

Marsin

i

with a touch  
of Irony



**strikes galore**

## prologue

The tourism industry is always on the lookout for new niches. New ideas to intrigue and attract the customer. To show them something new. To let them experience life in a new way. New sensations. New insights. New orientations. There's no standing still. Tourism moves forward. It races. But what's left to invent? What new thing this time? The bright minds are racking their brains. Shark diving has been done. Feeding seals, done. Pheasant hunting, check. There were trips to mines. Parachute jumps, even without parachutes. Whatever anyone wanted. So they keep thinking. Drawing in the curious. The thrill-seekers. And among the curious is Brother. Brother scrolls through offers, looking for something that'll catch his eye. Something special. Once a year he goes somewhere with the family. Camping, or to Tenerife. All-inclusive. No tent. But the tent reminds him of the old days. Before the kids. When he was free and the world was wide open. So the tent returns. His wife's not a fan, but Brother insists. Every other year, they camp. That's the arrangement. The so-called consensus. And that's good. No room for sitting still. But Brother also arranges his own vacations. Outside the family trips. A quick mountain escape, or the seaside. Usually solo. His friends have long settled down. Grown up. They're busy. Focused on the here and now. On how to make ends meet. No time for getaways or madness. But Brother can't help himself. So he keeps searching. Browsing offers. Tasting what the world has to offer. There are videos, attraction descriptions. Kilimanjaro, Kamchatka. But it's all been done. All so similar. Until Brother stumbles upon something unique. A true novelty. Available starting this year. Strike tourism. Now that's new. Brother has never heard of it. No one has. Because it's a new trend. Or at least something trying to become one. But it exists. Organized tours. Lectures. Packages. Different options. Different possibilities. Larger groups, smaller ones. With a strike guide, or without. But Brother chooses differently. He decides to skip the travel agency. Figures it'll be cheaper to do it solo. Just travel and find the strikers himself. Traveling to strike zones, that sounds exciting. To places where people are oppressed. Where people are fighting for their rights. And Brother sees the beauty in that. Strike tourism pulls him in. Because it's wonderful that people have their own opinions. That they want to fight for a better tomorrow. That they can stand up, and fight hard for what's theirs. In fact, it's inspiring, thinks Brother. That people don't have to be eternal servants. That this world can be pro-human. Not pro-exploitation. Not just about crushing and cheating. Draining people dry. Wearing them down. It's wonderful that people still care, thinks Brother. So he'll go visit them. That's how he'll spend his free time. This year. This season. A new beginning. Hand in hand with the strike. Maybe he'll help. Maybe bring comfort, or lift someone's spirits. Maybe he'll have something to say about their cause. About what matters to them. Maybe something special will come out of these trips. Well, we'll see, Brother mutters. And it's good to see. It's good to find out. Not just form opinions based on what TV says, or what papers print. You have to see for yourself. Feel it on your own skin. Look these people in the eye. That's what builds you. That opens new spaces. That enriches you. And Brother hopes it'll enrich him, too. We'll see how it goes. Maybe it won't end with just one trip. If he likes it. If something good comes out of it. Maybe next year, another strike, he's already thinking. But first things first. Start with one. See how it goes. Strike tourism on one hand, Brother on the other. On his own terms. With his own ideas. In a group, the truth

blurs. But solo, you're free. And that's how it'll be. And the ticket's already booked. To the Ouenza mine in Algeria. An iron mine. Hard work. All done by hand. Handmade, as they say. Only usually, handmade costs double. In mines, it pays half. That's the difference. That's how miners are "valued." And how it'll turn out, we'll see. Let the adventure begin.

### **strike one**

Brother packs his bags and hits the road. To Algeria. To the striking miners. What will he see there? What will he hear? That's what fills his head. Boarding, airplane, and he's there. The hot air hits his nostrils. Now transport. To get to the mine. To see what he came for. A real strike. And after two days with connections, he's on site. Just like he imagined. The mine and the miners. No one's working. Because there's not enough money. Because wages are starvation-level. Because they don't make it to the end of the month. And the work is hard. The output, meager. It takes a lot of sweat. And now there's a strike. Just his luck. But that's exactly why Brother came. That's what he wanted to see. Real strike tourism. So he asks one of the miners, Rachid, what he'd change. What he'd improve. And Rachid says: money. Because pickaxes don't break. You can rely on pickaxes. But not on the mine managers. They just promise, and deliver nothing. To them, we're worth little. Worth nothing. If someone doesn't like it, they'll just hire someone else. But you've got to feed your family. Send the kids to school. Clothe them. So what choice do we have? We have to strike. Brother says, do you like the strike? Is this how you imagined it? Rachid replies, a strike is a strike. We just loaf around. Lie down and wait. Maybe it'll move someone. That the mine is at a standstill. That no money is being made. But when the mine doesn't earn, neither do we. So we don't know how long we'll last. It's kind of a war of attrition. Either management breaks, or we do. Either we starve them out, or they starve us. Brother asks, maybe you have some demands? A list of expectations. To fulfill. To sign. To promise. Rachid replies, we don't know how to write that. And promises don't fill our stomachs. They need to show up with cash and pay us. Double. If they don't, let them dig themselves. Let them do what we do. If they do the work, for what we're paid, then fine. But they don't rush to grab a pickaxe. They just stroll around in suits. So let them stroll. But let them pay, too. Without fair pay, there'll be no work. Period. Brother, satisfied with the conversation, tours the mine. Asks questions. The miners guide him through tunnels. Through sinkholes and slag heaps. Brother sees a lot. Snaps photos everywhere with his phone. For Instagram. For Facebook. Wherever. You've got to show where you've been. What kind of strike it was. In what cruel conditions the miners work. A strike is a strike. But not all strikes are created equal. So he asks more. Takes another photo. And a video of miners lying around. And some music playing in the background. Someone's playing. Someone's singing a sad song. But no one's interested in the miners. Except Brother. But Brother won't pay them. That's not his concern. That's not why he came. He's on vacation. Full-on strike tourism. And that's how it stays. And he's thrilled. Brother returns home. And tells the tale. To his wife. The neighbors. His coworkers. What wonders are happening in Algeria. How people are mistreated. How hard work is undervalued. And that's life. And those are the memories. A Facebook post. Photos, videos.

People like it. And post sad comments. With sad emojis. The crying one. Or the frowny face. Mouth turned downward. Yes. Everyone's interested. So they sympathize. And congratulate Brother. On a great trip. And for caring about those who suffer. Such broad interest takes Brother by surprise. I'll go again next year, he thinks. I need to see more strikes. More human suffering. More disrespect for labor. People like it. They hit like. So I'll show them more. So I'll see more myself. And experience it. And that's exactly what he did.

## **strike two**

A year passed. But Brother waited patiently. And it paid off. Another chance to get away. To cut himself off from family life. To rest in an interesting place. Under interesting circumstances. Strike tourism – round two. This time, Brother found out that doctors in Davao, Philippines, were on strike. Just a flight to book, and off he goes. To learn. To process the issue. And that's exactly what he did. A few days later, he was in Davao. Hot again. And he had to connect through Manila. Manila is hell, thinks Brother. But then Davao. And a public hospital, reached by taxi. Of course, no meter running. Filipinos scam you on everything. And there they are, the doctors. Banners already visible in front of the hospital. Some placards. But Brother doesn't speak the language. Still, it's not hard to guess what it's about. He checks. Asks around. Reflects. How can someone who saves lives earn so little? But they do. Earn little. In the Philippines. Maybe that's just the way it is here. A talk with one doctor reveals a wider problem. Not enough hospital beds. People dying at the doors. Dying in the entranceways. Not enough equipment. Not enough of anything. Even syringes get reused because there aren't enough to go around. Shortages everywhere. The president only makes promises, says another doctor. He was supposed to reform healthcare long ago. And sure, it's better in private hospitals, if you can afford everything. But in public hospitals, like ours, it's poverty and lack. Most people can't afford private care. So they die. Young. Far too young. And that's a shame. Because they could live. If someone just cared enough to fund it. To provide opportunities. Because we do have skilled professionals. But without equipment, there's not much we can do. No beds. No medicine. A third doctor says: I paid out of my own pocket for my last two patients. Bought their medicine. The basics. But that's not sustainable. The system is derailing. Derailing where it matters most, taking care of citizens. Showing concern and compassion. Because compassion isn't just a sad face when you see someone sick. Compassion is in the effort to heal them. In sacrifice, often there's no other way. If the patient's wellbeing matters. If healing matters. That's why we strike. And we'll keep striking until it changes. Until we get money and equipment. Possibilities. Because without possibilities, there's no help. Brother is thrilled. So much going on here. Such human tragedy. Such apathy. So, photos. Instagram. Facebook. People like it. Sad doctors, and him, Brother. And he's glad to help. He made them tea. Things are happening. And he doesn't regret a thing. Strike tourism, what a wonderful thing, thinks Brother. It won't end with just two trips. Next year, I'm going again! Brother returned home smiling, full of energy. What an experience. What sights. What was happening there. How beautifully they struck. With such finesse and determination. With such selflessness, all for human good. That's real

