



THE WAY

Day 1. Naleczow

“Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

Something caught in my throat. I'm standing in the hallway. I'm wearing shoes, pants and a backpack. A short farewell gesture. It's not like I'm going to stop. I won't turn around. My shoes are red. My backpack is blue. I turn the knob. I go through the door. I go down the stairs. Step by step. My hand subconsciously grabs the railing. I leave through the main door. I walk across the neighbourhood. Only now, I feel the weight of the backpack. I packed it yesterday. I put everything I needed in it. Then I put oatflakes and a fifty-ounce bottle of water on top. I'm wondering where to go. I look at the map on my cellphone. It gives weird directions. I climb up. Lublin is located on hills, and so is all of Lubelszczyzna actually. I reach the Lubartowska. Then I go down. I pass people and cars. Everyone busy with something. Everyone going somewhere. Everything bustling as always. It's Friday, almost nine. This damn backpack hurts my back. The truth is, I've never walked wearing a full backpack before. Three months earlier I got a serious ankle injury—that's how bad I wanted to get prepared. The last month and a half, maybe a little longer, I was extremely easy on myself, trying to get my ankle more or less back in shape. So now I'm improvising. Unprepared. Without the tests I should have gone through. To walk few dozen kilometers with a full backpack. To see what it's like.

Good Lord, my back. An intersection. Trolleybuses waiting at the lights. Only two cities in Poland have trolleybuses. It turns green. I go. Can't make it. I go across the island and to the other side. I take a turn towards a nearby wall. I take off the backpack. It just hurts. It really does. My spine. Those twelve kilograms. At first, when I left

home, I didn't feel anything. Now, after about an hour, I can't go any further carrying this. I have to make it at least a little lighter. I open the bottle. I pour half of the water out. I put the cap back on. The grass is green. I lift the backpack. I put it on. That's not so easy. I buckle up all of the belts. I grab the poles. I go uphill, towards the town hall.

The plaques in front of the town hall inform about historical events. A union between two great countries, Poland and Lithuania. The creation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The union was signed in Lublin. The plaque is black. The font is easy to read. The weather is nice. A guy I know wearing a black suit is heading towards the town hall's entrance. I recognize him.

“Hi.” I reach out my hand.

“Hi,” he answers and looks at me a little awkwardly. He's elegant and clean-cut. His shoes shining.

“Don't you recognize me?” I ask him.

“Well... Not really,” he adds quite awkwardly.

“You're Zdzisiek.” I also add the last name.

“Well... Not really.” His awkwardness keeps getting bigger, but then I realize all the hilarity and ridiculousness of the situation and of my greeting. “But I do know Zdzislaw.” the stranger saves the day.

“Oh. Well, then, say hello to him. Sorry.”

“It's okay.” He smiles with relief.

Another handshake. I turn right. I walk down the pedestrian zone. I look at the buildings and people. For how long am I leaving you all behind? Does it even matter? The pain on the right of my lower spine is getting unbearable. So is that it? Is that how it ends? Here? Really? I sit on a bench. I take a rest. I've walked for about four, maybe five kilometers. I take out the bottle. No way. I can't go without water. But I can't go with water, either. I just can't. Why didn't I get prepared? Why didn't I train? Why didn't I walk around with a full backpack? Why did I end up in a stupid situation like this? I drink as much as I can. Cold water fills my throat. Two dressed-up guys are collecting money for a noble cause. I can tell the nobility of it from their costumes. Well done. So historical. I flip the bottle. I pour the rest of the water down the drain. If I can't walk, what's the use of water? No, re-

ally? I haven't even started yet and already I'm messing up. I'm failing. I crumple the bottle. I take the few steps to the trash can. I put the backback back on. I walk across Krakowskie Przedmiescie. Pigeons are circling above the post office to the left. Now Aleje Raclawickie. A huge municipal park to the right. To the left, the University of John Paul II, the so-called KUL. It's not going to work. My spine hurts again. Why? Why? Why is it happening to me? How ridiculous am I?

It hurts around the sacral vertebrae. I unbuckle the waist strap. All the way. I grab the bottom of the rolled-up mattress which is fastened to the bottom of the backpack. That way, its weight is spread between my shoulders and hands underneath it, supporting the mattress, which supports the backpack. Makes me want to scream. But I stop myself. I stop myself with persistence. That conviction, that touch of failure. That experience of overwhelming infirmity and inability is taking me over. But I keep going. Going. Where am I going? Why am I going? To myself?

“Do you believe in me?”

“I do.” My answer is memorized. It's correct. It's the right one. Without a hint of flame and truth.

“Do you believe in me?”

“I do,” I repeat again. What else am I supposed to do? That's the truth. In this pain. In this hopeless, stupid situation, in the failure dropping on my head. That answer is true.

“Do you believe in me?”

How many more times will this question come up? Is it even a question? Do I actually get it?

“I do.” This time the answer is genuine. Because now there is no calculation to it. There's no rehearsing or trying to meet the expectations of the right answer. There's nothing left to it but the truth. It's stupid. It's simple. But it's the truth nonetheless.

“You'll make it.”

Kidding. What do you mean, I will? I'm eight kilometers from home. What do you mean “You'll make it”? What does “I believe” even mean? So do I believe or not? Or is it just a game? Just in case. So am I supposed to hold on to that “You'll make it”, or am I supposed to try to be clever, like I always do? I'm left with all those ques-

tions and answers. I walk for an hour and a half, carrying my backpack in a peculiar way. Then I let go of it, but I don't buckle up the waist strap. My arms are starting to hurt. That's not the way to carry a camping backpack. Will I make it? Do I believe? I do. But will I make it? How can one give such an assertion in a situation like this? Can one accept it? What does it all actually mean and what does it lead to?

A Biedronka store to the left is a place to catch a breath. I take off the backpack and put it in the cart. I buy kefir. Outside, at a bus stop, I take out plastic cutlery from the backpack and the oatflakes. I eat. That's my first stop. A moment of peace. I look down at my feet. I take out my phone and write a short blog post. Maybe they will read it. Maybe they're worried. I get going again. Now I buckle up the waist strap. It's somewhat bearable, I mean it doesn't hurt me for now.

There's a lot of traffic on the road. When I talked on the phone with the mother superior in Naleczow, she expressed concern over the route I had selected. Maybe I should have gone around. But this route is shorter. Thirty kilometers is more than enough for me. There is no roadside area. Thirty centimeters off the edge of the road, the ground drops in a sharp slope and all of it is covered in thick grass. There's an oncoming truck ahead. Going fast. It's huge. It wobbles about. I go down. My feet are sliding on the steep ground. The backpack is shaking on my back. A swoosh. It went by. A step up. I keep going. More cars. More dodging. Finally a town. A kilometer of sidewalk. It all repeats. Exertion. Stepping off the road. Sidewalks in towns. Tomaszowice. I look around. I turn left. I walk towards the church. Now I'm looking at it. There's a woman to the right watching me.

"You some sort of a backpacker, mister?" It's neither a question nor a statement.

"Nope. A pilgrim," I answer. I see disbelief on her face. I try to explain a little. "Do you see that mosaic on the pediment of the church, ma'am? The mosaic depicts Jesus with his arms spread wide. Did you know I used to work on it once?" I feel so proud.

I enter the church. I get on my knees for a moment. I get immersed in the silence. I say no words. There's probably no need to. I get up. Getting up is the hardest. After a brief stop or a longer rest. That's

when it's the worst. The body starts sending dozens of signals of pain and discomfort. When you're walking, even though you're tired, it's all kind of balanced. But you can't just keep walking.

Road construction. I mean, some sort of a major investment on the road. Dust everywhere. Every car passing me by drags a tiny dirt-colored cloud behind. I walk through that orange-brown mist. The workers are setting up something on the steel scaffolding. Our country's developing.

Right before Naleczow I make the third stop. I take out a plastic garbage bag. I will use it as a mat, wherever I sit on grass or dirt. I lie down. I can feel my legs relax. I walked relatively carefully, so the joint doesn't hurt that much. Still, I'm awfully tired. Legs are pulsing with fatigue. I close my eyes. I breathe out.

When I get up, it's bad again. Worse than before the rest. I walk in pain. I see a road sign saying "Naleczow". Mother of God. So it's true. I did make it. The first day. God, it was so hard. Stopping all the time just to let a car go by. The shaking backpack. But I'm carrying it now and everything's okay. There's no water inside. I ate almost all the oatflakes. It's lighter now. Once in a while, I unbuckle the waist strap and then buckle it up again. A long alley. How long is it? A kilometer? Two? I keep going. My feet hurt. My legs hurt. My back hurts. Where is it, anyway? I passed by the sign welcoming me to Naleczow long time ago, but I'm still walking. I turn right, then left. Here's the street. Now uphill. Each step is a tiny spark of pain. God, it's so hard. Why is it uphill? I take one step at a time. Getting slower. Steps getting shorter. I reach the gate with the last of my strength. I ring the doorbell. I talk to the mic. I hear buzzing. I open the gate. I enter. The nuns welcome me.

