

## Voices from the Grave

By Michael Danese

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Marnie pulled open the door to the bus station, happy to be out of the strong exhaust fumes. She rubbed her red, irritated eyes, then closed her umbrella and shook off the rain. She loosened her jacket as the heat in the station was a strong contrast to the raw air outside.

She stepped up to the ticket window behind a tall, smartly dressed man.

“I’m sorry, sir but the bus to Chicago is running late. There was a mechanical breakdown on the road,” said the clerk.

“Any idea how long?” the man asked.

“Don’t know ... hard to say ... five hours, maybe...” the clerk answered.

“Oh, okay,” said the man. He turned and headed to the already crowded café.

Marnie followed him, since she now knew that she would also be delayed. She took a long whiff of the welcoming smell of fresh brewed coffee. She walked up to his table, which had three empty seats. “Do you mind if I sit? I was behind you in line and heard of the delay to Chicago.”

“Not at all, yes, please join me. I’m Peter,” he said, extending his hand. Peter was about 40 years old, with longish brown hair, which was the style of the time. He had a black overcoat over the chair next to him and was wearing a smart blue suit, white shirt, and a red tie. His brown shoes were nicely polished.

“Thanks, I’m Marnie,” she said while shaking his hand. Marnie peeled off her coat and placed it on the chair next to Peter’s coat. She was in her early 30s, wearing a colorful blouse and bell-bottomed jeans, her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail.

“What can I git yez?” asked the waitress.

“Coffee!” they both said, almost in unison.

The waitress nodded and sped onto the next table.

“So, are you going to Chicago or just away from here?” he asked.

“Away,” she said. “You?”

“To. It’s my home, but I haven’t been there for a while,” he said.

The waitress returned with two more people. “Da joint is jammed, do you mind sharing your table?”

“Of course not,” said Marnie. They both moved their coats onto the backs of their own chairs as the two new folks sat down.

“Coffee around?” asked the waitress.

“Yes please! And thanks, kids, I don’t mean to crash your party! I’m Ellie, and this is...”

“Jimmy,” said the man. He was in his 40s with longer black/gray hair on the sides and balding on the top. He had a large overcoat over his flannel shirt and jeans.

“I’ll never get back to Chicago at this rate,” said Ellie, louder than needed, which was how she talked. Always.

“I’m Marnie and this is Peter. We’re heading to Chicago too,” said Marnie.

“Aww, it’s a great city! Are you honeymooning?” asked Ellie.

“No, no, we are just sharing the table, just like you,” said Marnie.

“Sorry, my mistake, you just have that look! Let’s get this party started!” said Ellie removing a flask from her purse. She was in her late 30s, with blond permed hair. She was wearing a mini-skirt, black heels, and a flowered blouse. “Listen! I hear Janis Joplin! Did you all see her on the Dick Cavett show last week? She’s so totally groovy!”

“No,” said Peter, as the others shook their heads.

The waitress brought two cups of coffee and freshened the cups of Marnie and Peter. Ellie poured from the flask into her cup. Marnie and Peter put their hand over their cups. Jimmy had no reaction, so Ellie poured some of the liquor into his cup.

“This is, like, cosmic! The four of us are brought together like fate. We’re all going to Chicago and all delayed, and we all ended up here! Isn’t it incredible?” said Ellie.

“Cosmic …” muttered Jimmy.

“I’ll bet that we are going to be great friends, we have this common bond!” said Ellie. “Hey, let’s all share our phone numbers so we can meet in Chicago in a few weeks and laugh about this! Here’s my business card,” she said as she pulled her card out. She also produced a few pieces of paper and some pencils. “Come on, please write down your info and pass it around!” She handed out the paper and pencils.

“This all sounds great, but I’ll need to get in touch with you all when I’m settled in Chicago. I don’t have an address there yet,” said Marnie.

“Perfect!” said Ellie.

Marnie collected the papers and the business card and shoved them into her pocket. “Please excuse me for a minute. I want to grab some air, it’s a bit stuffy in here.”

“I can use some too,” said Jimmy. “Be back in a minute.”

Marnie and Jimmy both stepped out onto the platform. Jimmy took a pack of Marlboros from his pocket, offered one to Marnie, then lit them both with his Zippo lighter.

“What’s in Chicago for you?” asked Jimmy.

“I … I’m not sure, to tell the truth. A new start, I guess,” said Marnie.

“So, you’re running away?” asked Jimmy.

