

one story

Latvian Angel

Matthew Lansburgh

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Matthew Lansburgh

She'd been what was once called a mail-order bride, a Latvian beauty from a village eighteen kilometers south of Rēzekne, her advertisement indexed under the section of the international periodical titled "Remarkable Women." Remarkable not because of her thick, blonde hair or outgoing personality, but because of the growths on her back—wings akin to those of a small dove—sprouting from her *latissimus dorsi*, which, from an early age, had made Klara certain no man would ever find her attractive, despite her mother's assurances to the contrary. Her mother, a seamstress, had called Klara *mans engēlis*, my angel, and though some villagers had caught glimpses of the miraculous appendages, most had not.

The year was 1993, just two years after Latvia declared its independence from the Soviet Union, back when few people in Latvia had traveled to the United States, and what was

known about life abroad came mostly from magazines and radio shows and, occasionally, TV. Televisions were a luxury few could afford, requiring electricity and enough cash to feed a family of six for more than a year.

America, Klara had heard, was a land of great wealth and infinite opportunity. An intelligent woman—a woman who had done well in school and excelled at English composition and grammar—even one from a town with a single dirt road in a country where the ratio of livestock to people was twenty to one and phone service was still considered a luxury, could make something of herself. She could own a car, a microwave oven, a twenty-five-inch Zenith TV. She could wear fancy clothes and send money home.

Not that Klara wanted to stroll around in fine hats or gowns. She simply wanted shoes that fit properly and a warm coat when winter came. “My darling,” the most promising of her suitors, an accountant named Ezra Vogel, wrote during their long correspondence, “you can buy many shoes—high heels from Paris and Milan, sandals from Rome for long walks on the beach, and enough lace and tulle and charmeuse to don a different glamorous look every day.”

“What are high heels?” she asked her mother, trying to translate the man’s words when she opened his mail. “What is charmeuse?”

She had seen pictures of beaches, of course, and Ezra had sent her photos of Long Island where he lived—snapshots of large houses with pools and tennis courts and two-car garages. She admired the sturdy windows and driveways

and well-maintained sidewalks and hedges, groomed with precision and taste.

“Should you change your mind, I will fly you first class back to your home. You can keep the clothing I’ve bought you, and you’ll return with presents for your parents and siblings. But, my darling, I promise you will not change your mind. Your life here will be better than you can imagine—you will be pampered from morning to night.”

In her dictionary, she found the word *pamper* and liked what it meant.

In their correspondence, Klara waited nearly five months before revealing what she sometimes referred to as her most intimate secret or the magical part of herself. Occasionally she felt guilty for withholding the information so long, but she reasoned that a clever person might have deduced the truth merely from the wording of her advertisement:

True Angel Seeks Loving, Open-Minded Man. I am Latvian beauty. Large breasted, intelligent, warm laugh, proficient in cooking, sewing, and domestic chores. Looking for good man who lives in United States and owns pleasant house and car. Respond to Klara Ozols, Box 344578, Rēzekne, Latvia.

She’d received more letters than she expected, though most of them were quite short. One man, a farmer in Louisiana, told her his wife died in a boating accident, and he needed someone to help raise his four children, ages six through thirteen, the

youngest a girl with a tender heart and loving disposition. Another man said he was bedridden with cerebral palsy and was in search of a nurse to take care of him. The third, from Utah, described himself as a Mormon who'd recently embraced polygamy. The Mormon asked for a nude photo and admitted that he had "a thing for large breasts."

Ezra's letter arrived nine weeks after she posted the ad.

November 3, 1993

Dear Angel,

I read your advertisement a few weeks ago and intended to respond earlier, but then I wondered whether it made sense to write to a woman halfway around the world, in a country I know nothing about. This past weekend, however, I was watching TV and saw a documentary about the Baltic States, and I was struck by how beautiful your country is. It seems like a place where people are happy—even if they often struggle to make ends meet. The documentary talked about the importance of family, something that many people in the United States seem to have forgotten.

I know that people who have never been here sometimes think our country is perfect, and while we do have physical comforts, I have found that many Americans do not feel the sense of belonging and connection that all humans need. I myself have struggled to find a woman to love.