I sit down. Made it. Such a blessing, to be able to sit down. A warm welcome. Smiles. I talk to the mother superior. Yes. We do know each other. That's why I came here in the first place. On my first day. That's my first stay, the only arranged and planned one. I have none after that. Where am I going to sleep? God will show. Will guide. Will help. It will work out somehow. It has to. After all, Poland is a Christian, Catholic country. I go to St. James the Apostle. I'll visit

the parish. There are always some parishes. It will be okay. I fall asleep. I have no dreams. No memories. A healthy, healing sleep.

Day 2. Janowiec

The road to Wawolnica is wonderful. Beautiful, comfortable. Such a motorway for pedestrians. They say it just opened. Breakfast was good. I even got some sandwiches for the rest of the day. Dear sisters. They are such a blessing. Such sympathetic convents are probably only found within the Catholic Church. Anyway, maybe some day I will come back, this time as a tourist, to Naleczow, to the sisters. They have a beautiful chapel. Morning Mass. It was bright inside. Father spoke clearly. It's all so close. My family called me while I walked. As I was leaving, I said that I plan to go to Wawolnica. It is a Marian shrine near Lublin. Every year, there are groups of pilgrims going there on foot. Of all the places, Wawolnica is one I actually do want to reach. At least there. I'll pray there, and then we'll see what next.

It's getting hot. I walk to Wawolnica. A man stops me. Old. Fatigued face, fatigued jacket. A cap, trousers, brogue-type shoes. It's obvious. You can tell. Sadly, you can. That he's had a few. He wants two zlotys. For cigarettes. Not for vodka. Just for the cigarettes. I'm talking to him. The sky behind his silhouette is blue. The sun is shining upon the rows of buildings. The church is on the right. Probably closer than a kilometer. I don't know whether to give or not give. I'm torn between the two opposite choices. I look him in the eyes. I think I should just look away. Give. Of course, to give. I am a pilgrim and I met a poor man.

“No,” I say and shake my head. “I don't think you need it.”

Surprise on his face.

“I don't think you need it. These cigarettes.”

What does he need? Isn't he that knows the best? But actually, I think he does not need it. He needs something that will cure him of a

desire to forget. The desire to give himself a short moment of relief. By alcohol. Maybe even by cigarettes, though I doubt it somehow. Guy wobbles. He wobbles not only physically. He wobbles mentally. In fact, he fell off the road, scrubbing the roadside with his heart. He is probably bleeding, so he must forget. But it's no use. It's no use for another two coins. Or five coins. They will only push him again into a reality in which he's not happy at all, in which he's not standing on his feet, in which he's going nowhere. I don't know if I'm choosing well. I'm not giving him those two coins. Am I a bad man? I leave these questions behind me. I'm turning right. Uphill. I see the church. All built with red bricks. The figure of the Mother of God is in the chapel on the right. I know it because I have been here before. I take a photo before entering the chapel. I'm going in. It's quiet and all in shadow. I kneel. I'm not saying anything. I don't know what to say. I am. I'm just here. Can we explain everything that stands behind these words: "I am"?

In the small window at the exit of the church, I ask about the stamp in a pilgrim's passport. It's the third in my passport. The first one is from the Dominican Abbey in Lublin. The second, the Ursuline convent in Naleczow. Now I have a third. I'm going further. It's a kind of breakthrough. This is the beginning of the challenge. I'm out of Wawolnica. Outside this stage, which I declared was to be the minimum of my pilgrimage. My legs hurt, but the weather is beautiful. I'm going into some ravine. It's deep. Trees on both sides bend with green over the corridor on the ground. From above, the sun shines here and there, looking inside. It's quiet, peaceful. There's nobody but me. The glen climbs uphill. The sun-flooded green of the leaves above me and ahead of me, the roots and tree trunks sticking out of the slopes of the gully in a picturesque way, everything so eerie and beautiful. I could go on that way forever.

I go out in the open, under the sky, out in the fields. Far ahead of me shining yellow with flowers. I don't know what it is. Canola or some other plant? The unsurfaced road leads me towards them. Everything is glittering with the colors. The wind is gentle, the sun is decent. I can see a tractor. The guy pulls up to me. He is dragging a machine behind him. We pass each other without words, but with a nod.

I'm happy. I am happy that there are no more cars at last. That I walk freely. But when I look beneath my feet, I see the lush earth, lumps of dried mud. If it would rain... It does not. I'm actually still filled with concern. It is still there, somewhere behind the wall of the stream of consciousness through which I experience all this beauty around me, all this charm of nature. Thought and knowledge that I don't know where I will sleep. Will I sleep? How will it be? After all, this day is really a challenge. The first challenge. I go blind. I'm walking ahead. I'm a true pilgrim walking without reassurance. Because it is how a man should live. Because it's the way a man should walk. Because God watches over us. My consciousness plays before me the scenes. I see myself entering the church or the presbytery and asking for a bed. I see a priest who answers me. I'm checking whether this is an affirmative answer. I would like so much it to be an affirmative answer. The road is long. Tiredness is much worse than yesterday. Yesterday was the first day. The first. After a long time of rest and avoiding excessive activity. My leg doesn't really bother me. I try to walk carefully. I stop. I sit on the grass, on my official rubbish bag. I take out my sandwiches from the sisters. On the right, just above me, there is a nest on the electric pole. A stork looks down at me curiously. Or that's what I'm telling myself. I roll away the foil. I chew bites of the sandwich. The sisters did a fine job. How good it is. So nice to eat something. A sudden noise. With strong flaps of its wings, the stork descends from its nest and then rises up in the sky right next to me. If only I could get that bird on tape. Take photos. There's not enough time. Taking a picture takes me at least a minute. I'm still learning to handle my cell. I would like. I would like to keep. Remember. Save. Everything I experience. Maybe not everything. Everything that's beautiful. That's striking, like this big bird, smashing the air with its wings.

My legs hurt more and more. It is becoming unbearable. I approach Kazimierz Dolny. I don't know what people see in it. It is one of the most famous places. Maybe even in all Poland. The Vistula is beautiful. But beauty is everywhere. Buildings quite charming. Monuments. But whence this wonderment? I keep thinking. I still think how it will be tonight. I plan what to say to be accepted. I'm analyz-

ing how the priest can react. Could he say “no?” He could say “No.” The thought just keeps popping up among others, as much as I try to reject it, get rid of it, repress it. That's impossible. He won't say “No.” One has to have a positive attitude in life. First of all. When we're positive, everything goes well. I visualize a positive reception by a priest. After all, if he does not take me in, I would surely be fucked. That means nowhere. That means I don't know what I will do with myself then. I chastize myself for being vulgar in my thoughts. It is all from fear, worry—unnecessary after all. I get up from the lawn where I was resting. I'm not going to the center of Kazimierz. My goal is Janowiec. It is on the other side of the Vistula River. I have never been there before. I read on the Internet that there is a ferry crossing nearby. I even called two days ago. They confirmed. So I will manage across the Vistula. Just what time does the ferry start? How long will I have to wait? On the left side, two guys play guitar and sing. They're good. I stop and listen. Bravo. It's live. Not from the radio, but absolutely wonderful music. There is a pillar on the right. On the level of my face a black cat lies on it. It's just lying, warming up or lazing. I walk along the Vistula River to the ferry crossing. I turn to the embankment. I watch the river. Where is this crossing? I reach it. The ferry is just waiting. I rush. I mean I'm trying. I am completely exhausted after this second day of marching. The backpack is heavy. Legs hurt tremendously. I make some grotesque gestures, trying to speed up. There are two young people passing me on bikes.

“Camino?”

“Yes,” I answer.

“Be well, then!”

I walk to the ferry. A few zlotys. I take off my backpack. I sit in front. I squint my eyes. My eyelashes split the sunlight into a thousand strands of light. The ferry is working. There is a rope coming from under the surface. The river flows. I rest. Second shore. There, waiting there are people and cars. I have never been there. I cross the largest river in Poland. I let my mind rest, to stay in that mixture of sun and water. Until the gentle jolt indicates that I've arrived.

The road is clear. I ask, just in case. I see the castle ruins in the distance. It's beautiful. I wish I had come here before, it's not like it's that far away. It's getting dark. Cool. It's getting colder. When I checked the weather forecast, it said it would be eight degrees at night. Everything will be fine. "Everything will be fine," I almost cry out to that stream of thoughts that are constantly telling me: "Where are you going? Are you crazy? And what if you can't find accommodation?" I'm looking around. My mind is looking for a place. A place to sleep. I can see nothing suitable. I see clouds instead. The weather forecast predicted the possibility of rain. I see a church. Finally. Entrance to the parish is carved in a solid wall. The church is straight ahead. Presbytery to the right. But what a presbytery! Wow! Have they got a lavish income from tourism or what? Everything looks superb—floors and satellite dish. I push the bell. I look around. Nothing happens. My heart pounds much faster than I want. So how will it be? "It will be fine," I shout once again into my inside. I push the bell again. Seconds pass lazily. I hear the sound. The door opens.

