

Dražen Ilinčić

Berlin Towel

Translated from Croatian by Una Krizmanić Ožegović

"Dad! Dad!" the little boy screamed, sitting on the floor surrounded by his toys. "Daddy's not here, he'll be here soon," Mum cooed. "Dad," the boy said again, more quietly this time. "He'll be here soon, any minute now," Mum explained.

Meanwhile, in my bed, deep moans of sheer pleasure escaped his Dad. The symphony of "oooooooooh's", "mmmmmmmm's" and "aaaaaaah's" could hardly be labelled as meaningful utterances. He liked a good squeeze, me on top, ramming his butt for twenty minutes minimum. It felt good, we both felt good, we always fucked hard and this was our ninth or tenth time. As far as I could gather, it wasn't easy for him, sometimes he'd say it felt as if a whole hand was stuck in his arsehole and he'd even hiss through his teeth: "Ahhh, why do I keep doing this...," but he liked my cock, I could tell. It was touch and go whether he liked me, but my cock he liked for sure.

Occasionally, things would even get romantic between us. After all, we were kissing and fondling each other in random, dark corners like a couple of teenagers from the moment we met – and that gave our relationship a touch of loveliness. As far as he was concerned, being romantic helped him to come to terms with himself and his double life. When you sneak around and leave your wife and child to see another man, it must be a teeny-tiny bit easier if there are "feelings" involved.

Look at me babbling, of course there was love between us. We said sweet nothings to each other over the phone. Each time we had coffee, I'd stare into his eyes and lashes, perpetually enhanced by some kind of mist. I'd think of him fondly from time to time, say his name out loud, the works... But the highlight was when we met at my place and I'd quickly remove items of Romano's clothing and, saving the best for last, I'd reach for his top-shelf undies which always hugged his round buttocks super tightly.

Emotionally speaking, I never actually took him seriously, of course. If you're gay and you want to experience slow, long-lasting agony, do fall for a married man or a guy who has a girlfriend. Thanks to a certain level of maturity I had reached up to that point in my life, I saw Romano as a welcome, but fickle novelty. At times, I'd really get into it and talk about our relationship more seriously than I should have, shame on me. This involved painting myself as an utter loser, bitching about how he had a life and a family, whereas I was spending weekends alone in front of the TV. Friday night, gloomy weather, me all alone, him in a happy marriage. And so forth...

I'd say those things jokingly and I didn't really care whether he took me seriously or not. I loved my life, especially the sex, because the volunteers moaning in my bed had been

adding up to one hell of a winning streak lately. But I guess Romano liked to think I was truly miserable without him, so one Friday night he mustered up the courage, skipped the usual family gathering, bought a bottle of cabernet, some goat cheese and dark chocolate and made a beeline for my bed.

Now, things were looking a bit different on my end. That Friday, I had spent the entire day looking for a tap for my bathroom sink and it took me hours to find one to my taste, minimalist and beautiful. It was already evening when I finally got home, and I was looking forward to the beef stew I had in the fridge. It was supposed to be one of those cosy pleasures of single life: a great meal in front of the TV. I also had a bottle of cabernet on standby and as I was getting ready to eat, when my mobile suddenly rang. Romano was telling me that he was close by, he was coming over with wine, goat cheese and chocolate because he didn't want me to be lonely!

What the hell! Can you believe the guy? That night, I wanted to eat my stew, drink wine and espresso, light one of my cohiba cigars and watch a movie from the rental shop! Romano was the last thing on my mind because I also happened to have a life, even though I was single. Not that there was anything wrong with that anyway.

I didn't want to fake it, so I mumbled something to Romano about having worked all day and feeling exhausted, how I really couldn't see him. And I really couldn't.

I don't know if he ended up taking home the wine, goat cheese and chocolate or throwing them away along the way, but the truth is, things cooled down after that little incident.

His ego was too big, I guess. We talked and saw each other a few more times, then he stopped calling. In fact, I don't think we ever fucked again after the stew incident. Of course you didn't, you moron, you'd say, who could handle being ranked lower than a piece of cow meat on a list of priorities. Then allow me to get on my high horse, too, my dears: if I am okay with being the secret, scorned, unacknowledged and utterly casual part of someone's life – without complaining or asking for anything in return – then that someone should not be offended if I have other joys in my life apart from his casual arse, please and thank you!

I don't know what's got into me, but there it is. I'm turning forty in a few months, so it's confession time aka bitching sessions with a few juicy details thrown in the mix. I guess I believe that by telling this story, I will be reminded that it was all real or I may decide, on a whim, that none of it was real at all.

I don't like the tone. Sex – and that's what I want to talk about the most – is a jolly old thing, but not everyone figures this out on time. If you are gay, it is highly likely you will spend your youth doubting and torturing yourself, going on quixotic missions, compensations and sublimations to boot.

I see myself standing on the edge of a park, twenty years old, listening to my first lover explaining to me, with the air of a connoisseur (and a connoisseur he was indeed), that I would never find what I was looking for in that park which, at night, turned into a popular meeting spot for gays. "You see, the same four hundred people come here," Muki, my first lover tells me, "and here you will never find what you're looking for." Even though Muki and I shared several splendid days and nights together up to that point, tossing feverishly in bed, he could tell from my face that I was looking for something else, a great romance, something meaningful to say the least.

When I met Muki, I was terribly naive and totally inexperienced. We met in that very park, walked a bit, talked sparsely, and then went to my place. While I was awkwardly boiling a pot of coffee on the stove, Muki was busy being the epitome of cool – even though we were the same age, he was years ahead of me in terms of sexual practice. He was cool, considerate and patient in his exploration of the physical realm, in a way that was reminiscent of the flower power movement.

