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Cold East

a novel

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Gabija Grušaitė

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Translated from Lithuanian by
Kipras Šumskas

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New York

Fucking twenty-nine today. How, and when, did that happen?

Before opening my eyes or even breathing in the thick summer heat of New York, I run my fingers through the rumpled surface of the sheet and the coolness of it sinks into my skin. In conclusion, I'm alive... and old.

I rise up on my elbows and glance through the window. A late night is transforming into an early morning, with night crawlers heading back to their lairs after the parties. The early office birds are still asleep – it's a rare moment in time when one can witness a shade of tranquillity hanging over Manhattan. I take a seat on the windowsill and spend some time choosing the right angle for a picture.

Click.

#sublime #newyorknights #happydaytome #blessed #happiness

An ungodly hour. People wake up thinking of the day they're going to face, to-do lists, tasks to get done and to avoid, the whys and the hows. Still, they get up, get dressed, put makeup on, shave, turn themselves smooth and soft, perfect as a Valencia filter, and, well, they live. Somehow. All of them somehow live, little by little. Except, certainly, those who die, with RIP messages stalking their deaths on Facebook.

The AC hums like a stifled soundtrack, yet I still feel hot. After kicking the sheets off, I lie there sweaty, nude, breathing heavily. The headlights of passing cars perform a small show on the ceiling, with ambulances providing the audio. Sunrise is almost here. The two of us are in bed.

Hell's Kitchen, 46th Street.

She rolls over and strokes my hair.

“You awake?”

I’m not answering. I need air. The AC should be turned up to the max, but I just keep looking at the ceiling. Those twenty-nine years suddenly hit my chest like weights on a bench.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks ten minutes later.

I remember the answer, “Mormons.” The rest – welcome to Hell. Silence.

It tingles.

I look at my phone’s screen. 508 people clicked ‘Like’ on my photo.

I turn to her and caress her naked stomach, savouring her soft, smooth skin. I take her breasts in my palms; she smiles gently and kicks the sheets off without opening her eyes. I stroke her hair while getting on top. In the twilight, her face seems grey, cheeks even more defined, chin sharp. I grasp her wrists – they’re so frail, like those of a doll or a child. Brushing her shoulders and collarbones, I embrace her neck, which I can cover completely with a single hand. Counting her ribs one by one with my fingertips, I hold her waist.

She opens her eyes and looks at me, surprised. Waiting for my hands to move again. I softly run my left hand between her legs and open up the moisture. She maintains eye contact as if she’s trying to read me, to figure out what I’m thinking. A sudden tsunami of anger rolls over me and I press on her so hard that she’s squirming.

“Stop it, no bruises.”

I grab her throat. She shuts up and looks at me without moving.

We fuck until the sun rises and thousands of people pour onto the streets. I don’t even know what I’m thinking of. Probably nothing.

“I didn’t know it was your birthday today,” she says after looking at her phone, smiling uncomfortably. I notice fibbylifewellness clicking ‘Like’.

She puts her clothes on and disappears into the morning noise

without saying goodbye. I run the bathtub and drink coffee while listening to the water. After the bath, I go down to the street.

It's not hot yet. The buildings look fake in the sky-blue background, as if they were put here straight from a board game. Broadway. Madison Avenue. Green streets, red streets. Expensive and cheap ones, where we'd put small houses during our careless childhood summers. Time looked like it was never going to end.

When was the last time I played Monopoly?

Does anyone still play Monopoly? Tweet.

A corner shop provides me with another coffee. Feed your caffeine addiction. I have two hours to stroll 30 blocks down to West Village, where I'm meeting my friends for birthday lunch.

The anxiety creeps up on you. Silently. You know someone's making more money, the budgets are not yet confirmed at this point, you're getting old, your eye bags prove you're not the same prodigious teenager you were just several years ago. Everything's slipping away, you need new blood. We always crave it. More and more, and it's never enough. This perfectly sunny world is a permanent battlefield, with invisible frontlines on sidewalks, between restaurant tables or couches at home. You can't win this war, even though sometimes you feel so close to victory. Close to your goal, dream or any other similar shit – maybe you were a start-up god last night, perhaps one of the highest-paid supermodels or the trendiest trendsetter. But! A new day is here and you're back on the frontline. Victory is either yesterday's news or in the distant future, whereas this day is always a hill you have to climb anew. For some reason, it never gets easier. Those who don't realise this and feel as if they've reached some kind of Olympus, thinking now they'll have a chance to rest on the throne, end up ditched in some black hole along with Modern Talking and Libeskind.

Black maple sunglasses. Black, Egyptian cotton T-shirt. Skinny, dark-grey DDDP jeans.

I'm twenty-nine and my life only looks complete through

Instagram filters; you crop out the battlefield and hide untidy mornings, and all that's left are blue eyes which aren't even really blue. My eyes reflect the surroundings, constantly changing their colour. "Northerners lack pigment," a famous Estonian designer once stated. Sometimes an azure sea is visible in the frames of a vacation, sometimes it's the greyness of London or the intense cobalt before dawn. If someone's looking from afar, a perfect reality is always reflected in my eyes. This seems like a life that many would want to have – sunsets, parties, pools, photogenic food and photogenic bodies. Even the streets of Vilnius look like they're candy for visual consumption. I don't know where the mirage of my life begins and where it ends.

