

Bedlam at the B n B

By Michael Danese

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The late model sedan pulled into the parking lot just past the colorful sign that said, “B’s B n B.” It was a large Victorian house surrounded by tall trees. A young girl, probably high school age, exited the passenger door and shivered as she bundled her blue coat around her to hold back the crisp air. “Pop the trunk, Mom. I’ll grab the bag,” she said.

“Thanks, Elle. My legs are a bit stiff from driving,” said Mom.

Elle had short red hair and a few freckles visible on her face. Her mother was wearing a leather coat, jeans, and short boots. She also had red hair. They entered the quaint reception area where another young girl, about the same age as Elle, greeted them from behind the desk. “Hi, I’m Jessie. Welcome to B’s B n B. And what brings you to our town today?”

Elle recoiled a bit at the question. It was almost like she was going to cry.

“Oh, just some visiting,” said Mom. Elle grabbed the bag and went to the adjoining sitting room where she collapsed onto an overstuffed chair. “I’m Maggie Johnson,” her mother told the receptionist, “We have a reservation.”

“Ah, yes. Two double beds. Room 6. Here’s your key. I hope that you enjoy your visit. Please join us in the parlor between four and six for some coffee, tea, and fresh cookies.”

“Thank you, Jessie,” said Maggie as she grabbed the key. Elle followed her up the steps to their room.

A woman emerged from the office behind the reception desk. She was in her sixties, with grey hair pulled into a bun on the top of her head. She was wearing a blue polka-dot dress.

“How did I do, Mrs. B?” asked Jessie.

“You did fine. Congratulations on your first check-in,” said Mrs. B. “Just one thing. We don’t ask our guests about their business. A hotel is like a small slice of society. Each of the six rooms upstairs will be filled with people with their own stories, on their own private journeys. They could be coming here for a vacation, a stop along the way as they travel, or something more serious, like a funeral or a recent breakup. No matter what it is, it’s *their* business, and we’re only here to provide comfort along the way.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t think of that,” Jessie said, just as two men entered the reception area. She turned to them. “Welcome gentlemen. Do you have a reservation?”

“No, sorry. Do you have a vacancy for one night? Two beds.” asked the taller of the two men.

“Ah, yes. Please sign in. Will that be on a credit card?” asked Jessie.

“I assume we can still pay with cash in this country,” said the second man as he pulled out a roll of bills.

“Yes, we certainly accept cash, Mr. Sam Malone and Mr. Lou Grant,” she said as she read the ledger. “One hundred and forty dollars, please.”

He counted out the cash and handed it to her. She handed him the key. “Here ya go, Room 5. And please join us between four and six for some coffee, tea, and cookies here in the parlor. Breakfast is served between six and nine in the morning.”

Several minutes later an older couple entered. “Isn’t this lovely, Al? Just as I pictured it.”

“Very nice, Joyce. You always know how to pick ‘em,” Al said as he struggled to carry the bags.

“Welcome,” said Jessie.

“Thank you, dear. We have a reservation. The name’s Watson,” said Joyce.

“Yes, two nights, correct?” said Jessie.

“Yes,” said Joyce. “Is the football stadium close to here?”

“Only about ten minutes down Main Street, to the left,” said Jessie.

“Perfect,” said Al, “Our grandson’s memorial is tomorrow. We’re planning to spread his ashes on the field there. But please don’t tell anyone.” He leaned over the counter and said with a wink, “I don’t think it’s exactly *legal*.”

“Is Peter Watson your grandson?” asked Jessie.

Joyce nodded.

“I graduated with him. So tragic. I didn’t know him well, but he was a very popular guy and a great football player. I’m so sorry for your loss,” added Jessie.

“Thank you, my dear,” said Joyce, holding back a tear. Al took Joyce by the hand, and they slowly ascended the stairs.

Next, a young couple entered. They were touching each other from the time they entered until they got to the desk.

“Hi, I’m Jessie. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes, the name’s Cooper, Tom Cooper,” said the young man. He was tall with wavy brown hair and big dimples. Jessie caught herself staring at him.

“I’m sorry, do you have a restroom nearby? It’s been a long ride…” asked the woman. She was also tall, with long blond hair, a blue sweater, and fitted jeans.

“Yes, of course, right down the hall there,” directed Jessie.