We had coffee and Muki suggested we go to sleep. I repeat, I was very naive and even thought that was it, we'd sleep until the morning and then he'd go home.

But no, after we lay next to each other, both of us wet after taking a shower, something amazing happened – we had sex. Everything was clear to me, I knew intuitively what I had to do and in the middle of the night, while taking a break from the hugs that seemingly made us melt into each other, I quietly told Muki: "You know, this is my first time." He was baffled and even took offence: "Why are you telling me this? You think it's some kind of a turn on for me?"

I was a bit embarrassed, but satisfaction came an hour later, when Muki, after a wonderful session filled with kisses, blowjobs and so much more, wistfully said: "This can't be your first time."

It's always great when someone compliments your talents, especially when they are an expert themselves.

Muki and I enjoyed each other's company for a few weeks; perhaps he wanted me to fall in love, but I didn't feel that way about him. My affection towards him did however grow with each encounter and just as I was starting to feel more comfortable in our relationship,

wishing we could be together for a long time, Muki left me without a word of warning, par for the course. Perhaps he wanted payback for not falling for him immediately. He really was charming, popular and enjoyed a reputation as a great lover. Or maybe he just wasn't after a real relationship, I don't know.

I was sorry to see him go and when I accidentally ran into him once, I felt a real pang in my heart. But I had to move on. I went looking for a new lover in the Park, all the while dreaming of love, just like everyone else.

Dear straight readers, before we go any further, here are a few words about why people feel everything in the gay community revolves around sex and that gay people are exceptionally, as the proper term would have it, promiscuous (which is a word devoid of any positive connotations). The reason one may feel that way is because it is true – sex is the gay arena! Deprived of social benefits of freely expressing one's sexuality, public, i.e., accepted relationships and marriage (liberal societies have embraced some same-sex relationships and marriages, of course, but it is still not the norm), homosexuals instinctively seek out the warm embrace of sex.

I would notice a flash of envy in the eyes of my straight male friends while talking about my sexcapades; they probably thought how nice it would be if sex was such a casual thing in their world: no persuasion, no flirting, only heaps of naked women all eagerly waiting to fuck them.

No can do, my dears. Sex is our domain.

Gay sex is, first and foremost, sex between men, and we all know how little persuasion a man needs to have sex, even if he is not your average bloke who likes to swing his hips. It takes about a second. There are no complications, no expectations, no past, no future, no thinking, when it comes to gay sex. This is why it is so great.

You can read about all this and so much more if you check out Jean Genet, but don't expect any homework from me because you'd be in for one hell of a complicated read. Better to ask me, while we are on the subject. Or don't, it's better if you didn't, I'm afraid you might smother me with questions...

Of course, not everyone who has gay sex finds it equally enjoyable. No, it's not about who is on top and who is underneath– a real gay man enjoys every position because, as one of my friends says – sex is one and the body is one. A gay man has the luxury of being a cold, domineering arseblaster one minute and a submissive, mewling sub the next, anxious about

the weapon the other man is about to pull out on him. The thing is, gay partners are equally equipped for each scenario; sooner or later, it all comes down to solid infrastructure.

Not that long ago, in the beginning of our brief affair, when I was kissing and groping Romano in the dark (Romano is the one with the goat cheese), it reminded me of another dark place, a long, long time ago; a snowy park in the days of yore. The guy was tall, dark-haired, somewhat pale, if I remember correctly, but that's all I know, apart from the fact that he seemed nice. Who knows where we met... The only thing I know is that we went to this abandoned park on our first and only date. It was cold, the shrubs were covered in snow and we were shivering in one of those shrubs with trousers around our ankles, but our cocks were pulsating and warm, we fondled them and kissed a bit, didn't do much, we were both young and green.

Still, I remember the snow and the trousers around our ankles, a couple of young fellows, and, as one of my friends always says, the best thing about being young is that whenever there is a shift in temperature, your dick gets hard, so our dicks were hard the moment they sprang out of our steamy undies into the snowy night.

Possibilities, possibilities! Oh, the things that can happen! And the most incredible thing of all is when you want to be with someone, and suddenly he appears, alive and warm, there for you to grab, squeeze, to suck the air out of him and blow air back into him. You exchange atmospheres, your oxygen is mixed with his oxygen, molecules dance, eyes gleaming like spotlights, then closing like a strong vault.

If there is one thing I find sexy, it has to be the summer. First, it's the holiday season so people work less. The heat makes everyone horny, there's a minimum amount of clothes, bare skin flashing everywhere. I'm sitting in front of my computer, browsing through an international gay website with men's profiles posted like little personal ads, many of them with photos (mine has one, too). I'd like to take him right now, I say almost out loud, looking at a guy's photo. He could be twenty-six or twenty-seven, sitting on a rock near a body of water (it's unclear whether it's a lake or the sea), dressed casually in light-coloured Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt, his toned legs disappearing in fuck-me black sneakers.

He's online, but what's the point when he is in Ticino, which is where he lives according to his profile. I'd fly to Ticino (I am not speaking figuratively, it's a thing), just so I could caress his beautiful legs in the afternoon, and then devour the rest of him at night. His eyes are greenish-brown, his head slightly tilted forward, one arm leaning on his bare knee.

I am crazy with desire and sad he is not here right now. I message him, I must put some of my passion into words. "What are you up to?" he replies. I'm surprised, I jump at the chance to tell him I'm up for anything, but there's no way, because we are so painfully far apart. "No, we're not," he says, "where do you live? I'm here, downtown, coming home from the seaside." "Great," I say, shivering with the new, sudden prospect, "I live close by, do you really want to meet up?" "Yes," he is determined. See you in half an hour, sure, sure, see you in half an hour.

