



My passion for chocolate cake has deep roots!

Matthew Lansburgh's collection of linked stories, *Outside Is the Ocean*, won the 2017 Iowa Short Fiction Award and will be published by the University of Iowa Press this fall. His fiction has appeared in *Ecotone*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Columbia*, the *Florida Review*, *Guernica*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Joyland*, and elsewhere. He was the winner of *Columbia Journal's* fiction contest in 2014 and the *Florida Review's* fiction contest in 2015, and his work has been nominated for four Pushcart Prizes. In selecting *Outside Is the Ocean* as the winner of the Iowa Short Fiction Award, Andre Dubus III described his book as “mesmerizing.”

ENORMOUS IN THE MOONLIGHT

Matthew Lansburgh

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If you are lucky in this life,
you will get to raise the spoon
of pristine, frosty ice cream
to the trusting creature mouth
of your old enemy

because the taste buds at least are not broken
because there is a bond between you
and sweet is sweet in any language.

—Tony Hoagland

Last night, after scouring the vegetable drawers in the fridge, Stewart set his alarm for 7:30 a.m. He set the back-up travel alarm for 7:35, then brushed his teeth and checked both alarms again. Not that either alarm was actually necessary—he spent most of the night awake, dozing off briefly just after 1:15, then waking up for good at 2:54. He thought about taking a sleeping pill but worried that, even with the alarms, he might not get up in time. For the last twenty-four hours, his stomach has been going haywire, pitching and churning and making animal sounds.

Finally, at 6:45, he gets out of bed and makes a bowl of plain oatmeal. Maybe that will calm him down, he thinks, but when the phone rings at 7:50, he's only managed to eat a few bites. "Hello?" he answers. For some reason, there's a hopeful sound in his voice, though there's no reason to think it's Luis. Luis's plane won't arrive for another three hours.

“Hey, Buddy. Flight delay. American strikes again.” The sound of Luis’s voice still makes Stewart’s adrenalin course. Luis says something else, but he’s calling on his cell, and the connection is bad and the line goes dead.

Stewart finds the new arrival time online, takes a shower, and clips each of his nails, meticulously. He shaves the stray hairs that have started to sprout from his shoulders and then, before he puts on his underwear, he allows himself to look in the mirror, to examine the paunch that with each passing year grows more generous. At least he hasn’t lost too much of his hair. He wonders how he will fill the day. He’s already scrubbed the bathroom, done the laundry, swept the floors. If he were a normal person, he wouldn’t be giving this visit a second thought. Twelve years ago, Luis moved to Austin, after dumping him. He’s made it clear on numerous occasions that he has no interest in getting back together. He lives with a guy named Cramer now, someone who goes to the gym six times a week and likes karaoke. Someone who ran the Chicago Marathon.

Each December, Stewart receives a card with a photo of their Labradoodle, Bentley. Last year Bentley was wearing a Santa Claus hat. The holiday letter shared lots of good news—Luis’s tenure at the University of Texas; the publication of his first book; Cramer’s promotion at a company that makes online games, where he undoubtedly gets stock options and bonuses and generous raises. The letter included a few blurry photos of Luis and Cramer at Iguazu Falls and Patagonia, where they’d gone on vacation. Stewart opened the card, read the letter, then went straight to his office and turned on the shredder.

Seven years ago, when Luis got back in touch with Stewart, he said he wanted to be friends. It had been thirty-four months since they’d seen each other, and Luis chastised Stewart for being petulant, for punishing him. Stewart tried to be mature. Of course they could be friends, he said, as nonchalantly as possible. Just one thing—could Luis please not call him Buddy anymore? It was the nickname they’d used for each other and, Stewart said, the memories were too painful. Afterward, he kicked himself for making such a big deal about the nickname thing. The fact is, however, that Luis agreed to Stewart’s

request. “No worries,” he said. Luis doesn’t call that often—once or twice a year, usually on Stewart’s birthday, though this year he forgot that too—but sometimes when they’re talking, Luis slips and uses the term of endearment. These days, the nickname doesn’t make Stewart angry, just sad.

For a long time, Stewart blamed the breakup on his mother. After all, it was Heike’s conversation with Luis on the beach that precipitated his decision to move out.