Tom Cooper reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. He opened it to reveal a diamond ring. “Tonight’s the night, and Janice has no idea!”

“How wonderful!” said Jessie. “Here, take Room 3, it’s our best room,” she said handing him the key just as the soon-to-be fiancé returned.

An hour or so later a young man entered. He was wearing a jean jacket and a baseball cap. He carried a small bag. “Sorry, I don’t have a reservation. Do you have a vacancy?” he asked.

“It’s your lucky night. We have one room left,” said Jessie with a joyful tone.

The man handed her a credit card and signed the ledger without even looking up at her. She handed him the key and said, “I hope you enjoy your stay with us, Mr. Banks.”

Up in Room 6 Maggie was on the phone while Elle unpacked their bag.

“No, it’s nice enough. The room’s a little small, but clean. The people seem nice. I feel like we are in Mayberry. I think Aunt Bee runs the place, and any second, Andy and Barney will walk in whistling.”

Dad was laughing on the other end.

“Yes, it does seem very safe,” Maggie continued, “I just can’t get over the fact that we need to travel hours to a different state for this. It’s awful enough, but to add the stigma that it’s *illegal* back home makes it worse.”

After a short pause, she turned to Elle as she put the phone on speaker. “He wants to talk to you.”

“Hi, Dad.”

“Are you okay, baby girl? I know this has been rough on you. And if you change your mind we will support you, you know that.”

Elle could see her mother glaring at the phone.

“I know Dad. But you guys are right. It will be for the best, I guess . . .,” said Elle.

A few doors down Al and Joyce were sitting at the table in their room.

“Wasn’t that girl at the desk lovely?” asked Joyce.

“Yes,” said Al. “I wish he woulda met up with her instead of that trash gang he fell in with at college. He might still be alive today. I’ll bet she never did drugs.”

“Possibly,” said Joyce. “But, when he got hurt and they prescribed those pills for him, that’s what led to his fall. I don’t think we could blame his friends.”

“Well, he was getting the poison from someone!” blurted Al, almost breaking down.

“I know dear,” she said as she hugged her husband. “Let’s just think good thoughts and remember how sweet he was.”

In the Cooper room, there wasn’t a lot of talking. The grim mood from the neighboring rooms certainly didn’t spill over into this room. Almost as soon as they were alone their clothes came off and they were enjoying their privacy and the bed.

Things were certainly not as enjoyable in Room 5, where Sam Malone and Lou Grant were on the speaker phone with a colleague.

“We’ll go over it as many times as I say!” said Sam. “It’s my ass if this doesn’t go as planned.”

“It’s all set. You have the alarm code. Easy in and out. Louie, are you sure the safe won’t be a problem?” asked the man on the phone.

“We got this,” said Lou. “Don’t worry about Sammy. He knows what he must do. And if something goes sideways, we won’t be leaving any witnesses,” he said making pistols with his hands and pointing them towards the phone.

“Fine,” said the voice on the phone, “I’ll meet you at the gas station in the next town. We can ditch your car there and be on our way.”

Soon it was getting close to dinner, and over the next hour or two the guests made it down to the lobby. Elle and her mom were having tea and cookies when Al and Joyce sat down across from them.

“I can’t resist a warm chocolate chip cookie! I’m Al and this is my bride, Joyce. Are you folks from around here?”

“No,” said Elle, taking the lead from her mom. “We are just here for a quick visit.”

“Oh,” said Joyce. “I was going to ask if you could recommend a restaurant.”

Jessie heard the question and said, “Mrs. Watson, I have a list of a few places in town that you might like. There’s a diner down the street, an Italian restaurant, and a Chinese place. The Long Bar is also on the list. They have great burgers.”

“Thank you, my dear. I’ll take a list,” said Joyce.

“Me too,” said Maggie.

“Here ya go,” she said handing them the pamphlets. “And tomorrow for breakfast you’re all in for a treat. Mrs. B is cooking her famous buttermilk pancakes and taking omelet requests.”

“Don’t brag on me too much, Jessie, I don’t want to set their expectations *too* high,” said Mrs. B as she came out of the office.

“You won’t be disappointed,” said Jessie.

“Well, I’m certainly looking forward to those pancakes,” said Al.