"How old are you?" Hugs and kisses on the cheek follow.

I could fucking murder you right now.

"Too old," I try to let it go.

"Well?" No luck in avoiding it.

"Twenty-nine," I say whilst trying to hide the melancholy that this number brings me.

"Ah, so you're thinking of the to-do list before you're thirty, right? What have you come up with so far?"

"A million followers?" Ian suggests timidly. I barely know him. He likes TED Talks, grand ideas, charity, seals and pretty much anything else. He annoys the fuck out of me. I wish I could throw a shoe at his face; however my \$300 limited edition sneakers would be too soft for his foul mug. I'd need some leather, hard-soled boots.

"Sooner, I hope," I smile through gritted teeth.

"Maybe a second book?" Clearly, Ian doesn't get the message.

I grab the menu in silence.

"What'll you have?" Janet tries to change the subject.

"Don't know, you wanna share?"

"I'm thinking of getting the pumpkin and polenta salad with mackerel, but also I'd like to try their burger with Portobello mushroom."

“OK,” I nod and call the waiter. “A shot of Bloody Marys with an oyster for everyone to start with,” I say.

“Yuck,” Janet growls and smiles again. She takes her phone out and spends plenty of time selecting the right angle to capture the bloody oysters we’re about to have; then, unhappy with the choice, asks me to hold the glass and the oyster. Click.

#bffbdy #goodlookingboo #newyorksummer #bloodymary #blessed

“I’m off to Rio tomorrow,” Tina yawns. “Send me your recommendations on what to do and where.”

“Work trip?” Janet seems distracted.

“I’d like to fly to Rio too. It’s on my list,” Ian says. He then carefully adds, “On my before thirty list.”

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Twenty-eight.”

“And what else is on your list?” I take my phone out and think of a brilliant topic for an article. Perhaps even *The New Yorker* will want it. Oh, yes.

“I watched a TED talk last night,” Ian states. Janet rolls her eyes. She’s slightly sad that she’s basically making my birthday worse by bringing him here, but New York doesn’t have any good men, so an addiction to TED talks doesn’t seem like a deal-breaker. “It was about Bhutan. Have you seen it? I just found out about it yesterday, and it’s supposed to be the happiest place in the world. They have an index for happiness. I want to travel there, live among the locals and feel the real spirit of Buddhism.”

“Do you know that you can only go there with a fully-planned holiday package from a travel agency?”

“Really?” Those spiritual eyes seem less excited now. Somehow, I feel a heavenly joy in giving him this news.

“I’ll go to Iceland then,” he pierces through the pause.

“Any idea of how cold it gets there? The average temperature for June is nine degrees Celsius. Don’t forget the wind as well.”

“Oh fuck,” he pouts.

“Happy birthday!” Janet raises a glass of champagne. She’s already ordered another bottle.

“Happy birthday, darling,” Tina smiles. “We have some presents for you.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I shake my head. Why haven’t I got the presents yet? Give me my fucking presents.

Janet passes a postcard with the words, “We are going to LA” on it.

The thought of Ian joining us makes my stomach curl, but then I remember that I’ll pick out some good shoes and that makes me smile.

Why does the 30th bday drive people insane? #not30yet. Tweet.

While we eat the Portobello burger, hundreds of comments and retweets come my way.

What’s on ur BEFORE 30th to-do list? Tweet.

Even more comments.

Not to die, someone writes.

That would be great. Not dying until I’m thirty. Good one. I swallow that thought with champagne. A slight sense of euphoria gradually takes over me as I glance at rushing people from the terrace on the nineteenth floor. I’m not thinking about anything.

We say our bye-byes and I go home to sleep, waking up when it’s dark. Kanye West replied to my tweet:

TO BECOME A GOD.

Fuckin’ people.

I open a bottle of wine, turn my phone off and look hopelessly at my notebook. Something has to change, I swear to myself. My head’s killing me. I mix wine with Ibuprofen and stay up until 4am to binge on *South Park* in the living room, lying on my latte-coloured Umbess rug.

*

Without fail, LA always surprises me with its hot, dusty air, letting me breathe in the desert itself and breathe out Californian dreams.

It's the Fourth of July weekend. The golden sun sets on the coast while you ride by, observing how surfers pierce through the waves.

I'm here to glide on the surface of Venice Beach and watch sunburnt emigrants from down south catch poisonous fish at the pier. I don't really care whether someone actually eats the fish.

Rose Zinfandel under the palm trees until dawn. We're celebrating while Janet and Tina pass out on the sunbeds next to the pool. The security guy politely suggests that we should go home.

I get out of the Virgin Atlantic plane at 9pm on a Sunday evening. I close my heroin-chic eyes to inhale the humid summer of New York. Fatigue hits every vein of my hungover body that's still losing the fight to Californian food.

