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The name written on the back of the airmail envelope fixed Rita's feet to the driveway. She looked around for something that might rescue her, but the usual meanings of the russet-coloured gravel and the white letterbox, of Bill's roses and the neighbour's tabby balancing on the fence: all had rushed away, leaving the envelope the only solid thing in the world.

She flipped it over and began an intensive study of the stamps. The postmark—she could not help reading 'Minnesota'—had smudged them only a little. With effort she saw that the pelican was delicately watercoloured, and that the faces of the sculpted soldiers marching towards her from their war memorial were grim and determined. She could have gone on examining them forever if it meant she would not have to open the letter, but Bill called from the living-room window, 'Charlie?'

The envelope trembled. She shook her head and tried to smile.

'Not to worry. He'll email, most likely.'

He disappeared. Rita looked again at the letter. Bill did not know that in the first years of their marriage she had daydreamed constantly of Leland Swann. That Leland would write announcing the annulment of his mistake. That financed by some of those wealthy congressmen he would send a plane, or come himself to claim her.

She slipped her forefinger under the flap and made a messy rip. Inside the envelope a single sheet of onion-skin paper, dark inky reversals of Leland's handwriting showing through, was folded around the Order of Service for a funeral. Rita did not recognise the name centred on the heavy paper, and it occurred to her with relief that Leland had accidentally included her while notifying acquaintances of a relative's death.

Elizabeth Lois Swann
February 22nd, 1944 to December 23rd, 2003
Duluth First Presbyterian Church

Only one month older than me, she thought. Fifty-nine was awfully young to die, though she had known others who'd gone early. Several work colleagues, and three of Bill's Quaker friends. Car accidents and cancer. She never could get used to the passing of her own generation.

Then, as she began to walk towards the house, preparing herself to read whatever words were contained in this artefact of the man who had exiled them from the Centre (his fingers had brushed against this flimsy paper, squeezed the pen, his tongue had licked the stamps), another part of her mind continued to muse on the dead Elizabeth—

Betty.

Betty was gone. Gone from the world. After all this time, but so soon.

She dropped the Order of Service and stumbled to the edge of the drive, sitting heavily on its red-brick border. The bricks' sharp edges pressed through her skirt. A twitchy breeze nudged the pamphlet on to the lawn and towards the rhododendrons. For a few moments she let it drift; she'd have liked to see it tumble right off the property. But she knew that if Bill found it dirtied, softened by rain and glistening with snail slime, he wouldn't buy a tale about the wind whipping it out of her hand. He had liked Betty. Even if Rita could lie to him, he'd know it, and then she'd have to disclose her other secret: that she couldn't bear to think about her old friend.

She braced her hands on her knees and slowly stood, collected the leaflet from the lumpy soil beneath the rhododendrons and blew a tiny black spider off one corner. With a shivering intake of breath, she opened it.

The mourners had sung 'The King of Love My Shepherd Is' and 'Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty'. Reverend Michaels of the Duluth First Presbyterian Church had

welcomed them, and someone called Dustin Franks had read from 1 Corinthians 13. Aurelia McClure, Cousin, had given the eulogy. The congregation had been invited to partake of coffee and sandwiches after the service. It had all taken place two weeks ago, while Rita and Bill were sitting in deckchairs outside their caravan at Riversdale, munching on leftover Christmas cake and talking lazily about how it would be Easter before they remembered to write the correct date on cheques. Perils of growing old, they'd said.

The breeze cut at her arms. She folded the Order of Service back into the envelope, and carried it into the house. Bill was in the kitchen. 'What you got there?' he asked, and she had to tell him: Betty was dead. Cancer.

'No? Good God, terrible,' he said, hugging her close. 'Terrible news. Poor Betty.'

Rita buried her nose in the musty wool of his sweater, wishing she could stay there forever. He rubbed circles on her back. 'You all right?'

She straightened, and moving away from him began to tidy some papers on the counter. 'Sure. It's a shock, it brings back memories, but it's not like we . . . I mean, I haven't seen her in so long.'

It worked. He patted her again, and kissed the top of her head. 'Take it easy, eh. Have a sit down. I was just on my way out to pick a few of those cherry tomatoes.'

Obediently, she sat, but after the screen door banged behind him she stood again, watching through the window until he'd collected a pile of tomatoes in his frayed towelling hat and was crouched by the spinach, weeding. He'd keep at it until his creaky knees drove him inside. She licked her dry lips, tapping the envelope against her palm. Had Betty told Leland something before she died and he'd written to complain? The possibility of their joint criticism terrified her.

But the letter was short, with only a scant three sentences about Betty's death. Cancer again, its original location and progress unspecified. One line made her wonder: 'The self-

determined circumstances of her illness have rendered my loss all the more painful.’

