

ANONYMOUS

By Laurel Dewey

My name is Jane Perry and I'm an alcoholic.

As I write that, it doesn't feel like it belongs to me yet. I'm three months sober so I'll get another goddamn chip at the meeting tomorrow night. Can't wait. The fucking thing can rattle around in the left pocket of my jeans and keep the other chips company.

This whole sobriety trip is still like a new pair of shoes—too constrictive and rubbing my sole the wrong way. But I play along, go to the AA meetings, listen to the “Basement People” (as I call them) talk and convince myself that I am powerless over alcohol and my life has become unmanageable. That's the first step in AA and, for me, it took over twenty years to make that leap.

But I also fight the notion that there are some alcoholics who really *should* tap a keg because they suck at sobriety. They are the ones who are wound up so fucking tight that the least amount of stress kicks them into a frenzied orbit. That's when they're told to meditate or do yoga or take a long walk or breathe deeply. But the fact of the matter is, they really just need to get a load on and it's just too fucking bad they can't convince their mind to stop popping a cap after one or two beverages.

Some nights, when I'm laying awake, I wonder if I'm one of those people who shouldn't be a teetotaler. But then I remember that there's no way I could stop at two beers or two shots of Jack Daniels. Hell, two drinks was a warm up for me. I didn't get my drink on officially until I hit *numero* six. In AA, you have to delve into *why* you drink and what triggers the need to disappear. I find it ironic that a group dedicated to uncovering the need to disappear has the word *anonymous* in its title. Shouldn't they call it Alcoholics Identified? When you lay it on the table and really start pulling the layers off that goddamn onion, you discover that those of us who like to bend our elbow are really just wishing we could escape, become someone else and believe that when we became that someone else, the problems wouldn't follow us. But then every time you go to a meeting, you're reminded that the voices and the nightmares follow you no matter how creatively you radically reinvent yourself.

I thought I was ready to reinvent myself after working my last case at Denver Homicide. I had nothing left in me. My adrenal glands had coughed up their last teaspoon of adrenaline. My world had turned on its ass and I was forced to understand that there's more to heaven and earth than we can perceive. I couldn't digest everything that had happened and so when my boss, Sergeant Morgan Weyler, offered me the job of Sergeant working next to him, I knew I

wasn't ready to deal with it. But I still had to be a cop because I came out of the womb with a desire to solve crimes and to understand why people do evil deeds.

So, like I said, I reinvented myself and started my own PI agency called JPI for Jane Perry Investigations. I've had the shingle out for a little less than a month and I'm catching a few cases that don't deal with dead bodies. The press I got after the Lawrence murder case helped get my name out there. My reluctant appearance on Larry King's show, still earns me free coffees at *The Gourmet Grind*. Even though I hated doing it, it was a necessary evil. So when I went from Detective Jane Perry at Denver Homicide to Jane Perry, Private Investigator, I hoped that all those shadows that haunted me as a Denver cop would disappear and I could be reborn and start fresh.

That all dovetails into the case I worked this week. The fallout still has me smoking more than my normal pack a day.

It started last Monday night when I was sitting with the Basement People at the Methodist Church. During the break, I went outside to smoke and this woman who I thought was around fifty, sidled up to me.

"You're Jane Perry, right?" she said, taking a hard suck of nicotine off her cigarette.

"Jane P.," I corrected her. "Remember where we are?"

“Yeah, yeah,” she muttered, not giving a shit about anonymous protocol.
“My name’s Ellen Brigham. I saw you on Larry King’s show.”

“Who the fuck didn’t?” I said, hoping to God she wasn’t going to ask me to sign a copy of the group members’ phone list.

Ellen went on to say that she’d heard I’d opened up my own PI office and wanted to know what I charged. I took one look at her shredded jeans, faded t-shirt and dirty tennis shoes and figured she couldn’t afford even half of my usual \$175 an hour plus expenses.

Without answering her question, I asked another. “What do you need?”

“I was wondering if you can find dead people?”

“Sure,” I said, taking a hit off my cigarette. “I just go to any morgue or cemetery and there they are. Dead people.”

“I should have rephrased that,” Ellen said, struggling with her thoughts. “My older sister...Marge Challis...she was last heard from back in the fall of 2001.”

