

Death Wish

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

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The cop saw the car stop on the bridge but didn't pay any particular attention to it. People were apt to pull over to the side in the middle of the span, especially late at night when the traffic was thin and they could stop for a moment without somebody's horn stabbing them in the back. The bridge was a graceful steel parabola over the deep channel of river that cut the city neatly in two, and the center of the bridge provided the best view of the city, with the old downtown buildings clustered together on the right, the flour mills downriver on the left, the gentle skyline, the gulls maneuvering over the river. The bridge was the best place to see it all. It wasn't private enough for the teenagers, who were given to long-

term parking and preferred drive-in movie theaters or stretches of road along the north bank of the river, but sightseers stopped often, took in the view for a few moments, and then continued across.

Suicides liked the bridge, too. The cop didn't think of that at first, not until he saw the man emerge from the car, and walk slowly to the footpath at the edge, and place a hand tentatively upon the rail. There was something in his stance, something in the pose of the solitary figure upon the empty bridge in the after-midnight gloom, something about the grayness of the night, the way the fog was coming off the river. The cop looked at him and cursed and wondered if he could get to him in time.

He walked toward the man, headed over the bridge on the footpath. He didn't want to shout or blow his whistle at him because he knew what shock or surprise could do to a potential jumper. Once he saw the man's hands tense on the rail, his feet lifting up on the toes. At that moment he almost cried out, almost broke into a run, but then the man's feet came back into position, his hands loosened their grip, and he took out a cigarette and lit it. Then the cop knew he had time. They always smoked that last cigarette all the way down before they went over the edge.

When the cop was within ten yards of him the man turned, started slightly, then nodded in resignation. He appeared to be somewhere in his middle thirties, tall, with a long narrow face and deep-set eyes topped with thick black eyebrows.

„Nice night,“ the cop said.

„Yes.“

„Having a look at the sights?“

„That's right.“

„Saw you out here, thought I'd come out and have a talk with you. It can get lonely this hour at night.“ The cop patted his pockets, passed over his cigarettes. „Say, you don't happen to have a spare cigarette on you, do you? I must have run out.“

The man gave him a cigarette. It was a filter, and the cop normally smoked nothing but regulars, but he wasn't about to complain. He thanked the man, accepted a light, thanked him again, and stood beside him, hands on the rail, leaning out over the water and looking at the city and the river.

„Looks pretty from here,“ he said.

„Does it?“

„Sure, I'd say so. Makes a man feel at peace with himself.“

„It hasn't had that effect on me,“ the man said. „I was thinking about, oh, the ways a man could find peace for himself.“

„I guess the best way is just to go on plugging away at life,“ the cop said. „Things generally have a way of straightening themselves out, sooner or later. Some of the time they take awhile, and I guess they don't look too good, but they work out.“

„You really believe that?“

„Sure.“

„With the things you see in your job?“

„Even with all of it,“ the cop said. „It's a tough world, but that's nothing new. It's the best we've got, the way I figure it. You're sure not going to find a better one at the bottom of a river.“

The man said nothing for a long time, then he pitched his cigarette over the rail. He and the cop stood watching it as it shed sparks on the way down, then heard the tiny hiss as it met the water.

„It didn't make much of a splash," the man said.

„No."

„Few of us do," the man said. He paused for a moment, then turned to face the cop. „My name's Edward Wright," he added. The cop gave his own name. „I don't think I would have done it," the man went on. „Not tonight."

„No sense taking chances, is there?"

„I guess not."

„You're taking a chance yourself, aren't you? Coming out here, standing at the edge, thinking it over. Anyone who does that long enough, sooner or later gets a little too nervous and goes over the edge. He doesn't really want to and he's sorry long before he hits the water, but it's too late; he took too many chances and it's over for him. Tempt fate too much and fate gets you."

„I suppose you're right."

„Something in particular bothering you?"

„Not... anything special, no."

„Have you been seeing a doctor?"

„Off and on."

