



METRA TRAIN IN ELGIN

CHAPTER 1

Metra Messenger

It was a ripped and dirty seat in the last car of the ice-cold Metra commuter train, but it was the only one that was without another passenger in it, so I sat down and shivered. I quickly placed my backpack and my bag next to me to discourage any other last-minute riders from joining me. I held on to my shiny new plaque that announced my induction into my high school athletic hall-of-fame, and as the train pulled and jerked into motion, spontaneous tears began to slide down my cheeks.

They weren't tears of pride or happiness. Instead they were another uncontrollable and sudden release of my soul's sadness and emptiness due to the inability of my wife and me to conceive children for almost a decade. I leaned my head back on the uncomfortable metal bar that doubled as a headrest and dozed in and out of prayer and self-pity.

I don't know how long I was in that state, but I do know what woke me up. WHACK! Out of nowhere, I was hit in the back of

the head with something that felt like a blunt weapon. Before I could stumble to consciousness it happened again, WHACK! I lurched forward and shot a quick glance over my shoulder as I raised my arms over my head in fear and confusion, sure that I was being mugged by some street hoodlums or gang bangers.

To my utter astonishment, the hostile attacker was a toothless, gum-smiling, middle-aged bag woman with about six sweaters on. A tattered old ball cap rested loosely on tangled and unwashed wavy, brown hair. Her right hand held a tightly rolled-up *Chicago Sun-Times*. She saw my look of horror and amazement and happily countered with, “How ya doing, honey?” Before I responded, I looked around to gain some context and composure and noticed that several other passengers were looking on with shock and amusement. “How ya doing, honey?” she repeated again, as if her head-smacking greeting was a normal form of introduction.

“Fine, until you hit me on the head twice,” I offered nervously. “Why did you do that?” I asked.

“I just wanted to see how you were doing,” she replied, sitting down in the seat behind me where I assume she’d been for the duration of the trip from Chicago’s Union Station.

I sat back down in my seat, but this time faced her direction, still a bit unsure of my surroundings and her motives. “I’m OK, I guess,” I stammered, hoping this would end the conversation and I could go back to sulking. No such luck.

“What do you have there?” she asked, looking at my Hall-of-Fame plaque.

“An award from high school.” I retorted a bit coldly, trying to communicate my displeasure at her intrusion.

She went on unabated. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going back home,” I said, purposely void of city or destination.

“Where’s home?” she responded, completely unphased by my verbal and non-verbal attempts to control the conversation.

I sighed and gave in, letting my guard down against my better judgment. “I live in Elgin,” I told her. “I was at my parents’ home in Cincinnati, Ohio, and I’m going back to Elgin where I live.”

“I used to live in Elgin,” she replied, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she had spent significant time in the well-known Elgin Mental Health Center that was only a short distance from my current residence.

“Where do you live now?” I asked her, returning the intrusive manner of our dialogue. I thought I could at least turn the interrogation her way to avoid further disclosure—a standard counselor’s trick for clients without boundaries.

“I live at the zoo,” she said seriously.

“You do?” I said in amusement, and I couldn’t stop a reactive smile.

“Yes, honey. I used to work in the circus and now I live at the zoo because I am comfortable with animals and can speak to

them and play with them and they protect me,” she declared with confidence.

By this point, a majority of the other passengers were leaning toward us in vicarious anticipation of the remainder of this comedic interaction.

I continued, now almost enjoying the attention and harmless banter. “What is your name?” I asked playfully.

“Mary,” she happily volunteered.

“What’s yours?” she countered fairly.

“Elliott.”

The conversation went on for about fifteen more minutes, and we covered topics such as our family histories, our careers, and our distaste for the blustery winter wind that is so common in Chicago and its suburbs. Our voices had lowered and my defensive posture had relaxed, and to the disappointment of most of the other passengers, there was no further display of violence. Then just when I thought I had her in a comfortable realm, she surprised me again.

“Do you believe in God?” she asked softly.

“I sure do,” I said proudly, and in one of those moments you pray for, I began to share the Gospel with her in a simple and direct manner. Pleased with my effort, I waited for her overwhelming conversion experience.

“I already believe all of that stuff, honey,” she grinned with a

twinkle in her eye. “But thanks for sharing. I have to get off at the next stop. Do you have \$20?” she probed without hesitation.

Now it made sense. This was her routine. She had worked me all along waiting for the moment I let her in so she could then ask for money with a much higher probability of success. Whether an act or not, I don’t know, but it was successful. I reached into my backpack, found my wallet, and looked in the billfold. Sure enough, all I had was a \$20 bill. I pulled it out and handed it to her with an affectionate “God bless you” along with it. She beamed with contentment and then caught me off guard yet again.

“Can I pray for you?” she asked sincerely.

“S-s-s-ure,” I stammered, now embarrassed by the once-again public nature of this conversation and the intimate gesture on her part. Before I could even bow my head or shut my eyes, she grabbed my hand, covered it with her own, and launched into one of the most holy and beautiful prayers I have ever heard in my life. After getting over my natural reaction to rip my hand out of her grasp and back away to a more appropriate distance, I shut my eyes, bowed my head, allowed the moment to be what it was, and relaxed into a spirit of prayer.

The content of the prayer included issues and insights from my life that no stranger, and certainly no bag lady, should have known or been able to discern in a 20-minute conversation. I don’t recall all of the specifics of the prayer or where we were exactly on the route to Elgin when this incident happened, but

I'll always remember Mary, and I'll never forget the last line of her charismatic, flavored prayer on my behalf.

“And Lord, bless Elliott, bless his wife, and may all of his dreams come true. Amen.” She gripped my hand tighter and looked me dead in the eyes, penetrating my soul; and held that stare of love and compassion until I looked away for fear of an emotional reaction. Then, as quickly as the whole ordeal began, it was over. She let go of my hand, slid into the aisle, seemed to float to the back of the train and disappeared into the night without so much as a wave or a good-bye glance.

I sat dumbfounded the rest of the trip. Was Mary an angel sent by God to give me hope? A hallucination? A vision? I decided I better ask one of the other passengers whether or not he had seen her. To my relief he had. I couldn't help but feel uplifted.

In fact, I had difficulty thinking about anything else that night, even though I had to coach my college basketball team against our arch rivals just an hour after I arrived home. Later, I had an even harder time sleeping as I replayed the Mary Mystery for my wife and then over and over again in my head.

Do you believe that God still speaks through dreams? Do you believe that God uses angels to deliver words of encouragement or hope? I do believe that Mary was an angel and I do believe that the Lord sent her to assure me of His plan for my future family.