

The background of the cover is a photograph of a wetland. In the foreground, there is a dense clump of tall, green grasses. Beyond them, the water is shallow and reflects the sky and surrounding vegetation. Several tall, thin reeds or grass stalks rise from the water. The overall scene is a natural, serene landscape.

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DRIVING NORTH

MATTHEW LANSBURGH

Three years ago, when his mother announced that she was flying to Moscow to adopt a seven-year-old girl, Stewart did his best not to react. His mother had always been the kind of person who made threats, who cajoled and coerced, until she got her way. For years, she'd been threatening to adopt one of the children she sponsored in Mexico and Guatemala and Romania, to bring a child home to live with her in Ventana Beach, so she would have someone in her life who loved her, who appreciated her.

According to his mother, Stewart was an ungrateful son. He was ungrateful and unloving and his decision to move to the East Coast for college and grad school and then to settle there permanently had been a slap in the face.

And what had Heike done to deserve such an ornery child? Why should she grow old alone in California and die, leaving her savings to him, when she could adopt one of the cute little girls whose photos she'd seen in the magazines and newsletters and Christmas cards she received from abroad? After everything she had endured in this country wasn't she entitled to a little happiness?

"Be my guest," Stewart said.

He didn't use those exact words of course. He told his mother he loved her and was sorry she felt lonely. He expressed concern for her well-being, asking whether she was sure she could, at the age of fifty-eight, really take care of a child, a disabled girl named Galina whose left arm was essentially missing—whether she was willing to make the sacrifices this decision would require, because he knew that despite the fact that Heike insisted her

life was miserable, she did like her trips to Germany and Acapulco and the cruises she went on with her new husband, Al.

“What sacrifices?” Heike replied. “It will be fun. This little girl is an angel. They sent me a video from the orphanage showing her singing and dancing. She enchanted everyone in the room.”

When Stewart asked her what Al thought of the plan, she had an answer for that too. “Don’t always worry so much what others think. I am your mother. Think about my happiness for a change.”

And so Heike went to the bank and withdrew five thousand dollars in twenty-dollar bills and got on a plane from Los Angeles to London and then on to Russia and adopted herself a seven-year-old girl. Had the child turned out to be happy and grateful, had she been the least bit appreciative and loving, everything would have been marvelous, but Galina wasn’t what Heike had in mind.

She didn’t like the little dolls Heike bought for her, the dolls that came from Leipzig and wore dirndls and *walkjankers* and whose eyes opened and closed. She didn’t like Heike’s good German cooking. She wanted Pop-Tarts for breakfast. She preferred Chuck E. Cheese pizza with pineapple to rouladen and dumplings and sauerkraut with gravy made from scratch. She wasn’t grateful at all, and Heike was miserable, even more miserable than before, and now she was saying that the whole adoption had been a mistake.

Stewart kept his mouth shut—on the phone when she told him how Galina had gotten suspended from school for calling one of the boys in her class a “beaner,” and in person when his mother picked him up from the airport for his Christmas vacation. Because she still called his visits to her house a vacation.

In the car, on the way from LAX to Ventana Beach, Heike gave him an earful about Al’s incontinence, about the fact that, just four nights ago, they had to stop when they were driving home from the movies so he could use the bathroom at Wendy’s, about how she had to use the sink in the men’s bathroom to wash out his underwear, and about Zhana Smolenski, the Russian woman whom Heike had initially referred to as a godsend—because the Smolenskis had two children whom Galina adored and because they invited Galina to spend the night sometimes so that Heike and Al could have a few moments of peace and quiet.

Apparently, things with the Smolenskis had begun to unravel recently.

Heike and Al had gone to Aruba to use a timeshare that was about to expire, and Galina had stayed with the Smolenskis, and when Heike drove over to pick the girl up, Galina refused to get in the car. She cried and said she'd rather die than go back to that stinky place. Heike had brought Galina a little wind-up dog that played music and turned somersaults, but Galina didn't even look at the dog. She swiped it away with her arm, her good arm, and said, "I hate you, Heike."