I am forty-two years old, and if you think this is too old for you, I understand. I grew up in Florida and moved

north for college more than two decades ago. Currently, I live on Long Island, which is approximately forty-five minutes away from New York City. I have a cat named Whiskers (see photo), and I work as an accountant. Though I may not be as wealthy as some men who will undoubtedly express interest in you, my life is comfortable, and I am looking for someone who would like to build a family with me.

I look forward to hearing from you should you wish to continue our correspondence, in which case I hope you will send me a photo.

Respectfully yours,
Ezra Vogel

27 November 1993

Dear Mr. Vogel,

Thank you for your letter and the photo of your extremely adorable kitten (as well as that of yourself and your handsome smile). I find Whiskers to be a perfect name for such a cat. I myself had a white cat with gray markings named Laumina, though she died two years ago, and now I find myself on constant watch for a new friend. Is your Whiskers playful or shy?

I was interested to learn that you have watched film about Latvia, because I was under impression no one in United States would be interested in such a small country as ours. However, you are correct that our countryside is quite

beautiful, with many forests, rivers, and lakes. Mountains we do not have as many, but near to my home are manifold bodies of water that are quite refreshing to bathe in during the warmer months.

I come from small town named Gramzda in the Latgale region of the country. My village is quite small with one church, only thirty houses, and not much to do! On the weekends, I sometimes go into Rēzekne to see a film or have ice cream with friends. My favorite flavor is butter pecan.

What about you? Do you have a preference?

I am intrigued to hear that you grew up in Florida, which I have heard is quite beautiful too. Did you go surfing there? Why did you leave? As you have requested, I am sending a photo of myself from my graduation ceremony. The dress was made by my mother, who is an accomplished seamstress.

Sincerely,
Klara Ozols

December 11, 1993

My dear Klara,

Receiving your letter made me happier than I can express. Thank you for the photo, which I have put up on the mantle next to my bed. You are a very beautiful young woman indeed! I can only guess that you have every young man in Latvia banging at your door. ☺ Why on Earth have you placed a personal ad for a suitor abroad? Are you that eager to leave Latvia?

It is funny that you should mention that you are partial to butter pecan ice cream—it is one of my favorite flavors as well! In the summer, I will often walk to the ice cream store down the block and treat myself to a cone with butter pecan and strawberry after work when I get home from the office and my household chores are all finished. I find it is a very relaxing way to end the day, though I only wish I had someone like yourself to share the evening with.

You asked me whether I ever surfed in Florida, and I must confess I did not, though I have an older brother who did. While I do enjoy going for walks and bike rides, I am not as athletic (or rowdy) as some of the people I grew up with. Indeed, I consider myself something of an introvert and am more likely to spend a quiet evening at home watching TV than going out to a bar or sporting event.

I'm guessing you're much more extroverted. Are you the life of the party? You strike me as someone who probably has a lot of friends and is quite popular!

I must confess that while I would like nothing more than to sweep you off your feet with my mellifluous words, it is important to me that I present myself honestly and accurately so that you have as good an idea as possible re: who I am. There are so many different kinds of people in this world, and it is impossible to fit a round peg in a square hole. If you are looking for a man who goes to parties and cracks jokes all the time, I am not the right person for you. I can, at times, be quiet, but if nothing else, I am sincere.

Growing up, my mother always told me she thought I had a good heart. I would like to believe that is true, though I did not have the easiest childhood and feel like certain scars have stayed with me into adulthood. For better or worse, I was not the most popular student in my school, and I ended up spending a good deal of time on my own.

I have made friends here on Long Island, however, and I am a member of a bowling league. We meet on Thursday evenings and sometimes arrange dinners to celebrate special occasions. I would like to write more, but my job has been somewhat stressful recently, and I must get up very early to finish a report.

I hope you are doing well and that it is not too cold in Latvia these days. I imagine you have quite a bit of snow! Please keep warm and write soon.

With affection,
Ezra

P.S. The dress in the photo is beautiful—please tell your mother she is quite talented! I am including another photo for you and hope you will send me more pictures with your next letter.

28 December 1993

Dear Ezra,

I have been checking the post office frequently, hoping for a missive from you, and, of course, I was very happy to

see your blue envelope waiting for me yesterday! You sound like a kind and gentle person, which is reassuring to me, since you can imagine that it might be a bit scary for someone with very little experience to begin a correspondence with a man such a great distance away.

