I destroy the sense of all insults

Ilya Kharkow

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> *Marilyn Monroe once said that love and work are the only worthwhile things in life. Trying to combine them, I invented sex.*

What do our readers need to know about you?

My name is Ilya Kharkow. I like polo shirts, anarcho-individualism and PrEP. I'm a writer from Ukraine, but I don't consider myself a Ukrainian writer. I can only be presented as a rights activist if we are talking about the rights of guys during wartime. But when we talk about me as a gay guy, what is important to me is not rights, but privileges.

Today I'll talk about this in more detail, because *I want people to come to me not only for revolution, but also for eroticism.*

What do you mean?

The thing is, I'm not a genre writer. Not only do I dislike government restrictions, I also don't accept restrictions in literature. *I perceive books as real life, and therefore I try to cram real life into a book with all its unshaven armpits, smells, and stains.*

Most books today are repetitions of well-working schemes. But it's boring. This has nothing to do with art. A book is not a plot, but an experience and impressions. And I know that experience doesn't always smell good.

My goal as a writer is not just to sleep with a young astronomer, but to drag the reader into my bed and make him enjoy someone else's awkwardness. Allow the reader to study our moles instead of constellations through the astronomer's remarks. *This way I turned sex into my job, but did not become a prostitute.*

Can you give an example from your work when you invite the reader into someone's bed?

Right after I left Ukraine, I went to a flea market. There I bought an American half dollar coin with Kennedy's elegant profile on it. I literally fell in love with this profile, and the seller noticed it.

I wanted to buy this coin, but I didn't know what to do with it. Coins can be so beautiful, but if they cannot be spent, they are worthless. The seller advised me to keep the coin in my pocket until I met someone I really like.

And then a year ago I gave the coin to an unexpected person. I accidentally met a guy in exile with whom I had been planning a date for 5 years. 5 damn years! Then we spend 3 days in a

rented apartment. To get into our bed and find out exactly what happened there, you should read my short story. In this case, for you the title of the story is the code for the door to our bedroom. It's called ZODIAC DECADENCE IN MY PANTS.

How did you started writing?

I don't remember what came first: masturbation or passion for literature. I think at the same time.

Masturbation is a great scam. At first, erotic fantasies involve you in this process, but as soon as it is over, the guy immediately finds himself thrown into a hostile, uncomfortable world. The leap from warm fantasies to a hostile world occurs in a second. I remember that I started writing in order to prolong a pleasant moment for at least a few pages.

And how can a gay writer prolong pleasure in Ukraine today?

Firstly, I live in Portugal, not in Ukraine. Secondly, *I don't consider myself either a Ukrainian or a Ukrainian writer.* I must repeat this, because in Ukrainian literature there have been several cases of appropriation of writers of a foreign culture. Even if they wrote anti-Ukrainian works, such as Mikhail Bulgakov. Even if they didn't write in Ukrainian like me.

And yet, I'd say that *today in Ukraine it's dangerous not only to be a gay writer, but also to have any position that differs from the official one.* Local patriots pay 1,500 hryvnia for public humiliation on camera of those who speak freely. 1500 hryvnia is approximately 35 euros. With this money you can buy 2 solid books in Europe, or you can order the humiliation of a Ukrainian guy.

Are you afraid for your life?

When I was in Ukraine, I could have died from Russian missiles. When I tried to leave the country, I could have died at the hands of the Ukrainian military, who catch guys on the street and forcefully send them to war. *Over the past 2 years, I have imagined my death so often that I am tired of dying.*

Moreover, it is not patriots who constitute the main danger for me in exile, but the Ukrainian government. Ukrainian officials periodically appeal to European countries with a request to deport the guys, so that Ukraine will force us to choose: prison or war.

Are there topics that you basically don't write about?

Of course, everything that is usually written about does not interest me. *But everything that causes embarrassment or bewilderment is the subject of my study.*

That's why I find talking about penis size wonderful. Sexually transmitted diseases? I will be happy to write a couple of paragraphs about this. But only in the context of analysis, because analysis is the path to perfection. Analysis is a wrinkle cure for your inner child. Does it make you horny? For now it shouldn't.

Other than penises, what else do you enjoy writing about?