And had the Smolenskis tried to help? Of course not; Zhana Smolenski had probably poisoned the girl against her. "The woman is impossible," Heike said in the car, on the 101 North, the freeway that was taking Stewart farther and farther away from his life in Boston, from his home, from civilization. "Two weeks ago she calls me up and tells me I'm not a fit mother. Can you imagine? She has a Ph.D. in mathematics and takes a very haughty tone with me."

The whole way up, sitting next to his mother in her little Toyota, Stewart tried to look like he was paying attention, but all he could think was that he'd made a colossal mistake—that letting Heike talk him into staying until New Year's, letting her talk him into not renting a car, allowing himself to step into the web she'd woven for him was not just a mistake, but a miscalculation of potentially disastrous proportions for which he could blame no one but himself. Could he risk telling Heike how he really felt? Could he say Mrs. Smolenski was right, that Heike was in over her head, that Galina would be better off living in a different household?

Not unless he wanted his head chewed off at the neck.

He felt sorry for Galina; he did. He knew what she was going through, what it was like to be raised by someone like Heike. And to some extent he *had* tried to be there for her. He'd bought her presents along the way, had played Stratego with her, and Old Maid, but he was not going to give up his life for her.

He was not going to give up everything he'd worked for to come back and play peacemaker, to assume the role of big brother to Galina and consigliere to Heike, or whatever it was they expected of him. That was not going to happen. He'd barely made it out in one piece himself. The situation was quicksand.

A sound, not quite human, wakes him in the middle of the night. It takes him a moment to remember where he is; he wonders whether the neighbor's Doberman has caught a skunk or raccoon, but then he realizes the sound wasn't made by an animal. He gets out of bed, pulls on his pants, and hurries to the kitchen, where Heike is down on her knees, in her nightgown, holding a hammer. On the carpet a rat writhes in pain, its head and chest stuck to a glue pad. "Look at this poor thing," she says, handing him the hammer. "It's in agony. You have to smash into its skull." There are dark circles under her eyes, and her hair—gray at the roots, and orange elsewhere from attempts to restore its natural color—is frizzy and untamed. "Don't just stand there!" she shouts.

"You want me to kill it?"

"We have to—there's no alternative."

"I thought the exterminator said the rats were all gone."

"Ach, the exterminator is for the birds. All they do is send me huge bills. Look—the rats are still here!"

"Can't we just throw it away or something?"

"Throw it away? This thing is *alive*. Don't you see how it suffers?"

"Jesus," he says, taking the hammer. "Maybe we should try to drown it instead."

"Fine. You always choose the easy way out." She picks up the glue pad, rat and all. The rodent's hind legs strain to gain traction. Its tail is long and dark, like a snake crossing asphalt. As they head to the bathroom, they pass the Christmas tree in the living room, and Heike tells Stewart to unplug the lights. "I asked Al to do it before going to bed. Does he listen? Of course not. Everything falls on my shoulders."

He bends to unplug the lights; it's the same tree they've had since he was in high school—the tree he and his mother and his now-deceased stepfather, Gerry, purchased on sale at May Company and fastened with bungee cords to the roof of their car two decades ago. The gifts, nearly all for Galina, are wrapped in the paper Heike recycles year after year—green and white sheets with gold bells and mistletoe and candy canes stuck on with pieces of leftover Scotch Tape.

In the bathroom, Heike shoves the glue pad into the toilet, submerging

as much of the rat as she can. Stewart tries not to look, but he can see one of its legs moving, its tail flapping. The bathroom has a ripe smell, the smell of accidents that have accumulated over time, never properly cleaned, always covered with air freshener. Something pungent and citrus.

The tail stops thrashing, and Al appears in the doorway. “What’s going on?” he asks, groggy. He’s tall and thin, his pajamas two sizes too large.

“Nothing,” Heike says. “Just go back to bed.”

“You need help?” he asks, fingering his hearing aid.

