With a Smile for the Ending

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

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I had one degree from Trinity, and one was enough, and I'd had enough of Dublin, too. It is a fine city, a perfect city, but there are only certain persons that can live there. An artist will love the town, a priest will bless it, and a clerk will live in it as well as elsewhere. But I had too little of faith and of talent and too much of a hunger for the world to be priest or artist or pen warden. I might have become a drunkard, for Dublin's a right city for a drinking man, but I've no more talent for drinking than for deception—yet another lesson I learned at Trinity, and equally a bargain. (Tell your story, Joseph Cameron Bane would say. Clear your throat and get on with it.)

I had family in Boston. They welcomed me cautiously and pointed me toward New York. A small but pretentious publishing house hired me; they leaned toward foreign editors and needed someone to balance off their flock of Englishmen. Four months was enough, of the job and of the city. A good place for a young man on the way up, but no town at all for a pilgrim.

He advertised for a companion. I answered his ad and half a dozen others, and when he replied I saw his name and took the job at once. I had lived with his books for years: *The Wind at Morning*, *Cabot's House*, *Ruthpen Hallburton*, *Lips That Could Kiss*, others, others. I had loved his words when I was a boy in Ennis, knowing no more than to read what reached me, and I loved them still at Trinity where one was supposed to care only for more fashionable authors. He had written a great many books over a great many years, all of them set in the same small American town. Ten years ago he'd stopped writing and never said why. When I read his name at the bottom of the letter I realized, though it had never occurred to me before, that I had somehow assumed him dead for some years.

We traded letters. I went to his home for an interview, rode the train there and watched the scenery change until I was in the country he had written about. I walked from the railway station carrying both suitcases, having gambled he'd want me to stay. His housekeeper met me at the door. I stepped inside, feeling as though I'd dreamed the room, the house. The woman took me to him, and I saw that he was older than I'd supposed him, and next saw that he was not. He appeared older because he was dying. "You're Riordan," he said. "How'd you come up? Train?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pete run you up?" I looked blank, I'm sure. He said that Pete was the town's cabdriver, and I explained that I'd walked.

"Oh? Could have taken a taxi."

"I like to walk."

"Mmmmm," he said. He offered me a drink. I refused, but he had one. "Why do you want to waste time watching a man die?" he demanded. "Not morbid curiosity, I'm sure. Want me to teach you how to be a writer?"

"No, sir."

"Want to do my biography? I'm dull and out of fashion, but some fool might want to read about me."

"No, I'm not a writer."

"Then why are you here, boy?"

He asked this reasonably, and I thought about the question before I answered it. "I like your books," I said finally.

"You think they're good? Worthwhile? Literature?"

"I just like them."

"What's your favorite?"

"I've never kept score," I answered.

He laughed, happy with the answer, and I was hired.

There was very little to do that could be called work. Now and then there would be a task too heavy for Mrs. Dettweiler, and I'd do that for her. There were occasional errands to run, letters to answer. When the weather turned colder he'd

have me make up the fire for him in the living room. When he had a place to go, I'd drive him; this happened less often as time passed, as the disease grew in him.

And so, in terms of the time allotted to various tasks, my job was much as its title implied. I was his companion. I listened when he spoke, talked when he wanted conversation, and was silent when silence was indicated. There would be a time, his doctor told me, when I would have more to do, unless Mr. Bane would permit a nurse. I knew he would not, any more than he'd allow himself to die anywhere but in his home. There would be morphine shots for me to give him, because sooner or later the oral drug would become ineffective. In time he would be confined, first to his home and then to his room and at last to his bed, all a gradual preparation for the ultimate confinement.

"And maybe you ought to watch his drinking," the doctor told me. "He's been hitting it pretty heavy."

This last I tried once and no more. I said something foolish, that he'd had enough, that he ought to take it with a little water; I don't remember the words, only the stupidity of them, viewed in retrospect.

"I did not hire a damned warden," he said. "You wouldn't have thought of this yourself, Tim. Was this Harold Keeton's idea?"

"Well, yes."

"Harold Keeton is an excellent doctor," he said. "But only a doctor, and not a minister. He knows that doctors are supposed to tell their patients to cut down on smoking and drinking, and he plays his part. There is no reason for me to limit my drinking, Tim. There is nothing wrong with my liver or with my kidneys. The only thing wrong with me, Tim, is that I have cancer.

"I have cancer, and I'm dying of it. I intend to die as well as I possibly can. I intend to think and feel and act as I please, and go out with a smile for the ending. I intend, among other things, to drink what I want when I want it. I do not intend to get drunk, nor do I intend to be entirely sober if I can avoid it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Bane."