Half an hour later, we meet in the street next to mine, he's face playfully hidden by a baseball hat; he is gorgeous, just like in the photo, he's even wearing a similar pair of black sneakers and light-coloured shorts, he is slightly tanned. His eyes are green-brown.

I am nervous, I don't know what he thinks about me, if he will like me. He saw my photo, too, but meeting face-to-face is another story.

He accepts my invite, we walk slowly to my place. When we get inside, I politely offer him a drink, but he only asks for a glass of water.

I could not wait any longer. As soon as he took the first sip of water to freshen up, it's the summer; after all, I sit next to him and slide my hand under his T-shirt, greedily reaching for his nipples. We kiss like maniacs biting each other's lips, then, getting up, I push him to the big bed in the bedroom. His body is divine, not from working out, kind of naturally, his butt is round, so far, so good, he takes it well, I go in smoothly as he is kneeling on the edge of the bed. I am giving it to him good, I pull back almost all the way and go again, I can't believe the object of my desire appeared in front of me just like that, as if I had a magic wand (I do have a wand, so to speak, but I wouldn't call it magic, or maybe that's the thing, maybe, when we release our desire freely from the wand, it makes our wishes come true).

Ticino cooperates, I flip him over, he is on his back, I enjoy pulling up his strong, tanned legs. He wants me to come all over him, so I jizz on his face, neck and chest. Silence thickens in the summer afternoon.

After he's showered, he finishes his glass of water, sits down to put on his sneakers, his pretty head under my fingers. While carefully tying his shoelaces, he says: "I have to see my family in town, that's why I'm leaving so soon. I hope you don't mind. Or should I...?" This last, tiny question opens an entire universe. I could've said I didn't want him to leave, that it was out of the question, that we had to fuck three, four, six, ten times more, that I won't let go of his firm arse for hours, that we will walk pressed against each other all the way to Ticino, my dick in his arse, a merry sight for anyone we meet along the way, us not them paying attention whatsoever.

But, the only thing I said, complacently, was: "No, no problem, it's fine," as if everything that's supposed to happen in life didn't occur just a few moments ago while I was holding onto his lush body.

God, I am such an idiot! God, you must be so ashamed of me! I'm the one who gives back his three wishes to the golden fish and says: "No, thank you, it's fine!"

My dears, it's not like I was about to kidnap someone and tie him to the radiator just because I felt like it. It's about seizing a great moment to its fullest and not signing out prematurely.

Anyway, Ticino said: "Okay then, I'll be on my way." And away he went, as if he had never even been there.

New technologies can be life-changing. I was at a gay club one night and an acquaintance of mine watched while I consistently and methodically dodged all the guys walking past me on their way to a smaller room in the back. I was close to the wall and I would politely stand aside as they appeared. Many of them were good-looking.

"That's no good," my friend said. "Why are you so polite? Rest assured, a lot of those guys wanted to brush up against you but you're not letting them."

And that was that, I was too polite, to my own detriment. That is why I am not good at direct contact.

That is also why the night I discovered the Internet was so special to me.

I've already mentioned my online profile when I talked about Mr Ticino. The night I opened my first profile was incredibly exciting; words, words, words, messaging potential matches, explicit sexual content, the "what I would do to you, what you would do to me" type of thing, a highly improbable brand of cheekiness which does not come naturally when you meet someone face-to-face – I was ecstatic. Finally, a medium I could call my own; I was the king of the world, at least the king of the World Wide Web and potential pornographic situations-induced lip licking. .

So, the profiles are like little ads. They may have virtually zero information or have loads of it. Dates, descriptions, photos (full-body or a body part of choice, showing off a hard-on or aperky butt out, etc.), food and drink preferences, list of hobbies, favourite books, music and films... Of course, you can also write what you are looking for or what you are not looking for: "Fat, camp guys over 35, nothing to see here, move along, please" (these kinds of vulgar and vile remarks always activate my sense of political correctness; I don't like the

discriminatory intention – I am no fan of fat guys, camp guys or guys over 35, but there are people who would like a guy just like that, different strokes for different folks).

In fact, when I think about it, it seems that people put down what they are not looking for a lot more often than what they are looking for. There are exceptions: "I'd like to meet a guy my age, around 25 or younger, cute eyes, tall and lean, smart and funny, athletic or even ripped. I hope I'm not asking for too much..."

No, sweetie, you're not asking for too much. But do take a walk to the pond and take a dive...

I already know what you're about to ask me, my dears, at least those of you who are not that Internet-savvy: what use could it possibly have, I mean, people can make up all sorts of things?

I can tell you this: people do not lie online more than offline. On the other hand, they are careful about what kind of information they share because they might actually meet the person after an online chat, so any false information easily come to light. Then again, if there is some fake (or not entirely true) information, who cares? The only thing that matters is that the person reasonably matches their online profile.

I immediately liked Charlie because he invited me over for the weekend as soon as we started chatting online. The guy didn't waste any time, I mean, why draw it out anyway? His photos were great. He was a designer, so he knew how to appeal to his target audience.

He was waiting for me at the airport and kissed me right away. He looked exactly like the photos, which had obviously been taken quite recently. We sat in his old car and drove to his place in the suburbs. The flat was cosy, even charming, and Charlie was a good host. The sex was good, too – "sorry, maybe it's not as hot as you'd expected," Charlie said – but no, everything was okay. Besides, he had a great body, he wasn't too tall, just my size.

"C'mon, read this," he asked playfully after sex, while we were reclining on the bed wearing only flannel bathrobes.

