

EPISODE 3: VANISH

SCENE ONE: OPENING

THE MARTLET RADIO HOUR'S INSTRUMENTAL INTRO MUSIC PLAYS.

THE ANNOUNCER:

Welcome once again, ladies and gentlemen, to Dawn Arbor's very favorite nightly radio program, presented by Martlet Radio! Martlet Radio: always on the air!

And now, as ever, your lovely hostess: Sybil McIntyre!

SYBIL:

Autumn is marching on, everyone. The leaves have fallen, except for a few of the bravest holdouts. Every year the morning comes when we wake up and discover that overnight, the first frost has stripped the poor trees and sent all of their multicolored finery dancing around our feet at the whim of the breeze. Time for fathers and older brothers to drag out the rakes and pull crackling leaves into soft, bronzing mountains. Time for younger siblings to give in to the irresistible gravity of those piles and go flying in. Then in the evenings, time for bonfires and — at least here in Dawn Arbor — wild apple cider.

As a town we took our name from those trees. There were, after all, apple trees on the hill between the Slate and the oxbow long before there was a diner or a town hall or a hardware store. The old oak predates Oak Street by at least a hundred years. So when I see the changes of leaves and buds, of fruit and flowers, I always remember what goes with those changes every year in the human life of our town. We do love a good holiday here.

Those markers don't always stay the same. When I was young — well, younger — I knew that once the leaves had all fallen, the Apple Parade would be coming soon. We don't have a lot of parades in Dawn Arbor! There's the yearly Fourth of July parade, of course, with Main Street decked in flags and streamers. Sometimes there were parades when someone came home from the war, and when I was very young there was a parade in honor of a senator who came to town to open the new bridge. But what our younger listeners might not know is that there used to be a second annual parade, later in the year. It marked the time when all the apples had been harvested, when the trees were done and resting for the year, when all of our mothers had had time to put away bags of apples, to dry long strings of apple slices, to cook up jars of apple butter. Then everyone brought out a few of those new jars, and baked pies, and Minnie Shoemaker took out her old cider press and installed it in the place of honor at the foot of the steps of the town hall for a day, and we had a parade in honor of apples! And we all ate them — apple pie, apple cider, apple preserves, crumbles, cakes, fresh apples — until everyone was sick of them, and usually just plain sick, too.

And then it was gone. I barely knew how it happened — I was only twelve or so at the time. I think that Minnie's press broke down, and that year the whole parade faltered. And that next year we elected a new mayor, and everything had to be changed over — and then the next year there was just no parade. And every year after that, there was no parade. Eric didn't even remember it.

Things can, on occasion, vanish from our lives with shocking speed and completeness. People can do the same thing. It's an unsettling thing to experience, beyond all

the feelings of simple loss. We start to wonder about ourselves. How quickly might we disappear from the world when we're gone? Will we leave traces? For how many generations will we be remembered?

I remember the parade. I remember the people whom I have known and lost. And more than that. As a child I found and read a case of old letters, sent between my great-grandmother and her best friend, and I felt as though I had resurrected two women whom I had never known. The vanished past is alive – within us, without us, in ways we never expect. I don't think that I believe in forgetting.

SCENE TWO: ADVERTISEMENT

ANNOUNCER:

The Martlet Radio Hour will be back after this short message.

PRESENTER:

Oh no! While I was enjoying a lovely plate of my very favorite spaghetti with tomato sauce, my plate was jolted and red sauce spilled all over my lovely brand new periwinkle blouse! Whatever will I do!

Well, good thing that just like any savvy housewife, I'm always equipped with SPARKLE's new EVERCLEEN laundry soap! It's the new flaked laundry soap from SPARKLE that will remove every stain from your clothes, no matter how difficult the stain or how white the fabric! Hubby spilled wine on his very best white shirt? Don't worry – just use EVERCLEEN! You'll never have to worry about dirt or stains again – everyone will see you SPARKLE with EVERCLEEN!

SCENE THREE: LETTER INTRO

SYBIL:

Welcome back everyone. Tonight, we have once again what is – and I love that it is! – becoming a recurring segment of ours here on the Martlet Radio Hour. That's right – we've received another letter, and if my eyes don't deceive me, then it's from the same wonderful listener who's written us – oh, six or seven letters now, isn't it? I have to say, I appreciate this kind of devotion to my little show!

