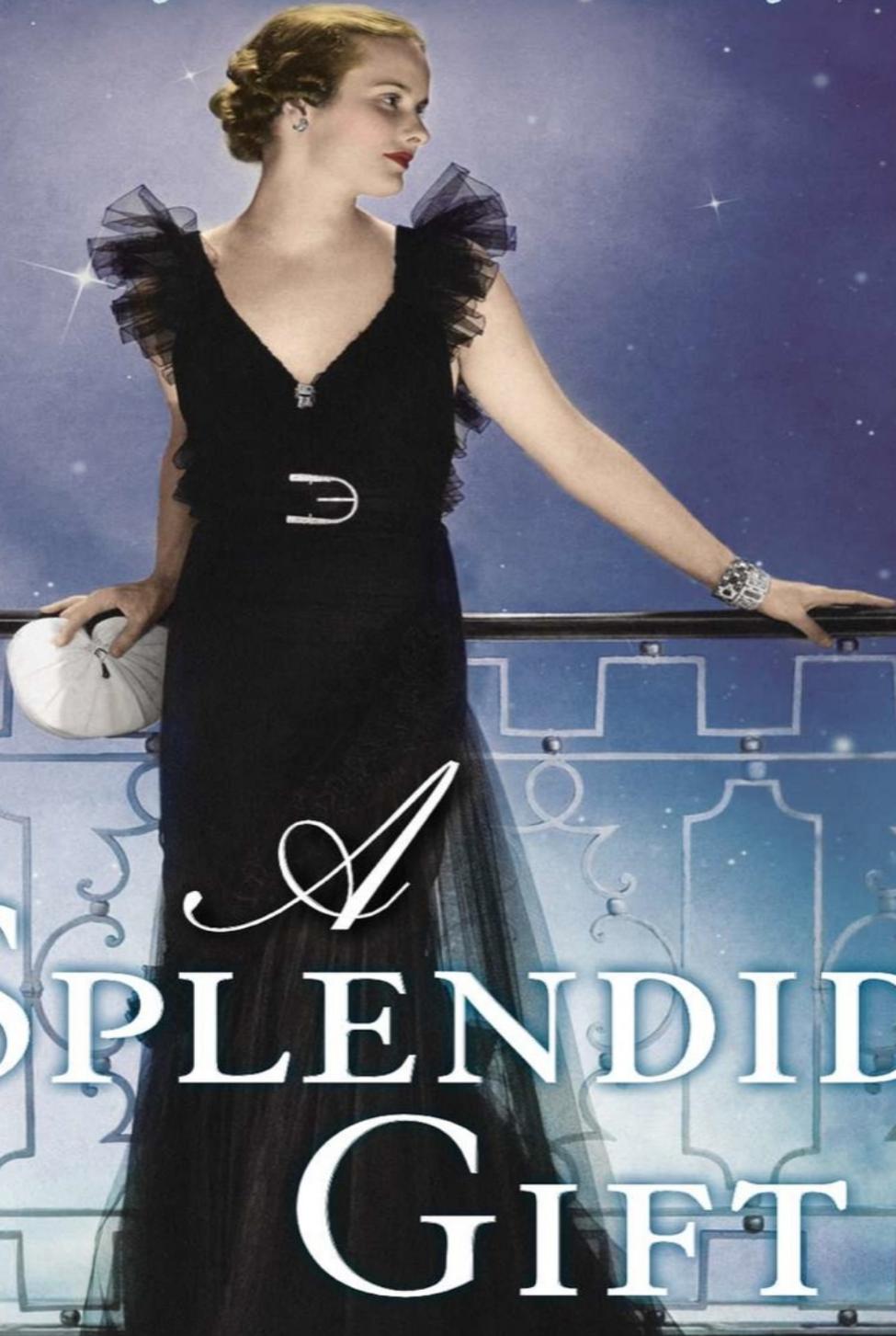


# ALYSON RICHMAN

National Bestselling Author of  
*The Lost Wife* and *The Garden of Letters*



## A SPLENDID GIFT

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The Last Van Gogh

The Lost Wife

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The Garden of Letters

# **A Splendid Gift**

Alyson Richman

InterMix Books, New York

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## Foreword

Shortly after I finished my latest novel, *The Garden of Letters*, which contains several plot references to *The Little Prince*, I learned that the author, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, wrote his iconic story while shuttling between homes in New York City and Long Island, New York, in the spring and summer of 1942. More interesting to me personally was that he rented the Bevin House, a French-style, twenty-two room mansion situated in Eaton's Neck, which is a remote area of Asharoken, New York, facing out onto Huntington Harbor. My own home sits directly across from Eaton's Neck and shares the same mirror view of the harbor. I was immediately struck by the coincidence that Saint-Exupéry looked upon—and was inspired by—the same glimmering bay and rocky shore that I had while I was crafting *The Garden of Letters*. As I began to further investigate his time on Long Island, I learned that the Frenchman took secret trips to Manhattan to visit a woman who had captured his heart and became the basis for the character of the wise fox in *The Little Prince*. Much like my character Luca in *The Garden of Letters*, a bookseller who, during the Italian Resistance, gifts his copy of *The Little Prince* to his beloved Elodie, Saint-Exupéry believed that even if a couple is separated by distance or even death, true love continues to exist beyond the stars.