"What is it?"

"It's an interview for a magazine; they asked me about my work."

I readily accept the fresh-off-the-press magazine, with several photos of Charlie that were already familiar to me – I had seen more, for instance, the raunchy ones, with Charlie's two trouser buttons undone were omitted from the magazine. A short introduction read: "Charlie T. is gaining more and more recognition in the world of design. The 35-year-old artist has had an interesting path...", and so on, the usual stuff, but I put down the magazine.

"But, sweetie," I said, while our bathrobes were more than slightly open, with Charlie's head rowdily peeking through his foreskin, "your profile says you're thirty-one."

Charlie is a bit flustered.

"I mean, it's fine, no worries," I say with a smile, "But why lie about your age? You look fantastic. Why not say you're 35?"

"Seriously? Thirty-five? It's too much," Charlie said while his cheeks went red.

I pulled the loose belt of his bathrobe, kissed him on the cheeky tip, which was, as it turned out, four years older than I had been led to believe. Maybe I shall have my revenge and put all of it in my mouth!

I enjoy browsing through different profiles, guessing and fantasizing, but I mostly do it to meet other men, explore and have sex. For those who prefer getting turned on and roleplaying, there are chat rooms, flimsy and casual virtual venues where one can spend hours opening up and easing into a conversation without anything ever happening. Click, pick a username and dive head first into a mass of blinking caresses which always remain too far away.

People are often scared. I feel their desire growing desperately, being moulded into sentences inside the chat bubbles, then floating away like a loose balloon no one pays any attention to anymore.

I didn't even guess he could be that scared. I went down to the ground floor and waited in front of the main entrance, crossed my arms on my chest in the pleasant grasp of a spring evening. He was walking slowly towards me, eyes steady and when we got up to the flat, he only had a glass of water. I had already noticed that my guests were extremely low-maintenance – all of them only drank a glass of water. It's not that I'm thrifty; it's merely an observation...

Once we started, the calm young man turned into a shivering plant! He was shivering when he dropped to his knees and pulled down my tracksuit trousers, he was shivering while he licked my cock and gave me a blowjob, he was shivering even though I fondled him on the head in an effort to soothe him.

It all felt a bit silly, but what could we do; I held his head in my hands and let his mouth do the work – he was still shivering, but he kept going until I came.

"Are you all right?" I asked worriedly, but he couldn't speak. We sat next to each other. I guess he couldn't believe he had gone so far and had sex with another man. His quivering moves were filled with a great desire to have sex with a man, but also such fear! As

if sticking your head in a man's crotch would bring about the global apocalypse! As if, while sucking a man off, he'd be dragged away by the beasts of hell!

I was slightly relieved when his personal torment was over. Alas, no, I was wrong. Lust was greater than the beasts of hell, at least on that spring evening! He quickly pulled a condom out of his rucksack; the only thing he still had on was a thin undershirt. He took my dick out again, made me hard with a couple of wanks, put the condom on and then popped on his smooth arse with surprising skill, almost silently. He turned his back to me, so that he didn't have to look at me, didn't have to see himself reflected in me and me inside of him and started riding me energetically until that deed was also done.

As he was leaving, a mask of guilt and suffering had already set in on his face. For the next few mornings, he'd wake up alone and terrified; the terror would refuse to simply go away. His lust for life, for sex, for another body, would take a while to break free from slavery. Even if it was for just one night.

"There are three degrees: off, off off and mental," Davor is speaking loudly and articulately, I'm sure people can hear him down there in the alley through the large open windows. Windows in Davor's room are almost always wide open, no matter the season; according to Davor, it's good to let some air in because of cigarette smoke, among other things. He smokes, but he's no chain smoker.

I love listening to Davor talk about the gay world. He's smart, experienced, quick on his feet and when he's talking to someone, he stares at them as if he couldn't possibly grasp what they're saying, while his mind constantly reaches astute conclusions. Davor is a practitioner and an intellectual, innocent and experienced, cunning and naive, romantic and down-to-earth. When he talks about love, his loud voice turns soft and considerate; when he talks about "silly queens", he screams through the open windows with abandonment.

We've been friends for a few years now. I'm still relatively young, curious and impressionable. We talk for hours, until our throats become sore.

So, off, off off and mental. They are created in the pressure cooker of the gay world, in constant hiding, lying, denial. "What does he think he's doing, he's not fooling anyone," Davor yells about an encounter in a public toilet that afternoon. "He's carrying a wicker bag, leafy vegetables on full display, and he's in a hurry, of course. He's ditched the missus for an hour and now he's all nervous. "Get it out already," he says, still holding the wicker bag in one hand and I tell him to wait," Davor is outraged.

"And then?"

"And then," Davor goes on. "He loses his shit. Stuff flies everywhere, hands, legs, he's dropped the wicker bag, kneels on the floor. Doesn't even check to see whether there is shit or piss on the floor. As long as he can put it in his mouth."

"Ohhh!" I cringe and laugh at the same time. I am in awe of Davor and his bathroom escapades. Personally, I was too much of a prude to pull off something like that. I tried once, stood in the stall for twenty minutes, I think I even took my dick out and started wanking; someone in the stall next to mine watched me through a peephole, but that was it.

Every bathroom he comes out of, Davor manages to be cleaner and more fragrant, like a shouting angel spreading his protective wings to shelter all those who are off, off off and mental.

Anyway, the guy sucked him off in a public bathroom that afternoon, then picked up the wicker bag and rushed back to his wonderful life. Davor is not actually angry, he is just loud and passionate when he speaks. He is way too rational to get angry. In any case, the three distinct categories are off, off off and mental.