I dropped my cigarette to the pavement and snuffed it out with the toe of my cowboy boot. “I need a lot more than that.”

“Like what?”

“Like her last known location and the date she went missing.”

“That’s easy. She was in Tower number one on 9/11.”

Well, that got my attention. I agreed to meet Ellen at my office the next day. She showed up early, dressed almost identically the way I saw her outside the meeting. She said she'd taken the bus and walked five blocks to my office. She looked like she'd come right out of the homeless shelter. Her brown and grey streaked hair was half-combed and her face appeared haggard. I hadn't noticed the brown mole at the right corner of her bottom lip the night before.

After sitting across from me, Ellen removed a large blue binder from her cloth bag. She was quick to apologize for her unkempt appearance, telling me she hadn't slept a wink the night before. It had taken her six years to get the guts to talk to somebody.

"Can I smoke in here?"

"Denver building code says no. I say why the fuck not?" Ellen nervously rummaged through her bag, coming up empty handed. After about a minute, I handed her a pack of Marlboros. Ellen took a cigarette out and handed the pack back to Jane. "Keep 'em. So, what's the story?"

Ellen lit up, took a meaningful drag and gathered her thoughts. "Her name is Marge Challis."

"Is?" I questioned.

Ellen tilted her head. She struggled with the concept. "Was."

“Challis her married name or—”

“No, she never married.” Ellen spelled the last name out for me so I could make a note.

“So, your last name of Brigham is—”

“I got married young and divorced. But I kept his name...”

I noticed how Ellen’s voice inflected upward right then. It could be the sign of a lie but it could have also been nerves.

“Marge was having trouble back then.”

“What kind of trouble?” I asked.

“Emotional and financial.” Ellen looked me in the eye straight on for the first time. “She had a 9 A.M. job interview for a secretarial position in Tower One. If she didn’t get the job, she was basically gonna be kicked out of her apartment. She was drowning in credit card debt. Life had become unliveable.”

I noticed that when Ellen talked about her sister, she seemed to have an outstanding grasp of what her sister had gone through.

Ellen continued. “Marge always wanted to be successful. Marry the good guy, live in the nice house, maybe have a kid. But, deep down, she never thought she was good enough to deserve any of that.” Ellen took a hard drag on her cigarette. “This is real hard for me.”

“Take your time.”

“She got involved in drugs.” Ellen looked ashamed. “Ecstasy and pills. She did meth for awhile. That fucked her up.”

“How old was she in the fall of 2001?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Twenty-eight?” I questioned.

“Yeah.”

“So, she’d be thirty-four now?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

“And she’s your *older* sister?”

Ellen shrugged. “Yeah. What’s the problem?”

The woman sitting across from looked fifty. Her face was haggard and aging rapidly. The grey in her brown hair lent even more maturity. I wanted to be diplomatic but diplomacy has never been forte. “How old are you?”

Ellen slightly hesitated. “Thirty-three.”

Good God, I thought. Talk about rode hard and put away wet. I thought I looked like shit for thirty-five but the woman sitting across from me had obviously experienced one helluva stressful life to look that bad at thirty-three. “You’re thirty-three?” I said, just to make sure my hearing wasn’t going.

She could see that I was confused. “Marge and I are Irish Twins,” Ellen offered, using the term for siblings born less than twelve months apart.

“Any other siblings?”

Ellen’s eyes welled with tears. “There was a brother. Frank. He was really good to Marge. He gave her money when she was broke and never expected it to be paid back. He’d talk to her any hour of the day or night for as long as she needed to talk. He’d tell her to keep positive and that she deserved a better life.”

“He died?”

Ellen’s eyes scanned the carpet. She took another drag on her cigarette. “Yeah. Right after 9/11. Car crash.”

The first thing I thought was what were the odds of losing two siblings in that short period of time. The second thought was how tragic life could be. Jesus, no wonder Ellen was a drunk. “You say Frank was good to Marge. Was he good to you?”

“What?” She seemed unprepared for that question.

“We all need a decent person to talk to who actually gives a shit. Did Frank give you the same pep talks he gave your older sister?”

“Well, sure...uh, yeah. He was a good guy.” Ellen appeared flustered. “I’m not trying to say he didn’t help me. He *did*. But we’re not here to talk about me. We’re here to talk about Marge and the possibility of...”

