

5 Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson, sitting in the morning-room of her home at Calverley Park, Tunbridge Wells, received the morning post. Lying on the salver was a brown manila envelope from New Zealand bearing a crest that she had not seen for some fifty years!

10 Despite her usual habit of opening the post before pouring her tea, this letter sat until Penny had cleared. Only then, with a self-directed criticism of "Elspeth, you are being ridiculous," did she lift her letter knife and open the envelope. Inside was a form letter, with blank spaces that had been filled in by hand, as follows:

45 Jackson Crescent,

Wellington,

New Zealand.

15 Dear Elspeth,

Your name has been referred to the Karori Primary School Anniversary Committee by your sister, Lilian Bates.

20 The Committee, which has been actively working towards the centennial celebrations of the School, would like to extend to you a warm invitation to attend an Anniversary Dinner in the school hall on 10 August this 5year, at 7.30 p.m. Roll Call, by year, will be taken at 5.00 p.m. A photographer will record the happy event. The Committee hopes you will be able to come along.

Yours sincerely,

(Mrs) Lena Holmes

25 The letter was perforated with a tear-off portion bearing the address of the committee and, "I will be able/unable to attend: I attended Karori Primary School from to My registration fee of \$20 is/is not enclosed."

Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was somewhat nonplussed. The use of her Christian name by a person whom she did not know, called Lena Holmes, irritated her. But

most of all the letter brought memories of school days which she hoped had faded forever. Bearing in mind the time difference between England and New Zealand, she telephoned her sister in Wellington. “Lilian, dear? What is going on?”

5 Given her initial reaction to the invitation, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was amused to find herself, three months later, sitting in the third row of the Business Class section of an Air New Zealand flight from Gatwick to Los Angeles en route for Auckland. Not only that, but no sooner had she seated herself than the purser, on the advice of the ground staff who had recognised her, invited her to take a seat in First Class. Her sense of gratification was only undercut by the fact that the passenger
10 seated next to her, when told that she “was in the judiciary”, assumed she was a typist or else the wife of a judge (she was not the sort to be mistaken for a mistress); silly pompous little man. Luckily there was a window seat vacant three rows ahead and Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson firmly invited her neighbour to take it. Once that was achieved she took up her Dorothy Sayers, but only briefly before setting it to one
15 side and watching England sinking beneath her.

If anybody had been looking at Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson, they would have seen a slim and elegant woman of pleasant good looks and a fresh English rose complexion. They would certainly not have guessed from her appearance, or even any intonation of voice or physical mannerism, that she had actually been born and raised in New
20 Zealand. There was not a shred of the Antipodean about her, nor any of the hallmarks of the Antipodean Woman Abroad – the tightly curled perm, twinset and pearls and bright magpie look which characterised all New Zealanders south of Balmoral. Instead, what any other passenger would have seen was exactly what Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson had become – a romantic Englishwoman, in her prime,
25 knowing exactly where she is because she can remember quite clearly exactly how far she has travelled – and Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson had travelled a very long way indeed. Home Counties style had always meant so much to her that being taken for English was quite a compliment and logical enough. All the same, there was a sense of fairness in Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson which allowed her to accept that her country
30 of birth would want to claim her – as it was prone to do, given her successes – as one of its very own. As a judge, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson well knew that all known facts must be taken into account when any case came before the bench and if she was trying herself for identification, she would have to weigh against the fact that although she was British by virtue of her marriage to the late Hon. Rupert Fairfax-
35 Lawson, she had nevertheless maintained dual citizenship with the country of her birth. Much as she disliked the idea of balancing on both sides of the scales, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson had to admit that giving up anything at all had always been difficult for her. Add to this that all her side of the family obstinately remained in New Zealand and that they were her only family (she and the Hon. Rupert Fairfax-
40 Lawson being childless, and not at all pleased with the Hon. Rupert Fairfax-Lawson’s

scurrilous nephews), and one realised the depth of her dilemma. She was as much a New Zealander because her family made her one. She could not escape them – and nor would she want to – because she loved them; yes, loved was not too strong a word. And she did so with familial pride and devotion, particularly her elder sister
5 Lilian who had become a grandmother again. So it was a fait accompli really, with the gavel confirming the decision and dismissing the court.

Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was about to resume her Dorothy Sayers, but by that time champagne and caviar were being served! Not long after that, dinner – either roast duck or lamb – was offered! Bearing in mind the long journey ahead, Mrs Justice
10 Fairfax-Lawson therefore decided to nap rather than to read. Eight hours later, after more champagne and more roast duck, her flight landed at Los Angeles. Shortly thereafter she was on her way again, with fourteen hours of flying time ahead and the vast expanse of the South Pacific below, bound for Auckland and thence Wellington, New Zealand.

Lilian Bates was waiting with her husband George at the Domestic Terminal. There was, at close inspection, a family resemblance to her younger sister Elspeth, but no one would ever have taken Lilian for anything but a New Zealander – at a pinch, an Australian perhaps – and that was where the likeness ended. Lilian's cheeks were ruddy, whereas her sister's were pallid, and Lilian's spontaneity expressed itself in its
20 overeagerness and anxiousness, whereas Elspeth's was under control, quite. Apart from that, years of healthy living and appetite had turned Lilian's figure to pear-shaped whereas Elspeth was still, as ever, a wishbone. Somewhere far back in their lives there had been a parting of the ways. In Elspeth's case it had been the winning of a major scholarship to Cambridge when she was nineteen. As for Lilian, her fate had
25 been forever sealed when George Bates, then garage mechanic and now proprietor of Bates Towaway Trucks, admiring her lines, cast an eye over her, ran her round the block a couple of times, found her bodywork in good condition and pronounced, "She'll do."

"Now, George, don't forget," Lilian told him. "She likes to be called Elspeth. Not
30 Elsie. Or Ellie. Or Else. Or anything but Elspeth." She picked at his tie. "The way you go on," George replied, "you'd think she was the bloody Queen of England." Lilian grimaced as if she had never heard such words from his lips before. "And keep your bloodys to your trucks, George – or save them up for when it's just us." George rolled his eyes and Lilian tried to hug him around. "Oh please, George, do behave. You
35 know I haven't seen Elspeth for six years now. That's such a long time. She's my only sister after all and – Oh, there she is! Oh, George" – Lilian broke away from him and began to run toward the woman who had just come through the gate. George had always known that his wife was a real softie, but her abrupt emotional departure surprised him. Why, they're as different as chalk to cheese, he thought. He watched

as Lilian flung her arms around her sister and wept on her shoulder – he hadn’t realised that Lilian would be so affected. He felt a lump in his throat at the sight of these two middle-aged women embracing like this – Lilian, as always, so open with her emotions, and Elspeth as gracious as ever – you’d think she was waving from a bloody Rolls. He walked over to them. Elspeth said, “Why, George!” in that cultured voice of hers and proffered a cheek for him to kiss. And Lilian stepped aside, saying, “It’s really her, George, she’s really here,” as if he couldn’t see that for himself.

Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson had planned to stay in New Zealand for three weeks but had not expected that her sister would want to make the most of it. She should have realised when they arrived at the house and were greeted by Lilian’s two daughters and their children – plus the new baby – that she would be kept busy. It was understandable, she supposed, that Lilian would want to have dinner on the first evening for “Just us and the family” – but when confronted with the cheery barbecue that evening and guests including the local mayor, she knew that life was not going to be that simple. Over that first week Lilian would alternate between expression of “Oh, you must still be jet-lagged, Elspeth. Why don’t you go up to the bedroom and rest?” and frequent trips to answer the front door-bell with, “Why, hello!” to yet more neighbours bearing yet more platefuls of lamingtons, pikelets or scones. Nor could the visits possibly be accidental, despite protestations that “We just dropped by”. Oh no, these ladies in their cardies and pearls had just been to the local hairdressing salon, and once ensconced in Lilian’s sitting-room with a cuppa, were there to stay. Even the innocent “I’m just popping down to the shop, Elspeth. Why not come for a ride?” would turn into a virtual royal procession throughout the land. And at each house the hostess would be ready and waiting with “Why, Lilian do come in! And this is your sister, isn’t it! Elspeth? Lilian has told us so much about you. You’re just in time for a cuppa tea before opening the door wider and turning to others gathered inside – “isn’t she, ladies!” These ladies knew that New Zealand hospitality was the best in the world, and they weren’t going to let the side down – especially with such a famous person in their midst. And so the polite conversation would begin, with everybody minding their p’s and q’s and trying not to be too colonial – clinking the teacups ever so softly and not dropping one crumb of the lamingtons – until with a little squeak of a cough, the hostess would turn to Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson and ask, “So you live in England, do you?” Where-upon all tea-drinking would be suspended as Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson, as custom required, told them about life as it was lived by those whose Title and Reputation enabled an English Existence spread between an apartment in Westminster and a country home in Tunbridge Wells. On her part, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson knew that she, too, couldn’t let the side down – her side being her sister – and she rose to every occasion. For despite her caustic tongue, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson would not have hurt her sister for anything in the world. And success was measured by the indrawn gasps of “You don’t say!” “Listen to that, Millie!”, “How interesting!” and “Do go on.” And if,

near the end of the socialising, the hostess sighed, “Oh, it sounds so different from life here,” then Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson knew also that form required her to offer generalities like “But you are so lucky, New Zealand is such a paradise, it is so green, and your food is so delicious” – even if she didn’t really mean it herself. Then Lilian
5 would drive her sister home, and Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson would go up to her bedroom and have a lie down and listen to Lilian’s happy voice downstairs as she responded to telephone calls from the friends just visited – “Oh yes, I’ll tell her! Yes, we are all very proud of her! No, really, do you really think we are that alike?” Such things had always been important to Lilian.

10 However, when, at the beginning of the second week, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson came across her photograph on page seven of the Dominion and read the accompanying article she became most displeased. It wasn’t really the photograph, which was at the very least twenty years old – and while Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was as vain as the next person, a photograph of that vintage could only draw unhappy
15 comparisons with one’s current estate – nor was it the article itself, which was succinct and to the point:

Mrs Justice Elspeth Fairfax-Lawson, M.B.E., (pictured right) returned last week for a private visit to New Zealand, her first in six years. Mrs Fairfax-Lawson recently retired from the U.K. judiciary following the death of her husband, the late Hon.
20 Rupert Fairfax-Lawson, M.P. Born in Wellington in 1910, Mrs Fairfax-Lawson will be well known to New Zealanders as the founder and first chairperson of the Wellington Women’s Co-operative. Educated at Cambridge, England, Mrs Fairfax-Lawson served in British Intelligence during the Second World War, where she met her husband. Following the war she began a private legal practice in London, Fairfax
25 and Madden, and was invited to join the U.K. judiciary in 1962. Her M.B.E. was awarded by H.R.H. Queen Elizabeth II in 1970.

The displeasure stemmed from the headline and last sentence of the text, to wit:
FAMOUS NZER RETURNS FOR SCHOOL REUNION and “Mrs Justice Fairfax
Lawson is a guest speaker at next week’s Anniversary Dinner of the Karori Primary
30 School, which she attended from 1915 to 1923.”

Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was therefore very cross when she went down to breakfast that morning and, seeing this, Lilian said to George, “You’d best leave us a minute, George dear.” To do her justice, Lilian was looking very contrite. She poured Elspeth a hot cuppa and, “The photo’s nice,” she said. But Elspeth could not be
35 pacified so easily. “How could you do this, Lilian. You know that my main reason for coming was to see you, and that I have only agreed to attend the school reunion because you want to go. I am going under sufferance, Lilian. You know how much I hated that school. The way the parents treated Mother and vilified Father was so