March 1942  
New York City

That evening, after she had put her son to bed, peeled off her rollers, and reapplied her lipstick, Silvia was nothing short of a comet as she hailed a taxi, the invitation to the cocktail party fluttering between her fingers.

She read the driver the address and settled against the backseat. The night was damp, and as the wind streamed through the driver's half-opened window, she considered asking him to roll up the glass in order to protect her hair. But Silvia found the air invigorating, so she untied the scarf around her neck, wrapped it over the top of her head, and tied a small knot underneath her chin. Her very own silk helmet to protect her coiffure. As they barreled down Park Avenue, the New York skyline brilliantly illuminated, she closed her eyes and felt the freedom of the night unfurling before her. With the car's wheels rolling underneath, she imagined herself taking flight.

She had been told by the hostess that the famous French pilot, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, would be in attendance, and that his publisher was trying to ease both his homesickness and frustration at being classified medically unfit to fly as his country was beset by war. For Silvia, the chance to meet the man who had bravely navigated the skies and written so poetically about it thrilled her.

She had devoured his book *Wind, Sand and Stars*, and its prose had kept her awake long into the night. She still kept her copy on her nightstand. His words had lifted her from the confines of her small, elegant apartment to skies that were ablaze with the light of the stars. From his descriptions, she had imagined the roar of the engines, the sensation of the controls beneath his fingers, and the sheer ecstasy of flight as his plane soared above the peaks of the Pyrenees or the dunes of Dakar.

She had wondered what it might be like to look down at the world from Saint-Exupéry's cockpit, her breath merging with the clouds and her body nearly weightless. Just the thought of being given the gift of wings for even a moment was enough to make her dizzy. Warmth flowed through her as she imagined herself coasting in a dark sky, her face misty against the rolling fog.

\*\*\*

The hostess slipped Silvia's coat from her shoulders and offered her a glass of champagne. With her black dress, white throat, and auburn hair, her beauty lit up the room. She saw Saint-Exupéry in the corner smoking a cigarette, his eyes following her as she entered.

Silvia knew Lewis Galantière, the pilot's translator, who welcomed her with a tight embrace.

"So good of you to come," he said, kissing her on both cheeks. "Don't you look as beautiful as the moon. . . ."

She laughed, taking a sip of champagne. As usual, Galantière tried to flirt, but Silvia had no interest in him. She only wanted to meet the famous author himself.

Her eyes darted over to Saint-Exupéry, who was now amusing two women in the corner with a deck of cards.

"Would you like me to introduce you?" Galantière offered, in an obvious attempt to win her over by showing how close he was with the famous pilot.

Silvia's eyes brightened.

"Does he speak any English?"

"Hardly a word." Galantière smirked.

"Then can you give him a message for me?" Silvia asked in her sweetest voice, coming closer to the translator's ear.

"I suppose it depends on the message, my dear girl." He rolled the ice in his glass like it was dice, then took a deep swallow of gin.

For a moment she considered the different florid declarations and compliments she might bestow on the pilot in order to get his attention, but then decided it was best to be direct in matters of the heart.

"It's a simple one," she said, as she batted her eyelashes.

"What's that?" Galantière asked.

"Just tell him that I love him."

\*\*\*

Galantière swaggered over to the pilot and began to make idle conversation. It was clear to Silvia that he had not actually delivered her message, but rather had given a watered-down interpretation of her words.

Again, once he returned to her side, she whispered to Galantière another message for the pilot, this one more passionate than her first. She hoped that he would translate her second attempt with more accuracy this time.

But Galantière was not amused.

"Enough!" he said, turning to her. "I won't play Cyrano de Bergerac for you."

He raised his empty glass to the air. "You're on your own, the two of you. . . ." He looked at Silvia one last time and shook his head. "Good luck."

Saint-Exupéry had been watching them and laughed. Even if he didn't understand their actual words, he had grasped enough of the conversation to be entertained. Silvia shrugged to intimate *good riddance*, her face beaming because she now had the chance to be alone with the pilot.

He stood across from her, far taller than she had imagined, with dark eyes framed by thick eyebrows. His face, although not classically handsome, was intelligent and soulful. His smile was disarming, and his gaze contained a predatory wisdom that reminded her of an owl.

She ventured in a blend of English and German to ask him if he'd like her phone number. Already she was set on establishing a language between them that was all

their own.

“*Oui. Oui,*” he said, with a grin she could well understand. The pilot reached into his breast pocket and handed Silvia a pen.

