

FICTION JANUARY 23, 2017 ISSUE

CONSTRUCTED WORLDS

By Elif Batuman

**AUDIO:** *Elif Batuman reads.*

I didn't know what e-mail was until I got to college. I had heard of e-mail, 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."

That summer, I heard e-mail mentioned with increasing frequency. “Things are changing so fast, Selin,” my father said when I visited him that August. “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, where my parents had gone to medical school. I had no idea what my father was talking about, but he lived in New Orleans and 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 school, I stood in line behind a folding table and eventually received an e-mail address and a temporary password. I didn’t understand how the e-mail 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,” the girl sitting at the table said.

Insofar as I’d had any idea about it at all, I had imagined that e-mail 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 font, like the universal handwriting of thought. Some messages were formally epistolary, employing “Dear” and “Sincerely”; others telegraphic, all in lowercase with no punctuation, as if they were being beamed straight from someone’s brain. And each message contained the one that had come before, so that your own words came back to you—all the words you threw out, they came back. It was as if the story of your relations with others were constantly being recorded and updated, and you could check it at any time.

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 another real bonanza, as far as lines and printed materials were concerned. I got 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 above her desk that read "Hannah Park's Desk" and 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 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. "Hey—no one gave *me* a dictionary!"

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

She took the dictionary from my hands, riffling 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 been given 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?"

"Sh-h-h. Stand absolutely still."

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

“It’s the soundtrack for ‘The Last of the Mohicans,’ ” Hannah whispered. “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 got to our three-person, two-bedroom suite at seven the previous morning and had taken the single bedroom, leaving Hannah and me to share the one with bunk beds. When I arrived, in the evening, I found Hannah storming around, moving furniture, sneezing, and shouting about Angela. “I never even saw her!” Hannah yelled. She 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? Her last testament?”

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

Angela came in. She had a sweet expression; she was black, and wore 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 said maybe we could each have the single room for a third of the year, with Angela going first. 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.

Hannah bought a refrigerator for the common room. She said that 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. Its cover 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 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 O.K. 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, mistreated dogs, neglected his children. “There were many greater geniuses than Einstein,” a guy from down the hall, who had stopped by to borrow my copy of Dostoyevsky's “The Double,” said. “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, and then 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 is synonymous with genius in this country, 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 which was the

dumb opinion, thinking Einstein was so great or thinking he was the worst?

Hannah and I both caught a terrible cold. We took turns buying cold medicine and knocked it back from the little plastic cup as if we were doing shots.

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. Then a door opened and the professor called me in. He extended his hand—an enormous hand on an incredibly skinny, pale wrist.

“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 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.

“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 had recently joined a screenwriting class and wanted to make a documentary about the lives of foreign medical graduates in America—people who hadn't passed the medical-board exams and ended up driving taxis or working in drugstores, and 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.

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 applied for an art class called Constructed Worlds. 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,” the visiting artist finally said. “Your composition in the drawings is . . . O.K. 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.”

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. “O.K.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Sorry?”

“Are you accepting?”

“Can I think about it?”

“Why won’t you just admit you forgot where you parked the car?”

“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.”

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 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, 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 name for some kind of a fire pit that Turkic people dug somewhere.

ended up taking a literature class, too, about the city and the novel in nineteenth-century 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.

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

The teacher, Barbara, was a graduate student from East Germany—she specifically said "East Germany." She said that in Russian her name would be Varvara. We all had to choose Russian names, too. Greg became Grisha, Katie became Katya. There were two foreign students whose names didn't change—Iván 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, and in the end my name was Sonya.

"Hey, Sonya, what a drag," Svetlana said sympathetically in the elevator afterward. "I think you're much more like a Zinaida."

"You guys were really torturing her with that Zinaida business," said Iván, the Hungarian, who was unusually tall. We turned to look up at him. "I felt really bad," he continued. "I thought that 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.

Iván'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, that he "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.

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 issuing decreasingly genial instructions to his T.A., 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 cartoonish drawing of a party full of grotesque men and women leering over cocktail glasses.

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“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. “Well, I hope you do, because someday you’re going to know that scene by heart. You’re going to know what every last one of those people 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 was an etching of a theatre 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 ninety-nine per cent of thoughts in the dark. 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 I.D. cards. That I.D. card will open doors for you. Why don’t you use it? Why don’t you go 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 let you in, you know.”

