

Extracts from the novel, Endless Summer: A Memoir of Love and Sex

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That February night we meet by the Zara store. Hubert gives me a big smile as he shakes my hand. My hands are numb from standing outside in the minus ten degree air. All I have on is a thin leather jacket. Hubert invites me for coffee at his place in Šnipiškės. “I baked an apple cake today,” he says. He doesn’t look threatening, but an invitation for coffee at eight o’clock at night could be read many different ways. For Americans, it would simply mean sex. “Would you like to come upstairs for some coffee?” the woman asks George Costanza, the chubby, balding neurotic friend from the hit series *Seinfeld*. George stammers: “I can’t drink coffee late at night,” and then proceeds to torment himself for misreading the woman’s invitation. His friends console him: “Sometimes coffee is just coffee, not sex. Some people drink coffee that late.” I’m not one of those people, but we catch the bus together anyway. Several stops and a five-minute walk later, we reach the wooden door to his flat in a dreary prefab five-storey. “I have a roommate, but he’s not here today. Went to see his girl,” Hubert explains.



We smoke over a faded red tablecloth draped over the table in his pocket-sized kitchen. Hubert slices his apple cake, but instead of coffee, he pulls out a bottle of tequila from the cupboard.

“Drink?” he asks.

“If you make a margarita, I’d take one,” I answer through a smoke ring.

His margarita is strong – not enough lime juice – but its good enough with the sweet cake. After the limes run out, Hubert pours the tequila into a mix of mango and orange juice. “Mango margaritas are my favourite,” I tell him, a cigarette still burning in my fingers.

I grow tipsy as I listen to Hubert tell me how, at eighteen, he was brought to Vilnius from a small village by an older man with whom he lived for a decade. How he had all of gay Vilnius in the palm of his hand: parties, exotic trips, new friends, even casual sexual partners. They split up when the man found someone younger. Then Hubert spent a few years with a jealous man from Klaipėda – their arguments often ended in fights. The scar on his forehead was from a shard of glass broken off an old Soviet door. “He drove me to the hospital himself. I thought I was going to bleed to death. After the wound healed, I told him to move out.” Such was the short history of the scar.

“I like you,” Hubert says, stroking my shoulder, pouring more mango margarita into my glass. A few more sips and I start to see myself through a camera lens: a pale-skinned man lying on a mattress in a room with faded floral wallpaper. Hubert’s plump lips are on my nipples, navel, cock. I close my eyes.

When I returned to Vilnius from Stockholm in May, my flat had a distinctly southern radiance to it. The polished and lacquered floor smelt of freshly cut timbre. Maple trees rustled outside the window in the undying light of a waning crescent moon. I couldn’t get the memory of my night walks around Stockholm out of my head – to

strange gay bars where Swedes danced to Eurovision songs, with Anna Bergendahl belting out: “’Cause this is my life, my friend, and this is my time to stand... and I can't be no one else!”

I saw Dmitry/Apollo the first time through a window at the gym. One brief glance left my entire body quivering. My friend Hubert was standing by the window with Dmitry. He was pointing to me doing a back exercise. I pulled the long cable toward my chest. Dmitry's eyelids dropped a bit and he winked. He was wearing small eyeglasses with thin frames. He was looking at me, I at him. It was a recognition of a strange kind of intimacy. That was all it took – that moment of recognition. Hubert waved at me and they walked off.



Sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Eva Illouz claim that our bodies accumulate social experiences, which are then conveyed back through

the body.^[1] So, when I felt that physical attraction to Dmitry, my body instantly recreated the mechanics of social intimacy: I immediately recognised myself in him. The body is the best, and probably the only way of getting to know another person, to experience the attraction to that person. Which is why I always laugh at those who feel it necessary to constantly remind me about spirituality and kindred spirits.

