

**Author's note:**

**I wrote this story on a TGV (high speed train) while travelling from Paris to Perpignan in 2001, soon after the publication of 'Death in Little Venice'. This means that in this story Anne is about sixteen and has recently moved to Knightly St John to work with Marnie. Now read on ...**

**A Death Foretold**

**A Marnie Walker story by Leo McNeir**

"Oh, go on! Try it. It could be fun." Marnie looked doubtful. Anne persisted. "Why not? It can't do any harm."

The sign stated simply: Madame Aurora, Tarot Readings. A small crowd gathered in front of the booth. Most of the people stayed just long enough to read the board before turning to rejoin the mass of sightseers mooching around the Little Venice Christmas Market. The area surrounding the pool of Little Venice looked wonderfully festive, with a huge decorated Christmas tree, colourful booths and stalls and silver lights twinkling in the trees of Browning island. The air was suffused with the rich smell of cinnamon, mince pies and hot dogs, laced with the spicy aroma of mulled wine.

Marnie glanced at her watch. "I don't think it's really my scene. I was wondering about having a coffee somewhere ... unless *you* want to go in?"

"*Me?* Oh no, it's much too sophisticated for me." She lowered her voice. "Not to say scary. You ought to go first, Marnie."

"So that's the idea, is it? You want to try it, but you want me to go as guinea pig."

Anne wheedled. "Oh, go on! We'll have plenty of time for coffee afterwards."

"Under protest, then." Marnie had secretly wanted to try the Tarot since her student days. "This is against my better judgment. Anyway, what are you going to do while I'm in there?"

Anne scanned the stalls lining the footpaths on all sides of what many regarded as the most attractive setting on the whole of the inland waterways network.

Anne pointed. "I'll be generally mooching about, then looking round the stalls on that side where they're selling clothes. I don't expect you'll be very long."

"Anne with an 'e', I don't know why I'm letting you talk me into this."

"You'll love it!"

Marnie almost turned back as she stood before the heavy curtain across the front of the booth, but while she hesitated on the threshold, a man came out. He looked like a normal, conventional kind of man, no Zapata moustache, no beads, no headband. He held the curtain aside for her. She went in.

The interior was a surprise. It seemed larger on the inside than on the outside. The walls and decor were in dark colours, mainly burgundy, blue and purple, but there were no strange smells, no incense, no whiff of camel dung, no odour of dried goat's blood. She stepped forward uncertainly and heard a faint tinkling of bells somewhere beside her. Seconds later, a woman appeared from the shadows, black silk shirt, black velvet trousers, short cropped hair, also black, silver earrings. Marnie put her at about fifty. She was no Gipsy Rose Lee.

"Do you have an appointment?" The voice was light with a trace of South London.

"Er, no ... I didn't realise ..."

"That's all right," said the woman. "I can fit you in. What do I call you?"

"Marnie. I suppose I call you *Madame Aurora*?"

"Julie will do. Come through, Marnie." She took Marnie by the hand and guided her forward. The booth was lit only by electric wall lights flickering dimly like candles. Now that Marnie's eyes were growing accustomed to the gloom, she saw two straight-backed chairs in gilt and a card table covered with a dark blue cloth.

"Before we start, do you want to cross my palm with plastic? Most people do nowadays."

"Visa?"

“That’ll do nicely.” They completed the transaction and Marnie signed the slip. The price seemed reasonable enough.

“Have you had a Tarot reading before, dear?”

Julie indicated a chair. Marnie sat down.

“No. I was just ... curious.”

“Nothing on your mind, nothing particularly bothering you?”

“Not really.”

Julie sat down and produced a deck of cards, somewhat larger than normal playing cards. She shuffled them twice and handed them to Marnie. “Can you shuffle them for me?”

Marnie did as requested, a little clumsily, and gave them back. Julie began laying them down on the table in the form of a T, with others on each side, some face down, some face up, some face to face in pairs. She began picking them up and looking at them. Marnie tried to see the designs. There seemed to be drawings with swords, cups and some that looked like giant carrots. She tried not to smile as the thought crossed her mind that she was accidentally having a Carrot reading, a special variety for the dyslexic.

“You have known pain and suffering, Marnie.”

Marnie shrugged. “Who hasn’t?” It seemed a safe bet.

“You have known mortal anguish.” She had become *Madame Aurora* now, no longer just plain Julie. The words came out as a simple statement.