“You treat her like shit,” Luis said in the car after they left Heike’s house in Ventana Beach. “She’s really not that bad, Buddy.” It was the Friday before Memorial Day, and they were driving up to San Francisco, but they still hadn’t made it to San José. Traffic was backed up. They’d been planning to go to dinner with a friend of theirs who’d recently bought a postcard-perfect Victorian across from Golden Gate Park, and they were running late. They’d only stayed at Heike’s place three nights, the first nights of the two-week trip they’d been looking forward to all year, but as far as Stewart was concerned, the vacation had been ruined.

Maybe Luis was right. Maybe Stewart was a misanthrope. Maybe he needed to lighten up.

The strange thing, the unexpected thing, was that Luis and Heike hit it off. After worrying for months that his mother would alienate Luis, Luis ended up liking her. He found her stories about the men she was dating hilarious. He thought her *dirndl* was a hoot. When she asked if he wanted to see Stewart’s baby photos, he seemed genuinely interested. Stewart still remembers sitting on the couch, cringing, listening to his mother’s stories about the apartment in Denver they moved into after his parents’ divorce and how the Indian family next door kept making huge pots of vegetable curry and inviting them over for supper, how Heike taught their daughter to yodel. He remembers Heike cooking *rouladen* and dumplings and telling Luis about a man she met at the tennis courts who invited her back to his place for a Jacuzzi and what she referred to as a passionate lovemaking session.

Since they’d moved in together, three years earlier, Heike had harangued

Stewart to introduce her to Luis. “Why not invite me out to Boston for Thanksgiving this year? I’m your family.”

Or: “Bring him home for Christmas; we can all celebrate together. You’ll have plenty of room. You can even have my bed.”

Then: “Are you embarrassed by me? Is that it? Why keep me from meeting him?”

Finally Stewart relented. Luis had always wanted to drive up Highway 1, and they decided to fly to L.A. and make their way up the coast—stopping at Ventana Beach, then San Francisco, then Ukiah, where a friend of Luis’s from college had bought thirty acres and built a two-room house without running water.

“Promise me you’ll be on good behavior,” Stewart implored his mother on the phone.

“Good behavior? What means good behavior? You’re the one who gives me a hard time.”

Maybe he shouldn’t have threatened to cancel the visit. Maybe he shouldn’t have made her swear she wouldn’t throw any tantrums, that she’d allow Stewart and Luis to spend some time by themselves, that she wouldn’t be needy and pushy and clingy. “You made your mom promise she wouldn’t walk around the house in her bikini? You made her promise she wouldn’t cry? Who does that?” Luis asked Stewart after they stopped at a gas station twenty miles north of her house. “You act like she’s some kind of psycho.”

In retrospect, what happened wasn’t actually that big a surprise. Stewart had been planning to take Luis to the tide pools, and Heike asked if she could join them, and Stewart said no, she could not join them, because this was meant to be their vacation, an opportunity in their otherwise over-scheduled lives for them to spend some time together alone and could Heike please respect the fact that Stewart was an adult now and entitled to some privacy with his boyfriend? Despite Heike’s promises that she would control herself, she started to cry and accuse Stewart of the usual litany of things, and then Luis intervened and said Heike was more than welcome to accompany them on their walk, in fact insisted on it, and Stewart, being perhaps a bit childish, told them they could go to the tide pools by themselves,

because he was going to stay home and work on an article, and so Heike and Luis went off and didn't come back for three hours. What happened was Stewart's boyfriend and his mother hit it off fabulously, and Heike spilled her guts and told Luis how badly Stewart treated her, and how she wished she had a son like Luis, and Luis gave her a hug and calmed her down and ended up telling Stewart he needed to go back to therapy and work on his issues. What happened, after they left Ventana Beach, was Stewart and Luis had a huge fight, and Stewart flew back to Boston while Luis went up to Ukiah on his own, and when Luis returned to Boston, he packed up his things and said he thought they needed some time apart.

When Stewart finally gets in the car and drives to Logan, it looks like it might rain, maybe even snow. In ten days it will be Thanksgiving, then Christmas and New Year's. He finds it all dreadful. The holiday music, the candy canes in grocery store aisles, the fabricated excitement. For a while, after Luis moved back to Texas, people in Stewart's department took pity on him and invited him over to their homes for turkey and cranberry bread and stuffing and eggnog. It wasn't much, but it was something. Then the invitations tapered off until, eventually, they stopped altogether. Not that it really matters. In the end, when all is said and done, doesn't everyone end up alone?

