

THE IDIOT



ELIF BATUMAN

A NOVEL

The Idiot

ELIF BATUMAN



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But the characteristic feature of the ridiculous age I was going through—awkward indeed but by no means infertile—is that we do not consult our intelligence and that the most trivial attributes of other people seem to us to form an inseparable part of their personality. In a world thronged with monsters and with gods, we know little peace of mind. There is hardly a single action we perform in that phase which we would not give anything, in later life, to be able to annul. Whereas what we ought to regret is that we no longer possess the spontaneity which made us perform them. In later life we look at things in a more practical way, in full conformity with the rest of society, but adolescence is the only period in which we learn anything.

MARCEL PROUST, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume II: Within a Budding Grove*

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Part One

FALL

I didn't know what email was until I got to college. I had heard of email, and knew that in some sense I would "have" it. "You'll be so fancy," said my mother's sister, who had married a computer scientist, "sending your e, mails." She emphasized the "e" and paused before "mail."

That summer, I heard email mentioned with increasing frequency. "Things are changing so fast," my father said. "Today at work I surfed the World Wide Web. One second, I was in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One second later, I was in Anıtkabir." Anıtkabir, Atatürk's mausoleum, was located in Ankara. I had no idea what my father was talking about, but I knew there was no meaningful sense in which he had been "in" Ankara that day, so I didn't really pay attention.

On the first day of college, I stood in line behind a folding table and eventually received an email address and temporary password. The "address" had my last name in it—Karadağ, but all lowercase, and without the Turkish ğ, which was silent. From an early age I had understood that a silent *g* was funny. "The *g* is silent," I would say in a weary voice, and it was always hilarious. I didn't understand how the email address was an address, or what it was short for. "What do we do with this, hang ourselves?" I asked, holding up the Ethernet cable.

"You plug it into the wall," said the girl behind the table.

Insofar as I'd had any idea about it at all, I had imagined that email would resemble faxing, and would involve a printer. But there was no printer. There was another world. You could access it from certain computers, which were scattered throughout the ordinary landscape, and looked no different from regular computers. Always there, unchanged, in a configuration nobody else could see, was a glowing list of messages from all the people you knew, and from people you didn't know, all in the same letters, like the universal handwriting of thought or of the world. Some messages were formally epistolary, with "Dear" and "Sincerely"; others

telegraphic, all in lowercase with missing punctuation, like they were being beamed straight from people's brains. And each message contained the one that had come before, so your own words came back to you—all the words you threw out, they came back. It was like the story of your relations with others, the story of the intersection of your life with other lives, was constantly being recorded and updated, and you could check it at any time.

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You had to wait in a lot of lines and collect a lot of printed materials, mostly instructions: how to respond to sexual harassment, report an eating disorder, register for student loans. They showed you a video about a recent college graduate who broke his leg and defaulted on his student loans, proving that the budget he drew up was no good: a good budget makes provisions for debilitating injury. The bank was a real bonanza, as far as lines and printed materials were concerned. They gave you a free dictionary. The dictionary didn't include "ratatouille" or "Tasmanian devil."

On the staircase approaching my room, I could hear tuneless singing and the slap of plastic slippers. My new roommate, Hannah, was standing on a chair, taping a sign that read HANNAH PARK'S DESK over her desk, chanting monotonously along with Blues Traveler on her Discman. When I came in, she turned in a pantomime of surprise, pitching to and fro, then jumped noisily to the floor and took off her headphones.

"Have you considered mime as a career?" I asked.

"*Mime?* No, my dear, I'm afraid my parents sent me to Harvard to become a surgeon, not a mime." She blew her nose loudly. "Hey—*my* bank didn't give me a dictionary!"

"It doesn't have 'Tasmanian devil,'" I said.

She took the dictionary from my hands, rifling the pages. "It has plenty of words."

