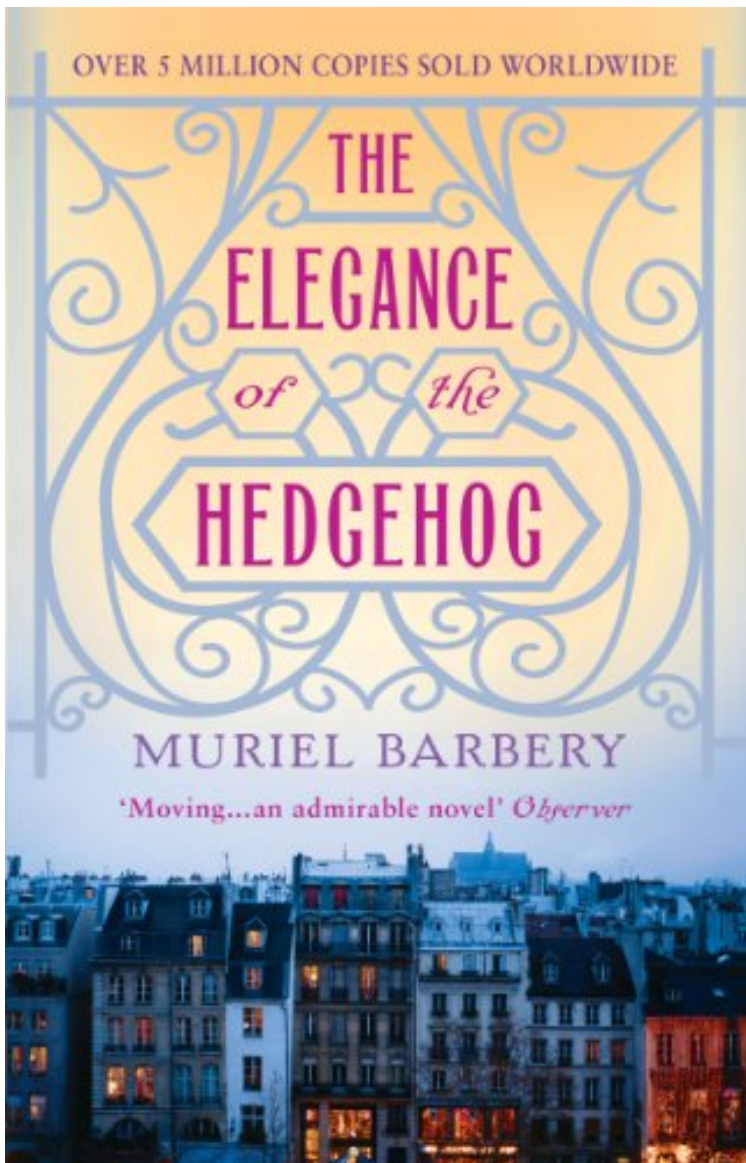


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The Elegance of the Hedgehog



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurRene is the concierge of a grand Parisian apartment building, home to members of the great and the good. Over the years she has maintained her carefully constructed persona as someone reliable but totally uncultivated, in keeping, she feels, with society's expectations of what a concierge should be. But beneath this faade lies the real Rene: passionate about culture and the arts, and more knowledgeable in many ways than her employers with their outwardly successful but emotionally void lives. Down in her lodge, apart from weekly visits by her one friend Manuela, Rene lives resigned to her lonely lot with only her cat for company. Meanwhile, several floors up, twelve-year-old Paloma Josse is determined to avoid the pampered and vacuous future laid out for her, and decides to end her life on her thirteenth birthday. But

unknown to them both, the sudden death of one of their privileged neighbours will dramatically alter their lives forever. Extrait By purchasing this digital edition you have been granted right to its private use only. All other uses, including those committed without knowledge of these conditions, are excluded and will be considered as a violation of copyright laws, an offense subject to prosecution. Europa Editions 116 East 16th Street New York, NY 10003 info@europaeditions.com www.europaeditions.com Copyright 2006 by Editions Gallimard, Paris First publication 2008 by Europa Editions Translation by Alison Anderson Original title: L'égance du hérisson Translation copyright 2008 by Europa Editions Cover/Emanuele Ragnisco www.mekkanografici.com ISBN 978-1-933372-60-0 (TPO, US) ISBN978-1-60945-013-7 (ePub, US) ISBN 978-1-60945-015-1 (ePub, World) Muriel Barbery THE ELEGANCE OF THE HEDGEHOG Translated from the French by Alison Anderson