"Good. Get the chessboard."

For a change, I won a game.

The morning after Rachel Avery was found dead in her bathtub I came downstairs to find him at the breakfast table. He had not slept well, and this showed in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth.

"We'll go into town today," he said.

"It snowed during the night, and you're tired. If you catch cold, and you probably will, you'll be stuck in bed for weeks." This sort of argument he would accept. "Why do you want to go to town, sir?"

"To hear what people say."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Because Rachel's husband killed her, Tim. Rachel should never have married Dean Avery. He's a man with the soul of an adding machine, but Rachel was poetry and music. He put her in his house and wanted to own her, but it was never in her to be true, to him or to another. She flew freely and sang magnificently, and he killed her.

“I want to learn just how he did it, and decide what to do about it. Perhaps you’ll go to town without me. You notice things well enough. You sense more than I’d guessed you might, as though you know the people.”

“You wrote them well.”

This amused him. “Never mind,” he said. “Make a nuisance of yourself if you have to, but see what you can learn. I have to find out how to manage all of this properly. I know a great deal, but not quite enough.”

Before I left I asked him how he could be so sure. He said, “I know the town and the people. I knew Rachel Avery and Dean Avery. I knew her mother very well, and I knew his parents. I knew they should not have married, and that things would go wrong for them, and I am entirely certain that she was killed and that he killed her. Can you understand that?”

“I don’t think so,” I replied. But I took the car into town, bought a few paperbound books at the drugstore, had an unnecessary haircut at the barber’s, went from here to there and back again, and then drove home to tell him what I had learned.

“There was a coroner’s inquest this morning,” I said. “Death by drowning induced as a result of electrical shock, accidental in origin. The funeral is tomorrow.”

“Go on, Tim.”

“Dean Avery was in Harmony Falls yesterday when they finally reached him and told him what had happened. He was completely torn up, they said. He drove to Harmony Falls the day before yesterday and stayed overnight.”

“And he was with people all the while?”

“No one said.”

“They wouldn’t have checked,” he said. “No need, not when it’s so obviously an accident. You’ll go to the funeral tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t go myself.”

“And I’m to study him and study everyone else? Should I take notes?”

He laughed, then chopped off the laughter sharply. “I don’t think you’d have to. I didn’t mean that you would go in my place solely to observe, Tim, though that’s part of it. But I would want to be there because I feel I ought to be there, so you’ll be my deputy.”

I had no answer to this. He asked me to build up the fire, and I did. I heard the newspaper boy and went for the paper. The town having no newspaper of its own, the paper he took was from the nearest city, and of course there was nothing in it on Rachel Avery. Usually he read it carefully. Now he skimmed it as if hunting something, then set it aside.

“I didn’t think you knew her that well,” I said.

“I did and I didn’t. There are things I do not understand, Tim; people to whom I’ve barely spoken, yet whom I seem to know intimately. Knowledge has so many levels.”

“You never really stopped writing about Beveridge.” This was his fictional name for the town. “You just stopped putting it on paper.”

He looked up, surprised, considering the thought with his head cocked like a wren’s. “That’s far more true than you could possibly know,” he said.

He ate a good dinner and seemed to enjoy it. Over coffee I started aimless conversations but he let them die out. Then I said, “Mr. Bane, why can’t it be an accident? The radio fell into the tub and shocked her and she drowned.”

I thought at first he hadn’t heard, or was pretending as much; this last is a special privilege of the old and the ill. Then he said, “Of course, you have to have facts. What should my intuition mean to you? And it would mean less, I suppose, if I assured you that Rachel Avery could not possibly be the type to play the radio while bathing?”

My face must have showed how much I thought of that. “Very well,” he said. “We shall have facts. The water in the tub was running when the body was found. It was running, then, both before and after the radio fell into the tub, which means that Rachel Avery had the radio turned on while the tub was running, which is plainly senseless. She wouldn’t be able to hear it well, would she? Also, she was adjusting the dial and knocked it into the tub with her.

“She would not have played the radio at all during her bath—this I simply *know*. She would not have attempted to turn on the radio until her bath was drawn, because no one would. And she would not have tried tuning the set while the water was running because that is sheerly pointless. Now doesn’t that begin to make a slight bit of sense to you, Tim?”

They put her into the ground on a cold gray afternoon. I was part of a large crowd at the funeral parlor and a smaller one at the cemetery. There was a minister instead of a priest, and the service was not the one with which I was familiar, yet after a moment all of it ceased to be foreign to me. And then I knew. It was Emily Talstead’s funeral from *Cabot’s House*, except that Emily’s death had justice to it, and even a measure of mercy, and this gray afternoon held neither.