Stewart wonders whether Luis still has his youthful demeanor. Well into his thirties, he could have passed for a senior in college. At least Stewart isn't still living in the same apartment he and Luis shared. At least Stewart scraped enough money together to buy his own condo. And even if his career never took off the way he once hoped, at least he was promoted to full professor last fall.

When he gets to the terminal, Stewart finds the baggage claim and waits. He watches two bags on the carousel circle endlessly: a large black suitcase wrapped in tape and a smaller red bag covered with stickers of parrots. He wonders if the bags belong to the same passenger. Maybe the person never made it off the plane, he thinks. Perhaps the person got up in the middle of the flight to use the lavatory, and as he or she was sitting on the toilet, his or her heart decided to stop

beating. Stewart imagines the body of a middle-aged man slumped over, pants down around his ankles. He imagines the stewardesses, in their dry-cleaned outfits, knocking on the flimsy door.

Sometimes, when Stewart is walking down the street, he senses that something terrible is about to happen. He imagines a truck swerving onto the sidewalk and plowing into him. Years ago, when he was still in therapy, his therapist asked how he felt when thoughts like this went through his head. She encouraged him to breathe deeply and visualize something peaceful and calm. Breathing deeply never helped. The thoughts didn't go away.

Watching the baggage carousel, Stewart breaks into a sweat. He takes off his jacket, then, moments later, considers getting up and going home. Luis might be irritated but he'd survive; he'd find a hotel—it wouldn't be that big a deal. Stewart weighs his options: wait until Luis arrives and pretend to be happy, make it seem like he's leading a balanced life full of friends and engaging activities and perpetual good cheer; or run out of the terminal like a maniac, screaming for help.

He tries to think clearly but can't. He imagines getting into his car and turning on the engine, sitting behind the steering wheel with his seat belt securely fastened around him as the car explodes. He imagines perplexed onlookers gathering around the flames. Before he can make a decision, he sees a stream of people coming down the escalator toward him—an African family in bright, patterned clothes; a large woman with ribbons in her hair, carrying a tennis racquet and a bouquet of flowers; a group of bearded backpackers who look like they've just returned from the Himalayas. Then he sees a man with a head of thick hair—dark hair, full lips.

Luis is wearing the same jacket he had when he lived in Boston, his hunter green North Face parka. He smiles, gives Stewart a hug, tells him about his flight, about how much he hates traveling these days, how little legroom he had, how long he had to wait at the airport before the plane finally took off.

"What happened to Mr. Sunny Disposition?" Stewart asks.

"Mr. Sunny Disposition didn't want to come to this conference. Mr. Sunny Disposition wanted to stay home and go for a bike ride."

They walk to the car, Luis chatting about the classes he's teaching, about the fact that the paper he's giving at tomorrow's conference is a disaster, that the conclusion isn't even finished. Stewart wonders whether Luis will reach out and take his hand or his arm or brush some part of him.

Eight years ago, Stewart's father died. He had a heart attack while he was watching TV in his two-bedroom bungalow twenty miles south of Santa Fe. Four years later, Heike suffered an aneurysm. His parents are dead now. Stewart was estranged from them both, though he did make the trip out to California for Heike's funeral. His therapist told him to go, that it would give him the closure he needed. How many hours had they spent talking about his parents over the years? Hundreds? Thousands? If only Stewart had saved that money and invested in Amazon or Google or Netflix.

Heike's funeral was small—mostly people Stewart had never met: men she'd played tennis with at the public courts; a neighbor with a Pomeranian that wouldn't stop barking; her then-current renter, a woman named Madeleine, a retired school teacher from Iowa who'd always dreamed of living in California and who now occupied the condo Heike had owned for almost half a century.

Frankly, Stewart was surprised anyone had shown up, given how much his mother had deteriorated. Before she died, an administrator from the nursing home had called to say she didn't think Heike had long. Stewart thought about flying out to see her but decided it would be too painful. So many issues remained unresolved in their relationship. So many accusations and misunderstandings, so much ill will. He wasn't even sure Heike would have recognized him, the administrator having told him that Heike had become convinced Stewart had committed suicide. "These things happen," the woman said. "Sometimes patients who don't see their children for a long time think they've simply died. It's a way of coping."

The funeral took place in a cemetery overlooking the ocean. It was a beautiful day, and afterward Stewart went for a walk on the beach. The next afternoon, he stopped by his mother's old condo, the place

he and his mother had lived together for five years after his parents' divorce, until Heike finally met Gerry, an accountant with vitiligo who ended up dying of lymphoma less than a decade later. Stewart knew that Madeleine had been close to Heike, that she'd visited his mother almost daily, and he wanted to thank her in person.