humanism. That's real care. Wonderful people. Incredible impressions. There's nothing like seeing poverty and struggle. Helps you sleep better later. The pillow somehow feels softer. And things are happening. Let them happen. Let it keep going. Because all this happening, it makes the heart swell. And that's good. Just have to make it to next year. And it'll be another rush of adrenaline. Another beat of the heart. Beautiful. That's what it's all about.

### **strike three**

Another year, another challenge. Brother was ready. Tickets bought. This time: Córdoba, Spain. Brother had learned that government clerks were on strike there. Well, then, it needed to be seen. A break from the family to investigate the problem. To feel like someone important. Someone who inspects. Who visits the afflicted. An interesting perspective. It excites Brother's mind. Gets him moving. So, he moves. Plane ride. No meal on board. So Brother's in a rotten mood. But he arrives. Córdoba. Sunny Spain, yet it's raining. What kind of Spain is this, thinks Brother. But it's vacation, so it must be used. So he uses it. Strike tourism, beginning of round three. And disillusioned clerks. They weren't hard to find. Just head to the local government office. There, banners and shouting. "No more queues." "Down with queues." Brother doesn't understand the language, but grabs one of the clerks, and it all becomes clear. The clerks are striking against eternal lines. People always want something. A stamp. A document this or that. A permit for this or that. Next thing you know, they'll be asking for permits to smile. But there are no smiles here. Just a clerk strike full of scowling, furious faces. And then there are the people who won't give up their place in line. It stretches on for two kilometers. They're also thinking about going on strike. Considering it. So Brother offers a suggestion. Strike as the queuers. Your strike will solve the clerks' strike. No queue, clerks will be happy. Someone replies: but there'll still be a queue, just a striking one. To which Brother says: a striking queue is like no queue at all. No one respects strikers. They're lazy, remember? And then came the revolt. People throwing insults. "How dare you," "What did you say," and so on. Brother bolts. Someone's chasing him on a donkey. Someone else sprints a few meters behind. Brother, mid-escape, manages to snap a few photos for Instagram. Got to capture the striking clerks. Another one, with the nearly-striking queue members chasing him. What a mess. What a ruckus. And a brawl breaks out in the background. A clerk snapped. Someone in the line lost their temper. Brother can only imagine what happened next. He didn't stick around to see. There was no time. No chance. Because they were chasing, because they were shouting. But he managed to hide in a café. Pretending to order coffee. And he did. No strike here, and good. This time, he got lucky. The coffee was delicious. And time to return. Home. To family. To tell all about the emotions. What he saw. How he narrowly escaped disaster. How he was almost trampled by a charging donkey. Now that was an adventure. Now that was something. And now, peace. One last night and the flight. Mission accomplished. Strike complete. Picture-perfect strike tourism. And stories to tell. So he tells them. To strangers on the plane. Later, at the airport. Later still, in the taxi, to the driver. He even calls his ex-wife to report on the experience he took part in. But the ex doesn't listen. Just tells him to go see a psychiatrist. But Brother has no

intention of sharing his adventures with a psychiatrist. Psychiatrists aren't people. They don't understand. They just prescribe pills. And what if someone invented a pill against strikes? But then where would I travel, thinks Brother. And abandons the idea. Better to keep away from psychiatrists. Better to shout louder about the adventures. About strike tourism. Because it's beautiful. Because it delivers emotions. Because it takes over the whole person. That's how one should travel. That's how one should discover the world. Even if it means risking a trampling by a donkey.

### **strike four**

Brother spent the whole year thinking about his next trip. About the next group of strikers. Who would they be? What sector? What reason? Who would he run into? Would their strike be meaningful? And the moment finally came. Time to travel. This time, strikers in Minnesota, USA. An opportunity. One that couldn't be missed. And Brother didn't. He booked the tickets, and a few days later, he was there. Despite his wife's criticism. That he should finally give it a rest with the strikes. That a grown man shouldn't be running around like that. That he could stay and help at home. But Brother wasn't swayed by her talk. And there he was. Minnesota. Another strike. This time, bank workers. People working in banks. And the first striking person Brother meets says: "We've had enough." The next says: "It's the last straw." Brother isn't sure what it's about, but he meets with the branch director, who is also striking, and everything becomes clear. The director explains: bank employees are protesting high interest rates on loans and credit from which they earn nothing. Only the bank profits. And they, the bank workers, want a cut of the spoils. After all, they're the ones convincing people to go into debt. That's their hard work. Without their persuasion, no one would sign up for a loan. So they want a share in the gains. They want it to be not just the banks getting richer. They want the bank workers to profit too, from their skills in coaxing and roping in unsuspecting customers. Because customers don't understand they're about to be squeezed dry. But maybe that's for the best. Ignorance is bliss, they say. Or at least, that's what the director says. Brother asks, "But don't you get sales bonuses?" The director sighs. "Sure we do. But it's peanuts. A drop in the ocean compared to the bank's income. Even I, the director, have to drive a Jaguar instead of a Rolls. A man like me should have at least two Rolls-Royces in the garage. And a Jaguar for each mistress. But instead I'm counting pennies. Just to pay for pool cleaning. For the gardener. Don't even mention the housekeeper." Yes, Brother understands. He feels for the bank workers. He even asks if he can help. The director says he accepts voluntary donations, in unmarked bills, in envelopes. If it's more, then briefcases. Plastic bags are out. Backpacks too. "I won't accept a plastic bag," he says. So Brother puts what he has into an envelope and hands it over. It doesn't cheer the director up. His face remains heavy with struggle. Like a true striker. Like the exploited. And he keeps muttering about that exploitation. "The bank this, the bank that." But the envelope wasn't in vain. The director let Brother record a video, showing the coffee machine sputtering out of order. "How can we live under these conditions?" the director asks. It's all on camera. Brother is thrilled. Perfect for Facebook. On his way out, he takes

more pictures. One bank worker has chained himself to a radiator. Brother asks if it's warmer by the radiator. The worker says it doesn't even heat. "Well, that's a bust," thinks Brother. You'd think, America. Wealth. But they're chaining themselves to radiators like in third-world countries. Striking like it's a warzone. The world's gone mad, thinks Brother. If it keeps going this way, the U.S. will collapse before Europe. Bookmakers should start taking bets. With odds. Who falls first, America or Europe? The only thing certain: China won't fall. No strikers there. They'd pack up banners faster than they could unroll them. That's the charm of communist order. Don't like it? Off you go, to some steppe or wasteland. No whining. No debate. But now, time to return. Home. And Brother did. And again, he had things to show. Again, he had stories to tell. And people couldn't believe it. America. Bankers. And they can't even afford two Rolls-Royces.