I found it very interesting to learn more about your disposition and interests. It is true, I can be outgoing, but growing up my closest friends have always been more like you—quieter and more introverted. My sister Tasenka, who passed away six years ago, was the kind of person who enjoyed spending time alone reading or playing solitaire. She and I often went together for walks in the woods, looking for mushrooms and sorrel and cloudberry, and often entertained one another with tales of witches and goblins, though sometimes we did not speak for long periods of time, because we were each lost in our own thoughts. I actually think you and I would be compatible, based on what you have imparted.

I am sorry to hear that your childhood was unhappy and you did not have very many friends. This must be hard. You mentioned a brother; was he at least a good companion to you?

As for me, I have my mother, a quality seamstress, my father, who works in a mill factory manufacturing furniture, my brother, Ivo, and sister Zuzka, who is four years younger than I. We live in a small house with only three rooms, thus making our time together as a family very cozy, indeed! I finished my secondary school eight

years ago and since then have been working diligently as the assistant to my mother, learning to make dresses, overalls, dress shirts, blouses, and any other article of clothing that someone might like to purchase, though the demand for her handcrafted apparel has decreased over time, and she has recommended to me looking for work in Rēzekne or Riga, where I might become a secretary or office assistant. I welcome the idea of spending more time in a larger town, so I have begun to fill out applications and in the meantime wait patiently.

With anticipation,
Your Klara

P.S. I am enclosing another photo for you of me with my sister Zuzka. I am the girl on the left.

P.P.S. We had Christmas here three days ago, and in the morning the snow was so high outside our house, we found it nearly impossible to open the front door. I was afraid I would not be able to make it to Rēzekne to mail your letter, but finally Papa allowed me to take the bus into town, where I rushed to the post office without further delay.

There were, of course, things that each withheld from the other: secrets that, in the case of Ezra, he believed might diminish the likelihood Klara would accept his proposal of marriage, and that, in the case of Klara, were either too

strange or too painful to divulge to someone she'd never met. While Klara did allude, for example, to the fact that the miraculous nature of her body was not especially unusual in Gramzda, she did not reveal that her older sister, Taseņka, had been born with a tail-like appendage just above the coccyx, and that her father and brother had both been born with albinism. Nor did she disclose that her mother, Gundega, had six toes per foot and an aunt with skin so sensitive to the touch that she was forced to spend most of her life in bed swaddled by thick cushions and pillows. This aunt, people believed, was able to predict the future, at least with respect to certain matters, with moderate accuracy.

When Klara told Ezra she had always aspired to live in America and wanted nothing more than to have a family with a distinguished gentleman, she did not tell him that many people, including her mother, believed Gramzda was cursed, and that Gundega had warned her against becoming intimate with Einārs—the pig farmer's son—who had repeatedly professed his love and devotion for Klara, wings or no wings, till death do they part. "Einārs is a fine young man," Gundega said, "but whatever you do, don't let him pressure you into making love. You must be careful, my angel. God only knows what future punishments our lineage might be forced to endure." Klara knew, without being told, that her mother's admonition referred not just to the conjoined twins whom a cousin had conceived months earlier, but also to Taseņka's efforts the prior year to sever the tail from her

body, resulting in blood loss so significant that she died in the barn alone, save for three cows and a mare.

Klara did not think it necessary to burden Ezra with these sordid details or any of the old wives' tales she'd heard her mother repeat endlessly regarding Spīgana Nolādēts, a distant relative who'd been burned at the stake for what people called acts against God—purported pagan rites and rituals. According to Gundega, the woman (possibly her great grandmother) had practiced black magic, turned men who maligned her into pigs, and been banished to the woods on three separate occasions. Apparently, she was stubborn and always returned home, refusing to leave her husband and children behind. "It was on a cold winter's night that the pyre was lit," Gundega once told Klara. "The villagers all came out to witness the burning, and it is said that crows descended upon the village for many days afterwards, as if mourning her passing. Some believe the poor woman had been born with the organs of both sexes and was spurned for this reason."

When she was younger, Klara's parents told her that her wings were a sign she was chosen, that she did not have to worry about Spīgana Nolādēts or any of the rumors people spread about people being burned at the stake. "The Lord has blessed you and sent you to Earth as his divine messenger," her father said. "An angel whose path will be sacred."