I sensed a lot of nerves kicking in right then. I leaned forward, clasping my hands on my cluttered desk. “Of what?”

“That maybe she didn’t die.” The words fell like stone. Ellen pulled her large blue binder to her lap, opened it and rifled through a disorganized heap of pages. “She was on the sixteenth floor. Her interview was with a bank.” Ellen found the page she was looking for. “The plane struck Tower One at 8:46 A.M. It hit floors ninety-three to ninety-nine. No one above those floors survived. Below the crash line, approximately seventy-two die but over *four thousand* survive! Tower One doesn’t collapse until 10:28 A.M. Being on the sixteenth floor, even if the elevators didn’t work, she could have walked down sixteen floors real quick —”

“How do you know all the details about your sister’s schedule that day?”

Ellen looked taken back. “Well, we talked.” Her eyes drifted to the side. “We didn’t talk a lot but I knew about her interview. She called me a few days before and told me about it.” Ellen’s chin quivered as her mouth went dry. This wasn’t just nerves, I realized. This was outright fear. “You got some water?”

I grabbed the cleanest glass I could find and filled it with some bottled water. Ellen drank it like she’d just run a marathon in 110-degree heat.

I wanted to gauge my next question carefully. “Did she call you...from the Tower?”

Ellen looked at me. “No. She called Frank.”

“Not you.”

“No. She called Frank.” Ellen hung her head. “He told me what she said. She called him right after 10 A.M....right after Tower Two collapsed. She told him how she saw the debris hit the windows, obscuring everything outside. And the way the ground shook, like bombs were goin’ off all around her. And...how they should have evacuated right away but that she was scared.” Ellen’s hand trembled. “She told him she wasn’t sure if she’d get out alive. And that she loved him. That he’d been the only good thing in her life. And that this was a sign from God.”

There must have been some serious rift between Ellen and her sister, I thought, for Marge to say that Frank was the “only good thing” in her life. “Wait a second,” I said. “She had twenty-five minutes or so from when she called Frank to get out safely and walk down sixteen floors—”

“Maybe she figured she wasn’t worth saving.” Ellen seemed to be in another world.

I sat back. “What are you saying? She made a split decision to suicide in the Tower?”

Ellen was silent for almost a minute. “Her life was so messed up. Maybe she decided at that moment that Marge Challis needed to die.”

I watched Ellen’s face fight the words she just said. But I also knew that even when people say they don’t want to live, it doesn’t necessarily mean they

want to die. The will to survive is programmed in our DNA. I know from my own dark past that just because I wanted to check out a few times, it didn't mean that the driving force to sustain my life didn't take over. You may hate life but you may fear death even more.

"So, she tells Frank that the terror attack is a sign from God and then what?" I ask.

Ellen's eyes filled with tears. "She told him she loved him and that she had to make a difficult decision."

"To live or die." Ellen nodded weakly. "Then what?" I asked.

"She hung up. And no one ever heard from Marge after that."

"Ellen," I said cautiously, "I don't mean to be insensitive. But why are you here?"

"I needed you to hear my story. We're anonymous at the meetings. But I wanted you to know about me and what happened to Marge. I've never told anyone about it."

"You're kidding?"

"I'm not. They tell us at AA to make amends for past wrongs. To face people who you've hurt and let them know that you weren't thinking clearly when you were using and that," she choked on her tears, "that I shouldn't have let Marge die."

“But you didn’t have any control over that. Marge called Frank from the Tower. Not you.”

“What I mean is I should have helped her more. I should have believed in her more. I should have filled her up with hope instead of...” Her thoughts drifted.

“Instead of what?”

“Making her think she wasn’t worth saving!”

And that, I decided, is why Ellen looked like she was fifty. Her sister and she obviously had a falling out, with probably minimal contact toward the end of Marge’s life. Although, I recalled, Ellen said she did talk to her a few days prior to the job interview. I ruminated on it and deduced that the inevitable guilt and all the “what if’s” had flooded Ellen’s head for six painful years. At that moment, I realized that Ellen wasn’t talking to me because she needed a PI. Ellen needed someone to confess to. I was a priest and Ellen was confessing her sins. I took a breath and did my best to assume the role. “So, if Marge was alive today, what do you think she’d be doing?”