I finally met Dmitry later, on my way home from the gym. I was going to visit Hubert, and they were both there, drinking tea and eating Dutch cheese sandwiches. We talked about Dmitry's medical studies. He was Russian, but he spoke Lithuanian without the slightest accent. His voice excited me. Dmitry "flexes" it as he speaks, like I do, hitting the consonants hard. His eyes turn me on even more: blue, vibrant, under big eyelids. They remind me a bit of Jake Gyllenhaal's eyes – one of my favourite actors. Only Dmitry's face is much more striking than Jake's.

According to Lauren Berlant, an American English professor, the object of our love is like a promise, or a cluster of promises to which we have a certain obligation.^[2] The things we cherish are like unfulfilled promises – but we can love more than just people. Words, scents, books, sounds, trees – all of them are capable of muting the loneliness that constantly flutters around our hearts. They stay with us even when all we want to do is kill ourselves; they rouse me when I'm too lazy to get up. But are the things we love nothing more than sweet hallucinations peddled to us by romantic songs and stories?

"Love is intoxicating and manic, but in the end, it is toxic: a never-ending exercise in self-deception."^[3] You desire it, even though you know it's like a drug. And you want to believe that, even as you deceive yourself, you'll be deceiving another. Falling in love is like a crying child who's just received a beating from his mother. The wounded pride dissipates and only red belt marks on the back or behind remain. It hurts only as much as you are capable of convincing yourself that, as you loved, it didn't hurt at all.

Those who know me know that I like the French writer Michel Foucault. Like him, I studied philosophy at first, but then Foucault chose psychiatry and I – sociology. His big, piercing eyes remind me a bit of Dmitry's. Sexual desire is nothing innate or natural, Foucault believed. It's more likely a culturally or historically dictated way to feel, admire, flirt, fall in love, fuck, break up and suffer. It is a combination of actions, sensations, experiences, knowledge and body parts that make me who I am now, and that stimulate me to fantasise about sex. It is a combination by which I measure all my successful and failed sexual encounters.

Thinking about Dmitry I try to think about how I've lived, trying to imagine a life that would be more meaningful than the one I'm leading now. Sitting in a comfortable leather armchair, my computer on my lap, I keep catching myself poking fun at my own expense, finding the irony in my life's failures, including Dmitry, as the most prominent hallmarks of my life. Sometimes I feel as if I've never had a life that had any actual meaning to me. My entire life story is a collection of unexpressed gestures, unsaid phrases, things I never had the courage to do, and constant interruptions, breakthroughs and recovery. Perhaps I could claim I had a life if I joined it to Dmitry's?



I've lived in this exhausted country for over thirty years now, with the occasional break. I know it's not easy here for people like me. Their

lives are usually dismissed because they don't conform to the generally accepted ideal of a "real" life. But I cling to it all the same – to that illegitimate, misunderstood, frightening and unreal life.

Would you even want to repeat the lives of others? To speak with someone else's words, walk along already trodden paths, crave the comfort that everyone desires? Would you want to follow and justify those who call your life an unbearable failure, to listen to that daily refrain: you're strange, unpredictable, unplanned, lost, fake. You don't pray for us, or have children, or drink vodka on Saturdays, or pick up girls, or play cards, or watch basketball. Which is why you are plagued by a constant sense of unease. Your entire body radiates it: I love you, discomfort.

Now that I've tamed that feeling of discomfort, I know that it not only helps me to survive, but it also helps me craft a life that doesn't involve blindly following the paths of my parents, or grandparents, or sisters, or other people my own age. When I can't make peace with the reproachful looks of others, when I wake up alone in the middle of the day, when I feel the uncertainty of the future weigh on my shoulders, and when I remember my failures and cry my eyes out, I laugh to myself: "Lada lada lee, where will the road take me?" Probably nowhere.

Memory is an imperfect thing. It's like those abstract drops on a Jackson Pollock painting – all blended colours, tangled lines, spots and spilt paint. A multi-coloured, messy memory. Sometimes I'm shaken awake by those intoxicating colours and ask myself: how do I write about all of my sexual relationships without making them sound vulgar? How do I show that all of these encounters were a way of coming to know myself, to experience pleasure, to find the erotic within that vulnerable state into which my body, my imagination, my curiosity and my doubt have plunged me?