Madeleine invited him in for tea, told him to make himself comfortable on the couch while she got out some mint cookies she recently made. Stewart was surprised at how little the place had changed. The kitchen still had the same wallpaper—decorated with tiny roses and wheelbarrows—that he helped his mother put up when they lived there together so long ago. From the couch, he told Madeleine that, when he was a young boy, he and his mother would sometimes eat breakfast on the balcony overlooking the ocean.

"It's a wonderful view," she said, returning to the living room. "I can sit for hours looking out across the water. There's something so peaceful about it. Is it strange being back after so many years?"

"Strange?"

"I mean strange to be here now that your mother's passed away."

He reached for one of the cookies she'd brought out on a yellow ceramic plate, unsure how to respond. Afternoon sunlight filled the living room.

"It's not strange so much as bittersweet, I suppose. I have a lot of mixed feelings about the years we lived here."

"I know. Heike said you were quite an unhappy child. She said you hated living here." Madeleine had thick gray hair, almost like his mother's.

Her statement caught him off guard. "I wouldn't say I hated it. It was perfectly fine."

"Maybe I misunderstood. Your mother always gave me the impression you despised this condo. Years ago, when I first got to know her, she insisted the minute she died, you'd put it on the market."

Madeleine's hands had a slight tremor, and he wondered how old she was. Late sixties? He wondered whether she herself had children. He wondered what else Heike had told her about him. Her impression of him was, he assumed, quite unfavorable.

"I assume that's why you're here, to give me notice. It's all right, I can vacate if that's what you want."

"Not at all. I haven't actually decided what I'm going to do with the place. Who knows? Maybe I'll want to retire here myself one day." His words surprised him. He'd never actually thought about retiring in Ventana Beach.

"Well, it's a wonderful spot," she said and wiped her lips with a napkin.

It turned out they had quite a bit in common. Madeleine had lived in Boston for several years, before she met her husband and moved to Iowa. Like Stewart, she wrote poetry in her free time. Eventually, she asked whether he wanted to stay for dinner. "I have a chicken stew simmering in the crock pot. I can't eat it all myself." He hesitated, then accepted her invitation. Something about the condo felt cozy to him, and he had nothing else to do with his time, nothing pressing.

It wasn't until after dinner, as he was leaving, that Madeleine handed him the stack of letters, some in envelopes, others simply folded, page after page covered in his mother's handwriting. She gave him a hug and told him she was glad he'd taken the time to see her.

That night, Stewart and Luis go to a vegan restaurant Stewart has been wanting to try. There's a line of people waiting to be seated, and they huddle in the foyer next to a bulletin board covered with flyers advertising meditation classes and yoga retreats. Luis asks Stewart about his book on Allen Ginsberg, which he's been grappling with, on and off, for several years, and Stewart shakes his head. "Not that, Luis. Please don't ask me about the book; anything else."

"I hear you. Writing the paper for this conference made me want to puke. You'd think it would be easier to pump these things out the older you get, but, instead, it's getting so fucking hard. I have to bribe myself. You can't leave your desk until you've written two paragraphs; no lunch until you've written three hundred words."

"Three hundred words! Three hundred words would be huge. For me, a hundred words constitutes prolific output."

Stewart asks him what his talk is about. "You're going to love this,"

Luis says. “I went back to my dissertation and dredged up something from that.” Luis’s thesis was a comparison of Lorca and Neruda; he’d examined the ways in which the two poets had been influenced by Surrealism and the Modernist movements.

“Finally,” Stewart says. “I never understood why you didn’t do anything with it. I think you really had something solid.” They talk about how hard it had been for Luis to finish his dissertation, how much he despised his advisor—a man from Chile who now ran a B&B in the Atacama desert with a former student of his—until the hostess signals their table is ready, and they make their way past a man playing a kora to the back of the restaurant. “I’m starving,” Luis says as they sit down. “I think I’m going to start with the broccoli tofu, but you want to share a seaweed salad too?” Stewart hesitates. At that moment it feels as if they’re boyfriends again. “I mean only if you want to. We don’t have to.”

“Sure, that sounds good. Let’s get a seaweed salad. And maybe some edamame.”