In that funeral parlor I was the deputy of Joseph Cameron Bane. I viewed Rachel’s small body and thought that all caskets should be closed, no matter how precise the mortician’s art. We should not force ourselves to look upon our dead. I gave small words of comfort to Dean Avery and avoided his eyes while I did so. I sat in a wooden chair while the minister spoke of horrible tragedy and the unknowable wisdom of the Lord, and I was filled with a sense of loss that was complete in itself.

I shared someone’s car to the cemetery. At graveside, with a wind blowing that chilled the edge of thought, I let the gloom slip free as a body into an envelope of earth, and I did what I’d come to do; I looked into the face of Dean Avery.

He was a tall man, thick in the shoulders, broad in the forehead, his hair swept straight back without a part, forming upon his head like a crown. I watched his eyes when he did not know that anyone watched him, and I watched the curl of his lip and the way he placed his feet and what he did with his hands. Before long I knew he mourned her not at all, and soon after that I knew the old man was right. He had killed her as sure as the wind blew.

They would have given me a ride back to his house, but I slipped away when the service ended, and spent time walking around, back and forth. By the time I was back at her grave, it had already been filled in. I wondered at the men who do such work, if they feel a thing at all. I turned from her grave and walked back through the town to Bane’s house.

I found him in the kitchen with coffee and toast. I sat with him and told him about it, quickly, and he made me go back over all of it in detail so that he could feel he had been there himself. We sat in silence awhile, and then went to the living room. I built up the fire and we sat before it.

"You know now," he said. I nodded, for I did; I'd seen for myself, and knew it and felt it. "Knowing is most of it," he said. "Computers can never replace us, you know. They need facts, information. What's the term? Data. They need data. But sometimes men can make connections across gaps, without data. You see?"

"Yes."

"So we know." He drank, put down his glass. "But now we have to have our data. First the conclusion, and then backward to the proof."

My eyes asked the question.

"Because it all must round itself out," he said, answering the question without my giving voice to it. "This man killed and seems to have gotten away with it. This cannot be."

"Should we call the police?"

"Of course not. There's nothing to say to them, and no reason they should listen." He closed his eyes briefly, opened them. "We know what he did. We ought to know how, and why. Tell me the men at the funeral, Tim, as many as you remember."

"I don't remember much before the cemetery. I paid them little attention."

"At the cemetery, then. That's the important question, anyway."

I pictured it again in my mind and named the ones I knew. He listened very carefully. "Now there are others who might have been there," he said, "some of whom you may not know, and some you may not remember. Think, now, and tell me if any of these were there."

He named names, five of them, and it was my turn to listen. Two were strangers to me and I could not say if I'd seen them. One I remembered had been there, two others had not.

"Get a pencil and paper," he told me. "Write these names down. Robert Hardesty, Hal Kasper, Roy Teale, Thurman Goodin. Those will do for now."

The first two had been at the funeral, and at the cemetery. The other two had not.

"I don't understand," I said.

"She had a lover, of course. That was why he killed her. Robert Hardesty and Hal Kasper should not have been at the funeral, or at least not at the cemetery. I don't believe they're close to her family or his. Thurman Goodin and Roy Teale should have been at the funeral, at the least, and probably should have been at the cemetery. Now a dead woman's secret love may do what you would not expect him to do. He may stay away from a funeral he would otherwise be expected to attend, for fear of giving himself away, or he might attend a funeral where his presence would not otherwise be required, out of love or respect or no more than morbid yearning. We have four men, two who should have been present and were not, and two who should not have been present but were. No certainty, and nothing you might call data, but I've a feeling one of those four was Rachel Avery's lover."

"And?"

"Find out which one," he said.

"Why would we want to know that?"

"One must know a great many unimportant things in order to know those few things which are important." He poured himself more bourbon and drank some of it off. "Do you read detective stories? They always work with bits and pieces, like a jigsaw puzzle, find out trivia until it all fits together."

"And what might this fit into?"

"A shape. How, why, when."

I wanted to ask more, but he said he was tired and wanted to lie down. He must have been exhausted. He had me help him upstairs, change clothes, and into bed.

I knew Hal Kasper enough to speak to, so it was his shop I started in that night. He had a cigar store near the railroad terminal and sold magazines, paperbound books, candies, and stationery. You could place a bet on a horse there, I'd heard. He was thin, with prominent features—large hollow eyes, a long, slim nose, a large mouth with big gray-white teeth in it. Thirty-five or forty, with a childless wife whom I'd never met, I thought him an odd choice for a lover, but I knew enough to realize that women did not follow logic's rules when they committed adultery.