I told her she could have it. She put it on the shelf next to the dictionary she had gotten in high school, for being the valedictorian. "They look good together," she said. I asked if her other dictionary had "Tasmanian devil." It didn't. "Isn't the Tasmanian devil a cartoon character?" she asked, looking suspicious. I showed her the page in my other dictionary that had not just "Tasmanian devil," but also "Tasmanian wolf," with a picture of the wolf glancing, a bit sadly, over its left shoulder.

Hannah stood very close to me and stared at the page. Then she looked right and left and whispered hotly in my ear, "That music has been playing

all day long.”

“What music?”

“Shhh—stand absolutely still.”

We stood absolutely still. Faint romantic strings drifted from under the door of our other roommate, Angela.

“It’s the sound track for *Legends of the Fall*,” whispered Hannah. “She’s been playing it all morning, since I got up. She’s just been sitting in there with the door shut, playing the tape over and over again. I knocked and asked her to turn it down but you can still hear it. I had to listen to my Discman to drown her out.”

“It’s not that loud,” I said.

“But it’s just weird that she sits there like that.”

Angela had gotten to our three-person, two-bedroom suite at seven the previous morning and taken the single bedroom, leaving Hannah and me to share the one with bunk beds. When I got there in the evening, I found Hannah storming around in a fury, moving furniture, sneezing, and shouting about Angela. “I never even saw her!” Hannah yelled from under her desk. She suddenly succeeded in detaching two things she had been pulling at, and banged her head. “OWW!” she yelled. She crawled out and pointed wrathfully at Angela’s desk. “These books? They’re fake!” She seized what looked like a stack of four leather-bound volumes, one with *THE HOLY BIBLE* printed on the spine, shook it under my nose, and slammed it down again. It was a wooden box. “What’s even in there?” She knocked on the Bible. “Her last testament?”

“Hannah, please be gentle with other people’s property,” said a soft voice, and I noticed two small Koreans, evidently Hannah’s parents, sitting in the window seat.

Angela came in. She had a sweet expression and was black, and was wearing a Harvard windbreaker and a Harvard backpack. Hannah immediately confronted her about the single room.

“Hmm, yeah,” Angela said. “It’s just I got here really early and I had so many suitcases.”

“I kind of noticed the suitcases,” said Hannah. She flung open the door to Angela’s room. A yellowed cloth and a garland of cloth roses had been draped over the one tiny window, and in the murk stood four or five human-sized suitcases.

I said maybe we could each have the single room for a third of the year, with Angela going first. Angela’s mother came in, dragging another suitcase. She stood in the doorway to Angela’s room. “It is what it is,” she said.

Hannah's father stood up and took out a camera. "First college roommates! That's an important relationship!" he said. He took several pictures of Hannah and me but none of Angela.

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Hannah bought a refrigerator for the common room. She said I could use it if I bought something for the room, too, like a poster. I asked what kind of poster she had in mind.

"Psychedelic," she said.

I didn't know what a psychedelic poster was, so she showed me her psychedelic notebook. It had a fluorescent tie-dyed spiral, with purple lizards walking around the spiral and disappearing into the center.

"What if they don't have that?" I asked.

"Then a photograph of Albert Einstein," she said decisively, as if it were the obvious next choice.

"Albert Einstein?"

"Yeah, one of those black-and-white pictures. You know: Einstein."

The campus bookstore turned out to have a huge selection of Albert Einstein posters. There was Einstein at a blackboard, Einstein in a car, Einstein sticking out his tongue, Einstein smoking a pipe. I didn't totally understand why we had to have an image of Einstein on the wall. But it was better than buying my own refrigerator.

The poster I got was no better or worse than the other Einstein posters in any way that I could see, but Hannah seemed to dislike it. "Hmm," she said. "I think it'll look good there." She pointed to the space over my bookshelf.

"But then *you* can't see it."

"That's okay. It goes best there."