At the airport, Ezra Vogel, who'd celebrated his forty-fifth birthday just three days earlier, was standing amidst a throng

of people, wearing a three-piece brown suit and a silk tie adorned with what appeared to be miniature owls; he smiled and held out two dozen red roses wrapped in white paper, but Klara nonetheless failed to recognize him. Whereas the man in the photos she'd received by mail had sported a full head of thick, brown hair, broad shoulders, and a masculine build, this person with polished black shoes was portly and almost fully lacking in hair. Klara wondered whether the snapshots had been taken several years earlier, or whether, perhaps, they were photos of someone else. It took her a few minutes to make sense of the situation, to allow the image in her mind she'd built up over the past many months to align with reality. "I thought you'd never arrive," the accountant said eagerly. "They kept saying the plane was delayed due to weather, and I said I don't see any storms or rain. Skies are all blue, but it doesn't matter—you made it! My goodness, I can't believe you're actually here."

He didn't try to kiss her in public, thankfully, but instead merely gave her a pat on the shoulder and cupped her head in his hands, his palms warm on her cheeks. He wasn't ugly, exactly, just not what she expected. The important thing, she told herself, was that he seemed happy to see her—that and he looked kind. The fact that he was shorter than she expected was actually probably good, she decided, given her own diminutive stature.

Ezra peppered her with questions—asking how her flight was, whether she was tired or hungry. "Please, sit down and let me tend to the luggage," he said when they reached the

baggage area, motioning for her to sit in one of the empty seats next to a large African family.

“No, thank you,” she said, a bit defiantly. “I’ve been sitting for so many hours my buttocks currently hurt. I must stand and stretch my limbs a bit after such a long flight.”

“Of course, of course. We’ll stand together and keep an eye out for your things. Would you like a few cookies?” He brought out a small tinfoil package from the briefcase he carried. She accepted the offer because she was, indeed, famished, and because she was eager to sample true American food. She noted how different the cookies he’d brought for her were from the kind her mother made. His cookies were perfectly round—two dry, chocolate wafers with soft, white filling between, very sweet and delicious. She ate six or seven, and he chuckled to himself, admiring her appetite and telling her there were many more treats where those came from. “You’re even more beautiful than your photos,” he said, squeezing her left cheek with his fingers, the way her grandfather might.

She thanked him and blushed, noticing the sweetness of his breath, the result no doubt of the mint he caressed, to and fro, with his tongue. Waiting for her bags to arrive, she wondered what it would be like to kiss a suitor as old as her father. She’d never kissed a man before, other than Einārs, who at the time had still been a teenager. She and Einārs had grown up together, gone to school with each other, played in the river in the summer, and rested on the grass under the birch trees talking about heaven and hell

and wondering whether there really was an afterlife, or whether your body just rotted in the earth until you were nothing but teeth alongside an old bullet, perhaps, if you’d been shot.

Einārs was a year younger than Klara—he’d turned twenty-five just a week before her departure—and she’d told him he must stop trying to dissuade her from moving away. “Quit your nonsense once and for all, Einārs,” she said in their mother tongue. “You are making a fool of yourself and of me with your tears and the snivel coming out of your nose. You’re a grown man, and you must find a nice wife, someone like Liene with whom you can have proper children.”

He shook his head vehemently to indicate that he disagreed with her assertions, and though his sobs were so violent he could barely speak, she already knew what he was trying to say: he loved her, he didn’t care about her wings, which he found beautiful, it didn’t matter to him if they had children with wings or webbed feet or antlers growing out of their heads. They didn’t even need to have sex if she was opposed; they could just live together like brother and sister. “You are my best friend, Klara. What will I do?”

She’d heard it all before—a thousand times, if not more—and seeing him grovel there made her more certain than ever about her decision to leave. Einārs was a good person, it was true, and part of her did love him, but the man she intended to marry owned a car and a two-story house with three bathrooms and a washing machine. He lived in New York—

home of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Empire State Building and the Cyclone at Coney Island.

Ezra insisted on carrying her suitcases, one in each hand, though Klara had already determined she was sturdier than he, and probably stronger. He had a limp, which he attributed to an old tennis injury, saying it was nothing and he was fit as a fiddle and strong as a horse. He grinned at her. She hadn't heard the word *fiddle* before, but she was disinclined to ask Ezra to define each unfamiliar word he happened to utter. For the most part, she understood what he meant, and even if he spoke more quickly than her English teacher in school, Klara felt reassured that language would not pose a problem as she adjusted to her new life.