He had been at the funeral. Joseph Cameron Bane had found this a little remarkable. He had no family ties on either side with Rachel or Dean Avery. He was below them socially, and not connected through his business. Nor was he an automatic funeral-goer. There were such in the town, I'd been told, as there are in every town; they go to funerals as they turn on a television set or eavesdrop on a conversation, for entertainment and for lack of better to do. But he was not that sort.

"Hi, Irish," he said. "How's the old man?"

I thumbed a magazine. "Asleep," I said.

"Hitting the sauce pretty good lately?"

"I wouldn't say so, no."

"Well, he's got a right." He came out from behind the counter, walked over to me. "Saw you this afternoon. I didn't know you knew her. Or just getting material for that book of yours?"

Everyone assumed I was going to write a novel set in the town, and that this was what had led me to live with Mr. Bane. This would have made as much sense as visiting Denmark in order to rewrite *Hamlet*. I'd stopped denying it. It seemed useless.

"You knew her?" I asked.

"Oh, sure. You know me, Irish. I know everybody. King Farouk, Princess Grace—" He laughed shortly. "Sure, I knew her, a lot better than you'd guess."

I thought I'd learn something, but as I watched his face I saw his large mouth quiver with the beginnings of a leer, and then watched the light die in his eyes and the smile fade from his lips as he remembered that she was dead, cold and in the ground, and not fit to leer over or lust after. He looked ever so slightly ashamed of himself.

"A long time ago," he said, his voice pitched lower now. "Oh, a couple of years. Before she got married, well, she was a pretty wild kid in those days. Not wild like

you might think; I mean, she was free, you understand?" He groped with his hands, long-fingered, lean. "She did what she wanted to do. I happened to be there. I was a guy she wanted to be with. Not for too long, but it was honey-sweet while it lasted. This is one fine way to be talking, isn't it? They say she went quick, though; didn't feel anything, but what a stupid way, what a crazy stupid way."

So it was not Hal Kasper who had loved her; not recently, at least. When I told all this to Joseph Cameron Bane he nodded several times and thought for some moments before he spoke.

"Ever widening circles, Tim," he said. "Throw a stone into a still pool and watch the circles spread. Now don't you see her more clearly? You wouldn't call Kasper a sentimental man, or a particularly sensitive man. He's neither of those things. Yet he felt that sense of loss, and that need to pay his last respects. There's purpose in funerals, you know, purpose and value. I used to think they were barbaric. I know better now. He had to talk about her, and had also to be embarrassed by what he'd said. Interesting."

"Why do we have to know all this?"

"Beginning to bother you, Tim?"

"Some."

" 'Because I am involved with mankind,' " he quoted.

"You'll learn more tomorrow, I think. Get the chessboard."

I did learn more the next day. I learned first to forget about Roy Teale. I had not recognized his name, but when I found him I saw that he was a man who had been at the funeral, as he might have been expected to be. I also learned, in the barbershop, that he was carrying on a truly passionate love affair, but with his own wife. He sat in a chair and grinned while two of the men ragged him about it.

I left, knowing what I had come to learn; if I'd stayed much longer I'd have had to get another haircut, and I scarcely needed one. I'd taken the car into town that day. It was colder than usual, and the snow was deep. I got into the car and drove to Thurman Goodin's service station. Mr. Bane usually had me fill the car at the station a few blocks to the north, but I did want to see Goodin. He and Robert Hardesty were the only names left on our list. If neither had been the woman's lover, then we were back where we'd started.

A high school boy worked afternoons and evenings for Goodin, but the boy had not come yet, and Thurman Goodin came out to the pump himself. While the tank filled he came over to the side of the car and rested against the door. His face needed shaving. He leaned his long hard body against the car door and said it had been a long time since he'd put any gas into the car.

"Mr. Bane doesn't get out much anymore," I said, "and I mostly walk except when the weather's bad."

"Then I'm glad for the bad weather." He lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. "Anyway, this buggy usually tanks up over to Kelsey's place. You had better than half a tankful; you could have made it over there without running dry, you know."

I gave him a blank look, then turned it around by saying, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. I was thinking about that woman who was killed."

I almost jumped at the sight of his face. A nerve twitched involuntarily, a thing he could not have controlled, but he might have covered up the other telltale signs. His eyes gave him away, and his hands, and the movements of his mouth.

"You mean Mrs. Avery," he said.