### **strike five**

And another year rolled in. And with it, new strike experiences. Brother could hardly wait. Scanning news for fresh strikes. What's bubbling under the surface. Where something big was brewing. And there it was. A strike. Airline workers in Toronto. So, Canada. A major journey. And that's where he went. Somehow, he made it there. Apparently, not all airline workers were striking. But those in Toronto clearly were. And that's good. He saved on a taxi, no need to go looking for the strikers. They were right there. Within reach. At Toronto airport. Of course, his luggage went missing. Or maybe no one was there to unload it. After all, who would unload it if everyone's on strike? At least they let them off the plane. But Brother rolled up his sleeves. Time for some recon. Time to understand what this strike was all about. He asked some woman at a ticket window. She was only covering someone, but still striking like the rest. Wouldn't sell him anything. No tickets, nothing. Brother corrected her, it wasn't a sale he wanted, but information. The second conversation was more fruitful. He stopped some passing pilots. Started asking questions. And they said the reason was applause. Or lack thereof. That's what inspired the strike. They wanted applause. Regularly. From everyone. Doesn't matter if you're moving suitcases or directing traffic, people should clap. And that became the cause. Because people don't clap. They don't appreciate. Landing isn't everything. It's not enough. "And what about meal service?" chimed in a nearby flight attendant. "We want applause too. We want praise. Without us, passengers would be hungry. And everyone knows, hunger means irritability. Which means we provide spiritual comfort. We preserve travelers' peace of mind. And yet, no clapping." Brother nodded wisely. There's something to that. People only clap for landings. Meanwhile, all these frowns, so many others working hard to ensure the flight goes smoothly, and they hear no claps. It's true! That needs to change. Brother's heart softened. He felt for the striking aviators. Such a shame. Human apathy, that's all. From now on, I'll clap at every opportunity, thought Brother. And he took photos. Without waiting for an opportunity. Because it's always there. Because it's constant. Sad pilots. And him. And Brother. The one who will tell the story when he returns and post it online. With photos. With the emotional drought of the un-clapped. Because not everyone understood the strikers. Some passengers were



outraged, flights suspended, stranded at the airport, late for important events. They didn't understand. They didn't empathize. They couldn't grasp how vital clapping is for flight crews. But enough about them. What matters is the journey. Strike tourism. What matters is where it leads, to understanding. To expanding horizons. And to the fact that Brother's wife was pissed. Because he got back four days late. Oh well. Strikes. That's how it goes. But it was worth it, thought Brother. It's amazing to see that people still have the strength and will to strike. To voice their opinions. To point and say: that one, and that one, didn't clap. That's the basis of a healthy spirit. Recognition and applause. Paying tribute to fallen, un-clapped-for aviators. With claps. That changes everything. And may that change spread everywhere. Not just in Toronto. Because it's needed. Because it makes sense. And so does travel, if you stumble upon a good strike.

### **strike six**

Year six of strike tourism. Brother was all fired up. Where this time? What's it about? Who's striking? And he found it. A good one. Used car salesmen on strike in Mombasa. So, Kenya. So, more world to see. And Brother saw it. Packed his bags and flew. A long flight. Who in their right mind flies with four connections? Brother does. That's who. Because it's cheaper. Saved fifty złoty by adding two more layovers. But he made it. Mombasa greeted him. A dirty, crowded city. And there they were, used car salesmen. Not hard to find. The locals knew exactly where they were. Just ask. Brother asked. And found them. It was a bit of a culture shock, though. Black people driving cars. That alone was something. And on top of that, used car salesmen. Striking. But surely no speed cameras here, thought Brother. If a camera snapped a Black driver, how would you know who it was? They all look the same. And if the photo was taken at night, just a car with no driver. Who's behind the wheel? Ah yes, dilemmas and musings. But here, real drama. The used car dealers were on strike because people couldn't afford cars. Sales were down. People would buy one and keep it for generations. Sellers demanded it be like in the EU. Or the States. Buy a car, drive it two years, then sell. Get a new one every two to three years, tops. But here, in Kenya, thirty years. Until all the wheels fall off, they keep driving the damn things. "So how are we supposed to make a living?" ask the sellers. "How are we supposed to feed our families? Climb the career ladder? When no one's buying cars?" So they're striking. But hardly anyone cares. People just laugh at them. But not Brother. He sees it as a real issue. And maybe it is. At least the cause. But then Brother has an idea. "Since you're not selling any cars anyway," he says, "buy our electric cars. With worn-out batteries. Yours are sitting idle, might as well sit some electrics." But even the locals didn't fall for that one. "Power's unreliable here," they said. "But maybe someday." "We'll call you." "But you don't have phones," Brother noted. "There's one," they replied. "But it's broken." That's what it's like dealing with Black folks, thought Brother, walking off, disappointed. But a moment later, he came back. To take some photos. Record a video of Black hardship. For Facebook. So people could see. And he vanished. Back to Europe. He wasn't going to sit around with them. On the way out, someone called, "How about a first-gen Passat? Almost mint. Great price." But Brother

didn't respect German engineering. Besides, you don't get home in an old Passat. Might as well walk. So he took a plane. And returned. And told his wife about the hardship of Kenya's used car dealers. He shared the story online, too. But it didn't get many likes. People don't seem to feel for Black folks. If it were a white guy, multiply the sympathy by four. But since he's Black, barely anyone hits like. That's how it goes. But it was still an adventure. Another strike completed. A new chapter written. And so strike tourism rolls on. And that's how it'll stay.

### **strike seven**

And another year passed. And with it, Brother's ongoing quest for the perfect strike. Or at least the best possible. Well, okay, any strike at all. This year, there weren't many to choose from. But something finally popped up. Found it. Nailed it. A bicycle strike in Amsterdam. So off I go, thinks Brother. And off he went. Better than nothing. Full-on strike tourism once more. And he arrived. Amsterdam welcomed him with rain. As always. And tourists who looked like they'd never seen weed before. "I don't get it," Brother says to the taxi driver. "People come here from all over the world just to smoke pot. Travel hundreds of thousands of kilometers. Can't they just smoke at home? Or is it about doing numbers while high?" he continues. "They don't throw TVs out the window at home. That'd be a shame. But doing that in Amsterdam? Now that's something." The taxi driver only nodded meaningfully. And there they were, cyclists. With their bikes. Striking. Not pedaling. At first, Brother thought it was about the pedals. Maybe the pedals were faulty. And that's why the strike. But no, this time, it wasn't about pedals. It was about Poles. The strike was about how Amsterdam locals were fed up with their bikes getting stolen. Wherever they go, bikes disappear. And a Pole was always there. Leave it in a park? Bike's gone, there was a Pole. Visit their mother? Bike's gone, another Pole. "So the strike is about Poles?" asks Brother. "Yes," came the answer. "Well good," says Brother. "Gotta look at the positives. No bikes? Boosts the economy. You buy new bikes, right? Can't live in Amsterdam without one. And besides, it's nice to get something new. You don't enjoy the old bike anymore. But a new one, that brings a smile." That's when Brother got hit with a shoe. From some activist in a vegan T-shirt. It was a direct hit. Right in the head. "But I'm making sense," Brother went on. "Besides, a Pole is still a person. Better he steals bikes than sits unemployed watching soap operas. At least the guy's got a job. A job and a new bike." The protestors weren't pleased with Brother's take. They started chasing him. He barely managed to snap a few photos. On the run. "Who would've thought," Brother pondered as he fled. "This is the Netherlands. Supposed to be developed. The West. And you can't even say what you think. Can't share your vision. Suggest a solution. Nothing. They won't listen, these beasts. Just throw shoes and chase you through town. Even the Black folks in Kenya were more civil." "To hell with the West," Brother concluded. And grabbed a parked bike. "Well, it's here, I might as well," he muttered. And pedaled off. To the airport, instead of taking a taxi. Always good to save some cash. And he did. Back home, complaining to his wife. That this time, it didn't go well. Supposed to be strike tourism, but no fun. "Maybe too much fun," his wife replied. Depends how you look at

it. But earlier, it had all been rather nice. And the Amsterdam cyclists? A total disaster. Oh well. "Here's to next year," Brother tells his wife. And immerses himself in uploading photos. Promoting and praising strike tourism. Doesn't mention the downsides. No need to stir the waters. Better to boast that he was there. That's enough. People don't need to know everything, Brother thinks. Sometimes they don't need to know anything at all. As long as they like the pictures. As long as they're jealous. Because not everyone has the guts. To go to strikes. To understand people. And sometimes, try to correct them. Even if, as life shows, it doesn't always work out. Just make it to next year. Maybe people will be calmer. More reasonable. Hopefully.