“No, I don’t need help. Go to sleep before Galina wakes up and starts getting rambunctious.” Heike tosses the rat—mouth open, teeth protruding obscenely—into the wastepaper basket.

This is the image that stays with Stewart when he goes back to bed. It’s 4:00 AM, 7:00 in Boston, the time he normally goes to the gym. He lies awake, looking at the popcorn ceiling, illuminated by the garish Santa Claus the neighbors display in their yard every year. He examines the cobweb in the corner of the room, scrutinizing the desiccated insects suspended above him, looking for movement. The pillow beneath his head is lumpy and stained. He wonders if it’s the same pillow Gerry used in his final months in this house, when he went through round after round of chemotherapy, Heike nursing him day and night, putting compresses on his forehead to bring down the fevers, while Stewart stayed holed up in the library, three thousand miles away, writing a dissertation on T. S. Eliot.

He wonders how long it will be before Al ends up bedridden. The first few years Al and Heike were together, he made an effort to hold his own, but the last few times Stewart has visited, Al has seemed more and more out of it. It’s gotten to the point where he can’t stand up to Heike at all, can’t defend himself from her badgering and criticism and bulldozing. His mother preys on this kind of weakness. Galina herself, who initially had treated Al like a father figure, calling him Papa and sitting on his lap at night when they watched TV, has started acting like he doesn’t even exist.

Stewart wakes to the sound of rain; even though it’s already 9:30, the sky is lead gray. Heike’s collection of dolls sits on the dresser, staring at him. Their eyes, all blue, are always open these days. One of the dolls, a girl with

braided blond hair, is missing her eyelashes—one of Galina’s earliest acts of defiance when Heike refused to buy her a toy gun she’d wanted at K-Mart. Stewart dresses and goes to the living room, where Galina is on the carpet—in her favorite orange sweatshirt, the left sleeve flapping at her side—watching cartoons.

“Heike!” she calls out. “Stewart’s awake.” Without pausing, she asks who he thinks is stronger: Superman or Wolverine.

“Wow, that’s a tough one, Galina. I don’t know.”

“Wolverine, of course. Superman doesn’t even exist.”

“And Wolverine does?”

“You finally got up,” Heike says, walking into the living room with a dishrag in her hands. “I was worried something had happened.” She glares at Galina. “Your brother is here. Turn that thing off so we can spend some time together as a family.”

“But I’m in the middle of a show!” Galina hollers, grabbing her knees with her good arm and rolling back and forth. Stewart goes into the kitchen, where Heike is mixing batter in a large bowl, and sees several of the glue traps piled up in a plastic bag on the counter. “You’re throwing those away?”

“I have to. I can’t go through last night again. So what if these rats eat through the carpet.”

“Where’s Al?”

“He went to the store. Someone ate all my almond slivers. Must have been Galina. She better watch it or she’ll end up fat.”

Stewart pours some cereal and eats at the counter while Heike enumerates the people she still has to bake stollen for—Bernie Kramer, the man she plays tennis with on Wednesday mornings; Galina’s teacher, Mrs. Castañeda; Lois, a neighbor who sometimes plays violin with Heike and who takes care of the dog when Heike and Al go to Las Vegas; the Smolenskis.

“The Smolenskis?” Stewart says. “I thought you hate them.”

“Hate them? I don’t hate them; I need to keep them on my good side.” Stewart watches his mother knead the dough with her hands. She’s wearing a fitted red jacket, something short and shiny that looks like imitation leather, like something Michael Jackson might wear. He considers asking where she got it, but what’s on his mind now isn’t his mother’s wardrobe, or the Smolenskis, or the number of stollen that still need to be made. What’s

on his mind is the fact that today is December 22 and he's scheduled to stay in California until January 2 and that once he gets home he will have just eighteen days until Spring semester starts: eighteen days to prepare for the three courses he'll be teaching and to finish an article he was supposed to have completed two weeks ago. Eighteen days to digest a substantial body of secondary literature on the relationship between violence and the grotesque in the work of Flannery O'Connor and to come up with a compelling argument, a *groundbreaking* thesis, that will shed new light on the theme of disfigurement in one of his favorite writers' work. Because if he does not finish this article before classes start and receive an acceptance from a decent journal in the next few months, he might as well kiss his shot at getting tenure goodbye.