“Let’s do it!” one student, whose name either was or sounded like Ham, shouted.

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

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 panelled 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 nineteen-twenties by some high-spirited undergraduates.

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

“Sonya, hi!” she called. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you. You’re taking linguistics, right?”

“How did you know?” I pulled out the chair across from her.

“I shopped the class last week. I saw you there. How is it?”

“It’s O.K.,” I said. I told her about the fire pits that the Turkic peoples dug, about how vowels changed over time and geography.

“That’s *interesting*.” She placed an almost voracious emphasis on the word “interesting.” “I’m sure it’s much more *interesting* than Psych 101, but you see it’s inevitable, really, that I should take psychology, since my father is an analyst. A Jungian, a real big shot. He founded the only serious journal of psychoanalysis in Yugoslavia. Then two of his patients became opposition leaders and the Party started harassing my dad. To get the transcripts. Of course, they had it in for him, anyway.”

“Did they get the transcripts?” I asked.

“Nope—there weren’t any. My father has a photographic memory. He never writes anything down. I’m just the opposite, a real graphomaniac. It’s pretty sad, really. I mean, look at all the notes I’ve taken, and it’s only the second week of school.” Svetlana flipped through her notebook, displaying many pages covered on both sides in tiny, curly handwriting. She picked up her fork and judiciously composed a forkful of salad.

“Soldiers searched our apartment,” she said, “looking for the imaginary transcripts. They came in uniforms with guns at eleven at night and trashed the place—even my room and my sisters’ and brother’s rooms. They took all our toys out of the box and threw them on the floor. I had a new *doll*, and the *doll* broke.”

“That’s terrible,” I said.

“I cried and cried. And my mother was so angry at my father.” Svetlana sighed. “I can’t believe this,” she said. “This is the first real conversation we’re having and already I’m burdening you with my emotional baggage. Enough—tell me about yourself. Are you going to major in linguistics?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I might do art.” I told her about Constructed Worlds—about how museums hid things from people, and how the class seemed to be planning some kind of heist.

“I would never have the nerve to take a class like that,” she said. “I’m very traditional, academically—another legacy from my father. Basically, when I was five, he told me all the books to read, and I’ve been reading them ever since. I have some bad news, by the way—we’re not going to be in the same Russian class anymore. I had to transfer into another section, because of my psych lab.”

“That’s too bad.”

“I know. But don’t worry—I think we live in the same dorm. I’m pretty sure we’ll end up seeing a lot of each other.” I felt moved and flattered by how sure she sounded. I wrote her phone number on my hand, while she wrote mine in her daily planner. Already I was the impetuous one in our friendship—the one who cared less about tradition, who evaluated every situation from scratch, as if it had arisen for the first time—while Svetlana was the one who subscribed to rules and systems, who saw herself as the inheritor of centuries of human history and ways of doing things.

In the second part of Constructed Worlds, we went to the Museum of Comparative Zoology, where we saw a brace of pheasants that had belonged to George Washington, a turtle collected by Thoreau, and “about a million ants,” described as “E. O. Wilson’s favorites.” I was impressed that E. O. Wilson had been able to identify, in this world of seemingly infinite ants, his one million favorites.

After an hour of bugging the people at the front desk and standing around while they made phone calls, we got someone to show us the back room, where they kept things that weren't on display. There was a New Zealand diorama—a plaster meadow littered with decrepit stuffed sheep, as well as an emu and a kiwi bird—that had become infested with moths. “We've mostly been disinfecting, and patching up with acrylic,” a museum employee told us.

“Acrylic? Why don't you use wool?” Gary asked.

“Hmm. We tried wool first, but acrylic holds better.”

“Do you see?” Gary demanded, turning to the class. “Do you see the artifice?”

“So this is what the curators are hiding from us,” Ham remarked of a bison that had stuffing pouring out of its guts.

Gary laughed mirthlessly. “You think it's really any different at the Whitney or the Met? Let me tell you, kid, it's all blood and guts in the back room, in one form or another.”

For the nonfiction-film seminar, we watched “Man of Aran,” a silent movie from the nineteen-thirties, which had been filmed on an island off the coast of Ireland. First, a woman rocked a baby in a cradle. Next, the woman and a man dug in the ground with sticks. “The land upon which Man of Aran depends for his subsistence—potatoes—has not even soil!” the intertitle read. Finally, a man harpooned a basking shark, and then scraped something with a knife.

