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The Correspondent

A Novel

VIRGINIA EVANS



PENGUIN BOOKS

A Preface

At last, on Monday around ten or half past, Sybil Van Antwerp carries the mug of Irish breakfast tea with milk to her desk. The bed is made, the dishes clean and drying on a towel beside the sink, the plants watered, the shelves dusted. She scoots the chair with precision, then gazes for a few moments out the window over her garden and toward the river off and below, at the few white triangle sails there in the distance, the reflection of the sky on the wide water, the square mansions on the Annapolis side. With satisfaction, she straightens the stack of letter-writing paper and the short, always-turning-over pile of books she will read next. She arranges the pens in the mug. She counts her stamps. She consults the stack of what letters she has received and not yet answered; a list she keeps of letters she means to write; a stack of upside-down pages in the drawer, a letter she has been writing going on years now, still unsent. Sybil is a mother and grandmother, divorced, retired from a distinguished career in law, these things are all there around her, but it is this correspondence –

On Wednesday it's the same.

And on Friday.

And on Saturday.

On Monday around ten or half past Sybil Van Antwerp sits down at her desk again. It is the correspondence that is her manner of living.

Felix Stone
7 Rue de la Papillon
84211 Gordes
FRANCE

June 2, 2012

Felix, my dear brother,

Thank you for the birthday card, the fountain pen, and the book, which I started the day it arrived (Thursday) and finished today. It was exactly as you described. Unlikely and electric, inventive, and right up my alley. Seventy-three feels the same as seventy-two for what it's worth, arthritis, constipation, and trouble sleeping, and I've decided to stop dyeing my hair. I don't care much for my birthday, as you know, though it's always nice of you to acknowledge it. Trudy and Millie of course came for appetizers and cards. The children both contacted me – Bruce had a strawberry tart delivered from a bakery (he'll be up next weekend to clean out my gutters anyway), and it was awful, so I threw it out. Probably cost him a fortune. Fiona called from London. She said she won't come home again until Christmas because work is keeping her jumping and now she is designing something in Sydney, for heaven's sake, so she'll spend a month in Australia. She assured me Walt doesn't mind how often she is gone, but I'll tell you, I don't know how their marriage will make it. She'll certainly never be able to have children at this point. (They're not even trying. At least she hasn't told me if they are. When I bring it up she chastises me.) Theodore Lübeck down the street brought me cut roses from his bushes, as he does every year, which is good of him, even if he is a renegade from the lawless fringe of the American West.

How is France? How is Stewart? What are you writing? Thank you for the invitation to visit, you're always good to refresh it. Yes, I loved The Château, but that was a novel, and as much as I would love to see your new house, no, I'll not come. Just as a summer afternoon is gorgeous from inside air-conditioning, and you step into the day, hot, muggy, miserable, a postcard of France with all the lavender and sunflowers, I imagine, is far more alluring than the place itself. It's such a hassle to fly these days with the security and all the regulations about the size of bag and transferring the creams and contact lens solution into the small bottles. Honestly, it doesn't appeal to me in the least, and I made it clear when you moved continents I wouldn't be coming.

I was going through boxes and found this photograph (encl.) from the day they brought you home from the Sisters. Your little trousers and absolutely bald head. You've come full circle. Mother looks gorgeous here and I've never seen another photo of her in this green skirt suit, but I remember it clearly. I remember that day as clearly as if it were yesterday. I remember there had been a bad storm, no rain, but a strange wind and warm temperatures and there was a tree down in the yard and branches and sticks, and I remember the neighbor, Mrs Curry, had made a dinner of pot roast and a chocolate pie and I'd been waiting all afternoon for the car to pull up and bring you. Mitsy hadn't been able to get there for the morning chores because the storm had downed the lines on the Canton bridge, so I had dusted, made the beds, drawn the drapes. Can you think of who it would have been taking the photo? Mother's sister Heloise was there looking after me, but I can't imagine Heloise taking photographs. I suppose this is our

first family portrait. I'm giving it to you, as I have my own photo of the day they brought me in.

My regards to Stewart, of course,
from your loving sister,
Sybil

Postscript: Felix, I got into a little scrape last night. It was nothing, really, I'm fine, but the Cadillac is in the shop. More of an inconvenience than anything else, honestly.

June 2, 2012

Dear Mr Lübeck,

Thank you for the exquisite white roses you left on my porch on my birthday, May 29. Furthermore, I received your voice message this morning. I was delivered home by taxi last night due to a minor car accident, but everything is being taken care of.