unspeakable. Just because she had to take in washing and because father was a bankrupt." Lilian bit her lip and, "Yes, Elspeth," she said. "Can't you remember anything at all?" Elspeth continued. "It wasn't Mother's fault that she had to send us to school in dresses made from bits given her by other people – other people's cast-offs and curtain material – but did the other children understand? No they didn't." Whenever Lilian was embarrassed, her face took on a silly shamefaced smile, and, "You're quite right, Elspeth," she said, her heart aching from the pain of the reprimand. And a vivid picture flashed into her mind of Lena Logan sliding, gliding, dragging one foot, giggling behind her hand, shrilling, "Is it true you're going to be a servant when you grow up, Lil Kelvey?" And taunting her again with "Yah, yer, father's in prison!" before running away giggling with the other girls. "We were always on the outside," Elspeth said. "They never invited us to play in any of their games, because we weren't good enough for them. And now I read in the newspaper that I am to be guest speaker. Lilian folded her hands in her lap and looked down and, "They only want you to say a few words," she said. "A few words?" Elspeth cried. That's more than they deserve. There was only one girl, just one, who ever showed us a kindness and..."

Lilian couldn't take any more. Her silly smile opened too wide and let the tears through. She tried to say something to Elspeth, gulped and instead patted Elspeth on the hand and kissed her right cheek. Then she stood up and left the table. Elspeth, still furious, sat there in the grip of her own recollections and how, it seemed, she had only managed to survive by holding on with a piece of Lil's skirt screwed up in her hand, holding on all day, every day, holding on so tight, so tight. And not saying a word to anybody but wanting to scream, just scream, with the loneliness and pain and awfulness of it all. Then Elspeth heard George and looked up into his disapproving face. "You were too hard on her, Elspeth," he said. "Lilian may be the elder of the two of you but she's the one who suffers more. You should have a care for your sister. She thinks the bloody world of you." And that only made Elspeth feel worse – about her petulance and, oh, at Lilian too for being such a martyr and running off like that! You'd think they were still children the way Lilian behaved – going off so bravely to sulk like that and make her feel so mean. Elspeth looked at George and sighed. He indicated the direction in which Lilian had gone.

"Lilian? Lilian," Elspeth called. She heard Lilian reply, "In here, dear," and found her at a small card table in the lounge. Lilian had put on her reading glasses and was cutting the article about Elspeth out of the newspaper. "What are you doing?" Elspeth asked. She came up behind Lilian and looked over Lilian's shoulder. On the card table was a large scrapbook. Elspeth recognised it instantly – it was the book their mother had begun when her daughters had both started school and filled year by year with school reports, handwritten memories, school magazine photographs, newspaper clippings: ELSPETH KELVEY IS DUX OF SCHOOL; LOCAL GIRL WINS

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARSHIP; MORE HONOURS FOR KELVEY; OUR ELSPETH TOPS CLASS AT CAMBRIDGE; ENGAGEMENT OF ELSPETH KELVEY TO SON OF LORD FAIRFAX-LAWSON – and other memorabilia. Elspeth gave a small cry and reached over to leaf through the pages: LOCAL PERSONALITY AWARDED M.B.E.;
5 FAIRFAIX-LAWSON RETIRES FROM U.K. JUDICIARY. “It’s mostly all about you,” Lilian said softly. “I never did much myself except marry George and have my two girls. But oh, Mother was so proud of you, Else, love. You wouldn’t believe the times she would go through this scrapbook. ‘Look at our Else’ she used to say. ‘All those brains, where’d they come from!’” The mood sweetened between the two sisters, and
10 Elspeth reached over and put her hand in Lilian’s. “Anyway,” Lilian said, “when Mother died I kept the scrapbook going. I don’t know why really. It would have been a shame to just let it go, don’t you think?” And suddenly Lilian started to weep again, saying, “I’m so sorry, Else, I just didn’t realise...” And Elspeth replied, “Come, come, Lilian. Oh, Lilian, do stop” – because she had begun to recall how difficult it had all
15 been for Mother and Lilian to keep her at school. “Oh, Lilian!” she said, furious, because tears were so unseemly at their age.