Because the chair of his department told him, in no uncertain terms, that he must publish at least three more pieces in the next eighteen months if he wants any hope of getting enough votes. Stewart knows the deal: he's heard stories about promising academics, rising stars, who failed to get tenure and whose careers never recovered—who ended up adjuncting for three thousand dollars a class at third- or fourth-tier schools. At community colleges in Kansas.

He could have spent the entire day obsessing about the precariousness of his professional future, and of the unreasonable demands being made on his time by his department and his students and his mother, had Roxy not lumbered into the kitchen. He's still sitting at the counter nodding and smiling when his mother lets out a shriek. "Who let this dog in here? Out, out, out!"

Heike has dough on her hands, but that doesn't matter. She grabs Roxy by the collar and pulls her toward the front door. "Look at this carpet! Who did this? Do you see how muddy her paws are? Al, did you let Roxy in from the garden?" She opens the door, pushes Roxy outside, and slams the door.

"Mom," Stewart yells as Roxy lets out a yelp. "You just slammed the door on her tail!"

He rushes over, opens the door, and guides Roxy through the hallway and into the garage. She walks slowly, her legs stiff. He tries not to look too closely at her fur, which is thinning near her tail, exposing scaly flesh. He can't remember the last time he took Roxy for a walk. For the past several

years, whenever he's come home to visit, he's avoided her. Occasionally he'll pet her, but only if he's certain he'll be able to wash his hands right away.

In the garage, he takes a rag and wipes off her paws, one by one. She looks at him, her eyes milky with cataracts. Her tongue moves in and out of her mouth, slowly, as if she were trying to swallow something lodged in her throat. Her nails are long, the pads of her feet cracked. He holds his breath, moving as quickly as possible.

Hour after hour, it rains. Stewart had hoped to go running, but how is he going to run in this weather? How is he going to get out of the house when he doesn't even have a rental car? He could borrow his mother's car, but what if he has an accident? The last thing he wants is to be responsible for something happening to her car. What he wants to do is go into his room, the room Heike calls his room, despite the fact that he hasn't lived at home for nearly two decades, and get some work done, because it makes no sense for him to stand in his mother's kitchen listening to the endless bickering—over what should be eaten for lunch, and whether crumbs are falling on the sofa chair, and whether Galina will please come into the kitchen and decorate the Christmas cookies that Heike baked for her.

"Come in here please or you don't get any stollen. *Now.*"

"I don't want stollen. I hate stollen!"

"You hate stollen? Since when do you hate stollen? You told me you loved my stollen. Al, can you please discipline her?"

But Al's hearing aid is not turned on properly, and he's watching a show about the Amazonian rainforest, where a man is explaining that it rains more than 240 days a year, rains so much that moss can grow at the rate of up to three millimeters per month.

Stewart needs to take a deep breath, to remember that what goes on in this house is not his life, no matter what his mother says. He needs to not feel implicated when Galina does finally come into the kitchen and, instead of sprinkling the red sparkling sugar crystals on Heike's snowmen and reindeer, showers them onto the sticky surface of the two glue pads his mother left on the counter. He needs to not intervene when his mother yells at Galina and says if Galina doesn't shape up, Heike will send her back to Russia once and for all.

Just twenty-four hours ago, he was a well-adjusted, thirty-six-year-old adult, an assistant professor of English literature at an up-and-coming

women's college in Boston, a scholar of twentieth-century poetry and prose. And now what is he? A reclusive adolescent barricading himself in his room, giving himself pep talks, telling himself that his mother is crazy and he's already done everything he can to intervene, that soon enough he'll be back in his one-bedroom condo with his books and his notes and his porn.