From that day on, everyone who happened by our room—neighbors wanting to borrow stuff, residential computer staff, student council candidates, all kinds of people to whom my small enthusiasms should have been a source of little or no concern—went out of their way to disabuse me of my great admiration for Albert Einstein. Einstein had invented the atomic bomb, abused dogs, neglected his children. "There were many greater geniuses than Einstein," said a Bulgarian freshman who had stopped by to borrow my copy of Dostoevsky's *The Double*. "Alfred Nobel hated mathematics and didn't give the Nobel Prize to any mathematicians. There were many who were more deserving."

"Oh." I handed him the book. "Well, see you around."

"Thanks," he said, glaring at the poster. "This is the man who beats his wife, forces her to solve his mathematical problems, to do the dirty work,

and he denies her credit. And you put his picture on your wall.”

“Listen, leave me out of this,” I said. “It’s not really my poster. It’s a complicated situation.”

He wasn’t listening. “Einstein in this country is synonymous with genius, while many greater geniuses aren’t famous at all. Why is this? I am asking you.”

I sighed. “Maybe it’s because he’s really the best, and even jealous mudslingers can’t hide his star quality,” I said. “Nietzsche would say that such a great genius is *entitled* to beat his wife.”

That shut him up. After he left, I thought about taking down the poster. I wanted to be a courageous person, uncowed by other people’s dumb opinions. But what was the dumb opinion: thinking Einstein was so great, or thinking he was the worst? In the end, I left the poster up.

• • •

Hannah snored. Everything in the room that wasn’t a solid block of wood—the windowpanes, the bed girders, the mattress springs, my rib cage—vibrated in sympathy. It did no good to wake her up or roll her over. She just started again a minute later. If she was asleep, I was by definition awake, and vice versa.

I convinced Hannah that she had obstructive sleep apnea, which was depriving her brain cells of oxygen and compromising her chances of getting into a top-ten medical school. She went to the campus health center and came back with a box of adhesive strips that were supposed to prevent snoring by sticking to your nose. A photograph on the box showed a man and a woman gazing into the distance, wearing matching plastic nose strips, a breeze ruffling the woman’s hair.

Hannah pulled her nose up from the side, and I smoothed the strip in place with my thumbs. Her face felt so small and doll-like that I felt a wave of tenderness toward her. Then she started yelling about something, and the feeling passed. The nose strips actually worked, but they gave Hannah sinus headaches, so she stopped using them.

• • •

In the long days that stretched between even longer nights, I stumbled from room to room taking placement tests. You had to sit in a basement writing essays about whether it was better to be a Renaissance person or a specialist. There was a quantitative reasoning test full of melancholy word problems—“The graph models the hypothetical mass in grams of a broiler chicken up to eighty weeks of age”—and every evening was some big meeting where you sat on the floor and learned that you were now a little fish in a big sea, and were urged to view this circumstance as an

exhilarating challenge rather than a source of anxiety. I tried not to give too much weight to the thing about the fish, but after a while it started to get me down anyway. It was hard to feel cheerful when someone kept telling you you were a little fish in a big sea.

• • •

My academic adviser, Carol, had a British accent and worked at the Office of Information Technology. Twenty years ago, in the 1970s, she had received a master's degree from Harvard in Old Norse. I knew that the Office of Information Technology was where you mailed your telephone bill each month. Other than that, its sphere of activity was mysterious. How was Old Norse involved? On the subject of her work, Carol said only, "I wear many hats."

Hannah and I both caught a terrible cold. We took turns buying cold medicine and knocked it back like shots from the little plastic cup.

When it came time to choose classes, everyone said it was of utmost importance to apply to freshman seminars, because otherwise it could be years before you had a chance to work with senior faculty. I applied to three literature seminars and got called in for one interview. I reported to the top floor of a cold white building, where I shivered for twenty minutes on a leather sofa under a skylight wondering if I was in the right place. There were some strange newspapers on the coffee table. That was the first time I saw the *Times Literary Supplement*. I couldn't understand anything in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

A door opened and the professor called me in. He extended his hand—an enormous hand on an incredibly skinny, pale wrist, further dwarfed by a gigantic overcoat.