He meets the man from Kaunas at the bus station. He's an unpleasant sort of man – tall, large, with a shaved head. His face is angry and harsh. He reminds him of those guys who attack you on the street for

no reason. They shake hands and walk toward Naugarduko Street. “I thought you’d be taller,” the man from Kaunas says. Realising the skinhead doesn’t fancy him at all, the pale man stops. “I brought some brandy, let’s go sit somewhere,” Kaunas says to him. “Let’s go.”

They snack on smoked sausage, grainy black bread and bad canned olives. The pale man opens a bottle of Pinot Grigio, as he doesn’t care for cheap Latvian brandy. The man from Kaunas is mysterious. He says he knows a lot of influential men there, but he doesn’t reveal what he himself does for a living. “Import, export,” he says, but exactly what he trades in remains unclear. He washes down bites off the sausage with big gulps of brandy. And even though he’s much larger than the pale-faced man, it doesn’t take long before he’s tipsy. “You wanna go over to my friends who live in Šnipiškės?” he asks. “One of them is an amazing top. He’ll fuck you good. They’re really friendly.” An interesting proposition.



They get off the trolleybus near the small Aibē shop to buy vodka and wine. They turn off Kalvariju Street, the main road in Šnipiškēs, into a narrow alley, walking down the hill toward a shabby five-storey dormitory. There's a room on the first floor with a tiny corridor,

kitchen and toilet. No shower. No bathroom. Alfonsas, the man Kaunas told him about, is a small, lean construction worker whose wife lives in Gargždai, a town in Western Lithuania. He only comes to Vilnius to make extra cash, but he's been spending most of this time here for the past three years. He goes back to Gargždai every third weekend – he never invites his wife along to Vilnius. The pale man understands why. Alfonsas' lover is an Armenian who speaks perfect Lithuanian. He's lived here for over ten years.

A porn video plays on an enormous television set in the corner of the room. The man sits down on a footstool while Kaunas finds a spot on the extended sofa, next to the Armenian. "I'm like a porno myself. I need to wash off," the pale man says. "The shower's at the end of the hall, on the right," Alfonsas says with a wave of his hand. There are several shower stalls, and the pale man goes into one and starts the water, standing on a plastic bag he's laid down over the thick layer of dirt coating the tiled floor. He wishes he didn't have to go back to the porno film, but he left his bag in the room.

He comes back from his shower and finds the men going at it. Alfonsas is still dressed, but he's stroking the thick penis he's pulled out of his pants. Kaunas is kissing the Armenian. The pale man, dressed only in his t-shirt and underwear, sits down next to Alfonsas. He doesn't want to kiss, so he touches the other man's penis and pretends to be into him. Alfonsas pulls down the man's briefs, tells him to stand up, and shoves his face into his butt. Forceful thrusts of his tongue are accompanied by strong slaps from his rough hands. The sound of the smacking merges with the moaning coming from the video.

Standing there, the pale man watches the Armenian suck off Kaunas. Alfonsas cums from spanking his ass. The porno plays on, and Kaunas and the Armenian, caught up in each other, pay no attention to the man as he dresses to go. He shakes Alfonsas' hand and runs out of the room. It's not even eleven o'clock yet and buses are still running down Kalvarijų Street. It's a warm, late August night. His trolleybus is empty – just the driver and the man, hastily recording his thoughts into his telephone about the pitiful offerings of the

Lithuanian sex market and his pleasant failures. One more badge to pin on the lapel over his fit chest.

Translation by Darius Sužiedėlis
Images by Adomas Danusevičius

¹ E. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 100.

² L. Berlant, "Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss and the Senses." *New Formations* 63 (2007), p. 33.

³ L. Kipnis, *Against Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), p. 99.