“Something like that. The truth is, I just found out that my husband, George, has been carrying on with my best friend, Linda, and it’s been going on for a while. When I confronted him, he didn’t even deny it,” said Marnie.

“Ouch!” said Jimmy.

“Yes, ouch. He said it’s over with her, and that he still loves me and wants to make it work, but I don’t know if that’s even possible. That’s the moment that I realized that people are basically

despicable. It sounds like a cliché, but I really lost all hope for humanity ... Enough about me. What is in Chicago for you?" she asked.

"I guess I'm running there too. I did some terrible things and I need to make my peace with my wife," he said. Jimmy began to tell Marnie about a tragic accident he had at a job in Chicago as the door opened and the noise pouring out from the station engulfed them.

Back at the table Ellie was holding court. Her voice filled the room, as usual. She was standing next to the table. Three other guys were crowded around, enjoying the view.

"So I said to the buyer from Strawbridge's, listen, Bub, I can sell these dresses to you or to the guy from Macy's. Makes no difference to me! However, I'll give you a better price if you buy now so I can head for home sooner. I want to get back to my lovie ASAP, signed, sealed and delivered!"

"Let me guess, he bought them?" said Peter.

"You know he did, Sugar!" exclaimed Ellie.

Marnie and Jimmy returned and took their seats and the crowd dissipated. "I'm not sure I could take many more hours of this," said Marnie.

"Listen kids, here's an idea," said Ellie. "My car's outside in the lot, and since we're all family now, why don't we take the car, as long as you don't mind sharing the driving and gas."

"If your car is here, why are you taking the bus?" asked Peter.

"I'm only going to be in Chicago for a few days, then I'm back here next week. The bus just seemed easier," said Ellie.

"Works for me," said Peter.

Jimmy and Marnie both agreed, and soon they were on the road.

Ellie was driving the large Buick with Peter in the passenger seat. Jimmy and Marnie were in the back.

"So, Mister Peter, waddya hear, waddya say, where ya been and where ya going, come on daddio, spill!" said Ellie.

"Well, that's a boring story," said Peter. "I left Chicago about a month ago. It just wasn't doing it for me. My mother-in-law, Mildred, has a small grocery store there, and my wife, Betty, works there too. Mildred always had it in for me. I was never good enough for her little girl. As much as I tried, I was always a failure in her eyes."

"Didn't your wife stick up for you?" asked Ellie.

"She tried, in the beginning," Peter said. "Then she just kinda ignored it."

"So, what changed?" asked Marnie.

"In Omaha, I found a great job managing a department store. And I get a relocation package to move Betty and Mildred there too, including jobs for them both. Mildred had been struggling with the store for years, so now she can be comfortable," said Peter.

"That sounds wonderful! Did they agree to move to Omaha?" asked Marnie.

"I haven't told them yet, I wanted to do it face to face to see their eyes light up!" said Peter.

“That sounds wonderful!” said Ellie. “And now I’ll have another store to sell clothing to. My distributor will be thrilled! I told you this group is cosmic!”

“I’m sure it will work out for you, Peter,” said Marnie.

“And what about you, Ellie, our chariot pilot? What’s your story?” asked Peter.

“Well, nothing as exciting as that. As you know, I’m a clothing distributor serving the greater Omaha area, if that even exists. I get a huge discount on clothes, and also at most of the stores that I sell to. I get home every other week or so to be with my Bobby Boy. We’ve been together since high school, and he still lights my fire. Whenever I’m away from him, he’s all that I think about!” said Ellie.

“That’s so sweet!” said Marnie. “It seems so rare to meet someone that’s so happily married! You’re an inspiration!”

“Thanks, you just gotta work at it! Don’t get me wrong, we’ve had our challenges, but love really does conquer all!” said Ellie.

“Could you put some music on, I’m starting to fade …,” said Peter.

“Could we not? I was just starting to fall asleep,” said Jimmy, almost interrupting Peter.

“Let’s vote! I vote for music,” said Ellie.

“Me too,” added Marnie.

“Sorry old boy,” said Peter.

Ellie turned on the radio and had trouble finding a station. She finally landed on something that wasn’t all static. “We’ll be back to the music in a minute, but first we have a bulletin! As you know, we’ve been covering the robbery in Omaha for a few hours now. The teller who was shot has died along with the security guard. Two of the alleged perpetrators have been killed in a shoot-out with the police. The third man, the driver, identified as James Wilson, was last seen near the Greyhound Bus station. He was wearing jeans and a large overcoat.”