"I don't think I should shake your hand," I said. "I have this cold." Then I had a violent fit of sneezing. The professor looked startled, but recovered quickly. "Gesundheit," he said urbanely. "I'm sorry you aren't feeling well. These first days of college can be rough on the immune system."

"So I'm learning," I said.

"Well, that's what it's all about," he said. "Learning! Ha, ha."

"Ha, ha," I said.

"Well, let's get down to business. From your application, you seem to be very creative. I enjoyed your creative application essay. My only concern is that you realize this seminar is an academic class, not a creative class."

"Right," I said, nodding energetically and trying to determine whether any of the rectangles in my peripheral vision was a box of tissues.

Unfortunately, they were all books. The professor was talking about the differences between creative and academic writing. I kept nodding. I was thinking about the structural equivalences between a tissue box and a book: both consisted of slips of white paper in a cardboard case; yet—and this was ironic—there was very little functional equivalence, especially if the book wasn't yours. These were the kinds of things I thought about all the time, even though they were neither pleasant nor useful. I had no idea what you were supposed to be thinking about.

“Do you think,” the professor was saying, “that you could spend two hours reading the same passage, the same sentence, even the same word? Do you think you might find it tedious, or boring?”

Because my ability to spend hours staring at a single word had rarely been encouraged in the past, I pretended to have to think it over. “No,” I said finally.

The professor nodded, frowning thoughtfully and narrowing his eyes. I understood with a sinking feeling that I was supposed to keep talking. “I *like* words,” I elaborated. “They don't bore me at all.” Then I sneezed five times.

I didn't get in. I got called to only one other interview, for Form in the Nonfiction Film: a seminar I had applied to because my mother, who had always wanted to be an actress, had lately joined a screenwriting class and now wanted to make a documentary about the lives of foreign medical graduates in America—about people who hadn't passed the medical board exams and ended up driving taxis or working in drugstores, and about people like my mother who passed the boards and became research faculty at second-tier schools, where they kept getting scooped by people at Johns Hopkins and Harvard. My mother had often expressed the hope and belief that I would help her make this documentary.

The film professor had an even worse cold than I did. It felt magical, like a gift. We met in a basement room full of flickering blue screens. I told him about my mother, and we both sneezed continually. That was the only freshman seminar I got into.

. . .

I went to the snack counter in the student center to buy a Diet Coke. The guy in front of me in line was taking forever to order. First he wanted iced tea, but there wasn't any.

“Do you have lemonade?” he asked.

“Lemonade, I have in the can and the bottle.”

“Is it the same brand in the can and the bottle?”

“The bottle is Snapple. The can is, uh, Country Time.”

“I’d like the bottle of lemonade, and an apple Danish.”

“I’m out of the apple. I got cheese and raspberry.”

“Oh. Do you have baked potato chips?”

“You mean the kind that’s baked?”

It was the world’s most boring conversation, but somehow I couldn’t stop listening. It went on like that until finally the guy had paid for his Snapple lemonade and blueberry muffin and turned to leave. “Sorry for taking so long,” he said. He was really good-looking.

“That’s okay,” I said.

He smiled, started to walk away, but hesitated. “Selin?”

“Ralph!” I exclaimed, realizing that he was this guy I knew, Ralph.

Ralph and I had met the previous summer at a program for high school juniors where you spent five weeks in a house in New Jersey studying the interdisciplinary history of the Northern European Renaissance. The thing that had brought us together was how the art history teacher mentioned the Doge of Venice, whom she called simply “the Doge,” in every lecture, regardless of subject. She could be talking about the daily lives of burghers in Delft and somehow the Doge would come into it. Nobody else seemed to notice this, or to think it was funny.