MARX (Preamble) 1. Whosoever Sows Desire Marx has completely changed the way I view the world, declared the Pallires boy this morning, although ordinarily he says nary a word to me. Antoine Pallires, prosperous heir to an old industrial dynasty, is the son of one of my eight employers. There he stood, the most recent eruption of the ruling corporate elite class that reproduces itself solely by means of virtuous and proper hiccupsbeaming at his discovery, sharing it with me without thinking or ever dreaming for a moment that I might actually understand what he was referring to. How could the laboring classes understand Marx? Reading Marx is an arduous task, his style is lofty, the prose is subtle and the thesis complex. And that is when I very nearly foolishly gave myself away. You ought to read The German Ideology, I told him. Little cretin in his conifer green duffle coat. To understand Marx and understand why he is mistaken, one must read The German Ideology. It is the anthropological cornerstone on which all his exhortations for a new world would be built, and on which a sovereign certainty is established: mankind, doomed to its own ruin through desire, would do better to confine itself to its own needs. In a world where the hubris of desire has been vanquished, a new social organization can emerge, cleansed of struggle, oppression and deleterious hierarchies. Whosoever sows desire harvests oppression, I nearly murmured, as if only my cat were listening to me. But Antoine Pallires, whose repulsive and embryonic whiskers have nothing the least bit feline about them, is staring at me, uncertain of my strange words. As always, I am saved by the inability of living creatures to believe anything that might cause the walls of their little mental assumptions to crumble. Concierges do not read The German Ideology; hence, they would certainly be incapable of quoting the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. Moreover, a concierge who reads Marx must be contemplating subversion, must have sold her soul to that devil, the trade union. That she might simply be reading Marx to elevate her mind is so incongruous a conceit that no member of the bourgeoisie could ever entertain it. Say hello to your mother, I murmur as I close the door in his face, hoping that the complete dissonance between my two sentences will be veiled by the might of millennial prejudice.

2. The Miracles of Art My name is Rene. I am fifty-four years old. For twenty-seven years I have been the concierge at number 7, rue de Grenelle, a fine hotel particulier with a courtyard and private gardens, divided into eight luxury apartments, all of which are inhabited, all of which are immense. I am a widow, I am short, ugly, and plump, I have bunions on my feet and, if I am to credit certain early mornings of self-inflicted disgust, the breath of a mammoth. I did not go to college, I have always been poor, discreet, and insignificant. I live alone with my cat, a big, lazy tom who has no distinguishing features other than the fact that his paws smell bad when he is annoyed. Neither he nor I make any effort to take part in the social doings of our respective species. Because I am rarely friendly though always polite I am not liked, but am tolerated nonetheless: I correspond so very well to what social prejudice has collectively construed to be a typical French concierge that I am one of the multiple cogs that make the great universal illusion turn, the illusion according to which life has a meaning that can be easily deciphered. And since it has been written somewhere that concierges are old, ugly and sour, so has it been branded in fiery letters on the pediment of that same imbecilic firmament that the aforementioned concierges have rather large dithering cats who sleep all day on cushions covered with crocheted cases. Similarly, it has been decreed that concierges watch television interminably while their rather large cats doze, and that the entrance to the building must smell of pot-au-feu, cabbage soup, or a country-style cassoulet. I have the extraordinary good fortune to be the concierge of a very high-class sort of building. It was so humiliating for me to have to cook such loathsome dishes that when Monsieur de Broglie the State Councilor on the first floor intervened (an intervention he described to his wife as being courteous but firm, whose only intention was to rid our communal habitat of such plebeian effluvia), it came as an immense relief, one I concealed as best I could beneath an expression of reluctant compliance. That was twenty-seven years ago. Since then, I have gone every day to the butchers to buy a slice of ham or some calves liver, which I slip into my net bag between my packet of noodles and my

bunch of carrots. I then obligingly flaunt these paupers victuals now much improved by the noteworthy fact that they do not smell because I am a pauper in a house full of rich people and this display nourishes both the consensual cliché and my cat Leo, who has become rather large by virtue of these meals that should have been mine, and who stuffs himself liberally and noisily with macaroni and butter, and pork from the delicatessen, while I am free without any olfactory disturbances or anyone suspecting a thing to indulge my own culinary proclivities. Far more irksome was the issue of the television. In my late husband's day, I did go along with it, for the constancy of his viewing spared me the chore of watching. From the hallway of the building you could hear the sound of the thing, and that sufficed to perpetuate the charade of social hierarchy, but once Lucien had passed away I had to think hard to find a way to keep up appearances. Alive, he freed me from this iniquitous obligation; dead, he has deprived me of his lack of culture, the indispensable bulwark against other people's suspicions. I found a solution thanks to a non-buzzer. A chime linked to an infrared mechanism now alerts me to the comings and goings in the hallway, which has eliminated the need for anyone to buzz to notify me of their presence if I happen to be out of earshot. For on such occasions I am actually in the back room, where I spend most of my hours of leisure and where, sheltered from the noise and smells that my condition imposes, I can live as I please, without being deprived of the information vital to any sentry: who is coming in, who is going out, with whom, and at what time. Thus, the residents going down the hall would hear the muffled sounds indicating a television was on, and as they tend to lack rather than abound in imagination, they would form a mental image of the concierge sprawled in front of her television set. As for me, cozily installed in my lair, I heard nothing but I knew that someone was going by. So I would go to the adjacent room and peek through the spy-hole located opposite the stairway and, well hidden behind the white net curtains, I could inquire discreetly as to the identity of the passerby. With the advent of videocassettes and, subsequently, the DVD divinity, things changed radically, much to the enrichment of my happy hours. As it is not terribly common to come across a concierge waxing ecstatic over *Death in Venice* or to hear strains of Mahler wafting from her loge, I delved into my hard-earned conjugal savings and bought a second television set that I could operate in my hideaway. Thus, the television in the front room, guardian of my clandestine activities, could bleat away and I was no longer forced to listen to inane nonsense fit for the brain of a clam. I was in the back room, perfectly euphoric, my eyes filling with tears, in the miraculous presence of Art. Profound Thought No. 1 Follow the stars In the goldfish bowl An end Apparently, now and again adults take the time to sit down and contemplate what a disaster their life is. They complain without understanding and, like flies constantly banging against the same old windowpane, they buzz around, suffer, waste away, get depressed then wonder how they got caught up in this spiral that is taking them where they don't want to go. The most intelligent among them turn their malaise into a religion: oh, the despicable vacuousness of bourgeois existence! Cynics of this kind frequently dine at Papi's table: What has become of the dreams of our youth? they ask, with a smug, disillusioned air. Those years are long gone, and life's a bitch. I despise this false lucidity that comes with age. The truth is that they are just like everyone else: nothing more than kids without a clue about what has happened to them, acting big and tough when in fact all they want is to burst into tears. And yet there's nothing to understand. The problem is that children believe what adults say and, once they're adults themselves, they exact their revenge by deceiving their own children. Life has meaning and we grown-ups know what it is: the universal lie that everyone is supposed to believe. Once you become an adult and you realize that's not true, it's too late. The mystery remains intact, but all your available energy has long ago been wasted on stupid things. All that's left is to anesthetize yourself by trying to hide the fact that you can't find any meaning in your life, and then, the better to convince yourself, you deceive your own children. All our family acquaintances have followed the same path: their youth spent trying to make the most of their intelligence, squeezing their studies like a lemon to make sure they'd secure a spot among the elite, then the rest of their lives wondering with a flabbergasted look on their faces why all that hopefulness has led to such a vain existence. People aim for the stars, and they end up like goldfish in a bowl. I wonder if it wouldn't be simpler just to teach children right from the start that life is absurd. That might deprive you of a few good moments in your childhood but it would save you a considerable amount of time as an adult not to mention the fact that you'd be spared at least one traumatic experience, i.e. the goldfish bowl. I am twelve years old, I live at 7, rue de Grenelle in an apartment for rich people. My parents are rich, my family is rich and my sister and I are, therefore, as good as rich. My father is a parliamentarian and before that he was a minister: no doubt he'll end up in the top spot, emptying out the wine cellar of the residence at the Htel de Lassay. As for my mother . . . Well, my mother isn't exactly a genius but she is educated. She has a PhD in literature.

