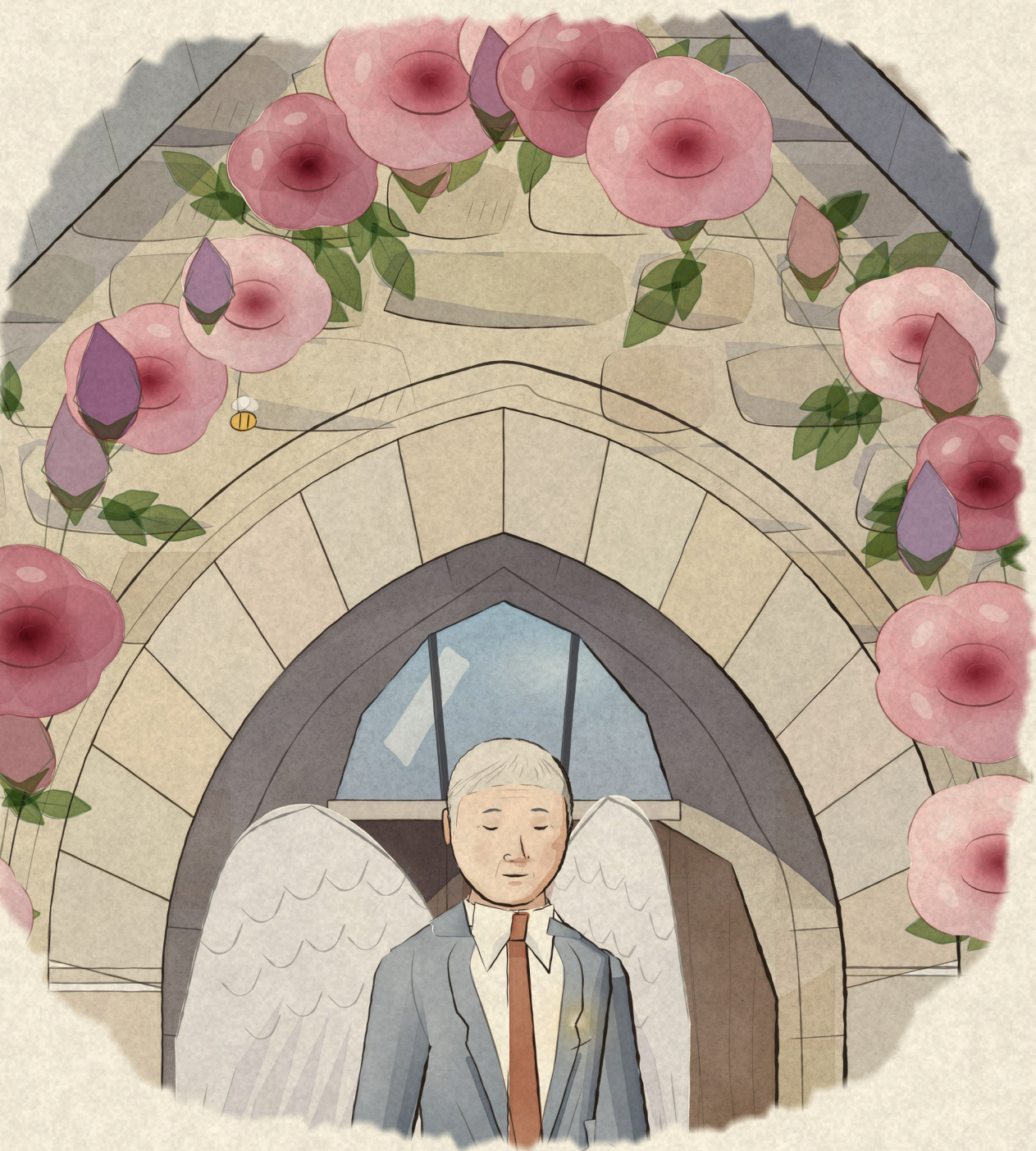


The Angel at the Wedding



The Angel at the Wedding



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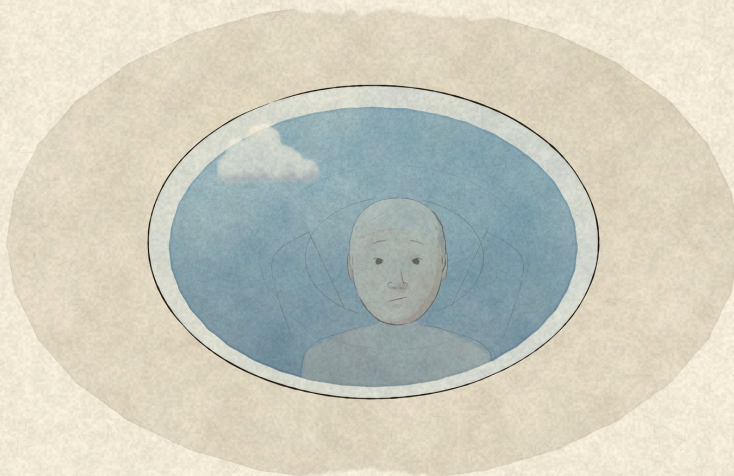
One

Water into Wine

At his first wedding in seventy years, the angel discovered that the caterer could turn water into wine.

“Red or white?” the caterer asked.

Elias looked into the jug.