We sat together with our drinks and his muffin. There was something dreamlike about our conversation, because I found that I couldn’t quite remember how well we had known each other last summer. I remembered that I had admired him, because he was so good at imitating people. Also, I found that I now somehow knew a lot of information about his five aunts—more than one would know about someone who wasn’t a friend. At the same time, Ralph was somehow categorized in my mind as the kind of person I would never truly be friends with, because he was so handsome, and so good at relating to adults. He was what my mother called, in Turkish, a “family boy”: clean-cut, well-spoken, the type who didn’t mind wearing a suit or talking to his parents’ friends. My mother had really liked Ralph.

Ralph and I talked about our freshman seminar interviews. He had interviewed for a seminar with a Nobel Prize–winning physicist who hadn’t asked a single question and just made Ralph wash some lab equipment. The equipment might have been a gamma ray detector.

• • •

I applied for a class called Constructed Worlds, in the studio art department. I met the instructor, a visiting artist from New York, in a studio full of empty white tables, bringing my high school art portfolio. The visiting artist squinted at my face.

“So how old are you anyway?” he asked.

“Eighteen.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake. This isn’t a freshman class.”

“Oh. Should I leave?”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. Let’s take a look at your work.” He was still looking at me, not the portfolio. “Eighteen,” he repeated, shaking his head. “When I was your age I was dropping acid and cutting high school. I was working summers in a fish factory in Secaucus. Secaucus, New Jersey.” He looked at me disapprovingly, as though I were somehow behind schedule.

“Maybe that’s what I’ll be doing when I’m *your* age,” I suggested.

“Yeah, right.” He snorted and put on a pair of glasses. “Well, let’s see what we’ve got here.” He stared at the pictures in silence. I looked out the window at two squirrels running up a tree. One squirrel lost its grip and fell, crashing through the layers of foliage. This was something I had never seen before.

“Well, look,” said the visiting artist finally. “Your composition in the drawings is . . . okay. I can be honest with you, right? But these paintings seem to me . . . sort of little-girlish? Do you see what I’m saying?”

I looked at the pictures he had spread out on the table. It wasn’t that I couldn’t see what he meant. “The thing is,” I said, “it wasn’t so long ago that I was a little girl.”

He laughed. “True enough, true enough. Well, I’ll make my decision this weekend. You’ll be hearing from me. Or maybe you won’t.”

. . .

Hannah was applying to be a campus tour guide. I heard her in the shower in the morning, reciting Harvard trivia in an enchanting voice. Later, when she didn’t get the job and stopped reciting the trivia, I found that I somehow missed it.

I went with Angela to an introductory meeting at the Harvard student newspaper, where a young man with sideburns told us repeatedly, in the most aggressive manner, that the Harvard student newspaper was his life. “It’s my *life*,” he kept saying with a venomous expression. Angela and I exchanged glances.

. . .

On Sunday evening the phone rang. It was the visiting artist. “Your essay was somewhat interesting,” he said. “Most of the essays were actually incredibly . . . boring? So, in fact, I’ll be happy to have you in my class.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Sorry?”

“Are you accepting?”

“Can I think about it?”

“Can you think about it? I mean, not really. I have a lot of other applicants I can call,” he said. “So are you in or are you out?”

“I guess I’m in.”

“Good. See you Thursday.”

• • •

I auditioned for the college orchestra. The conductor’s office was a hexagonal room with a bay window, a grand piano, and shelves full of books: orchestral scores, encyclopedias, volumes of music history and criticism. I had never seen a music person with so many books. I played the sonata I had prepared. My hands didn’t shake, the room had great acoustics, and the conductor’s expression was kind and attentive.

“That was lovely,” he said, with some special emphasis I couldn’t interpret. “Just very, very nice.”

“Thanks,” I said. The following Monday, I went back to the music building to look at the seating chart. My name wasn’t there, not even in the second violins, nowhere. I could feel my face change. I tried to control it, but I could feel it wasn’t working. I knew that everyone and his cousin at Harvard played the violin, it was practically mandatory, and there was no way they could all fit in a single orchestra—the stage would collapse. Still, I had never seriously considered that I might not get in.