I think she might be my new favorite listener. Oh, I know I shouldn't play favorites, but I'm so excited every time one of these letters arrives. And that's enough stalling – I'm just dying to open it.

SOUND: THE LETTER BEING OPENED AND UNFOLDED.

SYBIL READS.

SCENE FOUR: LETTER

Dear Sybil,

It's me again, your anonymous friend. I've been lucky recently, or I just haven't been able to sleep, and I've been catching the show every night. It seems easier than it used to when I was little. I don't know whether I just want to hear it even more than before or whether it's just because I'm older – because there are so many ways that the world gets simpler as you get older, like how fiddly little tasks become simpler for your fingers. Have you ever noticed that? When I was little, I couldn't dance; my body just wouldn't obey me, I was too clumsy. I never learned or practiced, but now it's easy enough to move to the music. Don't you wish that everything got easier like that? Without even trying or thinking, it just suddenly makes sense?

Listening to you talk lately about how much you love the community and the togetherness here, I felt like I had to tell you that I haven't come back here out of nostalgia for the old hometown. You've seemed so sure that Dawn Arbor and I were being happily pulled back together. I didn't want to disappoint you, but it felt wrong to stay quiet any longer, when it's so far from the truth. The truth is that I barely managed to make myself come back here. I'm only here for my mom. There was really no one else who was going to take care of her after her diagnosis. She tends to drive people away, you see. I'm not sure she would have come to me for any other reason, either. But she called, and I came. I don't know why.

So, part of the reason I've had so much time to think about your show is that I'm here in a town I never loved, taking care of my dying mother, when the two of us can barely stand to be in the same room for twenty minutes at a time. Boy, what a bummer of a letter this is, huh? But I've been having a bummer of a time here in good old Dawn Arbor, the backwoods jewel of Fischer County. Hiding from the town that threw me out and waiting for someone to die.

Writing that first letter was the first thing I could think of doing when it all finally got to be too much. I'm not surprised I thought of you first. I was a really lonely kid, growing up here. People here always talk about how great it is in a small town, how everyone knows one another, how there's a real community. But you know what? A community that keeps everyone like-minded through the fear of what happens to them if they don't fit in isn't a community. It's a prison. I felt trapped here, and I feel trapped again now. Like I'm that kid again, too small to fight back, too powerless to run away, just taking the

beating for eighteen years. I had thought the hard times were over. I had filed them away under "Bad Past." Now I'm starting to worry that my life is going to be a loop of the same hard times, over and over.

I guess what I'm asking is, do you have any advice for someone who is stuck toughing it out through a bad situation, just waiting for everything to get easy again? Any advice for someone who is really tired of always being alone? You always seem to be able to take things in stride, so gracefully. And again, thank you for listening to me.

Sincerely,
One grateful listener

SCENE FIVE: RESPONSE

SYBIL:

Well. I am... It can be difficult to react to what's happening in the moment. That's the danger of live radio! There's a certain skill you need to ad-lib, to find your words quickly enough to keep up the appearance of wit and composure. Or if you can't, to turn it so that everyone can laugh with you.

But there are times, I think, that it's dishonest, disingenuous to scramble for the smooth and perfect response. And one of those situations is when someone comes to you with their fear and their grief. It's tempting to retreat to some trite response — "That sounds so difficult! I'm so sorry!" True as those words are, they don't do very much for the person who hears them. They're for the speaker, the person who feels the need to say something. I think we're being kinder to one another when we take a moment to think. To come up with something that, even if it isn't easily in reach, even if it isn't simple or easy, will genuinely mean something to both of us.

Advice. Believe it or not, for all that I rattle on here, people don't ask me for advice very often. Isn't that funny?

I wish that I could use your name to comfort you, but we'll make do with what we have. You haven't said very much about yourself in these letters, I think, not as such. Maybe your anonymity is a comfort for you — I know that it can be healing to let out your grief in public, even through a proxy like myself, without necessarily coming so close to it that others will know it's yours. But whatever amount of your struggle we can share, we will — all of us here, everyone who is hearing your story now, and who feels for you.