His car, at least, was everything she'd anticipated—beautiful red upholstery, a radio, and an expansive, gleaming hood. It was, she knew, a Buick Regal Grand National—he'd told her this in his sixth letter, had described the shade of blue, comparing it to a robin's egg, which she found poetic. He placed her suitcases in the trunk, gingerly; opened her door; and, once inside, gave her a choice of classical music or what he called rock. "Fine to leave it off too and just talk to each other, seeing as how there's so much to catch up on now that you're here, darling."

She opted for rock, for Michael Jackson and Mariah Carey and Tori Amos, all of whom she'd heard on the radio in Rēzekne and once in Riga, when she and her

mother traveled there by bus for an appointment. Even now, so many years later, she still remembers her first hours in New York vividly: the clogged traffic on the JFK Expressway, the belching buses, the advertisements and apartment buildings crowded together, the French restaurant Ezra took her to for dinner on that first night, with white tablecloths and bottles of wine and waiters who called her Madame. She remembers the filet mignon he ordered for her and the caviar and crème caramel served with raspberries and, afterwards, in his car, the taste of his saliva as he kissed her on the lips, his tongue gentle at first, then more insistent, probing her teeth and the roof of her mouth.

"I hope I'm not too much of a disappointment to you," he said, looking away. "I mean physically. I know I'm much older than you."

"Of course not," she said, the skin at the nape of her neck tingling as was common whenever she veered from the truth. She lifted the roses from her lap and straightened the fabric of her burgundy dress. She didn't know what to do with the roses he'd given to her other than allow them to rest on her lap, bunched up together without water, wilting. The car felt hot, and she wished he would roll down the window.

The drive to Bay Shore from the restaurant took another forty-five minutes, and Klara continued to do her best to answer his questions, telling him what subjects in school had been her favorite and translating phrases into Latvian and

Russian per his requests. She knew he was trying to be kind, to make her feel at home, but what she wanted then was to be left alone. She didn't like the way he laughed, hadn't considered the possibility that, when she arrived, she might not be taken with him. How many nights had she lain on her little bed next to Zuzka, imagining the man she would spend the rest of her life with—not someone like Tom Cruise, necessarily, but perhaps like Michael J. Fox, or Tom Hanks in *Splash*.

When they pulled into the parking lot of the Ocean Terrace apartment complex, it was nearly 11 p.m., 6 a.m. in Gramzda, the time when her parents and her sister and brother would be waking up and starting their day—her father catching the bus to work at the mill six kilometers away, her mother walking twenty minutes down the road to the home of the woman for whom she made dresses and embroidered shirts, her siblings helping with chores. “Home sweet home,” Ezra said, satisfied it appeared as he turned off the engine. Klara looked out the windshield at the enormous garbage dumpster just twenty meters from the car and the empty box of McDonald's French fries on the pavement. The apartments looked cramped and forlorn, and Klara felt a weight descend upon her as if Baba Yaga or the devil incarnate had lowered himself onto her ribs. “*Krāpnieks!*” she wanted to yell. “Liar! Where is the swimming pool and the two-car garage? What do you mean ‘home sweet home’? Where are the manicured hedges from the photos you sent and the statues of swans?” She said nothing, however,

because her mother had told her she needed to learn to control her tongue and swallow her bile.

Klara had never thought of herself as someone who might be homesick or sentimental, had always been matter-of-fact in the face of life's setbacks. When her father lost the index finger of his right hand; when her kitten, Laumina, was drowned in a sack by a retarded boy; when her mother pleaded with her not to pack her things and depart, each time she remained unmoved, adopting an almost clinical response, as if solving a math problem in school. Even at Tassenka's funeral, she'd maintained her composure. She cried, of course, but she hadn't allowed herself to become hysterical, the way her mother and Zuzka had. She saved the sobbing and wailing for nighttime when everyone was asleep, and she could go outside and cry under the night sky, with only the moon and the spruce trees for company. Tassenka, just fourteen months older, had been more than a sister to Klara, had been her best friend.