I didn’t have a religion, and I didn’t do team sports, and for a long time orchestra had been the only place where I felt like part of something bigger than I was, where I was able to strive and at the same time to forget myself. The loss of that feeling was extremely painful. It would have been bad enough to be someplace where there were no orchestras, but it was even worse to know that there was one, and lots of people were in it—just not me. I dreamed about it almost every night.

I wasn’t taking private lessons anymore—I didn’t know any teachers in Boston, and I didn’t want to ask my parents for more money. For the first few months, I still practiced every day, alone, in the basement, but it began to feel like a sad, weird activity, disconnected from the rest of human enterprise. Soon just the smell of the violin—the glue or the wood or whatever it was that smelled like that when you opened the case—made me feel melancholy. I still sometimes woke up on Saturdays, the day I used to go to music school, feeling excited to go and play; then I would remember how matters stood.

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It was hard to decide on a literature class. Everything the professors said seemed to be somehow beside the point. You wanted to know why Anna had to die, and instead they told you that nineteenth-century Russian landowners felt conflicted about whether they were really a part of Europe. The implication was that it was somehow naïve to want to talk about anything interesting, or to think that you would ever know anything important.

I wasn't interested in society, or ancient people's money troubles. I wanted to know what books really meant. That was how my mother and I had always talked about literature. "I need you to read this, too," she would say, handing me a *New Yorker* story in which an unhappily married man had to get a rabies shot, "so you can tell me what it really means." She believed, and I did, too, that every story had a central meaning. You could get that meaning, or you could miss it completely.

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I went to Linguistics 101, to see what linguistics was about. It was about how language was a biological faculty, hardwired into the brain—infinite, regenerative, never the same twice. The highest law, higher than Holy Scripture, was "the intuition of a native speaker," a law you couldn't find in any grammar book or program into any computer. Maybe that was what I wanted to learn. Whenever my mother and I were talking about a book and I thought of something that she hadn't thought of, she would look at me and say admiringly, "You really speak English."

The linguistics professor, a gentle phonetician with a mild speech impediment, specialized in Turkic tribal dialects. Sometimes he would give examples from Turkish to show how different morphology could be in non-Indo-European languages, and then he would smile at me and say, "I know we have some Turkish speakers here." Once, in the hallway before class, he told me about his work on regional consonantal variations of the names for some kind of a fire pit that Turkic people dug somewhere.

• • •

I ended up taking a literature class, too, about the nineteenth-century novel and the city in Russia, England, and France. The professor often talked about the inadequacy of published translations, reading us passages from novels in French and Russian, to show how bad the translations were. I didn't understand anything he said in French or Russian, so I preferred the translations.

The worst part of the literature class came at the end when the professor answered questions. No matter how dumb and obvious the

questions were, he never seemed to understand them. “I’m not quite sure I see what you’re asking,” he would say. “If, however, what you mean to say is this other thing . . .” Then he would talk about the other thing, which usually wasn’t interesting, either. Often one or more students would insist on trying to convey the original question, waving their arms and making other gestures, until the professor’s face became a mask of annoyance and he suggested that, out of consideration for the rest of the class, the discussion be continued during his office hours. This breakdown of communication was very depressing to me.

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You were only supposed to take four classes, but when I found out they didn’t charge extra for five, I signed up for beginning Russian.

The teacher, Barbara, a graduate student from East Germany—she specifically said “East Germany”—told us about Russian names and patronymics. Since her father’s name was Dieter, her full Russian name would have been Barbara Dietrevna. “But Barbara Dietrevna doesn’t really sound Russian,” she said, “so I call myself Varvara Dmitrievna—as if my father’s name were Dmitri.”

