

How I Quit

Excerpts translated by *Jayde Will*

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When it all started, when I started to smoke and why, and why I smoked for twenty years, was it because that others smoked, that during my entire childhood I saw the fuming chimneys of factories, plants, and neighboring buildings, I saw men smoking (women didn't smoke, because back then it wasn't proper for women to smoke in public, and I didn't see women smoking clandestinely), or did I smoke because others smoked, so I'd have something to say, when people don't have anything to say, which is why they pull out cigarettes and have a smoke, or was it so that I'd be more manly, because real men smoked and then reeked of smoke, because that kind of smell suits real men, the smell of war and death, because what do all soldiers ask for before death – to smoke, which is allowed to the condemned before death – to smoke their last cigarette, or maybe I smoked so I would have something to do during breaks at the university, or so I would experience the pleasure imparted by the tobacco smoke, when you pull out a cigarette after having had a few sips of coffee or the first gulp of beer, or stronger drinks, habits can be harmful and beneficial, but the harmful ones are most often pleasant, because they are deadly, while the beneficial ones are boring, because they are oriented towards eternity – eat broccoli and you'll live forever, of course it's a lie, a ruse, and a scam on a grand scale, those useful habits are simply bourgeois and not connected to any sort of eternity at all, but people's mechanisms for fooling themselves are very creative, and the arsenal of those mechanisms is endless, but when it started, the billowing smoke, the hissing stone knuckles, the fired-up stove spewing out columns of steam, the silhouettes of naked bodies, they are sitting in clouds of steam, they are sitting on a platform, which takes one to heaven, which disappears into the clouds, they sit, as if it were the Mount Olympus of Greek gods, naked gods, every one of them sitting on their own platform according to a hierarchy, and the rows of those naked bodies rise higher and higher, who's sitting above on the last platform, it's hard to make out, when the steam dissipates, Zeus appears, the old Russian Safron with his winter hat, the ears of the hat are folded upwards, they look like the wings of Hermes, every time that Zeus moves, they flutter in the air, and Zeus is always moving, always searching, for a Europe to screw, Safron flails his birch branch, whipping his back and yelling something in Ancient Greek: "*Blat', kak chorosho!*"^{*} Zeus whips himself like a medieval Byzantine monk with big black olives in the place of eyes, punishing himself for his sins, but the suffering in the face of the Lord is so pleasant, that Zeus-cum-Byzantine monk-cum Safron shouts at the top of his lungs: "*Kurva, kak chorosho, davai, iesho paru!*"^{**}

* Goddamn, that's so good! (*Russian trans.*)

** Fuck, that's so good, alright, more steam! (*Russian trans.*)

“When I think about smoking, I remember the sauna,” says Sigitas.

“What sauna?” Sara asks.

“The town sauna, back in the day in the towns, there were public saunas, women bathed on Fridays, men on Saturdays, or maybe it was the other way around, Mother used to take me to the women’s sauna when I was little, until one day after I got back from there, I said: the sauna’s not nice, and then mother didn’t take me along anymore to the sauna, my father did, the saunas of the time were such that whether you wanted to or not, you’d start smoking after visiting them a few times.

“I don’t see the connection,” Sara said.

“No one knows what ties connect us to the past, with our subconscious, with our instincts, fears, and preconceived notions, everything sinks deeper and deeper into a mythological fog, which we nonchalantly call the past or memory, but in reality no one knows for sure what sort of ties connect us to the past, memory, with our subconscious, instincts, fears and preconceived notions, or if the information is kept in the catalogues of the brain as intricately constructed cases, or if a spider of the imagination creates a web of associations, which we ourselves ultimately find ourselves in and get tangled up in until the end of our life, I don’t know, the sauna was a big space, along the walls of which benches were placed and there was also one bench in the middle, no one wanted to sit there, because then the entire sauna looked at you washing yourself, whereas near the wall you felt safer and looked at those who sat in the middle on the bench and felt uncomfortable, the water ran from two faucets, hot and cold, you needed to stay with a tin wash basin in your hands in a line near the water, the line never ended, because the first wash basin was for washing with soap, the second for washing the soap off, the third to rinse off, people at the time were frightening, unshaven, with huge toenails, when you stood in line for the water, it looked like you were in line for a gas chamber, there was another area, called the steam area, everybody went there at first, occupying a place in the main area – they poured water into the bowl, put it on the bench, and next to it put the soap, shampoo, and if you had one, a loofah, and you went to the steam area so you could sweat it all out, there was a system of levels, perhaps seven levels, there was always a local Russian hanging out on the top, there were quite a few of them in our town, they had moved there from Slabada, Russians like to beat themselves, they would whip themselves with birch whisks and cry out in satisfaction, occasionally one of the men would open up the upper door of the stove and throw half a bowl of water on the heated stones, and the stove would spit out a hot burst of thick white steam, and everyone sitting on the levels, would grab their ears, just the Russian wouldn’t, because he had a hat with earflaps, he would just whip himself with his whisk and yell out in Ancient Greek: “*Blat’, kak chorosho!*”

One guy’s feet had gotten frostbite and walked poking those stumps into the floor tiles, and that was a horrible image, and how would you not start smoking after seeing such images...