The tables are packed together and the place is loud, but the service is good. Within minutes they’ve ordered and Stewart finds himself asking Luis about his trip to South America.

“It was great. You have to go to Buenos Aires. It really does feel like Paris, and La Recoleta Cemetery is incredible.” He tells Stewart about the Art Deco and Baroque mausoleums and the tombs of Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares and Eva Perón. Luis is a talker, and he’s several minutes into his description of the place he and Cramer stayed in Torres del Paine, when Stewart realizes he hasn’t been paying attention to what Luis is saying. All night, he’s been asking questions, one after another, about Austin’s music scene and Cramer’s job and Buenos Aires and Patagonia, but he’s been having a hard time listening. He keeps wondering whether his breath is bad, and whether he should have gotten a haircut before Luis arrived, and whether he should have told Luis about his mother’s death four years ago, when she passed away. He knows Luis is going to ask about her and that he will either have to lie—again—and say she’s doing fine, or come clean with the truth.

“You okay, Buddy?” Luis says at one point, putting his hand on Stewart’s knee. “What’s going on with you? Here I am just yammering on.” Stewart had prepared himself for this moment, actually planned what he would say when Luis finally turned the tables and asked him about himself. He decided he would tell Luis about a story he’d read recently by Alice Munro involving a woman with Alzheimer’s whose husband takes her to a nursing home called Meadowlake. Stewart was going to tell Luis the story’s plot: how the woman, Fiona, falls in love with another man at Meadowlake and forgets who her husband—Grant—is.

It was something he and Luis used to do when they lived together, recount stories they’d read to one another. Stewart took pride in his talent for retelling stories he liked, for being able to capture the writer’s tone and narrative tension; Luis had said it was one of the things that had made him fall in love with Stewart.

“I read a story I think you would like,” he planned to say. “It’s about a married couple who’ve lived together for fifty years, who’ve spent their lives together, despite the fact that the man had an affair or two along the way. The man is a professor who’s writing a study of Norse wolves, and like all relationships theirs has had its ups and downs, but part of the story’s power is that you see the underlying commitment, the love between these two people, which, through everything—the man’s affairs, the wife’s failing memory—sustains them.”

Stewart was going to tell Luis about Fiona’s infatuation with the new man, Aubrey, and then he was going to ask: “Do you want to know how Grant responds? He doesn’t stop visiting her, doesn’t give up on her. He hangs on and keeps driving there, to Meadowlake, day after day, watches her play cards with her new crush, and whisper sweet nothings in his ear, and then, when Aubrey ends up leaving Meadowlake and goes home, do you know what Grant does? He sees how heartbroken Fiona is, and he drives to Aubrey’s house and tries to convince Aubrey’s wife—a real frump with a ‘walnut-stain tan’—to let Aubrey visit Fiona again.”

Stewart planned to pause here and then, after taking a sip of Armenian mint tea or whatever the flavor du jour was, he was going to look

Luis in the face and say, “Imagine the commitment there: a man who would do that for a wife who’s forgotten him completely.”

Stewart hadn’t decided whether he would quote any lines from the story—like the comparison of Aubrey’s wife to, of all things, a lychee nut (flesh with “oddly artificial allure...shallow over the extensive seed”). Nor had he decided whether he would tell Luis how the story ends (Fiona forgetting Aubrey and recognizing Grant again). The art of recounting a story derived, at least in part, of course, from the extemporaneous quality of the narration. It couldn’t sound too rehearsed. And, in most instances, Stewart’s narrations had always been improvised; there hadn’t been ulterior motives.

Until now. Stewart wondered whether this time would be different, whether, like Scheherazade, he might use the narration as a tool. Was he really that pathetic? Did he actually think recounting Munro’s story would soften Luis up, that he could use Fiona and Grant to segue into a confession about Heike’s death, thereby playing on Luis’s sympathy so that when they finally returned to his apartment Luis would have pity sex with him? Was that his plan? Had Stewart imagined they might actually end up falling asleep together—if not in each other’s arms, then at least side by side?

Sitting across from Luis, picking at his Kuzu stew, Stewart realizes he doesn’t have the wherewithal to pull it off. Instead, he says he’s doing well, talks about a graduate seminar he’s teaching on Flannery O’Connor, sidesteps Luis’s questions about Heike. “She’s hanging in there. Still playing ping pong.”

“Incredible. She’s a real survivor.”

“Yeah, nothing’s changed.”