We all had to have Russian names, too, though we didn’t need patronymics, because we weren’t figures of authority. Greg became Grisha, Katie became Katya. There were two foreign students whose names didn’t change—Ivan from Hungary and Svetlana from Yugoslavia. Svetlana asked if she could change her name to Zinaida, but Varvara said that Svetlana was already such a good Russian name. My name, on the other hand, though lovely, didn’t end with an *-a* or a *-ya*, which would cause complications when we learned cases. Varvara said I could choose any Russian name I wanted. Suddenly I couldn’t think of any. “Maybe *I* could be Zinaida,” I suggested.

Svetlana turned in her seat and stared into my face. “That is so unfair,” she told me. “You’re a perfect Zinaida.”

It somehow seemed to me that Varvara didn’t want anyone to be called Zinaida, so I looked at the page of Russian names, and chose Sonya.

“Hey, Sonya, what a drag,” Svetlana told me sympathetically in the elevator afterward. “I think you’re much more like a Zinaida. Too bad *Varvara Dmitrievna* is such a zealous Slavophile.”

“You guys were really torturing her with that Zinaida business,” said Ivan, the Hungarian, who was unusually, almost unreasonably tall. We turned to look up at him. “I felt really bad,” he continued. “I thought she was going to destroy herself. That it would be too much for her German sense of order.” Nobody said anything for the rest of the elevator ride.

Ivan's comment about the "German sense of order" was my first introduction to this stereotype. It made me remember a joke I had never understood in *Anna Karenina*, when Oblonsky says, of the German clockmaker, "The German has been wound up for life to wind up clocks." Were Germans supposed to be particularly ordered and machinelike? Was it possible that Germans really *were* ordered and machinelike? Varvara was always early to class, and always dressed the same, in a white blouse and a narrow dark skirt. Her tote bag always contained the same three vocabulary items: a Stolichnaya bottle, a lemon, and a red rubber mouse, like the contents of some depressing refrigerator.

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Russian met every day, and quickly started to feel internalized and routine and serious, even though what we were learning were things that tiny children knew if they had been born in Russia. Once a week, we had a conversation class with an actual Russian person, Irina Nikolaevna, who had been a drama teacher in Petersburg when it was still Leningrad. She always came running in a minute or two late, talking nonstop in Russian in a lively and emotional way. Everyone reacted differently to being spoken to in a language they didn't understand. Katya got quiet and scared. Ivan leaned forward with an amused expression. Grisha narrowed his eyes and nodded in a manner suggesting the dawn of comprehension. Boris, a bearded doctoral student, rifled guiltily through his notes like someone having a nightmare that he was already supposed to speak Russian. Only Svetlana understood almost everything, because Serbo-Croatian was so similar.

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The Boston T was completely different from the New York subway—the lines named after colors, the cars so clean and small, like toys. And yet it wasn't a toy, grown men used it, with serious expressions on their faces. The Red Line went in two directions: Alewife and Braintree. Such names were unheard of in New Jersey, where everything was called Ridgely, Glen Ridge, Ridgewood, or Woodbridge.

Ralph and I went to a pastry shop he knew in the North End. They sold cannoli like phone receivers, Noël logs like logs, elephant-ear cookies. Ralph ordered a lobster tail. I had a slab of German chocolate cake the size of a child's tombstone.

Ralph was doing premed and taking classes in art history, but thought he might major in government. Most government majors belonged to a social type known as "gov jocks." It wasn't clear to me what was going to happen to them after college. Were they going to be our rulers? Would

Ralph become one of them? Was he one, somehow, already? Surely he was too funny, and not interested enough in war. But he did have a certain all-American quality, a kind of clean-cut broad-shoulderedness, as well as a powerful obsession with the Kennedys. He imitated them all the time, Jack and Jackie, with their slow, goofy 1960s voices.

“I’ve so enjoyed campaigning, Mrs. Kennedy,” he said, looking in the distance with a startled, stymied expression. Ralph had already applied for an internship at the JFK Presidential Library.

