

Her Fearful Symmetry

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Extract

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❧ THE END ❧

Elspeth died while Robert was standing in front of a vending machine watching tea shoot into a small plastic cup. Later he would remember walking down the hospital corridor with the cup of horrible tea in his hand, alone under the fluorescent lights, retracing his steps to the room where Elspeth lay surrounded by machines. She had turned her head towards the door and her eyes were open; at first Robert thought she was conscious.

In the seconds before she died, Elspeth remembered a day last spring when she and Robert had walked along a muddy path by the Thames in Kew Gardens. There was a smell of rotted leaves; it had been raining. Robert said, 'We should have had kids,' and Elspeth replied, 'Don't be silly, sweet.' She said it out loud, in the hospital room, but Robert wasn't there to hear.

Elspeth turned her face towards the door. She wanted to call out, *Robert*, but her throat was suddenly full. She felt as though her soul were attempting to climb out by way of her oesophagus. She tried to cough, to let it out, but she only gurgled. *I'm drowning. Drowning in a bed...* She felt intense pressure, and then she was floating; the pain was gone and she was looking down from the ceiling at her small wrecked body.

Robert stood in the doorway. The tea was scalding his hand, and he set it down on the nightstand by the bed. Dawn had begun to change the shadows in the room from charcoal to an indeterminate grey; otherwise everything seemed as it had been. He shut the door.

Robert took off his round wire-rimmed glasses and his shoes. He climbed into the bed, careful not to disturb Elspeth, and folded himself around her. For weeks she had burned with fever, but now her temperature was almost normal. He felt his skin warm slightly where it touched hers. She had passed into the realm of inanimate objects and was losing

her own heat. Robert pressed his face into the back of Elspeth's neck and breathed deeply.

Elspeth watched him from the ceiling. How familiar he was to her, and how strange he seemed. She saw, but could not feel, his long hands pressed into her waist – everything about him was elongated, his face all jaw and large upper lip; he had a slightly beakish nose and deep-set eyes; his brown hair spilled over her pillow. His skin was pallorous from being too long in the hospital light. He looked so desolate, thin and enormous, spooned around her tiny slack body; Elspeth thought of a photograph she had seen long ago in *National Geographic*, a mother clutching a child dead from starvation. Robert's white shirt was creased; there were holes in the big toes of his socks. All the regrets and guilts and longings of her life came over her. *No*, she thought. *I won't go*. But she was already gone, and in a moment she was elsewhere, scattered nothingness.

The nurse found them half an hour later. She stood quietly, taking in the sight of the tall youngish man curled around the slight, dead, middle-aged woman. Then she went to fetch the orderlies.

Outside, London was waking up. Robert lay with his eyes closed, listening to the traffic on the high street, footsteps in the corridor. He knew that soon he would have to open his eyes, let go of Elspeth's body, sit up, stand up, talk. Soon there would be the future, without Elspeth. He kept his eyes shut, breathed in her fading scent and waited.

❧ LAST LETTER ❧

The letters arrived every two weeks. They did not come to the house. Every second Thursday, Edwina Noblin Poole drove six miles to the Highland Park Post Office, two towns away from her home in Lake Forest. She had a PO box there, a small one. There was never more than one letter in it.

Usually she took the letter to Starbucks and read it while drinking a venti decaf soy latte. She sat in a corner with her back to the wall. Sometimes, if she was in a hurry, Edie read the letter in her car. After she read it she drove to the parking lot behind the hot-dog stand on 2nd Street, parked next to the dumpster and set the letter on fire. 'Why do you have a cigarette lighter in your glove compartment?' her husband, Jack, asked her. 'I'm bored with knitting. I've taken up arson,' Edie had replied. He'd let it drop.

Jack knew this much about the letters because he paid a detective to follow his wife. The detective had reported no meetings, phone calls or email; no suspicious activity at all, except the letters. The detective did not report that Edie had taken to staring at him as she burned the letters, then grinding the ashes into the pavement with her shoe. Once she'd given him the Nazi salute. He had begun to dread following her.

There was something about Edwina Poole that disturbed the detective; she was not like his other subjects. Jack had emphasised that he was not gathering evidence for a divorce. 'I just want to know what she does,' he said. 'Something is . . . different.' Edie usually ignored the detective. She said nothing to Jack. She put up with it, knowing that the overweight, shiny-faced man had no way of finding her out.

The last letter arrived at the beginning of December. Edie retrieved

it from the post office and drove to the beach in Lake Forest. She parked in the spot farthest from the road. It was a windy, bitterly cold day. There was no snow on the sand. Lake Michigan was brown; little waves lapped the edges of the rocks. All the rocks had been carefully arranged to prevent erosion; the beach resembled a stage set. The parking lot was deserted except for Edie's Honda Accord. She kept the motor running. The detective hung back, then sighed and pulled into a spot at the opposite end of the parking lot.

Edie glanced at him. *Must I have an audience for this?* She sat looking at the lake for a while. *I could burn it without reading it.* She thought about what her life might have been like if she had stayed in London; she could have let Jack go back to America without her. An intense longing for her twin overcame her, and she took the envelope out of her purse, slid her finger under the flap and unfolded the letter.

Dearest e,

I told you I would let you know – so here it is – goodbye.

I try to imagine what it would feel like if it was you – but it's impossible to conjure the world without you, even though we've been apart so long.

I didn't leave you anything. You got to live my life. That's enough. Instead I'm experimenting – I've left the whole lot to the twins. I hope they'll enjoy it.

Don't worry, it will be okay.

Say goodbye to Jack for me.

Love, despite everything,

e

Edie sat with her head lowered, waiting for tears. None came, and she was grateful; she didn't want to cry in front of the detective. She checked the postmark. The letter had been mailed four days ago. She wondered who had posted it. A nurse, perhaps.