I am so, so sorry about your mother. I'm not — I'm not sure what you meant, exactly, but I gather that she's ill, and that you've been away from home here in Dawn Arbor for some time — at college, you said? I dreamed of doing that myself, once, but in the end it was just too hard to make myself leave. Maybe they ought to build the college here, and not quite so many of our young people will run off to the city or the army!

It is so difficult, I know, to watch and care for a loved one who is suffering through an illness. I've done the same in my life, for people I cared for very much, and — there wasn't quite so certain a diagnosis in their cases. We didn't know until the very end that we were saying goodbye. But I can't believe that it's any easier to know otherwise. In fact, I can only imagine what kind of pain that would cause you.

We're not strangers to slow illness in Dawn Arbor. All the new children raised by friends I went to school with, little five-and-six-year-olds — none of them quite

understood, I think, how their parents grew up. Our own parents, of course, had just come out of a time with its own difficulties. I was born during Prohibition – and yes, I was; a lady doesn't tell her age, but I wouldn't lie about it! – but the crash came when I was still small. Only just old enough to understand – just old enough that I think it was the first formative experience for my generation. The knowledge that we were losing things. Parents sitting around the table crying. Quiet discussions about money.

Then losses come in concrete forms, forms that even young children can grasp. Favorite foods disappeared from the table. Parents got more irritable – and for some, began to drink freely. No more spare money for penny candy, fewer presents on Christmas morning; mothers telling us we had to be careful, to make our clothes last, because there wouldn't be any new ones. That's frightening at any age, and for a long while it felt like we were sickening, weakening. The whole world had become ill, and we were catching the illness ourselves.

It did get better. I think I told a story noting as much a few weeks ago – there was Minnie with her distillery, and Mrs. P at the dollar store sneaking all kinds of extra stock to the children to keep our spirits up, and relief money raised by the ladies at the church. After a little time, the government brought more jobs, and our town, at least, managed to float by sticking together. It was still a tired, strange time to be growing up – as though everything was ending.

That time itself ended, but not how any of us had hoped. Admittedly, Dawn Arbor was a bit of a hawk town from the start. If I'm not wrong, it was all the boys I'd gone to

school with — young men by that point, like Fred and my brothers. The jobs had kept the older men going, but there still weren't quite enough to accommodate the youngest generation coming of age. So we had a town full of boys ready to bursting to go rip-roaring off to Europe and Hawaii and Japan to finally prove that they had some use to them, that they were as good as their fathers. I never understood any of it. What a ridiculous thing to prove.

The war didn't feel ridiculous, of course. It was a very serious thing, just as much as the banks had been. To those of us who had been born in the time of bootlegger gangs and grown up during the bank crashes, it seemed we were now coming of age at the end of the world. How could it not? Even staying at home, it was... they were long years, even once I found an occupation I love so much. After a few months, Jenny followed Fred overseas, as a nurse for the air force. They both came back, both with so many stories — but here in town, for everyone who had never left, they'd been years of anticipation.

That's the grief, isn't it? Anticipation. And when it finally ended, after all of the celebrations of victory, we had to remember everything we'd lost. The day came when Pop and I had — had to go and clean up James' room, put his things away, rather than let them sit and collect dust. Had to move the extra chair away from the table. But for all that, we healed. There were so many weddings the next few years! Fred and Jenny were even the first of them. We lost so much and struggled so terribly, but in the end, we were still here. Diminished, but standing. It felt like we were always left behind, but still we moved forward. After such a long, long illness, we could heal.

My friend, from where I'm sitting in front

of this microphone, I can't offer much except my sympathy and my heartfelt love. And of course, my voice, and my stories. I hope that those might be a comfort for you, in this time when comfort is so badly needed. I hope that you're not alone, and I hope you know that as long as this show is on the air, you can't be alone. In spirit if not in body, I'm with you. And as dark as today seems, it can't stay dark forever.

Unfortunately, this show can't last forever, either. And once again, it looks as though it's time for us to part. But don't worry. It won't be long before we're together again.

ANNOUNCER:

Nothing lasts forever – but as long as forever lasts, remember that Martlet Radio will be on the air, and you can always tune into another episode of the Martlet Radio Hour with Sybil McIntyre! Don't forget to tune in tomorrow night to Martlet Radio, and don't forget that when you need something extra clean, then you want SPARKLE's new EVERCLEEN!

THEME CLOSES THE EPISODE.

CREDITS.