She writes her dinner invitations without mistakes and spends her time bombarding us with literary references (Colombe, stop trying to act like Madame Guermentes, or Pumpkin, you are a regular Sanseverina). Despite all that, despite all this good fortune and all this wealth, I have known for a very long time that the final destination is the goldfish bowl. How do I know? Well, the fact is I am very intelligent. Exceptionally intelligent. Even now, if you look at children my age, theres an abyss between us. And since I dont really want to stand out, and since intelligence is very highly rated in my family an exceptionally gifted child would never have a moments peace I try to scale back my performance at school, but even so I always come first. You might think that to pretend to be simply of average intelligence when you are twelve years old like me and have the level of a senior in college is easy. Well, not at all. It really takes an effort to appear stupider than you are. But, in a way, this does keep me from dying of boredom: all the time I dont need to spend learning and understanding I use to imitate the ordinary good pupils the way they do things, the answers they give, their progress, their concerns and their minor errors. I read everything that Constance Baret writes she is second in the class all her math and French and history and that way I find out what I have to do: for French a string of words that are coherent and spelled correctly; for math the mechanical reproduction of operations devoid of meaning; and for history a list of events joined by logical connections. But even if you compare me to an adult, I am much smarter than the vast majority. Thats the way it is. Im not particularly proud of this because its not my doing. But one thing is sure theres no way Im going to end up in the goldfish bowl. Ive thought this through quite carefully. Even for someone like me who is supersmart and gifted in her studies and different from everyone else, in fact superior to the vast majority even for me life is already all plotted out and so dismal you could cry: no one seems to have thought of the fact that if life is absurd, being a brilliant success has no greater value than being a failure. Its just more comfortable. And even then: I think lucidity gives your success a bitter taste, whereas mediocrity still leaves hope for something. So Ive made up my mind. I am about to leave childhood behind and, in spite of my conviction that life is a farce, I dont think I can hold out to the end. We are, basically, programmed to believe in something that doesnt exist, because we are living creatures; we dont want to suffer. So we spend all our energy persuading ourselves that there are things that are worthwhile and that that is why life has meaning. I may be very intelligent, but I dont know how much longer Im going to be able to struggle against this biological tendency. When I join the adults in the rat race, will I still be able to confront this feeling of absurdity? I dont think so. That is why Ive made up my mind: at the end of the school year, on the day I turn thirteen, June sixteenth, I will commit suicide. Careful now, I have no intention of making a big deal out of it, as if it were an act of bravery or defiance. Besides, its in my best interest that no one suspect a thing. Adults have this neurotic relationship with death, it gets blown out of all proportion, they make a huge deal out of it when in fact its really the most banal thing there is. What I care about, actually, is not the thing in itself, but the way its done. My Japanese side, obviously, is inclined toward seppuku. When I say my Japanese side, what I mean is my love for Japan. Im in the eighth grade so, naturally, I chose Japanese as my second foreign language. The teacher isnt great, he swallows his words in French and spends his time scratching his head as if he were puzzled, but the textbook isnt bad and since the start of the year Ive made huge progress. I hope in a few months to be able to read my favorite manga in the original. Maman doesnt understand why a little-girl-as-gifted-as-you-are wants to read manga. I havent even bothered to explain to her that manga in Japanese doesnt mean anything more than comic book. She thinks Im high on subculture and I havent set her straight on that. In short, in a few months I might be able to read Taniguchi in Japanese. But back to what we were talking about: Ill have to do it before June sixteenth because on June sixteenth Im committing suicide. But not seppuku. It would be full of significance and beauty but . . . well . . . I really have no desire to suffer. In fact, I would hate to suffer; I think that if you have decided to die, it is precisely because your decision is in the nature of things, so you must do it in a gentle way. Dying must be a delicate passage, a sweet slipping away to rest. There are people who commit suicide by jumping out of the window of the fourth floor or swallowing bleach or even hanging themselves! Thats senseless! Obscene, even. What is the point of dying if not to not suffer? Ive devoted great care to planning how Ill exit the scene: every month for the last year Ive been pilfering a sleeping pill from Mamans box on the night table. She takes so many that she wouldnt even notice if I took one every day, but Ive decided to be particularly careful. You cant leave anything to chance when youve made a decision that most people wont understand. You cant imagine how quickly people will get in the way of your most heartfelt plans, in the name of such trifles as the meaning of life or love of mankind. Oh and then there is the sacred nature of childhood. Therefore, I am headed slowly toward the date of June sixteenth and Im not afraid. A few regrets, maybe. But the world, in

