

## The Birch Tree's Lesson: A Polish Tale of Homeless Heroes, Animal Rescue, and Life's Simple Truths

An elderly Polish woman befriends a homeless bottle collector, revealing how kindness, survival, and authenticity thrive in life's unexpected corners.

### A Short Story by Romuald Roman

I sit and look at the garden and think to myself that someone else wouldn't be able to just look at the flowers and trees minute by minute, just wondering what to do here, which weed to pull, which plant to replant, which chair to put on the table, do something...

I do nothing. I just watch. Nobody's watching me, nobody's trying to get me to do anything ("because you'll get old quicker from doing nothing, Grandpa"), I just sit there, like a tree or a stone. I also think slowly, lazily. What would I do to make me happy? Eat something? Eh, no. I just ate recently. Make myself a drink? A bit early. Oh I know! I'll call Irena.

Irena is my age. She lives in Katowice. She has always lived in Katowice. She worked there for over forty years, raised two sons, buried her husband three years ago and now lives alone. She's not poor, so she doesn't have to scrimp very much, but she doesn't have much extra to spend either.

Spend on what? In your seventies, traveling gets tiresome and you become less and less curious about the world. When traveling, you can fall ill and that's a problem. And if you're on a distant, exotic trip, it's a tragic shame! So why travel?

Irena doesn't even like to drive around town. To the shop, to the post office, even to the doctor - almost everywhere. She takes her shopping bag with her and walks. If you live alone and are old, you don't need to buy much. It's even healthier to eat less. And it's easier to live by having only the essentials, without getting attached to unnecessary things. That's her philosophy.

I met Irena when she visited relatives in Warsaw after her husband's death. They, good people, thought if they invited her to visit—by having a transition period between visiting the hospital every day watching Staszek fade away—she would forget more easily that she was now alone with years of loneliness ahead. A noble reflex on the part of these relatives, right? So she came. First for a week, then a second week, until she stayed in Warsaw for a whole month. It didn't seem right to stay longer. Why should she? They live differently.

These relatives of Irena's, Nina and Andrzej, have been friends of ours for forty years, from back when we all lived in Philadelphia. They returned to Poland, we didn't. Nina has her principles, she believes a long-standing friendship is more precious than jewelry or beautiful clothes. That's why Nina doesn't neglect old friendships. Whenever we are in Poland, we know their house will always welcome us.

This is how I met Irena three or four years ago. She was looked lost among the Art Nouveau furniture, Italian fridges, German food processors, shiny parquet floors, carpets and huge windows through which the greenery of the garden entered the living room. Nina and Andrew live beautifully. Irena would have liked to clean but didn't have anything to do there. The staff cleaned and dinners weren't cooked in this house. This was not the simple life back in Katowice she was accustomed to.

It took us only a few days for Irena and me to realize we were soul mates.

We'd rather avoid the glamour of life and distant travel. We are among those who think: "it's fine the way it is", "as long as there's peace and quiet", or "what's there to fight about?"

Nina and my wife always have something to talk about, to buy, to go somewhere. Andrew is still working, so he spends hours with his computer. Irena and I are a bit left on the side.

But slowly, without rushing, sometimes Irena helping me with the computer, or other times when I shared stories with her about the Peloponnesian War and Spinoza's sad life, over time we noticed we see the world similarly, without big dreams and great expectations, and we both avoid revolutionary change. This is how we are.

Others, and these others in the world are the majority, still act. And us, we don't know how to act like that, we just let life carry us. This similarity of character has meant that, when each of us has returned home, we occasionally phone each other and tell each other what has gone wrong in our lives, or, more rarely, what nice things have happened and seek confirmation that we are the normal ones and the world is crazy.

So I'm sitting in this garden, in Warsaw, at my daughter Katya's house. My family are all over me, telling me incessantly not to make an old man of myself, that I could still do this and that and the other thing. I wonder if something really is wrong with me. I'm heartbroken. Here, where I am now, the only person who approves of me as I am is me. Everyone else is "just helping" me.

I phone Katowice.

