

## DAN MUNTEANU, TRANSLATOR / from Eugen Serbanescu's Afternoon with a Nymphomaniac

*Translated from the Romanian<sup>1</sup>*

But men are immature for yet another reason. They equate a woman's beauty with her inner pulses when there is no connection between the two. So, in order to make them understand that the door is open to them, I had to look after the body. I mean my body. Painfully. Physically painfully. O. K. I am very beautiful, but beauty too needs to be maintained. First and foremost, the breasts. Men have created this big breast fetish when in fact what matters, what they should engage is the breasts' sensitivity, the way I react when I am touched on my breasts, and how tremendously aroused men get by the whole thing. If my breasts are hard as wood and just as dead, or balloons filled with water and salt, or made of fissionable material which makes me (and them) explode—well, that should be the men's problem, but it is not. I hate them, but there is nothing I can do. These are the rules of the game. You have to visually dazzle men before you get them to touch you. There are some who have a sixth sense, they "smell" the woman from far away, regardless of her physical looks—but such men are rare. On the other hand, just as I have found out, there isn't necessarily a link, a causal relationship, between masculine beauty and sexual prowess. This is also true for women. Why that hasn't gotten into men's heads I don't know.

I was working as a translator for a law firm in New York. I took a break, I was also a student at New York University, I was studying Law, I was 27, and I decided to get a silicon implant. I had money, I could pay as much as it took. There is no fixation more infantile and more American than the mammary fixation. The surgeon tried to convince me not to make them that big. I wanted them big, as big as possible. You cannot conquer the United States if you have puny tits. A huge country, a real continent, it is obsessed with grandeur. The doctor, one Dannys Borruck, gabbed on about proportion. Now, this proportion issue is also a question of culture. I have studied the problem for several months. For instance, the Spaniards love corpulent women; the Brazilians, medium-sized breasts, not too large; the French, flat breasts; the Argentineans, pear-shaped breasts, etc. Even within America, the standards vary—because of the climate. For example, in California and Texas where it is hot, big breasts are greatly appreciated because women wear light, low-necked blouses.

So, you must have the right stuff to show off. If you don't wear light, summery blouses in those hot climates, you are ridiculous. If you wear such clothes and have no breasts, you look ridiculous too. Therefore, big breasts are a must. In New York or in the North, the situation is different. It's colder, you can hide your breasts inside a coat, you can get away with it more easily. But if you have a social life, you've got to take off your coat anyway. And it's not only the breasts. Some women try to re-jig their ethnicity. Asians get double eye-lifts, Italians and Jews straighten their noses, Mexicans get false teeth, African-Americans turn whiter, and so on. Oh well, eventually I accepted a C cup. Fine, but I had a problem. I couldn't all of a sudden show up on the job with different breasts. First, all my women co-workers would have given me the cold shoulder, some of them would've become really envious and pissed off, especially in a law firm where the appearance of seriousness is more important than all legislation put together. So, I decided to graduate from New York University Law School. After that, I'd land a job with a new firm, with new breasts, and my problem would be solved because the people in the new firm wouldn't know my new breasts from my old ones.

At the other end of the spectrum are the sensitive, the losers by definition. They would do anything for a woman, even sacrifice themselves to have her. Of course, I feel like milking them dry, I'd be an idiot if I didn't. They come in all nationalities, but the Romanians are record-breakers. In New York, I met a guy who wouldn't touch me, why, because he was in love with his wife in Bucharest. A fine, educated fellow. I tried to seduce him in every imaginable way, but he wouldn't give in. That irritated me hugely. I don't like it when somebody stands me up. And if he turns me down right away, he takes a big, big risk... I asked him what was wrong with him, was he sick or something? "Understand me, I am waiting for Alina." "Come on, for this trifle you refuse me? What do you think she is doing now in Romania, picking flowers, praying in church for the souls of the dead? I'll tell you what she's doing: looking for men. Actually she's not looking for them, she found them a long time ago, more precisely the very next day after you got on the plane." "Please, you don't know Alina, really! She's an extraordinary girl. She truly loves me, we talk on the phone every day, there's not a false note in her voice, she is head over heels in love with me, we've been in love since high school, she has never been unfaithful to me. I put up with a lot here and work only for her. We'll make it, we'll make it, we'll be happy as we could