Ellen looked up at me with soulful eyes. “She’d be clean and sober. I’d make sure of that. She’d still be searching but she’d be trying to get her life together. She’d be...reaching out to people, like I’m reaching out to you.” Ellen considered the question further. “Frank wouldn’t be dead either.”

“How’s that possible? He died in a car crash.”

Ellen’s eyes moved from her fixed gaze toward me to the side. “Well, after Marge died, Frank got pre-occupied a lot. His mind wandered and, well, her death impacted him. I’m sure that’s why he wasn’t paying attention when he slid on the ice.”

“Where’d he live?”

“Vermont.” Ellen smiled at a pleasant memory. “He was an *award-winning photographer*.” She said that to me almost like she wanted to make damn sure I heard her. Tears welled in her eyes. “So, if Frank wasn’t dead and Marge was alive and clean and sober, I know he would be so proud of her. *So proud*. And he’d know that all those late night phone calls with her finally paid off and that she was figuring out that she *did* deserve to have a good life.” Ellen looked at Jane with near desperation. “I wish to God Frank could know that, Jane. It’d mean the world to me.”

“If there’s a heaven, Ellen, then they’re together and he knows how much he helped Marge.” Shit, now I really *did* sound like a goddamned priest.

“Right,” she whispered, as if she didn’t believe that Marge and Frank were shooting the breeze in the afterlife. “I just wish...”

“What?”

She shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “I just wish.”

It was an odd statement but I let it go. Ellen closed the blue binder and put it back in her bag. "Thank you for listening to me." She squashed out the spent cigarette in my ashtray.

"Sure."

"What do I owe you?"

"Nothing."

Ellen looked a bit shocked. "Wow. Thank you." She got up and walked toward the door, let out a nervous long breath and then turned back to Jane. "What if she got out? What if she walked away from the Towers and kept walking? What if she's out there, scared to death and wishing she could make everything right?"

I thought how delusional Ellen sounded at that point. But I was also sure that the same thought had probably crossed other families' minds who lost family on 9/11 since they never saw their loved one's body and had closure. For them and for Ellen, there was the comforting fantasy that somehow their nearest and dearest were out there, lost but alive.

She stared at me and it seemed she was trying to get me to understand something with her mournful gaze. But all I could see then was regret and sorrow.

I couldn't shake Ellen's visit for five days. There was something about her that haunted me. I picked up the AA member phone list once with the idea of calling her but then I realized she wasn't listed on it. Maybe she didn't have a phone, although, that would complicate her life when she had to reach her sponsor. But sponsors certainly weren't mandatory. I didn't have one. I figured by the looks of her, she was probably so broke that she didn't own a cell phone.

By Sunday afternoon, I was obsessed with Ellen's story. I thought about the tragedy of losing both her sister and brother so close together and how I understood why she chose to disappear into a bottle. I wondered, briefly, if the story of the brother and sister's death might have made it to some news show. I'd seen plenty of post-9/11, human interest stories on TV and in the newspaper—stories that followed victims' families and revealed everything from suicides to new relationships. Call it curiosity, but I opened my laptop and searched "Frank Challis photography Vermont" based on the limited information Ellen gave me. The very first website was "Frank Challis Photography" and made mention of "In Memoriam" in the brief description. I clicked on the website and read about Frank's work. There was a beautiful shot of Vermont in the wintertime. I looked closer at the photo and read the copyright. It was 2007.

I went through photo after photo and found current dates on most of them. Finally, at the bottom of one page, it read, "To contact Frank directly..."

and gave a number. If Frank was dead, he sure as hell took great photos from the grave.

My eyes drifted to the “In Memoriam” link at the top of one of the pages. I clicked on it. It loaded slowly. First I saw the name “Marge” and then “Challis” appear. The photo took longer to load. But once it did, I stared in stunned silence. It was Ellen.

Sure, she looked younger and fresher but it was Ellen. There was the striking brown mole by her right side of her bottom lip and the same haircut, with less grey. Even entertaining the idea that she and her “sister” were Irish twins, the chance of both of them having a large mole in the exact same location was a billion to one.