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Constructed Worlds met on Thursdays, for one hour before lunch and three hours after. Before lunch, the visiting artist, Gary, gave a lecture with slides while pacing around the room and giving decreasingly genial instructions to his TA, a silent Gothic-looking person called Rebecca.

On the first day, we looked at pictures of genre scenes. In one painting, shirtless muscular men were planing a floor. In another, gleaners stooped over a yellow field. Then came a film still of people in evening dress sitting in a theater box, followed by a cartoonish drawing of a party full of grotesque men and women leering over cocktail glasses.

“How *well* do you know this party?” Gary exhaled, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “You look at it and think: I *know* that scene. I’ve been to that exact fucking cocktail party. And if you haven’t yet, you will—I guarantee it, you’ll find yourself there someday. Because you all want to succeed, and that’s the only way to do it. . . . *Selin* doesn’t believe me, but she will someday.”

I jumped. The cocktail party was reproduced in miniature in Gary’s eyeglasses. “Oh no, I believe you,” I said.

Gary chuckled. “Is that sincerity or what? Well I hope you do believe me, because someday you’re going to know that scene by heart. You’re going to know what every last one of them is saying and eating and thinking.” He said it like it was a curse. “Power, sex, sex *as* power. It’s all right there.” He tapped the bilious face of a man who was holding a martini glass in one hand and playing the piano with the other. I decided that Gary was wrong, that I was definitely not going to know that man. He would probably be dead by the time I even turned drinking age.

The next slide showed a color photograph of a woman applying lipstick at a vanity table. The photograph had been taken from behind, but her face was visible in the mirror.

“Putting on the face: preparing the self for display, for a party or a performance,” Gary chanted. “Look at her expression. *Look* at it. Does she look happy?”

There was a long silence. “No,” intoned one student—a skinny junior with a shaved head, whose name either was or sounded like “Ham.”

“Thank you. She does *not* look happy. I count this as a genre scene rather than a portrait, because what we see is the generic situation: what is at stake in the invention of the self.”

The next slide was an etching of a theater from the perspective of the stage, showing the unpainted backs of the scenery, the silhouettes of three actors, and, beyond the footlights, a big black space.

“Artifice,” Gary blurted, like someone having a seizure. “Frames. Who selects what we see?” He started talking about how museums, which we thought of as the gateway to art, were actually the main agents of hiding art from the public. Every museum owned ten, twenty, a hundred times as many paintings as were ever seen on display. The curator was like the superego, burying 99 percent of thoughts in the dark behind a door marked PRIVATE. The curator had the power to make or break the artist—to keep someone *sup*-pressed or *re*-pressed for a lifetime. As he spoke, Gary seemed to grow increasingly angry and agitated.

“You have Harvard ID cards. That ID card will open doors for you. Why don’t you use it? Why don’t you go to the museums, to the Fogg Museum, the Museum of Comparative Zoology, the Glass Flowers gallery, and demand to see what they aren’t showing you? They have to show you once you have the card. They have to let you in, you know.”

“Let’s do it!” called Ham.

“You want to? You really want to?” said Gary.

It was time to break for lunch. After we got back, we were going to go to the museums and demand to see the things they weren’t showing us.

. . .

I was the only freshman in the class, so I went by myself to the freshman cafeteria. Portraits of old men hung on the dark paneled walls. The ceiling was so high you could barely see it, though with effort you could make out some pale specks, apparently pats of butter that had been flicked up there in the 1920s by high-spirited undergraduates. I thought they sounded like assholes. What light there was came from a few high small windows and several massive chandeliers with antlers on them. Whenever a lightbulb burned out, a handyman had to climb up a two-story ladder and bat at the antlers, ducking to avoid being gouged, until he could reach the right socket.

Exiting the lunch line with a falafel sandwich, I noticed Svetlana from Russian sitting alone near a window, with an open spiral notebook.