But here now, in this place called Long Island, with this man whose breath, when he didn't mask it with peppermint, smelled rancid, whose tongue felt like an ungainly eel forcing its way into her mouth, she nurtured no hope for the future. Following him as he lumbered up the staircase toward the front door of the apartment, she noticed that the sole of his left shoe was substantially thicker than that of the right, a fact which, she told herself, should not have been a big deal to her given the imperfection of her own body and the courtesy he displayed. Had his home been

like the houses in the photos he'd sent her—grand spaces with marble floors and sunken living rooms overlooking well-maintained gardens, instead of a one-bedroom with worn carpeting, tattered drapes, and a galley kitchen—she might have overlooked the lie he'd told her about his limp, might have overlooked the discrepancy between the looks of the man in the photos and this person who kept calling her darling.

During those first days on Long Island, she wished she'd brought along the photos Ezra had sent—to confirm her suspicions and, possibly, confront him with tangible proof. She wished she hadn't acceded to her mother's request that she leave the photos behind so Gundega could imagine the circumstances of her angel's new life. Klara told herself to make, at least for the time being, the best of the situation: to improve her English, sample cuisines she'd never tasted, and gorge herself on the television programs she'd read about but had never been able to watch, including *Melrose Place*, *Law & Order*, *Seinfeld*, and her favorite, *Beverly Hills 90210*, in which everyone looked like a model and had what her brother, Ivo, called *svētīta dzīve*, or a blessed life.

On the plus side, Ezra was kind and respectful. He spent each night on the couch, giving her the bedroom and telling her he wanted them to get to know each other before making love. "I spoke to a man who married a girl from the Ukraine," he told Klara, "but they took it too fast. Poor guy was so eager to be with the girl that he didn't give them a

chance to get to know each other. That's not my intention. I want to give you time to settle in and feel at home. This needs to be a mutual thing."

In addition, Whiskers—who, though no longer a kitten, enjoyed chasing grapes and blueberries across the living room carpet—had not been a lie. Though not as beautiful or as clever as Laumina, the American cat did at least purr willingly on her new mistress's lap; like her owner, she was always eager to please.

Soon enough the couple fell into a routine: Klara heard the accountant get up in the morning and shower, heard him make his breakfast shake with wheat germ and chunks of banana, listened as he washed the dishes and then left for work. It was only after she was certain he was gone that she emerged from the bedroom to use the bathroom. Though he'd given her spending money to go downtown and buy herself some new outfits, the first few days she stayed on the couch, watching TV and eating powdered donuts.

On the ninth day, she took a piece of paper from his desk drawer and wrote a letter to her parents:

Dearest Māte and Papa,

You were right: I was a fool. Life here in America is nothing like the images on TV. This man is boorish and fat. He coughs while eating his food, and though he has not tried to become intimate with me, I fear that will come soon enough. It is only a matter of time. The luxuries I yearned

for are nice, but what good are hot water and cable television when one is seven thousand kilometers from the people she loves? In our correspondence, Ezra promised to allow me to return to Latvia should I change my mind. I hope he is a man of his word. The question now is simply when I will ask him. Already I can tell he is often moody. Sometimes he is quite gentle and kind, but twice already I have seen flashes of anger when he is frustrated. I must be careful to ask him when the time is right, so he grants my request without too much fuss.

Tell me, please, how you are. I miss you and Zuzka and Ivo so much.

Your loving daughter,
Klara

The post office, she discovered, was just a short walk from Ezra's apartment, next to a Subway and Suzi's beauty salon. She mailed the letter and then, on her way home, she stopped at a store with elegant displays and bought herself a pair of red high heels—shoes she'd coveted for some time. She walked back to the apartment in them, passing, on her way, the elderly man who lived downstairs from Ezra and seemed to spend his entire day sitting in a small chair outside his apartment in the sun, reading the paper. It was October, the air crisp, the leaves beginning to turn.

That night, Ezra took her into Manhattan to see *Phantom of the Opera* at the Majestic Theatre, and on the train home,

as she was looking out the window, she felt ashamed of the letter she'd written. The fact was Ezra had not shown flashes of anger—if anything, she was the one who'd been surly and difficult. The least she could do was to be kind to the poor soul while she ate his food and accepted his gifts, because he had been generous to her, and there were certain things she realized she still wanted before she went home.

