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State of Wonder

Written by Ann Patchett

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STATE OF WONDER

ANN PATCHETT

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To my friend Jo VanDevender

One

The news of Anders Eckman's death came by way of Aerogram, a piece of bright blue airmail paper that served as both the stationery and, when folded over and sealed along the edges, the envelope. Who even knew they still made such things? This single sheet had traveled from Brazil to Minnesota to mark the passing of a man, a breath of tissue so insubstantial that only the stamp seemed to anchor it to this world. Mr. Fox had the letter in his hand when he came to the lab to tell Marina the news. When she saw him there at the door she smiled at him and in the light of that smile he faltered.

"What?" she said finally.

He opened his mouth and then closed it. When he tried again all he could say was, "It's snowing."

"I heard on the radio it was going to." The window in the lab where she worked faced out into the hall and so she never saw the weather until lunchtime. She waited for a minute for Mr. Fox to say what he had come to say. She didn't think he had come all the way from his office in the snow, a good ten buildings away, to give her a weather

report, but he only stood there in the frame of the open door, unable either to enter the room or step out of it. "Are you all right?"

"Eckman's dead," he managed to say before his voice broke, and then with no more explanation he gave her the letter to show just how little about this awful fact he knew.

There were more than thirty buildings on the Vogel campus, labs and office buildings of various sizes and functions. There were labs with stations for twenty technicians and scientists to work at the same time. Others had walls and walls of mice or monkeys or dogs. This particular lab Marina had shared for seven years with Dr. Eckman. It was small enough that all Mr. Fox had to do was reach a hand towards her, and when he did she took the letter from him and sat down slowly in the gray plastic chair beside the separator. At that moment she understood why people say *You might want to sit down*. There was inside of her a very modest physical collapse, not a faint but a sort of folding, as if she were an extension ruler and her ankles and knees and hips were all being brought together at closer angles. Anders Eckman, tall in his white lab coat, his hair a thick graying blond. Anders bringing her a cup of coffee because he'd picked one up for himself. Anders giving her the files she'd asked for, half sitting down on the edge of her desk while he went over her data on proteins. Anders father of three. Anders not yet fifty. Her eyes went to the dates—March 15th on the letter, March 18th on the postmark, and today was April 1st. Not only was he dead, he was two weeks dead. They had accepted the fact that they wouldn't hear from him often and now she realized he had been gone so long that at times he would slip from her mind for most of a day. The obscurity of the Amazonian tributary where Dr. Swenson did her research had been repeatedly underscored to the folks back in Minnesota (*Tomorrow this letter will be handed over to a child floating downriver in a dugout log,* Anders had written her. *I cannot call it a canoe. There never were statistics*

written to cover the probability of its arrival.), but still, it was in a country, it was in the world. Surely someone down there had an Internet connection. Had they never bothered to find it? "Wouldn't she call you? There has to be some sort of global satellite—"

"She won't use the phone, or she says it doesn't work there." As close as they were in this quiet room she could scarcely hear his voice.

"But for this—" She stopped herself. He didn't know. "Where is he now?" Marina asked. She could not bring herself to say *his body*. Anders was not a body. Vogel was full of doctors, doctors working, doctors in their offices drinking coffee. The cabinets and storage rooms and desk drawers were full of drugs, pills of every conceivable stripe. They were a pharmaceutical company; what they didn't have they figured out how to make. Surely if they knew where he was they could find something to do for him, and with that thought her desire for the impossible eclipsed every piece of science she had ever known. The dead were dead were dead were dead and still Marina Singh did not have to shut her eyes to see Anders Eckman eating an egg salad sandwich in the employee cafeteria as he had done with great enthusiasm every day she had known him.

"Don't you read the reports on cholesterol?" she would ask, always willing to play the straight man.

"I write the reports on cholesterol," Anders said, running his finger around the edge of his plate.

Mr. Fox lifted his glasses, pressed his folded handkerchief against the corners of his eyes. "Read the letter," he said.

She did not read it aloud.