"God bless," I say.

"God bless."

"Eh... Would you like to give a place to sleep for a pilgrim? I am a pilgrim."

"No..." The middle-aged man takes a half step back in the middle of the word.

"But I can sleep anywhere. I can sleep on the floor," I complete my sentence like a machine that has lost some gearwheel and suddenly accelerates its operations.

"No... we do not have it," the man replies, withdrawing another ten centimeters and closing the door slightly.

"What don't you have?" sounds in my mind. "What don't you have? Do you have a floor? You have satellite dish after all." The incredibility of the situation flows like a stream into my face, down my throat and right into me. Everything inside me boiling and seething. Out of fear. Out of worry. Out of horror. Out of anger.

"Well then... Godspeed," I say.

"Godspeed," the man replies and closes the door.

I stand. I stand in front of a solid wooden door. In front of the beautiful rectory. It's impossible. I turn around. I'm going out. Legs complain of pain and fatigue. "What don't you have? What don't you have?!" something cries in me. I'm looking around. Street of a small town. Houses. There are still people. I'm not alone. The most important thing is to be focused now.

"Good evening."

"Good evening."

"Excuse me. I have such an unusual question. I'm a pilgrim. Could you offer me some accommodation? I can sleep anywhere on the floor..."

The woman is making a face as if she has noticed something in my pants that pours out. A mixture of disgust and repulsion. She shakes her head. I feel a little dizzy. Next attempt the same reaction. When I ask for the third time, I hear advice:

"You'd better go to church and ask a priest."

"But I'm coming from there. From the parish priest."

A woman throws up her hands. A silence between us. Where am I to go? Nobody wants me. Holy Mother. What is this place where I've ended up? It's getting dark. I go down the street, chewing some grain of despair. It is impossible. Just impossible. I have no place to sleep. It is impossible. It is not how it supposed to be. All fears now materialize in a nightmare reality. I ask again and again. The women I have just asked finally start discussing something.

"But where would you want to sleep?"

"Anywhere, ma'am."

"But are you willing to pay?"

"I can pay. I have no place to sleep, but I have to sleep somewhere."

"Come," one of them says.

She shows me the house a few dozen meters away.

"She has a farm lodge. Ask there."

I ask. There is room. I'm going in. I'm trying to negotiate. Financial resources are not my strength. Unsuccessfully. I pay. A bed. A table. I sit down. I want to howl. To howl to the whole world. To myself. To my stupidity. To these people. By almost a miracle, by my

last dice roll, I have a room. I have a place. I've bought it. Will the miracle happen again? The Internet doesn't work. But the conditions are good. It's clean, nice, just very cold. I'm calling home. "I have a bed. At the parish? No. Not at the parish. In a farm lodge." I fall asleep without memory.

Day 3. Zwolen

It's raining. For the first time, I walk in intense rain. It rained on the first day too, back when I walked to Naleczow, but that was just a temporary, timid rainfall. Now it's different. I'm wearing a raincoat. Head under the hood. I'm all buried in that raincoat. I walk in it. I sweat. I walk as fast, as hard as possible. I'm going to Zwolen. Can't let it happen. Can't let it happen again that it's dark and I have no place to sleep. Not to mention the rain. So I'll get there earlier. I'll check it out. See the backup options. Because what if the priest says no again? I could expect anything but this. Or maybe it's quite the opposite, it's exactly what I expected, or dreaded. I wanted to believe in good, in the world, in people. Dammit, I'm a pilgrim, on his way to Santiago. Except this... doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean anything here.

I pass the sign with the town's name and the first buildings. My eyes greedily scan the street in search of an emergency sleeping location. There it is. A hotel to the left. Mother of God... they've put the prices on the banner. I can't afford that. I simply can't. I'm short on money. So short. So short that I might run out. And then. Then what? Then what? Those sitting in warm chairs would say, "You'll be fine, cheer up." And things like that. It's so damn annoying to be on the road with little money. You have to keep counting, keep saving, stressed all the time. A guidepost to the church on the right. I get there. It's early. I go inside for a moment. Then I look for the parish. It's right nearby. I ring the bell. And again. And again. I sit on the bench by the door. I have nothing to do. I take out the oatflakes. My pilgrim's food. Cheap and filling. It stays long in the stomach, so you don't feel hungry. Plus it's healthy, as it cleanses your stomach. The sun is shining. I close my eyes. A car pulls up. A priest. I get up.

“Who do we have here?” asks the priest.

“A pilgrim.”

“And where is our pilgrim going?”

“To Saint James.”

“Which one?”

“The Greater. The Apostle.” I've done my homework. I know that Santiago is the resting place of James the Greater. One of the twelve apostles of Jesus.

“You mean...” the priest pauses, “all the way at once?”

“All the way at once,” I answer with a hint of pride.

“Well, then, come on in.”

We chat in the main hall. The priest offers me something to eat. I'm grateful.

“And what about the sleeping place?” he asks.

“Yeah, about that... I'm looking for it. Do you have any suggestions? I can sleep on the floor,” I say carefully.

Concern. Analysis.

“Well, there's that guy,” he mentions the name. “But he would charge you money, you know.” More opportunities pop up as we eat. “Actually, I do have one hall to spare. They're having a meeting there right now. If you'd like.”

What a question. Sweet Mother of Mercy. Would I? I could even kiss the priest. On the cheek of course.

“I'd love to.”

“Then wait right here, I'll go check it out.”

Everything tidy, clean, elegant. I eat tomatoes. They have vitamins. The hall turns out to be a great place for me to sleep. It's located a little to the side of the parish building. I can pull benches together to make a bed. I decide to sleep on the floor. But first the priest invites me over. There's a debate on. We watch it. The TV looks pretty ancient. The politicians' arguments go over my head. We talk. To tell you the truth, I feel like at home. Normal. Casual. Accepted. Like a brother maybe. I say goodbye and go to the hall. I wrap myself in a red sleeping bag. I turn off the light first. Life isn't so bad, after all.

Breakfast in the morning. We have a casual chat. The priest asks about my decisions, my preparations. About the languages. I have

more enthusiasm than resources. As for the languages, I speak a little English, a few words in German, not a single word in French or Spanish. “But I can learn,” I assure him.

“What is a man to do, going alone like that?” the parish priest ponders. “I guess one has to pray. With a rosary. For what else is there to do? So many hours.”

Indeed, he does have a point. On the other hand. When you're on the road, you just keep wondering what next. Where to sleep? What will it be? Was I praying with a rosary as I walked? Of course I wasn't. Did I pray at all? If you count my attempts at turning to God or some pondering, then yes. But those remarks about having nothing to do when on a pilgrimage just didn't resonate with me. I was never bored in my life. It never happened that I had nothing to do with the time. It just never happened. I don't know why. I don't understand people who feel the so-called boredom. I don't know how to be bored. I've never been. After all, the mind is such an amazing toy that is on all the time.

“Do you know where you are going today?” the priest hangs his voice, and I make a surprised face. What does he mean, do I know where I'm going? “To Skaryszew,” the parish priest continues, “and you know why?”

“Well... I don't.” I smile.

“Because they have a Saint James the Apostle parish there and their parish priest is running a project right now to build a pilgrim hostel. He wants to open up a place to stay for those who follow the paths of Saint James, so he'll take you with all the honors.”

I relax. The horror I went through back in Janowiec seems to be nothing but an unpleasant accident at work. We say goodbye. Normally. In Polish. One could say, like a Pole with a Pole. I thank God for priests like that. I'm off to Skaryszew.

Day 4. Skaryszew

My leg is broken. Sudden, stabbing, acute pain in the joint. One more step. Another. I can't. Damn it. Little town. More like a village. A shop. I buy kefir and oatflakes. I'm limping in pain to the bench next to the church. I sit down. Apparently, there's some celebration inside. Leg straightened. Resting. I mix kefir with flakes. I pull out a plastic spoon. I'm looking. The wind swings with branches. The sun is leaning against the church walls. Red brick. Everything is kind of sleepy, suspended in the air. I bite the flakes. They haven't softened enough yet. I'm looking around. I still crave for what's around. The world? I allow time to flow. I'm sitting with this question: What will happen when I get up, where will I manage to go? Another portion of the flakes lands in my mouth. Finally, because everything in this reality always has to end, I get ready. I stand on both legs. It's not good. I'm wearing a backpack. I take the poles, I go. Very. Very slowly. Each step is twenty-five centimeters in length. I do it gently. Even more gently. Slowly I move forward. There is a sky between trees. Occasionally a car. I become this lazy move. The sleepy move in time and space, both of which are filled up with early spring. Or maybe late spring? Does it matter?