In school, a teacher had told Klara that New York was the most diverse city on Earth, that it didn't matter if you were short, fat, ugly, rich, or poor; you could make something of yourself. She liked walking through Times Square at night with Ezra, liked the people yelling at the top of their lungs, relished seeing the prostitutes and pimps and drug addicts, the African people and Orientals, the immigrants from places like India and Bangladesh. She saw a woman walking topless in just a mini-skirt, despite the fact that it was cold enough to see your breath. As they were waiting for the light to change, a skinny, bearded man yelled "Suck my dick, baby," and at first Klara didn't realize he was talking to her. His directness didn't offend her, however. She wasn't afraid of him. No one had talked to her like that before, and part of her liked being called *baby*.

At home, everyone in her village went to church and spent their evenings gossiping. Everyone knew about her wings and about Tsenka's tail and her gruesome death in the barn with the knife used to chop onions and potatoes and beets. They knew that when her father stammered, Gundega often berated him, told him she'd made a mistake in

marrying a man with no spine, that she should have married the electrician in Rēzekne who'd once kissed her behind an outhouse under a blood moon. They knew Gundega believed that if you saw two frogs mating on the road as you were walking home, it meant that Spīgana Nolādēts, the hermaphrodite who'd been burned at the stake, would appear later that night and wreak havoc upon you and your loved ones: start a fire in the barn, or upset the cows so their milk would sour, or cause a child to drown. They knew that when she first learned of Tsenka's death, Gundega became so enraged that she threatened to raze the entire village—to burn all thirty-four houses to the ground—and that when she was done screaming and wailing, she went to the barn where Tsenka died and sobbed for hours on end. Klara missed her parents and Ivo and Zuzka and also Einārs, but now that her previous homesickness had passed, she reminded herself that here, in America, she could reinvent herself. She didn't have to be the pious girl who pickled mushrooms for her mother and made cabbage soup, the virgin who went to church with her parents on Sunday and prayed to the Lord for good harvests. Here, in America, she could drink a glass of brandy at three in the afternoon while watching a show about unfaithful wives. She could look a man in the eyes who made catcalls at her and tell him to fuck off or to drop his pants and show her his dick.

Soon enough Klara started going into the city on her own when Ezra was at work. She didn't tell him, of course. If he

asked her how her day had been, she said she'd whiled away the hours waiting for him, watching *Oprah* and *The Price Is Right*, or walking down to the market for cheese or peaches or grapes. She didn't tell him she took the train to Penn Station and walked up to Forty-Second Street, past the winos and homeless people, past the dark-skinned people holding out cups for donations and women in tight mini-skirts. She didn't tell him she leaned against the side of the store with peep booths and dildos and lube and watched people go by, didn't mention that she fantasized about taking off the down jacket Ezra had bought for her and the cashmere sweater and baring her flesh to the mobs. She didn't admit that part of her envied these women in their slinky outfits, admired by men for their bodies.

Five days after Thanksgiving, Klara went into a movie theater on Eighth Avenue, a place called The Pussycat, where she handed an obese man with silver rings on each of his sausage fingers three dollar bills for a ticket. As she opened the door and stepped into the dimly lit foyer with a small concession stand selling popcorn and soda and candies, it felt as if her heart might pound free of her chest. The place was nearly empty, aside from a tattooed man in a wheelchair and a few men in suits who avoided making eye contact with her. She wondered whether someone might stop her, might tell her women weren't allowed in a theater that showed movies with titles like *The Senator's Daughter* and *Saddle Tramp* and *Lusty Nympho*. She wondered whether it was a sin for a virgin to step foot into a place this sordid and nasty.

Inside the cinema, the screen showed a white woman with small breasts being penetrated from behind by a muscular African man. It was the first time Klara had seen a man and woman having sex like this, so graphically. Growing up, she'd heard about porn, of course, but she'd never seen any herself. Not that she hadn't been curious—the opportunity had simply never presented itself to her. The closest she'd come was walking in on her parents one morning when they were naked in their bedroom, her father's member erect. She'd averted her eyes as quickly as possible, but the image stayed with her. She wondered what it would be like to have sex. Sitting there in the theater, she wondered what she would do if one of these strangers, one of these businessmen with their briefcases and ties, propositioned her. She had no interest in making love in the cinema, of course, but she found the charged atmosphere exciting.