Afterwards Elspeth told Lilian that she had better check with the Karori Centenary Committee how many words a “few” constituted. They had a cuppa tea and laughed about the absurdity of two grown women losing control like that. “There was never a
20 jealous bone in your body, was there?” Elspeth asked her sister. “A couple of times,” Lilian admitted. Elspeth smiled and turned away, intending to go up to her bedroom. Just as she went through the door, Lilian called to her. “Oh, Elspeth,” she said. Elspeth turned and, “Yes?” she asked; Lilian’s attitude was resolute and firm. “Although we may have been a washerwoman’s children,” she said, “we were never
25 too proud” – which was just the sort of infuriating commonplace thing Lilian always liked to say.

And after all that, not to mention the effort that Elspeth had put into preparing a ten-minute address, Lilian came down with a bad flu on the very night of the dinner. “You will get up this instant,” Elspeth ordered. “Put on your pearls and come with
30 me. Her tone was similar to that she used when addressing felons from the Bench. Lilian nodded and tried but, “Oh, Elsbed, I don’d thig I cad,” she said. “You bedder go wib Geord. Geord? You go wib Elsbed to the didder.” Lilian reached for a handkerchief. George, taken by surprise, said, “Go back to school? Not on your bloody life.” Then Elspeth interrupted him, saying, “Lilian Kelvey, it is already after
35 five. You are as strong as a horse and never get the flu. Get up at once.” But it was obvious that no command would work. “Oh, by dose,” Lilian said, blowing on it. “By hed,” she said, holding it. “Elsbed, you should rig the cobbidee and ask theb to ged sobody to pig you ub.” And that was that – which explains how Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was delivered, an hour late, by a nice but obviously awestruck Maori
40 committee member called Mrs Maraki.

No sooner had Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson walked through the door of the crowded Assembly Hall than she saw a woman gasp and whisper behind her hand to her companion, and then sliding gliding; dragging one foot and shrilling she came, calling, "Elspeth! Yoo hoo, Elspeth! And Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson reeled backward as if she had been hit, and reached out for Lil's hand and to hold a piece of Lil's skirt. "Elspeth?" the woman laughed. "You must remember me! I'm Lena Holmes! See?" She pointed rather superfluously at a small tag on her dress with her name and CHAIRMAN ANNIVERSARY COMMITTEE written on it. "I used to be Lena Logan. Remember? You and I were in the same class. But you were much younger of course. Come along with me." Proudly, Lena Holmes took Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson's arm and began to steer her possessively in the direction of other committee members. Yah, yer father's in prison. "Cora? May I introduce Elspeth to you? But you know her of course. Weren't you in Mrs Fredericks' class together? Oh, you will have some stories to tell! And this is Peggy, Elspeth. Peggy used to be the horrid little girl who did ballet – oh, we hated her, didn't we! And you can remember Annabelle? Her aunt was the postmistress. Oh, you must remember Miss Leckey and that terrible hat she used to wear!" Oh yes. I remember. When Miss Leckey had no further use for it, she gave it to Mother. Lilian used to wear it. "We are so sorry, Elspeth, to hear that Lilian won't be able to come. What a shame. Never mind, you are in good hands now. We'll look after you, won't we ladies!" Yes, you'll all run after me and make fun of me and sneer and laugh and wrinkle your noses as I pass and...

"Are you all right, Elspeth?" The voice sounded so loud in her ear that Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson was startled. Lena Holmes was looking at her, concernedly. "Oh. Yes," Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson said. "The trip. The strain." Lena Holmes nodded. "I do hope you aren't catching your sister's flu. There's a lot of it going around," she said. "But come along, we must get you tagged!" She laughed as she took Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson's hand. Yah, yah, your mother washes clothes and your father's a jailbird. "There!" Lena Holmes cried as she branded Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson with a label, ELSIE KELVEY, so that everybody – everybody – could remember that awful little girl with cropped hair, remember ladies? That's her, over there. Suddenly a hand bell began to ring. A middle-aged man who could never have been young was standing in the centre of the hall, swinging the bell to and fro. His face was red with mirth as the bell clanged and boomed and shattered the conversation. Lena Holmes put her hands to her ears and said, "Oh, that Johnny Johnston! Isn't he a one?" One of the other men ran out to wrestle with "Johnny" and the crowd watched and grinned with amusement – Wasn't this fun? That Johnny, he never changed, good old Johnny. And all of a sudden Johnny was running between people, trying to escape his friend, and the women gave little screams and the men pretended to scrimmage and then he was heading for Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson and the shock of recognition spread over his face as, pointing at her, he said, "I know you! You're... you're..." Yes. My name is Elsie. My sister is Lil. My mother washes your mother's clothes. You are