His wife was her cousin, Mr. Bane had told me. So he should have been at her funeral, and now should have been calling her Rachel or Rachel Avery. I wanted to get away from him!

"I was at the funeral," I said.

"Funerals," he said. "I got a business to run. Listen, I'll tell you something. Everybody dies. Fast or slow, old or young, it don't make a bit of difference. That's two twenty-seven for the gas."

He took three dollars and went into the station. He came back with the change and I took it from him. My hand shook slightly. I dropped a dime.

"Everybody gets it sooner or later," he said. "Why knock yourself out about it?"

When I told all this to Joseph Cameron Bane he leaned back in his chair with a sparkle in his eyes and the ghost of a smile on his pale lips. "So it's Thurman Goodin," he said. "I knew his father rather well. But I knew everybody's father, Tim, so that's not too important, is it? Tell me what you know."

"Sir?"

"Project, extend, extrapolate. What do you know about Goodin? What did he tell you? Put more pieces into the puzzle, Tim."

I said, "Well, he was her lover, of course. Not for very long, but for some space of time. It was nothing of long standing, and yet some of the glow had worn off."

"Go on, Tim."

"I'd say he made overtures for form's sake and was surprised when she responded. He was excited at the beginning, and then he began to be frightened of it all. Oh, this is silly, I'm making it all up—"

"You're doing fine, boy."

"He seemed glad she was dead. No, I'm putting it badly. He seemed relieved, and guilty about feeling relieved. Now he's safe. She died accidentally, and no one will ever find him out, and he can savor his memories without shivering in the night."

"Yes." He poured bourbon into his glass, emptying the bottle. Soon he would ask me to bring him another. "I agree," he said, and sipped at his whiskey almost daintily.

"Now what do we do?"

"What do you think we do, Tim?"

I thought about this. I said we might check with persons in Harmony Falls and trace Dean Avery's movements there. Or, knowing her lover's name, knowing so much that no one else knew, we might go to the police. We had no evidence, but the police could turn up evidence better than we, and do more with it once they had it.

He looked into the fire. When he did speak, I thought at first that he was talking entirely to himself and not to me at all. "And splash her name all over the earth," he said, "and raise up obscene court trials and filth in the newspapers, and pit lawyers against one another, and either hang him or jail him or free him. Ruin Thurman Goodin's marriage, and ruin Rachel Avery's memory."

"I don't think I understand."

He spun quickly around. His eyes glittered. "Don't you? Tim, Timothy, don't you truthfully understand?" He hesitated, groped for a phrase, then stopped and

looked pointedly at his empty glass. I found a fresh bottle in the cupboard, opened it, handed it to him. He poured a drink but did not drink it.

He said, "My books always sold well, you know. But I had bad press. The small town papers were always kind, but the real critics… I was always being charged with sentimentality. They used words like *cloying* and *sugary* and *unrealistic*." I started to say something but he silenced me with an upraised palm. "Please, don't leap to my defense. I'm making a point now, not lamenting a misspent literary youth. Do you know why I stopped writing? I don't think I've ever told anyone. There's never been a reason to tell. I stopped, oh, not because critics were unkind, not because sales were disappointing. I stopped because I discovered that the critics, bless them, were quite right."

"That's not true!"

"But it is, Tim. I never wrote what you could honestly call sentimental slop, but everything always came out right, every book always had a happy ending. I simply *wanted* it to happen that way, I wanted things to work out as they *ought* to work out. Do you see? Oh, I let my people stay in character, that was easy enough. I was a good plot man and could bring that off well enough, weaving intricate webs that led inexorably to the silver lining in every last one of the blacker clouds. The people stayed true but the books became untrue, do you see? Always the happy ending, always the death of truth."

"In *Cabot's House* you had an unhappy ending."

"Not so. In *Cabot's House* I had death for an ending, but a death is not always an occasion for sorrow. Perhaps you're too young to know that, or to feel it within. You'll learn it soon enough. But to return to the point, I saw that my books were false. Good pictures of this town, of some people who lived either in it or in my mind or in both, but false portraits of life. I wrote a book, then, or tried to; an honest one, with loose *threads* at the end and—what was that precious line of Salinger's? Yes. With a touch of squalor, with love and squalor. I couldn't finish it. I hated it."

He picked up the glass, set it down again, the whiskey untouched. "Do you see? I'm an old man and a fool. I like things to come out right—neat and clean and sugary, wrapped with a bow, and a smile for the ending. No police, no trials, no public washing of soiled underwear. I think we are close enough now. I think we have enough of it." He picked up his glass once more and this time drained it. "Get the chessboard."