“Either.”

“Dry?”

“If possible.”

The caterer touched the side of the jug and poured.

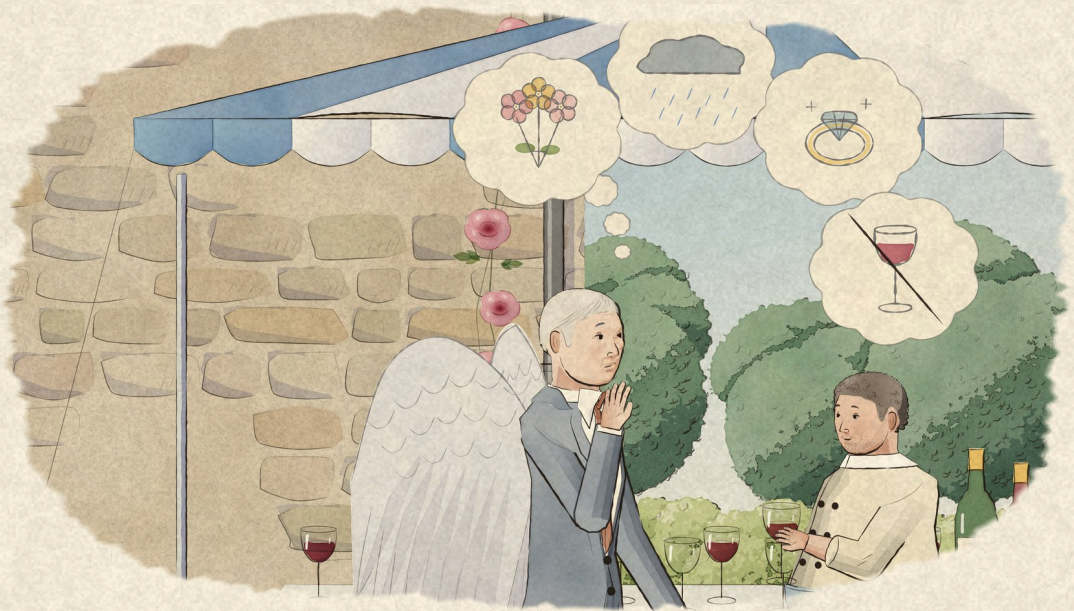
Elias tasted it.

It was excellent.

“We can do something more interesting,” the caterer said. “This is just for the people who don’t want to think about what they’re drinking.”

Elias handed back the glass.

He had come prepared to be useful in several ways. Wine had been one of them.





Two

The Instructions

*H*is instructions were simple.

Two names. A church. A date.

And a blessing to deliver.

Elias had attended weddings before. He liked them. People made such astonishing promises at weddings, considering what people were like.

He had seen a groom arrive with the wrong ring, a bride faint into a hydrangea, and a dispute over seating persist for thirty-six years. Once, he had kept rain off a roofless church for an entire afternoon. People still spoke about that one.

He had never been asked to make a marriage easy.

He had been sent to bless it.

Today's names were Ruth and Daniel.

The church was Saint Anne's, a small stone building on a hill. There were roses around the door and a handwritten sign directing deliveries to the side entrance.



Below the hill, the town had changed.

The river was clean. The houses had green roofs. A grove of fruit trees stood where Elias remembered a factory that made things nobody had liked producing.



Most strikingly, the people looked well.

Not all happy. He could already see three people who were worried about the wedding.

But well.

He stood for a moment beneath the roses and gave thanks.

Then someone handed him a box of candles.

“Could you take these inside?”



Three

The Bride

The first person he met in the church was the bride.

She wore slippers beneath her dress and held two copies of the wedding program.

"Which one did they put out?" she asked.

Elias looked at the papers.

They appeared identical.

"The second page."

On one copy, beneath the order of service, was a sentence:

We rejoice to be married in the world our ancestors were promised.

On the other:

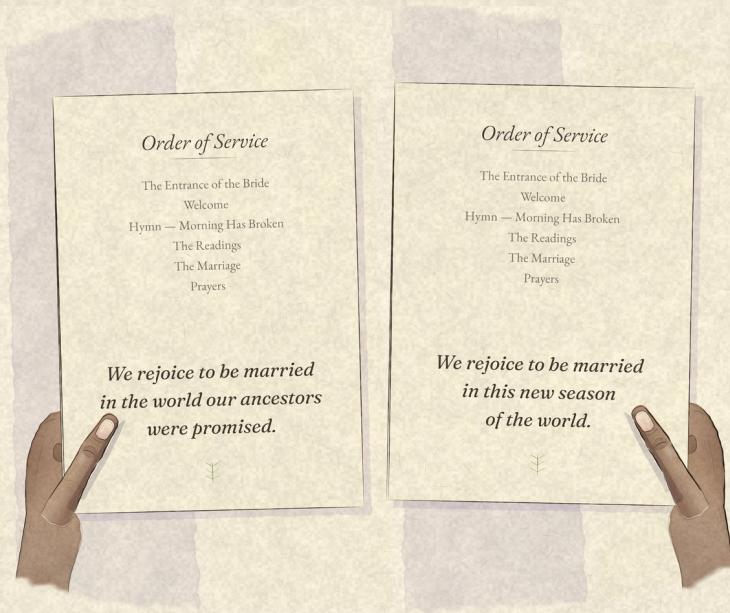
We rejoice to be married in this new season of the world.