Ellie turned off the radio and the car fell silent for a few seconds. She glanced at the rear-view window and caught Jimmy glaring back at her. “What are you going to do to us, Jimmy? Please don’t hurt us! Remember, we’re all *family* now!” she said.

Jimmy pulled out a Smith and Wesson .38 snub-nosed revolver from his pocket and pointed it at the back of Ellie’s head. “I’m just looking for a ride,” he said. “Nobody needs to get hurt here. We’re *family*, remember? The robbery just went wrong. No one was supposed to get shot, but now I’ll need to live with that.”

“Please put the gun down,” said Marnie. “I know you’re not a bad person. Please put it down. We can’t do anything to you anyway.” She slowly reached her hand over towards his. He pushed her hand away and pushed the barrel into the back of Ellie’s head.

“Just *drive!*” growled Jimmy as his face tensed. “Do as I say and nobody gets hurt!”

“Please don’t shoot us!” said Ellie as she began to get a hysterical. She started driving very fast, passing people on the rainy road.

“Slow down or I’ll blow your head off!” said Jimmy.

Ellie swerved hard into the other lane, narrowly missing a bus coming right at them. Jimmy was thrown into Marnie's lap. Marnie grabbed for the gun and Jimmy pulled the trigger, shooting Ellie in the back. Ellie fell forward as the horn blared. She was pushing 70 miles per hour when she rammed the truck in front of her. The car careened off the road down a steep embankment. Marnie was thrown from the vehicle as it turned over and over rolling down the hill and ramming into a tree. It burst into a huge fireball that lit up the night sky for miles.

When Marnie finally opened her eyes, she was in a hospital room. She tried to move but everything hurt. "She's awake!" alarmed a nurse.

Soon there was a team of doctors and nurses hovering over her.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Winston, can you hear me?"

"Yes," whispered Marnie.

Dr. Winston held a small flashlight over her eyes. "Please follow the light. Very good." He turned to the nurse and said, "She suffered a severe concussion, but she's very lucky."

"You've been here for three days following a horrific accident," the doctor said turning back to Marnie. "When you were found you didn't have any identification on you. We found a purse nearby. Is your name Margaret?"

"Yes, Marnie."

"Excellent, pleased to meet you, Marnie. Is there anyone that you would like me to call?"

"No, thank you. How long until I can get out of here?" she asked.

"Well, your arm is injured, so you will be in a sling for a while, but there doesn't seem to be any other injuries. You were very fortunate that you were thrown from the car. Your friends weren't so lucky. What do you remember?" asked the doctor.

"Bits and pieces. It was raining and we were going very fast," she said.

"Well, try to get your thoughts together because the police will be here soon to question you. They've been waiting for you to wake up."

A few hours later the police detectives questioned her. She told them everything that she could remember, which wasn't much. She took the card of the lead detective and promised to call him when she was in Chicago. Three days later she was well enough to be discharged. She boarded a bus to take her the rest of the way the city.

When she got off of the bus, she took a deep breath and decided to focus on getting back to her life. She reached into her pocket and found the crumbled papers with the information from Ellie, Peter and Jimmy. Her first instinct was to throw them into the trash. The more that she thought about it, though, she decided to try to give the relatives of her three dead "family" members some closure.

She found her way to the grocery store where Betty and Mildred, Peter's wife and mother-in-law, worked. It was pretty run down, but clean. She asked the man at the register they were around.

"Boss, someone here ta see ya!" the man yelled.

A few seconds later, Mildred appeared. She was a large woman with wild red hair piled high. She was wearing an apron and stockings with holes in them. “What can I do for ya, hon? Make it snappy, I got a business ta run!”

“Hello, my name is Marnie. I want to talk to you about Peter ...”

“That good for nothin’ son-of-a-bitch! Took off and left us high and dry! I told my daughter from day one that he was a bum! What he do, knock ya up or something? We ain’t got no money for you!” said Mildred.

“Mother! Please! Let the woman talk!” said Betty as she entered the room. She was a slight girl, in her 30s. She had short brown hair and was also wearing an apron.

“Hi, my name is Marnie, and you must be Betty,” she said.

“Yes, I’m Betty.”

“I was in the same car accident as Peter ...” Marnie began before she was cut off.

“Accident! What accident? Is Peter ok?” asked Betty.

Marnie all of the sudden felt terrible. She just assumed that they had been notified. Then she remembered that the detective told her that the bodies were badly burned. The only one they were able to identify was Ellie, since it was her car.

“I’m so sorry, I thought that you knew,” said Marnie as she hugged Betty.