“Fuck,” I said out loud. Not so much angry, but more confused. I thought back on the conversation I’d had with her that still rang in my head. Little by little, the jigsaw puzzle started to make sense. I had wondered why “Ellen” knew so much about the private thoughts and motives of Marge—how an estranged sister was able to intimately tell me what Marge was going through and how it was affecting her. When she relayed the phone call that Frank allegedly told her about, she was really telling me first hand what *she* saw out that window of Tower One and what *she* felt at that critical moment. And when she told me, regretfully, that she shouldn’t have let Marge die, that she “should have helped

her more," believed in her and filled her with hope instead of making her believe she wasn't worth saving, the poor woman was actually talking about herself. The addict she used to be. The one who Frank tried so desperately to help.

I think I understand why she killed off Frank in her head. Once she "killed" herself, she had to "kill" him too in order to assuage the loneliness. If he wasn't dead in her mind, she might get weak when she was drunk and call him up to hear him tell her that everything was alright and that she wasn't a bad person. But as each year passed, and Marge Challis remained on the 9/11 victim list, the chance to resurrect her "dead body" and come clean became more unfeasible. But that's what she wanted more than anything. After getting sober and the cobwebs cleared, she came face-to-face with herself. She didn't want to be "dead" anymore. So she reinvented herself like we all do when we shake loose the shadows of addiction. She became Ellen Brigham, went to more meetings and finally got the guts to approach me one week ago and partially reveal her stained soul. She was on Step Nine in AA: making direct amends to people, whenever possible, for past wrongs. The problem was, the "dead" can't make direct amends.

I played back the visit to its conclusion and I remembered that look she gave me right before she left—that look that almost pleaded with me to read her mind. "*I just wish,*" she stated. It rang odd to me then but not now. I was pretty

sure the way she talked about Marge and Frank that what she wished more than anything was for Frank to know she was okay. Like it was up to me to be a good PI, put the pieces together and maybe contact him and...what? What in the hell was I supposed to do? I couldn't call Frank up out of the blue and drop that bomb on him. Fuck that shit. It's called "direct amends" for a reason, not amends via a third party who also happens to be a drunk No. I'd talk to her first at the meeting. Somehow, we'd figure out how to make it all right.

So, right now, I'm sitting in my Mustang sucking down my twenty-second cigarette of the day and I'm about to go inside the Methodist Church for the weekly meet-and-greet with the Basement People. I've been keeping an eye out for Ellen...I mean, Marge, but I haven't seen her. The meeting starts in five minutes and I want to get a good seat close to the bad coffee and bowls of shitty hard candy.

I walk down into the basement and the mood is grim. There's a few people crying and shaking their heads. I walk over to Joe, the guy who runs the meeting. He's not looking great either.

"What's going on?" I ask him.

"Sad news. I got a call yesterday. Ellen B. died."

"Fuck," was all I could muster. "What happened?"

"Car accident."

“What?”

“She fell asleep at the wheel and ran off the road. Died on impact.”

I felt the walls start to cave in around me. Marge took the bus to my office. She didn’t own a car. “How did you find out Ellen died?”

“I got a call from her cousin,” Joe offered. “She said she found my number on the member’s phone list.”

It suddenly made sense to me. “Right. Her cousin. Marge Challis?”

Joe nodded.

And so the cycle of life and death, reinvention and resurrection continue for Marge. I contemplated calling up Frank but I figured I’d need a stiff drink before I did that and so to preserve my sobriety, I opted out.

Like I said at the beginning, in AA, you have to delve into *why* you drink and what triggers your need to disappear. Once you stop killing the pain with the bottle, you’re supposed to come alive and find out who you really are and why you choose to exist. But some of us...some of us chose to walk out of a burning building that is twenty-five minutes away from collapsing and before we get to the end of the street where the debris isn’t so thick and the smoke has cleared, we’ve become someone else. And we believe in our hearts that the long shadows that stand just behind us will magically disappear just like the person

we slaughtered. But those damn shadows are as uncompromising as we chose to be when we believed we could kill the past. They grasp onto us even more relentlessly.

Somewhere out there right now, Marge Challis thinks she's once again shaken off the darkness. But when she wakes up tomorrow, there will be a little less light to guide her.