„That can help, you know."

„So they say."

„Want to go grab a cup of coffee?"

The man opened his mouth, started to say something, then changed his mind. He lit another cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke, watching the way the wind dispersed it. „I'll be all right now," he said.

„Sure?"

„I'll go home, get some sleep. I haven't been sleeping so well, not since my wife—"

„Oh," the cop said.

„She died. She was all I had and, well, she died."

The cop put a hand on his shoulder. „You'll get over it, Mr. Wright. You just have to hold on, that's all. Hold on, and sooner or later you'll get over it. Maybe you think you can't live through it, nothing will be the same, but—"

„I know."

„You sure you don't want a cup of coffee?"

„No, I'd better get home," the man said. „I'm sorry to cause trouble. I'll try to relax, I'll be all right."

The cop watched him drive away and wondered whether he should have taken him in. No point, he decided. You went crazy enough hauling in every attempted suicide, and this one hadn't actually attempted anything, he had merely thought about it. Too, if you started picking up everyone who contemplated suicide you'd have your hands full.

He headed back for the other side of the bridge. When he reached his post he decided he should make a note of it, anyway, so he hauled out his pencil and his notebook and wrote down the name, *Edward Wright*. So he would remember what the name meant, he added *Big Eyebrows, Wife Dead, Contemplated Jumping*.

The psychiatrist stroked his pointed beard and looked over at the patient on the couch. The importance of beard and couch, as he had told his wife many times, lay in their property for enabling his patients to see him as a function of such outward symbols rather than as an individual, thus facilitating transference. His wife hated the beard and felt he used the couch for amorous dalliance. It was true, he thought, that he and his plump blonde receptionist had on a few occasions occupied the couch together. A few memorable occasions, he amended, and he closed his eyes, savoring the memory of the delicious way he and Hannah had gone through Krafft-Ebing together, page by delirious page.

Reluctantly, he dragged himself back to his current patient. „...no longer seems worth living,“ the man said. „I drag myself through life a day at a time.“

„We all live our lives a day at a time,“ the psychiatrist commented.

„But is it always an ordeal?“

„No.“

„I almost killed myself last night. No, the night before last. I almost jumped from the Morrissey Bridge.“

„And?“

„A policeman came along. I wouldn't have jumped anyway.“

„Why not?“

„I don't know.“

The interplay went on, the endless dialogue of patient and doctor. Sometimes the doctor could go through the whole hour without thinking at all, making automatic responses, reacting as he always did, but not really hearing a word that was said to him. *I wonder, he thought, whether I do these people any good at all. Perhaps they only wish to talk and need only the illusion of a listener. Perhaps the entire profession is no more than an intellectual confidence game. If I were a priest, he thought wistfully, I could go to my bishop when struck by doubts of faith, but psychiatrists do not have bishops. The only trouble with the profession is the unfortunate absence of an orderly hierarchy. Absolute religions could not be so democratically organized.*

He listened, next, to a dream. Almost all of his patients delighted in telling him their dreams, a source of unending frustration to the psychiatrist, who never in his life remembered having a dream of his own. From time to time he fantasized that it was all a gigantic put-on, that there were really no dreams at all. He listened to this dream with academic interest, glancing now and then at his watch, wishing the fifty-minute hour would end. The dream, he knew, indicated a diminishing enthusiasm for life, a development of the death wish, and a desire for suicide that was being tentatively held in check by fear and moral training. He wondered how long his patient would be able to refrain from taking his own life. In the three weeks he had been coming for therapy, he had seemed to be making only negative progress.

Another dream. The psychiatrist closed his eyes, sighed, and ceased listening. Five more minutes, he told himself. Five more minutes and then this idiot would leave, and perhaps he could persuade plump blonde Hannah to do some further experimentation with him. There was a case of Stekel's he had read just the other night that sounded delicious.

