

## A Death in the Village

A Marnie Walker short story

“You must remember Ben, or rather Benjamin. That’s what he insisted on being called.”

Marnie Walker was going through the post in the farmhouse kitchen. It was a Saturday morning in September, and her partner Ralph was spooning coffee into the cafetière.

“Remind me,” he said.

“You know. He kept his boat in Little Venice. His mooring was three or four slots along the towpath from *Sally Ann* when I first started boating. Tall chap, fairish hair, rather nice looking. His boat was called *Disraeli*. Fifty-seven foot semi-trad, slightly in need of a lick of paint.”

Ralph began pouring hot water over the grounds. “Not sure. I wasn’t around much back then, of course.”

“I thought you’d met him. He was a kind of Little Venice in-joke at the time.”

Marnie was referring to the boaters’ habit of using only first names, plus the name of the boat as an identifier, almost like a surname. She was always known as Marnie-*Sally Ann*.

“I do remember,” said Ralph. “He was always known as Benjamin-*Disraeli*.”

Marnie grinned. “That’s the one.”

“What was his actual surname?”

Marnie pondered this for a moment. “Er ... Browning, I think, like the island in Little Venice. Yes, that’s right: Benjamin Browning.”

Ralph placed the lid carefully on the cafetière. “He had a wife, also quite good-looking, and a boy of about twelve or thirteen. Am I right?”

“Yep.”

“I seem to remember thinking the wife – what was her name? – was pretty high maintenance. I got the impression she thought the whole canalboat thing was rather beneath her.”

“Andrea, she was called,” Marnie said. “I remember her reaction when she heard someone joke that we were all regarded locally in Little Venice as the *water gypsies*.” She laughed. “That did not go down well.”

Ralph set out two coffee mugs on coasters and fetched the milk jug from the fridge. “Why are we talking about them?” he asked.

Marnie waved a letter. “He’s written – yes, an actual letter – to say he’s split up from Andrea and sold *Disraeli*.”

“Probably thought an e-mail would be too casual for such an important matter,” Ralph said. “Is this permanent? Are they getting divorced?”

“It’s already happened. From the tone of his letter he sounds quite cut up about the whole thing. And selling the boat seems to have hit him hard, to make matters worse.”

“What about their son? He had an odd name, didn’t he? No doubt he’ll be living with his mother.”

“Rollo,” Marnie said. “And yes, Benjamin says Andrea has custody, though I always got the impression he was really close to his father. They both loved boating.”

“A sad business.” Ralph began pouring coffee. “Will you reply? You knew him better than I did.”

Marnie reached for her mug and drew it towards her. “You know, Ralph, I’ve been thinking.”

“Oh dear, that sounds ominous.” He smiled at her as he tipped a little milk into her coffee.

“Thinking the unthinkable,” she said, her expression solemn.

“What is it?”

Marnie took a deep breath. “Between us we have three houses – or rather two houses and a Docklands apartment – and two narrowboats. This house is our home, and your cottage near Oxford is obviously a good investment for the future. It’s also useful to have the flat as a  *pied-a-terre*  in London for business purposes.”

“I’m with you so far, Marnie, and I think I can see what’s coming.”

“Two boats,” Marnie said. “Your boat, *Thyrsis* – your *floating Oxford college*, as you call it – is well set up as your study. It has everything you need for your work.”

“But *Sally Ann*,” said Ralph. “Are you thinking she’s an indulgence, an extravagance? What’s brought this on?”

Marnie shrugged. “The business is doing well at the moment, but my expenses are high, including London rates and outgoings on the flat, plus the high cost of running a boat. I have to keep an eye on the future.”

“Could you really think of selling her? If you’re serious, perhaps you ought to offer first refusal to Beth. After all, *Sally* was originally your sister’s boat.”

Marnie blew steam off the top of her mug. “I floated the idea past her last night while you were in the shower.”

“And?”