Stewart suddenly feels hot, feels another panic attack descending. He wonders whether he can excuse himself to step outside without having Luis figure out what’s going on. He wishes he’d worn a short-sleeve shirt. So many restaurants in Boston turn the heat up too high in the winter. It’s practically impossible to go out to eat these days, given how crowded things are, how noisy, and Stewart wishes he’d stayed home, had told Luis he wasn’t feeling well, had never driven to the airport in the first place. He knows he should *man up*, as his

students would say—tell Luis the truth about Heike, because, after all, her death isn't his fault; he didn't *kill her*. But what is he going to say? "Hey, remember all those things you said about me when we broke up? That I was selfish and treated my mother like shit? You were right. She died alone in a nursing home. I hadn't called her for five years. She thought I was dead."

Luis reaches over and touches his arm. "Deep breath, Stewart. Have some water."

The next day, when Luis is at his conference, Stewart goes online and trolls various hookup sites. He navigates the ads with the dexterity that comes from experience. Two weeks ago he found an ad with a Ukrainian guy who'd just moved to Boston and needed a place to stay. The guy's photos were hot, and Stewart responded. The ad didn't promise sex in exchange for a place to stay, but that was clearly the implication. Stewart spent all afternoon cleaning the apartment, trimming his eyebrows and nose hair, bathing. He bought lilies for the dining room table.

Lilies.

But the guy looked nothing like his photos. He was at least fifteen years older and thirty pounds heavier, and his breath stank like sardines. Stewart let him spend the night on the couch but told him he had to leave in the morning.

Stewart promised himself that while Luis was at the conference, he'd work on his book, but here he is at one o'clock in the afternoon, in his pajamas, wasting the day. He's moved from his usual sites to his most recent discovery, a hustler site. He's only hired one guy so far, and that experience was such a disaster he vowed never to visit the site again, but he can't help himself. An hour later, the buzzer downstairs sounds, and Stewart lets in a guy who calls himself Vlad. Stewart's heart feels like it's going to split his ribcage wide open. He's beside himself with fear, with expectation and shame. He thought about hiding the knives in the freezer, but decided he doesn't care. If Vlad turns out to be a serial killer, so be it.

Miraculously, Vlad looks just like his photos. He looks better than

his photos. He's twenty-three. He's visiting from Prague for eighteen days, and he's adorable—blond hair that's a bit too long, blue eyes. He has some acne and he's on the skinny side, but Stewart doesn't complain. He can't believe his luck. He offers Vlad a glass of water. They sit on the couch, awkwardly, and Vlad puts his hand on Stewart's leg. The entire encounter lasts forty-five minutes, at most. Stewart pays him, watches him dress.

"See ya," Vlad says as he grabs his Jansport backpack. Stewart gets up to open the door. He tries to give him a kiss on the lips, a good-bye kiss, but Vlad pulls away. "Not on the mouth," he says, angry. "I told you not on the mouth." Stewart closes the door and gets in the shower. He washes himself carefully. He examines his genitals, tells himself he's playing with fire.

He goes to his desk, turns on his computer, rereads the chapter he's working on—about *Kaddish*—which if one thinks about it, is quite fitting, given the circumstances in which he finds himself. He makes a few edits, then opens the drawer to his right and takes out the stack of letters Madeleine gave him when he visited her. He hasn't arranged the letters in a sequence meant to soften the emotional blow. The first letter, the one he keeps on top, the one he's read so many times he's almost memorized it, is the one that makes him the saddest:

Mein lieber Sohn,

It is Christmastime here, the time of year I miss you the most. All day I spend baking Reindeer cookies and one Stollen after another. I have already baked nine loaves and have four more to put in the oven. Each year, the list of recipients grows longer and longer.

Yesterday I ran into Lana Horton at the mall when I was buying Gerry new underpants. Do you remember her? I barely recognized the woman, she is so gray nowadays. She uses a walker and goes very slowly. I almost didn't say hi, I was in such a rush, but she waved and called out my name.

For more than thirty minutes she talked my ear off, telling me about her arthritis and the lump on her breast she had removed, then showing me photos of her granddaughter who gave a recital last week of Mozart's

Piano Sonata in C. This brought tears to my eyes, because I remembered her teaching you *Für Elise* so long ago, and the little sonatinas you were so good at. Finally, she asked how you were, which of course was too much to bear. Apparently she had not heard the news, and I did not have the energy to explain everything. I said you were fine, still living in Boston as a professor, and she was very impressed.