Jim Fox,

The rain has been torrential here, not unseasonable yet year after year it never ceases to surprise me. It does not change our work except to make it more time-consuming and if we have been slowed we have not been deterred. We move steadily towards the same excellent results.

But for now this business is not our primary concern. I write with unfortunate news of Dr. Eckman, who died of a fever two nights ago. Given our location, this rain, the petty bureaucracies of government (both this one and your own), and the time sensitive nature of our project, we chose to bury him here in a manner in keeping with his Christian traditions. I must tell you it was no small task. As for the purpose of Dr. Eckman's mission, I assure you we are making strides. I will keep what little he had here for his wife, to whom I trust you will extend this news along with my sympathy. Despite any setbacks, we persevere.

Annick Swenson

Marina started over at the top. When she had read it through again she still could not imagine what to say. "Is she calling Anders a setback?"

She held the letter by its slightest edges as if it were a document still to be submitted into evidence. Clearly the paper had been wet at some point and then dried again. She could tell by the way it was puckered in places, it had been carried out in the rain. Dr. Swenson knew all about the relationship of paper and ink and rain and so she cut in her letters with a pencil of hard, dark lead, while on the other side of Eden Prairie, Minnesota, Karen Eckman sat in a two-story brick colonial thinking her husband was in Brazil and would be coming home as soon as he could make Dr. Swenson listen to reason.

Marina looked at the clock. They should go soon, before it was time for Karen to pick the children up from school. Every now and then, if Anders happened to look at his watch at two-thirty, he would say to himself in a quiet voice, *School's out.* Three little Eckmans, three boys, who, like their mother, did not know enough to picture their father dead. For all that loss Dr. Swenson had managed to use just over half the sheet of paper, and in the half a sheet she used she had twice thought to mention the weather. The rest of it simply sat there, a great blue sea of emptiness. How much could have been said in

those remaining inches, how much explained, was beyond scientific measure.

Mr. Fox closed the door and came to stand beside Marina's chair. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed, and because the blinds on the windows that faced the hall were down she dropped her cheek against the top of his hand and for a while they stayed like this, washed over in the palest blue fluorescent light. It was a comfort to them both. Mr. Fox and Marina had never discussed how they would conduct their relationship at work. They had no relationship at work, or not one that was different from anyone else's. Mr. Fox was the CEO of Vogel. Marina was a doctor who worked in statin development. They had met, really met, for the first time late the summer before at a company softball game, doctors vs. administration. Mr. Fox came over to compliment her pitching, and that compliment led to a discussion of their mutual fondness for baseball. Mr. Fox was not a doctor. He had been the first CEO to come from the manufacturing side. When she spoke of him to other people she spoke of Mr. Fox. When she spoke to him in front of other people she addressed him as Mr. Fox. The problem was calling him Jim when they were alone. That, it turned out, was a much more difficult habit to adopt.

"I shouldn't have sent him," Mr. Fox said.

She raised her head then and took his hand in her hands. Mr. Fox had no reason to wear a lab coat. Today he wore a dark gray suit and striped navy tie, and while it was a dignified uniform for a man of sixty, he looked out of place whenever he strayed from the administrative offices. Today it occurred to Marina that he looked like he was on his way to a funeral. "You didn't make him go."

"I asked him to go. I suppose he could have turned me down but it wasn't very likely."

"But you never thought something like this would happen. You didn't send him someplace dangerous." Marina wondered if she knew this to be true. Of course there were poisonous snakes and razor-

toothed fish but she pictured them safely away from the places where doctors conducted scientific research. Anyway, the letter had said he died of a fever, not a snake bite. There were plenty of fevers to be had right here in Minnesota. "Dr. Swenson's been down there for five years now. Nothing's happened to her."

"It wouldn't happen to her," Mr. Fox said without kindness in his voice.