I got the board. We played, and he won, and my mind spent more of its time with other pawns than the ones we played with now. The image grew on me. I saw them all, Rachel Avery, Dean Avery, Thurman Goodin, carved of wood and all of a shade, either black or white; weighted with lead, and bottomed with a circlet of felt, green felt, and moved around by our hands upon a mirthless board.

"You're afraid of this," he said once. "Why?"

"Meddling, perhaps. Playing the divinity. I don't know, Mr. Bane. Something that feels wrong, that's all."

"Paddy from the peat bog, you've not lost your sense of the miraculous, have you? Wee folk, and gold at the rainbow's end, and things that go bump in the night, and man a stranger and afraid in someone else's world. Don't move there, Tim, your queen's en prise, you'll lose her."

We played three games. Then he straightened up abruptly and said, “I don’t have the voice to mimic, I’ve barely any voice at all, and your brogue’s too thick for it. Go up to the third floor, would you, and in the room all the way back, there’s a closet with an infernal machine on its shelf—a tape recorder. I bought it with the idea that it might make writing simpler. Didn’t work at all; I had to see the words in front of me to make them real. I couldn’t sit like a fool talking at a machine. But I had fun with the thing. Get it for me, Tim, please.”

It was where he’d said, in a box carpeted with dust. I brought it to him, and we went into the kitchen. There was a telephone there. First he tested the recorder, explaining that the tape was old and might not work properly. He turned it on and said, “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party. The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.” Then he winked at me and said, “Just like a typewriter; it’s easiest to resort to formula when you want to say something meaningless, Tim. Most people have trouble talking when they have nothing to say. Though it rarely stops them, does it? Let’s see how this sounds.”

He played it back and asked me if the voice sounded like his own. I assured him it did. “No one ever hears his own voice when he speaks,” he said. “I didn’t realize I sounded that old. Odd.”

He sent me for bourbon. He drank a bit, then had me get him the phone book. He looked up a number, read it to himself a time or two, then turned his attention again to the recorder.

“We ought to plug it into the telephone,” he said.

“What for, sir?”

“You’ll see. If you connect them lawfully, they beep every fifteen seconds, so that the other party knows what you’re about, which hardly seems sensible. Know anything about these gadgets?”

“Nothing,” I replied.

He finished the glass of whiskey. “Now what if I just hold the little microphone to the phone like this? Between my ear and the phone, hmm? Some distortion? Oh, won’t matter, won’t matter at all.”

He dialed a number. The conversation, as much as I heard of it, went something like this:

> “Hello, Mr. Taylor? No, wait a moment, let me see. Is this four-two-one-five? Oh, good. The Avery residence? Is Mrs. Avery in? I don’t… Who’m I talking with, please? … Good. When do you expect your wife, Mr. Avery? … Oh, my! … Yes, I see, I see. Why, I’m terribly sorry to hear that, surely… Tragic. Well, I hate to bother you with this, Mr. Avery. Really, it’s nothing… Well, I’m Paul Wellings of Wellings and Doyle Travel Agency… Yes, that’s right, but I wish… Certainly. Your wife wanted us to book a trip to Puerto Rico for the two of you and… Oh? A surprise, probably… Yes, of course, I’ll cancel everything. This is frightful. Yes, and I’m sorry for disturbing you at this—”

There was a little more, but not very much. He rang off, a bitter smile on his pale face, his eyes quite a bit brighter now than usual. “A touch of macabre poetry,” he said. “Let him think she was planning to run off with Goodin. He’s a

cold one, though. So calm, and making me go on and on, however awkward it all was. And now it's all ready on the tape. But how can I manage this way?"

He picked up a phone and called another number. "Jay? This is Cam. Say, I know it's late, but is your tape recorder handy? Well, I'd wanted to do some dictation and mine's burned out a connection or something. Oh, just some work I'm doing. No, I haven't mentioned it, I know. It's something different. If anything ever comes of it, then I'll have something to tell you. But is it all right if I send Tim around for your infernal machine? Good, and you're a prince, Jay."

So he sent me to pick up a second recorder from Jason Falk. When I brought it to him, he positioned the two machines side by side on the table and nodded. "I hate deception," he said, "yet it seems to have its place in the scheme of things. I'll need half an hour or so alone, Tim. I hate to chase you away, but I have to play with these toys of mine."

I didn't mind. I was glad to be away from him for a few moments, for he was upsetting me more than I wanted to admit. There was something bad in the air that night, and more than my Irish soul was telling me so. Joseph Cameron Bane was playing God. He was manipulating people, toying with them. Writing them, and with no books to put them in.