Marnie said nothing. The cards made no sound as they were picked up from the table. Strange symbols, odd images. Marnie wondered what counted as *mortal anguish*. The break-up of her marriage four years earlier had caused her pain. Now she had made a fresh start with her own design business, a home that she was busy renovating from farm ruins and a narrowboat, *Sally Ann*, alongside it on the Grand Union Canal in Northamptonshire. Gradually she was building a new relationship with Ralph Lombard, sharing him with his Oxford college. They had first met when she pulled him from the canal and thwarted his attempted suicide. Did that count? More cards were gathered up.

“Evil has stalked your footsteps, Marnie.” This was getting heavy. The room felt warmer than before.

“Not so you’d notice.” Marnie tried to sound light-hearted. She did not feel light-hearted, not at that moment. Nor when she had learnt of the violent death of her friend Toni, the first woman vicar to be appointed in her village. Nor when she herself had all but died from an attack by the same murderer. Was it *mortal anguish*, was it *evil stalking her footsteps* when she had pulled a dead man from the Regent’s Canal by London Zoo that previous winter? She swallowed and shifted in her seat.

“Why did you come, Marnie? What are you looking for?” Just then it did not seem right to admit she had come for the hell of it, urged on by a friend.

“I had no special reason ... nothing but curiosity. I meant to try it years ago, as I told you, when I was a student. So here I am.”

Madame Aurora picked up more cards. She sighed. Marnie wondered if this was part of the performance.

“There have been forces in your life, Marnie ... you have disturbed strange forces.” More cards were picked up and replaced. Marnie was definitely feeling warmer now, much warmer. She would be glad of some fresh air. “You have the power to do good, Marnie. You have done good. You have a healing power. It surrounds you like an aura.” Marnie made encouraging sounds. “You will be using these powers sooner than you think.”

This pronouncement did not fill her with joy. What was she doing here? This was absurd.

Madame Aurora gathered up all the cards and laid them out again. “I want you to do something for me now, Marnie.” She laid the cards down again in the T pattern as before. “I want you to indicate a card. Just point. Don’t touch it.”

Marnie pointed at the last card at one end of the top bar of the T. Madame Aurora picked it up and looked at it briefly. “Now another.” Marnie chose the card at the opposite end of the same row. Madame Aurora flicked it over and placed it face up on the table. Marnie had never seen Tarot cards close at hand before and had no idea of the significance of the characters. In the faint light she studied her last card. It was not difficult to understand. It

depicted a skeleton wearing a cloak, riding on horseback. At the top of the card was a single word: *Death*. Madame Aurora did not look up.

Marnie swallowed. "I think I get the general idea. I'm getting the hang of this."

Madame Aurora stared at the card she was holding. When she spoke it was almost a whisper. "It isn't always what it seems. Nothing is that easy. I see darkness coming ... yes, darkness. And Death is coming ... in a way that you cannot foresee. It will come soon." She frowned. "You will be glad of it ..."

When Marnie emerged from the booth, she immediately saw Anne waving at her, smiling and eager.

"How did it go?"

Marnie shrugged. "Oh, harmless fun ... all rather predictable ... you know the sort of thing."

"A tall dark stranger?" said Anne.

"Something like that."

"Nothing special then?"

"Not really."

"And Madame Aurora?"

"Her real name's Julie."

"Oh." Deflation. "So not worth spending money on?"

"Definitely not."

"Good," said Anne. "I've seen this really nice jumper in a booth over here. Can I show you?"

"OK. Then we have that coffee. What time's your meeting?"

“Twelve-thirty, registration and drinks. One o’clock, buffet lunch and visit the exhibition. Seminar starts at two-fifteen.”

“Right. I said I’d meet Ralph at twelve-thirty, so we’re fine for time. Lead on, Queen of Fashion ...”

“Is that the name of a Tarot card?”

“Probably.” Marnie tried not to shudder.

After coffee, she set Anne on her way in good time, paying for a taxi so that she could arrive in style. The place at the seminar had been part of a gift from a national magazine after they had included Anne, at Marnie’s suggestion, in a series on young designers. The seminar, entitled: “Signposts for the new Millennium,” featured major speakers like Sir Terence Conran, and they would all meet at the buffet lunch. Not a bad experience for a sixteen-year-old.

Before taking the tube, Marnie rang her sister Beth on the mobile. She told her about the Tarot. She had to tell someone.