“You look forward to *every* meal,” added Joyce. This prompted a laugh from everyone. “Sorry, but I need to ask, I heard this place was haunted. True?”

“Well, I’ve been in this house for over 30 years,” said Mrs. B. “The first 15 were with my husband, Sal. After he passed, I would be lying if I said that I didn’t feel his presence many times. But more to your question, several years ago there was a ghost tour in the town, and this house was the main attraction.”

“I knew it!” said Joyce.

Mrs. B took a few steps and stopped in front of the fireplace, “Apparently, during the Civil War, a nurse named Ann Hemmings lived here and attended to many of the wounded. Several soldiers died here, but many were saved. Over the years people said they saw the shadows of soldiers in the windows as they passed by on the street. Occasionally guests said they heard the moans of the dying soldiers. But most of the stories were around what they called the *guardian angel* ghost, who they believe is the nurse, Ann Hemmings.”

“Do tell,” said Elle.

“Several guests talked about feeling a *helping hand* from time to time. A few said they stumbled going up or down those creaky stairs, and they felt someone hold and steady them. One woman said she slipped getting out of the shower and felt hands catch her and gently help her down to the ground,” said Mrs. B.

“Fascinating, I don’t doubt it,” said Al.

Just then Tom Cooper and Janice came down. “Can you recommend a place to . . .”

Before he could finish Jessie handed him the restaurant list. They grabbed a few cookies, nodded to the others, and made their way out of the building. A few minutes later, Sam and Lou came down and went out the door without looking at anyone. Eventually, everyone headed out to dinner, except for George Banks who remained in his room. Jessie unwrapped a sandwich and ate it behind the desk.

By 9:00 pm everyone had returned and had gone to their rooms. The last guests back were Sammy and Louie. They returned from the bar and had a bottle in a brown paper bag. Sam was smoking a cigar.

“Got ice?” asked Louie.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Malone, but there’s no smoking in the building,” Jessie said. “The ice machine is outside that door. Help yourself.”

Lou looked at Sam and nodded, then Sam went for the ice as Lou ascended the stairs. Sam returned without the cigar and went upstairs with a bag of ice.

Jessie turned off the lights in the parlor. Mrs. B turned off the light at the desk. “A great first day for you, Jessie. You’re a natural at this.”

“Thanks, Mrs. B. I know I’ll enjoy working here. I do need to ask, is all of that ghost talk true?”

“Sure, well, at least some of it,” said Mrs. B. “Remember, ghosts are *very* good for business!”

Jessie nodded and smiled, then grabbed her coat from behind the desk and headed towards the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night, dear,” said Mrs. B as she went through the office and into her apartment.

George Banks never emerged from his room. The contents of his bag consisted of a bottle of cheap vodka and a handgun. He refilled the cup in his room from the bottle and put the gun on the bed. He took his phone and propped it up on the dresser so he could see himself.

He pressed record. “Hi Mom. First, I’m so sorry about this. I *know* you’re devastated, but please know that it was a difficult decision for me. I was just out of options. My kids hate me, and June refuses my calls. I got caught being drunk at work and lost my job at the bank. Being dead is so much easier for me, and everyone’s better off without me around. I’m sorry for all of the heartache and pain that I’ve caused you. Please try to convince the kids that I wasn’t a bad person and that I loved them very much. Goodbye Mom, I love you.”

He stopped the recording and then decided to record several more versions of the same message for his father, brother, his ex-wife June, his kids, and his co-workers at the bank. When he was sure he covered everyone that mattered to him, he put the phone on the dresser. He found a pen and some B’s B n B stationary in the desk drawer. He wrote, “First, I’m sorry that you found me like this. My phone has recordings for my friends and family. The passcode is my birthday, 111396.”

He refilled his glass, then emptied it in one big gulp. He picked up the gun and examined it. It felt good in his hands. He went to the window and raised it all the way. He put the gun against the roof of his mouth and his finger on the trigger. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a glow.

He leaned his head out of the window as far as he could. Below he saw the bushes next to the shack with the ice machine ablaze. The flames were licking their way up the side of the old

building. He threw the gun down and bolted out of the room. He went to the next door, Room 6, and banged on it. "Get out NOW! The building's on fire!"