Before getting a taxi, I drop by the airport bar to drink some whiskey on the rocks while looking around, trying to determine things I could be thankful to the world for.

I'm sick. With every bit of energy left in me, I'm failing to remind myself why I love life and just how lucky I am. I should appreciate everything I have, yet my brain is arctic cold. Can't think. Those arctic ice cubes are running the show. If we're off the Instagram record, some moments of alcoholism are not fun at all. For some reason I remember Kerouac who bled to death. Internally.

Jeez. Stasys, don't think about that.

Just name things you're thankful for.

1) I have money. Not much, but enough to keep me relaxed about accounts not running dry tomorrow. Not enough to buy a condo in Manhattan though. 2) I have friends, casual

acquaintances, followers, fans. I'm surrounded by people, I'm never alone (am I really?). 3) I still look great. 4) I've already written a novel (yes I'm struggling with the second, but still). 5) ...what could the fifth thing be?

At times, I act as if I'm better than I really am; however this trick doesn't work – desperate exercises in positive thinking will never change my Eastern European blood.

“Sometimes it seems like you don't have a soul,” Janet told me in LA.

“Why?” a wave crashed in the distance. She refilled our glasses at the pier's bar. “Why sometimes?”

“Can't you just shut up? Smile? Let it go?” It almost seemed as if she was serious, thinking about something else than her weight for a second.

“Oh, you mean the stuff with Ian? He's an alpaca, and that's that.”

“No one's perfect,” she sighed, squinted her eyes and puts on her horn-frame sunglasses.

Click.

Going through the photos always makes me see myself from an odd angle – that's not a reflection of me, that's someone else. Weekend photos of someone else.

I can't pick one to post on IG.

So I open Tinder.

Left. Left. I'm looking at smiling women at the speed of forty photos per minute.

Right. Match.

Less than twelve per cent body fat and solid abs are the best disguise from reality. I look around. Even though I resemble a post-LA zombie I'm no uglier than most of the people at the bar. I don't feel handsome, but who cares.

Left. Left! Left.

Holiday photos. Duck faces. False eyelashes. Bikini beach

photos. At the bar with the girls, sucking your cheeks in. People hoping to find their match by presenting a summary of their best moments in several clicks. Hoping to avoid spending the night alone.

You shove your life, personality, story into a few micro reflections that others can examine like a menu at a Japanese restaurant.

Who gives a shit what you're really like. I'm no one. The real me is a clump of situations, dialogues and thoughts, lost like a King Charles Spaniel in the suburbs, ever-changing and never becoming a finite product that I can show people and say, "Take your goddamn eyes off the Matcha lattes for a second and look – this is the real ME."

The whiskey runs out and I start my trip to the taxi queue. A guy from university days sends me a message that he flew in from Oslo yesterday and wants to meet up. We're not friends, and if this were any other night – a night without airports, transcontinental flights and post-festivity desperation, I would've lied to him that I'm busy.

When you land in JFK and crawl out of a plane like a post-Forth of July zombie (with a tan). Tweet. Plus a photo. I look charming. A bit like a charming panda.

"Where?" I text him.

"Williamsburg. On the roof of the Northern Territory bar with a few mates. Join."

Oh no. Fucking Williamsburg people with their beards, unable to tell the difference between a wagyu steak and a sanitary pad, yet insist on calling themselves food bloggers. Or dancers 'tryin' to make it in the city". Or makers of organic chocolate, who tell ecstatic stories of walking around in the mud in El Salvador, looking for beans and epiphanies.

"OK. 20 mins." I have no dignity. No integrity.

"12 Franklin," I mumble to the taxi driver while taking a seat. I don't know why I just don't go home. I look like shit, feel like shit too.

On the morning of his 29th birthday, Lithuanian Stasys Šaltoka wakes up next to a woman he doesn't know, in his own bed, in New York, realising that his days look good only through Instagram filters. Ferocious anxiety lurks under the photogenic everyday surface, and the question WHY? keeps poking him in the back – what the fuck should he do with his life? Stasys decides to change lanes and moves to Southeast Asia. New friends, an occasional wan tan mee, phad thai or mashed potatoes, all drowning in whiskey and sarcasm, leads him to making documentaries about the third world. Yet there is still just silence inside him.

Cold East is the second novel by Gabija Grušaitė, telling the story of today through an inner transformation lens of thirty-year-olds, through the search of profound happiness or meaning while dancing around the surfaces of life, and through human ties.

Cold East is exceptional. Beautifully written and easy to read, it's a book about you and me it's a book about you and me – post-Soviet hipsters. It's an intense exploration of values and the meaning of life in a modern Instagram society. I absolutely could not put it down.

Rūta Pulkauninkaitė-Macikė, CEO of hotel PACAI

Gabija Grušaitė's novel exploded like a bomb on the Lithuanian literary scene, dragging us willy-nilly into the 21st century.

Violeta Kelertas, literary critic,
New Literature from Europe festival, New York City 2018

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