\*\*\*

He had arrived in New York on the cusp of 1941, his body aflame with pain from an injury he had suffered in a crash years before. At night he suffered from mysterious fevers. He dreamed of flight and falling, of stars and bodies tumbling from the sky. He closed his eyes as the taxis honked their horns and imagined the silent desert. He saw camels and Bedouins. But mostly he saw the faces of his fellow pilots from his former days on the African mail route, each one now dead. As the only survivor, his anguish cut him to the bone.

He sought the laughter of others to forget his sadness, and to hide his awkward and clumsy nature. And so at parties, he played the clown. He brought cards and performed magic tricks, or entertained the crowd with songs on the piano.

Elizabeth Reynal and Peggy Hitchcock, who were married to the founding partners of his American publisher, Reynal & Hitchcock, had furnished an apartment high above Central Park South, with all the necessities to bring him comfort so he could write. They bought him a toaster and stocked the refrigerator. They dressed his bed in crisp white linen and placed a lamp at his desk.

He used the apartment as a hideaway. He smoked cigarettes and drank tea long into the night. He wrote and scribbled on notepads. He spread out his papers as though they were maps.

He wrote letters to his wife, Consuelo, who, in a show of independence and South American drama, had taken an apartment upstairs in the same building.

He pleaded with her to forsake her bohemian ways and live a more private and proper life, while at the same time sifting through scribbled phone numbers collected from women he had met at parties.

Most of the women he chose not to call. But Silvia, with her dark, sly eyes that reminded him of a fox, who was clever enough to create a language of stolen phrases from other languages, and who rejoiced in pantomime when she had no words, he had found enchanting.

The evening following their first encounter, he smiled as he remembered how she had clutched her heart to show affection for his books, and how she had extended her slender arms to simulate a plane in flight.

It was past midnight when he picked up the phone and called her.

“Hello?” a voice half-asleep answered on the other end.

He tried to speak in broken English, though mostly French came out, and asked if he could see her.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “Come at noon.” He envisioned her smile. She had to repeat her address four times before he got the number of her building correct.

But he assured her he had received the transmission loud and clear and that he would be there.

\*\*\*

She had her apartment ready by eleven o'clock. She had bought flowers for the dining room table and prepared a meal of roasted chicken and a salad. She had set the table with her good china and sterling, all wedding gifts from her brief marriage.

She dressed her slender frame in simple shapes that accentuated her figure. She wore her hair like Rita Hayworth and lined her dark eyes with kohl.

She served the salad in a fluted bowl. She had already cut the chicken into slices, to avoid Saint-Exupéry seeing her wearing an apron and holding a carving knife.

\*\*\*

He arrived more than two hours late.

Her ten-year-old son, Stephen, was at school, but would be returning home within the hour. She had nearly given up hope when the doorman rang and said she had a visitor.

“Send him up!” She could barely contain her excitement.

And when she opened the door, there wasn't a hint of exasperation in her voice despite his late arrival.

“You made it!” she said, as she opened her arms to greet him. As he leaned in to kiss her, they discovered that the scent of her perfume was a word common to both of them.

“Rose,” he said, inhaling her fragrance as he kissed her.

She smiled as she felt his lips on her cheek. “Yes,” she said. “It's my favorite.”

\*\*\*

That first afternoon, in the elegance and comfort of Silvia's Upper East Side apartment, Saint-Exupéry discovered a well-needed refuge, even though his hostess barely spoke a word of his native tongue. For as soon as he stepped over her threshold, he felt at home. Like his mother, Silvia possessed a rare gift of making every space she inhabited beautiful.

He admired her colorful collages—the clippings of cabbage roses and tendrils she adorned on small plates and her framed pieces of needlepoint. He took note of how artistically she had arranged the vase of fresh flowers, and how even her black poodle was perfectly groomed. Whereas his wife created a tornado in her wake, Silvia emitted a sense of tranquility and ease.

What he wanted to tell her—though he lacked the words in English—was that her home reminded him of France. He had the sensation that he could have been in Paris, or in the dining room of his childhood home in Saint-Maurice. He closed his eyes and savored the chicken. Silvia both soothed and enchanted him.

He reached out toward her as she came closer, lifting the silk hem of her dress. After seeing her taut thigh, he forgot all about Silvia's homemade apple tart.

\*\*\*

Over the next several weeks, he sought her out often. She was a tonic for his restlessness. He would typically surprise her late at night, bearing a bottle of wine and a folder full of his latest writings. The moment he removed his coat and slipped off his shoes, a sense of relief washed over him. Without uttering a word, she would usher him to the sofa, hand him a glass, and massage his feet in her deft hands.

She learned that she needn't go through the trouble of roasting a chicken on his behalf. He requested only scrambled eggs and a tumbler of gin. The fragrance of the butter melting in the frying pan or the jingle the ice made as she handed him his cocktail, were rituals he adored.