"I'm afraid I don't—"

"Neither do I anymore," she said.

She sat in the front pew.

"Are you with the church?"



“Yes.”

“Good. Can you tell them a wedding is still a wedding?”

“Who?”

“My mother. His father. Possibly the whole town by the time they’ve finished.”



Four *The Vestry*

*I*n the vestry, the bride's mother and the groom's father were arguing quietly.

Quietly was worse. They had evidently passed through loudly and come out the other side.

"It's a sentence of gratitude," said the mother.

"It's a declaration," said the father.

"It doesn't say anyone has to agree."

"It's printed beneath the creed."

The minister stood between them holding a cup of tea she had forgotten to drink.

Elias set down the candles.

"Perhaps I could help."

All three turned.

"What are your views on fulfillment?" the father asked.

Elias hesitated.
He had not expected an examination.





Five

Seventy Years

*M*uch had happened in seventy years.

Elias had been occupied elsewhere, and news reached him unevenly.

He knew about the machines that thought. He knew that people had taught them to discover things, and that the discoveries had led to better machines, which had led to further discoveries.

He had not quite understood how far this had gone.

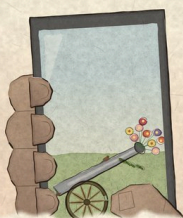
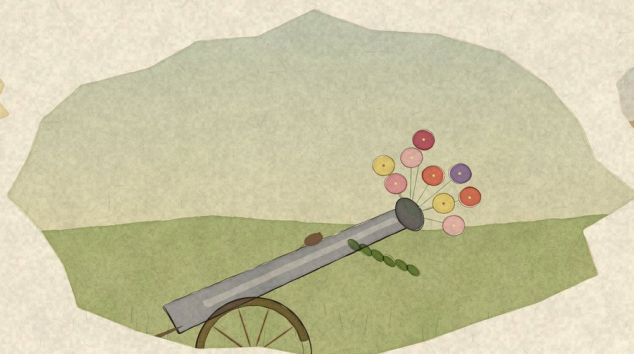
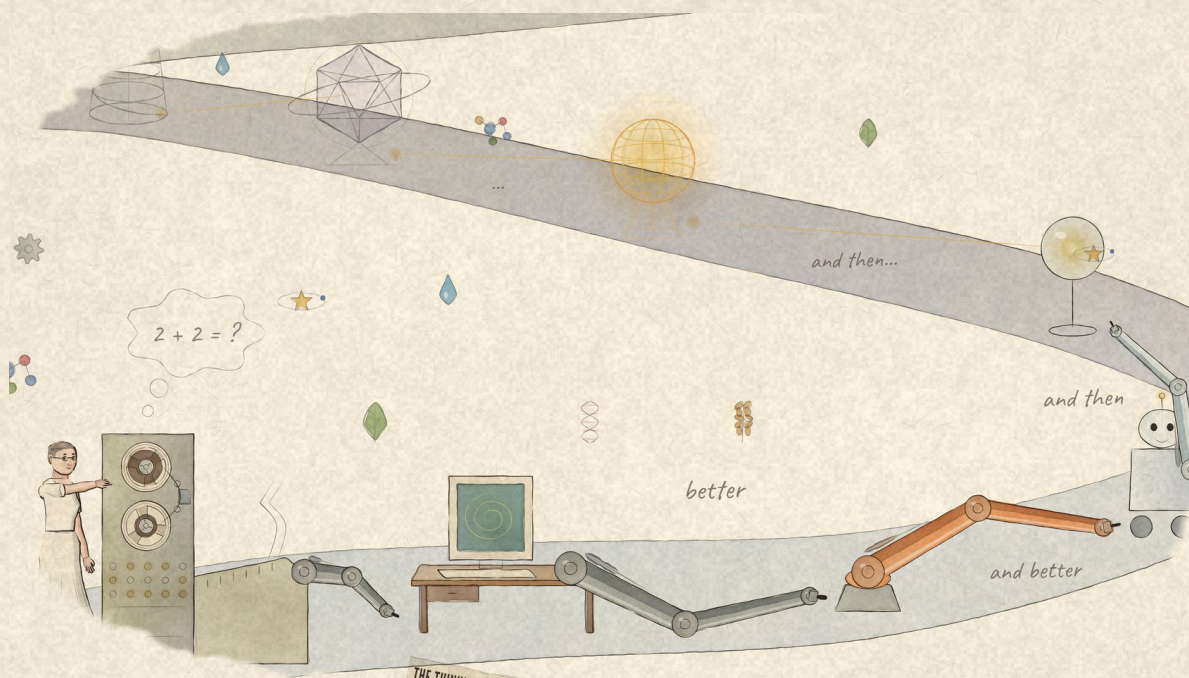
The bride's mother showed him.

Sight restored. Diseases cured. Deserts cultivated without exhausting their water. Weapons rendered useless by defenses that quietly refused to let them work.

There were wolves that could live peaceably among sheep.

There were places where nobody went hungry.

There were new forms of knowledge, new ways of living, new possibilities that sounded remarkably like the old descriptions people had read aloud for centuries.



Ruth had helped build the system that managed water across the dry interior. Her mother showed Elias a picture of the first harvest.