It was too cold for walking. I got into the car and drove around the streets of the town, then out of the town and off on a winding road that went up into the hills beyond the town's edge. The snow was deep but no fresh snow was falling, and the moon was close to full and the sky cluttered with stars. I stopped the car and got out of it and took a long look back at the town below, his town. I thought it would be good right now to be a drinking man and warm myself from a bottle and walk in the night and pause now and then to gaze at the town below.

"You were gone long," he said.

"I got lost. It took time to find my way back."

"Tim, this still bothers you, doesn't it? Of course it does. Listen to me. I am going to put some people into motion, that is all. I am going to let some men talk to one another, and I am going to write their lines for them. Do you understand? Their opening lines. They wouldn't do it themselves. They wouldn't start it. I'll start it, and then they'll help it play itself out."

He was right, of course. Avery could not be allowed to get away with murder, nor should the dead woman's sins be placed on public display for all to stare at. "Now listen to this," he said, bright-eyed again. "I'm proud of myself, frankly."

He dialed a number, then poised his index finger above one of the buttons on the recorder. He was huddled over the table so that the telephone mouthpiece was just a few inches from the recorder's speaker. The phone was answered, and he pressed a button and I heard Dean Avery's voice. "Goodin?"

A pause. Then, "This is Dean Avery. I know all about it, Goodin. You and my wife. You and Rachel. I know all about it. And now she's dead. An accident. Think about it, Goodin. You'll have to think about it."

He replaced the receiver.

"How did you…"

He looked at my gaping mouth and laughed aloud at me. "Just careful editing," he said. "Playing from one machine to the next, back and forth, a word here, a

phrase there, all interwoven and put together. Even the inflection can be changed by raising or lowering the volume as you bounce from one machine to the other. Isn't it startling? I told you I have fun with this machine. I never got anything written on it, but I had a good time fooling around with it."

"All those phrases—you even had his name."

"It was *good* of you to call. And the tail syllable of some other word, *happen*, I think. The two cropped out and spliced together and tossed back and forth until they fit well enough. I was busy while you were gone, Tim. It wasn't simple to get it all right."

"Now what happens?"

"Goodin calls Avery."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, Tim! I'll call Goodin and tell him how my car's broken down, or that he's won a football pool, or something inane, and do the same thing with his voice. And call Avery for him, and accuse him of the murder. That's all. They'll take it from there. I expect Avery will crack. If I get enough words to play with, I can have Goodin outline the whole murder, how it happened, everything."

His fingers drummed the table top. "Avery might kill himself," he said. "The killers always do in that woman's stories about the little Belgian detective. They excuse themselves and blow their brains out in a gentlemanly manner. There might be a confrontation between the two. I'm not sure."

"Will it wait until morning?"

"I thought I'd call Goodin now."

He was plainly exhausted. It was too late for him to be awake, but the excitement kept him from feeling the fatigue. I hated playing nursemaid. I let him drink too much every day, let him die as he wished, but it was not good for him to wear himself out this way.

"Goodin will be shaken by the call," I told him. "You'll probably have trouble getting him to talk. He may have closed the station for the night."

"I'll call and find out," he said.

He called, the recorder at the ready, and the phone rang and went unanswered. He wanted to wait up and try again, but I made him give it up and wait until the next day. I put him to bed and went downstairs and straightened up the kitchen. There was a half inch of whiskey in a bottle, and I poured it into a glass and drank it, a thing I rarely do. It warmed me and I'd needed warming. I went upstairs and to bed, and still had trouble sleeping.

There were dreams, and bad ones, dreams that woke me and sat me upright with a shapeless wisp of horror falling off like smoke. I slept badly and woke early. I was downstairs while he slept. While I ate toast and drank tea, Mrs. Dettweiler worried aloud about him. "You've got him all worked up," she said. "He shouldn't get like that. A sick man like him, he should rest, he should be calm."

"He wants the excitement. And it's not my doing."

"As sick as he is…"

"He's dying, and has a right to do it his own way."

"Some way to talk!"

"It's his way."

"There's a difference."

The radio was playing, tuned to a station in Harmony Falls. Our town had one FM station but the radio did not get FM. Mrs. Dettweiler always played a radio unless Mr. Bane was in the room, in which case he generally told her to turn it off. When she was upstairs in her own room, the television was always on, unless she was praying or sleeping. I listened to it now and thought that he might have used it for his taping and editing and splicing. If you wished to disguise your voice, you might do it that way. If Dean Avery had never heard Thurman Goodin's voice, or not well enough to recognize it, you could work it well enough that way. With all those words and phrases at your disposal…

Halfway through the newscast they read an item from our town, read just a brief news story, and I spilled my tea all over the kitchen table. The cup fell to the floor and broke in half.