Elle came into the hallway in her nightgown. "Hurry!" he said. "Get out and call 911!" She got her mom, and they made their way downstairs and out of the building. The next room was Tom Cooper and Janice. Luckily, they were still awake. They ran downstairs wearing only their robes. George got the Watsons out next, then finally Sam and Louie. Sam and Lou almost knocked the slow-moving older couple down the stairs.

Al took Joyce by the hand and helped her. "Assholes!" he said under his breath. "Come on dear, we're almost there."

By now the rooms formerly occupied by the Watsons and Elle and Maggie were on fire. It was then that the smoke alarms started to go off as the fire spread rapidly through the house. George Banks ran down the stairs and went behind the office and into the apartment where he woke Mrs. B, who was in a deep sleep. He had to carry her as embers fell around them. Just as they cleared the front door, the floor above collapsed into the reception area behind them.

The fire department showed up almost immediately, followed by the police and eventually the news media. Sam and Lou ran to the parking lot and jumped into their car. They tried to get out, but the fire engines had them boxed in. They tried to force their way out around the large trucks, and that attracted the attention of the police. As the police drew closer to the car, Lou drew his pistol and took a shot, then Sam did the same. The police, caught off guard, quickly drew their weapons and Sam and Louie were met with a hail of bullets. They didn't survive.

They apparently were sleeping in their clothes, as they were the only guests with clothes and shoes. The police found their wallets and cell phones in their pockets. It turned out that there were outstanding warrants for both Sam Morris and Louis Ahern. One cop used Sam's face to get into his phone. Illegal? Probably, but it didn't seem to matter. Through the text messages, they were eventually able to track down and arrest the other member of the gang and thwart the robbery they had planned for the next morning.

The fire department passed out blankets and slippers to the almost naked and mostly barefoot guests. Everyone was so thankful for that, as it was a cold night. They determined that the fire spread so quickly through the old building that the smoke detectors were too late to warn anyone.

When the fire chief was being interviewed by the local media in front of the smoldering building, he said, "George Banks is the greatest hero that this town has ever known. Not only did he save all of those lives, he also helped lead us to the capture of some notorious wanted criminals."

Soon the microphones and cameras were pointed at George. "Mr. Banks, how do you feel about what you did? They're calling you a hero!" asked the pretty young reporter who appeared to be a bit smitten with him.

"Believe me, I'm *no* hero. I just did what anyone woulda done," said George.

"How did you know the building was on fire?" asked the reporter.

"I . . . I just happened to look out the window and saw the red glow and then I saw the flames. I knew the building would burn fast. These old buildings always do. I guess I was just on autopilot after that," said George.

Next, the reporter turned to the B n B guests. First up was Mrs. B.

“You’re the owner of the bed and breakfast?”

“Yes, I’m so sorry, I’m still shaking. What if he didn’t think to get me? What if all those people were burned? I’m so thankful. I can’t imagine . . .” she said through tears.

Jessie emerged from the crowd and started to hug her. “Oh, Mrs. B, I don’t know what I would have done if you were harmed!” She turned to the camera, sobbing, “Thank God that Mr. Banks was brave enough to save her!”

Tom Cooper and Janice were huddled nearby, and the microphone was pointed at them next. “I’m just so thankful. Thank you, sir. It’s been a night I will certainly never forget! I got engaged at dinner,” Janice said holding out her hand to show the dazzling ring. “Then our joy turned to terror almost immediately. Thank you, Mr. Banks. If ever there was a hero, it’s you!” She then collapsed into Tom’s arms.

Elle ran up to George and started to hug him. “Thank you, thank you. You can’t imagine how you’ve opened my eyes. God had a better idea about *all* of us. You saved me, my mother, and my unborn child. And this child will be named after you! Thank you!” she said rubbing her belly as George hugged her back. “I’ll bet the guardian angel ghost helped you to see the fire!” she added as George gave her a puzzled look.

Maggie joined them and said, “Thank you, kind sir. I’m not sure how you did it, but you are certainly a blessing.”

George Banks started to walk away and couldn’t help but think about what would have happened if he hadn’t looked out that window. Maybe it *was* a guardian angel. He realized that no matter how down he was, there was always something to live for. Just then his ex-wife, who had rushed to the scene after seeing the news report, threw her arms around him, and his son and daughter joined in the group hug.

George, with tears running down his face, whispered to her, “I think I’m going to volunteer for the fire department.”

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