Mechanical pencil in hand, Stewart tries to read an article arguing that the self-mutilation Hazel Motes inflicts on himself at the end of *Wise Blood* is not an effort to find redemption, but he can't concentrate. He can spend days, weeks, ruminating over the implications of O'Connor's decision to maim and blind and kill her characters, can debate the nuances of physical versus emotional impairment in her work, yet when it comes to the person who is now his sister, to the people who are his family, he does his best to eradicate them from his mind. Maybe he is a selfish person. Instead of sitting in his room feeling sorry for himself, he should be spending time with Galina. He should take her to the mall or the botanical garden. After the adoption, the first few times Stewart came home to visit, Galina greeted him enthusiastically, rushing to give him a hug, going on and on about her favorite TV shows and arcane facts she'd learned about the Soviet empire. Whenever they went to a restaurant, she insisted on sitting next to him. This time, however, she's been more distant. It's probably just as well, he decides.

The sound of Galina's TV amplifies. "*That's it,*" Heike screams. "I said no more TV. Go to sleep!"

"Just ten more minutes!" Galina hollers back.

He hears some kind of scuffle, then a banging sound as his mother cries out. Stewart gets up and opens his door. "What's going on? What happened?"

Heike is sitting on the floor of Galina's room, rubbing her arm. "I can't take it anymore! I'm too old for this. Look," she says, raising her elbow. "This child is a monster! I try to take the remote, but she yanks it away. I'm no match for her. Tomorrow you go to the Smolenskis. Do you hear me? I could have broken something! Do you want me to end up in the hospital? *Is that what you want?*"

Galina is sitting on her bed, staring at the TV. Heike bursts into tears and pushes past Stewart, slamming the bathroom door. Stewart tells her she's overreacting, but she doesn't respond. He walks back to Galina's room, where she's twisting a piece of green yarn around the tip of her left arm, which ends with a small appendage that looks like a partially formed finger. It's covered in scar tissue, as if it were disfigured in some kind of fire. Heike insists that Galina's arm was this way at birth, but Stewart wonders whether maybe something happened at the orphanage when she was an infant.

"Come on, Galina. I think you better turn that off now."

Galina continues to stare at the TV, refusing to look up. "You're not my boss." She lets go of the yarn and brushes her right hand against the back of her head, where her hair is so short it's bristly. This too was a source of conflict.

Stewart returns to his room. When he finally falls asleep, his dreams are fleeting. He wakes up feeling something crawl across his left arm. He rubs the skin, trying to kill whatever was there, then pulls up the sleeve of his sweatshirt to see whether anything bit him. It's still dark outside, but he can tell the rain has stopped. All he hears is the sound of a frog. He gets up, puts on his running pants, and opens the door, holding his breath.

Roxy lifts her head and looks up at him. In this position—reclined, head lifted—she looks like a sea lion, her body corpulent from years of too many leftovers: half-eaten bowls of cereal, sour cream sauces, week-old mashed potatoes and gravy left at the back of the fridge. For years, Roxy has eaten Heike's cooking gratefully. No wonder her fur stinks, Stewart thinks. He heads toward the garage to put on his running shoes, and Roxy gets up and lumbers over. Her tail wags stiffly. Her nose is dry, the whiskers around her snout gray. "Good dog," he says.

He finishes tying his shoes, then heads out the garage and up the street. He crosses the mesa behind his mother's house, hearing the crows call to one another in the eucalyptus trees at the far edge of the fields. He makes his way down the trail to the ocean and begins traversing the shoreline.

It's still early when he returns to the house, but everyone is up. Al is sitting in the armchair in the living room, wearing sunglasses, eating cottage cheese with apricots and drinking tomato juice. Galina is in her room watching the History Channel, and Heike is in the master bedroom, ominously quiet, packing a suitcase laid out on the bed.

"Good morning!" Stewart calls out, like a department store greeter.

"Yes, good morning," Heike says morosely; she doesn't turn to face him, but he can tell she's been crying.

"What's going on?"

"Our little girl is moving out."