Anders had wanted to go to the Amazon. That was the truth. What are the chances a doctor who worked in statin development would be asked to go to Brazil just as winter was becoming unendurable? He was a serious birder. Every summer he put the boys in a canoe and paddled them through the Boundary Waters with binoculars and notepads looking for ruddy ducks and pileated woodpeckers. The first thing he did when he got word about the trip was order field guides to the rain forest, and when they came he abandoned all pretense of work. He put the blood samples back in the refrigerator and pored over the slick, heavy pages of the guides. He showed Marina the birds he hoped to see, wattled jacanas with toes as long as his hand, guira cuckoos with downy scrub brushes attached to the tops of their heads. A person could wash out the inside of a pickle jar with such a bird. He bought a new camera with a lens that could zoom straight into a nest from fifty feet away. It was not the kind of luxury Anders would have afforded himself under normal circumstances.

"But these are not normal circumstances," he said, and took a picture of his coworker at her desk.

At the bright burst of the flash, Marina raised her head from a black-necked red cotinga, a bird the size of a thumb who lived in a cone-shaped daub of mud attached to the tip of a leaf. "It's an ambitious lot of birds." She studied every picture carefully, marveling at the splendors of biodiversity. When she saw the hyacinth macaws she experienced one split second of regret that she wasn't the one Mr. Fox had tapped for the job. It was a singularly ridiculous

thought. "You'll be too busy with birds to ever find the time to talk to Dr. Swenson."

"I imagine I'll find a lot of birds before I find Dr. Swenson, and when I do find her I doubt she'll pack up on the first day and rush back to Johns Hopkins. These things take finesse. Mr. Fox said that himself. That leaves me with a lot of daylight hours."

Finding Dr. Swenson was an issue. There was an address in Manaus but apparently it was nowhere near the station where she did her field research; that location, she believed, needed to be protected with the highest level of secrecy in order to preserve both the unspoiled nature of her subjects and the value of the drug she was developing. She had made the case so convincingly that not even Mr. Fox knew where she was exactly, other than somewhere on a tributary off the Rio Negro. How far away from Manaus that tributary might begin and in which direction it ran no one could say. Worse than that was the sense that finding her was going to be the easy part. Marina looked at Anders straight on and again he raised his camera. "Stop that," she said, and turned her palm to the lens. "What if you can't get her to come back at all?"

"Of course I can," Anders said. "She likes me. Why do you think I'm the one Mr. Fox decided to send?"

It was possible that Dr. Swenson had liked him on the one day she spent at Vogel seven years ago, when she had sat at a conference table with Anders and four other doctors and five executives who made up the Probability Assessment Group to discuss the preliminary budget for the development of a program in Brazil. Marina could have told him Dr. Swenson had no idea who he was, but why would she have said that? Surely he knew.

Mr. Fox didn't know Karen Eckman. He had met her at company parties but he told Marina he could not remember her face,

a fact that seemed unforgivable now in light of what had happened. Marina saw the look of gratitude when she took down her coat that was hanging by itself on the rack by the door, but she would never have sent him there alone. The task was one for military chaplains, police officers, people who knew something about knocking on doors to deliver the news that would forever derail the world of the people who lived inside the house. *Anders is dead.*

"She'll be glad you're there," Mr. Fox said.

"Glad doesn't figure into this," Marina said.

Marina was going along to help Mr. Fox, and she went out of respect for her dead friend, but she had no illusions that she was the person Karen Eckman would want to break the news. It was true that she knew Karen, but only as well as a forty-two-year-old woman with no children knows a forty-three-year-old woman with three, as well as any single woman who works with the husband ever knows the wife who stays at home. Marina understood that Karen had made a point of knowing her even if Karen had not consciously mistrusted her. Karen engaged her in conversation when it was Marina who answered the phone in the lab. She invited her to their Christmas open house and the Fourth of July barbeque, where she got Marina a glass of tea and asked her thoughtful questions about protein research and said she really liked her shoes, a vaguely exotic pair of yellow satin flats a cousin had sent her from Calcutta years ago, shoes she loved herself and saved for special occasions. When Marina in turn asked about the boys, what they were doing in school, whether or not they were going to camp, Karen answered the questions offhandedly, offering up very few details. She was not the sort of mother to bombard her husband's polite colleague with the endless talk of Scout meetings. Marina knew that Karen was not afraid of her. Marina was, after all, overly tall and bony with impenetrable eyes and heavy black hair that set her apart from all the Swedes; it was only that Karen didn't want Marina to forget her. And Marina did not forget her, but what was important be-