What did he mean? What had Betty ‘self-determined’?

His next words put everything else out of her head.

‘My doctor has advised me to take a vacation,’ he wrote. ‘I arrive at Wellington airport on Tuesday 27th. It is close to your home. I would appreciate your hospitality.’

Tuesday the 27th of *January*, she realised, checking the calendar. In four days’ time.

The letter mentioned a flight number, but nothing about the length of Leland’s stay, or whether he planned to tour after his arrival. She pushed her fingers into her temples, then collected cookbooks from the shelf above the table, fetched paper and pen. Deep in menus, she didn’t notice Bill come in, and he had to plonk the tomatoes by her elbow and ask twice before she heard.

‘Oh! Leland’s coming to stay. In *four days!*’ She didn’t turn to see his reaction.

That evening, after they had kissed good night and switched off their lamps, he said from his pillow, ‘You all right then, Reet?’ She squeezed his hand, but she was fretting that her insomnia would return and, if it did, how would she get through the cleaning and preparations? Hours later, though, she became sleepily aware that she was breathing slowly and deeply, and that her slow, deep breathing had manifested itself in a sliding weight along her hip and thigh, as though her whole body had transformed into a replenishing breath. When Bill, spooned behind her, moved his hand lower and pressed his fingers gently through her nightie, she emerged a little further into the bedroom’s sludgy, comforting darkness. Deep in the shadows of her drowsiness, something she didn’t want to remember threatened to make itself known. She wiggled to show Bill she had woken, and he kissed the knob at the top of her spine, and her neck and bare shoulder. She turned on to her back, hooking an arm around him. She had long loved these early morning assignations, when her drowsiness nudged out the internal

chatter that ruled her head in daylight hours. Instead, her freed self rose to meet Bill from somewhere near her solar plexus, and she could move her luxuriously floppy, aging limbs with abandonment, forgetful of her skin tags and the slack muscle on her upper arms.

Tonight, she refused to remember anything at all, refused everything except the brief burn as he guided himself in, and his mouth closing over hers, and every soft and bumpy point inside and out where they joined. When the currents shivering through her belly threatened to bring her to full consciousness, she wriggled out from under him and pushed him on to his back, kissing him hard, sucking now and then on his lips, swirling her tongue around his mouth, catching it briefly on his broken tooth. Acting this way still felt somewhat daring, even though she'd been doing it since not long after Charlie was born, when she'd discovered it in a crazed, uninhibited state brought on by sleep deprivation.

Bill gripped her wrists and lifted her hands off the sheet, then loosened his hold and slid his palms against hers, propping her up so she could sit straight while she moved above him. She felt him smiling through the darkness, and returned his smile.

Afterwards, lying next to him, she straightened her leg and laid the sole of her foot along the smooth, bony top of his. She felt a deep steadiness, as if she had been lowered, vertical, on to ground that would never move. He whispered, 'Happy Almost-Anniversary, love.'

It hadn't taken her long to get used to him: his smell of leather soles and fallen tree bark and the inside of small tin boxes; the way he gurgled in his sleep, and on rising always drew the curtains right back, leaving the entire window frame exposed; his habit of scraping dead skin from round his toenails on to a newspaper he laid over the quilt. And then, in the second decade of their marriage, she decided she had never loved Leland. How could that feeling have been love, when Bill made it so easy for her to love him?

That didn't erase the fact that she had failed God: had failed

His Promise. (After all, who knew what profound feelings for Leland might have developed if she'd lived up to it?) She still believed in God's divine plan—it seemed foolhardy not to—and believed, with equal certainty, that forty years ago her inadequacy had spoiled it. She had never been able to confess to her steady, affectionate husband that in her very foundation, where wordless desires and terrors bumped blindly around in the dark, she feared dying in the knowledge that she had lived a second-best life.

Now, only moments after she and Bill kissed more quietly and said a second good night, and he subsided next to her, one hand still on her thigh, this fear crackled and flamed. A hectic, jumbled sense of the Centre roared into her head—the Movement's magnificent ideal: a perfect, painless world. The hope and vigour, the exhilaration of being part of the biggest, most important effort in history.

And she had failed it.

She knew Bill, snoring softly beside her, didn't feel the same, even though Leland had sent them both away. But then, God hadn't made him a special Promise.

Neither had Bill betrayed his best friend.

She fell into dreams of sole responsibility for an endless series of five-course banquets on which depended stakes as vague and high as world peace. She smeared mud across the table linen, or saw, too late, that the most honoured guest had sat on the cracked chair. She sprinted down the Centre's long corridors, chasing deliveries of sticky ribs that flew ahead of her, catching on the panelling. Betty hovered at the periphery of every dream, indistinct, her intentions unclear.