its present state, is no place for princesses. Having said that, simply because youve made plans to die doesnt mean you have to vegetate like some rotting piece of cabbage. Quite the contrary. The main thing isnt about dying or how old you are when you die, its what you are doing the moment you die. In Taniguchi the heroes die while climbing Mount Everest. Since I havent the slightest chance of taking a stab at K2 or the Grandes Jorasses before June sixteenth, my own personal Everest will be an intellectual endeavor. I have set as my goal to have the greatest number possible of profound thoughts, and to write them down in this notebook: even if nothing has any meaning, the mind, at least, can give it a shot, dont you think? But since I have this big thing about Japan, Ive added one requirement: these profound thoughts have to be formulated like a little

Japanese poem: either a haiku (three lines) or a tanka (five lines). My favorite haiku is by Basho. The fishermans hut Mixed with little shrimp Some crickets! Now thats no goldfish bowl, is it, thats what I call poetry! But in the world I live in there is less poetry than in a Japanese fishermans hut. And do you think it is normal for four people to live in four thousand square feet when tons of other people, perhaps some potes maudits among them, dont even have a decent place to live and are crammed together fifteen or twenty in two hundred square feet? When, this summer, I heard on the news that some Africans had died because a fire had started in the stairway of their run-down tenement, I had an idea. Those Africans have the goldfish bowl right there in front of them, all day longthey cant escape through storytelling. But my parents and Colombe are convinced theyre swimming in the ocean just because they live in their four thousand square feet with their piles of furniture and paintings. So, on June sixteenth I intend to refresh their pea-brain memories: Im going to set fire to the apartment (with the barbecue lighter). Dont get me wrong, Im not a criminal: Ill do it when theres no one around (the sixteenth of June is a Saturday and on Saturdays Colombe goes to see Tibre, Maman is at yoga, Papa is at his club and as for me, I stay home), Ill evacuate the cats through the window and Ill call the fire department early enough so that there wont be any victims. And then Ill go off quietly to Grandmas with my pills, to sleep. With no more apartment and no more daughter, maybe theyll give some thought to all those dead Africans, dont you suppose? CAMELLIAS 1. An Aristocrat On Tuesdays and Thursdays, Manuela, my only friend, comes for tea with me in my loge. Manuela is a simple woman and twenty years wasted stalking dust in other peoples homes has in no way robbed her of her elegance. Besides, stalking dust is a very euphemistic way to put it. But where the rich are concerned, things are rarely called by their true name. I empty wastebaskets full of sanitary napkins, she says, with her gentle, slightly hissing accent. I wipe up dog vomit, clean the bird cageyoud never believe the amount of poop such tiny animals can makeand I scrub the toilets. You talk about dust? A fine affair! You must understand that when she comes down to see me at two in the afternoon, on Tuesdays after the Arthens, and on Thursdays after the de Broglies, Manuela has been polishing the toilets with a Q-tip, and though they may be gilded with gold leaf, they are just as filthy and reeking as any toilets on the planet, because if there is one thing the rich do share with the poor, however unwillingly, it is their nauseating intestines that always manage to find a place to free themselves of that which makes them stink. So Manuela deserves our praise. Although shes been sacrificed at the altar of a world where the most thankless tasks have been allotted to some women while others merely hold their noses without raising a finger, she nevertheless strives relentlessly to maintain a degree of refinement that goes far beyond any gold leaf gilding, a fortiori of the sanitary variety. When you eat a walnut, you must use a tablecloth, says Manuela, removing from her old shopping bag a little hamper made of light wood in which some almond tuiles are nestled among curls of carmine tissue paper. I make coffee that we shall not drink, but its wafting odor delights us both, and in silence we sip a cup of green tea as we nibble on our tuiles. Just as I am a permanent traitor to my archetype, so is Manuela: to the Portuguese cleaning woman she is a felon oblivious of her condition. This girl from Faro, born under a fig tree after seven siblings and before six more, forced in childhood to work the fields and scarcely out of it to marry a mason and take the road of exile, mother of four children who are French by birthright but whom society looks upon as thoroughly Portuguesethis girl from Faro, as I was saying, who wears the requisite black support stockings and a kerchief on her head, is an aristocrat. An authentic one, of the kind whose entitlement you cannot contest: it is etched onto her very heart, it mocks titles and people with handles to their names. What is an aristocrat? A woman who is never sullied by vulgarity, although she may be surrounded by it. On Sundays, the vulgarity of her in-laws, who with their loud laughter muffle the pain of being born weak and without prospects; the vulgarity of an environment as bleakly desolate as the neon lights of the factory where the men go each morning, like sinners returning to hell; then, the vulgarity of her employers who, for all their money, cannot hide their own baseness and who speak to her the way they would a mangy dog covered with oozing bald patches. But you should have witnessed Manuela offering me,