Regards,
Sybil Van Antwerp

Ms Ann Patchett
c/o Parnassus Books
3900 Hillsboro Pike
#14
Nashville, TN 37215

June 2, 2012

Dear Ann,

I am writing to congratulate you on your most recent novel, State of Wonder, which was given to me for my birthday by my brother. I finished reading it this morning. Today is Saturday and I only started the book Thursday, which says something in itself, though you wouldn't know that as we are strangers, though not utter strangers, as we have exchanged letters on one previous occasion, and that was when I read your first big smash Bel Canto in the very early part of the millennium and you sent a reply, remarking on my penmanship and encouraging me to address you by your first name. You might, though perhaps not, depending on the volume of letters you receive and read on a regular basis, recall from that letter that I enjoyed Bel Canto very much, but this new book is even better. (I should add, for clarity's sake, that I did write to you when I finished reading the book before this one, Run, but I never heard back, but that's just fine, so don't give it a second thought.)

It typically takes me four days to read a novel of standard length, but I was flying through the pages of State of Wonder, that exotic Amazonian backdrop and those smart, tremendously complex women Drs Singh and Swenson. How did you come to be so knowledgeable about these things – the details about the Amazon, all the science – ? Did you travel

there? I found myself wondering about the balance of fact and fiction with the matter of the tree bark. The scene when the behemoth snake comes up from the water onto the boat and wraps its muscular snake body around the child Easter with the Americans looking on in horror, the silence of that scene was positively cinematic. I didn't take a breath for what was it then, five pages or more. And of course, the matter of Dr Swenson, at her age (my age! Dr Swenson is seventy-three, and so am I) being pregnant. I can't imagine. When they retrieve the baby there near the end, well that sent a chill right down my spine, but it was wonderful to read such a complex woman of her vintage, bold with her intelligence and dignity as well as her errors, and the layers upon layers of her. I am not a scientist; my own career was in law, but I saw some reflection of myself in her. The agonizing ethical questions for which the reader puts her on trial. That amazement one feels at this stage of life – a sort of astonishment that is also confusion, which leads to a sort of worry, or a sort of fear, I guess. How did we get here? How can it be? My sister-in-law Rosalie and I exchange books, and I am positive she'll love this one, so that's perfect.

Please keep in mind if you ever visit Annapolis, I'd be glad to host you. I have a small house, tucked away in a charming old neighborhood where the homes are well spaced and with massive old trees, you know. It faces the water on a point, and the upstairs is a nice big guest room with its own lavatory and a dormer window that looks toward the Severn River so you can see the boats and the large homes across the way and my garden, which I tend meticulously, there below the window. I live alone, and furthermore, I only ever go upstairs to clean after I've had company, so it's completely private and I think you would be very comfortable there.

I am not a writer, but if I was I think it would be a nice place to write a book, so again, you are very welcome if you ever visit. Just a stone's throw from DC.

Until the next book, or your visit,
and with warm regards I write,
Sybil Van Antwerp

I wrecked the car. I was coming from a presentation at the library, and it was night, and I ran into a low concrete wall. The vehicle is most likely irreparable, according to the mechanic. I am fine in the body, but it's given me an awful shake. An awful shake. Of course the accident itself – the sound, the result of the Cadillac reduced to scrap, – but also because what happened is that – what happened. I'm not sure I. Well

What I think happened is that as I was driving out of the library parking lot, away from the lights and into the darkness, you know, well – I suppose I can't say exactly what happened. I was driving just like usual, slow and steady, but something occurred. I can't remember it exactly, but what I think is that quite suddenly I couldn't see. I couldn't see! But how? That stretch of time, was it a moment or was it minutes? It was as if my life was a movie and went black, wasn't it, but I'm not certain, and that's what's troubling me. I'm not certain it was my vision, that black chasm. It wasn't as if I'd closed my eyes; it's as if the space of time has been deleted from my memory, up until I crashed. And this has happened to me before, this feeling of deletion. That's what makes me afraid. How does a thing like that happen? I suppose it must be underway, Colt – the loss of vision. I suppose that must be what this was. I have known conceptually I would go blind, but as an eventuality. Now it seems the blinding is underway, and this is how it will go, but I didn't anticipate it being like this. This confusion.

The car went by tow, I was delivered home by a cab, and I sat awake all night afraid of the darkness. Afraid to turn off the lights.

I have nightmares. I may have mentioned this. In the nightmares I can still see, but I know I am blind somehow. So I am

looking out the window at the sailboats, but maybe they are fuzzy, or maybe I know it's daytime, but it looks like night. Or I'm in the garden and I don't recognize the flowers – What is this?, I think. Or I'm looking at the text in a novel but I cannot make any sense of the letters or the words. But the worst dream, this is the one I have over and over, is I'm sitting down at the desk to write and there is the stack of letter writing paper, there are my pens, there are the envelopes, and I'm pawing at them like a cat, but I cannot pick them up. Or I pick up the pen and it lists like a noodle in my hands. I press the thing to the page and it softens or disintegrates. Or there is one version where I get as far as the ink on the page, but I can't make sense – I can't write a thing, it's all scribbling. It's the way my fear imagines blindness. You'd think the dreams would just be a black void, which is what I suppose it will actually be, though if I were dreaming of a black void I suppose . . . I wouldn't be dreaming at all. I would be simply asleep, but I don't think I sleep, at this point in my life, without dreams, the mind being far too saturated for that. Far too many haunts for that.