a horrid boy. But before he could say anything more he was tackled and down he went. And Lena Holmes, pretending to be a little girl, went over to the two men lying on the floor, wagged a little finger and said in a squeaky voice, “Bad boys. Bad boys. I’m going to tell Mrs Frederick on you!” What a laugh that caused – that Lena Logan, the same as ever. Then Lena Holmes laughed herself and clapped her hands clap, clap, CLAP. “Roll call, everybody! Roll call! Everybodeeee,” and she led the way to the English Room, where the group photograph was to be taken.

Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Pull yourself together, she said to herself. The shock, the crowd, the smell of chalk, the bonhomie, all these people acting like children, pretending that school had been such fun and they were all friends. Whereas she had only had one friendly gesture made toward her. Stop it, Elspeth. For who was she to make such assumptions? STOP IT. Feeling better, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson joined the others. She smiled at everybody and was as charming as they expected her to be. She laughed just like everybody else at the photographer’s frantic attempts to arrange the “children” according to height, and when she had to say CHEEESE she did so as long as the rest did until the flashbulb popped. But deep inside her the little girl she once was still cringed and sought for a piece of dress to hold on to.

The bell rang again, far away, to announce that dinner would soon be served. Well-wishers approached Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson to say, “We are so looking forward to hearing you speak,” or “We are so delighted that you will be speaking on our behalf as fellow pupils of the school,” and she was so surprised, absolutely overwhelmed, by the warmth of it all. And she realised that the address she was going to give would be too pompous and too serious, for these returned pupils wished only for companionship and good memories and wonderful tributes to friends and school. And she heard Lilian’s voice in her mind saying, ‘We were never too proud, Elspeth, never too proud.’

So that when, following the dinner in the hall, it was time for Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson to rise and speak, she had to pause and reconsider her words. The hall looked so gay and colourful, with streamers hanging from the ceiling and flowers arranged on the trestles and food – jellies, pavlovas, salads, lamingtons – sparkling on the tables. And there were all those ridiculous elderly people, sitting on forms, faces gazing up at hers in expectation. And it came to her just what she should say. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she began. “Boys and girls,” and everybody laughed. “Like you all, I attended this school with my sister. There was once a little girl and her sisters who came to school one day and told us all about a wonderful gift – a doll’s house.” To one side Elspeth heard Lena Holmes gasp with pleasure. “Inside was a little lamp.” Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson paused at the memory. You can come and see our doll’s house if you want to, said Kezia. Come on. Nobody’s looking. “I think that girl died some

years ago but what she did stands as a shining symbol to all of us. Certainly it became a symbol for me.” The silence was such that a dropped pin could have been heard.

“Although my sister and I were the children of a washerwoman” – There, it was out – “that girl showed us the little lamp. I have never forgotten that lamp, ever. Its

5 flame has been a constant inspiration to me to always reach out – like that girl did – to others. To extend myself, become a better person and perhaps make the world a better place to live in. Were it not for that kindness, or similar kindnesses which I’m sure you all remember being done to you at this school, none of us would have become the people we are today. I would not have become the person I have.”

10 Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson had to pause again. “I seen the little lamp,” she said softly. She went to resume but somebody had begun to clap and very soon that person was followed by another and another, until the whole hall was on its feet and clapping at the memory of a school-friend, now gone, who had been so important in all their lives. And as they did so, Mrs Justice Fairfax-Lawson smiled a rare smile and
15 thought to herself that what she had said was just the silly commonplace sort of thing that Lilian would have liked.