“People had prayed for that land to flower for generations,” she said.

The groom’s father studied the picture.

“It’s wonderful.”

“Then why can’t we say so?”

“We can. I do. I thank God for it every day.”

“But—”

“But we read what the prophecy said, then built something that could do it. That is not the same as establishing that this is what the prophecy meant.”

“Perhaps it was meant to teach us what to build.”

“Perhaps.”

She spread her hands.

“Exactly.”

“Perhaps is not what the program says.”

Elias looked from one to the other.

He had expected disagreements about the seating.



Six *Good People*

*T*he minister took him into the churchyard.

“They’re good people,” she said.

“I can see that.”

“They’ve worked together for years. Food drives, flood relief, the winter shelter. They were delighted when the children got engaged.”

“What happened?”

“The world improved faster than their vocabulary.”

She drank her cold tea and made a face.

“His father thinks people are turning sacred promises into a set of technical specifications. Her mother thinks people are refusing to recognize an answer because it came through human hands.”

“Which do you think?”

“I think they’re both coming to pray at their children’s wedding.”

“Couldn’t you tell them that?”

SPEC 11.6 Predator-prey

- 1. Cohabitation 99.7% ☒
- 2. Predation 0.0% ☐
- 3. Supervision .. child (1) ☐
- 4. Status COMPLIANT ☒

“I have. They agree completely. Then they explain why the other person’s wording prevents it.”

The church clock struck eleven.

The service was at noon.

“Ruth says if this continues, they’ll have the ceremony privately tomorrow.”

“Without their parents?”

“She says she wants to remember being married, rather than refereeing.”

The minister went back inside.

Elias remained among the gravestones.

He could understand both sides of the dispute. He also understood that two people who wanted to bless the same marriage were rapidly making it impossible to enjoy.

Perhaps, he thought, something unmistakable would help.



Seven

The Roses

*H*e began with the roses.

They were lovely already, but there were possibilities.

He touched the stone arch.

Along it, buds opened in a slow, luminous wave. Flowers of extraordinary delicacy unfolded, each bearing a color slightly different from its neighbors. The air filled with a fragrance Elias had last encountered in a garden whose location could not be given on any earthly map.

A bridesmaid stopped.

“Oh, that’s much better.”

Elias waited.

“The florist said she could change the palette, but I thought it was too late.”

“She didn’t do this.”

“Was it Ruth?”

“No.”

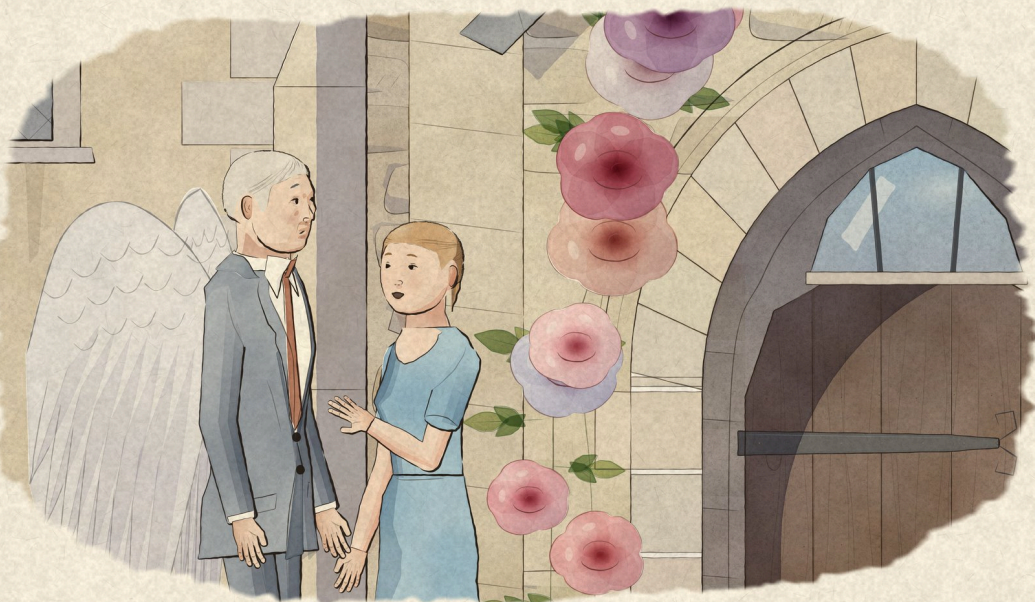


“Daniel?”

“No.”

The bridesmaid leaned close to a flower.

“Well, whoever did it, they’ve got the blue exactly right.”





Eight

The Light in the Glass

*H*e tried light.

For a few moments, the plain glass above the church door held a sky deeper than the sky outside. People could see stars moving through it, and a great soft radiance beyond them.

A little boy pointed.

His grandfather looked up.

“That’s new.”

“Can we have one?”

“For your room?”