I turn left. Now the road leads me through the fields. They're flat, almost like a table. The two-meter wide asphalt road is completely empty. That means there are no cars. I'm going a bit faster now. Quite unknowingly. Looking at green fields and grasses, I forgot about my leg. Steps become normal. The quiet seems infinite. One can hear the sounds of insects, probably enjoying the spring sunshine. I enter the forest. The forest is like an ocean of greenery. Not like the real one, which gently comes to the feet and rushes to infinity. The forest ocean just embraces you. It is everywhere. The streams of light, hundreds of

shimmering leaves, soft carpet of a forest litter. And this noise. Flowing through a man. There is no-one else before me, behind me. I wander through this filled with light and shadows forest completely alone. I'm in every leaf, in every branch, in every bend of the tree. I am entirely here. I'm the movement. The movement gliding through the forest. The movement of swaying grass blades, bush stems, high hanging branches.

When I'm leaving the forest, I see lonely human buildings. A farm. I've been walking for a long time. The pain in my legs becomes almost unbearable. I unfold the plastic garbage bag. I lie down on it. I put a cap on my forehead to cover the sun. All the time I walked through the forest and now when I'm lying down next to the fence of a farm, no one has passed me by, no car, no man. Only silence and wind. I can see another farm in the distance. A hundred, maybe more meters away. There are some children moving, running there. Maybe they are playing football. Maybe they play hide and seek. Happy time, happy place, taken out of reality. From my reality. From the reality of the world—acute, rushing, insistent, impassive, demanding, threatening, offering, still in tension, stress and haste. I hear a bird singing to me. A lark. At least that's what my mother taught me. That it's the name of the bird singing like this. I let him sing—that is, I let this song come to my head, get into my consciousness, fall into my consciousness, deep. Silence. The sun is warm. Maybe there is a paradise here? Maybe this is how people should live? Away from the all-encompassing race? From struggle for survival, for a better life. From fighting for pleasure, promotion, survival or satisfaction? Maybe this is the original state, our natural state, where the sun, where silence, where the birds, where the laughter of children sounds like nowhere else, because it is not constrained by the steel pliers of civilization. Three kids ride to me on bikes. They are younger than ten years old. Boy and two girls. They ask, I answer. They smile. They go on. Children do not have inhibitions. They still don't know what one must or should do. And what to fear and avoid. Probably no one harmed them yet, they see life and the world as it could be. They are still human. Are we still human? When we grow up. Maybe we become robots, machines with dozens of imprinted programs, so there

is nothing easier than to predict the next behavior of this or another person?

I get up. I walk a dirt road in the sun. It's getting dusty. The cows lazily lie on the grass to my left. They are black, brown, one has a bright color. I talk to them. I always speak to animals. I mean when no one sees or hears. I may look a little silly. There is nothing to talk about with cows. Well, the usual greetings. Asking what's up, giving an assurance that everything will be well. Grass green and juicy, milking on time, not too many flies.

The road is winding and splitting. I ask a woman about the direction. I follow a suggested route. This time to the right. Green fields, surrounded by walls of forests, seem to have no end. It feels good to be here. It's so quiet. One can rest, at least mentally. How beautiful my Poland is, in such places.

I enter some small town. I even don't know its name. Everything bathes in the sunshine. Old men sit in front of houses here and there. Old-fashioned hats. Slim bodies. Some people smoke. I pass them by. Regards.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

I check the position on the GPS. There are no signposts or road signs. I've made a mistake. I went a few hundred meters too far. I turn back. I curse. But not too harsh. Not today. Not here. Again I meet those men. I'm asking for directions.

“Go that way and there you turn.”

I follow his hand with my eyes. I really did miss it. A small lane to the right. The next few kilometers are passed in a similar fashion. There's one thing that comes to my mind to describe all those things I'm experiencing and learning, to describe this land of green, outside the fast-flowing river of civilization, to describe this island of fields and forests, where the time stops, the animals slack about in the sun, and kids are happy—just like that, that's how it is. It brings to me an image of The Shire, a fairytale land created by J.R.R. Tolkien in his novels. There is something primordial in these lands, something real. Although they're not the pinnacle of accomplishment or expectations, although life slows down here and time seems to stretch, everyone ac-

tually just lives a normal life here. That is, they have their concerns and emotions. They have their loves and fears. Except that here, they are not so overwhelming, unlike a few miles away. Everything stays untouched by necessities, haste, and desires beyond any measure.

I approach Skaryszew. There's an ad on the tree by the bus stop: Laying hens for sale. Fourteen zlotys each. Grown ones too. And chickens too. "Sales will take place at: church, store, fire station." Store and fire station are crossed out. Means what's left is the church. Center of village life. I see it, this church. I go inside. The figure of James the Apostle. I'm going to the rectory. Little. Very modest. How different presbyteries can be. The young priest asks what the matter is. I introduce myself and say where I'm going. He looks at me for a while without a word.

"Impossible."

"Yes, it is," I nod.

He's shaking his head and smiling.

"Oh no. Please wait. I have to go to the parish priest."

I stand in front of the door. I hear words from behind them.

"This is a pilgrim. He is going to St. James."

They come out. The pastor is middle aged, short-haired. Looks enquiringly.

"So you are going to St. James?"

"Yes."

"To Santiago de Compostela?"

"Exactly."

Silence.

"Well, it's good, because this is a parish of St. James."

The ice is broken. I get a bottle of some drink.

"Do not you know if I could find a place to sleep somewhere? Maybe at the parish?" Fearfully—why fearfully?—I ask.

Worry. Gestures. Looking around.

"Well, we are going to build a shelter for the pilgrims here, but only in some time. Now we have nothing."

I offer my willingness to sleep on the floor and ask if the priest can give me some advice.

“You know what, maybe in that hall. There are builders there on a daily basis, you know. We are renovating. Well, but now it's empty, and if you could get up before seven, that should be all right.”

I'm smiling. Inside and outside.

“Sure. Very well.”

The priest leads me to the hall. Opens it, shows me inside. It's a big hall. There are clothes and tools everywhere. A pile of newspapers on a bed. Those of the worst sort. I clear out what I can. I put my clothes on the armchair and the newspapers on the table. I spread the sleeping bag on the couch. I turn on my cell. I'll make a small video recording, describing where I've reached and what's up. I have a room. I have a place. I have a place to sleep. Tension, this invisible tension, is being lifted from my heart. I'm talking to a small device. Behind me, the door opens. A nun comes in.

“The parish priest said you'd be here. I won't disturb you, I'll just take these things.”

“It's all right,” I answer.

I'm alone. I sit at the table. I take the map. Pen. I draw a line on it. Where did I come from? Where to go next? I have no idea. I'm analyzing possibilities. I try to find, in a reasonable distance range, some places. Looking for towns and villages. The door opens behind my back.

A nun comes in, carrying a plate. Gorgeous, warm tomato soup and a piece of chicken meat. Life is beautiful.

“And you read these newspapers?” The nun points with disgust at the pile of tabloids left by the workers.

“No, they are not mine. I just moved them.”

The sister smiles. Goes out. I notice further possible places I can go tomorrow. I worship tomato soup by my mouth. I take a bite of chicken. Mother of God, I so needed that food. One can't just sustain themselves on oatflakes alone. When I go to sleep, I think about tomorrow. I agreed with the priest that I'll get up before seven in the morning, I'll go to mass and move on. So that the workers have no problem. It's dark and quiet. I go to bed, put myself in a sleeping bag. I zip the slider. I have a cap on my head. It's a little cold. I'm not even thinking. I drift into sleep with the speed of a gun bullet.

Day 5. Wieniawa

“Maybe some sweets?”

I see a plate of delicious cakes moving towards me.

“No. Thank you. I don't eat sweets on a pilgrimage.”

I was at the mass beforehand. It was celebrated by one of the priests: “And we wish you, brother, good journey and good people on this road. We wish you to make it and to find help, when you'll need it.”

It sounded so beautiful. I was honored. Appreciated. Noticed. Accepted like I was family. Father spoke fluently, professionally and in a dignified manner. In these robes, in front of the altar, in front of all these people. His words and silhouette gained power. Meaning. Therefore, his wishes touched me even more. Like paving the way. Here, from now on, I go as a rightful pilgrim. The church has noticed me. People... people will help. It is good to be a pilgrim. Except for that leg of mine.

“Is it a kind of pledge, or health issue?” The priest asks, hearing my refusal. I explain that it's both. I just decided that way. I won't eat sweets until I get home. It will be better that way. Healthier and nobler.

“Well, where are you going to go today?”

“Maybe to Wieniawa,” I said, mentioning a name of one of the few towns I noticed while searching the map before. I immediately hesitate, because this is the furthest town. Almost forty kilometers. But the word came out and it flowed through the air like a shred of cloud, the water vapor floating freely between people.