“So he left her a widow? With nothin’? What were you? His girlfriend?” said Mildred.

“Mother, please! I’m so sorry,” said Betty, still hugging Marnie. “How well did you know him?”

“I didn’t, really. We only met that night in the bus station,” said Marnie.

Marnie then told them the whole story of the accident, then added, “He was coming to Chicago to share good news with you. He got himself a great job managing a department store. He was going to move you to Omaha and give you both good jobs. He was *so* excited. He was especially looking forward to pleasing you, Mildred. And, Betty, he professed his love for you. He was so proud! And, after meeting you, Mildred, now I have a whole new respect for Peter. May he rest in peace.”

“Thank you for coming here and telling us that,” said Betty. “You certainly didn’t have to, and I really appreciate it.” Betty hugged her again. Mildred didn’t say anything.

Marnie excused herself and made her way back to the street. “Despicable,” she thought, recalling Mildred’s attitude towards her daughter and son-in-law. She was wrestling with herself about whether she should go through with the other visits.

The next day Marnie made her way to Jimmy’s house. She introduced herself to Jimmy’s wife, Sally. She assumed that Sally was also unaware of the accident and Jimmy’s death, and she was right. When she told her that Jimmy was killed, Sally cried and cried. She hugged Marnie several times.

“Sally, I’m so sorry to tell you this tragic news,” Marnie said as they sat across from each other at the kitchen table. “Jimmy got himself in with some bad people, but, as you know, he wasn’t a bad guy, just flawed. He was the driver for the robbery, and when the shooting started he was horrified. He was coming home to make his peace with you and the law. He was haunted by

demons going back for years. He told me about the accident at the job site, where he was driving a forklift. He said he made the forklift jerk by accident, and it knocked over a wall of heavy cans and seriously injured a coworker. He said that he blamed it on a mechanical issue with the forklift and felt terrible that the maintenance mechanic was fired. That lie haunted him for years, and he wanted to come clean with you. He was hoping that you would forgive him,” she said. “I guess that doesn’t really mean much now.”

“Oh, Marnie, yes it matters, it matters a lot! I knew he had something that was eating at him. I’m sure that coming clean would have made him feel better. I’m so disappointed that he got involved with the robbers, and embarrassed that he sunk so low as to pull a gun and cause that terrible accident. I know in my heart that he was a good man, he just made some terrible choices,” said Sally. “You will never know how much this means to me, that you came all this way just to tell me this information. I can’t thank you enough! Can you please stay and have lunch with me?”

“Yes, I would love to,” said Marnie. Over lunch Marnie told her about Ellie and Peter. Sally certainly appreciated the conversation. After lunch Marnie felt better about her decision to meet with the kin of her deceased fellow travelers.

The next morning she pulled Ellie’s card from her pocket. She took a cab to the address. She got out of the cab and was standing in front of a nice brownstone. There was a “Room for Rent” sign in the window. She climbed the steps and rang the bell. No answer. She rang again. Again, no answer. She knocked. Hard. Disappointed, she turned away and descended the stairs. Behind her she heard the door open. She turned around to see a man in a wheelchair. She did a great job masking her surprise. “Are you Bobby?” she asked.

“Yes, I am,” he said.

“Hi, I’m Marnie. This is a bit difficult, but I was with Ellie in the accident. Can we talk?”

“Of course,” said Bobby, wiping a tear.

Marnie came in and Bobby said, “Please sit anywhere you like. I was just making some coffee. Can I get you a cup?”

“That would be wonderful,” she said.

Bobby had one leg, and the right side of his face was horribly scarred and drooped. His right eye was covered by a flap of skin. He wheeled himself into the kitchen. Marnie looked around the room as she heard the sounds of running water, cups, saucers and spoons. The nicely decorated parlor was accented by several photos. She saw photos of their wedding, the young couple at Niagara Falls, and Bobby in uniform. These were obviously taken before his disfigurement. There were two other photos of them taken with Bobby in the wheelchair. Their happiness glowed in the photos.

“Can I help?” Marnie asked.

“All good,” he said from the kitchen. A moment later he wheeled himself back into the room. The pleasant aroma of coffee and fresh baked chocolate chip cookies arrived before he did. On his lap was a tray with a pot of coffee, two cups, and a few cookies.

“You went to so much trouble ...” she said.

“Not at all, it’s not like I get a lot of visitors, at least not since ...” he said.

She took the tray from him, put it onto the coffee table, then poured them each a cup. She told him about the accident, Jimmy, and her other visits.