\*\*\*

He believed Silvia possessed a unique magic, one that he had sensed from their very first encounter, when her eyes shone and her hands danced for him alone. It was as pure as the language of children. Two souls bound together without the use of words.

That she was a mother also endeared her to him. He loved her little boy, Stephen, often amusing him with small pranks. He taught him to make water balloons and crafted him an airplane from Popsicle sticks. He brought him a set of colored pencils and encouraged him to write and draw.

On the evenings when her son was at her parents', they'd go out to dinner at Ruby Foo's, feeding each other dumplings. They drank cocktails with paper parasols, spinning them on the table like tops. All the while they laughed and gestured like two mimes, so that those around them thought they were engaged in a mad game of charades. They scribbled drawings on paper napkins, teased each other with animated faces, and poked each other beneath the table.

Later, in the dark of her bedroom, he would undress her. When he slipped off her dress, the white of her body was dazzling. He wanted to tell her that her smile bewitched him, that her touch made him feel young again, even though his body was still laced with pain. But the words in English were lost to him, so he showed her his passion in other ways. He placed his hands on her small breasts, his large palms enveloping them whole. He cupped her between her legs. And he allowed himself to surrender to her.

\*\*\*

Isolation plagued the pilot, despite his new relationship with Silvia and the many invitations he received from his acquaintances. He felt ill at ease in the city, where he needed to crane his neck just to see the sky. He submerged himself in his bathtub and dreamed of ways to fight the Germans, inventing submarines and aircraft that could accomplish amazing feats. He amused himself by creating green slime to sling at the enemy. At his desk, increasingly unable to write, he busied himself by making a fleet of paper airplanes. He opened the window and propelled them into the air, watching as their parchment wings fluttered onto the heads of strangers and forced them to look up past the skyscrapers toward the clouds.

He visited Silvia regularly, finding comfort in her beauty and in the way she

allowed him to just be himself. She understood the passionate pilot just as much as she did the writer who was struggling to regain his focus. She sensed that he was broken in places that he hid, and she tried to bring a softness to his life, to ease the sharp edges of his pain.

But neither the paper airplanes nor the adoring Silvia eased his malaise from not having made greater strides with the U.S. government. He had hoped to convince the Americans to join the Allied war effort, but his pleas had been ignored. His writing suffered as well. He was under contract with his American publisher to produce a new book, but he had yet to find sufficient inspiration. Almost every night, whatever he had written ended up in his trash bin.

It was Elizabeth Reynal, the wife of his publisher, who seeded his next idea. She had noticed the little figure of a small boy with mop-topped hair and a scarf knotted around his neck sketched on the margins of the pilot's manuscripts and the bottoms of his letters. She had also seen Saint-Exupéry draw the *petit bonhomme* on tablecloths and paper napkins at restaurants.

"Why don't you think of writing a children's book?" she suggested one night over dinner, in an effort to distract him from his despair. By that June, the seed had begun to grow. He imagined this "Little Prince" on an intergalactic adventure.

He bought a set of watercolors at a drugstore on Eighth Avenue and an expensive Dictaphone so he could record his random thoughts. He lay next to Silvia during their stolen afternoons and told her the journey the Little Prince would take beyond the stars.

He began to work on the book in the sanctuary of her apartment, while Silvia took every step she could to maintain his morale. She served him eggs and English muffins on a tray. She rummaged through her closet to find one of Stephen's old dolls and accessorized it with a scarf made from a strip of yellow felt before placing it beside the pilot, so he'd have further inspiration as he sketched.

But the July heat became oppressive for Saint-Exupéry, and he found his own Manhattan apartment too sweltering to work. Hoping to give his wife an assignment she might enjoy, he asked Consuelo to find them a summer cottage where he could write. Preferably someplace on the water in Long Island not far from their friends, the Roussy de Saleses and the Lindberghs, who lived in Lloyd Neck.

He had hoped for little more than a small hut, just a place where he could lie on the grass and breathe in the fresh air. But Consuelo, in her typical dramatic fashion, found something far more extravagant. The Bevin House, a beautiful white home on Eaton's Neck. It had a rolling lawn and an enviable position that looked directly onto Duck Island Harbor, a quiet inlet off the Long Island Sound. Even though it was far grander than what he had envisioned, he found it enchanting. The house had all the privacy and calm he needed to write.

\*\*\*

The pilot awakened each morning with the sunrise, the windows open and the linen curtains fluttering like white sails. He kept an easel in the library and would sketch his drawings for the Little Prince in pencil and later add washes of watercolor. He traveled across the rooms of the Bevin House as the day stretched out, following the path of the

sun. As the light left the library, he moved to the parlor, and when it departed from there, he went out to the porch where he gazed at the water between the branches of the centuries-old linden and hickory trees.

He bought boxes of onion-skin paper and wrote draft after draft. He worked long into the night, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, fueled by coffee and Coca-Cola. For every ten pages he wrote, he threw nine into the garbage. He wanted every word to be essential.