tween them was so deeply unspoken that there was never the chance to defend herself from that of which she had never been accused and was not guilty. Marina was not the kind of woman who fell in love with another woman's husband, any more than she was the kind of woman who would break into the house at night and steal the grandmother's engagement ring, the laptop, the child. In truth, after two glasses of rummy punch at the last Christmas party, she had wanted very much to lean against Karen Eckman in the kitchen, put an arm around her little shoulders, bend her head down until their heads were almost touching. She had wanted to whisper in her ear, "I'm in love with Mr. Fox," just to see Karen's pale blue eyes go round in that collision of pleasure and surprise. How she wished now that she had been drunk enough to confide. Had she ever done that, Marina Singh and Karen Eckman would be very good friends indeed.

Outside the snow had been falling in wet clumps long enough to bury every blade of new spring grass. The crocuses she had seen only that morning, their yellow and purple heads straight up from the dirt, were now frozen as solid as carp in the lake. The tiny blooms of redbud made burdened shelves of snow. Mr. Fox and Marina pushed forward through the icy slush without a thought that they were for the very first time in their relationship leaving the building together. They made the long walk from the southern quadrant of the Vogel campus to the parking lot nearly a quarter mile away. Marina hadn't brought her snow boots. It hadn't been snowing when she left for work.

"I'll tell you something else," Mr. Fox said once they were in his car, the snow brushed off and the defroster turned to high. "I never thought he'd be gone so long. I told him when he left to take his time, to get the point across, but I had thought we were talking about a week, maybe two at the outside. I never considered him staying for more than two weeks."

"He had a hard time finding her, that threw his schedule off to start."

Anders had left the day after Christmas. The company had wanted him to go sooner but Christmas was nonnegotiable for the Eckmans. She had shown Mr. Fox the few letters she'd had from Anders because they confided nothing. He had mostly talked about Manaus and then about the birding trips he had taken in the jungle with a guide. To her, Anders had spoken mostly of rain. If Mr. Fox had also received letters from Anders, and she was sure he had, he never mentioned them.

"So two weeks then. Not three months. I would have told him to come back—"

"You couldn't get a hold of him then."

"Exactly." Mr. Fox let his eyes trail off across the whitened landscape that smeared beneath the windshield wipers. "I would have told him there's a message to deliver and once he gave it to her he should have gotten on a plane himself, with or without her. That was his only job."

"It never would have been as simple as that," she said, as much to herself as to him. No one seriously thought the outcome of telling Dr. Swenson she needed to bring her research back to Minnesota would be Dr. Swenson packing her lab into boxes and coming home—not Anders, not Mr. Fox, not Marina. In truth, it wasn't even essential that she come back. Had she been willing to reopen lines of communication, to prove that the drug was nearly completed, to let the company install a coterie of its own doctors who would give regular and accurate reports of the drug's progress, Vogel would have left her in her research station for years, pouring in cash from an opened vein. But now Anders was dead and the notion of success was reduced to sickening folly. Just the thought of Dr. Swenson gave Marina the sensation of a cold hand groping for her heart. It is fifteen years ago and she is in the lecture hall at Johns Hopkins in a seat safely on the aisle of a middle row, and there is Dr. Swenson pacing in front of the podium, talking about the cervix, *the cervix*, with a level of intensity that elevates to such ferocity that none of them dare to look at their watches. No one in the crowd