have never been in the old country, this American dream, fuck it, we'll make it reality, soon, very soon, it can't be an infinite fata morgana!" I left him alone. He lived only to bring his woman to America. He worked like a madman, about 18-20 hours a day. In the morning he was a programmer for a software company, in the afternoon a waiter, and in the evening a taxi driver, and he was dreaming of Alina. Of course, on the phone, she played the tune he wanted to hear, she mewed and purred, and filled his head with crap, yeah on the phone, ha-ha! Eventually he managed to bring her to the States. He got her a green card—the dream of any Romanian reaching the American shores—found her a job, and then brought over her parents as well. They lived happily for a few years, until the woman got firmly settled on her own, learned the language, got her credit cards, and generally learned the rules of the game. And then, our friend, the sensitive man, the dreamer, the lover got his just desserts: they kicked him out into the street! Just like that! He went to the police to lodge a complaint, but the “family” claimed he was violent. So, he was left just as before, that is—out.

The explanation? Well, it's complex. To begin with, far away from the old country, many men become... nostalgic. The distance makes them forget the misery here in Romania, because of which they probably left in the first place. The motherland (a term perverted by the communists who equated it with their own historical fraud, but essentially a genuine term) acquires the form of the beloved woman from the motherland. The motherland is an abstraction whereas the woman—boy, oh boy! I leave aside the failed attempts with American women who entertain a different metaphysics. But beyond this incompatibility, instinctively, in order not to lose their identity besieged by an environment of which they are not a product, and which is not theirs, the Romanians try to reinforce their identity, to reassert it, bringing from the old country something that is their own, only their own (more precisely, was their own, but they don't know it or refuse to know, they hope it still is). That is, a woman. The Romanian woman, in a state of despair generated by the misery here, does whatever is possible to fuel the flame, usually over the phone. Romanians who have fled their country spend fortunes on phone bills. Naturally, a Latin people, emotional... At the other end of the line, some are sincerely in love with their far away husbands, some are just using them, others honestly re-fall in love with them for the same reason—the American dream versus the Romanian nightmare. Once in America,

they find an egalitarian society, even feminist, libertine, a real paradise compared with Romanian society, ultra-male and rather vulgar. At work, American men—who have never seen East European women—eye them lustily, and act accordingly, within the work context, helping them, protecting them, etc. Of course, not for free. We are in America, mind you: no free lunch... The woman, in turn, makes her own simple calculation. Since she was, anyway, unfaithful to her husband in Romania just for art's sake, why wouldn't she do it in America for gain? In other words, why art for art's sake and not art with a purpose? A new world unfolds before her eyes. A world that changes her personality. All of a sudden, the husband, the Romanian lover becomes a stage, a step, a trampoline, but not a landing strip. The desire to avenge all the humiliation and misery once suffered in the old country is more important than the humiliation suffered in real time in America, it is overwhelming, it wipes out everything, including the one who opened this new, almost unbelievable gate to success. Her individual qualities, once frozen in agony in a country tormented by imaginable and unimaginable spectres, wake up. Now is the moment! Now or never! And, after all, once I've cooked my goose, I can always go back to Romania! But I will return like a grand lady! My relatives, my friends, the professors who punished me, the colleagues who rubbed my face in the snow, the boy who was courting me but married my cousin, they will all look at me stunned, as you would at a goddess! They will learn their lesson. The political notables, the socialites, the businessmen are all fighting to meet me, to offer me their services. They are all like puppets on a string, entertaining me. Ha-ha, the visit of the old lady, who is... very young. At long last, your own mother respects you, she bows, scared, in front of the brat whose bottom she spanked when she, the brat, was very little. The vindication is perfect, total. It was worth all the humiliation. That's life... Yes, if you are humble-determined, you prevail.