Bobby began to sob quietly. "I'm so sorry, I just miss her so much."

"Please just let it out," she said.

He sobbed for another few seconds then said, "I'm sure that you and the others found her so annoying."

"No, not at all! I thought she was a delight! I'm sure we could have been friends," she said.

"No, you're too kind, I know what people thought of her. She was always so loud and brassy. 'Look at me!' Seemed to be her mantra. But that was just on the outside. She was the sweetest ..."

"That is partially why I'm here. She spoke so highly about you, about how much she loves you, even at the end."

"She spoke highly about *me*? She's the one! My true love, my guardian angel!" Bob said. "I'm sure you're wondering about how I ended up in this chair."

"I wouldn't even think of asking that," said Marnie.

"It's okay, it's part of our history together," he said. He took a deep breath, then a pause, then continued, "It was about fifteen years ago during the final days of the war in Korea. We were all looking forward to heading stateside the next week. I had this vision of Ellie burned into my mind as a beacon of the future. Our unit was walking down a street, I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. I remember smelling bacon cooking from a nearby house. A young girl, maybe eight years old, left the house and walked towards us. Our eyes met and she smiled at me. She then ran right into the middle of our group and the bomb that she must have had taped to her little body detonated."

Marnie recoiled in horror. "*My God!*"

"Yes, it was horrible. The two fellas to my left were killed instantly. Their bodies took the brunt of the shrapnel, shielding me. I was so lucky to survive. A total of seven good men were killed, and many more were injured. Our comms officer radioed it in and soon we were airlifted outta there. I spent a month at Walter Reed and Ellie was by my side from the beginning. When we got home, she took a leave of absence from her job to nurse me back. So, yeah, she really was my guardian angel."

Marnie held herself back from giving him a hug as tears filled his eyes. "I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be sorry, I'm not. I'm lucky to be alive and to have had such love when I returned home," he said.

"So, what now? Are you okay? I saw the sign in the window," she asked.

"Ellie had a nice insurance policy, and since her death was connected to her work, there was a big bump in the payout. I'm okay. But realistically I know it won't last forever, so I'm hoping for some extra income by renting a room. It's a big house! But I'm good. I have a lot of friends and the neighbors are wonderful," he said.

"I can't tell you how much it has meant to me to visit with you. Ellie was the most happily married person that I ever met, even though I only knew her for a few hours," said Marnie.



“I’d say Ellie was the second most happily married person that you’ve ever met, cause now you know me!” he said with a big smile.

This time she couldn’t hold back. She went over and gave him a big hug. “Fair enough,” she said, “The second most happily married! Thanks so much for meeting with me, Bobby. You and Ellie, God rest her soul, have actually restored my faith in humanity, you might say.”

“Glad to help,” he said. “But all I really did was make some coffee,”

“No, you did so much more,” she said.

“And what about you?” asked Bobby. “I’m sure it hasn’t been easy for you since that horrible night?”

“No, it certainly hasn’t been easy. Since the accident I’ve focused all of my energy on the others in the car with me. But now, thanks to you, I’m going to get my life back on track. I’m heading back to Omaha,” she said.

“That’s great. If you ever get back to Chicago, please come and visit,” he said.

She hugged him again then left for the bus station. This time, the sun was warm on her face. Throughout the entire bus ride, she planned on how she would continue her life. She hoped that George would feel the same way.

When she got to her house she walked in the front door and was greeted by the aroma of spaghetti sauce cooking on the stove. She really felt like she was home because George made the best gravy in the world. She heard the TV and went to the family room in the back. She was horrified to see George and Linda, her “best friend” curled up on the sofa watching TV. She stepped back in horror and knocked a vase of flowers off a table. George and Linda leapt up, startled by the crash and both were stunned to see her. “He said it was over!” she thought to herself.

“Marnie!” said George, “I thought ... you ...”

“Forget it, George, you and that tramp can go to hell!” she said.

She ran out of the door. Luckily, the cab was still there, as the driver was reading the newspaper. She jumped in the back and asked him to drive. Her mind was bombarded with thoughts, mostly rage for George and Linda. She decided that, yes, people were no good. She knew that for sure now. She decided to head back to the bus station and vowed to never return that Omaha. She would find a lawyer and divorce that loser. She had experience as an office manager and figured she would easily find a job. Her thoughts continued to swirl as she got to the ticket counter and bought a ticket to Chicago.

Several hours later, as darkness and a hard rain began to envelope the city, she removed the “Room for Rent” sign from Bobby’s house.

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