The doctor looked up at the man, took in the heavy eyebrows, the deep-set eyes, the expression of guilt and fear. „I have to have my stomach pumped, Doctor,“ the man said. „Can you do it here or do we have to go to a hospital?“

„What’s the matter with you?“

„Pills.“

„What sort? Sleeping pills? Is that what you mean?“

„Yes.“

„What sort? And how many did you take?“

The man explained the content of the pills and said that he had taken twenty. „Ten is a lethal dose,“ the doctor said. „How long ago did you take them?“

„Half an hour. No, less than that. Maybe twenty minutes.“

„And then you decided not to act like a damned fool, eh? I gather you didn’t fall asleep. Twenty minutes? Why wait this long?“

„I tried to make myself throw up.“

„Couldn’t do it? Well, we’ll try the stomach pump,“ the doctor said. The operation of the pump was unpleasant, the analysis of the stomach’s contents even less pleasant. The pumping had been in plenty of time, the doctor discovered. The pills had not yet been absorbed to any great degree by the bloodstream.

„You’ll live,“ he said finally.

„Thank you, Doctor.“

„Don’t thank me. I’ll have to report this, you know.“

„I wish you wouldn’t. I’m... I’m under a psychiatrist’s care. It was more an accident than anything else, really.“

„Twenty pills?“ The doctor shrugged. „You’d better pay me now,“ he said. „I hate to send bills to potential suicides. It’s risky.“

„This is a fine shotgun for the price,“ the clerk said. „Now, if you want to get fancy, you can get yourself a weapon with a lot more range and accuracy. For just a few dollars more—“

„No, this will be satisfactory. And I’ll need a box of shells.“

The clerk put the box on the counter. „Or three boxes for—“

„Just the one.“

„Sure thing,“ the clerk said. He drew the registry ledger from beneath the counter, opened it, set it on the top of the counter. „You’ll have to sign right there,“ he said, „to keep the state happy.“ He checked the signature when the man had finished writing. „Now I’m supposed to see some identification, Mr. Wright. Just a driver’s license if you’ve got it handy.“ He checked the license, compared the signatures, jotted down the license number, and nodded, satisfied.

„Thank you,“ said the man, when he had received his change. „Thank you very much.“

„Thank you, Mr. Wright. I think you’ll get a lot of use out of that gun.“

„I’m sure I will.“

At nine o’clock that night Edward Wright heard his back doorbell ring. He walked downstairs, glass in hand, finished his drink, and went to the door. He was a tall man, with sunken eyes topped by thick black eyebrows. He looked outside, recognized his visitor, hesitated only momentarily, and opened the door.

„His visitor poked a shotgun into Edward Wright’s abdomen.

„Mark—“

„Invite me in,“ the man said. „It’s cold out here.“

„Mark, I don’t—“

„Inside.“

In the living room Edward Wright stared into the mouth of the shotgun and knew that he was going to die.

„You killed her, Ed,“ the visitor said. „She wanted a divorce. You couldn’t stand that, could you? I told her not to tell you. I told her it was dangerous, that you were nothing but an animal. I told her to run away with me and forget you but she wanted to do the decent thing and you killed her.“

„You’re crazy!“

„You made it good, didn’t you? Made it look like an accident. How did you do it? You’d better tell me, or this gun goes off.“

„I hit her.“

„You hit her and killed her? Just like that?“

Wright swallowed. He looked at the gun, then at the man. „I hit her a few times. Quite a few times. Then I threw her down the cellar stairs. You can’t go to the police with this, you know. They can’t prove it and they wouldn’t believe it.“

„We won’t go to the police,“ the man said. „I didn’t go to them at the beginning. They didn’t know of a motive for you, did they? I could have told them a motive, but I didn’t go, Edward. Sit down at your desk, Edward. Now. That’s right. Take out a sheet of paper and a pen. You’d better do as I say, Edward. There’s a message I want you to write.“

„You can’t—“

„Write *I can’t stand it any longer. This time I won’t fail*, and sign your name.“

„I won’t do it.“

„Yes, you will, Edward.“ He pressed the gun against the back of Edward Wright’s shaking head.