My ophthalmologist Dr Jameson said that with my condition, once it gets going, it could be a year or it could be ten years until it's complete, and as things progress it can sort of come in and out. I will have to make an appointment. I'll do that today. I haven't told anyone other than Rosalie and the child Harry I've mentioned in the past, the child with whom I exchange monthly letters, son of my former colleague Judge James Landy. Oh, I've also told Joan Didion the author. I haven't told Bruce or Fiona.

TO: grandmaalicelivingston@yahoo.com
FROM: sybilvanantwerp@aol.com
DATE: Jun 2, 2012 1:00 PM
SUBJECT: Regarding Garden Club meeting June 4

Dear Alice,

Please accept my regrets for the garden club meeting this Monday, June 4. I am sorry to miss the presentation about soil pH and its effect on growing hydrangeas, however, I have an appointment that cannot be moved.

I will look forward to July.

Additionally, if there is a vote taken at the meeting Monday (June 4) regarding moving from the Sunday school room to the basement of the church in order to accommodate a larger number of attendees, I vote a very enthusiastic 'NAY.' The club has already grown so large as to become unwieldy. One can hardly hear during the social quarter of an hour. Furthermore, the basement is musty, probably riddled with mold, and the church board has not yet prioritized the necessary renovations that would make the space usable.

Warm regards,
Sybil Van Antwerp

TO: sybilvanantwerp@aol.com
FROM: Fiona.VanAntwerpBeau@cgemarchitects.com
DATE: Jun 25, 2012 03:31 AM
SUBJECT: Hi from Sydney

Mom, I caught up with Bruce on the phone last night and he told me you totaled the Cadillac. Why didn't you tell me when we were texting? He said you ran into a barrier of some kind (??) but you're OK (??) Were you not able to see it, or were you confused in some way? Seems . . . unlike you. Bruce said you're fine and you don't need to be seen by a doctor, but Walt and I were thinking maybe you should get checked over. I'm not trying to boss you around, but it's worrying.

I know Bruce has mentioned you moving to be closer to him. Have you given that any thought? You'd be able to see Bruce and Marie and the kids more easily, and he's said he'd love for you to be there. I've done some research, and there is actually a really nice retirement village a mile or two from his house called [Happy Hills](#) (you can click the link). They have openings in both the independent cottages (yard) and the condos (no yard), and the pay structure is kind of complicated, but your house will sell high despite the lack of updating because those waterfront lots are in such high demand. I would be happy to make some calls to get more information for you if that would be helpful. Maybe just think about it.

I should be back in London by the end of July. Let's talk on the phone then. My schedule here is packed and the time change makes it harder. Talk soon,

Fiona

Ms Van Antwerp
 17 Farney Rd.
 Arnold, MD
 21012

July 1, 2012

Dear Ms Van Antwerp,

Thank you for including the Expert Puzzles book with your last letter. I like it very much, and I was able to complete all but three of the ciphers. How are you? Did you get a new car to replace the one you crashed? I am doing mostly fine. Here is what happened in June:

1. My parents got me a puppy (FINALLY) after I was begging for nine years. She is a golden retriever and her name is Thor after my favorite Greek god, the god of war.
2. We are going to take a safari trip in Botswana over Thanksgiving break because my sister Susannah is working for the Peace Core there.
3. My science fair project won second prize. Thank you for helping me with the paper. The judges said my research was flawless, but there was a girl younger (sixth grade! What!) than me who built an entire robotic whale that could swim in water. My mom said it was a sure thing her parents helped her because her dad is an engineer, and my parents did not help me, so I should be proud and feel like a first place winner, which is really stupid because I didn't win, but also I agree with her somewhat.

4. My psychiatrist Dr Laura had to move to Alaska because her husband works for an oil company, which is repugnant and I told her so, and he got relocated. I have a new psychiatrist named Dr Oliver and I hate him. He has bad breath and there are flakes on the top of his head and one huge disgusting scab, so every time he looks at his notepad to write down things I have to look at it and it makes me want to throw up. I am trying very hard not to say anything to him about it, and Mom says every time I go, if I keep it inside, she'll take me to pick out a candy bar at 7-11 as a reward. I made it through the first appointment, no problem, and got a Twix. Dr Laura made me feel less weird than I really am, but Dr Oliver makes me feel more weird than I really am (I think).

I can't wait to receive your letter on July 15. I would also like you to check your used bookstore for any more of the older science fiction like what you sent me for Christmas, namely, H. G. Wells.

Warm regards,
 Harry Landy

Postscript: I will keep your stones. I like using this code word for secrets, too. I am a very good stone keeper. I have not told anyone, not my dad or anyone, that you are going blind. Why is it a secret?

Postscript 2: Do you think President Obama will win a second term in office?