### **strike eight**

Yes, Brother and his experiences. Another year, another strike. Found fairly quickly this time. A strike by sombrero makers in Mexico. In Guadalajara. That's how it turned out. That's what Brother decided. So, off he goes. To see what's buzzing in Guadalajara. What those mustached Mexicans are up to. Airport. Check-in. Flight. All pretty smooth. First sombrero spotted, someone wore one on the plane. And they say you shouldn't bring wood to the forest. But let's see, thinks Brother. He can't wait. What will it be? What will happen? Taxi from the airport straight to the factories. To the sombrero makers. To find out why they're striking. And there he is, the first striker. Wearing a shirt that says STOP. Stop what? wonders Brother. He asks. And soon it all becomes clear. It's about how the sombrero reinforces the Mexican stereotype. And they want it to be fashionable. They want people wearing sombreros on catwalks in Paris and Milan. They want it to stop being tacky. Brother can't wrap his head around it. "But it's your thing," he says. "The sombrero, the mustache, the tequila. And the parties in Tijuana, but no one talks about those. What happens in Tijuana stays in Tijuana." "Yes," replies the striker, "but we want to go high-end. We want to show that anyone can be Mexican. That's the point. To make people want to be Mexican." Brother says, "Not sure you'll convert that many people. Or is this about harvesting organs?" He just couldn't understand Mexican thinking. "Why would I want to prance around in a sombrero?" he thought. But alright. "Give me one, I'll wear it for a photo." And he did. Photos. Videos. Brother even signed some list. Lord knows what it was for. He just hopes it wasn't a kidney donor form. Though there were people standing over him, so even if it was, maybe he'll get out in time. And those cartels. Guys in pickups everywhere. What's going on here? Are they striking too? Turned out they weren't. But Brother didn't dare ask what they were doing there. Time to get out, he decided. And so he did. Left the next day. Returned home full of impressions. But also full of confusion. They have sombreros, mustaches, and tequila, and they still want more? "We want exposure. We want fashion. We want to go viral." Viral Mexican. What nonsense, thought Brother. But the trip was a success. Something to talk about. To write about on social media. Brother's wife, however, was worn out by his absence. Everything was on her. Or so she claimed. "I'll buy you an original Mexican," Brother joked. "But without a sombrero. The ones with sombreros are more expensive. Especially now, they're on strike." She didn't get the joke. For the next week she

kept asking where her Mexican was. But he never showed up. Not easy finding a Mexican in Europe. Not many available for purchase. There are lines. Waiting lists. Plus you need tests. Vaccinations. Delousing. It's a whole thing. A lot of hassle. Not worth the trouble, thought Brother after a week, turned off the nightlight, and went to sleep.

### **strike nine**

Brother woke up in a bad mood. His wife noticed right away. So she found a solution. "How about some strike tourism? Maybe go somewhere, relax a bit. See a new strike." Brother didn't need much convincing. He grabbed his laptop and started searching. Where was something interesting happening? And there it was. A poachers' strike in South Africa. That sounded great! And it was. Two days later, Brother was already in South Africa. Looking for poachers. Not easy. They don't wait at the airport. And they're not in the big cities either. Who would they be hunting there? Black people? No one's hunted Black people in years. Now, it's all about rhinos. That's what someone told Brother, at least. And that someone knew someone, who knew... And that's how Brother found the poachers. Specializing in: rhinos. Brother immediately admitted he didn't know there were specializations. That's how he started the conversation. "Oh, there are," one poacher replied. "And that's what this strike is about. We're being pushed out by amateurs. No specialization. No training. They just show up with guns and start shooting. And to make it worse, safari demand is down. Used to be that illegal safaris were a daily thing. We'd charge \$20–30,000 per carcass. And now? There's this new trend, respect for animals. People want to feed rhinos, not shoot them. It's madness. We can't charge 30 grand for someone to feed a rhino. Rhinos are for dying, not dining. And then there are the guys with no permits, but I already said that," the poacher concluded. Brother's heart broke. He didn't know what to say. How could people be so indifferent to human suffering? They protect animals, instead of feeding the poachers. They poach without certification. Bypass the network. The ones who bribe cops so they won't get caught. The ones who support entire chains of corrupt officers. It's an ecosystem. The poaching ecosystem. And people don't respect it. They don't understand that a humble poacher has to eat too. Has to feed a family. Send his kids to school. All of that costs money, Brother concluded silently. But alright, time for photos. Time for videos. To show off, one poacher shot a small squirrel. Brother asked if that didn't violate the terms of the strike. The poacher said squirrels don't count. It was just for aim. For practice. Brother understood. He was deeply moved. He'd never seen such a tragic strike. He even left some cash, for alcohol. For the poachers. Apparently, they can't strike sober. And it was time to head back. "Amazing impressions. Amazing trip," thought Brother. "We don't have strikes like that in Europe. Only in wild countries. The wild know how to strike like no one else," he concluded. So, home again, and boasting on social media. Let the people see. Let them see what a real strike looks like. This time, though, fewer likes. People, it seems, were unmoved by the tragedy facing poachers. "To hell with such people," thought Brother. Wondering where he might go next year. What kind of strike would be waiting for him. It's wonderful to travel like this. To see the world. The world of strikes. A world worth striking for.

### **strike ten**

Brother and his next challenge. Another year, another strike. He couldn't wait. Already scouring the internet for news. About strikes. About what's bothering people. And there it was, or rather, there they were. China. Farmer strikes. So Brother, without thinking twice, hops on a plane and flies. And soon, he's in China. From the airport to the rice fields is, to put it mildly, a bit of a trek. More precisely, two full days of travel. But it was worth it. Brother made it. Safe and sound. And there they were, angry, striking farmers. Brother tried to understand what it was all about. He found someone who spoke English, and everything became clear. The farmers didn't want to grow rice for a bowl of rice anymore. After years of eating rice bowls, they now wanted to work for a bowl of noodles. And naturally, to grow noodles instead. Italian noodles. Because in their opinion, Italian pasta is better than Chinese rice. But here's the snag. The farmers believed the Chinese government was deliberately withholding pasta seedlings. That you couldn't buy them anywhere. "And how are we supposed to grow noodles without pasta seedlings?" one farmer asked rhetorically. "We need Italian pasta seedlings. Doesn't have to be spaghetti. Penne will do. Any kind. As long as it's durum. Any pasta, just not that damned rice." "It's rice that gave us slanted eyes," someone shouted from a distance. He ran up and started rambling about conspiracies. About government deals. "All we want is to work for a bowl of noodles," concluded the first one. And so it went. Brother was already confused. What government? What deals? But that didn't matter for the photos. So he staged a full shoot in the rice fields. Until he slipped into a muddy rice bog. His foot slid off a narrow path. "Chinese feet are smaller," muttered Brother angrily. Covered in mud. "What am I gonna tell my wife? Who's gonna wash this?" They were Louis Vuitton pants. Discounted, maybe, but still. Made in China, anyway. So it's fine. "This story needs to be told," Brother told himself. And a few days later, back home in Europe, he told it. He explained that the Chinese now want to be European. That they've developed a taste for pasta. Instead of sticking to their own thing. But that's the world now. Everything's blending. You can see it clearly, on the dinner table. For his welcome-home meal, Brother's wife served Szechuan rice. With extras. Brother pointed out that Chinese farmers despise extras. They prefer plain rice. Or now, pasta. Because who puts extras in a rice bowl? It ruins productivity. But hey, this is Europe. Here you can indulge. Let the belly grow. Enjoy it. Because soon there'll be no more rice. Only pasta. Unless Italian farmers stop growing pasta and start growing rice. Now that would be a switch. That would be something. Brother's wife didn't understand much of the story. Or of the strike. Because really, it was quite unique. And maybe it should stay that way.