as if I were a queen, the fruit of her prowess in haute patisserie to fully appreciate the grace that inhabits this woman. Yes, as if I were a queen. When Manuela arrives, my loge is transformed into a palace, and a picnic between two pariahs becomes the feast of two monarchs. Like a storyteller transforming life into a shimmering river where trouble and boredom vanish far below the water, Manuela metamorphoses our existence into a warm and joyful epic. That little Pallires boy said hello to me in the stairway, she says suddenly, interrupting the silence. I snort with disdain. Hes reading Marx, I add, with a shrug of my shoulders. Marx? she asks, pronouncing the x as if it were a sh, a somewhat slurping sh, as charming as a clear sky. The father of communism, I reply. Manuela makes a scornful noise. Politics, she says. A toy for little rich kids that they wont let anyone else play with. She is thoughtful for a moment, frowning. Not his typical reading material, she says. The illustrated magazines that the young boys hide under the mattress cannot escape Manuelas shrewd gaze, and the Pallires boy seemed at one point to be consuming them assiduously, however selectively, as exemplified by one particularly dog-eared page with an explicit title: The Saucy Marchionesses. We laugh and converse for a while longer about one thing or another, in the calm space of an old friendship. These are precious moments for me, and I am filled with anguish at the thought that a day will come when Manuela will fulfill her lifelong dream of returning to her country for good, and will leave me here alone and decrepit, with no companion to transform me, twice a week, into a clandestine monarch. I also wonder fearfully what will happen when the only friend I have ever had, the only one who knows everything without ever having to ask, leaves behind her this woman whom no one knows, enshrouding her in oblivion. We can hear steps in the entrance and then, distinctly, the cryptic sound of fingers on the elevators call button; it is an old wood-paneled elevator with a black grille and double doors, the sort of place where, in the old days, if there had been room you would have had an attendant. I recognize the footsteps, it is Pierre Arthens, the food critic who lives on the fourth floor, an oligarch of the worst sort who, from the very way he squints whenever he stands on the threshold of my dwelling, must think that I live in a dark cave even though what he is able to see is bound to prove the contrary. Well, I have read his brilliant restaurant reviews. I dont understand a thing what hes talking about, says Manuela; for her a good roast is a good roast and thats all there is to it. There is nothing to understand. It is a pity to see such a worthy wordsmith blindly wasting his talent. To write entire pages of dazzling prose about a tomato for Pierre Arthens reviews food as if he were telling a story, and that alone is enough to make him a genius without ever seeing or holding the tomato is a troubling display of virtuosity. I have often wondered, as I watch him go by with his huge arrogant nose: Can one be so gifted and yet so impervious to the presence of things? It seems one can. Some people are incapable of perceiving in the object of their contemplation the very thing that gives it its intrinsic life and breath, and they spend their entire lives conversing about mankind as if they were robots, and about things as though they have no soul and must be reduced to what can be said about them all at the whim of their own subjective inspiration. As if on cue, the footsteps suddenly grow louder and Arthens rings at my loge. I stand up, careful to drag my feet: the slippers in which they are clad are so very typical that only the coalition between a baguette and a beret could possibly contend in the domain of cliché. In doing this, I know I am exasperating the Matre, for he is a living ode to the impatience of mighty predators, and this shall contribute to the diligence with which I very slowly open the door a crack to reveal my wary nose, which I trust is red and shiny. Im expecting a package from the courier, he says, eyes squinting and nostrils pinched. When it arrives, would you bring it to me immediately? This afternoon Monsieur Arthens is wearing a large polka-dot lavalier that is too loose on his patrician neck and does not suit him at all: the abundance of his leonine mane and the floppiness of the silk cloth conspire to create a sort of vaporous tutu, causing the gentleman to forfeit his customary virility. Confound it, that lavalier reminds me of something. I almost smile as it comes back to me. Its Legrandin, and his lavalier. In Remembrance of Things Past, the work of a certain Marcel, another notorious concierge, Legrandin is a snob who is torn between two worlds, his own and the one he would like to enter: he is a most pathetic snob whose lavalier expresses his most secret vacillations between hope and bitterness, servility and disdain. Thus, when he has no wish to greet the narrators parents on the square in Combray, but is nevertheless obliged to walk by them, he assigns to his scarf the task of floating in the wind, thereby signifying a melancholy mood that will exempt him from any conventional greeting. Pierre Arthens may know his Proust, but, for all that, he has developed no particular indulgence toward concierges; he clears his throat impatiently. To recall his question: Would you bring it to me immediately? (The package sent by couriers rich peoples parcels do not travel by the usual postal routes.) Yes, I reply, beating all records of concision, encouraged by his own brevity and by the absence of any please, which the use of the

