sleep on the way home, or close to it.“

Hackett straightened up in his chair. „Let me see if I understand this,“ he said. „I get the call, and I turn around and call you, and the two of us drive to Cleveland together. I drive there, and you drive back, and I get to nap on the drive home.“

„Right.“

„You think that would work?“

„Why not?“

„It sounds crazy,“ Hackett said, „but I’ll try it.“

The following morning he called Krull. „I don’t know how to thank you,“ he said.

„It worked?“

„Like a charm. I got the call, I called you, you came over, and off we went to Cleveland together. I drove there, you drove back, I got a solid three and a half hours in the backseat, and I feel like a new man. It’s the craziest thing I ever heard of, but it worked.“

„I thought it would,“ Krull said. „Just keep doing it every time you have the dream. Call me the end of the week and let me know if it’s still working.“

At the week’s end, Hackett made the phone call. „It works better than ever,“ he said. „It’s gotten so I’m not dreading that phone call either, because I know we’ll

have a good time on the road. The drive to Cleveland is a pleasure now that I've got you in the car to talk to, and the nap I get on the way home makes all the difference in the world. I can't thank you enough."

"That's terrific," Krull told him. "I wish all my patients were as easily satisfied."

And that was that. Every night Hackett had the dream, and every night he drove to Cleveland and let the psychiatrist take the wheel on the way home. They talked about all sorts of things on the way to Cleveland—girls, baseball, Kant's categorical imperative, and how to know when it was time to discard a disposable razor. Sometimes they talked about Hackett's personal life, and he felt he was getting a lot of insight from their conversations. He wondered if he ought to send Krull a check for services rendered and asked Krull the following night in the dream. The dream-Krull told him not to worry about it: "After all," he said, "you're paying for the gas."

Hackett's health improved. He was able to concentrate better, and the improvement showed in his work. His love life improved as well, after having virtually ceased to exist. He felt reborn, and he was beginning to love his life.

Then he ran into Feverell.

"My God," he said. "Mike Feverell."

"Hello, George."

"How've you been, Mike? Lord, it's been years, hasn't it? You look—"

"I look like hell," Feverell said. "Don't I?"

"I wasn't going to say that."

"You weren't? I don't know why not, because it's the truth. I look terrible and I know it."

"How's your health, Mike?"

"My health? That's what's ridiculous. My health is fine, perfectly fine. I don't know how much longer I can go on before I just plain drop dead, but in the meantime my health is a hundred percent."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's too stupid to talk about."

"Oh?"

"It's this recurring dream," Feverell said. "I have the same dream every goddamned night, and it's driving me nuts."

The room seemed to fill up with light. Hackett took his friend's arm. "Let's get a couple of beers," he said, "and you can tell me all about your dream."

"It's stupid," Feverell said. "It's an adolescent sex fantasy. I'm almost ashamed to talk about it, but the thing is I can't seem to do anything about it."

"Tell me."

"Well, it's the same every night," Feverell said. "I go to sleep and the doorbell rings. I get up, put on a robe, answer the door, and there are three beautiful women there. They want to come in, and they want to have a party."

"A party?"

"What they want," said Feverell, "is for me to make love to them."

"And?"

"And I do."

„It sounds,“ said Hackett, „like a wonderful dream. It sounds like a dream people would pay money to have.“

„You’d think that, wouldn’t you?“

„What’s the problem?“

„The problem,“ said Feverell, „is that it’s too much. I make love to all three of them and I’m exhausted, drained, an empty shell, and no sooner do I drift off to sleep than the alarm clock’s ringing and it’s time to get up. I’m too old for three women in one night, and these aren’t hasty encounters. It takes the whole night to satisfy them all, and I’ve got no strength left for the rest of my life.“

„Interesting,“ said Hackett, in a manner not altogether unlike the late Dr. Loebner’s. „Tell me, are they always the same women?“

Feverell shook his head. „If they were,“ he said, „it’d be a cinch, because I wouldn’t keep getting turned on. But every night it’s three brand-new ladies, and the only common denominator is that they’re all gorgeous. Tall ones, short ones, light ones, dark ones. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. Even a bald one the other night.“

„That must have been interesting.“

„It was damned interesting,“ Feverell said, „but who needs it? Too much is still too much. I can’t resist them, I can’t turn them down, but I’ll tell you, I shudder when the doorbell rings.“ He sighed. „I suppose it relates to being divorced a little over a year and some kind of performance anxiety, something like that. Or do you suppose there’s a deeper cause?“

„Who cares?“

Feverell stared at him.