What on earth could I tell the poor soul? My son, who had everything handed to him on a silver platter, including a college degree, a good job, nice apartment, and loving mother, decided out of the blue to swallow a bottle of pills? She would never have understood why someone with so much privilege and good luck could possibly do this.

If anyone was to throw out the towel, it should have been me. Do you not remember how much I endured from childhood on? Yes, you had these bullies chasing you after school, but this is nothing compared to having bombs fall on one's head from the sky. Imagine having to flee your home at the tender age of five. I must have narrated for you how Omi woke Dieter and me at one in the morning and told us we had to dress immediately. She forced me to leave everything behind—my dolls and beautiful outfits, and even my little white kitten, *Schneeflocke*, whom I received as a gift for my birthday. I cried and cried as we went through the streets of Leipzig to the train station. All around, buildings were burning and people smashed windows to steal loaves of bread and vegetables and whatever else they could carry.

The station was crowded like the Devil himself was coming, everyone huddled together in the freezing cold hoping the train would finally arrive. We three squeezed close, seeking warmth from each other until, finally, there came the big engine and everyone pushed toward the track because they were afraid there would not be enough room in the cars. We rushed for the doors but very few could get in, so people started climbing through the windows and, as they climbed in, those on the ground tried to steal their shoes. Just making it on in one piece was a miracle.

Of course there were no seats to be had, so we pressed next to each other like sardines in a tin. I stood next to a fat woman and her husband who smelled like *Leberkäse* and who put little pieces of chocolate

into his mouth, without offering one crumb to anyone. Going to the bathroom was impossible, of course, and we were forced to hold our bladders as long as we could, steering clear of the metal bucket they passed around. I kept trying to peer out the window, hoping to see the mountains Omi had told us about, until eventually she pointed out these monstrous things in the distance, enormous in the moonlight.

When Garmisch came, we were completely exhausted, but still we had to trudge half an hour through the snow to the cottage that was our new home. Omi could barely open the gate, the banks were so high. I remember she went out to the pump for a cup of water to make us something to eat, and all we had was this one bowl that was dented and half a dozen bitter turnips she brought along in a sack. Fortunately Omi had with her some matches and she found a few sticks of wood to make a small fire. She boiled water with these turnips and this was our meal. We were terribly hungry there so many nights. Each week Omi got just one loaf of bread with the coupon she received and she cut slits on the top to show us how much we could eat every day. She covered the loaf with a dishtowel and sometimes Dieter and I would look up at it with our mouths watering, hoping for one extra slice.

Luckily Omi made friends with a farmer down the road and knitted blankets for him in exchange for some rabbits that we kept outside in the garden. Once a month she killed one for us to gorge ourselves on. She took it out of the cage by its hind legs and we always watched it struggle for freedom. The rabbit's nails were actually quite long and sometimes they scratched Omi's arm and we would get very alarmed seeing her bleed. Nothing bothered her though. She took the rabbit and banged its head against a big rock and cut into the fur with her kitchen knife. Then came the part we salivated for, putting this rabbit meat into a pot with some water and whatever vegetables she was able to get and, if we were lucky, some potatoes. We went crazy smelling such good food in our house. Without the rabbits we probably would have died.

If it is true that there is an afterlife, perhaps you have become friends with Omi by now. I know that when she came to visit us in Gerry's house, you always felt like she judged you for wanting these peach yogurts when you got home from school, but I hope you do not hold this

against her. From her perspective, food was not to be taken for granted. In any case, you can't hold grudges forever. If you see her, please, for my sake, be kind. It is the least you can do for me now.

I wish so much you could write a letter to me and explain what life is like after death. Do you live in your own apartment in Heaven? Do you cook your own meals and go grocery shopping? I sometimes picture it like a college, with dorm rooms and a cafeteria, though if this is the case, I hope you are not as picky about the angels' cooking as you were with mine. Do they make this tofu you always insisted on having, and tasteless brown rice?

Sometimes at night I walk out to the mesa and look up at the sky full of stars and I wonder what you are doing. I picture you sitting in a big comfy armchair, reading one of your books. Perhaps by now you have started getting gray hair. I hope that when my time comes, the angels will allow me to live in the same neighborhood as they put you. Don't worry, I won't insist on sharing a bedroom with you! I know you need your own space. It is fine with me that I live a few blocks away. This way at least I can stop by and just say hello every once in a while. It would be nice to see you again, even if only for a short time.