Never in my life had I seen such a boring movie. I chewed nine consecutive sticks of gum, to remind myself I was still alive. The boy in front of me fell asleep and started to snore. The professor didn't notice, because he himself had left after the first half hour. “I've already seen this film several times,” he said.

In class, the professor told us that, by the time of the film's making, fifty years had passed since the people of Aran had harpooned anything. To capture the ancient practice on film, the director had imported a harpoon from the British Museum and instructed the islanders in its use. Knowing this, the professor asked, could we rightly classify the film as nonfiction? We had to debate this question for an hour. I couldn't believe it. *That* was the difference between fiction and nonfiction? That was something you were supposed to care about?

I was more concerned by the question of whether the professor was kind or not, whether he liked us. "It's so interesting how you think there is, or should be, a right or a wrong answer," he said to one student, in a gentle voice. At the end of class, another student said he had to miss next week's meeting to visit his brother in Prague.

"I guess I can't try to tape-record the class, can I?" the boy asked.

"That would be completely worthless," the professor said in a friendly tone. "Don't you think?"

"We've tried all the news channels—this guy is unbreakable."

In literature class, we started reading Balzac. Unlike Dickens, to whom he was sometimes compared, Balzac didn't care for or about children, and was essentially unhumorous. Children weren't important to him at all—they barely figured in his world. His attitude toward them was dismissive, even contemptuous, and, though he could certainly be witty, he wasn't what you would really call funny, not like Dickens was. As the professor spoke, I became aware of a slight sense of injury. It seemed to me that Balzac's attitude toward *me* would have been dismissive and contemptuous. It wasn't that I was a child, exactly, but that I didn't really have a history as anything else. At the same time, it was exciting to think that there was a universe—"a *monde*," the professor kept calling it, annoyingly—that was completely other from everything I had been and done up to now.

The Boston T was totally 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.

Svetlana and I took the T to Brookline to visit a Russian grocery store that rented out videos. The tracks ran down the middle of a two-way street lined by endlessly recurring churches, graveyards, hospitals, and schools: institutions of which Boston seemed to have an infinite supply. Svetlana was telling me about a dream she'd had that she went to Taco Bell and had to eat a burrito made of human flesh.

"I knew my father would be angry if I ate it, but also that he secretly wanted me to," Svetlana shouted, to be heard over the train. "O.K., so the burrito is obviously a phallus, a *human* phallus—it's simultaneously taboo, like cannibalism, and yet it's something that has to enter your body. I guess I think my father has ambiguous feelings about my sexuality."

I nodded, glancing around the train car. A hundred-per-cent-impassive old woman with a shawl over her head was glaring at the floor.

"Sometimes I wonder about the man I'll eventually lose my virginity to," Svetlana continued. "I'm pretty sure it'll happen in college. I've had relationships that were intellectually erotic, but nothing ever happened physically. In a way, I feel like a sexual bomb waiting to explode. How about you? Are you planning to have sex in college?"

"I don't know," I said. "I never really thought about it."

"I have," Svetlana said. "I look at strangers' faces while I'm walking down the street and wonder, Is he the one? I wonder whether I've seen him yet, whether I've read his name printed on some list or directory. He must exist *somewhere*—he can't not have been born yet. So where is he? Where's this thing that's going to go inside my body? You never wonder that?"

I had often flipped through a calendar wondering on which of the three hundred and sixty-six days (counting February 29th) I would die, but it had never once occurred to me to wonder whether I had already met the first person I would have sex with.

We got off at Euclid Circle. There was no circle—just a concrete platform with a pay phone and a sign that read “Euclid Circle.” I thought Euclid would have been mad. “That’s so typical of your attitude,” Svetlana said. “You always think everyone is angry. Try to have some perspective. It’s more than two thousand years after his death, he’s in Boston for the first time, they’ve named something after him—why should his first reaction be to get pissed off?”

Bells rang when we went into the Russian store, and then the smell of salami and smoked fish hit us in the face like a curtain. Two clerks, one fat and one thin, stood behind a glass counter.

“Hello,” Svetlana said in Russian.

“ ‘Hello,’ ” the clerks said, somehow making it sound ironic.