“She said she’d talk it over with Paul. He’s away at a conference in Edinburgh for a few days. She’ll get back to me.”

Ralph looked at his watch. "I've got to e-mail an article to the editor of *Economics* magazine. As soon as I've finished the coffee I'll pop round to *Thyrsis* and get it done." He took a mouthful. "So what about that letter from Benjamin-*Disraeli*? Can I leave it for you to deal with?"

Marnie glanced down at it. "He sounds really glum. He's lost his boat; his wife's moved to somewhere in the home counties; he's living in a poky little flat in Hackney and he gets to see his son every other weekend. I'm wondering whether we could invite him – or both of them, even – up here for a visit. What d'you think?"

"Might be just what he needs. And while we've still got *Sally Ann* ..." Ralph left the rest unspoken.

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And that's how it turned out. Marnie rang Benjamin that afternoon. They had a long chat, and she learnt that he would be having Rollo for the following weekend. They would travel up to Milton Keynes by train, and Marnie would meet them at the station early on Friday evening. Marnie's devoted friend / disciple / assistant, Anne, would be visiting her family in Leighton Buzzard that weekend, which meant she and Ralph would be able to devote all their time to their guests.

The first surprise – and it was to be in some ways a weekend of surprises – came on Thursday evening. Benjamin rang to confirm the time of their train's arrival next day. He added that he had put the word round in Little Venice that *Sally Ann* might be up for sale. This had sparked a fair amount of interest, so much so that at least one potential buyer had emerged.

"Do you remember Andy Goodchild, Marnie? Used to have a forty-footer on the other side of the bridge. Sold it when he got married a few years ago. Seems he's interested in getting back into boating, and his wife's keen enough, too."

Marnie thought for a moment. "Scruffy little Springer, green and blue?"

"That's the one. He wants to come and take a peek at *Sally Ann*. Any chance this weekend?"

Marnie hesitated. "It all seems rather sudden. I'm not sure. I haven't even approached a broker for a valuation yet."

"It would only be for a preliminary inspection. I think he wants to show his wife what they might get. Thing is, they can only make it at weekends, and he wouldn't want to miss out if somebody else got in first."

"Okay. You're very persuasive, Ben ... jamin. Will you tell him?"

"Glad to, Marnie."

"Will they come up by car?"

"That's the plan."

"Tell Andy our entrance is the first field gate on the left after the church, when they come into Knightly St John from the dual carriageway. We've kept the old name-board, *Glebe Farm*, from when it still was a working farm. You can't miss it."

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It had been Ralph's idea, and they put it to Benjamin and Rollo over supper on Friday evening. Would the visitors like to sleep on *Sally Ann* for the weekend? In addition to the sleeping cabin there was a camp bed for the saloon that Anne had used in the past and said was very comfortable. A pleasant surprise. Father and son were delighted. For them, nothing could be better.

That night Marnie and Ralph, Benjamin and Rollo trooped through the spinney separating the buildings of Glebe Farm from the canalside. Marnie led the way, lighting the footpath with a torch, while Ralph brought up the rear, holding a lantern. They were halfway through the spinney when Ralph's mobile sounded. He checked the screen and announced that he had to take the call. The others walked on, leaving him following slowly behind.

On board *Sally Ann* the atmosphere was cosy and welcoming. The interior was lined throughout in varnished tongue-and-groove pine that gleamed in the glow of subdued lighting. The furniture was of blond-coloured wood, with safari chairs and

plump cream cushions. Deep blue felt tiles were soft underfoot surmounted by Oriental rugs. The curtains were classic Liberty print in red, blue and cream, held at top and bottom on polished brass rails.

Benjamin and Rollo stood speechless in the galley area with its cream shaker units.

“I think you’ll be comfortable in here,” Marnie said.