Stewart crosses to the other side of Heike's bed and sees that her eyes are puffy. In the sunlight, her skin looks grotesque—he can see faint scars under her ears, areas where the skin is taut in some places, bunched up in others. The coloring is uneven. Bit by bit, he coaxes the story out of her: this morning, before Heike had even woken up, Galina called the Smolenskis and told them Heike finally agreed to let her move out. Apparently, when Heike blurted out that Galina should go to the Smolenskis, Galina took the statement at face value. The Smolenskis agreed to come over and pick her up the next day at 2:00.

"She's going to move out? What do you mean? For good?"

"You heard me, the girl hates it here. She despises me. You've seen how she behaves."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean she should just move out. They said they want to adopt her?"

"Ach, I don't know. Don't get so technical with me. She said they invite her over there for the week. It's the same thing. She might as well be there with them. It's what she wants."

"Did you talk to them?"

"Why are you asking me all these questions? No, I didn't talk to them. *You* call them if you care so much. You come here for a few days and think everything is so easy!"

Stewart has to circle the lot three times before he sees a white minivan backing out of its space. The driver is halfway out of the spot when he stops and gets out to open the trunk. "Why don't you get the tickets while I deal with this joker," Stewart tells Galina. She's peppering him with an endless stream of questions when she pauses for a moment, takes the money, then dashes across the street to stand in line. A movie about machines that sedate humans to extract their energy isn't something he'd normally see, but this

outing isn't about him. "Talk to her, Stewart," Heike had implored. "She'll listen to you."

The fact is he has no idea what he's supposed to do. On the one hand, his mother said she's sick of Galina, wants to be rid of her once and for all. On the other hand, Heike pleaded with him, just before he borrowed Al's car to take Galina to the mall, to convince Galina to change her mind. After the movie, they go to Baskin Robbins, followed by the bookstore. "Stewart," Galina says when they're looking at the books on military history, "Do you think Hitler was really as bad as everyone says?"

Stewart studies her face.

"I'm serious. Do you realize he was one of the most effective leaders in history?"

"He also killed millions of people."

"True, but he did it because he was trying to make his country stronger and more powerful."

Stewart wonders whether she understands what she's saying. "Galina, do you know how many Russians Hitler killed? Do you realize that he sent disabled people to gas chambers?"

"So?"

"So—doesn't that bother you? Wouldn't it bother you if someone said anyone who walks with a limp or has a mole on their left cheek should be killed?"

"No. If I was living then, I would think he should kill me too. My arm is totally deformed."

He crouches down and puts his hand on her shoulder. "*Time out.* I know that life has sucked for you during the past few years, but you are way too smart to think that." Stewart tells her that when he was her age, he hated his life, that he couldn't wait to move away, but as soon as he got to college, everything changed. He takes out a napkin from his pocket and wipes the smudge of chocolate off her chin.

"It's okay, Stewart. You don't have to try to make me feel better. It's really not that big a deal."

"Yes, it is a big deal," he says, but Galina isn't listening to him anymore. She's turned her attention to the Christmas card boxes stacked atop one another on the nearest display table. She's been shifting one of the boxes at the base of the arrangement with her hand, and Stewart hasn't wanted

to say anything, but he sees now that she's leaning against the boxes. As he registers this, as he's about to take control of the situation, the boxes tumble to the ground, twenty or thirty of them.

"Galina!"

She turns and dashes out of the store at full speed. Stewart starts to pick up a few of the boxes, then stops and runs after her. He leaves the store, sees her halfway across the parking lot, and sprints as fast as he can, calling her name. It's dark outside and though the parking lot is well lit, he's worried a driver might not see her weaving between the parked cars and the people looking for parking places. She's surprisingly fast, but eventually she stops, in front of Costco, and turns around.

"I'm sorry, Stewart. I know I'm a bitch." They're both breathing hard.

"You're not a bitch, Galina. You're dealing with a lot of shit. I get it."