It was interesting to see so many Russian things: red and black caviar, stuffed cabbage, blini, piroshki, pickled mushrooms, pickled herrings, a muddy tank of carp that were alive, but perhaps only barely, and a barrel full of challenging-looking rectangular sweets, in wrappers printed with sentimental Cyrillic writing and pictures of squirrels. There was a whole aisle in the dry-goods section devoted to Turkish products: Koska halva, Tat pepper paste, Tamek rose-petal jam and canned grape leaves, and Eti biscuits. It turned out that Svetlana knew all these brands, because they had had them in Belgrade when she was growing up, and that the words for “eggplant,” “bean,” “chickpea,” and “sour cherry” were the same in Serbo-Croatian as in Turkish. “It stands to reason,” she said, “since the Turks occupied Serbia for four hundred years.” I nodded as if I knew what she was talking about.

Svetlana bought half a kilogram of loose tea and asked in exaggeratedly correct Russian if it was true that the store lent out videotapes.

One of the clerks handed her a binder with a list of titles. Svetlana flipped through the plastic-encased pages way faster than I could follow and picked out a Soviet comedy about a car-insurance agent.

On the train back, Svetlana told me a long story about a Serbian movie director and his wife, who was an actress. A young French director came into the story somehow, and then died tragically, by falling off a barstool. "They say it might have been suicide," Svetlana said.

By the time we got back to campus, at ten, I felt wiped out and speechless. I opened my notebook. "He died by falling off a barstool," I wrote. "It might have been suicide."

Svetlana took private French lessons from a grad student named Anouk. Every week, she wrote an essay about love, in French, and e-mailed it to Anouk, and they would meet at the Café Gato Rojo to discuss it together. Svetlana often recounted her essay to me when we were running together. Svetlana had no difficulty talking and running at the same time; she seemed able to keep it up indefinitely.

"For today," she said, "I wrote about how you can make absolutely anybody fall in love with you if you really try."

"But that's just not true," I said.

"Why not?"

"How could I make a Zulu chief fall in love with me?"

"Well, of course, you would need geographic and linguistic *access*, Selin."

Svetlana had written about whether love was a game that you could get infinitely good at—whether it was a matter of playing your cards right—or whether it existed in some kind of current and you just had to tap into it. She thought it was a matter of playing your cards right.

It was a mystery to me how Svetlana generated so many opinions. Any piece of information seemed to produce an opinion on contact. Meanwhile, I went from class to class, read hundreds—thousands—of pages of the distilled ideas of the great thinkers of human history, and nothing happened. In high school, I had been full of opinions, but high school had been like prison, with constant opposition and obstacles. Once the obstacles were gone, meaning seemed to vanish, too.

The final assignment for *Constructed Worlds* was to construct a world. I had decided to write and illustrate a story. Like all the stories I wrote at that time, it was based on an unusual atmosphere that had impressed me in real life. I had experienced the atmosphere I wanted to write about a few years earlier, when my mother and I were on vacation in Mexico. Something had gone wrong with the chartered bus, and instead of taking us to the airport it had left us in the pink-tiled courtyard of a strange hotel, where Albinoni's *Adagio* was playing on speakers, and something fell onto our arms, and we looked up and it was ashes. I was reading Camus's "The Plague"—that was my beach reading—and it seemed to me that we would always be there, in the pink courtyard, unable to leave.

I wanted to write a story that created just that mood—a pink hotel, Albinoni, ashes, and being unable to leave—in an exigent and dignified fashion. In real life, I had been in that courtyard for only three hours. I was an American teen-ager—the world's least interesting and dignified kind of person—brought there by my mother. It was the very definition of a nonevent. In my story, the characters would be stuck there for a long time, for a real, legitimate reason—like a sickness. The hotel would be somewhere far away, like Japan. The hotel management would be sorry that Albinoni's *Adagio* was being endlessly piped into the halls and lobby, but it would be a deep-rooted technical problem and difficult to fix.

Although *Constructed Worlds* was listed in the catalogue as a studio-art class, Gary said that studio was a waste of class time. We would have to learn to make time for art, like real artists. We weren't allowed to use the school's art supplies. This, too, was like life.

I went to the art store to buy supplies. Everything was too expensive. I ended up at an office-supply store. I bought two reams of bright-pink computer paper, and used them to cover the walls, floor, and furniture of my new bedroom: a third of the year had passed, and it was my turn for the single room, where I could now take photographs that would look as if they had been taken in a pink hotel. Anyone who spent any amount of time in my room ended up slightly nauseated, because of all the rubber cement. Svetlana said she couldn't imagine how I lived like I did. "You realize *you* are now a sick person in a pink hotel," she said.