At that moment Ralph stepped down into the cabin. Clearly embarrassed, he said, “Sorry about that. An emergency has cropped up. I’m afraid I’ll have to go into college tomorrow morning. A colleague is supposed to be chairing a seminar and he’s gone down with a migraine. With any luck I’ll probably just need to get things started. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Can’t be helped,” Marnie said. “I think we’ve sorted everything out here, unless there’s anything else you need to know, Benjamin?”

Benjamin shook his head slowly. “She’s beautiful, Marnie. I don’t know how you can bear to part with her.”

“Well, you know, sometimes difficult decisions ...”

Ralph chimed in. “I think the temperature inside seems all right. We’ve had the electric heater running on a time switch, so you should be warm enough now and again in the morning. We’ve got a family bathroom in the main farmhouse and a shower room at the rear of the office barn. Both are at your disposal. There’s also the shower and loo on board, of course, though they are rather cramped.”

“If there’s anything you need,” Marnie added, “you’ve got our mobile numbers.”

On the way back to the farmhouse through the spinney Marnie gripped Ralph’s hand tightly. Neither spoke.

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On Saturday morning Ralph set off for Oxford bright and early straight after breakfast. Their guests expressed great satisfaction with the accommodation on *Sally Ann*. They lingered over coffee at the kitchen table, and Marnie suggested they might go for a walk along the towpath before the prospective buyers arrived to view *Sally Ann*. No-one seemed in any hurry to leave the comforting warmth of the Aga stove.

For father and son the night on the boat had been a poignant reminder of what they had lost following the sale of their own craft with the splitting up of the family. Marnie began wondering if the ownership of the narrowboat had contributed to the incompatibility of husband and wife. Benjamin hinted that their elderly semi-trad had failed to live up to the status to which Andrea aspired. Marnie considered it wise not to pursue the subject.

It was one of those crisp September mornings with the low sun shining through dew-laden spiders' webs in the spinney as they began their walk. Little was said, but Marnie gained the impression of a firm bond between Benjamin and Rollo. She wondered if the boy, who was now in his mid-teens, would rather be living with his father. Their closeness was tinged with an air of melancholy just below the surface.

Mid-morning they retraced their steps to the farmhouse. Marnie was heating water for coffee when Benjamin's mobile rang. Bill and Jackie, the couple coming to see *Sally Ann*, were making good time and expected to arrive in Knightly St John within the next twenty minutes or so.

"Tell them we've got the kettle on," Marnie said.

Benjamin relayed the message, which was well received, and disconnected.

"Marnie." It was Rollo who spoke. He pointed at the mobile lying on the table. "I think you've got a message."

Marnie checked the phone. He was right. She pressed buttons for voicemail and listened, her expression darkening. When she hung up she looked exasperated.

"Is it Ralph?" Benjamin asked.

“No, worse. It’s a client. She recently qualified for an award: the *Pain in the Neck Prize*. She just finds it impossible to make up her mind about the colour scheme. I’m doing a makeover on her house. I ordered all the materials yesterday, now she’s saying: *Ooh, Marnie, I’m having second thoughts.*”

“What a drag.”

“More than a drag. She’s on her way here. That’s the trouble with living over the shop, as it were.”

Rollo said, “Can’t you tell her not to come, that it’s too late, and it’s Saturday?”

“Much as I’d like to, she could arrive any minute. Difficult to turn her away.”

Benjamin looked at his watch. “Bill and Jackie will be arriving soon. What do we do about them?”

“Oh gawd,” Marnie sighed. “This is not how things were supposed to be.”

“Double-booked,” Benjamin muttered.

“Benjamin, do you think you could show them over the boat, maybe take them for a tootle? You know where everything is and how it all works. You’re experienced at running a boat. What do you think?”

“A tootle?”

“A short trip. Maybe down as far as Cosgrove lock, then bring her back here? You could give them tea and biscuits or something. That would give them a fair impression.”

“Sure, I can do that. In fact, I’d enjoy it. Thank you, Marnie.”