“That's fortunate.” A shadow of hope in my heart. “My student is a priest in Wieniawa. You know, I was a teacher in the seminar. I used to teach future priests. Now I'm here. We're going to build a shelter

for pilgrims.” I eat scrambled eggs and listen. “I know that different people go. Some pray, others don't. That doesn't matter. What's important is that someone wants to leave his home and walk. So I'm to build a shelter for them. Because it is the parish of St. James after all.”

Scrambled eggs taste good. Filling. I take a slice of bread, I spread the butter.

“When you get to Wieniawa, then you'll go to the parish priest and give my regards to him. So maybe he let you in.” The priest smiles.

I smile as well. I tell a little about myself, why I'm going. How far I have already travelled. I think all the time, that after all, I'm lucky. That everything will be fine. Here again, my fortune gives me another place of accommodation. I will have a place to sleep. I only need to reach this Wieniawa. And that's so far away.

“What do you need for today's journey?” I hear a question.

“Nothing, I'll make it.”

“Well... the water, for sure. It will be a hot day.”

I'm given two bottles of mineral water. Some modern kind. I pack them into my backpack. I say goodbye. I leave.

The backpack is awfully heavy and it gets unbelievably hot all around. I walk in a sleeveless shirt. It doesn't help. I sweat terribly. There must be large changes in temperature between night and day. Still within Skaryszew's borders, I drink my own mineral water. I go half a kilometer, desperately searching for a trash can to throw out an empty bottle. Nothing. Because I carry it, I can't use my poles. In the end, I throw it willy-nilly on the roadside. Since the municipality does not care about trash cans, maybe they will clean it up. What do I have to do with this bottle? Carry it to Wieniawa thirty-eight kilometers?

“Where are you throwing this bottle?” I hear from the local cyclist passing behind my back. I turn around.

“And where should I throw it?”

“Why don't you just shove it up yer ass!”

Harsh advice. Unworkable. On the one hand, the guy is right that I came and am dropping litter. On the other hand—where? Where can I really throw it? There is physically just no trash here. Sweat, caused by heat, floods my eyes. I have nothing to drink, because these two

bottles are quite deep in my backpack and I don't feel like pulling them out now. Besides, it will be a long day. I will need them later. It's so hard. Hard and hot. I'm breathing heavily. Like a dog. Step by step I leave the inhabited area. I turn into the woods. I hear a voice coming from the left, from outside the fence. A middle-aged, bald man stands looking at me.

“Hot?”

I nod.

“Do you want to drink?”

I stop. A miracle or what? I approach the fence.

“Yes please... If you may.”

“Please come in.” The man opens the gate. “Water or juice?”

“Water, if you may.”

The man disappears in the homestead. Typical square-shaped farm. It's strange. Strange is this invitation. I don't have any religious marks or signs. No-one knows whether I am a pilgrim or a tourist. I'm an ordinary man who walks with a big backpack in this bloody heat. The man leaves the house. Carries a bottle of mineral water and a carton of orange juice. I choose water. I drink. We're talking. In this space of events and people, where I am still threatened with rejection, where I meet insensitivity, refusal, and dislike. Where am I begging for the gift of a place to sleep, where sometimes I succeed, and sometimes I'm being pushed back, I meet a man who without a reason, gives me a glass of water just like that. Without asking, without making requests, without anything.

“And where are you going?”

“It's very far.”

“Where?”

“To Spain.” I feel embarrassed myself saying it. I won't get there. It's only a dream. It's a whim of a homebody who got confused. And if I come back earlier, it will be such a shame.

“So—tourist?”

“No. This is a pilgrimage. I'm going to Santiago de Compostela. The Apostle James is buried there.”

The man nods. He says he used to run, back in the day. And it was hot too. A few more words. Farewell. I head towards the forest. The

pinus surrounded me. They are still young. Planted a few years ago. There will be a forest in time. Time is space. Possibility. Opportunity for things to come into being. Time is a gift. Without it nothing could come about, happen, grow, bloom. We often have a grudge against time, that it takes away our lives, what we love, what we want to keep. But this is a mistake. An error is in this wanting. Because time is a gift. Completely unearned. Quite like our lives. Maybe one is the other in some way. Cause what is our life, if not a time given to us? So in just that time, the forest is growing. It's young now. Dark green. In ten, maybe twenty years, those pinus will shoot up to the sky. There will be birds gliding among them. Their shade will cover, sometimes maybe a little too much, the bedding below. Some passerby, maybe a pilgrim, maybe a tourist, will walk among them, admiring the color of the sky from above. Now I think once more about this man. He gave me a glass of water. Unasked. Not because I was a pilgrim. Why? Because I was a human and it was hot. In that simple way, he saved humanity. For being human means to be for others. Ultimately, the whole of religion is about that. That is the essence of Christianity in the end, not the celebration of subsequent church services. Because people live with each other. What is between us is all that is. We exist for each other, despite all the times we try to fence ourselves, lock ourselves away, hoard what we have. This man allowed me to keep faith in people. When I make the next steps, I feel better. One can count on people. People do have good inside them. One just has to let this good to show up. Poles are good people.

I lie down on the grass near a fence. It's pretty mown, so it's comfortable. The sun is shining mad from above. Torturing my skin with its warmth. I have had enough. I feel blood pumping. In my temples, in my legs. The dog is frantically barking behind my head. He defends his territory. I close my eyes. Barking grows stronger. It's blowing my mind. I think the dog is going to get mad in a moment. We're separated by a meter of space and an iron fence. But we're together in his fury. After fifteen minutes, the deafening sound coming from his throat remains unchanged. If he could, he would have murdered me. Or so he thinks. I lie that way twenty, twenty five minutes. I can stand it no more. I drink water given by a priest. The barking does not stop.

I look towards the source of the noise. One dog just by the fence. Another, two meters away. I can't stand it any longer. I get up, put my backpack on. I move despite pain and fatigue. The barking slowly subsides behind me. My legs hurt. I walk slowly. I'm walking on the asphalt. It's getting cloudy.

The last part of the road to Wieniawa runs along the motorway. I put on a reflective jacket. Heavy traffic. Swoosh made by trucks. The necessity of paying attention. Walking along the road is tiresome. But there's no need to wonder where to turn, which way to choose. Road signs show the way. The sky slowly leans over and starts to shed tears. I'm just joking here, of course. It simply rains. Physical processes. Condensation of water vapor. Somewhere out there—high, in the heavy and gray clouds that covered the sky. I have a problem. I have a problem that if I put on a rain poncho, I can't wear my reflective jacket over it. And walking along a high traffic motorway in the darkening evening without a reflective jacket, but wearing a dark poncho, is a recipe for something worse than a simple injury... it's a recipe for catastrophe. No. I won't do that. I can't wear this poncho. I can't walk in the rain, because I'll get wet and my backpack will get wet, and everything will be in the water. I can't go on and I can't stand. And I can't shelter myself. Nature seems to mock me. If I were somewhere else. Not in this place where cars are rushing by on the asphalt road I walk along. I'm getting wet. More and more with every step. I chew on my own helplessness, my inability. I am getting more and more tired. Mentally and physically. The worst part is that I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. All day long. Throughout all this walking. The lack of food apparently influences my mental processes. My thoughts are becoming dark, like this landscape around me. I think slowly, dimly. Pessimistic. I walk. In the slowly falling rain. Like a tank. A thing that knows nothing and can do nothing but move ahead. I'm not hungry in the usual sense of the word. I do not feel hunger as such. I feel imbalance only. Mental imbalance. Some pain. Disappointment.

There it is. I turn to the right. The local road to Wieniawa. I take off my backpack. I put a rain poncho on. Actually, it is raining not so much. I got only a little wet. The backpack probably withstands mois-

ture. The hood blocks out the view. It's only now that the rain gets going all the way. I hear its drumming through the fabric of my cover. The water pours into my shoes. It's a small local road but still an asphalt one. A car passes me by occasionally. God, I'm tired. It's beyond words. I'm just walking. It's not far. Everything's gray, drowning in raindrops. Houses closed. Absent. I pass some streets. Looking for a church tower. It must be somewhere. The church is the easiest place to find, in any town. But. It is not anywhere. I turn right. It seems that I see a tower between the roofs of houses. I'm going one hundred meters, two hundred, three hundred. Where is it? Did I get lost? I'm looking for a silhouette of a man to ask. In vain. It's evening and it's raining. There is no-one on the streets. I get confused. I don't know where to go next. I see an open entrance to the garden and a house with an open garage behind it. I go through the open gate. I approach the front door. I press the doorbell. I hear humming inside. I am waiting. Raindrops run down my hood, my trousers. Flowing into my shoes. I don't even know what color this house is. This house has no color. In this rain, all colors dissolve and cease to exist. There are only outlines. Contours of buildings. I press the bell again. And once more. Still, with no effect. I press the handle. The door opens a little. I don't go in, just hold the opened door ajar. I call: "Anybody home?"

A young woman walks down the hallway from the opposite room. Blonde. She has a clenched mouth.