interrogative conditional did not, in my opinion, entirely redeem. Its very fragile, he adds, do be careful, I beg you. The use of the imperative and the I beg you does not have the good fortune to find favor with me, particularly as he believes I am incapable of such syntactical subtleties, and merely uses them out of inclination, without having the least courtesy to suppose that I might feel insulted. You know you have reached the very bottom of the social food chain when you detect in a rich persons voice that he is merely addressing himself and that, although the words he is uttering may be, technically, destined to you, he does not even begin to imagine that you might be capable of understanding them. Fragile how? I ask therefore, somewhat listlessly. He sighs conspicuously and on his breath I detect a faint hint of ginger. It is an incunabulum, he says and toward my eyes, which I try to render as glassy as possible, he directs the smug gaze of the propertied classes. Well, much good may it do you, I retort with disgust. Ill bring it to you just as soon as the courier arrives. And I slam the door in his face. The prospect that this evening Pierre Arthens will sit at his dinner table and entertain his family with a witty remark about his concierges indignation over the mention of an incunabulum (no doubt she imagined that this was something improper) delights me no end. God knows which one of us looks more the fool. Journal of the Movement of the World No. 1 Stay centered without losing your shorts Its all well and good to have profound thoughts on a regular basis, but I think its not enough. Well, I mean: Im going to commit suicide and set the house on fire in a few months; obviously I cant assume I have time at my disposal, therefore I have to do something substantial with the little I do have. And above all, Ive set myself a little challenge: if you commit suicide, you have to be sure of what youre doing and not burn the house down for nothing. So if there is something on the planet that is worth living for, Id better not miss it, because once youre dead, its too late for regrets, and if you die by mistake, that is really, really dumb. So, obviously, I have my profound thoughts. But in my profound thoughts, I am playing at who I amhey, no way around it, I am an intellectual (who makes fun of other intellectuals). Its not always the most, but its very entertaining. So I thought I ought to make up for this glory of the mind side with a second journal that would talk about the body or about things. Not the profound thoughts of the mind, but the masterpieces of matter. Something incarnate, tangible. But beautiful and aesthetic at the same time. With the exception of love, friendship and the beauty of Art, I dont see much else that can nurture human life. Im still too young to claim to know much about love and friendship. But Art . . . if I had more time to live, Art would be my whole life. Well, when I say Art, dont get me wrong: Im not just talking about great works of art by great masters. Even Vermeer cant convince me to hold life dear. Hes sublime, but hes dead. No, Im referring to the beauty that is there in the world, things that, being part of the movement of life, elevate us. The Journal of the Movement of the World will be devoted therefore to the movement of people, bodies, or evenif theres really nothing to saythings, and to finding whatever is beautiful enough to give life meaning. Grace, beauty, harmony, intensity. If I find something, then I may rethink my options: if I find a body with beautiful movement or, failing that, a beautiful idea for the mind, well then maybe Ill think that life is worth living after all. In fact, I got this idea for a double journal (one for the mind, one for the body) yesterday. Papa was watching a rugby match on television. Up until now, at times like this Ive looked mostly at Papa. I like to watch him roll up his shirtsleeves, take his shoes off and settle on the sofa with a beer and some salami, as though declaring, Behold the man I also know how to be. Apparently it doesnt occur to him that one stereotype (very serious Minister of the Republic) plus another stereotype (Mr.-Nice-Guy-all-the-same who likes his cold beer) makes a stereotype raised to the power of two. In short, on Saturday, Papa came home earlier than usual, threw his briefcase down any old place, took off his shoes, rolled up his sleeves, grabbed a beer in the kitchen and flopped in front of the television, and said, Sweetie, bring me some salami, please, I dont want to miss the haka. As far as missing the haka went, I had plenty of time to slice the salami and bring it to him; when I got back they were still showing commercials. Maman was sitting precariously on the arm of the sofa to show how she was against the whole business (in her holier-than-thou-left-wing-intellectual pose), and she was badgering Papa with some complicated story about a dinner party where the idea was to invite two couples whod fallen out, in order to reconcile them. Given Mamans psychological subtlety, this could be a very amusing undertaking. Anyway, I gave Papa his salami and, since I knew that Colombe was up in her room listening to music that was supposed to be enlightened avant-garde 5th arrondissement sort of stuff, I figured: after all, why not, lets watch a little haka. What I knew was that haka is a sort of grotesque dance that the New Zealand team performs before the match. Sort of intimidation in the manner of the great apes. And I also knew that rugby is a heavy sort of game, with guys falling all over each other on the grass all the time only to stand up and fall down and get all tangled up a few feet further along. The commercials finally came to an end and after