They sit down on the edge of one of the planters and Galina tells him she doesn't think she can make it until college living with Heike. She doesn't think she can make it just a few more years or even months. "I know she wants you to convince me to not go to the Smolenskis, but why does she even care? She says like every day how adopting me was a mistake and she wishes she could just send me back to Russia."

Galina lays out her case, explains why he should drop her off at the Smolenskis on the way home. She promises that once Heike stops freak-ing out, she'll move back in and do her best to be nice. She says that right now she really just wants to see the Smolenskis' daughter, Natalia. She tells Stewart how nice Mrs. Smolenski is and how fun it is at their house, and twenty minutes later Stewart is giving her a hug in front of a large home decorated with Christmas lights that blink on and off, and he's watching his sister ring the doorbell of the kind of place he wishes he'd grown up in. He sees the front door open and a girl who is about Galina's age jump up and down and scream with excitement.

Stewart drives back to his mother's place, slowly, not sure how he's going to explain himself. When he arrives, the house is dark, and he parks Al's car on the street. He turns off the engine and sits quietly, bracing himself for what's next.

He walks along the flagstones to the front door and turns the knob. Inside, the house is almost completely dark. "Hello?" he calls out. He hears nothing except the sound of the TV. Al is sitting in the living room in his robe, drinking a glass of wine and watching a figure skating competition. Bathed in the glow of the TV, he looks like a phantom.

"Where's Heike?" Stewart asks.

"She's not here now," he says, holding out an envelope. "She left you a note."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how she gets. These things make her upset."

Stewart takes the envelope and opens the letter.

To my dear son:

I know it will surprise you to see that I am no longer at home when you return from your movie. I thank you for being so kind to spend the evening with your sister on your own, when I know your time is so precious. Hopefully you can make up for it by returning to your beloved Boston a few days earlier than planned. I know how important your work is for you, and for this I am thankful that you have found a good life for yourself.

The thought for me of spending another Christmas without Gerry, who I have realized is the only person who will ever actually love me, is too much to bear, especially when I am aware that it is such an imposition for you to fly here to be together with us. As you know, I had hoped that we would all have a nice time, but I am in no condition after Galina's announcement this morning to make Christmas Carols together and create a festive mood in the house.

I have decided to drive up north for a few days to visit Linda, the friend I told you about who lives with her sister Emily and their elderly mother. At least they will be kind to me. Their house is quite simple, but they have put up a tree and they are cooking a turkey which they say will be plenty for all of us to eat together on Christmas Eve. Please

tell Galina that if she prefers to go to the Smolenskis I will not stand in her way. From the beginning I have known she does not love me. Perhaps I was foolish to believe that I could give her the life she deserves. I am an old woman now, and it is true she should have siblings her age. Please have her pack up her school work as well, since she has homework that is due when she goes back to class on the third. Maybe Mrs. Smolenski will be able to help her with these fractions they teach. For me, it has been many years since I did math problems like these.

In the fridge you will find plenty of *jagdwurst*, which needs to be eaten, though I know how picky you are. There is also red cabbage and pears from the farmer's market. Eat them if you like, or not, as you wish. I put no pressure on you.

For Christmas, I was going to give you \$100 so you can buy yourself something you like, since I never seem to choose correctly. Here is a check, which you can use as you wish. Galina, as you know, has already opened most of her gifts. The package in green under the tree is the airplane she so desperately wanted. Tell her she can take it along and open it with her new family. The puzzle from K-Mart I will return.

Love from your,
Mom

"Is this a joke?" Stewart asks Al, who is futzing with the remote, trying to turn down the volume.

"She'll be okay. I think she just needs a break." He looks at Stewart and gives him a shrug.

"Are you kidding? She just decided to pack up and leave?"

"You know your mother. This is who she is. When you get to my age, life stops surprising you, Stewart. I lived with Deb for thirty-seven years, then one day a truck slams into her car. You think I'm going to get upset when Heike throws a temper tantrum?"

Stewart goes to Al's study, picks up the phone, and dials his mother's number. Her cell rings, then goes to voicemail. On his third try, she finally picks up.

"Mom! Are you all right?"