“I still don’t see a connection,” Sara said, stubborn as a goat. “You didn’t start smoking as a teenager.”

“I never told you when I started to smoke.”

“When did you start to smoke?” Sara asked unphased.

“Most likely after I got into university. Though I really started more in the army.”

Sara once again resumed her unsavory business.

“So,” she said, “the sauna isn’t connected with your smoking at all.”

“In my childhood, well, in May at least, and wasn’t every year, there were a lot of cockchafers, giant brown beetles, I would catch one, tie a piece of thread to its leg, and let it go.”

“There’s some sort of Freudian pigsty in your head,” Sara said. “You need a lot of water from a psychotherapist’s jabbering in order to wash shit off it.”

“No one knows what thread connect us to the past, what where and when it started, why it suddenly pops up, why suddenly a morsel in one’s mouth becomes bitter after seeing something...” Sigitas can’t figure out anymore what one would need to see for a morsel in one’s mouth to become bitter, and falls silent.

“I’m telling you – you have shit in your head.” Sara laughs and pulls out a cigarette. He also sticks a cigarette in his mouth.

“I can smoke, because I already quit,” I said. Sara nodded.

“Many of those people, those naked figures, I saw in church, that was a different sort of purification ritual, everyone has clothes on in church, Rome and Constantinople slowly dressed people up, they dressed up the saints, slaughtered the gods of Olympus, and in the church, the Christian Catholic Church, the priest was like a pearl diver, who pulled the shell of the soul from Man’s depths and, waiving the blades of the bloody cross, tries to extract the pearl of repentance from it.

“Maybe that’s the main difference, maybe it’s an old conflict, that torments us, and that conflict is reflected in my conscious – the ancient Greeks, who didn’t think that one needs to separate the body and the soul, and Christianity, which rammed the burning sense of guilt into our heart valves because of the grace of primordial holiness that was lost by Adam and Eve, ordered us to feel ashamed of our filthy body and care only about the salvation of our immortal soul, maybe all of that isn’t about smoking at all, but about an irrational sense of guilt, which I feel since childhood. I thought that priests were like pearl divers, but...”

“As far as I’ve had the chance to see priests,” Sara said, “they certainly aren’t anything like pearl divers, a Catholic priest is your typical obese cook with a greasy and bloody apron...”

Sigitas laughed.

“He pulls out screaming souls from their filthy bodies and throws them into the enormous cauldron of eternity.”

“You told that story so deliciously, I want to eat,” Sara said.

“Ok, let’s go to the center, we’ll grab a bite to eat.”

Sara shook her head

“What is it?” Sigitas asked.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you’re a horribly dull guy?”

“What kind of dull? Like a habit of biting your nails?”

“And there it is.”

It's hard to create distance, it's as if you're looking at yourself dead or you're dead and looking at yourself. You have to abandon that peel, which means being a Lithuanian, tradition, family, culture, and the like, and look at it from the outside, it's very difficult, almost impossible, you'll start to lie, because the truth about yourself is unbearable, or you'll start to hate yourself, because you will always be lying.

There are stages in life when you live and don't see, don't feel, that you're living, and then something happens when you suddenly see, that you have been living for a few years, that your fingers are yellow from nicotine, that you gained a ton of weight, that you almost don't recognize yourself in photos made ten years ago.

"You need to quit smoking," the doctor said. She's almost a different person, she seems older, perhaps because of that she looks wiser, it could be that it really is another person, but the point is the same – we go to the same doctor our whole life. It's not important that the doctors' age, sex, or specialization changes, the doctor is the same the whole time – it's a person who holds the threads of your life in their hands. Sigitas looked at her, he's still thinking how he could look at himself from the outside, though he doesn't need it anymore, he has already seen himself from the outside, smoking two packs a day, gaining more than ten kilograms, going bald, with his graying face. Who changed me, Sigitas thought, where did they put the real me, where did they hide me, why did they stick this horrid person here instead of me...