credits showing a lot of big beefcakes sprawled on the grass, we got a view of the entire stadium with the commentators voice-over and then a close-up of the commentators (all slavish cassoulet addicts) then back to the stadium. The players came onto the field and that's when I got hooked. I didn't really understand what was going on at first: there they were, all the usual images, but they had a new effect on me; they caused a kind of tingling, a sense of heady anticipation, sort of an 'I'm holding my breath' feeling. Next to me Papa had already knocked back his first barley beer, and was preparing to carry on in good Gallic fashion by asking Maman, who had just got up from her sofa arm, to bring him another. As for me, I was holding my breath. What's going on? I wondered, watching the screen, and I couldn't figure out what I was seeing and what was giving me that tingling feeling. Then when the New Zealand players began their haka, I got it. In their midst was this very tall Maori player, really young. I'd had my eye on him right from the start, probably because of his height to begin with but then because of the way he was moving. A really odd sort of movement, very fluid but above all very focused, I mean very focused within himself. Most people, when they move, well they just move depending on whatever's around them. At this very moment, as I am writing, Constitution the cat is going by with her tummy dragging close to the floor. This cat has absolutely nothing constructive to do in life and still she is heading toward something, probably an armchair. And you can tell from the way she's moving: she is headed toward. Maman just went by in the direction of the front door, she's going out shopping and in fact she already is out, her movement anticipating itself. I don't really know how to explain it, but when we move, we are in a way de-structured by our movement toward something: we are both here and at the same time not here because we're already in the process of going elsewhere, if you see what I mean. To stop de-structuring yourself, you have to stop moving altogether. Either you move and you're no longer whole, or you're whole and you can't move. But that player, when I saw him go out onto the field, I could tell there was something different about him. I got the impression that he was moving, yes, but by staying in one place. Crazy, no? When the haka began, I concentrated on him. It was obvious he wasn't like the others. Moreover, Cassoulet Number 1 said, 'And Somu, the formidable New Zealand fullback what an impressive player, with a colossal build: six foot eight, and two hundred and sixty pounds, runs a hundred meters in eleven seconds, a fine specimen indeed, ladies! Everyone was enthralled by him but no one seemed to know why. Yet it became obvious in the haka: he was moving and making the same gestures as the other players (slapping the palms of his hands on his thighs, rhythmically drumming his feet on the ground, touching his elbows, and all the while looking the adversary in the eyes like a mad warrior) but while the others' gestures went toward their adversaries and the entire stadium who were watching, this player's gestures stayed inside him, stayed focused upon him, and that gave him an unbelievable presence and intensity. And so the haka, which is a warrior chant, gained all its strength from him. What makes the strength of a soldier isn't the energy he uses trying to intimidate the other guy by sending him a whole lot of signals, it's the strength he's able to concentrate within himself, by staying centered. That Maori player was like a tree, a great indestructible oak with deep roots and a powerful radiance everyone could feel it. And yet you also got the impression that the great oak could fly, that it would be as quick as the wind, despite, or perhaps because of, its deep roots. So I watched the game attentively, constantly on the lookout for the same thing: compact moments where a player became his own movement without having to fragment himself by heading toward. And I saw them! I saw them in every phase of the game: in the scrums, with one clear point of equilibrium, a player who found his roots, who became a solid little anchor giving his strength to the group; then in the phases of deployment, with a player who'd find the right speed without thinking any more about the goal, by concentrating on his own movement and running as if in a state of grace, with the ball stuck firm to his body; and in the trance of the place-kicker, cut off from the rest of the world in order to find the perfect foot movement. But none of them came near the perfection of the great Maori player. When he scored the first try for New Zealand, Papa sat there dumbfounded, his mouth wide open, his beer quite forgotten. He should have been completely pissed because he was rooting for the French team but instead, wiping his hand across his brow, he said, 'What a player!' The commentators were sort of hungover but they couldn't hide the fact that they'd seen something really beautiful: a player who was running without moving, leaving everyone else behind him. And the others, who seemed by comparison to move with frenzied and awkward gestures, were incapable of catching up with him. So I said to myself: 'There, I have managed to witness motionless movement in the world: is that something worth carrying on for?' And at that very moment a French player lost his shorts in a maul and suddenly I felt totally depressed because it made everyone else laugh so hard they cried, including Papa who had himself another beer to celebrate, despite two centuries of Protestantism in the family. I felt as if something had been profaned. No, then, that won't be

enough. Further movements will be necessary to convince me. But at least this one has given me an idea. 2. On Wars and Colonies I have had no formal education, as I said in the preamble to these musings. Well, that is not exactly true. But my studious youth came to a halt at the certificate of studies, and before that time I was careful not to draw attention to myself I was terribly frightened by the suspicions aroused in Mr. Servant, my teacher, when he discovered that I had been avidly devouring his newspaper, which was filled with nothing but wars and colonies and I was not yet ten years old. Why? I do not know. Do you suppose I might really have continued? That is a question for the soothsayers of old. Let us just say that the idea of struggling to make my way in a world of privileged, affluent people exhausted me before I even tried: I was the child of nothing, I had neither beauty nor charm, neither past nor ambition; I had not the slightest savoir-faire or sparkle. There was only one thing I wanted: to be left alone, without too many demands upon my person, so that for a few moments each day I might be allowed to assuage my hunger. For those who have no appetite, the first pangs of hunger are a source of both suffering and illumination. As a child I was apathetic, a virtual invalid, my posture so poor you would have taken me for a hunchback, and I only managed to get through my everyday life thanks to my ignorance of any alternatives. My lack of interest verged on the void: nothing spoke to me, nothing aroused me and, like a helpless wisp borne this way and that upon some mysterious wind, I was not even aware of any desire to put an end to my existence. There was very little conversation in my family. The children shrieked and the adults went about their business just as they would have had they been alone. We ate our fill, somewhat frugally, we were not mistreated and our paupers rags were clean and sturdily mended so that even if we were ashamed, at least we did not suffer from the cold. But we did not speak. The revelation occurred when, at the age of five, going to school for the first time, I was both astonished and frightened to hear a voice speaking to me and saying my name. Rene? asked the voice, and I felt a friendly hand on mine. This happened in the hallway where, for the first day of school, they had gathered the children, as it was raining outside. Rene? I heard again the inflections of the voice above me, and felt the touch of the friendly hand an incomprehensible language still pressing lightly and tenderly on my arm. I raised my head, an unusual, almost dizzying movement, and met a pair of eyes. Rene. That meant me.