Oaths are an idiocy. The attempt to contain for ever the life of feelings is a violation of human personality. No one can be held responsible for the transformation of one's feelings. When I swore my oath to you, I loved you, no doubt about it, that's what I felt at that moment, that I must, that I want to swear my oath to you, later on things got muddled up, I stopped loving you, so what was I to do, keep an oath that no longer had any real basis? Oh, well, one can swear an oath, but differently. For example, I swear that I will stay with you forever, if I love you forever (which is highly improbable). This oath is much more correct, much more human. When my feelings

for you have vanished, I am relieved of any oath. Hey, I'm not in the army, I swear to do my duty for my country, this is about feelings. The army of feelings is the only army in the world that refuses to take orders. I cannot order myself to love you forever. I love you as much as I can. Then, goodbye my darling. Have a happy life! We'll keep in touch by email.

Americans are rather dry, not really volatile, unlike Romanians, Serbians, Bosnians, Balkan peoples in general, who are too volatile. But Americans were fine for me because they don't fall in love. They have so many puritanical and financial restrictions that they cannot afford to fall in love. And besides, they tend to turn everything into sport—sex first of all. Their sentimental metaphysics exists, but it operates rather at an epidermal level, in clichés, in a standardized manner, while the Balkan peoples have a dramatic urge, they all have their particular eroticism, they are jealous, excessive, quick to kill for a woman, and even to kill her too into the bargain. So, as far as my personal tranquillity was concerned, Americans were more convenient since they wouldn't clutch onto me. We would have sex, that was it—and stay friends (insofar as I needed them) or not—but we would never part as enemies. Yet my problem with them is different: they are very hard to manipulate. It's very difficult to obtain anything from them, and when you do, it's minor stuff. And they have no memory either. If you call a guy after six months to ask him for a small favour, like, I don't know, a ride to the hair salon, he pretends he doesn't know you, then he remembers and asks you about your plans after you're done with the hairdresser, won't you drop by his place? I would definitely drop by if I were free from other obligations, but meanwhile I've changed my agenda, you see, the bird has flown, I have other matters to attend to, I am not here to serve him. Whereas, if, after two or five years, I call a “former” Romanian, he will help me without asking for anything in return. Romanians have memory, without a doubt.

I began to “attack” expatriate Romanians... I mean the Romanian officials, the diplomats, because the others, the Diaspora, couldn't in any way help me with my repatriation. The Diaspora was nice, I had a few friends, but now I needed friends among the Romanians with connections in Romania. And these were the diplomats, a species apart, I don't know whether you've met any. They are elegant, courteous, some very intelligent, when you ask them anything, they say very little, neither yes nor no, they avoid straightforward answers. Everyone had their connections in