“You’d be doing me a favour, to be honest. I’m not sure I really have the heart to do it. In fact –”



She was interrupted by the mobile chirping again. It was Ralph confirming he would definitely be back within the hour. Marnie was just passing on the news to Benjamin and Rollo when they heard the crunch of car tyres on gravel. Marnie looked out of the kitchen window.

“Bill and Jackie?” said Benjamin.

“No. It’s my client. I’d better take her over to the office. You’ve got the keys for *Sally Ann*?”

Rollo held them up.

“Good. Well, if you’ll excuse –” Marnie craned her neck. “Ah. There’s a couple coming down the field track. It’s probably them. Can I leave you to get on with things?”

“Sure,” said Benjamin. “Leave it to me – to us.”

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Things turned out at least as well as could be expected. Marnie’s client really only needed to be reassured that the scheme on which she had decided would be a great success. Marnie took her through the entire design, room by room, wallpaper by wallpaper, curtain by curtain. By the end of their discussion she pronounced herself thrilled with every aspect of the project and grateful for Marnie’s thoroughness and patience. For her part, Marnie felt she was destined for martyrdom or at least beatification. She smiled benignly as she walked the client out to her car and waved her off.

Marnie locked the office door and set off through the spinney. Arriving at the canalside, she was in time to see *Sally Ann* cruising towards the mooring. At the tiller was a stranger, presumably Bill, the prospective buyer. As she looked on, Bill handed the tiller over to Benjamin. He lined her up and slotted the boat snugly into her docking area, an accomplished boatman. Marnie found it strange to see other people steering *Sally Ann*.

A few minutes after their arrival, with the mooring ropes firmly attached front and rear, they assembled on the bank. Rollo opted to stay on board and tidy up. A faint sound of pop music could be heard coming from the cabin.

Benjamin introduced Marnie to Bill and Jackie who, it transpired, had been looking for a suitable boat all summer. They were impressed with *Sally Ann* and would be in touch 'very soon'.

As they shook hands, Marnie said, "So you're driving back to London now?"

"London?" said Bill. "No. We don't live in London any more. Since we married we've been living in ...". He glanced at Jackie. "... Reading."

"Reading," Jackie repeated.

"I know Reading," said Benjamin.

"Well, it's not actually Reading as such. It's in that area."

"I see. Whereabouts?"

"You know Pangbourne?"

"Oh yes, quite well."

Bill said, "I said Pangbourne because it's a place people might know. We actually live in a little village near there."

"Which one?" Benjamin asked.

"It's a small place no-one has ever heard of. It's called Cranton."

"I know Cranton," Benjamin said emphatically.

“You do?”

“Sure. It’s roughly midway between Pangbourne and Reading.”

“You really know Cranton?” Bill sounded sceptical.

“Certainly. In fact, my former wife lives there.”

“Does she? What an amazing coincidence.”

“Yes. She lives next to the pub. Let me think what it’s called. I know. It’s the White Hart.”

Bill and Jackie gaped at Benjamin. “The White Hart,” Bill murmured faintly. “We live next door to the White Hart. You’re sure you’re thinking of the right village?”

“Absolutely. There’s a pond right in front of the pub, surrounded by a low white fence.”

Marnie watched the reaction of Bill and Jackie. She saw the colour drain from their faces.

“Andrea?” said Jackie. “Andrea Browning?”

“That’s her,” Benjamin confirmed. “Moved there just a few months ago.”

Jackie spoke slowly. “She’s our next-door neighbour.”

“Well, well ... small world,” said Benjamin.

“I think we ought to be getting along.” Bill was already turning to go. “Thank you for the outing. She’s a lovely boat.”

“I didn’t see your car,” Marnie said.

“We weren’t sure about coming down the field so we parked on the road near the gate.”

Marnie began, “Would you like me to –”

“No, it’s all right we know the way. Goodbye.”

Marnie and Benjamin watched them head into the spinney. They didn’t look back. As they stood there they became aware that the music was no longer playing on the boat. Rollo came up onto the stern deck and looked down at them.