"Excuse me. Do you know where..." Her face is twisted into a grimace. She's closing the door just in front of my nose. "...I can find the church?" I'm still finishing the sentence.

I'm wet. Wet and cold. I turn around. I have no-one to ask. People here don't like strangers. I don't know where to go. In this rain, in this falling night. I see some boys. I'm asking for the way to the church. They show me. I wouldn't have guessed. I follow the directions they gave me. I find it. At last. It looks weird. Something gloomy. I mean the surroundings of the church and the parish. As if from some horror movie. Or maybe I'm hungry and my tired brain produces strange pictures and impressions. But I feel that way. Unpleasant. I call the door.

"God bless."

"God bless."

“Father. I'm a pilgrim. I'm going to Santiago de Compostela, to St. James. Can I ask for a stamp to a pilgrim's passport?” I thought it would be better to start with this document. The priest will see it. See that I'm not some hobo, just a pilgrim. He will see stamps from previous parishes. It will be easier to him to let me in. I need to approach priests in that way to be effective. Otherwise, it may end up like in Janowiec. Maybe the priest from there just took me as a vagabond, who was looking for a free bed at the expense of the parish?

The priest looks at me for a long moment in silence.

“Give me this slip of paper.” His words don't seem too encouraging. What is it: just a slip of paper? Surely, it's a pilgrim's passport. Or maybe anyone can print this out? A slip of paper... I stand in front of the door in the rain and wait. Waiting for Godot? I'm waiting for the priest. For further conversation. When I say that I am coming from Skaryszewo and I'm bringing best wishes from the priest from there, then I will be recognized as one of their own, and invited in, and I will have a place to sit, and shelter from the rain, because it's evening and it'll be night in a moment, and it's raining, and it's getting cold, and I'm terribly tired.

“Here you are.” The priest gives the passport back to me.

“I'm also bringing greetings from the parish priest from Skaryszewo.”

“Thank you.” The answer is dry. Completely without enthusiasm. No shadow of interest. I stand in the rain, weighing what to do or say next.

“Do you know if I can find a place to sleep somewhere nearby?”

I do not know why, but this priest makes me feel sad. As if his life was like mine on today's march. Exhaustive and grinding, grinding my psyche and emotions to the dust in which only fatigue and sadness can remain.

“I don't. You ought to look for something.”

“I understand,” I reply, and I begin to turn away. The frightening reality reaches me with the power of a river. So that's it. So I will stay alone again. It pours. It rains. I have nowhere to go. The night is falling. Where would I go? People slam their doors on seeing me. It gets cold. Where will I go? Dwarf trees before me are dimly visible in the

dusk and constantly falling rain. My insides start to squeeze. They squeeze themselves in one point. In one place. I'm closing this place with the full force of my will. I'm closing it, because if it opens, a scream will break out of it. A scream and a yell. A yell to the whole world. To these people. To this venture. To this stupid idea. To the rain. Fatigue. To this hopelessness. To all of this.

“Wait,” I hear from behind my back. I turn around. “I have a small room here. Please, come with me.”

We go a few meters, maybe a dozen. We enter from another side to the rectory. It looks so poor here.

“A canon lives here. I will tell him that you will stay for tonight.”

We turn to the door to the right. A hall for religious teaching. That is, it used to be. I smell the fresh paint.

“You can stay here as you wish. There is a kettle. You will find water in the toilet.”

I'm alone. It is dark. I'm sitting on the bench. Rainfall drums behind the tall windows. I'm cold. I want to cry. Just. Cry. All of this makes no sense. Makes no the slightest sense. I beg. I'm alone. I'm really damn alone. No one is with me. “And we wish you, brother, a good journey,” I recall as my farewell from Skaryszewo. I don't move. I eat my hunger, despair and fatigue. I chew it all. I guess I went against everyone. No-one cares about me. I will end up alone with that for the whole journey. I rise. I take off wet clothes. I move the bench. I open the window. After all, the smell of paint is annoying, so I would prefer a bit of cold and humidity to change the air at least. I pull out my sleeping bag. The door opens.

“And I brought something to eat. You know... it's late. That's all I have. It's a little cool because it's from the fridge.” The priest puts the tinfoil packages down on the table.

I thank him. I have a roll, bread, cake, cold cuts, canned meats and even an apple. I put it into my mouth. I gobble it all up. First time eating since breakfast. After nearly forty kilometers of heavy walking. I'm in such a state that I would eat anything. At the end, I hesitate over the cake. Eat, don't eat. I vowed not to eat anything sweet during the pilgrimage. In the end, I'm a bit sated. I put away the piece of cake. I boil water. I make a tea. It's getting dark behind the windows.

I turn off the lights. I slip into the sleeping bag. I'm pulling a cap over my eyes. I'm losing contact with reality.

Day 6. Opoczno

I'm cold. I feel sticky all over. The mass is at seven, so I get up at five forty-five. Everything hurts. I barely fold my stuff. I keep the sleeping bag at the bottom of the backpack because it weighs the least. That's what I read online, at least. The result is that I have to take everything out of the backpack to get to the sleeping bag, and then pack the whole backpack again. My hands are getting stiff, I'm still kind of sleepy. I get dressed and go to mass. Then it's another day on the road. This time... This time I really have no idea where to. For the first time I have completely no idea where to go. I have no foothold, no place to sleep, nothing. Nothing but Poland ahead of me. But, after all—I cheer myself up—I've somehow made it each time so far. I've always found a place. I'm worrying too much. It's time to stop. Time to believe, to trust and to just keep going. Time to ditch the constant fear, the constant worrying where I'm going to sleep. Playing the scenes in my mind of me asking for a place for the night, thinking how to go about it, how they'll react to my request. Time to snap out of it. Everything will be fine, I just need a little more courage. Courage and hope. That's the only way to live, not the constant worrying, constant stress—what will happen, will I find a place to sleep in the evening? I will. I know I will. The Lord will help.

The mass in Wieniawa was really nice. The church was small. The priest mentioned me at the end. It felt nice. When I'm leaving, he comes up to me. He saved me the evening before. He took me in. We say goodbye. At the nearest store I buy food. I'll stuff myself like there's no tomorrow. When I reach a gas station, I see a wooden table and a bench nearby. I spread my hoard. I eat. I take a picture. It was the wrong move yesterday not to eat all day. The weather is pretty

willy-nilly. It was supposed to be raining, and yet, the sun comes up and it's getting warm.

I wonder which way to go. According to the online weather forecast, there might be thunderstorms and rainfall. I won't go along the road. No way. I won't get in another situation where I have to choose between either wearing a rain poncho risking getting hit, or wearing reflective gear and getting wet. When it rains, drivers don't see much. I don't want one to run over me. Not to mention... when a speeding truck is passing you by in the rain, it's not very pleasant. Kind of like a sudden, horizontal shower. No, I won't follow the road. I check the map. If I turn south, I will leave the busy roads and enter a huge forest. The walk through the forest is about ten kilometers. Once I leave it, there will be some villages. I will find a church and ask for a place to sleep. People are better in villages than in cities and towns. It will be okay.

After leaving the main road, it gets quiet. Much better. On this route to the faraway Opoczno, there is a lot of traffic. Constant roar and noise. Now I walk across small towns. I pass by houses and gardens. It's empty everywhere. Not a soul in sight. Everyone at work or hiding somewhere. Sometimes a dog barks. It's hot. The sun is high in the sky. I see the forest's edge. I head straight for it. Into its dark, green embrace. There might be problems with the route. I follow a map downloaded on my phone, but I'm not sure if it's good and accurate. When I enter the forest, the road starts going uphill. I climb. It keeps getting higher and higher. This is not a forest. This is a huge elevation covered with forest. The poles are working hard, taking my body's weight. I'm sweating bullets. Still uphill. When will it end? I feel pain. That's right. Now I can clearly feel the pain. In the same place and on the same leg I injured three months ago. God, it hurts so much. It's because of the climb. The joint works differently. I'm mad at myself. I should go slower. Climb slower. But I'm in a rush. I want to cross that forest. I slow down. I look. Silence all around, trees, open space, the kingdom of green. I go slowly. I breathe. I love the scent of forest. I don't know where it comes from, what individual scents it consists of, but when I take the air in, I close my eyes for a moment. I stop. I stand still. I listen. I listen to the forest. What it has

to say. No one's here as far as the eyes and ears can reach. I'm alone. And this nearly wild forest. Its noise is flowing through me. I open up to it. I let my thoughts and consciousness run among moss-covered trees, slide along cobweb threads through bushy branches, glide with birds, tremble like an uncertain leaf in the rays of the sun. I simply am. I like it here. In this forest. Which is alive, after all. It's one big lifeform built out of hundreds and thousands of tiny beings it is home to.

I keep walking. After some time I see a cart in the distance. It's pulled by a chestnut horse. There's an old man steering.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” I answer.