"Oh, Stewart, it's you. Yes, I'm fine."

"Where are you?"

"At Denny's. They have the most delicious Spanish omelets for just three ninety-nine."

"I got your note. You sounded really upset."

"Upset? Why would I be upset? My little girl prefers the Smolenskis to me. My own flesh and blood despises me. It's okay. At least I know where I stand."

"Mom, stop it. You know I love you."

"You love me? Really? You come home once a year if I'm lucky. You send me a card for my birthday and Mother's Day. You call a few times a month out of obligation. Is that love? When Gerry was dying of cancer, you were too busy to come home and spend time with us."

"Jesus Christ. Do you know how tired I am of all of your guilt trips?"

"Guilt trips! I do no such thing. Look, I'm not going to fight with you, Stewart. Just go back to Boston. I know you have all these deadlines to meet. Have a nice Christmas."

Stewart hears her hang up. Part of him is relieved. He sits in Al's chair, looking at the photos on the wall of Al's first wife, and his children, standing together smiling; of Al when he was younger, building a sandcastle with one of his daughters; of Al and Heike in Hawaii, on their honeymoon. In the photos, Al looks happy.

In some ways, this outcome is better than anything he could have hoped for. Now he can fly home without feeling guilty. So what if there's a change fee. He'll be back in his own apartment. He'll be able to work on his article without being distracted. His stomach feels light, the same feeling of adrenaline coursing through his system that he sometimes experiences before a date or a presentation. He doesn't want to be rash: he'll take a few minutes to weigh the pros and cons of each option. Before he calls Continental, he'll take a shower.

He goes to the bathroom and locks the door. He turns on the faucet and lets cold water run over his hands. He washes his face and looks at himself

in the mirror—the light isn't flattering; it highlights the imperfections in his complexion, makes his teeth look discolored. He takes off his clothes and gets in the shower. He leaves the water on for a long time, thinking about the French toast his mother made for him the day before yesterday, which he left untouched, about the fight they had at the airport when she accused him of pulling away from her too quickly after she gave him a hug. He wonders what a good son would do in the current situation, what a good brother would do. Would he drive north in search of his mother? Would he move home to help raise Galina?

When Stewart finally leaves the bathroom, Al has gone to bed. He walks to the kitchen, takes a glass from the cupboard, and fills it with water. As he takes a drink, Roxy comes over to him, one step at a time. He reaches down to pet her and immediately she lies down and rolls on her back, spreading her legs. Her skin is pink and gray; there's something bloated and unhealthy about its appearance. Her nipples are shriveled, barely visible. He sees a mass, something tumor-like, at the base of her ribcage. He touches her stomach, feels the warmth of her skin. He lies next to her on the carpet, in the darkness, resting his head on her body.

His mother is gone; he's free to leave. He says this to himself, again, as if testing each statement's veracity, probing its soundness. He should be happy, but, for some reason, it isn't happiness he feels.

Maybe she'll change her mind, he thinks. She's always been mercurial; maybe tomorrow she'll show up at the front door and they can open presents together, as they have every year for as long as he can remember. His mother will put on her dirndl and her lipstick. She'll comb her hair and put it up in a bun, and she will take the stollen out of the fridge and cut it into pieces and sprinkle powdered sugar on top. She'll arrange the pieces on her festive red and white platter and hand everyone a napkin, the good napkins she only takes out during the holidays.

The carpet in the kitchen is soft, and above him a stream of warm air wafts down from the vent. He wonders whether he might hear the rats gnawing inside the walls, and he listens, but the only thing he hears is the sound of the clock's second hand and of the heater. He likes it when the heater comes on. When he was a child, the heater's sound always made him feel safe.

He remembers how he and his mother used to sit in front of the heater

together, after his parents' divorce, when they still lived in Colorado and it was cold. Often she told him stories about what it was like growing up in Germany during the war—how she spent afternoons in the woods collecting strawberries and blackberries and boysenberries for jam. She told him so many stories, some of which he still remembers.