For the first time, someone was talking to me, saying my name. Where my parents habitually merely gestured or grunted, here was a woman with clear eyes and a smiling mouth standing before me, and she was finding her way to my heart, saying my name, entering with me into a closeness I had not previously known existed. I looked around me and saw a world that was suddenly filled with colors. In one painful flash I became aware of the rain falling outside, the windows streaked with water, the smell of damp clothing, the confinement of the hallway, the narrow passageway vibrating with the press of pupils, the shine of the coat racks with their copper hooks where capes made of cheap cloth were hung close together, and the height of the ceiling which, to the eyes of a small child, was like that of the sky. So, with my doleful eyes glued to hers, I clung to the woman who had just brought me into the world. Rene, said the voice again, don't you want to take off your raincoat? And, holding me firmly so I would not fall, she removed my clothes with the agility of long experience. We are mistaken to believe that our consciousness is awakened at the moment of our first birth perhaps because we do not know how to imagine any other living state. It may seem to us that we have always seen and felt and, armed with this belief, we identify our entry into the world as the decisive instant where consciousness is born. The fact that for five years a little girl called Rene, a perfectly operational machine of perception blessed with sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, could have lived in a state of utter unawareness both of herself and of the universe, is proof if any were needed that such a hasty theory is wrong. For in order for consciousness to be aroused, it must have a name. However, a combination of unfortunate circumstances would seem to confirm that no one had ever thought of giving me my name.

You have such pretty eyes, added the teacher, and I knew intuitively that she was not lying, that at that moment my eyes were shining with all their beauty and, to reflect the miracle of my birth, were sparkling with a thousand small fires. I began to tremble and searched her eyes for the complicity that shared joy can bring. In her gentle, kindly gaze I saw nothing but compassion. In the moment where I had at last come to life, I was merely pitied. I was possessed. As my hunger could not be assuaged by playing the game of social interaction an inconceivable aim, given my social condition (and it was at a later point in time that I would grasp the meaning of the compassion I saw in the eyes of my savior for has one ever seen a girl raised in poverty penetrate the headiness of language deeply enough to share it with others?) then it would be appeased by books. I touched one for the first time. I'd seen the older children in class look into books for invisible traces, as if they were driven by the same force and, sinking deeper into silence, they were able to draw from the dead paper something that seemed alive. Unbeknownst to all, I learned to read. When the

teacher was still droning away with the letters of the alphabet to my classmates, I had already been long acquainted with the solidarity that weaves written signs together, the infinite combinations and marvelous sounds that had dubbed me a dame in this place, on that first day, when she had said my name. No one knew. I read as if deranged, at first in hiding and then, once it seemed to me that the normal amount of time to learn one's letters had elapsed, out in the open for all to see, but I was careful to conceal the pleasure and interest that reading afforded me. The feeble child had become a hungry soul. At the age of twelve I left school and worked at home and in the fields alongside my parents and my brothers and sisters. At seventeen I married.

3. The Poodle as Totem In the collective imagination, the couple formed by married concierges a close-knit pair consisting of two entities so insignificant that only their union can make them apparent will in all likelihood be the owners of a poodle. As we all know, poodles are a type of curly-haired dog preferred by petit bourgeois retirees, ladies very much on their own who transfer their affection upon their pet, or residential concierges ensconced in their gloomy loges. Poodles come in black or apricot. The apricot ones tend to be crabbier than the black ones, who on the other hand do not smell as nice. Though all poodles bark snappily at the slightest provocation, they are particularly inclined to do so when nothing at all is happening. They follow their master by trotting on their stiff little legs without moving the rest of their sausage-shaped trunk. Above all they have venomous little black eyes set deep in their insignificant eye-sockets. Poodles are ugly and stupid, submissive and boastful. They are poodles, after all. Thus the concierge couple, as served by the metaphor of their totemic poodle, seems to be utterly devoid of such passions as love and desire and, like their totem, destined to remain ugly, stupid, submissive and boastful. If, in certain novels, princes fall in love with working-class lasses, and princesses with galley slaves, between two concierges, even of the opposite sex, there is never any romance of the type that others experience and that might someday make a worthy story. Not only were we never the owners of a poodle, but I believe I can fairly assert that our marriage was a success. With my husband, I was myself. I think back on our little Sunday mornings with nostalgia, mornings blessed with restfulness where, in the silent kitchen, he would drink his coffee while I read. I married him at the age of seventeen following a swift but proper courtship. He worked at the factory, as did my older brothers, and stopped in many an evening on his way home to drink a coffee and a drop of something stronger. Alas, I was ugly. And yet that would not have played the slightest role had I been ugly the way others are ugly. But I bore the cruelty of my affliction alone: this ugliness that deprived me of any freshness, although I was not yet a woman, and caused me at the age of fifteen to resemble the woman I would be at the age of fifty. My stooped back, thick waist, short legs, widespread feet, abundant hair, and lumpy features well, features lacking any shapeliness or grace might have been overlooked for the sake of the youthful charm granted to even the most unprepossessing amongst us but no, at the age of twenty I already qualified as an old biddy. Thus, when the intentions of my future husband became clear and it was no longer possible for me to ignore them, I opened my heart to him, speaking frankly for the first time to someone other than my own self, and I confessed to him how astonished I was that he might conceive of wanting to marry me.

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