“That’s really *creepy*,” said Beth. “What did Anne think? Or didn’t you tell her?”

“You guessed. After all she’s been through with me, I didn’t want to scare her.”

“So you wanted to scare me instead.”

“Yes ... no! Of course not ... just tell you about it ... find out what you thought.”

“Well,” said Beth, “it’s got to be codswallop, hasn’t it?”

“Lots of people seem to believe in that sort of thing, omens and such” said Marnie.

“Sure, but not these days. I mean, people like Julius Caesar believed in it ... and look where it got him.”

“You’re not helping, Beth.”

“How about Cleopatra?”

“Fine. I’ll just go and throw myself in the canal right now.”

“Mm,” said Beth. “It has a certain ring to it, I suppose.”

“What does?”

“Death in Little Venice ...”

Before meeting Ralph, Marnie wanted to do some last-minute Christmas shopping in Oxford Street. She took the underground to Oxford Circus. It was just half a dozen stops away and, as luck would have it, she found just what she wanted in Marks and Spencer. Feeling pleased with herself, she was able to put the silly Tarot reading business behind her. She pondered what the Tarot cards had foretold as the tube train clattered back towards Warwick Avenue station along the Bakerloo Line.

There was no denying she had had encounters with death in the last year or two. She had almost been a murder suspect, almost been a murder victim. Despite everything, she had created a successful interior design company, with Anne helping her for a year between school and college. The turning point had been a summer spent cruising the canals on her sister’s narrowboat, *Sally Ann*. Marnie was now a dedicated boatwoman and had taken *Sally* up to her own docking area at Glebe Farm. Before then, her mooring had been in Little Venice in a residential part of central London. It was here that Marnie regularly returned for sentimental reasons to see old friends and keep in touch with her boating roots. Ralph, himself now also a boat-owner, was glad to aim for Little Venice when in London on university business.

The train rolled into Warwick Avenue tube station. Under each platform sign, in smaller print, was written: “For Little Venice”. Still pre-occupied, Marnie headed for the exit. At the foot of the escalator a middle-aged couple stood in a huddle, partly blocking the access. Stepping round them, Marnie noticed the woman’s anxious face.

“Are you lost?” she said.

“Oh no, thank you, it’s okay.” The woman had an American accent. She looked anything but okay.

“Have you got a problem?” said Marnie. “Can I help?”

The man spoke. He was burly and pink-faced, wearing a check jacket and a baseball cap with the legend: Chicago Bears. “It’s the escalator. She’s scared to ride it.”

“That’s right,” said the woman. “I never knew there were so many. They’re all over London.”

“Hard to avoid them really,” said Marnie. “If you use the tube, I mean.”

“Sure, it’s a real nightmare. It’s ruining our vacation. I wish there was some way I could learn to cope with this.”

Marnie looked at them. The man was red in the face, totally stressed, not a good way to spend a holiday. His wife looked utterly miserable. They needed help. Marnie stepped forward.

“Look, there is a way you can cope. It’s easy, but you have to trust me.”

“Are you a therapist?”

“No. I’m an interior designer, actually.” The woman looked doubtful. “That’s all right,” Marnie went on. “It means I ... er, know all about the insides of buildings, including escalators. It’s part of my job.”

“You think you can help me?” the woman said dubiously.

“I *know* I can help you. Absolutely. Will you give me your hand?” She took it. “Now, look at me, don’t look anywhere else. Just at me.”

“What do I have to do?”

“It’s easy. Look at me and do what I say.” Marnie began walking slowly back towards the rolling staircase. “Just come with me ... take it steady.”

“Hey! Watch where you’re going!”

Marnie had nearly reached the foot of the escalator. "Don't worry about me, just keep walking and keep looking at my face."

"You have a very lovely face, if you don't mind me saying so," said the woman.

"So do you. Will you tell me your name?"

"It's Jean, Jean Helman."

"I'm Marnie. Where are you from, Jean?"

"Chicago, Illinois."

Marnie smiled. "The windy city." She stepped backwards onto the rolling stairs. "Just keep on coming ... move with me. That's great. Don't think about here. Think about home. Have you lived there long?"

"All my life." She swayed a little as she edged forward and stepped onto the escalator, tightening her grip on Marnie's hand.

"You're doing really well, Jean. Tell me, do you have a family?"

"Two daughters and a son. He lives in Cleveland, Ohio, but the girls are nearby."