He called Silvia in the middle of the night to read fragments to her aloud. Her voice, still groggy from sleep, always perked up as soon as she heard him say her name, which had never sounded as beautiful as it did when it rolled off the pilot's tongue.

When he read her the latest chapters of *The Little Prince*, she was delighted he had chosen to share it with her, even though she couldn't really understand the text.

She had learned to say a few words in French. "*Tu me manques.*" "I miss you. . . ." she told him over the phone, slowly, like a caress. She had hired a tutor named Louise from the nearby Browning School and told her she needed to learn only the most important words for how to court and then how to love.

"I'm coming," he promised her, though he failed to give her an exact time. Like a pilot making an emergency landing, he would simply arrive.

Fearful she might miss him, Silvia spent almost every waking hour in her apartment. When she needed to go grocery shopping or take Stephen to an appointment, she hurried quickly back home to wait.

She wondered if her ten-year-old son noticed any changes in her since the pilot had entered their lives. She knew she was more erratic—the rush of adrenaline that flooded her body when she thought he was en route to see her, and the despair that washed over her if he failed to then appear.

Her parents, who still lived in her childhood home in Brooklyn, had not questioned Silvia too deeply the few times she had asked them at the last minute to pick up Stephen from school. But she knew they would grow suspicious if her requests became frequent. Beautiful, quick-witted, and charming, she had been raised to marry rich. Her mother was elated when Silvia became engaged at the age of eighteen to a Manhattan lawyer named Shapiro, who was several years her senior. And although he wasn't handsome or particularly eloquent, his bank account was full and he enjoyed spending money on her. While courting the young Silvia, he brought two bouquets to their apartment each visit, one for Silvia and an even bigger one for her mother.

Three years later, Silvia divorced the lawyer and took two-year-old Stephen and all of their belongings uptown to her new apartment on Park Avenue. She received enough money in her settlement to ensure that she and her son could live comfortably on Manhattan's elegant Upper East Side. But her parents had still hoped she'd remarry, and that their grandson would have a more involved father figure in his life.

Those moments when Saint-Exupéry took out his paints and began working with Stephen, Silvia could feel the urge for domestic stability wash over her. One day before the school term ended, Stephen came home distraught that his teacher had told him his illustration of a turkey was lackluster and that he should try harder at home. When the pilot saw the young boy so upset at his teacher's criticism, he took out his watercolor set and a sheet of paper and produced a lively sketch of a turkey for the boy

to present to his teacher.

“She said yours wasn’t good either!” Stephen told Saint-Exupéry the next time he saw him.

“Ignorant!” he said, hoping to amuse the little boy by showing his disapproval of the teacher’s poor artistic judgment. “*Ma dinde était parfaite,*” he said shaking his head. “My turkey was perfect.”

Silvia delighted in her son’s laughter merging with Saint-Exupéry’s. But she knew her parents would find no pleasure that their daughter was cavorting with a married Frenchman, one who lived from paycheck to paycheck from his publisher. In their eyes, there was little romance in poverty, nor any point being with a man who could never be a proper husband. Silvia could easily imagine their criticism.

She knew they were right. She had not realized when she first pursued the pilot that he was married, and it wasn’t until their third meeting that he revealed to her the truth.

In limited words, he tried to tell her that his wife was fragile and that their marriage was “*inexplicable.*” It was a word she understood, though it frustrated her all the same.

What he didn’t say was how much of an inferno his life was with Consuelo. It wasn’t just her other romantic entanglements that plagued him, for he too was guilty of such indulgences. It was more her disrespect of their marital privacy, how she insisted on putting her affairs on display. At dinner parties she reveled in making overly dramatic statements. Sometimes she would announce that her husband had just ravished her, while other times she would cut him down by saying his body had suffered from flying at high altitudes so he was no longer capable of satisfying her insatiable needs. She had no sense of shame.

Saint-Exupéry lacked the words to tell Silvia what was happening at home with his wife. How he often waited up until the early morning to see if Consuelo would return to their house in Eaton’s Neck or, when in the city, whether she would respond to the note he had left in her upstairs apartment imploring her to come down to see him. He kept those facts buried and hoped that Silvia would somehow sense, as she did with so many other things, the truth that lay hidden beneath.

\*\*\*

He continued to seek out Silvia’s company. She released him from the roles so many people expected of him: the debonair pilot, the charming Frenchman, or the clown. She understood the comfort of silence.

She did not grow frustrated when his injured body failed him. She lay peacefully with him, chest to chest, her lips against his neck, her leg draped over his thigh.

“Tell me about the desert,” she would whisper, her breath a gentle caress of wind. And soon she would see the light resurface in his eyes.

Her gentle coaxing awakened something deep within him. “The desert . . .” he said, as if the word itself contained its own magic. Instantly, he went back to another time, when his plane was dusted in sand and his face was burned from the sun. He relished the chance to tell her a story from his travels. To wrap her in his arms and share memories that were as vivid to him as the stars.