Davor happily talks about growing up in the countryside. Not so much because he was younger then, (Davor does praise youth because any change in temperature makes your dick hard when you are young; I love that phrase of his), but because everything unfolded so naturally. He hit puberty, found his soulmate in a boy from his village and they'd roam around the countryside and have sex.

"I really don't understand how we could've done it so naturally. We didn't talk about anything and we did everything. He gave it to me, then I'd give it to him, no lubes, no props. It just sort of happened on its own," Davor is still amazed. We didn't do a lot of thinking and didn't ask a lot of questions. It was all normal and acceptable, idyllic, the grass, the trees, the flowers and the bees. Bees do it too, don't they...?

The three of us, Robi, Davor and I used to hang out a lot back in the day, with Davor's windows wide open. The pair of them were certainly more experienced and bolder than me. I was always hesitant. Case in point: the field trip. We went to a forest close to the city, which was, naturally, quite the gay hot spot while the weather was warm. Simply put, you'd go there because you could do something or someone in the shrubs.

I wasn't dressed for the occasion. It wasn't so much the clothes, as it was my choice of footwear, new Italian suede sandals proved to be less than ideal for walking on the wet ground after several days of rain.

So, as soon as I had set course for the forest, I was doomed.

"Wait for us," Robi and Davor said benevolently, "don't go through the mud in those shoes, you'll ruin them."

I listened to their advice, what else could I do. Many times after that, I found myself to be under-equipped for the occasion; too prim or indecisive, in inappropriate outfits, always ready to run off to the changing room or be put on the bench. That feeling kept nagging at me when we went on the trip (I was acting like a fake aristocrat, even taking pride in the fact that I wasn't the typical man of the woods with a disposition of a lumberjack who'd pull up his sleeves and get to work, get down or whichever third option was available). Luckily, one day I would grow tired of these scenarios and vice versa.

We are sitting by the pool wrapped in towels, because the wind is blowing; it's late summer, after all. Robi is reading to me from *I Ching, The Book of Changes* after skilfully arranging the sticks that pointed out the answers (to my questions). Per usual, they don't tell us anything new; the answers are ambiguous (at least to me), it could be this or that, this way or that way. Whatever, the moment is lovely, relaxed, despite the windy, cloudy day.

I came last night for the weekend; Robi has been here for a week, in a hotel on a beautiful small island without cars. He came from the island, waited to pick me up and we were supposed to take a small boat back to the island. However, we went to a somewhat weird, but nonetheless special cafe right on the seashore, on the cliffs. The wind was blowing out the candles outside, so we decided to sit inside, which was also charming. There were a lot of little pillows, candles and a pleasant asymmetry... We chatted with some foreigners until closing time, even a while longer, and then Robi exclaimed: "The last boat leaves at midnight!"

We quickly said our goodbyes and ran to the pier; we saw the boat getting ready to leave, but thankfully, Robi, much like Davor, had a really strong voice, so he managed to draw the attention to us (I was hesitant, again), two guys emerging from the dark, one of us dragging a big bag, too big for a weekend getaway.

"*Halt, halt!*" Robi shouted.

"Why are you shouting in German?" I asked him as we were running.

"You know they are nicer towards German tourists!" Robi said while trying to catch his breath as we finally approached the boat.

I was thrilled when we docked on the island after a short ride. The tiny port was well lit and the same was true of the hotel up on a hill. Although it was late at night, a liveried attendant came down and took my bag.

"You'll tell me all about it in the morning," Robi said, still out of breath, but smiling nonetheless after our race to the boat.

"Yes, we'll ask *I Ching*," I replied.

But, like I said, *I Ching* was useless. I was feeling low over another unhappy romance, which started passionately, but hit a dead end in no time.

"Maybe you should keep that feeling in your heart as something special," Robi was trying to be considerate, "and still live a normal life." I was uncompromising, relentless, I was not happy with those answers, I constantly wondered why I was unlucky in love, why it kept slipping away; it came and went, as if it was fucking with me, saying: "You can never have me, but you will know what I'm like." Well, isn't that nice?

The wind was still blowing here and there over the hotel pool. It was chilly; we wanted to have lunch, so we put away the sticks and *I Ching*.

In that moment, up there in Berlin, I don't think they felt something special was going on. It was late August, in a few months, the Wall would fall. Soon after that, I'd go there. That's the way it goes: win some, lose some, or in my case: lose some, win someone.

I landed on Schönefeld airport in East Berlin on an early February afternoon and took a gloomy bus to a friend's place in West Berlin. It was my first time in Berlin, which had always seemed threatening, mysterious and far away, devoid of the benign charm of cliché tourist destinations, such as Rome, Paris, London or Vienna. It simply felt foreign.

And believe me, a cold, grey, muffled day in February is not the best time to fall in love. Still, we fall in love with cities, too, and not only on a clear, sunny day. I fell in love with Berlin, maybe not at first sight, but pretty fast.

What strange beauty! I was turning around on Breitscheidplatz, the point where Ku'damm and Tauntzienstrasse start or end, with Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche in between (try saying that out loud, please!), aka the torn down church-turn-monument, preserved as a warning of the fiery horrors of war.

Although the centre of West Berlin seemed interesting, it was neither beautiful nor neat. No fancy historical facades (Berlin was almost entirely destroyed in the Second World War), just a bunch of strong lines from the post-war decades. The archetype of the western way of life is the *Europa* shopping centre located on that square, full of glass and bright neon lights, somewhat reminiscent of a fair hangar. Built in 1965, it was designed by Helmut Hentrich and Hubert Petschnigg. The smell of fast food, sausages and beer rises from the basement; shops, shoes, clothes, quite an expensive Chinese restaurant on the next floor. Last

but definitely not least, a newspaper shop dawning the Internationale Presse sign where I enjoyed leafing through magazines.