Thank goodness Irena doesn't try to point out how hopeless I am and laugh at my shortcomings, she just tells me about herself, that she does things she's too ashamed to admit, and to prove it she admits to me that recently (just so I don't tell anyone about it!) she's been eating vegetables thrown out of the shops.

"Ooooo... This is indeed something I would never have suspected you of, Irena. If my wife caught me doing something like that, she'd throw me out of the house, divorce me and change her name."

"I know, I know, but listen to the whole story and try to understand me. If I know you, you would have done the same thing. Because it was like this: I'm going to do my shopping for lunch, and I see near my house a young woman picking discarded bottles from a rubbish bin."

"A beggar? Yes?"

"She didn't look like a beggar. She was in her thirties, neither pretty nor ugly, you know, the kind of young woman you see a lot of on the street, and not dirty, not ragged or torn in any way, neatly dressed, and she was looking for these bottles."

"Maybe a poor Ukrainian woman who didn't have a job and out of desperation is searching through rubbish bins?"

"Not that, either. I felt sorry for her and went up to her and asked: Do you not have a job? Because if you do, maybe I can help you, I can ask around among your friends if anyone needs someone to clean their flat, or to look after an elderly person, maybe to walk their dog, I can't promise, but maybe I can find some work for you."

"Meanwhile, the woman smiles politely at me and shakes her head and says no, that she can make a living from collecting bottles and doesn't need another job. So I say 'I just wanted to help. Goodbye!' And she, too, says 'Goodbye!'"

"I walk away. I have taken a few steps and I hear someone behind me calling out: 'Ma'am, ma'am! Please don't be offended. I really appreciate that you thought of me. You're a good person, but I don't need anything, any help, I can manage.'"

"So began our acquaintance," said Irena. "Every few days I'd see her on the street. As soon as we caught sight, she'd always be the first to greet me and smile warmly. So I'd stop and chat. Her name was Kasia. She liked dogs and cats. I was usually walking Homer, so she and the dog got to like each other (and Homer knows people, he won't let bad people touch him). Once he licked her hand, I had no doubt that she was a good person."

"She told me that she was now looking for an old bike with a rack, so that it would be easier for her to transport glass bottles, because on her back in a rucksack they're heavy, and yes, she'll put it on the rack; it'll be easier."

"I agreed with her and started looking for such a bike myself. But she found one first. No wonder, she walks so much on the streets that she reads various advertisements on poles or in shops about what people write about what they want to sell. So she bought a bike, a decent one, not old at all, and attached two bags to the sides, so that if you counted the bottles in the rucksack and the bags, there was room for more than fifty bottles altogether. Kasi updated me on her bottles every time we met. 'Ms Irena! Look, it's only eleven o'clock and I already have everything full - sixty-four bottles.' I now knew how many bottles fit into her bags. Then it occurred to me. 'Wouldn't it be more efficient to transport the bottles on a trolley; after all, you could pull a small two-wheeled trolley with a bottle pack behind your bike. I remember back in the day, milkmen used to distribute milk bottles to our house on such trolleys. But that was a long, long time ago and not in the big cities, only in the towns. Where would such a trolley still be found today?'"

"I shared this thought with Kasi and she rejoiced immensely: 'Great idea Ms Irena! I'll tell Antek as soon as I meet him!'"

'And who is Antek?' I ask.

'He's my boyfriend. We've been together for six months now. Maybe you'll meet him one day, but he doesn't come here often, so you'll have to wait.'

'He collects bottles too?'

'Yes, but not in this neighborhood, after all I said ...'

'Yes, yes, I understand, I'll have to wait.'

"Thus I learned of Antek, the much older man with whom she lived. For how long? What do they have in common? What, or rather who, was in her life before that? I didn't ask. You know, I don't ask because I myself hate it when someone questions me. Why would anyone want to know another person's secrets? Usually just for the empty satisfaction of knowing the details and being able to judge that this questioner is better than the one who gave in to the pressure of the questions."

"Am I right? Isn't that what this is all about? That everyone wants to convince themselves that they are the better, smarter, cleverer one?"

"You're right," I answered her. "People invade the private lives of others with questions, but not to help."