"And grandchildren?"

A proud smile. "Five."

"That's great. Tell me their names." she added sharply. "Don't look round."

"I'm not, honey. I really do trust you, Marnie. There's Karen and Mardi, Anna, Bob junior and Lucy."

"Nice names. I bet they're lovely kids."

"They sure are. We're missing them right now."

“Well, I’ll tell you something right now. You’re doing fine ... just great. We’re nearly at the top, but don’t look away.”

“I ... I won’t.” Marnie felt Jean’s fingers tighten on her hand.

“I’ll tell you something else, Jean. You’ve made it seem so easy. There’s really nothing to it, is there?”

“That’s right ... I can do it!”

“Just step off carefully when I say the word and we’re there. Ready? Now! That was great. Just keep walking.” They stopped and Marnie relaxed her grip, but Jean held on.

“Marnie, that was wonderful. Wasn’t it, Larry?”

The man appeared over his wife’s shoulder. “You were great, lady, just great! I could never have gotten her to do that.”

“Marnie, thank you,” said Jean. “Thank you *so much*. You’re my best friend ... *ever*.”

“Well, now you know you can do it. It won’t be a problem any more.”

“I’ll just think of my grandchildren and see your lovely face in front of me.” She hugged Marnie and Larry shook her hand. His grip was firm, but cold and clammy. He looked flushed, but he was beaming.

They stood aside as people milled around them. A short distance ahead a flight of stairs beckoned.

Marnie smiled at her new-found friends. “Have a good holiday. Do you know where to go from here?”

“Sure. We’re fine now ... just fine. I hope we haven’t held you up. You go on ahead, we’re not too fast going up the stairs these days.”

“Can you manage all right?” Marnie asked.

“No problems,” said Larry. “We’ll take it nice and slow.”

They waved Marnie off and she went up the final staircase two steps at a time. The incident in the station had restored her spirits and she set off towards the pool of Little Venice looking forward to lunch with Ralph in one of their favourite restaurants, *Venezia Grande*. She had barely gone fifty yards when a cry rang out from somewhere behind her. Looking back, it took a moment to understand what she was seeing.

The cry came from Jean who seemed seriously agitated, apparently being gripped by a tall dark man in a brown leather blouson jacket and jeans. Marnie began jogging back towards them, all sorts of ideas rushing through her mind ... *darkness* ... He was dark. In fact, as she got nearer, Marnie saw that the stranger was a young black man and he was definitely holding Jean by the shoulders. Just then, he turned and knelt down to where Marnie saw Larry lying on the ground. The younger man was rummaging in Larry's jacket. *A mugging?* Why was no one helping them? More to the point, Marnie wondered what she was going to do when she reached them. She would know the answer in the next few seconds.

"Oh, Marnie!"

"What's happening?" said Marnie breathlessly in the sternest tone she could manage.

Surprised by her sudden appearance, the young man stood up, reaching for something in his blouson pocket. *Oh my god! He's got a weapon.* This is it, thought Marnie. This is my death foretold! The young man pulled out something small and black and Marnie prepared to throw herself into the gutter. It was a mobile phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Got to get an ambulance," said the young man.

"Larry just collapsed," Jean whined. "I think he's real sick."

Marnie could see that Larry was struggling for breath.

"And he ... er," Marnie began, gesturing towards the young man.

"He stopped to help us. Our second saviour today!"

Marnie saw that Larry's top shirt button had been undone. His face was ashen grey. He looked dreadful. The young man was now talking into the mobile, giving their location. Marnie felt foolish and more than a little guilt-stricken at what she had imagined.

"You're obviously in very good hands," she said.

The young man ended his phone call. "Right. They're on their way. We've just got to make him comfortable." Without hesitation, he took off the blouson, rolled it up and placed it gently under Larry's head. Squatting down, he removed the baseball cap and ran a hand over the damp forehead.

"Just try and relax, mister. Keep calm. The ambulance is coming. You're gonna be fine."

Suddenly Marnie remembered the Tarot reading. Larry certainly looked grim. More than anything at that moment, she wanted him to get better. The young man was talking to him quietly, holding his hand.

"Looks like Larry's got a best friend, too," said Marnie, putting an arm round Jean's shoulder.

The man looked up at Marnie. "Are these friends of yours?"

"In a manner of speaking. Is he ... you know, all right?"