### **strike eleven**

Another year. Another challenge for Brother. To find the perfect strike. Something interesting. Something revealing. And he didn't have to look long. In the evening news, Brother heard about striking Russian cosmonauts. Let's go, he thought. But not to Russia, as one might assume. To Kazakhstan. To the Baikonur Cosmodrome. Because that's where the

strike was. That's where they decided: they're not going. So Brother flew. And landed. And there he was. Baikonur Cosmodrome. They didn't want to let him in, so he said he was with the friendly North Korean media. They believed him. Because come on, how could they not let him in? That would be an international scandal. So they let him through. And there they were. Cosmonauts. Luckily, they spoke great English. So they explained. As if talking to North Korean news. They'd had enough. They weren't flying, because they were afraid of heights. No one asked them about that during training. Training was in swimming pools. That's fine, they're happy to stay in the pools. But space? No thanks. Brother said it was for the good of humanity. That they would expand the horizons of their nation. A brotherly mission for Korea. That maybe one day, even a North Korean would fly. The cosmonauts asked if North Koreans didn't fear heights. And Brother replied: better a fear of heights than exile to a coal mine. With your whole family. "You had similar systems too," Brother added. "Used to exile people in Russia as well. Those were the days. Now, conventions and restrictions. Western media blow it all up. There's no proper oppression anymore." But after a while, something clicked in Brother's head. "Wait a second," he said. "What fear of heights? In space, there's nowhere to fall. Even if you fall out of the rocket, you're not going to smash into the vacuum. So what's to fear?" To which the cosmonauts replied: "That kind of logic might fool a dog. But not us." "Then send a dog," said Brother. "Been done," they replied. "Doesn't cut it anymore. Space needs showbiz now, something people want to watch. A dog doesn't do ratings." "So what is this, Big Brother in orbit?" said Brother. "You flying to conquer space or to film reality TV?" "Exactly. Space conquest is now just one big reality show. Gotta do something stupid to get the views." "Just like on my social media," said Brother. "Exactly the same." "And you'll give me the views," he added, snapping more photos. He even dressed up in a spacesuit. Brother, who else? The only issue: when nature called. Getting out of that suit is no joke. So he yanked at it. Ripped something. Knocked something over. Apparently, something expensive. They kicked him out. Told him the interview was over. "Even the Africans were more polite," muttered Brother. Oh well. Time to go. Back to Mother Europe. Away from space. Away from the whining Russians. And he told the story. To his wife. To friends. To distant relatives. Posted it all online. "The Russians this, the Russians that." Embellished a bit. Added a gay angle. Said one of the cosmonauts was, you know, that way, and the others didn't want to fly with him. Claimed he filmed adult content with the portrait of the Great Imperial Leader in the background. Caused a scandal. Brother, who else? Got his account banned for a month. Couldn't get over it. But the fame? Oh, the fame. The gay twist sold well, apparently. And it did. It sold. For likes and comments. For YouTuber gossip. And off it went. Brother gained notoriety, but lost access to Russian territory. And North Korea? Forget it.

## **strike twelve**

After gaining some fame, Brother knew his next journey had to be spectacular. It had to live up to expectations. And it did. Or did it really? This time, Brother's attention was drawn to the French military. Word of mouth had brought him rumors, things were heating up. In the

army. Over a flag. Brother had to see it for himself. And he did. Packed fast and by the next day, he was already in Marseille. Nothing like hearing the Marseillaise in Marseille. But it never reached his ears. What did reach him was the griping of soldiers. They weren't hard to find, drunkenly wandering around the city center. Brother started asking: what's the deal with this soldiers' strike? One of them explained, it was about the white flag. Their unofficial national symbol. The command had banned its use. The white flag, can you believe that? the soldier asked. "It was our specialty. Trouble starts? White flag, and we're out. Now they want us to shoot. To fight. To die for the motherland. For the tricolor. I could understand dying for a white flag. That's different. Say, alcohol poisoning. Or a heart attack during sex. That's honorable. Dying for a white flag. But for the three-stripe one? That just leads to unnecessary depopulation. So really, our protest is against depopulation. The white flag keeps population steady. The tricolor only demands. So now we drink, we chase women, we live life. In the spirit of strike principles. In honor of tradition. In honor of the white flag. The white flag is our heritage. And it should stay that way." Brother was in shock. What a speech. What determination, worthy of praise. That's how you defend your national traditions. You nurture them. Don't give in to those who spoil them. Who want to impose wild, new rules. Drinking and women, a perfect allegory. A defense of what really matters. The great ideals, for which their ancestors waved the white flag. Proudly, saying: We are French, and we surrender on our own terms. Because we choose to. "That's beautiful," thought Brother. He snapped photos. Filmed videos. This had to go online. People needed to see it. Feel that French spirit. One of the soldiers even let Brother hold a rifle. Unused, but loaded, as it turned out. Brother accidentally shot himself in the foot. And if that wasn't enough, gangrene set in. Had to disinfect it with French champagne. Vodka would've been better, but this was France, and all they had was bubbly. "Good enough," thought Brother. Because of the injury, he had to stay a few weeks in a French hospital. He had time, so he uploaded all the pictures and videos from the strike. The one where he shot himself went viral. Brother was already famous, but now, it doubled. The whole world laughed. At him. At the French army. At yet another strike. Strike tourism became a trend. Everyone wanted to visit a strike. Everyone wanted to try it. Be like Brother. And strangely enough, Brother had had enough. The bullet and the gangrene tipped the scale. "That's it," he said. "No more. I'm staying home. This has gone too far." His wife respected his decision. The kids, too. Though they didn't really get it. "But Dad, you're famous! Everyone at school talks about you. Everyone wants to be like you. You and your strike tourism." But Brother had a different plan for himself. A new, curious idea. But more on that, soon.

## reverie

After twelve years, Brother said "enough." His decision was mostly shaped by two viral mishaps in recent years, the one at the cosmodrome, and the one in France. But Brother wasn't one to leave a void. So he decided to do something else. To monetize his fame. To align himself with the trend of strike tourism. And this was his idea: a strike. What else? He

went on strike, but never said what it was against. No banners, no demands. Just a strike. And people bought it. Curiosity took over. They came from all over the world to see: What was Brother striking against? Oppression? Inflation? Taxes? Maybe to raise awareness for starving orphans? Brother revealed the cause to a few, provided they paid the appropriate fee. And there were plenty of takers. The truth behind Brother's strike was simple. He was striking against life. That's all, and everything. Few understood. But Brother was steadfast. So much so, that he died of starvation. Starved from the lack of life. His body became a kind of monument. A grand tourist attraction. Because he lay there, on a pile of money given by the curious, in exchange for the secret of his strike. Piles of money, and him. Starved Brother. He had seen so much. Lived through so many things. And the strikes he fed on had finally starved him. The absence of life proved to be the strongest adversary. One that couldn't be beaten. Only her, his wife in mourning, received condolences across every possible social platform. She carried on her husband's strike. Without realizing it. And she too was gone, eventually. But without flashes. Without media buzz. Because she wasn't lying on piles of cash like Brother. Because she hadn't launched a new strike. But life starved her just the same. Or rather, she starved herself. Lacking appetite. Appetite for what's real and meaningful. Appetite for what's all around us. Appetite for life.