of a hundred will suggest that class is long over, class should be dismissed, there are other classes they are now in the process of missing. Even though Marina is a second-year resident she is attending a lecture for third-year medical students because Dr. Swenson has made it clear to residents and medical students alike that when she is speaking they should be in attendance. But Marina would not dream of missing a lecture or leaving a lecture over a matter as inconsequential as time. She is riveted in place while the slide show of atypical cells on the high wall before her flicks past so quickly they nearly make a moving picture. Dr. Swenson knows everything Marina needs to know, answers the questions Marina has not yet formulated in her mind. A tiny woman made tinier by distance fixes one hundred people to their seats with a voice that never troubles itself to be raised, and because they are all afraid of her and because they are afraid of missing anything she might say, they stay as long as she chooses to keep them. Marina believes the entire room exists as she exists, at the intersection of terror and exaltation, a place that keeps the mind exceedingly alert. Her hand sweeps over page after page as she writes down every syllable Dr. Swenson speaks. It is the class in which Marina learns to take notes like a court reporter, a skill that will serve her for the rest of her life.

It strikes Marina as odd that all these years later she still remembers Dr. Swenson in the lecture hall. In her mind's eye she never sees her in surgery or on the floor making rounds, but at a safe, physical distance.

Karen and Anders Eckman lived on a cul-de-sac where the neighbors drove slowly knowing that boys could come sledding down a hill or shooting out between the shrubbery on a bike. "That one," Marina said, pointing to the red brick, and Mr. Fox pulled the car to the curb. Marina and Anders must have made about the same amount of money. They never talked about it but they did the same work;

Anders had been at the company a few years longer than Marina so he could have made a little more. But Marina's house, which was quite small and still too big for her, was paid for. She made regular contributions to charity and let the rest of her money languish in the bank while Anders paid for this house, piano lessons, teeth straightening, summer camp, college accounts. How had he managed, three sons and a wife, and who would pay for this life now that he was dead? For a while she sat there, imagining the various birthday parties and Christmases, endless pictures of boys with presents, knotted ribbon and torn-up gift-wrap in piles of red and silver and green, until finally the snow laid a blanket over the windshield and cut off the view.

"Now this is a surprise," Karen Eckman said when she opened the door, both hands grasping the choke chain of an enormous golden retriever; she was a small woman, and it didn't look like a battle she would win. "No!" she said loudly. "Sit!" She was wearing a white knit stocking cap pulled down over her ears and her coat was just behind her, thrown across a chair in the front hall. Marina was blanking on the dog's name, though there was a picture of him on Anders' desk along with pictures of Karen and the boys. He pushed his mallet head against Karen's hip and gave two sharp barks at the unimaginable good fortune of guests in the middle of the day.

"You're leaving," Mr. Fox said, as if this meant maybe they should leave as well.

Karen shook her head. "No, no, you're fine. I've got plenty of time. I was going to swing by the store on the way to pick up the boys but I can do that later. Come inside. It's freezing." The dog lunged forward when they entered, hoping for the chance to jump up, but Karen, who had at best twenty pounds on the animal, managed to drag him to the side of the entry hall. "You get back, Pickles," she said. "You sit."

Pickles did not sit, and when she let him go she rubbed her hands to work out the indentations the chain-link collar had left. In the kitchen everything was neat: no cups on the countertop, no toys on the

floor. Marina had been to the house before but only for parties when every room and hallway was pressed full of people. Empty she could see how big the place was. It would take a lot of children to fill in the open spaces. "Would you like some coffee?" Karen said.

Marina turned to put the question to Mr. Fox and found that he was standing almost directly behind her. Mr. Fox was not taller than Marina. It was something he joked about when they were alone. "No coffee," Marina said. "Thank you." It wasn't a bright day but what light there was reflected off the snow and cast a wide silvery band across the breakfast table. Through the big picture window Marina saw a jungle gym standing on a low hill in the backyard, a rough fort gathering snow on its slanted roof. Pickles leaned up against Marina now and he batted her hand with his head until she reached down to rub the limp chamois of his ears.

"I can put him up," Karen said. "He's a lot of dog."

Pickles stared at her, his vision unfocused by the ecstasy in his ears. "I like dogs," Marina said, thinking it was vital that he stay. The dog would have to stand in for their minister if they had one. The dog would be Karen's mother, her sister, whoever it was she wished was standing next to her when everything came down. The dog would have to be Anders.