„Really,“ said Hackett. „What’s the difference why you’re having the dream? The *dream* is the problem, isn’t it?“

„Well, yeah, I guess so. But—“

„As a matter of fact,“ Hackett went on, „the dream isn’t the problem either. The problem is that there are too many women in it.“

„Well—“

„If there were just one woman,“ Hackett said, „you’d do just fine, wouldn’t you?“

„I suppose so—but there’s always three, and no matter how much I want to I can’t seem to tell two of them to go away. I don’t want to hurt their feelings, see, and it’d be impossible to choose among them anyway—“

„Suppose you only had to make love to one of them,“ Hackett said. „Could you handle that?“

„Sure, but—“

„And then you could get plenty of sleep after she left.“

„I guess so, but—“

„And you’d be rested in the morning. In fact, after a dream like that you’d probably feel like a million dollars, wouldn’t you?“

„What are you getting at, George?“

„Simple,“ said Hackett. „Simplest thing in the world.“

He got out a business card and scribbled on the back. „My home phone number,“ he said, thrusting the card at Feverell. „Go ahead, take it.“

„What am I supposed to do with this?“

„Memorize it,“ Hackett said, „and when the doorbell rings tonight, call me.“

„What do you mean, call you? I'm supposed to get up out of a sound sleep and call you? And then what happens? Is it like AA or something—you come over and we have coffee and you talk me out of dreaming?“

Hackett shook his head. „You don't get up,“ he said. „In the *dream* you call me. You call me, and then you go open the door and let the girls in.“

„What's the point of that?“

„The point is that I've got a friend, a psychiatrist as it happens, a very nice clean-cut type of guy. You'll call me, and I'll call him, and the two of us'll come over to your place.“

„You're going to schlepp some shrink to my house in the middle of the night?“

„This is in the dream,“ Hackett told him. „We'll come over, and you'll make love to one of the girls, whichever one you choose, and I'll take one, and my friend'll take one. And after you're done with your girl you can go to sleep, and you'll be perfectly well rested in the morning. And we can do this every night you have the dream. All you have to do is call me and we'll show up and help you out.“

Feverell stared at him. „If only it would work.“

„It will.“

„There was a Chinese girl the other night who was just plain out of this world,“ Feverell said. „But I couldn't really relax and enjoy her, because the Jamaican and the Norwegian girls were in the other room and, well—“

Hackett clapped his friend on the shoulder. „Call me,“ he said. „Your troubles are over.“

The following morning, on his way to work, Hackett gave himself up to a feeling of supreme well-being. He had repaid Krull's kindness to him in the best way possible, by passing on the favor to another. At his desk that morning, he waited for the phone to ring with a report from Feverell.

But Feverell didn't call. Not that morning, not the next morning, not all week. And something kept Hackett from calling Feverell.

Until finally he ran into him on the street during the noon hour—and Feverell looked *terrible!* Bags under his eyes, deeper than ever. Sallow skin, trembling hands. „Mike!“ he said. „Mike, are you all right?“

„Do I look all right?“

„No, you don't,“ Hackett said honestly. „You look awful.“

„Well, I *feel* awful,“ Feverell said savagely. „And I don't feel a whole lot better for being told how terrible I look, but thanks all the same.“

„Mike, what's wrong?“

„What's wrong? You know damned well what's wrong. It's this dream I've been having. I told you the whole story. Or did it slip your mind?“

Hackett sighed. „You're still having the dream?“

„Of course I'm still having the dream.“

„Mike,“ Hackett said, „when the doorbell rings, before you do anything else, you were going to call me, remember?“

„Of course I remember.“

„So?“

„So I've called you. Every night I call you, for all the good it does.“

„You do?“

„Of course I do, every goddamned night.“

„And then I come over? And I bring my friend?“

„Oh, right,“ said Feverell. „Your famous friend, the clean-cut psychiatrist. Whom I’ve yet to meet, because he doesn’t come over and neither do you. Every night I call you, and every night you hang up on me.“

„I hang up on you?“ Hackett stared. „Why would I do a thing like that?“

„I don’t know,“ said Feverell. „I don’t have the slightest idea. But every night I call you and you don’t even let me get a word in edgewise. ›I’m sorry,‹ you say, ›but I can’t talk to you now, I’m on my way to Cleveland.‹ Cleveland yet! And you hang up on me!“