"Oh no! When someone questions you too much, prying and digging, wanting to know something, it's definitely not to help."

"Even though hundreds of kilometers lie between us and we don't see each other, we stop talking at the same time, because each has remembered how unpleasant it is when nosy people want to pry into our lives. For me, this topic seems to have gotten under my skin more strongly, because I'm the first to add:

"It's how they ask. They'll slip in questions not because they care about you, but to gain an advantage over you by knowing details, to find something they can use."

"Yes yes my dear," said Irena. "You hit the nail on the head. You better believe I didn't ask Kasi anything. I gave her time, thinking if she wants to brag about something, she'll tell me about it and if she doesn't, she won't."

"By using this technique—waiting, not asking questions, not seeming to pry—I found out this Antek of hers knows how to make things. She shared the idea of a bicycle trailer with him and he thought it was doable. Immediately he started constructing a trolley in his mind—looking for different parts for days—to surprise Kasia. Yes, and now he's putting it all together. He's got an old pram, various metal parts, bicycle wheels, white plastic tubing, a tabletop, all sorts of bits and pieces he's picked up from rubbish dumps, to make a lightweight but sturdy bike trailer for transporting bottles."

"He succeeded?" I asked

"Indeed!" Irena continued to tell me the story, "about a week later I met Kasi again. This time Kasi was riding an upgraded bicycle with a trolley attached, dozens of bottles clattering merrily behind her. Passers-by stared, but she didn't care, because she knew the bottle business was getting better and better."

"I interjected, 'But you, Irena, your story has gone completely off the rails. After all, you were supposed to tell me how it came to be that you eat spoiled vegetables, and you are reporting to me on the construction of bicycle trailers.'

"Indeed. I stand corrected. Let me pick up the thread. Some time passed and we met on Pilsudski Street near that big Carfur shop. After greeting me, Kasi hesitated a little, then asked me, as if searching for the right words so as not to offend me:

"Do you have a garden?"

"No."

"A balcony?"

"Yes, I have a balcony, a big one."

"Do you grow flowers on that balcony of yours? Because, you see, if you want to try, I found some discarded ones from the shop, which nobody bought and they look worse now, but they're in the ground - if you water them - they'll come back to life. Look ... how can you throw it away? You have to give the flowers a chance! After all, there is still life in these leaves!"

"Kasi showed me several pots in her trailer, flowers starting to wilt. 'It's easier for the shop staff to throw them away than to water them. I chose three pots for myself, put them in my bag and went home with flowers instead of bread, but once I had flowers in my bag, there was no room for other purchases."

"And you saved the flowers' lives? And they grow? I asked her."

"They grow beautifully. As if they want to repay me."

I grew impatient at Irena's meandering.

"And the spoiled vegetables?" I insisted. "We're closer with flowers, but you can't eat flowers. What about the vegetables?"

"Just listen! You might guess, Kasi increased the assortment of found goods, because she could pack found things on the bike trailer. It's easier to pull things than to carry them on your back. During her search, she also ventured into further regions of the city, where she explored the rubbish bins of large warehouses. We no longer saw as often as we used to. But well, well! let her business grow!"

"That's when, after about a week of not seeing each other, I met Kasi with her trailer fully loaded, covered with a plastic sheet pinned around the edges so you can't see what's inside."

"What are you carrying there, Kasia?" I ask. "Looks like you have the whole shop with you!"

“Just so you know! I have a whole vegetable store today! But wait a minute ... Wait a minute!” So Kasi opens a piece of cloth and removes a package with six tomatoes, tests each tomato with a touch through the wrapping, smiles with satisfaction, then hands me the tomatoes and says:

“OK, now tell me what's wrong with them?”

“Now I touch each tomato, one after another. When I finished I agree with her.

“Nothing. Just beautiful, good-looking tomatoes.”

“Well, you see. And they've knocked them off the shop shelves! Go ahead and get them! You just have to eat them right away today, okay?”

Irene stopped talking and waited for my reaction.

“Of course you showed your gratitude to her, thanked her and ...took the 'trash' tomatoes. And then, you ate them with relish?”