'Don't get het up, will you,' Bill said in the morning. 'He's an ordinary man, grieving for his wife. Poor Betty. Strange to think they were married right next to us in the chapel. And now she's gone.'

'Yes,' Rita said. 'Are you done in the bathroom?'

She didn't want to think about that double wedding, or what had led up to it.

Over the following days she planned menus, tweaked crispy leaves from the house plants, polished the indoor fig and regularly dead-headed every flowering shrub. On the evening before Leland's arrival she could not stop cleaning. Bill came to find her, and she said, without believing it, 'I'll relax once he's here.'

For the fourth time she straightened the spines of the *National Geographics* she'd arranged on the hall table. She tried to look calmly preoccupied, but Bill spoke again. 'Charlie's on your mind, eh. He'll be in touch. Give him time—you know what it's like with a wee one. Zane's probably not sleeping too well in that air-conditioning. But there's no way they'll miss the big do.'

For months, when Bill wasn't looking, Rita's forearms had cradled air, conjuring the sensation of baby Zane's bundled weight. It was all she knew of her grandson. Charlie had yet to make the journey home with his new family, and Rita and Bill, believing he would bring Noelle and Zane over for the planned Harper Family Anniversary Weekend (forty years of marriage! and Rita's sixtieth birthday, or near enough), had not diverted any of their hard-earned retirement savings into a Hawai'ian holiday.

There was a second reason to count on the presence of Charlie's little family at the Anniversary Weekend. Without Zane to cosset and coo over, she would have that many more awkward conversations with Stella, who would try to be sweet while giving away nothing, and with Stella's supercilious husband, Dan. It was a shame, she thought, rubbing a last dose of linseed oil into the table's wooden scrolls, that her overly educated son-in-law couldn't bring himself to be more civil. And ever since he and Stella had eloped to Fiji four years ago, her daughter had been even less confiding. Nonetheless, Rita fretted that Stella and Dan might stay away from the Anniversary Weekend. More than anything, she wanted the family together for the occasion—proof that her life had been worth something. Leland's impending visit had put her

on notice. Somehow, her future, and the final verdict on her, would be decided.

When the time came the next day to collect their guest from the airport, they drove down the valley and along the harbour's edge towards Wellington. A changeable wind gusted back and forth, sweeping creamy comb-overs from the waves, and the sky was full of a bright, blanching light that seemed independent of the sun hanging over the mountains. Looking across the water, Rita could see the narrow isthmus that the runway spanned and a plane coming in low from the south. If Leland's plane took the same ocean approach, it would skim the boulders that protected the runway from the sea.

'Funny sort of a northerly,' Bill said. 'Hope he's got a strong stomach for landings.'

In 1964, when they had come here after Leland told them to leave the Centre, they too had landed from the south. Roaring, bone-shaking, the plane had seemed to Rita like a transport to Hell. She'd resented the air hostesses with their shellacked, bouffant hair, miniskirts rising up sheer-stockinged thighs as they reached into overhead lockers. Earlier, Bill had pointed out three white cylinders rising from a distant platter of cloud: 'Look, Reet, the Three Pillars.' But, as they watched, the cloud towers had toppled and dissolved.

The wind buffeted the side of the car, bumping it sideways.

She said, 'Don't talk about the war.'

Bill looked at her, raised an eyebrow.

'Or the occupation, or whatever you want to call it.'

'Relax. It'll be fine.'

She had not slept well the night before, waking with gritty eyelids every hour or so, aware of Leland's route as she had been since she started tracking it the previous morning. Then, he must have flown out of Duluth after breakfast. By lunchtime, with a good connection, he'd have been over the Midwest. While she and Bill ate dinner he might have shifted around uncomfortably on a moulded plastic seat at LAX—as far as they knew, the

Movement's richest benefactors had died or defected long ago. During the night, while he flew over the Pacific, she had felt him bearing down on her like a potentate wielding judgement.

'Round the bays, eh?' Bill flicked the indicator. 'Nice day for it. We've got time.'

She looked down from the overbridge at the ferry terminal and the gaudy tails of cars waiting to board. Square loading cranes loomed above container ships. Then Bill steered them on to the ramp, and they headed towards the slit-eyed grey wall of the sports stadium. She knew this city better than she knew St Paul, now. Had lived in its neighbour, Lower Hutt, almost twice as long as in her own birthplace. The last thing she had expected was for her old life—let alone *him*—to touch her here.

'Shame they never had any kids,' Bill said. 'Company for Leland. And Betty would have made a fantastic mother, eh. What's up? Are you feeling crook?'

Her voice wobbled. 'I'm fine. I forgot to thaw the roast.'

She could almost persuade herself that she was telling the truth.