**new god**

## prologue

New God. He decided to come down to Earth. To gather followers. After all, can you really be a true god without believers? Without people who worship you, kneel before you, praise your name? Exactly. New God figured, no, you can't. A little publicity never hurts. You've got to be needed. Because what sort of god isn't needed? Exactly. And so he did the math. Our new god. The problem was, he wasn't quite sure how to start. What to say. How to act. And most of all, where are the followers? In heaven, everything runs smoothly. You can sleep till noon. Play Call of Duty. Walk your dog. You know, the usual. But on Earth? On Earth, nothing's that simple. At least not for a god. You show up, and the questions start. What are you doing here? Who sent you? What are your political views? Abortion, euthanasia, you know the drill. People are complicated. New God had it rough. He realized that quickly. It's not like people are waiting for a new god. Or... maybe they are? Maybe he's wrong. Maybe he's overthinking it. How is it with people? Is a new god still wanted? Still useful? Because that's what matters to them too. A god has to be useful. Has to get things done. Handle their problems. It's a miracle we're not yet paying their electricity bills, he thought. Heaven would go bankrupt. Because that's how it is. The religion business only pays on Earth. No one from Earth pays God a cut of their profits. That's not how it works. But maybe it should. Maybe God deserves compensation. But what would I even do with money? he wondered. Bonds are pointless. Crypto's too risky. Maybe stocks. Maybe oil. Or precious stones. Women always want jewels. Men want oil. The car won't drive itself. Though now everyone's into electric. The world's flipped upside down. And in this insane world, New God has to find his place. It's not easy. Nothing is obvious. Just question after question. And there's always someone ready to trip you up. That's how it is. People hope you'll fail. Human nature is a real pain. And has bulging eyes. But oh well. People are a must. Because what is a god without people? Or maybe, what are people without a god? Yes. That's a problem too. So many say it's not worth it. That God's expired. But still, you've got to try. Convince them. Or yourself. That it is worth it. Or maybe... acquisitions. Take over other religions. So many people are unsatisfied with their current god. The one they've got. They'd like a new one. Maybe one that looks better. Or promises more. But should I promise, or not? That's the question. If I promise, they'll say I'm trying to buy them. If I don't, they'll say I'm stingy. A tight-fisted god. Unwilling to hand out blessings. Always something. There's no way out of this labyrinth. But I'll try. I have to try. To be a god worthy of the name. So people won't be alone. So they'll understand that it's worth starting from the center, not the edge. Yes. I'll try, thinks New God. Let's see how it goes. Worst case, I apply for disability. If things go south. For alcoholism, maybe. They say it's a disease now. Might as well take advantage. Could make a little cash. But that's only if I derail. Maybe people will surprise me. Maybe they've been waiting for me all their lives. Maybe. We'll see. We'll believe. Or not. That's how it is. But the most important thing is to try. To make the effort. The one who doesn't try, loses. And New God doesn't want to lose. He's new. And new always means hungry. Hungry for experience. For discovery. For life. So let's see what divine life has to offer. How much to live through. How much to understand.

## **first refinement**

New God started with the Catholics. "Let's check them out," he thought. "Maybe they need something new. Maybe the old one's gone stale. So many problems, so much press. Might be an opening." So he came down to Earth and began asking questions. Outside a church, where else? But some woman smacked him with her purse. All it took was him introducing himself. She heard "New God" and, whack, right in the head. New God changed location. Asked a young guy outside another church. The kid asked his name. New God told him. The kid laughed. "Cool nickname for a dealer," he said. New God didn't get it. What dealer? What's going on here? So, another church. Third try. There, New God approached a priest who was just leaving. Told him who he was, and the priest said he'd burn in hell. For impersonating God. "What hell?" asked New God. "Why are you threatening me?" "Religion has to use fear," said the priest. "Otherwise, people won't listen. Otherwise, they'll think they know better. Fear is the best advisor. It keeps people from doing stupid things." New God paused. Didn't know what to say. After a moment of stunned silence, he said, "But in my world, there will be no fear." "Then I'm not interested," replied the priest. New God walked away, saddened. He didn't understand. Why do people prefer to be scared, lied to, manipulated? Why is there so much falseness? Why is everything new considered bad, suspicious, laughable? Because if it's new, it must be defective. Incomplete. Broken. Or maybe it's about tradition. Maybe they've been oppressed for so long, they don't want to change. New God puzzled over it. Didn't know what to say. Didn't know how to approach the problem. He sighed. "Catholics, busy," he muttered. And what can you do. Nothing by force. If they don't want me, too bad. Gotta look elsewhere. Try other approaches. Maybe I should've brought a gift to get their attention. But how? I've got nothing, he thought. Oh well. I'll search elsewhere. Maybe I'll get lucky. If not Catholics, someone else. Surely there has to be a demand for a god. I'd say it's a basic need. How else? Without a god, everything falls apart. Into tiny pieces. Everyone's life. Incomplete. Off-key. Out of tune. Exactly. So we'll see. First steps. Now things will get better. They have to. At least now I won't get smacked again. Right? So, next attempt. But who? Where to go? And while lost in all these thoughts, God fell asleep. Slept three full days. And when he woke, he figured the whole Catholic thing must've been a dream. But maybe a prophetic one. "I won't go back to the Catholics," he thought. "I value my head." He'd pick someone else. And he did. But more on that soon. After a divine coffee and a cigarette. That's how it goes. Tobacco companies make money even in heaven. Can't be helped. Gods have their weaknesses too. But back to the search...

## second refinement

After the failed attempt with the Catholics, New God figured things could only get better from here. Let's see. Let's find out. He didn't have to wait long for another try. This time, New God turned toward Orthodoxy, to look for followers, to explore the field, to see if there was potential. He appeared outside a small church and waited. After a moment, an old woman walked out. God approached her, saying he had something wonderful for her. She cursed him out with a string of angry words. God was surprised, but fine. A moment later, someone else walked out. Looked like a gay guy, or at least someone who wore eyeliner. A man, but okay. God wasn't discouraged. He tried: "I respect diversity." The guy snapped back, "Fuck off, you pervert," and walked away. Third out was a priest. And here, finally, a conversation started. It began, of course, with confusion, because "New God" isn't exactly the smoothest greeting or offer or pitch. That it's worth it. That I'll be a good god. That I'll care for you. New God gave it everything he had. Tried every angle. After a moment, the priest said, no. We believe in the great power of icons. Through them, we ask for grace. Through them, we connect with the saints. They are a great good. That's nothing new. It's tradition. It's the way things are. New God would only mess it up, so please leave. You won't replace what we know and love. What matters to us. What works. New God said they wouldn't need icons with him, that he'd come at every call. The priest replied, "Yes, and that's exactly why we want icons. So thank you, and goodbye." And that was that. That's how it ended. Orthodox, occupied. Nothing to be done there. New God returned to heaven, saddened. Took a shot of Scotch and went to sleep. New God claims Scotch helps him sleep, or at least that's what he mumbles when he can't fall asleep. This time, too, he couldn't. Emotions were drilling through his head. Damn it. Catholics, out. Orthodox, out. He'd have to keep looking. But no one said this would be easy. And he fell asleep. And dreamed of a giant dam, leaking. Apparently a beaver's fault. So instead of sealing the dam, they declared war on beavers. And the dam burst. When it did, New God jumped up in bed, startled. Awake. And now he wonders: was that whole Orthodox thing a dream? Did it really happen? Maybe the dam was real, and Orthodoxy the dream. Hard to say. New God thought about it, awakening his senses with another shot of Scotch. After all, a god can't live on air alone. He whispered, then went to do laundry.

### **third refinement**

New God wonders. What next? Who to approach? Who to talk to, so it doesn't end like the last times. So something good might finally come of it. Some actual followers. Because how long can you go without followers? Exactly. So he tries. Takes the next step. This time, he sets his sights on the Lutherans. Maybe with them. They've already rebelled once. They've already prayed a new path into existence. Maybe they'll do it again. We'll see. And now New God is standing by a Lutheran church. A pregnant woman walks out. New God speaks up. Introduces himself and says her child will grow up to be a wise person. And she bursts into tears. Into a wailing sob. What does he think he's doing, assigning social roles to her child? New God points out that wisdom isn't a role. She's not convinced. She laments and screams. People start staring. New God wonders whether he should just run. Just take off. Because this isn't going to end well. But he's saved by the woman's husband, who shows up and actually talks to him. Tells him to stop begging outside the church. That he won't get anything here. God says he doesn't need money. The guy says, oh, so you're trying to convert us to Jehovah's Witnesses. And that was that. Short and unpleasant. A moment later, the pastor comes out. And now things get interesting. New God goes all in. Talks about the benefits. That it's worth it. That he won't demand much. The pastor asks: will we still have to do good things? New God says, well, yeah, kind of. The pastor replies, then thanks but no thanks. Around here we go by "faith alone." Faith is enough to be saved. No need for good deeds. No need to be a good person. So beat it. You've got no place here. We've got a better god. Not some stray like you. So scram. And New God returned to heaven. Saddened. Lutherans, occupied. And it had started so well. Looked so promising. Oh well. Maybe next time. We'll see. Tired, God went to bed. Woke up at three in the morning. Opened the fridge. Ate whatever was there. Not much, but something. Then he remembered why he was so hungry. I smoked a joint before bed, didn't I? Oh well. I'll buy something tomorrow. Some yogurt. God, I'd kill for a yogurt. Then he went back to sleep. When he woke up, he remembered nothing. Not the joint. Not waking up at three a.m. Not the Lutherans. Though someone reminded him about the Lutherans. But who? That too he forgot. That's life. That's how it is with New Gods. You never know.