In fact, I've been writing too much about war lately. I wrote about human rights, and in particular about the right of guys to refuse military service. But I don't want war to become my main topic.

In order not to let the war overshadow the eroticism of my stories, I want to point out that while THE MINING BOYS is a novel about my escape from Ukraine, it is also about open relationships, emigration, and different cultures. Have you ever had sex with a Japanese guy? Yeah, this is an invitation. Unpleasant odours traveling across Europe. Social weaknesses. Dates that don't always turn out well. This kind of life is not shown on social networks, but still secretly everyone knows what I'm talking about. And it's all in my books.

Are you afraid of the war becoming your main topic?

The war destroyed my old life. I don't want it to destroy my creativity as well.

Are even literature books published today in Ukraine?

Before I left, several paperbacks of the President's wartime speeches were published. But this is not my area of interest.

For some time I worked in the largest publishing house in the country. I was the person who writes book annotations. My colleagues were afraid of graphomaniac writers who personally brought manuscripts and then fought with the guards. I was much worse. I knew that I wouldn't be able to defeat the bodybuilder security guard, and therefore my plan was like this: get a job in a publishing house, meet the editors and from the inside slip them the manuscript. I carried out this plan! But when the editors finished reading, they stopped greeting me. The entire team, except for one person, started ignoring me. Completely.

It turned out that not only did they not like my manuscript, they found it offensive. Suddenly, my colleagues felt uncomfortable working with a gay guy in the same office. That was enough for them to ask me to resign voluntarily soon after.

Around the same time, a law was passed limiting the publication of books in Russian in Ukraine. Publishing houses were forced to switch to Ukrainian, but I didn't speak it at the level to work with literature. I didn't own it because in the eastern part of Ukraine we speak Russian, not Ukrainian. Therefore, *not only was I not published in Ukraine, my dream of a career in publishing was buried there as well.*

Have you ever regretted starting to write?

If a dog regrets being born a dog, who will it bother? My teachers, upon discovering my literary talent, didn't rejoice for me; instead, they prepared me for a tough life. They turned out to be right. Greetings from the bottom! But this bottom is as poetic and erotic as Oscar Wilde's best times.

Who do you write for?

For the past 2 years, Ukraine hasn't been releasing men aged 18 to 60. They're told that being a pacifist is shameful. However, I'm trying to show that heroes aren't made by coercion. Not wanting to fight isn't just normal; it's a position of common sense. With my novel THE MINING BOYS, I aim to comfort all the guys who don't want to fight.

However, I don't write books specifically for gay people; I write them for those who love reading. *I would like heterosexuals to read my books just as I read books with heterosexual heroes. We are certainly different, but not so much that we can't understand fictional characters.*

You mentioned that as a gay person, you're fighting not for rights but for privileges. What does that mean to you?

Well… when I realised I was gay, I understood – I was lucky, and I wanted to share my luck with the world. Yes, to share luck, not to prove that I'm normal.

To those who still think it's not normal, I'll ask: *where have you seen even one normal writer?*

What inspires you?

Ordinariness. My life is so unusual that I gravitate toward simplicity and ordinariness.

In Lisbon, I have a friend whose place I love to visit just to lie on the floor. There's a laundry basket in his room. It's hard to say why I like it so much, but I'd trade two Triumphal Arches for the chance to see again how the morning orange sunbeams touch the white sleeve sticking out of that basket. Libraries inspire me too.

When I used to be a student, I loved reading in the library and during breaks, I would gaze out the window at a tiny island. The lazy river flowed around a long stretch of land on all sides. Fishermen in flesh- colored suits would constantly gather there. I stared at this island from the library window for 4 years before I found out it was a real gay island. Guys would gather there for sex, but they didn't wear flesh-colored suits. On this island, guys walked around naked. Later, I started going there myself. Did this inspire me? I think you already know the answer.

How often have you encountered hatred because of what you write?

Here it would be appropriate to recall the French writer Jean Genet. *When I declare that I'm an old whore, no one can beat me, I destroy the sense of all insult.* That's how he wrote. I sign for every word he says.

I think that's a great way to end, as I proudly feel like old whore, too. Thank you, Ilya.

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