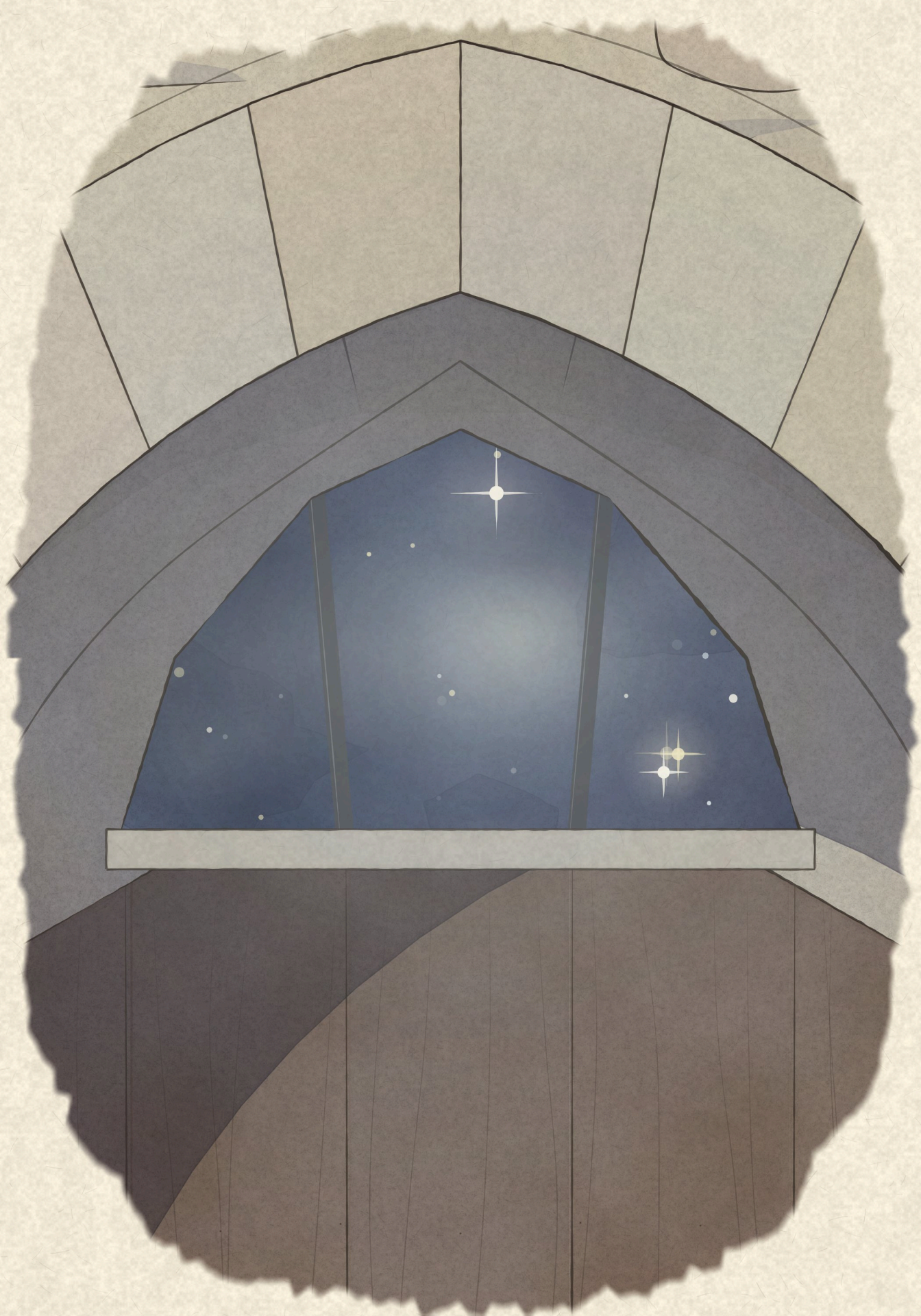
“Yes.”

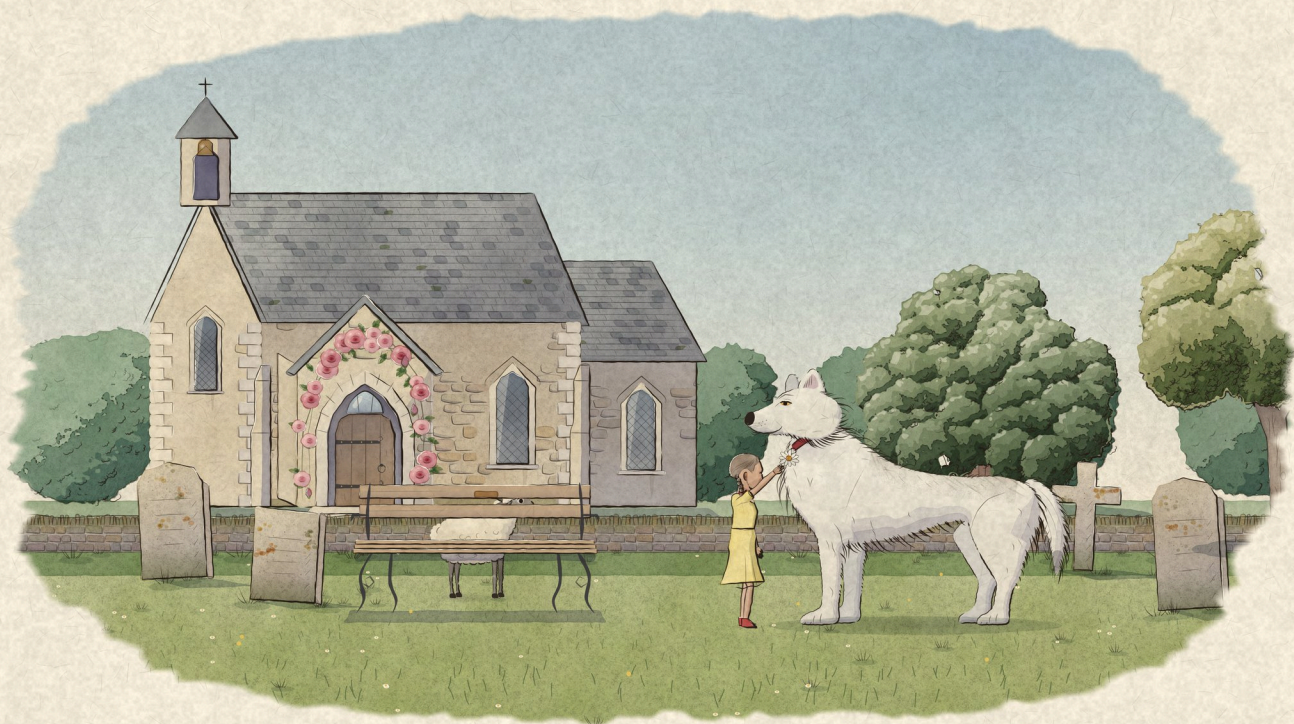
“We’ll ask.”

