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Her Fearful Symmetry

Audrey Niffenegger

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Extract

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She Said, She Said

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She said, 'I know what it's like to be dead.
I know what it is to be sad.'
And she's making me feel like I've never been born.

The Beatles

Part One

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.

She put the letter into her purse. There was no need to burn it now. She would keep it for a little while. Maybe she would just keep it. She pulled out of the parking lot. As she passed the detective, she gave him the finger.

Driving the short distance from the beach to her house, Edie thought of her daughters. Disastrous scenarios flitted through Edie's mind. By the time she got home she was determined to stop her sister's estate from passing to Julia and Valentina.

Jack came home from work and found Edie curled up on their bed with the lights off.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'Elspeth died,' she told him.

'How do you know?'

She handed him the letter. He read it

and felt nothing but relief. **That's all**, he thought. **It was only Elspeth all along**. He climbed onto his side of the bed and Edie rearranged herself around him. Jack said, 'I'm sorry, baby,' and then they said nothing. In the weeks and months to come, Jack would regret this; Edie would not talk about her twin, would not answer questions, would not speculate about what Elspeth might have bequeathed to their daughters, would not say how she felt or let him even mention Elspeth. Jack wondered, later, if Edie would have talked to him that afternoon, if he had asked her. If he'd told her what he knew, would she have shut him out? It hung between them, afterwards.

But now they lay together on their bed. Edie put her head on Jack's chest and listened to his heart beating. **'Don't worry, it will be okay' … I don't think I can do this. I thought I would see you again. Why didn't I go to you? Why did you tell me not to come? How did we let this happen?** Jack put his arms around her. **Was it worth it?** Edie could not speak.

They heard the twins come in the front door. Edie disentangled herself, stood up. She had not been crying, but she went to the bathroom and washed her face anyway.

‘Not a word,’ she said to Jack as she combed her hair.

‘Why not?’

‘Because.’

‘Okay.’ Their eyes met in the dresser mirror. She went out, and he heard her say, ‘How was school?’ in a perfectly normal voice. Julia said, ‘Useless.’ Valentina said, ‘You haven’t started dinner?’ and Edie replied, ‘I thought we might go to Southgate for pizza.’ Jack sat on the bed feeling heavy and tired. As usual, he wasn’t sure what was what, but at least he knew what he was having for dinner.