So, the centre of West Berlin is strange, even when you head east, there are enormous residential and commercial buildings, modern, without ornaments down Kurfürstenstrasse or Kleiststrasse. The overall impression is that of certain laid-backness when it comes to design, as if no one wanted the city to be likeable. That's Berlin's mentality anyway, if you're here, sit back, relax, do it your way, to hell with seduction.

That time I chose Tauntzienstrasse, a lively street towards KaDeWe (Kaufhaus des Westens), allegedly the second largest shopping centre in Europe after Harrods. But, before I reached the elegant KaDeWe to spend some of my measly money, a great sex shop on Nürnbergerstrasse caught my eye (some time later, they moved); it was a soft-core sex shop, where you can find not only sex toys, but also albums, monographs, comic books and calendars with artistic representations of the male physique, whatever that meant. (I'd always skip those chiaro-scuro, often black and white nude photographs, because I felt the intention behind launching them in the first place had nothing to do with either quality or art. Instead, it catered to the hypocrisy of the customer: if I get turned on by tasteful, artistic nudes, then I might come across as less nasty in my lustfulness.)

Therefore, I went straight to the real stuff, a shelf with an assortment of magazines that clearly embraced the idea that the body was made for sex, not pseudo-artistic nudes.

But why would one merely leaf through magazines in the city of sex? Was there a specific reason? No, but I just couldn't make myself go anywhere else.

I called Robi from a telephone box. He was glad to hear from me and immediately asked: "Have you been to the sauna, the one I told you about?"

I was uncomfortable, but I told him I hadn't been there yet. I was already halfway through my Berlin visit.

"Please, I beg of you, go there", Robi insisted and I really decided right then and there that I had to go there, despite my hesitance and fear.

Gay saunas are among the most popular places for sex and fun. I didn't want to go there because I thought: what was I going to do there, what it was it like, was it dirty, what about diseases...

Robi really persuaded me. Across the street from the Zoo, a few minutes' walk from Breitscheidplatz, on the ground floor of a large residential building with flats for rent, there was a plain metal door. It says "*bitte klingeln*" on a small bell next to it.

I rang, there was a buzz and the doorknob clicked – oh, how I remember those sweet sounds – and the inconspicuous, heavenly metal gates opened.

"To your left, you can see the People's Palace and if you look over to your right, you will see the Gardens of Eternal Peace," that's what tour guides usually tell you, while the bus drags down the tried routes which have defeated many a travel aficionado.

To my left, in the Adonis sauna, there was a tiny reception desk where they were just handing me a towel and the key to my locker (in exchange for twenty Deutch marks), while to my right, I was missing out on so much. At the end of a small corridor, a passageway, really – a lot of practically naked men were walking up and down, wrapped only in orange towels, mostly barefoot. I thought that was incredible: so many naked men, a hint of things to come...

I took my orange towel, left my clothes in the locker, wrapped the keychain around my hand and went to look around the semi-dark temple of desire. An ongoing crowd of men around the hedonistic bar; some of them drinking mineral water, only taking a few minutes' break between sex, others having a warm meal (brought by the chef himself), some decadently trying to ease their disappointment by generously sipping brandy.

I still couldn't believe a place like that existed. No questions, no answers. In a private booth in one of the corridors (you can pay for a booth with a bed, a small TV and a large mirror, so that the delights are magically reflected to you), on a brown, fake leather bench, two young man were kissing and hugging each other, stroking each other's thighs and groins, as if re-enacting a scene from antiquity. I passed them by, slowly, checking whether what I was seeing was actually happening.

At the Finnish sauna, a strong guy heated thing up by whipping his towel through the air. But the Finnish sauna was small potatoes. The epicentre in any decent gay sauna is the Turkish bath, where bodies glisten in the fumes and enjoy many activities, sometimes even in a group. Shocked by the freedom I witnessed in the orange Adonis during my first visit, I didn't even discover the steam room, tucked away in the basement...

I am at the phone box again, thanking Robi repeatedly for being so persistent and persuading me to press the "*bitte klingeln*" button. He mumbles happily; come to think of it, he started talking me into it a few months before, during our Munich visit. But I was adamant back then. I thought sitting in a pleasant-smelling coffee shop with predominantly gay patrons was more than enough. I was exchanging meaningful looks with a cute guy, he could've been

a year or two younger than me and he was browsing some newspapers and documents. We struck up a conversation, I was into him, he was into me, I could see it in his eyes, but nothing was happening. Robi was being a good friend, not interfering much and waiting patiently.

The newspaper guy, instead of making a real move, after all, it was my first time in his city, started beating around the bush and said: "Are you going somewhere tonight? I know a cool club, we could meet there..."

To the club we went (not the sauna), but the dork was a no-show; Robi listened to me whining about "Munich fags who didn't know what to do with themselves either." A beautiful pair of eyes in a pleasant-smelling coffee shop is a load of horseshit, let me tell you.

Luckily, after I discovered the sauna, those twisted and silly exchanges were soon behind me. When I found the steam room in the Adonis basement, I completed an important degree in my sexual education. When I opened the perpetually steamy, heavy, glass door, I found myself inside a tunnel leading into three rooms; each room more enticing than the last. The first room was mostly for waiting, the second one for mostly sex and the third one had nothing but sex. It was dark, only a small, blueish light shone from above, like a distant lighthouse. Almost all the bodies looked ravishing in the haze, clean and fragrant... In the second room, a guy with a little beard was leaning against the dripping wet tiles. He looked at me as I walked right past, practically touching him. I turned to him, he was slightly shorter than me; he started kissing me, fondling my dick and balls. We held each other tightly, panting, moving away from the wall. And hop, another guy jumps in and takes the spot in front of the tiles, approaching my current lover boy from the back.