“I’ve cleared away the tea things,” he said. “It’s all tidy in there now.”

“That’s great,” said Benjamin. “Good lad.”

“Everything all right, dad? You look a bit strange. Do those people want to buy the boat?”

“Not sure,” said Marnie.

“What’s up?” Rollo asked.

“You’ll never believe this,” Benjamin said.

He recounted the conversation, stressing how strange their reaction had been when he told them he knew Cranton and that Andrea lived there.

“Didn’t you recognise them, Rollo?” Marnie asked. “Next door neighbours, after all.”

Rollo shook his head. "I've hardly been there. I'm at boarding school in Bristol and I've been staying with my grandparents in Norfolk over the holidays."

Benjamin put an arm round his son's shoulders. "Andrea probably wanted time to get settled in."

"Well, their reaction was certainly most odd," said Marnie.

Rollo looked thoughtful. "I think I can guess why."

"Go on," Benjamin said.

The boy made a face. "It'll probably sound silly."

Marnie urged him on. "Why don't you just tell us?"

Rollo paused. Marnie and Benjamin waited.

"You know how mum sort of ... dresses things up?"

"What things?" said Benjamin.

"Well, I think it's like this. I may be wrong but I think – in fact I'm pretty sure – mum's been telling people ... she's a widow." His voice tailed away at the end.

"Why would she do that?" Marnie asked.

Benjamin nodded. "I can see why. It kind of makes sense. A widow has a different status from a ... *divorcee*." He stressed the last word.

"Even these days?" said Marnie. "Surely there's no stigma attached."

“The sympathy vote,” Benjamin said. “Andrea the martyr, the saintly victim.”

Marnie mulled this over. “So, Benjamin, that makes you, presumably ... *dead.*”

Benjamin and Rollo looked at each other. They both laughed.

“Better get back to the house,” Marnie said. “I’m doing a simple soup-and-cheese lunch. Ralph will be here soon.”

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Ralph turned off the dual carriageway and took the narrow country road to the village. After a twisty mile he reached the signboard for Knightly St John and drove down the high street. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere, no traffic, not even a bicycle. All seemed somehow eerily quiet. A strange feeling came over him. It was as if there had been a death in the village.

He passed the church, almost expecting to see a freshly-dug grave in the churchyard. It was a peculiar sensation. He couldn’t get the idea out of his head. Approaching the field gate, he braked, signalled, drove round a parked car and turned onto the track leading down to Glebe Farm. Almost at once he saw two people, a man and a woman, coming up the track towards him. They were in earnest conversation and only seemed to notice him as he drove by.

Ralph nodded at the couple. They both looked at him in surprise. Their expressions were drawn and anguished. For a moment Ralph thought he should stop to see if they needed help, but when he looked in the mirror he saw that they had quickened their pace and were hurrying away.

He parked the car in its usual place in one of the barns and walked round to the house. As he opened the front door he could hear voices in the kitchen. Marnie and their guests had evidently arrived just before him, for Marnie was shifting a pan onto one of the hotplates on the Aga, and the others were taking off their jackets.

"You've made good time," Marnie said. "Had a good journey?"

"Sort of. Strange atmosphere in the village."

"In what way?"

"Don't know. It just seemed deserted, abandoned. A strange idea came into my head: there'd been a death in the village, and it was in mourning."

"Not like you to be fey," said Marnie.

"Of course not, but then I saw these people coming up the field track."

"A couple?" Benjamin said.

"Yes."

"The people who'd been to look at the boat, probably."

"What about them?" Marnie said.

"They were odd. In fact, judging by their expressions, they looked as if they'd seen a ghost."

Marnie and Benjamin and Rollo stared at Ralph for a long moment. Then, as if on cue, they burst out laughing.

Ralph stared back, bewildered. "What did I say?"

### **Postscript**

Of course Marnie decided she could not bring herself to sell *Sally Ann*.