Over winter vacation, I went home to New Jersey. Everything was at once overwhelmingly the same and ever so slightly different. The Oliveri sisters' plaster donkey was still standing in the driveway under the willow tree, just a little smaller than it had been. There was basmati rice in the cabinet—a thing I had never seen there before.

My mother invited some colleagues to dinner.

She had planned the menu from "The New Basics Cookbook." I was supposed to make the dessert, a raspberry angel-food cake with raspberry amaretto sauce. I had never made an angel-food cake before, and got really excited when it started to rise, but then I opened the oven too soon and it fell down in the middle, like a collapsing civilization.

My mother's colleagues were cartoonishly awful. It was hard to believe they were oncologists—the idea that they were supposed to make sick people feel better was comical. "Fifteen years from now, the department will be nothing but beige faces," the department head, who was wearing a bow tie, declared.

I burst out laughing. “I can’t believe you just said that,” I said.

My mother brought out the cake, which was by then completely flat.

“I see you have a flat cake for us—is that on purpose?” one of the oncologists asked. My mother’s boyfriend said it was a Fallen Angel cake. We ate it with the raspberry sauce. It was good, if you thought of it as a sort of pancake.

Later, my mother and I watched “The Sound of Music” on TV. Because of commercials, it took more than four hours. I was interested when the nuns sang about solving a problem like Maria. It seemed that “Maria” was actually a problem they had—that it was a code word for something.

Final exams were after the vacation, instead of before. Anyone who was in a seminar or language class had to be back on campus for reading period, which started on January 2nd. My mother was full of outrage and pity that my vacation was so short, but I was mostly glad to go back.

The atmosphere on the train in early January was totally different than it had been in mid-December. In December, the train had been full of students: students slumped in a fetal position, or cross-legged on the floor, students with all their accessories—sleeping bags, guitars, graphing calculators, sandwiches that were ninety-nine-per-cent lettuce, the Viking “Portable Jung.” In January, the passengers were sparser, older, more sober. I went to the café car, which smelled of coffee, of the striving toward consciousness. In one booth, a man in a suit was eating a Danish. In another, three girls were studying.

“Hey, Selin!” one girl said, and I realized it was Svetlana. She said that she usually took the shuttle back, but Logan was snowed in. Apparently, the shuttle was an airplane. “Now I think I’ll always take the train. It’s so peaceful,” she said.

Dusk was falling in Boston, which lay under eight inches of snow. We made a series of bad decisions, taking the T instead of a cab, then riding for several stops in the wrong

direction—toward Braintree, instead of toward Alewife. Such names were unheard of in New Jersey, where everything was called Ridgefield, Glen Ridge, Ridgewood, or Woodbridge.

The campus felt deserted. Half the lights were out in the cafeteria, and there was only one line open, serving spaghetti and canned peaches. Angela was still home with her family, and Hannah was stuck in St. Louis because of the snow. She e-mailed me about it constantly, sometimes in verse. I wrote back some verses, too.

I tried to work in the dorm, but it was too quiet. Every time I looked up, Einstein seemed to be looking back at me in an expectant way, as if to say, *Now what?*

Eventually, I went to the library. I sat at a fifth-floor window overlooking the Hong Kong Restaurant, an almost windowless structure that played a big role in Hannah's imagination. "Guess what it means if you order a 'red egg roll,' " she often said. A few doors down from the Hong Kong was a Baskin-Robbins, dark except for the glow from the freezers. I took out my computer—for the first time in my life, I had my own computer, an extra from my father's lab—and started to write about the people in the pink hotel.

Nothing good was happening in the pink hotel. The hotel was in Tokyo. A family was supposed to stay there for two nights. The father, a film director, was going to the countryside to shoot a nonfiction film about a nightingale farm. But the mother got sick, so she and the two daughters couldn't leave the hotel.

At two in the morning, the library closed and I walked home through the fresh snow. The clouds had cleared, revealing the stars. Light from even a nearby star was four years old by the time it reached your eyes. Where would I be in four years? I thought about it for a long time, but somehow I couldn't picture it. I couldn't picture any part of it at all. ♦

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