Things were going great, I was still gasping with pleasure. The guy with the beard got down on his knees and took my dick in his mouth. I was kissing the other guy, who was tall and skinny, while the hard-working first contender was kneeling and proceeded to skilfully suck me off. In doing so, he was so committed and loving that I was absolutely thrilled, touched even.

I came; I let out a deep breath and tried to regain my composure. The other guy laughed quietly as if we had all won a game or something and patted me on the butt on his way out.

All this took place in a matter of seconds; the kid with the beard was still on his knees, and before I headed out to the showers, he took my hand and kissed it.

My straight friends were waiting for me at the airport in the early afternoon. My flight was on time. We arranged to have lunch so that I could tell them all about my Berlin adventures. They loved my stories, which I liked to pepper with a bit of humour.

A week before, at that same airport around half past nine in the morning, I was waiting to board my plane. There was a cheerful murmur from crowds of passengers from the surrounding gates to London, Paris and Amsterdam. This was usually the case, flights to London, Paris and Amsterdam always crowded and cheerful, while only a handful of passengers, me included, were waiting to fly to Berlin. This was a repeated scenario; me feeling weird, slightly anxious and a tad special because I was waiting with only a few other weird people in front of the display with the flight number and destination: Berlin – Tegel (Schönefeld was already a thing of the past, the plane would often land at Berlin's main airport, which meant a short and easy transfer since it was only eight kilometres from the city).

The small airplane was approaching Tegel, flying over beautiful lakes and forests on the verges of the city. It was the summer, so even the far north looked soft and tame. Tourists were still sitting in front of a huge pub in Ku'damm, with giant pints on their tables at two in the morning. I had dinner at the hotel restaurant on a small street terrace. A group of young string players showed up and played a couple of classical pieces. They played amazingly well, they must have been studying at the academy. They were surprised when I threw a ten-mark note in their box, but I really thought they did an amazing job, so why not reward them generously? Okay, stop, they were quite handsome as well.

But, during that week I didn't really listen to music or anything else. I researched different saunas around Berlin because I wanted to rank them. (It was a field trip of sorts.) It was soon evident that Adonis was in the lead by a mile. Relax sauna in an East Berlin courtyard also seemed interesting. Behind a modest entrance, there were two lovely decorated floors, with blue curtains covering its big windows from top to bottom. When the sunlight came in through the blue filter of the curtains, the interior and the people reminded me of an extravagant glyptothek. The steam bath, however, was somewhat deserted, far from the lively scene in Adonis. Luckily, there was a non-hairy, fair-skinned guy sitting on a plastic bench between me and another visitor who did devote himself to sucking both of us off in alternation.

Adonis was in the lead. In fact, when the small airplane flew over the lakes and forests and landed safely at Tegel, it didn't take me long to reach the hotel and do my check-in. I

unpacked and took a shower a little after eleven in the morning, longing to go to Adonis as soon as possible. But, it only opened at two. What now? I remembered I still hadn't visited the famous zoo which was right across the street from the sauna.

To the zoo I went. I only remember a huge tiger, locked in a too small a cage (temporarily, I hoped). And the big panda called Bao-Bao which was the Zoo's mascot? No idea, maybe it was there, maybe it wasn't. The only thing I do know is that I could keep an eye on the door of the sauna from the edge of the zoo. A few minutes past two, I still hadn't seen anyone come in. Oh, who cares. I abruptly ended my tour of the zoo (bye, bye, Bao-Bao, whether you're here or not) and rushed to the sauna. Orange towel, pitty-pat to the bar, then a beer. Adonis' first visitor of the day was waiting for life itself to start pouring over the corridors. Which is exactly what happened, there was no stopping it.

My friends at the airport are shocked – I have shed a few pounds!

"Did you even leave the steam room?" they ask jokingly.

"No," I replied. "As soon as I arrived, I could barely wait until two, which is when they open..." and so forth. At the restaurant, a little later, they're dying with laughter, a glass of white pinot in hand. Mr. Steam Diet, that's what they call me.

Hey, wait a minute, I tell myself. I woke up feeling worried and upset. My friends' faces appeared to me in a dream which was and wasn't a dream. In the dream which was and wasn't a dream, my friends were disgruntledly reading this piece of writing, asking me why I would write so irresponsibly, so superficially, it's all cocks, arses and sex. What's the deal? What's with the profanities? And this came from friends who usually liked me.

To be fair, I sometimes even have to convince myself that these stories make sense, ahem. All of us, my dears, are born as selfish, warm, little fuzz balls who want to fuck and cuddle. That's it, fuck and cuddle. Sometimes, these two things go hand in hand, sometimes, they appear separately, but most times there's neither one nor the other. And that makes us unhappy.

And that's all us fucking fags want, to fuck and cuddle. Haven't we earned that right? We're totally fucked anyway. Dear straight people, just think of your gay friends – I'm sure you have a few – and take a good look at their long, unhappy faces. The reason they always look like they're sulking is because they have suffered a grave injustice. They're so unlikeable, aren't they?

And they do suffer injustices, which makes them go off, off off and mental, according to Davor's astute diagnosis.