"Over a long period of time, having high blood pressure, the heart muscle strengthens in such a way that now the high blood pressure has become the norm, and it can only be regulated with medication," the heart specialist said, "but the feeling that you can't breathe, that you're gasping is not because of your heart, but because of a disruption of the sympathetic nervous system." Sigitas listened to her, but heard her as if through a wall that was being pounded by his heart, his proud, absurdly muscle-laden, self-tan lotion-doused, white-toothed grinning moron of a heart, a fucking bodybuilder.

"And it's not connected with the Italian word *simpatico*...I mean, it's nothing pleasant and *sympathetic*, like the meaning in Lithuanian..."

"No," said the doctor.

"Maybe that suffocating isn't even a physiological or neurological problem, maybe I am just being suffocated by cliches, which a person till the age of forty becomes overgrown with in a way that he becomes a fucking loser – someone convinced, someone having experienced something, someone reliable, though in reality all of that is just complacent cliches?"

The doctor didn't say anything, just picked her pen up from the table. The fucking pen.

"That old hag, that old woman, that I told you about," Sigitas said, "That elderly lady – that's that same old lady that Raskolnikov killed with an axe, Kharm's wrote about that, just in Kharm's case the old woman went into the house herself and dies, in other words, if you don't look for fate, fate will find you itself, and that old hag in the mountains, that I struck down, actually she struck me down, she climbed on my chest, she started to choke me..."

Suddenly something changed in the doctor's office, as if a black cloud had descend-

ed, or perhaps the blinds were lowered, but Sigitas had a difficult time making out the doctor sitting across from him, it wasn't a doctor sitting there anymore, but a monk, the Great Fucking Inquisitor, or perhaps an old woman, or perhaps the hag from the mountains, but certainly not the doctor, because when she spoke, Sigitas was paralyzed by a deathly cold, the sort of cold that seems where your back turns into ice and will shatter right then and there, and Sigitas will collapse like a wet rag on the floor...

"You control your body, feel like its master, eat this, don't eat that, do sports, get drunk, procreate, enjoy, torture yourself, pamper yourself, take your body from the trough of one pleasure to another and think that you're different from an animal because you control it after all, you think, you analyze, you choose, you have secrets, your body has many secrets, sometimes those secrets of yours seem like a flaw and shame, you hide them, you hide them even from yourself, and sometimes you think that those secrets, those flaws, that shame are advantages of your body, but at the same time they are your advantages, and you reveal them, you publicize them, you speak about the dark secrets of your body, about the most disgusting parts of your body like a victory, like it's your victory, your body is an altar for you, where sacrifices are offered up to you, your body is a scaffolding on which all that displeases you is condemned and tortured, a world that has wronged you, your body seems like a private territory for you, into which only preferred people and instruments are allowed into, and that is just in the worst case, when you need to fix up the body a little, but precisely when the problem is bigger, you suddenly understand that you are not its owner at all, when the problem is serious, you can't trade it in, give it back and ask for another newer, better one, you dream about that, but in reality you can't do anything, this vessel is disposable and can't be returned, when the time comes, when you'll be powerless, when you won't be able to clean up your own shit, when you can't even wipe off your own saliva anymore, then they will pull you out of your body like a snail, rip the pearl of your soul from that smashed shell and throw it to the pigs, and your body, that feeble casing, will have become a pile of wet paper, only the worms will care about it.

Sigitas is unable to utter a word out of surprise, he looks at that creature, at a shadow, sitting across the table, he understands that it can't be like that, but it is, and what is horrible, so horrible, that an iceberg is already sitting in his intestines, with the Great Inquisitor squatting on its tip.

"You need to quit smoking," the doctor says and writes something down without raising her head, through the window one can see a tree, a bit further, behind the hill – a cemetery, and his chest is flooded with a good feeling, it appears that it's some sort of defensive trick of the psyche, when we are really afraid of something, are extremely disappointed, when we have totally lost hope, when we think, that the world is a fucking shithole and that there is *darkness there and nothing more*, suddenly the most trivial idea crosses his mind, that hey, the silhouette of that tree is very beautiful, that the sun's rays, dripping through the yellowish maple leaves, create an extraordinary ornament, and – which is totally stupid and shameful – a thought turns up from the depths of his consciousness somewhere, that everything will be fine. And you know that all of that is a trick, a lie, that the instinct of self-preservation somehow organized a circular defense, and afterwards, having fashioned an arc of hope, penetrated the Troy of skepticism, looming on the hills of the conscious...and then it starts all over again.