Elias allowed the glass to become glass again.

The little boy looked disappointed.

That made him feel worse than being ignored.





Nine *The Wolf*

*I*n the churchyard, he found a girl fastening a flower to the collar of a large white animal.

He stopped.

“Is that a wolf?”

“Yes.”

“Does it belong to someone?”

“Me.”

“Is that wise?”

The girl looked offended on the wolf’s behalf.

“He’s very polite.”

The wolf sat down.

A small lamb wandered out from behind a bench and began eating the flower.

The wolf watched patiently.

Elias stood very still.



He knew the old words.

He had heard them spoken in rooms so cold that people's breath showed, in places under siege, beside fields that had failed. He remembered the care with which people held such pictures in their minds.



Now a little girl was trying to persuade a lamb to stop eating her wolf's wedding outfit.

“Do you know,” he asked, “what people once hoped this would mean?”

She considered.

“That nobody would have to be frightened?”

“Yes.”

She put an arm around the wolf.

“I think it’s working.”





Ten

Daniel on the Steps

Elias found Daniel sitting on the steps behind the church.

He had removed his jacket.

“Are you hiding?” Elias asked.

“Briefly.”

Elias sat beside him.

“Do you agree with your father?”

“About what?”

“The promises.”

Daniel rubbed his eyes.

“Some days.”

“And Ruth?”

“Some days she agrees with her mother. Some days she thinks they’re both asking the evidence to carry more than it can.”

“Does that trouble you?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s the person I want to talk to about it.”

Inside, someone began testing the organ.

It played a few notes, stopped, and played them again.



“Ruth’s system could have been used badly,” Daniel said. “The water could have gone to whoever paid most. A few people tried very hard to arrange that.”

“I imagine they did.”

“She spent three years fighting them.”

“And won?”

“Eventually.”

He looked toward the church.

“Her mother thinks the old promises helped her know what she was fighting for. My father thinks that’s a good use of them. They’re much closer than they sound.”

“Then perhaps—”

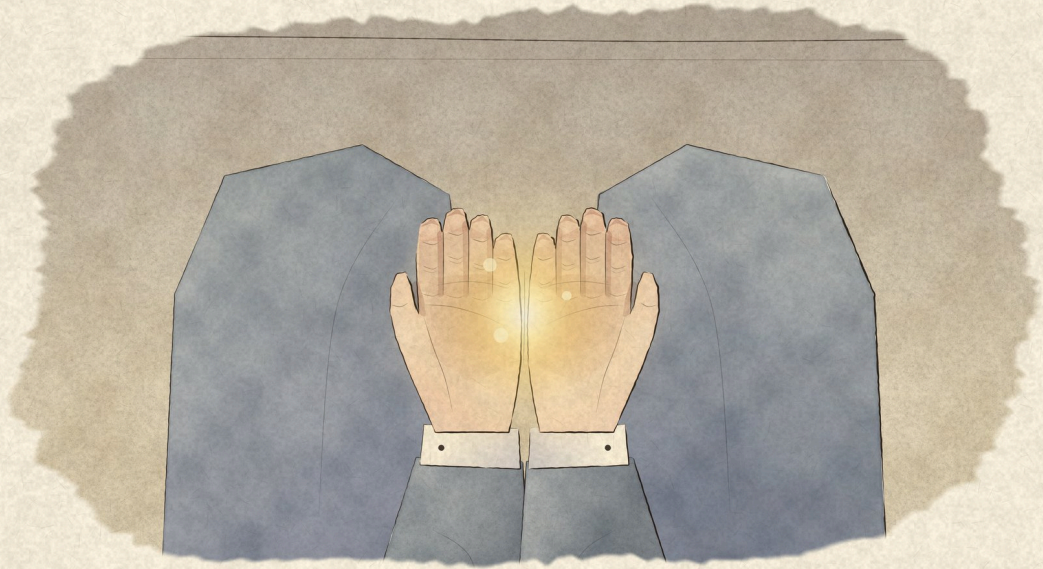
“I know. I’ve said it.”