“Where are you going, mister?”

“Going to Kurzacze.”

“That's pretty far. You're just going like that? What's the point? Why don't you just drive there?”

“It's a pilgrimage. I have to go there on foot.”

The man takes off his hat: “Well, sorry then.”

“It's okay.” I smile.

“Well, Godspeed, then.”

“Godspeed,” I answer.

The cart leaves me behind. I was right. People from villages really are better. I laugh to myself at the memory of the hat gesture. I feel a little more important. I'm a pilgrim, after all, who left his home and took a chance on an infinitely long road. And people appreciate that. There will be a place to sleep. It will be alright. I breathe a little easier. Only this leg keeps hurting more.

I can't go further. I just can't. This pain is just unbearable. I sit by the road. I'm alone. Stuck. I have to get out of this forest somehow. I can't just stay here. I'll rest. I've done this many times before. It will pass. Just have to be careful. I take out a kefir. I put the oatflakes in it. I stir it with a plastic spoon and start eating. I hear insects buzz and some noise. I don't know where it's from. The sky is getting darker, covered with clouds. Was that a distant sound of thunder? I wonder, listening. The wind obscures this sound with the noise of leaves and branches. Silence in a forest is never empty—it's alive, full of sound,

except it's subtle, soothing sounds. After about thirty minutes I get up. It hurts. I move half a foot. Literally half a foot. Then another half. I move an entire foot. I feel pain. One more. I rest my entire weight on the poles. Without them... I just would have been stuck here. It's so funny. When there's no one around. A few kilometers from the edge of the forest with me right in the middle.

The first raindrops start falling. It was supposed to rain—I remind myself. I stop and put on the raincoat. The rain keeps getting heavier. I slowly put down my feet. One after another, one after another. I hear a roll of thunder. It's still far away. Maybe a kilometer, maybe more. I walk at my tortoise pace, constantly resting my weight on the trekking poles. I take as much weight as I can off the hurting leg. It's a downpour now. The road across the forest gets covered in expanding little streams. Noise everywhere. I have to slalom among those streams. I don't want to step right in the middle of the water. A bolt of lightning. It strikes about one hundred meters from me. Gives me goosebumps. One more time. I don't feel too great. I read that you shouldn't hide under trees during a storm. Except I'm in a forest. Another lightning bolt strikes right ahead of me. Behind me. Next to me. The road is drowning in the rain. Arching trees making a blurry wall on either side of it. Lightnings striking left and right. I'm scared. I'm literally scared. I don't know what to do. Hide? Where? Walk down the middle of the road? Walk under the trees? I pick the middle. I start praying with the rosary. That's funny. When in fear, God is dear. It's funny when you sit comfortably, consuming good wine or aromatic tea. It's funny when your ass is safe and there's nothing dangerous on the horizon. When you're all alone, can't walk, with lightning striking everywhere, your perception changes. It just does. There's no guarantee that one of those won't strike close enough to you to... to... Never mind. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. I walk and I pray. My steps turn into a prayer. I don't pray for anything particular. I just keep praying with the rosary. It's so silly. But there's nothing, here in this wilderness, in this solitude, with random bolts from the sky hitting randomly dozens of meters from me, nothing else left for me. I keep marching on. The road turns into a small river with tiny islands. My feet are all wet at this point. I feel sloshing in my shoes. I

rest myself on the poles. They keep digging deeper into the soggy surface of the forest road. Hail Mary. More steps. Another one. And another. The storm gets quieter. Moving to the left. Gradually. The thunder sounds get less frequent. I'm left with the rain. Roaring around me. Spreading the grayness. Diluting the vision. Someone passes me by. The first pedestrian since I entered the forest. So I'm not alone here? He passes me by fast. Very fast. For a moment I can see his back looming in the thickening grayness. In a moment he's gone. I drag myself through this forest. I keep dragging, watching the ankle. Watching carefully. So that I don't get completely immobile now. This whole pilgrimage is one big joke. A big fantasy. I keep going. I chase those thoughts away. It feels a little better. Walking feels a little easier. Time is dragging painfully. That injury and all those careful steps have really slowed me down. When I see the first outlines of the gray space behind the trees, hope returns to me. God. I made it. I made it to the end. To the end of this forest. I see a road sign with the name of the town. The rain gets thinner. It's gray, misty. I leave the forest. Slosh, slosh, sound my shoes with every step. There's a house behind a fence, about twenty meters away. Same with the next one in the distance. And another one. Not a soul in sight. Everything closed. I sneak by, on this rainy evening, like some sort of a ghost among deserted buildings. There's got to be someone here. I yell something across the fence. Silence.

There it is. I see a man.

“Good afternoon.” I strike up a conversation.

“Good afternoon.”

“Excuse me, I'm looking for a place to sleep. Do you know if there are any places to stay here?” The man shrugs. “How about your place?” He turns away, murmuring something to himself.

I keep going. As far as I can see—grayness. It's already six. When there are houses, they stand silent, far beyond the fences surrounding them. There's no one to talk to, no one to ask. I'm scanning for a church tower. There has to be one somewhere around. The rain gets intense again. I walk, looking around. Some lady gets in her car. I stop her. She knows nothing about places to stay. I ask about a church. She makes a vague response. That there isn't one, or some-

thing. What does she mean, there isn't? I hear the rain ringing in my ears. Maybe I can't hear it right. The lady seems kind of scared. She gets in quickly and drives away. I'm left alone. I see a road sign for the next town. Kamienna Wola, that doesn't sound good. But it is just a name. I can't judge places by their names. The road leads through a thin forest. It's covered in grass. Water from the green stalks gets straight into my shoes. I pass some tractors. I walk for about an hour. It's almost seven. I'm damn tired. I got up over twelve hours ago. Two elderly people behind a fence.

“Good evening,” I greet them.

“Good evening.”

“Excuse me. I'm a pilgrim. I'm looking for a place to sleep. I don't mind sleeping on the floor. Would it be okay if I stayed at your place for the night?”

Surprise combined with anger.

“No,” I hear after quite a while, “we have little kids.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.” I hear the answer.

I make another approach. Surprise. Little kids again. It's raining awfully. I'm just tired. Maybe I expect too much. Does it even have to be a stay? I need a place to sit. Take a rest. I can't just keep going forever. And there's nothing but mud and grass around.

“Good evening.” An elderly man sitting on the porch gets up and comes in my direction. “Excuse me, I'm a pilgrim. Could I just sit under the roof for half an hour, because I'm really tired and I have no place to go?” That face again. That repulsed face. I hear something but I can't tell what. Right. It's kids. Little kids. The man turns around and walks away before he can hear my goodbye.

“Goodbye.” I say it anyway.

I try few more times. In turns. I just ask for a place to rest so that I can sit for half an hour. My legs are trembling under me. My backpack is bending my arms. My hips hurt. No. No. No—I hear it every time. Everything's snapping inside me. Rebelling. Boiling.

“Why don't you go to the bus stop!” An elderly man gives me advice in an annoyed voice, in response to my request for half an hour under the roof.

I find an old shelter made of corrugated sheets. I sit down. There's a stretch of road ahead of me, drowning in the falling grayness and the rain. I don't know what to do now. I count valuable seconds my legs have to rest. But I can't just stay here. I see two men. I don't ask them about a place to sleep, I just ask if they know if I can find any place to sleep around at all. They just shake their heads. There's nothing here. Simply nothing. No farm tourism, no hotels, no guest houses, nothing. Only people who turn away when they see me. And the rain that just keeps falling.

“Do you guys at least know where I can find a church here? Maybe I could spend a night there.”

“Well, you'd have to head for Warsaw. That would be about eight kilometers.”

That's absolutely not on my way. Not to mention—eight kilometers?

“Anywhere closer than that?” I ask.

“That would have to be Petrykozy.”

“Is it far?”

“About seven kilometers, I'd say.” Not much better. “Then there's Opoczno, but that would be about ten,” they add.

I go back under the corrugated sheet. I take out my cellphone with GPS and maps. I have to go somewhere. Could I walk for seven kilometers? That's not even on my way. I have no choice. I have to find a church. With these people around here—just thinking about it makes my throat tight. I put on my backpack. It's getting dark. I'm off to Petrykozy. It's an asphalt road. It's raining. There's a car behind me, and one more ahead. I have no reflective gear. What if they don't notice me? What if they're drunk? What if they don't turn? I walk in that rain and in my pain. I walk in people's indifference and rejection. I ask at one farm after another. One of the three men standing in the yard, that I approach asking if I could sleep in the barn, sneers back: “Well, not really.”

What does he mean, “not really”? Not really what? Silence. We look at each other.

“Okay, goodbye,” I say and swallow one more time. Swallow what? Better not say.

“Goodbye,” I hear from behind me.

An elderly woman makes an honest answer. “But I don't even know you.”

“I do know that you don't know me. I have a pilgrim's passport, take a look. I'm not some sort of a hobo or a thief. I'm a pilgrim. Here are my stamps.”