He spoke in as much English as he could not only about the different ports where he had been stationed, but also about the campfires, the wild gazelles, and the thrill of flying above the dunes. He painted a vivid picture of the Sahara. The infinite quiet. The golden light rippling across the sand. The sense that there, in the desert, time stood exquisitely still. Even when his lack of adequate English failed him, he was able to use his hands to gesture the pattern of the sand or the calm in the sky.

Her bed became their magic carpet, with the pilot guiding them to places where she could see and feel every element. Heat and hunger. Wind and stars. Nestled against him, she begged for one story after another, the adrenaline rising through her in a thirst for adventure. The excitement in his voice and gesticulations of flying were so intense that Silvia could almost smell the petrol and feel the wind whipping her hair across her face.

Sometimes they'd stay up so late that he would stop midsentence and declare that he was famished, patting his stomach with his two hands.

"So now I have two little boys, and they're both always asking for food," Silvia would chide him, as her lips gently pressed against his own. She'd pull herself out of his arms and reach for her robe. Before she slipped on her silk kimono, she could feel his eyes on her back. Her shoulder blades were cut in high relief like a dancer's. She knew they reminded him of wings.

\*\*\*

In bed they shared a plateful of scrambled eggs and then fell asleep exhausted by a night of tales and laughter. Before the sun rose, he would vanish, headed back to his rented home on Long Island.

That summer he raced down Asharoken Avenue in his little green car, with the water as blue as a mussel shell, the sky soft with clouds. He felt himself restored by the sunlight and he savored his drives across the long, winding causeway that seemed to float over the bay. And despite his lack of domestic stability with Consuelo, their home on Eaton's Neck, with its rolling lawn and sweeping views of the harbor, was a much-needed retreat.

He was merciless in his revisions as he continued to craft the adventures of his *petit prince*. He stockpiled boxes of his onionskin paper and scratched his sentences in pencil, until each word was just right.

By late morning, his room would look like a minefield of balled-up paper. Those few pages that he kept were often stained with droplets of black coffee or smudges of cigarette ash. He would stumble down the long carved stairway and attempt to make himself a plate of eggs and buttered toast in the kitchen. But whatever magic Silvia brought to a whisk, milk, and eggs, he certainly didn't possess it. Even his toast, he always managed to burn.

His sorcery was instead funneled into his work, polishing every sentence until it gleamed like a wet stone. He was determined that the message of his story be universal, regardless of the reader's age.

He wanted to create a world that revealed the essence of the soul.

His memories of his childhood at his family's estate in Saint-Maurice provided his inspiration. He imagined all of the animals his little prince would encounter on his

travels, especially ones that had entranced him when he himself was a small boy. The sheep, the foxes, and the birds.

In Saint-Maurice, he had read under the shade of ancient linden trees. It was a place where there were always gardens and games. It was his subsequent adulthood that struck him as a betrayal. He had no sense of money and had no finesse with navigating bureaucracy, and he imagined his little prince with the same innocent soul.

\*\*\*

He yearned for simplicity not only in his prose, but also with his personal life, which depleted his energy and caused him unrest. Saint-Exupéry's marriage continued to frustrate and infuriate him, sometimes making him behave like a petulant child.

Without any notice, Consuelo would appear and disrupt the pilot's solitude. He despised the chaos she brought when she returned to their home in Long Island, often bringing with her a wide rotation of lovers she introduced under the guise of "her friends."

He could feel the transformation sweep over him when she arrived, as if the air in the room had suddenly grown tropical and charged, like a tornado that might at any moment break all the china and glass in the house.

"Tonio," she would cry out his name as soon as she entered the house. She never arrived without an entourage. Aside from her coterie of friends, she brought trunks of clothing and hat boxes, and, on one memorable afternoon, even a parakeet in a bright red cage.

"What have you bought today?" he would inquire, cringing. No matter how much money his publisher advanced him, he could never keep up with her spending habits.

"You'd be happier if you just stopped counting," she snapped. She was even smaller than Silvia, but her deep red lips and dark hair gave her an air of authority. She swallowed up nearly all the air in the room.

On his own, he lived simply and stayed focused on his work. Coffee and cigarettes sustained him long into the night. But once Consuelo arrived, he invariably felt unsettled, and in need of reassurance and praise. He would think nothing of waking his household of sleeping guests to force them to look at his latest drawing or to use them as models. When the Swiss writer Denis de Rougemont came for yet another of his visits to the Bevin House, Saint-Exupéry enlisted the handsome young man as a model to create an illustration of his little prince in a bout of despair.

When Saint-Exupéry's own sadness became too much, he escaped his house and sped to the Upper East Side, parking his little green car on the street.

When he knocked at the door of Silvia's apartment, using the lightest rap so as not to awaken young Stephen, he was greeted by the loveliest woman wrapped in a silk kimono. No matter how late he arrived, her eyes were never swollen with sleep, but rather fluttering with life and sheer happiness just to see him. They reminded him of dancing fireflies, their wings beating within a glass jar.