Love from your
Mutti

Stewart is already in bed, reading, when he hears Luis return.

"Hey," Luis calls out. "Anyone home?"

"Yeah, hey," Stewart responds.

"Sorry I'm late. You know how these things are. Everyone wanted to go out for drinks afterward, and I lost track of time."

"No worries," Stewart says. "Are you hungry? I made some chicken."

"Wow, thanks, I grabbed a bite on the way back though. I didn't know you were cooking."

Stewart tells him it's no big deal. "I'll eat it for lunch tomorrow."

"Did you see the moon tonight? It's a blood moon. It's pretty intense." Stewart shakes his head; he hasn't left the house all day. "It's pretty cool. It's like this orange UFO. You should take a look. These things only happen once every three decades."

Stewart takes off his reading glasses and gets out of bed. Does Luis really think he's going to get dressed and go outside to look at the moon? It's already ten thirty. He's exhausted. He's pissed off. But he realizes this may be the last time he'll see Luis for a while. Luis's flight is leaving at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, and his taxi is coming at seven. Stewart offered to drive him to the airport, but Luis told him not to be ridiculous. "I'm not going to make you get up at six o'clock on Sunday morning, Stewart. You've already gone above and beyond the call of duty."

Stewart shuffles out to the living room in his house shoes and asks Luis whether he has everything he needs. He stands next to the dining room table, watching Luis dig around in his suitcase.

"Hey, Buddy, I know it's late, but is it okay if I use your phone to give Cramer a quick call? I promised him I'd call tonight, but I forgot my charger."

"Sure thing."

Stewart waits a few more seconds, then realizes there's no point in staying in his living room, staring at Luis, like a dog hoping for scraps. "Help yourself to some cereal in the morning," he says, wondering whether Luis will come over and give him a hug. "I got Grape Nuts. Is that still the kind you like?"

"Good memory! Thanks, but I'll probably just grab a muffin or something at the airport."

"Good seeing you, Luis," Stewart says, as he heads back to his room.

"Yeah, same here. Thanks again for letting me crash on the couch."

Stewart goes into his room and closes his door. He swallows a sleeping pill and gets out the earplugs he keeps in the drawer of his nightstand. He rolls them carefully between his thumb and forefinger to make sure they'll fit snugly. He wants to be certain that he won't hear Luis talking to Cramer. He doesn't want to hear Luis trying to be quiet, doesn't want to hear Luis laugh, doesn't want to hear Luis tell Cramer about his day. He doesn't want to hear Luis call Cramer *Honey* or *Soldier* or *Coco* or whatever nickname they use for each other. He wants to go to sleep.

He thinks about Vlad, about the way he closed his eyes just before he

came. He thinks about his chest, hairless and smooth. Maybe Stewart will call him again. Why save his money? Maybe he'll invite Vlad to dinner. He wonders how much dinner would cost, how much Vlad would charge to spend the entire night. I want you to pretend like we're boyfriends, Stewart imagines himself saying. Pretend you love me. He thinks about taking him to Iguazu Falls or on a cruise to Alaska. He's always wanted to go to Alaska.

Stewart likes the earplugs he uses. They form a barrier between him and the rest of the world. He feels the foam expand in his left ear, then his right. The sound of the outside world, of the radiator and the traffic and the creaking of the floorboards upstairs, slowly disappears. He feels like he's going underwater, like he's swimming down into the depths of a lake or the ocean. He hears nothing at all now. It feels like he's in outer space.

He's never believed in heaven, though these days he wonders, occasionally, whether his mother was right and there is life after death—not with angels and comfy armchairs, but something. He wonders whether, perhaps, it is she who can look down at him from above or beyond and contemplate the person she brought into this world. If Heike can see him, he hopes she can't read his thoughts; he hopes what she sees is simply a man doing the best that he can.

He rests his head on his pillow, now, carefully. He doesn't want the earplugs to come loose. He wants to make sure he doesn't hear Luis getting up in the morning, taking a shower, getting dressed, zipping up his suitcase, closing the door. He pictures his mother as a little girl on the train, wearing a wool coat two sizes too large. He sees his grandmother and his uncle next to her, and the man who smells like *Leberkäse* with his overweight wife, and, as the pill begins to take effect, he finds himself there at the station, watching the train as it heads into the night.