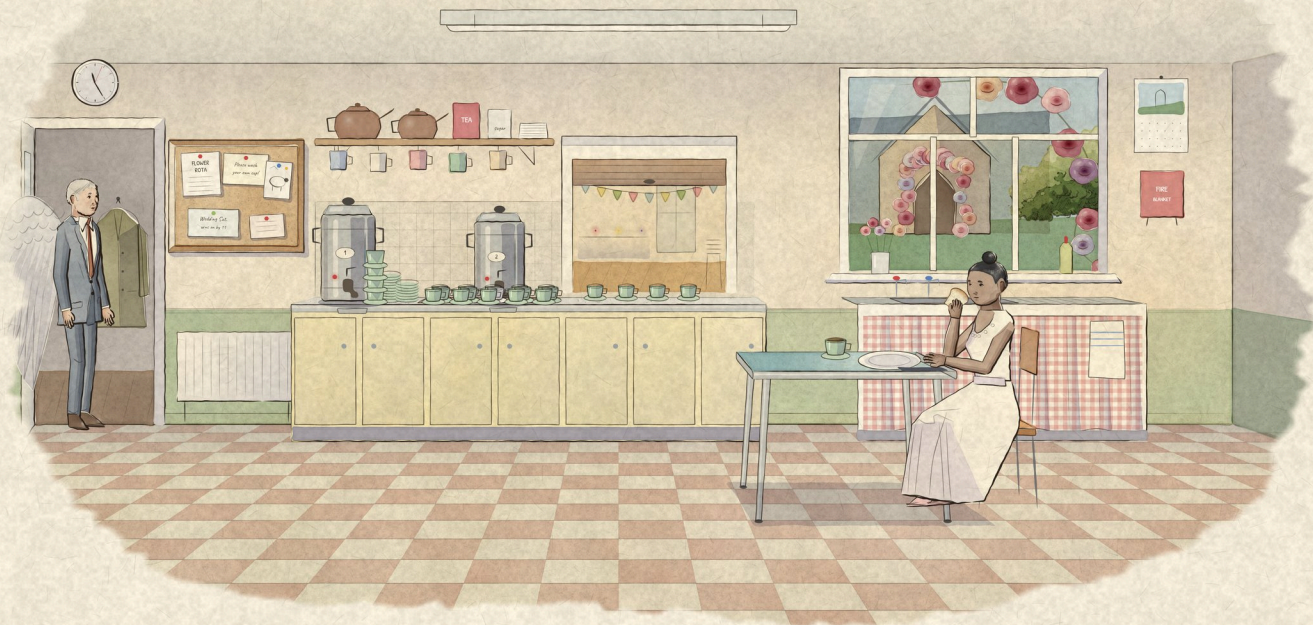
Daniel put his jacket back on.

“I’m worried that we’ll go inside and spend the whole service watching their faces to see whether they’re offended.”

Elias looked down at his hands.

The blessing was still there, warm and undelivered.





Eleven

Ruth in the Kitchen

*H*e found Ruth in the kitchen.

She was eating a piece of bread with great concentration.



“I’m told that’s wise before a wedding,” Elias said.

“I’m hoping it will improve my character.”

“Is it working?”

“Not yet.”

He sat opposite her.

“I’ve been trying to help.”

“Thank you.”

“I made the roses bloom.”

She looked toward the window.

“They’re beautiful.”

“And the light in the glass.”

“That was you?”

“Yes.”

“Also beautiful.”

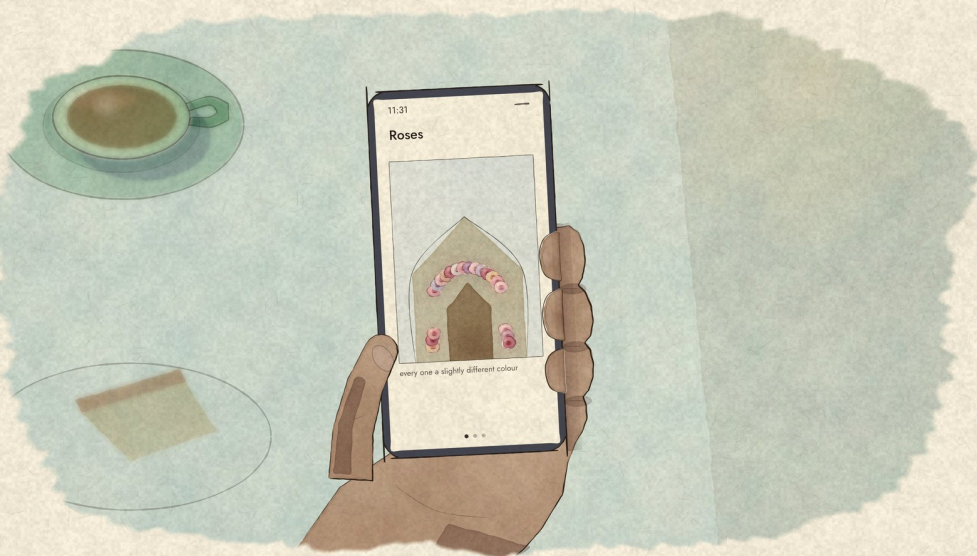
“But?”

She put down the bread.

“If I’d known that was what you were trying to do, I could have saved you the trouble.”