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He slept late the following morning, his long body extending over the edge of her bed. She was careful not to disturb him, removing herself from the tangle of white sheets that he had twisted around him like a parachute as he fell into his dreams. She wrapped herself in her kimono, tying the sash tightly around her waist and shutting the door of the bedroom firmly behind her so that her son wouldn't see the pilot asleep in her bed.

The first hours of the daylight were hers alone. She walked into the living room and picked up the plates and wineglasses from the night before. Aside from the hum of the fans she had placed through the apartment, the city was quiet. Most of her neighbors had already fled the heat for their summer homes in Connecticut or Long Island.

By the time she had washed the last dish, Stephen was sitting at the kitchen table in his pajamas. His favorite pair, which she constantly had to keep washing so they'd always be ready in his drawer, were the ones with airplanes printed on the cotton.

"What would you like for breakfast, lovey?" she asked him, though she already knew his answer.

"Scrambled eggs and English muffins," he replied, his voice hoarse from sleep.

She knotted her apron around her waist and began to whisk the eggs. Only a few hours before she had performed the same ritual for her pilot, who was now fast asleep in her bed. The preparation for both was filled with love.

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She got ready to take Stephen to her parents after breakfast, packing a towel, a swimsuit, and a change of clothes in a canvas rucksack Saint-Exupéry had bought him for his birthday. "Now all you need is a set of goggles and a pilot hat to pull over your ears," she had told him that afternoon after he opened the present, "and you're ready to go to the stars."

She looked at Stephen and smiled.

"A perfect day for Coney Island," she said as she kissed the boy on top of his head, inhaling the scent of his hair.

"Why can't you come along, too?" Stephen's eyes were focused on his plate and his fork gently prodded at the eggs.

"Oh, how I wish I could . . ." As the words tumbled out, she felt a sharp pang. "Let's go someplace tomorrow together . . . just the two of us. Maybe we could go to Central Park and head over to the boathouse."

He lifted his eyes at her, then got up from his chair.

"Tell him I want him to stay here with us."

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Her son's words echoed inside her for the rest of the afternoon. She dropped him off at her parents' house and kissed him on the cheek. "Tomorrow, boats . . ." she promised, as she turned to get back into the waiting taxi.

On the ride back to Manhattan, melancholy came over her. She knew her son felt

the same way she did about having Saint-Exupéry in his life. When he was there, he filled her with joy and made her mind feel alive. He was funny and entertaining, and she always loved to see what he was working on. She could not wait to pore over the pile of sketches he pushed at her for her approval. As much as she loved motherhood, she also yearned for a creative life and Saint-Exupéry brought that along with him. She dreamed of becoming fluent in French, of being not only a wife to him, but a partner in his work. Her mind was full of ideas, her spirit eager to travel and see the world. Part of her even imagined writing a book of her own.

But when her pilot left, the quiet in the apartment proved unbearable. He took a piece of her every time he departed. And Stephen, too, was growing attached. The paper airplanes Saint-Exupéry had made with him, the set of paints he had given the boy, and the times they'd spent in Central Park feeding the squirrels or flying kites made her son even happier than she had hoped. Now she regretted that they weren't all spending another day together, but Saint-Exupéry had insisted he had to leave by noon and she didn't want to have to say good-bye to him in front of Stephen. The last few times he had gone back to Long Island, she found it difficult to mask her tears.

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As Saint-Exupéry slept, Silvia took the papers he had brought with him and began to study the sketches, in an effort to decode the story by looking at all the illustrations he had spent hours perfecting.

She lifted the first pages, which described a hat that was really a well-fed boa constrictor, and smiled when she came upon the drawings of a sheep, which only she and the pilot knew was based on her poodle, Mocha. She also knew that the rose whom the little prince loved despite its thorns, who needed incessant care and protection from the sun and the wind, was Consuelo.

But the newest ones were sketches of baobab trees, with their menacing trunks and branches that looked like gnarled fists squeezing tight. In some of the sketches, the giant tree trunks engulfed the asteroid. Silvia knew, without reading a single word, that this was Nazi Germany overtaking his beloved France. She shuddered and put the papers down.

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He entered the living room shortly thereafter. His shirttail hung over the waistband of his pants, and his eyes were rimmed in shadow.

She stood up and went over to him, brushing her hand across the stubble on his cheek. Just a few hours before, she had kissed young Stephen good-bye, and now the pilot stood in her living room like another sad little boy. His eyes were lowered, as if he were ashamed. She could sense he was about to say something he knew would upset her.

"I need to get back to Long Island," he told her. He held his watch in his hand and fastened it around his wrist.

She was frustrated she couldn't find the words in French to tell him how she was

breaking apart inside. For months now he had lain in her arms, and when he was with her, she knew he was happier than when he was on his own or with Consuelo.