Allow me to reminisce. The first time I went off was in secondary school, when I suddenly picked up the habit of studying hard. Every day after school, I would diligently revise everything we had covered in school that day, gradually filling in the gaps in my knowledge, but not in that bad way just to cram before an exam. Oh, please, give me a break! Who in the world studies hard when they hit puberty? The answer is: someone who cannot quench their primal urges at that age, that is, explore the world of intimacy and sex.

I don't have any unpleasant experiences from that period – I mean, I wasn't bullied or made fun of – but I also don't recall anything awfully pleasant about that time either. I only remember a friend of mine, a girl, who was the first person I came out to, who, referring to my other classmates, put it in a nutshell: "They don't appreciate you."

I still remember. There was a famous erotic film showing at the cinema, I can't remember exactly which one. Maybe *The Last Tango in Paris*? But, *The Sound of Music* was also on! I was fascinated by that musical.

"Where are you off to?" my Mum asked, it was the afternoon.

"To the cinema," I said and she was surprised.

"You went two days ago, didn't you?"

"It's a great film, I wanna go again," I'm blushing now, angry that I have to share with her my newly found passion for singing and dancing in the alpine countryside. Mum, of course, gets everything wrong. She's convinced I want to go and watch the erotic movie again.

"I think it's better if you didn't go," she says.

"But why? You also said you saw that film when you were a kid!"

"What movie are you talking about?"

"*The Sound of Music!*"

Mum was taken aback and only said: "Okay, you can go."

My dears, if your teenage son is in love with *The Sound of Music*, then he's gay. Fact.

My female friends often ask me whether I can tell whether a man is gay. The thought of their boyfriends/husbands/lovers secretively falling prey to a big hard-on leaves them in frenzy. For instance, we've just finished our lunch at a restaurant when a man in his late twenties walks by. We've all seen him around, so we sort of know him. He says hi, stops at our table, leans over to where I'm sitting and chats for a minute or two. He saves a few funny comments for the end. He's attractive.

"Well, is he? Is he?" my friends murmur excitedly after he leaves.

"I think so," I say confidently and break it down for them – the talk, the moves, the looks. Just to be clear, the guy is not camp (oh, those vile, discriminatory comments come to my mind again: *Fat camp guys move along, please!*), but I'm experienced enough to tell them, with a fair degree of certainty, who he's thinking of after he comes home and starts to wank off. (Naturally, any gay man with a certain level of experience can do this, I'm no exception).

My friends are fascinated. They tell me I should open an agency for gay spotting.

As if in a dream, around four in the morning, as the night shatters into a muted blue of the dawn, with heavy eyes and legs, I somehow manage to float down Tauntzienstrasse to Ku'damm, to my lovely, alas empty bed in Fasenenstrasse, said to be one of the finest streets in Berlin according to the tour guides' stamp of approval who lavish it with compliments, glitzy Fasenenstrasse, they coo.

I had spent the whole night at Schöneberg, first at a stylish bar, then at a club. And now I was going back to my hotel, happy as a clam; everything was so tame around me that it didn't feel like a metropolis, birds chirping in the trees, in the clouds, on the window sills. Such an intimate place, Berlin, I half expected to see a friendly neighbour's fence.

Around ten at night, the previous day, I was sitting comfortably on one of two remaining empty stools at the long, long, cosy bar which was simply called Bar! That summer, I was generously consuming cocktails in any gaudy colour (turquoise, blue, red, pink liquid in a huge glass with a mountain of crushed ice), and that night was no exception. To be clear, I was completely relaxed and a bit sleepy, I had spent several hours at the Adonis, in the promising steam, fondling, among other things, two perky and smooth arses of these young Russians who were standing in front of me and quietly chatted away in Russian pretending nothing was going on. And, really, nothing was going on, I just impishly took turns leaning against their arses. At one point, the shorter of the two pressed his back against me, how lovely; he must've been tired from all the standing.

Of course, there were other encounters in the sauna that day – rarely was it otherwise – but who could remember it all. Then that last empty chair next to me at the bar was quickly occupied by a dark-haired fellow who may have been twenty-six or twenty-seven (my guess was almost spot-on, he was twenty-eight). He looked like a comedian doing his stand-up routine. He ordered a beer and then started to read a thick novel in English with grotesque concentration. There was an ashtray between our elbows, which he snatched abruptly. He was reading and smoking a cigarette. I decided to play along and lit up one of my small, dark

cigarettes, then grabbed the ashtray back. He pulled his eyes away from the book and looked at me all serious. "If you stop reading," I told him, "you'll get the ashtray back."

Suddenly he smiled, like an actor from a popular TV show – he really was an actor, one of a kind star, but I could see that he didn't think his job was really important, at least not the TV part (he looked like a wacky pedlar, Papageno, a free bird unburdened by success). He was smiling and looking at me warmly. We simply clicked, we had found each other. However, nothing came out of it somehow. No sex, obviously, even though we'd think of each other a lot in the days to come and he'd also hugged me at the airport, the moment before I disappeared into the departure area. We hugged, and he gave me a small box with an ashtray inside, the same one which sparked our conversation and which he, unbeknownst to me, nicked the same night we met at the Bar.

After the Bar, we went to a club with a maze in the basement. Around four in the morning, I was coming back to my room in Fasanenstrasse. All around me Berlin was soft and cuddly like a village, and at that moment I could merely anticipate, but not fully grasp all the things I am writing about now. A month later, the actor and I parted ways. He went to the United States and who knows what happened to him. I wonder sometimes.

Sometimes we inexplicably miss things and moments, as if we were mental. I'll never know what came over me a long, long time ago, to make me overlook a caress which was so strategic and yet so gentle at the same time.

I was holding an umbrella over our heads; I had no idea who the guy was, except that he was dating a girl who was part of our clique that night.