Bucharest, obviously they did not get to New York just like that, out of the blue, so it became imperative that I insinuate myself a bit into their milieu. To test the ground, I went to bed with one of them, young, very tall and dark haired, I admit I like young men, I “requisitioned” him at a name day party given by a friend from Queens, who invited me precisely to meet him. That very evening I took him home, I fed him, you know Romanian diplomats are rather poor, he really stunned me when he said they don’t even have medical insurance. He complained that when he gets together with colleagues from other countries, he has to lie that his salary is twice the real one, otherwise he would look ridiculous and spoil the country’s image. Plus, the poor dears were overworked like crazy, they had to show up at all sorts of events, meetings, coddle important visitors from Romania, everything with little logistics, almost zero protocol funding. And where? In America, a country that has to be reconquered, right? Sometimes they paid out of their own pocket, only to get things done, to keep the boss happy. They are rather afraid of one another and, paradoxically, the chiefs fear their subordinates. Unlike other institutions, in diplomacy, by rotation, a subordinate today can become a chief tomorrow—and the other way round. It is different from the army where fear is, so to say, legislated as authority, detailed in clear regulations. No, according to this guy, in diplomacy fear is perverse. Flunkeyism can stab you in the back at any time. But all diplomats, subordinates and bosses, are afraid of the technical-administrative personnel, building managers, drivers, secretaries, who often are husband and wife! These people do and undo everything, they turn a diplomat into a sandwich and devour him... There are a few among them who have some education, but very few, most of them are monumentally insolent and nothing happens to them, they keep their jobs for ever and ever, amen... like it’s done on purpose... although it is glaringly obvious that they have no business abroad, they have no business at Ciorogirla<sup>2</sup> either, there are hundreds of drivers and hundreds of secretaries in Romania who would perform excellently abroad, but nobody sends them abroad, they do not belong within the system... Well, that’s the profession... They too have their unseen hierarchies, you never know who is whose boss. The funny thing is that sometimes they don’t know either. In diplomacy, they say, you shouldn’t even kick a dog because you never know who’s at the other end of the leash... But here was potential gain for me. This guy who was a secretary or attaché with the Romanian Mission at the UN, invited me to the December 1st Reception.<sup>3</sup> Of course I went, that was the whole idea.

Here at the reception, the crowd was respectable, very decent, there wasn't any trouble or scandal, a new consul general had arrived, a fellow with ideas, who silenced everybody. . .

He had this obsession , which had become proverbial, that for an employee of the State the service in the national interest, in any form, would have priority over one's personal interest, what a utopia!, and he wouldn't get soiled, wouldn't cut any personal deals, wouldn't ask or offer kickbacks, had no clan connections in Bucharest, so because of that he was not exactly my cup of tea, you realize, he was totally uninteresting. My understanding was that he had been associated with a different coalition government, but he was not a member of any party, he merely carried out Romania's politics, which is what all diplomats are supposed to do, it seems that his only support was his own performance, which was fatal, he was recalled, it didn't help that the Diaspora jumped to his defence, that they wrote public letters of protest to Bucharest—he shouldn't be recalled, quite the contrary—he should be congratulated, it didn't help that Giuliani congratulated him, in writing, for his exceptional services to the Romanian-American cooperation, they simply recalled him before his term was over, both from New York and Los Angeles, where they had sent him also because of the pressure put on by the Diaspora, to shut them up, and when he got back to Bucharest they couldn't even find a place for him with the ministry, you see he didn't have a contract, as if he had worked for Patagonia not for Romania!!... The irony of this guy's story, as rumours have it, is that although since as far back as January '90 he had publicly supported Romania's joining NATO, and although on this issue he had been one of the opinion leaders, he was fired, by whom? Precisely by those who'd been "undecided" about NATO for the entire decade, when? Exactly when we joined NATO! Makes perfect sense, he had been so right, so successful.... Success story.... Nice, isn't it? Romanian stuff, 100%. Anyway, his story was a lesson for me about what's going on in the old country, about how the game is played and what really matters: personal services, financial or of any other nature, rendered to the right people, before anything else—professionalism, honesty, common sense, etc. I got the message and I drew the appropriate conclusions. A bon entendeur, salut! Anyway....

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Eugen Serbanescu's novel is constructed as a dialogue, taking place in a Romanian mountain resort, between the author and Livia Hosta, a young and very beautiful woman. She is a rich and powerful lawyer who has recently returned to Romania from the United States where she immigrated following her defection from Communist Romania. Her success is due to her clever and cynical use of sex as well as to her harshly practical view of life. Although, technically, the text is a dialogue, one hears only Livia Hosta's voice. The author's questions and comments are deduced from her replies.

<sup>2</sup> A village in Romania, the equivalent of "in the middle of nowhere."

<sup>3</sup> Romania's national day.