She stood only a few inches away from him. He towered over her.

He saw her eyes glisten, but she fought back her urge to cry.

He reached for her palm and his fingers enveloped her own. Neither of them said anything, but a thousand words were still uttered, all in the touch of his hand.

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For five days he doesn't call her, and the wait is eternal. She tries, without success, to reassure herself by considering all of his other commitments—his efforts with Washington and his publishing deadlines, not to mention the stress from his turbulent wife. All of these are valid reasons for his silence. But every hour passes more slowly than the next. She stares at the phone, and eats ice cream straight from the freezer to placate her nerves. She tries to hide her distress from Stephen, but when it becomes too hard, she asks her parents to take the boy to the beach so she can continue to remain at home, still hopeful that the pilot might call.

The summer air is so thick and stifling that, despite the fans running in the apartment, she feels she is suffocating waiting for him. When Stephen returns home, she goes to the fire escape to shake out his swim trunks. The smell of the sea clings to the cloth as briny as seaweed, and the sound of the sand falling out over the ironwork reminds her of rainfall and soothes her.

The next day she sends her son for yet another overnight stay with her parents. Stephen hardly looks at her as he's leaving. When he departs, she swears to herself that it's the last time she'll put her life on hold for the pilot. But that afternoon, she hears a sudden rapping on her door. His knock is impatient. Exuberant. When she opens the door, he is standing there with an armful of roses and a bottle of wine, and smiles. He pulls her into his arms, and all the harsh words she had planned to say to him—after she had sworn to herself she could no longer endure his absences—vanish immediately from her mind.

When he again leaves her later that afternoon, she finds he has scattered poetry for her around the apartment. "*My heart is healed in your arms,*" he scribbles on paper torn from a Chinese menu. Taped to the mirror, she finds another scrap of paper, this one containing a single line in English: "*You are my eternal embrace.*" She tucks them within the pages of her copy of *Wind, Sand and Stars* so that his words are all nested together, and smiles to herself.

All those days she just spent waiting for him have slipped away from her mind. She takes the flowers he brought her to her nightstand and savors their intense fragrance. She slips into her nightdress and calmly finishes the last bits of her cigarette. The memory of him fills the room, and for the first time in nearly a week, she no longer lies awake yearning for the phone to ring or a knock at the door. Instead, she can now sleep.

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Early that evening, he returned to find the house in Eaton's Neck empty. He walked past the open French doors of his study and headed toward the dining room where the housekeeper had stacked the mail. In a neat pile were several bills, a letter from his American publisher, and a note from a local girl, Adèle Breaux, inquiring whether he was in need of English lessons. He left them on the table and went over to the bar to pour himself a glass of gin. The air was hot. From the bay window, he noticed the water in the harbor was perfectly still. He took a few sips of his drink before refilling the glass, and then walked outside to the porch and sat down on one of the deck chairs.

As he looked toward Duck Island, the memory of Silvia standing in her living room stoic but breaking, haunted him.

He gazed at the large linden tree, then focused back to the copper beech near the water's edge. He imagined Silvia sitting beside him there, the sunlight on her face and a glass cupped in her hands.

But even though Consuelo thought nothing of disrespecting their household with her many lovers, he couldn't bring Silvia and Stephen to Eaton's Neck, despite how much he would have loved to see the boy play on the lawn or to have her sleeping beside him at night. He knew Silvia would have delighted in the grandeur of the grounds and its rooms with their arched doorways, mantels carved in white marble, and high windows and ceilings with crown moldings. He could see her setting the large oak wood dining room table with china and sterling, just as his mother had done during his childhood in Saint-Maurice. It gave him pleasure to imagine her bringing her innate sense of beauty to the domestic rituals that Consuelo never had any interest in. And yet it was part of his moral code that he must not invite Silvia into the home he shared with his wife.

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Consuelo always had too many angry words for him. Even when she wasn't at home, he could still hear her voice like a scythe slicing through the air.

And when she was feeling particularly vitriolic, she would throw plates or anything else she could find into the air.

But even though Silvia hardly spoke more than a few words of French, she could still read his emotions more clearly than anyone else. Without the benefit of words, she looked for other ways of interpreting his thoughts. She would read the expressions in his eyes or sense the pressure of his touch. Even his appetite for her food conveyed to her what he was feeling. And she understood best how to respond to his moods. When his eyes were wet with melancholy, she knew she had to be almost maternal with him and restore him by putting extra butter on his English muffins and more milk in his scrambled eggs. And when his eyes were alive with creative energy, she searched her apartment for things to stoke his imagination. When his body was ailing, she tried to restore his aching muscles with a massage.

She also understood how much she could soothe him simply by taking his hand in hers. Perhaps it was their language of touch that he loved the most. Her tight grip that begged him to stay a few minutes longer. Or the light caresses of her fingertips that felt as thrilling as the summer rain. He closed his eyes, and could convince himself