“How?”

She took out her phone.



Within a minute, she showed him designs for the roses, the light, and three additional effects he had not considered. One involved the shadows of birds passing across the ceiling without any birds being present.



“Any of these could be done?”

“Yes.”

“So you wouldn’t believe me if I said I was an angel.”

Ruth considered him.

“I might.”

“But I couldn’t prove it.”

“Not with the flowers.”

“What would you ask an angel, then?”

She looked at him for a long moment.

“Whether my mother and his father can disagree without making us choose between them.”

Elias put away the splendid answer he had been preparing to give a much smaller question.

“I hope so,” he said.

“Me too.”



Twelve

Twenty Minutes to Noon

At twenty minutes to noon, the minister gathered both families in the vestry.

Ruth and Daniel stood together.

Their parents had become very courteous. Everyone seemed to understand that things had gone too far, but nobody knew how to come back without abandoning something important.

Ruth spoke first.

“Mum, I want you to tell me what you’re afraid we’re leaving out.”

Her mother looked at the program.

“Gratitude.”

“We’re going to pray. We’re going to sing. We asked for this service.”

“I know.”

“Then what else?”

Her mother sat down.



“I remember what the world was like when you were born. We were always collecting money. Always something. Drought, floods, children without medicine.”

She looked at Daniel’s father.

“You remember.”

“Yes.”

“We kept reading that it wouldn’t always be so. And now so much has changed, and I don’t want us to behave as if those prayers were foolish just because the answers have diagrams.”

Daniel’s father looked down.

“I don’t think they were foolish.”

“Sometimes it sounds as if you do.”

“I’m sorry.”

The words surprised everyone, including him.

He took off his glasses.

“I’m afraid of claiming more than we know. We can thank God for a good thing without declaring that we’ve identified the final shape of history. If we make faith depend on that identification, what happens when we get something wrong?”

Ruth’s mother nodded slowly.

“I don’t want that either.”



“I know.”

For the first time all morning, neither began the next sentence with *but*.



Daniel reached for one of the programs.

“Could we say what we know?”

“What do we know?” his father asked.

“That we’ve received things people longed for. That people worked hard to make them happen. That we’re thankful. And that we still need guidance about what to do with them.”

The minister set down her cup.

“I believe I can find room for that in a prayer.”



Thirteen

The Shorter Program

*T*hey chose the shorter program.

Ruth's mother asked whether the harvest picture could remain on the back.

Daniel's father said of course.

The caterer sent someone to ask whether a wolf was allowed near the cheese.

The little boy wanted to know whether the stars would come back in the window.

The organist was missing a page.

The wedding resumed being a wedding.



Fourteen

The Wedding

*E*lias stood near the back of the church.

He had imagined, when he arrived, that the great challenge would be to make something happen that no machine could imitate.

Now he watched Daniel's father straighten Ruth's veil because it had caught on the edge of a pew.

He watched Ruth's mother take his arm.

It would have been possible to arrange all this badly, even with a world full of extraordinary powers. People had still needed to listen. They had still needed to apologize. The machines could have helped with that too, if asked.

None of it seemed to make the prayer that followed unnecessary.

The minister gave thanks for the work of human hands and for the gifts those hands had learned to use. She prayed for wisdom in abundance, for care toward those still overlooked, and for patience when people saw the same world differently.



There was no announcement that the final meaning of history had been settled.

There was no suggestion that the old hopes should be put away.

Then Ruth and Daniel made their promises.

Elias had heard those promises before.

Their bodies might remain healthy for centuries. Their home might be built in a place nobody in the church could yet imagine. They would be able to ask for comforts that kings had never enjoyed.

Still, they were promising each other something.

They could have declined.

They did not.

Elias opened his hands.





The blessing he had carried entered their lives without a flash, without a change in the weather, without any evidence a clever person could isolate afterward.

He did not mind.



Fifteen

The Reception

At the reception, the caterer handed him a glass.

“The same as before?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Did everything go all right?”

“I think so.”

Elias looked across the room.

Ruth’s mother and Daniel’s father were arguing again.

This time they were arguing about where the newly married couple ought to go on their honeymoon.

The wolf slept beneath a table.

The lamb had been removed from the vicinity of the flowers.

Someone asked for quiet.

Ruth’s mother stood to offer a blessing over the meal. Before she began, she thanked the caterers, the people who had grown the food, and the engineers whose work had made the harvest possible.



Then she bowed her head.

Elias bowed his too.

The wine was excellent. He knew exactly how it had been made.

He gave thanks anyway.



About this edition

This is the complete text of *The Angel at the Wedding*, word for word. Its fifteen sections are the chapters; their titles were added for this edition.

The pictures come from the animated film of the same story, drawn again at print size by the film's own code: pen and ink, watercolour washes that pool and granulate, and the bare paper they fade into at their edges. None of them was made by an image generator. Most are the film's frames as they appear on the screen. The full-page pictures and the cover are the same scenes drawn again for the shape of the page, and the title page and the back are the film's title card and end card.

The Angel at the Wedding



At his first wedding in seventy years, the angel Elias finds that the caterer can turn water into wine, that the roses can be redesigned on a phone, and that the bride's mother and the groom's father cannot agree about one sentence in the program. He has come to Saint Anne's with a blessing to deliver.