"Yeah, I think he'll be OK. Whatever he's had, I think it's been mild. He's a lot calmer now."

Marnie sighed with relief.

A small crowd had formed around them as the ambulance arrived. The paramedics tended to Larry and placed an oxygen mask over his face. With great care they loaded him into the ambulance. Marnie gave Jean an encouraging kiss on the cheek and helped her to climb in alongside her husband. The young man reached out and gave Jean his card.

"I'm local. If you need any help, call me on that number. Any time."

“I’m from out of town,” said Marnie, “but here’s my card, too. Just in case there’s anything I can do.” To the paramedics she said, “You’re taking him to St Mary’s? I’d like to ring later to check his progress.”

“Okay. We’re taking him to A and E.”

They watched the ambulance pull away, lights flashing, siren wailing.

Marnie turned to Larry’s saviour. “Do you really think he’ll be all right?”

“Well, I reckon he’s in with a good chance.” The young man picked up his blouson jacket, pulled it on and dusted himself down.

“It was wonderful, what you did then. If Larry *is* okay, it’ll be thanks to you.”

The man shrugged. “Least I could do for the poor guy. Can I give you a lift anywhere? My car’s just here. I only stopped to buy a paper.”

“It’s kind of you, but I don’t have far to go.”

Ralph was sitting at a window table in the *Venezia Grande* when Marnie arrived. The restaurant was in a cobbled side street round the corner from the canal. He stood up to kiss her and pulled out a chair for her.

“Sorry to be late, Ralph. I got held up.”

“Is there a problem? You seem a little breathless.”

“I’ll tell you over lunch. It’s been quite a morning!”

The waiter brought menus and promised Marnie something special that would bring her great pleasure.

“Luca’s very chirpy today,” said Ralph.

“He’s always like that when business is brisk. Let’s order. I’m starving.”

“And you can tell me what you’ve been up to.”

"It's a deal."

By the time Marnie reached the end of her story, they were well into the main course. Ralph, who had listened attentively, took a sip of wine.

"So you thought the forecast of imminent death might be coming true when you saw what state Larry was in?"

"It did cross my mind at the time, yes." Marnie flapped a hand in front of her face. "Do you find it rather warm in here?"

"And the darkness," Ralph persisted. "You thought that was presumably the dark-skinned young man?"

"I felt awfully guilty about that, Ralph. He was really nice and very helpful."

"It's a mistake anyone could've made."

Marnie finished eating and folded her napkin. "Sorry to do this, but I'm desperate to know how Larry is. I'm going to phone the hospital. I'll go outside." She stood up and took the mobile from her bag. "It'll be good to get some air. It's so warm in here. Back in a minute."

"Take your time. No rush."

When Marnie returned she was smiling.

"Good news?" Ralph said.

Marnie nodded and sat down. "Stable and comfortable. I spoke to the nurse on duty. She said Larry was going to be fine."

"So not a death foretold, then." Ralph grinned at her.

"You don't believe any of this fortune-telling stuff, do you, Ralph?"

"What do you think?"

“Of course not. But we’re sitting in a cosy restaurant – a rather *stuffy* cosy restaurant – not in a dimly-lit room with flickering lights and strange cards looking at us.”

Ralph smiled indulgently. “Talking of cosy restaurants, here comes Luca with a very self-satisfied expression on his face.”

The waiter cleared the plates but did not leave a menu.

“Do you want a dessert, Marnie?” Ralph asked.

“I think it might complete my rehabilitation.”

Ralph waved Luca to come over. “You didn’t leave the dessert menu.”

“No. I didn’t leave it on purpose. I told you I had something special for Marnie. And for you too, of course, Signor Lombardi.” Luca always used the Italian form of Ralph’s surname.

Marnie was intrigued. “What have you got in store for me then, Luca?”

The waiter leaned forward and lowered his voice. “We’ve been waiting for you to come,” he breathed softly. “We have something you are not expecting.” There was something in his manner that made Marnie feel slightly uneasy. “For you, Marnie, we have ... *death*.” He paused theatrically. “Death ... by chocolate!”

Luca waited for a reaction. When Marnie turned pale, he looked disappointed.

“Aren’t you pleased, Marnie? It used to be your favourite ...”

The last thing Marnie heard before the darkness enveloped her was Ralph’s voice, his tone urgent. “Brandy, Luca. Make it a double! Make that two!”

Ralph just caught her as she began sliding to the floor.