#### **fourth refinement**

New God was puzzled. Where to go now? Who to try and convince? To lay out his arguments. How, and with what result. That result was what worried him most. Because what had come before didn't exactly inspire optimism. People seemed closed off. Resistant to anything new. But maybe that was just bad luck, he thought. Maybe the next ones will turn out better. So let's see. And he did. New God appeared outside an Anglican church. Out walks a man in camo, gives him a sideways look. God greets him, and hears, in short, soldierly words: "We shoot people like you." Then the man disappears behind the gate. God was floored. Didn't know what to think. And had even less of an idea what to say. But there wasn't time to respond. It all happened so fast. A moment later, a young guy walks out of the church, puts on headphones. Doesn't even notice when God tries to stop him. He's got his own life, his own business. Music takes priority. Finally, the vicar exits the church. More precisely, the lady vicar. With her, there's at least a chance for conversation. Though her attitude is far from optimistic. She's surprised, God? A new one? Trying to persuade someone? After hearing him out, she stated plainly: "No one will give us more rights than Anglicanism. Us, women. Here we can serve as clergy. And in your world? We'd probably be cleaning floors. Cooking for priests. No, thank you." She didn't even wait for a reply. Just walked off. And God was left standing, staring at the empty church. He walked inside. Just echoes. He didn't see the Anglican God. That one must've been on vacation. Or off handling business somewhere. It happens. New God returned to heaven. Made himself pork knuckle braised in beer. With beer. For the beer. New God likes greasy food. That's just how it is. The unhealthiest stuff always tastes the best. New God doesn't know who came up with that rule, but one thing's for sure: whoever it was, they had a dark sense of humor. They liked messing with people. Watching them jump. Yeah, such is life. New God went to bed. Woke up twelve hours later and couldn't quite remember what happened the day before. He remembered Anglicans. But why? For what? And how did it go? That's another story. A story like boots in the fog. Fog so thick it drowns you.

## **fifth refinement**

New God was looking for a way to attract people. He wanted to put out a TV ad, but airtime was too expensive. He thought about doing radio, but they said his voice wasn't made for it. He tried posting online, but before he could even hit send, a wave of hate hit him like a tsunami. That's just how it is. That's the era. In the end, he settled on an old-school method, a campaign banner, like the ones politicians hang up before elections. With the slogan: "New Means Better." But apparently, not everyone liked it. Someone crossed out "New" and wrote "Nude" instead, then gave him a moustache and a gap-toothed grin. That's people for you. You just can't please them. Even an ad offends them. What's wrong with someone wanting to advertise, thought God. But some see it as an attack, others as a joke. That's just how it is. So New God decided to go back to a classic approach, visiting a house of worship. This time, a synagogue. He waited. Someone came out, a fellow with long sidelocks. God approached him with a "special offer of the day," and the guy scammed him out of some money. God didn't mean to bring up money, but somehow, he ended up needing to borrow more just to pay the guy back. That's how it goes with Jews, thought God, and kept waiting. Then a Jewish woman walked out. God introduced himself. She said he wasn't her type, too old, too hunched, clearly broke. God tried to explain that he had money before, but the Jew from earlier had just "Jewed" him. Swindled him, that is. She looked at him with pity and walked off. Eventually, a rabbi came out. Finally, a real conversation. The rabbi even believed God was God. But something else was off. "You probably want priests, like most gods," the rabbi said. "But we don't have those. I'm just a spiritual guide for the community. That's it. Judaism has no priesthood." God said he was fine with that. The rabbi said, "You've probably got some commandments, right? A few, maybe ten or so?" Exactly. "Well, we Jews love commandments. We have 613. We're not giving those up." God said they didn't have to. The rabbi added, "But we're the chosen people. We've got a covenant. Not with you, with another. We can't break it." And that was the end of that. "Jews - taken," muttered God, and went back to heaven. There, it was noisy. Electric scooters, bicycles, shouting, racket. God got a headache. So he popped some pills, for the head, for sleep, for mood, for everything. God likes pills. He just hates waiting in pharmacy lines. Always thinks people must really enjoy being sick. Either way, he fell asleep fast. The pills worked. And when he woke, he couldn't even remember his own name. Let alone who he'd been trying to convince. Who he'd talked to. Which, honestly, sometimes is for the best. Sometimes it's healthier that way. Because no one's invented a pill for that.

## sixth refinement

New God woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Probably. Everything annoyed him today. The line at the liquor store. Something in the newspaper throwing shade at God. But after a moment, he figured it wasn't even about him. When they write articles, it's about the gods they know. So not me, thought New God. And that made him feel even worse. That realization, that he couldn't break through. And yet, he was willing to compromise on so much. He was incredibly liberal. He'd agree to most human whims. After all, they weren't foreign to him either. That's life. But he had to keep trying. So New God tried. Again. This time, he landed outside a mosque. And waited. For someone to come out. Maybe they'd bow like usual. Maybe say something fresh. But then, surprise. A goat walked out of the mosque. Stepped confidently. New God just watched. Stared, confused. The goat let out a long "meeeh," and walked off. A moment later, movement again. This time, a shadow. Someone's coming. This is my chance, thought God. But no, it's another goat. This time, God decided to engage. He launched into a speech about how wonderful he is. The goat responded with another long "meeeh" and wandered away. Finally, a human being appeared. An imam. And here began a real conversation. About God. About the meaning of life. About all things human, not goat. The imam was curious at first. But soon backed off. Said he was attached to fasting. That New God wouldn't require a month of Ramadan. That's a dealbreaker. New God tried to win him over: "If you want, I'll give you two months of fasting. Plus mandatory self-flagellation." The imam was still unimpressed. Then he brought up the holy Arabic language. Sacred, because it's the language of the Quran. "And you, New God, you don't speak Arabic." New God countered, "I'll learn. I'll hire a native speaker. I'll do what it takes." Just to get the Muslims on board. Just to get them to switch gods. The imam wasn't budging. Said "no" and offered a curt farewell. New God was crushed. Another failure. Muslims - occupied. To cope, he went to a cricket match. Had no idea what was going on, but he watched. Supposedly it's calming. Maybe when you're playing, not watching. He couldn't remember. He'd read it somewhere but forgot the details. Later, he returned to heaven and went to bed, with a rented blonde. They were handing out discount coupons for her with cricket tickets. Would've been a shame not to use it. So he did. That's New God for you. Doesn't pass up a bargain. And then, a holiday. He woke up not even knowing which one. What holiday, and whose religion. These holidays all blur together after a while, for people, and for gods. Go figure.