The woman bows her head, bends down to the ground, picking up or arranging something. Doesn't say anything. I stand there on the other side of the fence. I turn around. Rain is falling on my glasses. I don't know if I'm on the right road. I see a small car with two people inside. I wave at them to ask them about the road, because it's just so easy to get lost around these parts, and it's getting dark. I want to ask if that's the road to Petrykozy. The man makes some weird gestures towards me. He seems to be shaking his fist at me. They pass me by without stopping. I curl up on the inside. I get tense. I shut off all possible thoughts and feelings. I have to get somewhere. I have to find a church already. Or else it will get really bad.

The night falls. I keep going. Nine o'clock slowly approaches. I see a road sign. So it's true. I've made it. Raindrops illuminated by the nearby streetlamp look like streaks of light in dark air. The church is big, really big. Or so it seems. I feel relief. Just few more steps. A giant banner for Radio Maryja. It's a little late. Nine o'clock. The parish is big. You enter it by walking up the stairs outside that go above a kind of arcade. In the worst case, I could just hide under those stairs. At least there's no rain there. I'd slip into my sleeping bag and wait until morning. It will work out somehow. I climb up. I ring the doorbell. I hear barking. The priest is young and polite. He invites me inside.

“Where is it exactly that you are going?”

“To Santiago de Compostela.”

“So you have quite a road ahead of you.”

“It is quite a road. Could you put a stamp in my pilgrim's passport?”

The priest checks out my passport, the signatures and stamps from the previous places of stay. He adds his own.

“And where are you going to sleep?”

“That's the thing. Would it be okay for me to stay in the parish for the night? I could sleep on the floor.”

There's a dog lying nearby. It's miserable, lanky, looking kind of scared. It looks at me. Not in a hostile way at all. More like a fearful one. The priest's face gets gloomier. The smile leaves it. “Well, you know. Our parish priest has his ways.”

I don't understand. I don't know. I don't want to know. What is he talking about? What does it mean? “What do you mean? Can I stay for the night?”

“You know. There's nothing I can do. It's not up to me.”

“So maybe you could ask the parish priest?” I ask, understanding less and less of it.

The vicar makes a troubled face. “He's already upstairs in his room.”

“Maybe you could ask him? I can wait.”

After a prolonged hesitation I hear: “Okay. I'll go ask him, wait right here.”

This is nonsense. It's nine o'clock in the evening. The parish priest can't just turn me down. I start talking to the dog. It walks up to me. I pet it. We strike up a conversation. Like a man and an animal. I tell him a little about my fortunes. About things that have happened to me. He seems to be telling me his own. I think he's been through a lot. That's why he's so timid and shy. In a moment everything will be fine. I'll stay here for the night. Who knows? Maybe we could sleep next to each other.

The young priest walks down the stairs. He sits across from me. His face is sad. Apologizing.

“So, can I stay?”

The priest shakes his head. I don't understand it. I don't understand anything. I just feel everything getting all stiff somewhere inside me. Freezing up. Curdling. Becoming hard as concrete, as metal.

“Please, understand,” says the young priest.

“Then how about... I could at least stay out there under that arcade in front of the parish?”

“Please, understand...” he repeats with sadness in his eyes.

I get up. I don't say a word.

“You know what? Why don't you ask the local people. They're good people. They'll take you in.”

These words are like spikes or blades. Cutting through my body.

“I have. I asked plenty of times. About dozen or more.”

“And?”

“Nothing. Nobody wants to take me in.”

“You know what? The mayor's wife is a nice woman. How about you ask her?” I wave my hand to that. “I know. There's that one couple. They're really decent.”

The priest instructs me on where, about a kilometer away, there is an intersection, and which house and so on. We go outside. It's raining. It's dark. Ten degrees or less. I put on my raincoat.

“I can help you.” He jumps to help.

I stop his hand. “No thanks. We're on our own in this world.”

I wrap myself in the raincoat. Then I put a flashlight on my forehead.

“Please, understand, there's nothing I can do.”

It's night. It's raining. I can't even stay under the arcade. I don't know where to go. I came here because nobody wanted to take me in, even for half an hour. The priest gives me few more directions on which road leads to Opoczno. It's almost twelve kilometers from here. Twelve kilometers on a dark, rainy night through a forest. With no light source, because the clouds even block the Moon and the stars. I leave this parish. I feel nothing but a horrible tension. A tension that is eating me away somewhere inside. I walk like a machine. It's raining heavily. I have no hood, just a hat. There's a flashlight on it. My head is wet. I see the house the vicar talked about. I take a turn. I go through the fence. The gate is open. A big bright house with an arcade and some machines parked underneath it. The man who comes outside is middle-aged—I'd say about my age. I pour out everything. Who I am, where I'm going, that I only want to stay for the night, on the floor, anywhere.

“I understand.” The man nods. “Wait right here, I have to ask my wife.”

I wait. He comes back. I read his face. Like many times before.

“Well... we have no room.”

“How about there?” I point to a place outside with some machines and equipment kept under a roof.

“Please understand. We have no room.”

I understand. “Well, Godspeed.”

“Godspeed.”

I turn around. I leave into the night.

“Please, don't take offense.” I hear behind me.

I turn back. “I'm not,” I respond.

I really wasn't. Taking offense is the last thing that would come to my mind. I just want to scream. Scream like probably never before. But no. Not now. I'm stubborn now. A car passes me in a way that made me dodge to the side. I step in a deep puddle. I nearly trip. I switch the flashlight to flashing mode. Everything around me starts shaking in that flashing white light. The streaks of rain keep coming and going all the time. It feels like a disco, with flashing light splitting every movement into a sequence of stationary poses. I run. I'm stubborn now. I reach into my pocket. There's about twenty zlotys in there. I throw that money on the road. It's for you. Dear citizens. Of Petrykozy. Kamienna Wola, and so on. For you, who, led by your parish priest, raise all those beautifully decorated shrines. I pass them by. In the ever-flashing light. They're beautiful. With flowers everywhere. God, it hurts. It hurts so much. No. Not the leg. I no longer feel any pain in my body. Maybe except in the head, which has become awfully cold from all that rain and wind. It's eleven o'clock. I go somewhere, don't know where, just straight ahead. I go through the black night, through that damn forest, dodging speeding cars from time to time. I try not to get killed and keep moving forward, although I have no idea if this road will lead me to Opoczno, or somewhere else. It makes me mad. This ignorance makes me mad. The fact that I'm going without even knowing where. Everything makes me mad. All those shrines make me mad. Damn it all. AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! I scream at the top of my lungs into the night. It's for nothing. It's all for nothing. That weird pain on the inside takes everything out of me. I block it. Pent it up. I walk. I'm a ruthless consequence. A machine that functions, follows its goal. I focus on the pace. I focus on my steps. I forget that anything hurts me at

all. I walk through the night. Finally. After a long state blended tension and some sort of stupor, I see an overpass. Civilization. Finally civilization. I stop under the overpass. I take out my cellphone. Yes. It's finally Opoczno. I don't know where to go here in Opoczno. It's the middle of the night. But I keep going. The rain stops. To the right there's an illuminated glass building. The police station. I'm not going there. I can't just go to the police. At the same moment, I take a turn and enter the police station building.

“Good evening.”

“Good evening.” The policeman takes a careful look at me. “What happened?” He asks.

“Well... I was looking for a place to sleep. I'm on a pilgrimage. I thought I could stay at a parish. But they wouldn't let me.”

“So you're looking for a place to sleep.”

“Yes.”

“What kind?”

“Any kind.”

“Is a hotel okay?”

“Everything's okay.”

“Follow me please.”

We go outside the station. We walk for a while in the night, we pass a hedge.

“Over there.” The policeman points the direction. “You see it? The hotel is right there. About three hundred meters from here.”

I say thank you. Thank you. This is probably the first humane treatment I've come across today. I go. The dark hotel building. It's night. I go in. It's empty. I walk down a hallway. I enter a huge room, probably the restaurant. An elderly man asks me what I'm doing here.

“I'm looking for a place to stay.”

“Then follow me.”

We reach the reception. He takes out some papers, asks me about my details, writes them down.

“That will be one hundred and thirty five zlotys.”

“Ouch.” I wince involuntarily.

“So what will it be?” The man raises his head, giving me a curious look.

“Okay. I have no other choice.”

He looks down again and writes something down.

“Of course, that includes breakfast,” he adds after a while, looking at me again.

“Can I have it without breakfast?” I ask with a hint of hope.

“Of course you can. Then it's one hundred and fifteen.”

“Then make it without breakfast.”

My room is upstairs. Some stylish black and white photographs on the walls. It's warm. I take a shower. It hurts. My left hip is chafed to the point of bleeding from the backpack strap. I didn't even feel it. There are blisters on my feet. I go to bed. The bedsheets are white. It's almost midnight. I close my eyes.