„You wouldn’t do it,“ Wright said.

„But I would.“

„You’ll hang for it, Mark. You won’t get away with it.“

„Suicide, Edward.“

„No one would believe I would commit suicide, note or no note. They won’t believe it.“

„Just write the note, Edward. Then I’ll give you the gun and leave you with your conscience. I definitely know what you’ll do.“

„You—“

„Just write the note. I don’t want to kill you, Edward. I want you to write the note as a starter, and then I’ll leave you here.“

„Wright did not exactly believe him, but the shotgun poised against the back of his head left him little choice. He wrote the note, signed his name.

„Turn around, Edward.“

He turned, stared. The man looked very different. He had put on false eyebrows and a wig, and he had done something to his eyes, put makeup around them.

„Do you know who I look like now, Edward?“

„No.“

„I look like *you*, Edward. Not exactly like you, of course. Not close enough to fool people who know you, but we're both about the same height and build. Add the character tags, the eyebrows and the hair and the hollow eyes, and put them on a man who introduces himself as Edward Wright and carries identification in that name, and what have you got? You've got a good imitation of you, Edward.“

„You've been impersonating me.“

„Yes, Edward.“

„But why?“

„Character development,“ the man said. „You just told me you're not the suicidal type and no one will believe it when you kill yourself. However, you'd be surprised at your recent actions, Edward. There's a policeman who had to talk you out of jumping off the Morrissey Bridge. There's the psychiatrist who has been treating you for suicidal depression, complete with some classic dreams and fantasies. And there's the doctor who had to pump your stomach this afternoon.“ He prodded Edward's stomach with the gun.

„Pump my—“

„Yes, your stomach. A most unpleasant procedure, Edward. Do you see what I've gone through on your account? Sheer torture. You know, I was worried that my wig might slip during the ordeal, but these new epoxy resins are extraordinary. They say you can even wear a wig swimming, or in the shower.“ He rubbed one of the false eyebrows with his forefinger. „See how it stays on? And very lifelike, don't you think?“

Edward didn't say anything.

„All those things you've been doing, Edward. Funny you can't recall them. Do you remember buying this shotgun, Edward?“

„I—“

„You did, you know. Not an hour ago, you went into a store and bought this gun and a box of shells. Had to sign for it. Had to show your driver's license, too.“

„How did you get my license?“

„I didn't. I created it.“ The man chuckled. „It wouldn't fool a policeman, but no policeman ever saw it. It certainly fooled the clerk, though. He copied that number very carefully. So you must have bought that gun after all, Edward.“

The man ran his fingers through his wig. „Remarkably lifelike,“ he said again. „If I ever go bald, I'll have to get myself one of these.“ He laughed. „Not the suicidal type? Edward, this past week you've been the most suicidal man in town. Look at all the people who will swear to it.“

„What about my friends? The people at the office?“

„They'll all help it along. Whenever a man commits suicide, his friends start to remember how moody he's been lately. Everybody always wants to get into the act, you know. I'm sure you've been acting very shocked and distraught over her death. You'd have to play the part, wouldn't you? Ah, you never should have killed her, Edward. I loved her, even if you didn't. You should have let her go, Edward.“

Wright was sweating. „You said you weren't going to murder me. You said you would leave me alone with the gun—“

„Don't believe everything you hear,“ the man said, and very quickly, very deftly, he jabbed the gun barrel into Wright's mouth and pulled the trigger. Afterward he

arranged things neatly enough, removed one of Wright's shoes, positioned his foot so that it appeared he had triggered the shotgun with his big toe. Then he wiped his own prints from the gun and managed to get Wright's prints all over the weapon. He left the note on top of the desk, slipped the psychiatrist's business card into Wright's wallet, stuffed the bill of sale for the gun into Wright's pocket.

„You shouldn't have killed her,“ he said to Wright's corpse. Then, smiling privately, he slipped out the back door and walked off into the night.