She glanced back at Mr. Fox again. Every second they were in the house without telling her what had happened was a lie. But Mr. Fox had turned towards the refrigerator now. He was looking at pictures of the boys: the two youngest ones a couple of washed-out towheads, the older one only slightly darker. He was looking at a picture of Anders with his arms around his wife and in that photo they were not much older than children themselves. There were pictures of birds, too, a group of prairie chickens standing in a field, an eastern bluebird so vibrant it appeared to have been Photoshopped. Anders took a lot of pictures of birds.

Karen pulled off her hat and pushed her straight pale hair behind

her ears. The flush that had been in her cheeks from the momentary burst of cold had faded. "This isn't good news, right?" she said, twisting the rings on her finger, the modest diamond and the platinum band. "I'm glad to see you but I can't imagine you're just dropping by to say hello."

And for a split second Marina felt the slightest surge of relief. Of course she would know. Even if she hadn't heard she would know in that way a soul knows. Marina wanted so badly to put her arms around Karen then, to give her condolences. She was ready for that if nothing else. The words for how sorry she was ached in the back of her throat.

"It's not good news," Marina said, hearing the catch in her own voice. This was the moment for Mr. Fox to tell the story, to explain it in a way Marina herself did not fully understand, but nothing came. Mr. Fox had given himself over to the refrigerator photos. He had his back to the two women, his arms locked behind, his head tilted forward to a picture of a common loon.

Karen turned her eyes up, shook her head slightly. "The letters have been crazy," she said. "I'll get two in a day and then nothing all week. They don't come in any sort of order. I got one a couple of days ago that didn't have a date on it but it must have been pretty recent. He sounded like he was half out of his mind. He's definitely writing to me less now. I think he doesn't want to tell me he has to stay longer."

"Karen, listen."

Pickles lifted his head as if *listen* was his command. He sat.

"It isn't his job," Karen said, and while she looked at Marina she pointed her finger at Mr. Fox's back. "He doesn't like the jungle. I mean, the birds, he says the birds are spectacular, but the rest of it is making him crazy, the leaves and the vines and all of that. In one of his letters he said he felt like they were choking him at night. Where Anders grew up in Crookston there are hardly any trees at all. Have you ever been to Crookston? It's nothing but prairie up there. He used to say that trees made him nervous, and he was joking, but still. He

isn't cut out for this. He isn't some mediator who's been trained to talk down the difficult cases. I understand why you sent him. Everybody likes Anders. But if Vogel has inflated its stock price then that's Vogel's problem. It's not his job to fix it. He can't fix it, and you can't just leave him out there to try."

Marina imagined that Karen had been making this speech in her head every morning and night while she brushed her teeth, never thinking she'd have the opportunity to deliver it to Mr. Fox himself.

"He's never going to say this to you but even if he hasn't been able to bring this nutcase back it's time for him to come home. We've got three boys here, Mr. Fox. You can't expect them to finish out the school year without their father."

This time Marina recognized the sensation at the onset, the helpless buckling of joints, and was able to reach for the tall chair at the kitchen island. Surely it was Mr. Fox's part to give Karen the letter, but then with a fresh wave of grief, Marina remembered that the letter was in her own pocket. She pulled out the chair beside her. "Sit down, Karen," she said. "Sit next to me."

The moment did not bring to mind her own losses. What rushed before Marina was the inherent cruelty of telling. It didn't matter how gently the news was delivered, with how much sorrow and compassion, it was a blow to cut Karen Eckman in two.

"Anders?" Karen said, and then she said it again, louder, as if he were in the other room, as if she both believed what she had been told and denied it. All the cold that swept through Minnesota came into Karen Eckman and she stammered and shook. Her fingers began to rake at the outside of her arms. She asked to see the letter but then she refused to touch the thing, so thin and blue, half unfolded. She told Marina to read it aloud.

There was no way to say she wouldn't do it but still, no matter how much Marina tried to edit the words as they came out of her mouth she couldn't make them into sympathy. "Given our location, this rain,"