The theater carried a faint odor of bleach, and eventually the moaning and feigned exuberance became tiresome, and Klara felt a need for fresh air. As a new actress—a girl with braids in a cheerleading outfit *sans* underwear—licked a popsicle, Klara gathered her coat and purse and left the theater, afraid she might run into Ezra, despite the fact that his office was farther downtown. She took the subway to Penn Station and caught the 4:23 train back to Bay Shore.

Staring out the window, as the train carried her from Penn Station to Rockville Center and Freeport, then on to Massapequa Park and Lindenhurst, she imagined Ezra at his desk in his white shirt, pencil in hand, doing calculations.

She imagined him in front of a computer entering sums on the keyboard. Each night, after they ate dinner together, he took a shower, put on his pajamas, and sat with her on the couch, watching TV. He stroked her hand gently, looking at her occasionally to see whether she understood what the actors were saying. Sometimes he explained a joke, despite the fact that she told him that wasn't necessary. Afterward, at 10:30, he gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek, telling her he hoped she slept well.

The walk from the train to the Ocean Terrace apartments, where residents had already begun putting up Christmas lights around their doorways and windows, wasn't long—ten minutes at most—but by the time Klara arrived home, her need to pee was ferocious. It was not quite six o'clock, and Whiskers greeted her at the door, meowing and weaving in and out of her legs as Klara headed toward the bathroom. Since Ezra would not be home for another forty-five minutes, she decided there was plenty of time to take a hot bath. She used the lavender gel he'd provided for her when she arrived, and luxuriated in the warm water. She shaved her armpits and legs, thinking that perhaps, tonight, she would greet him in just a robe, without underwear, like the cheerleader in the movie she'd seen. The thought excited her—and not simply for the future dividends it might yield.

The wings, which in Latvia she accepted, had begun to bother her more and more here in the States. Recently she'd gotten it into her head that she might consult a specialist—a

plastic surgeon—to see how difficult it would be to have them removed. Without wings, she could wear a bikini at the beach. In the summer, she could frolic in the waves and get a tan like the girls who arrived at the train station with their beach bags and blankets and Coppertone. She'd learned that, despite what he said, the accountant was a man who was careful with money and tallied each penny, but she knew too that there were ways she could entice him to open his purse strings. As her aunt always said: a happy man is a generous man.

Sitting on the couch now with her feet up on the coffee table, sipping a glass of wine, Klara turned on the TV. Whiskers jumped up onto her lap and rubbed her face against Klara's, purring loudly and flicking her tail. Klara felt the animal's paws flex on her bare thighs, the tiny claws pressing—ever so slightly—into her mistress's skin. Whether it was the wine or her afternoon outing or perhaps the cat's heightened state, Klara decided that tonight, when Ezra Vogel came home, she would allow him to kiss her on the mouth, as he'd done early on. Then, when he was ripe, she would take his hand and lead him into her bed.

His torso, she already knew, was soft to the touch and almost wholly lacking in muscle, but she was curious to feel the hair on his chest and, if nothing else, she decided, the experience of having sex with this man might answer certain questions she'd had for some time. At a minimum, it could prepare her for future encounters.

Klara imagined a chiseled lifeguard with red shorts and broad shoulders putting suntan lotion on her smooth

back. Sometimes, she chastised herself for letting her imagination get the best of her—her father had tried to teach her to be proud of her body, to celebrate every part of herself, even her feathers. He called her his angel and said her life would be blessed. But what did her father know? Maybe her path wasn't meant to be sacred. Maybe she wasn't an angel after all.

Matthew Lansburgh's collection of linked stories, *Outside Is the Ocean*, won the 2017 Iowa Short Fiction Award and was a finalist for the 30th Annual Lambda Literary Award and the 2018 Ferro-Grumley Award for LGBTQ Fiction. The book's title story was named a distinguished story in *The Best American Short Stories 2018*. Matthew's work has appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *Glimmer Train*, *Ecotone*, *Electric Literature*, *Epoch*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Columbia*, *Guernica*, *Shenandoah*, *The Florida Review*, *Joyland*, and *Michigan Quarterly Review*. You can read more of his work at www.matthewlansburgh.com.

To read an interview with Matthew Lansburgh about "Latvian Angel," visit the stories section of one-story.com. To discuss the story with other subscribers, visit one-story.com/blog.

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