“Of course! And you wouldn't take one?”

“I would have taken one too. After all, you can't refuse such a gift from the heart.”

“And would you have eaten them as I did?”

“By all means. I'm inundated from all sides with appeals to protect nature, save the climate, live ecologically - should I be the one to throw away edible tomatoes? Should I turn my nose up at the fact that they were found in a dumpster? Of course I would eat them!”

“Hm .... Except you wouldn't overlook the fact that you're now holding another giveaway: "and waiting for you to eat, 'still edible' onions, 'slightly yellowed' leeks, 'just a little wilted' lettuce and aged 'fresh' basil that's still fit to make pesto.”

“So, you stopped buying vegetables because you had supplies from Kasi?”

“Not quite, but for a couple of weeks I didn't know what to do with it here anymore. After all, I couldn't refuse her, because she treated me like a close friend, and on the other hand ... after all, do you understand?”

“I understand. But you said 'for a few weeks'. And what happened after a few weeks?”

“Kasi changed her work profile. She switched from picking vegetables to meat.”

“What?”

“Yes. She was collecting expired cold cuts to give to dogs and cats.”

“It's a good thing it was cats and not you.”

“Very good, because out-of-date cold cuts ... That, with all my sympathy for Kasi, I wouldn't eat anymore.”

“Me neither. It shakes me up. But who are these cold cuts for?”

“For dogs and cats. Kasi and Antek, in what was a rented shed, have created an asylum for homeless dogs and cats.”

“Beautiful! Wonderful! And have they been successful? Enough of this collecting for people and animals?”

“Not only that they have succeeded, they have succeeded by opening a 'shelter' for animals, competing with officially operating animal hotels.”

“This one already qualifies as a fairy tale! That two homeless people would find a place in life by creating a hotel for four-legged animals out of nothing, without any funding? What a beautiful ending to the story of the accidentally met Kasi! And what do you think, Irena? How will it all turn out next? Will they succeed in the long run?”

Irena didn't answer for a long while.

I, too, contemplated what might also happen to two brave, noble people who make their living by taking advantage of opportunities that "fell from heaven" to them.

“I think they can go on like this,” I said.

“Maybe they can even develop this animal shelter of theirs into a legitimate animal hotel?”

And already, in my mind, I had begun to follow a truly American scenario of how Kasi and Antek create a business, rent a suitable building, hire a semi-truck, arrange official permits to run an animal hotel. And on and on they go, as they create a whole network of such shelters, become rich and ...”

Such was my momentum in this prediction of the story of the Polish version of the American dream that I shared it with Irena. And she:

"Now I'll tell you something: Last year I found a small birch tree in the backyard, against the wall of the house. The tree was probably a few years old by now, but it was as small as a potted flower. But it lasted. Twisted, huddled against a brick wall, growing in rubble and stones. Constantly undernourished. Constantly in the shadows. It looked as if it were ashamed of being poor and decrepit.

"I felt sorry for the tree. dug it up gently, brought it to the balcony and put it in a large pot with extra-rich soil for flowers. I placed the pot in a sunny spot, but not so sunny that the birch would suffer from too much sun, and I watered it whenever the soil in the pot didn't seem moist enough.

"You know what happened? In two months my birch tree was dead. Yes, it died. Everything a plant needs to thrive—sunshine, water, soil—yet leaves fell and only dry stick was left."

"Uhmhhh ... So do you think the same thing would have happened with Kasi and Antek?"

"I think so."

"That they are not destined for great success and a life of great excess?"

"They... No! They're like that birch tree."

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This is the end. I don't know what happened with these people. Irena doesn't know either, because she stopped running in to Kasia. Any scenario is possible. We can hope things improved, that their great success didn't end in tragedy.

But they probably weren't the best candidates for an American dream. After all, they must have had issues in the past to find themselves on the street collecting bottles. You can't catapult such a person into another world to turn into a capitalist fortune hunter. You need to approach people gently, to try to understand, to help, but don't impose your expectations on them.

Like... birch trees, some of us survive in cracks in the cobblestones, or huddled against a wall. Too much sun, too much water, too much love, and they wither away.