"Why, for goodness…"

I turned off the radio, thought better, and reached to pull its plug. He never turned it on, hated it, but it might occur to him to tape from it, and I didn't want that. Not yet.

"Keep that thing off," I said. "Don't let him hear it, and don't tell him anything. If he tries to play the radio, say it's not working."

"I don't…"

"Just do as you're told!" I said. She went white and nodded mutely, and I hurried out of the house and drove into town. On the way I noticed that I held the steering wheel so tightly my fingers had gone numb. I couldn't help it. I'd have taken a drink then if there'd been one about. I'd have drunk kerosene, or perfume—anything at all.

I went to the drugstore and to the barbershop, and heard the same story in both places, and walked around a bit to relax, the last with little success. I left the car where I'd parked it and walked back to his house and breathed cold air and gritted my teeth against more than the cold. I did not even realize until much later that it was fairly stupid to leave the car. It seemed quite natural at the time.

He was up by the time I reached the house, wearing robe and slippers, seated at the table with telephone and tape recorder. "Where'd you go?" he wanted to know. "I can't reach Thurman Goodin. Nobody answers his phone."

"Nobody will."

"I've half a mind to try him at home."

"Don't bother."

"No? Why not?" And then, for the first time, he saw my face. His own paled. "Heavens, Tim, what's the matter?"

All the way back, through snow and cold air, I'd looked for a way to tell him—a proper way. There was none. Halfway home I'd thought that perhaps Providence might let him die before I had to tell him, but that could only have happened in one of his novels, not in this world.

So I said, "Dean Avery's dead. It happened last night; he's dead."

"Great God in heaven!" His face was white, his eyes horribly wide. "How? Suicide?"

"No."

"How?" he asked insistently.

"It was meant to look like suicide. Thurman Goodin killed him. Broke into his house in the middle of the night. He was going to knock him out and poke his head in the oven and put the gas on. He knocked him cold all right, but Avery came to on the way to the oven. There was a row and Thurman Goodin beat him over the head with some tool he'd brought along. I believe it was a tire iron. Beat his brains in, but all the noise woke a few of the neighbors and they grabbed Goodin on his way out the door. Two of them caught him and managed to hold him until the police came, and of course he told them everything."

I expected Bane to interrupt, but he waited without a word. I said, "Rachel Avery wanted him to run away with her. She couldn't stand staying with her husband, she wanted to go to some big city, try the sweet life. He told the police he tried to stop seeing her. She threatened him, that she would tell her husband, that she would tell his wife. So he went to her one afternoon and knocked her unconscious, took off her clothes, and put her in the bathtub. She was still alive then. He dropped the radio into the tub to give her a shock, then unplugged it and checked to see if she was dead. She wasn't so he held her head under water until she drowned, and then he plugged the radio into the socket again and left.

"And last night he found out that Avery knew about it, about the murder and the affair and all. So of course he had to kill Avery. He thought he might get away with it if he made it look like suicide, that Avery was depressed over his wife's death and went on to take his own life. I don't think it would have washed. I don't know much about it, but aren't the police more apt to examine a suicide rather carefully? They might see the marks on the head. Perhaps not. I don't really know. They've put Goodin in jail in Harmony Falls, and with two bloody murders like that, he's sure to hang." And then, because I felt even worse about it all than I'd known, "So it all comes out even, after all, the way you wanted it, the loose ends tied up in a bow."

"Good heavens!"

"I'm sorry." And I was, as soon as I'd said the words.

I don't think he heard me. "I am a bad writer and a bad man," he said, and not to me at all, and perhaps not even to himself but to whatever he talked to when the need came. "I thought I created them, I thought I knew them, I thought they all belonged to me."

So I went upstairs and packed my bags and walked all the way to the station. It was a bad time to leave him and a heartless way to do it, but staying would have been worse, even impossible. He was dying, and I couldn't have changed that, nor made the going much easier for him. I walked to the station and took the first train out and ended up here in Los Angeles, working for another foolish little man who likes to hire foreigners, doing the same sort of nothing I'd done in New York, but doing it at least in a warmer climate.

Last month I read he'd died. I thought I might cry but didn't. A week ago I reread one of his books, *Lips That Could Kiss*. I discovered that I did not like it at all, and then I did cry. For Rachel Avery, for Joseph Cameron Bane. For me.