## **seventh refinement**

New God was in a rough mood today. With everyone. In heaven. Because where else would he be. If anyone thinks that in the afterlife, commonly referred to as “heaven”, everyone’s nice to each other, they’re mistaken. Among gods, there are arguments and quarrels. Misunderstandings and half-truths. Even power struggles. To some extent. Someone once said God created man in his own image. And there’s some truth to that. Man craves power, and so does God. Even more so. So here we are. Another day, another attempt by our New God. An attempt at fame. Though fame isn’t quite the right word. But it all boils down to that in the end. So New God descends to Earth once again. This time, he pays a visit to the Hindus. He’s already standing outside a mandir, watching and waiting to see who’ll come out. First, a woman in a sari. She’s talking to herself. God introduces himself, and she calls him an evil spirit. A demon. Tries to drive him away with whatever she’s got on hand. God ducks into the bushes. You don’t mess with an angry Hindu woman. A little while later, a young boy comes out, painted entirely blue. God asks him if his mom knows. Knows that he’s all smeared like that. Who’s going to wash that off now!? The kid runs off, ignoring God completely. Eventually, a Brahmin steps out of the mandir. And here, finally, a real conversation begins. A talk. About life, you could say. God tries to convince him that switching over would be good for the Hindus. The Brahmin asks if karma will still be valid. New God has never heard of it. And what about reincarnation? New God didn’t go to school. Where was he supposed to learn all these weird words? “No idea,” he says. And the caste system? “It’s the backbone of our religion,” says the Brahmin. New God isn’t big on dividing people, so he gives a vague, evasive answer. That’s not enough for the Brahmin. He’s not satisfied. Walks away. And as he leaves, he mutters, “With gods like you, best to keep it to a selfie.” New God doesn’t get it. But he’s pissed. How much more of this? Hindus, too, are not interested. Hindus - occupied. So, making the best of it, New God helps himself to the local specialty, bhang. Tastes better than it sounds. That’s how thoroughly blitzed God summed it up. That’s life. Time to head back. Heaven and sleep. So he sleeps. And when he wakes up, the usual. He only remembers that he got high. But what on? With whom? What was said? “Hindus occupied” is all that echoes in his head. So he wraps it up: “Well, fuck it.” And that’s how it goes. That’s how it stays. Everything between gods.

## **eighth refinement**

New God paraded around heaven in a dress. He got noticed, and it sparked a scandal. Because how could he. If only he hadn't been wearing makeup, maybe it would've blown over. But this... Shame on the whole of heaven. But that's how it goes with new gods. Either way, to calm the waters a bit, it's best to disappear for a while. So New God slipped down to Earth. To Africa. To win over a local tribe. Or tribes. Depending on how the first one went. We'll see. God. Africa. And a worship hut. God's already waiting there. Maybe someone will come out. And soon someone does. A mother nursing her child. Instead of pitching himself, New God blurts out, "Since you're so dark, is your milk ebony-colored too?" He gets whacked on the head. End of conversation. He keeps waiting. After a while, a malnourished child with a distended belly steps out, and God says, "You've had enough. Looks like you've eaten two goats in one go." The child bursts into tears. Not a great day for God, conversation-wise. Third to emerge from the hut is the laibon, the mediator between this world and the other. God strikes up a chat. Shows off his powers. Tries to impress. But the laibon isn't impressed. He's seen too much. He just asks, "How many cows do you want in offering? Monthly? Annually?" New God is taken aback. "What the hell do I need cows for?" he says. "I don't even have a pasture. Who's going to milk them? Feed them? Waste of time." The laibon says, "Every real god demands cattle sacrifices. And if you don't, you're not a real god." That was the end of that. Nothing more to add. That's how it ended. "African tribes, taken," thought God, and was about to head back to heaven when someone stopped him. Stopped him and offered a local delicacy. A mixture of milk and cow's blood. They told him to drink it. God didn't want to. But they insisted, and pointed at a spear. God figured it couldn't be that bad. The spear was worse. So he drank. The locals just watched. One of them started talking about strength. About tradition. But God stuck to his story. And they didn't want to listen. And he didn't want to listen to them. So they parted ways. God returned to heaven, just about to go to bed, when diarrhea hit. "Can't get any worse," he thought. Must've been those bloody concoctions. The locals don't go easy. An hour on the toilet. Then sleep. With breaks for more toilet time. A rough night. If there even are nights in heaven. But that's what they say, so I said it. Anyway, in the morning, God remembered nothing except the toilet. It was still his best friend. And so it burned itself into his memory: "Don't trust the blacks." And on he went.

## **ninth refinement**

New God is making an effort today. Morning exercises instead of coffee. Not even a cigarette. Walks and yoga. Whatever works. Seems like the recent experiences gave him a motivational kick. Who knows. Anyway, he's heading toward a "new me" direction. And good. And then the idea popped up that maybe he should try something different this time. Less conventional. Maybe not the big religions. Maybe something fresher. And he settled on Scientologists. So off he goes. He's already on Earth. Knocking at the Flag Building. No one's coming out. So he needs to go in. Somehow. And there he is. Someone appears. An auditor, you can tell by the eyes. But the conversation is pleasant only for a moment. Turns out nothing here comes for free. You've got to pay. This isn't a place for the poor. Not a place for me, thought New God, and gave up on the Scientologists. Back to heaven, and a surprise, turns out he's bugged. When did they do that? Those fucking cultists. Snooping around. Damn. But a cigarette saved the day. God calmed down, thought things through, and made a decision. Buddhism. But the most interesting kind. Let's see what Buddhists will say to a God. And he checked. And now he's already on Earth. By a gompā. And waiting. Someone's bound to come out. And someone does. An old woman. God approaches and introduces himself. She turns her back on him. In these parts, that's a meaningful gesture. Not a good one. A little later someone else comes out. Tall. A basketball player. Turns out he's a tourist. Wants to explore the local culture. And the conversation with God actually goes well. God gives him his business card. They exchange numbers. Talk about grabbing a beer in town. You know how it is with tourists. Soon after the tourist disappears, a lama emerges from the gompā. God knows what to do. It's his moment. His chance. So he tries. And they talk. They exchange arguments. The lama asks what New God thinks of the tantric path. Of visualizations and mantras. Because without that there's no enlightenment. Or maybe there is, but it's harder. God has never heard of enlightenment. So he dodges the question. The lama shifts topics and asks about developing bodhichitta. About compassion and the wish to liberate all beings from suffering. About becoming a bodhisattva. New God scratches his head. What suffering? Who's suffering? Why? I don't suffer, and people shouldn't either. Just stop suffering. Just like your life. The lama wasn't expecting that answer. And it must've offended him, because he said there was nothing more to talk about. That's how it goes. Buddhists are busy, thought God. And he was about to head back to heaven, but then noticed the lama had reappeared. Like a ghost. He was there, gone, and back again. And he said, I'd like to invite you for a traditional po cha tea. So God gave in. During tea, the lama talked a lot. Praised many things. The path to enlightenment. The benefits it brings. He almost convinced God to convert to Buddhism. But no. Time to go back. Take a nap. In heaven. And God does. And he sleeps. And he dreams of a mandala. And he wakes up, and there's no mandala. And really, who was he even talking to before he fell asleep? Right.

## tenth refinement

New God was feeling lazy. He spent the whole day under the covers, watching one show after another. Then another, and another. And on the third day, something strange happened, the TV started talking to him. Told him to get off his ass and go find followers. New God thought the mushrooms on his pizza must've been off, but who really knows. Either way, he got up, got dressed, and came down to Earth. This time, to visit the Taoists. He stood outside the daoguan, waiting. Maybe someone would come out. And sure enough, after a while, a dog appeared. Half-eaten. Not much of a conversation to be had with half a dog. Still, he wondered where it was going. Maybe it was searching for its other half. Hopefully not a horse, half dog, half horse would be ridiculous. A moment later, another dog came out of the daoguan. Whole this time. But skinny. New God asked why it was still in one piece. The dog said it had given a speech praising Tao, so they let him be. "What's Tao?" God asked. "Everything," the dog replied, and walked away. Then a daoshi came out. They struck up a conversation. The daoshi asked questions, told stories. He seemed intrigued by God, but what mattered more to him was what was here, wu wei, which New God couldn't wrap his head around. "How can non-action be a thing if you're still doing something?" The daoshi explained that action must align with the natural order. "Fine," said the God, "but then it's still an action. And it's supposed to be non-action." "Because wise action is non-action," replied the daoshi. And so they babbled for half an hour, act or don't act. Then came the topic of Yin and Yang, and the God flunked. Called it nonsense. Said good shouldn't balance out evil. He liked good shows. Didn't want to watch as many bad ones just to balance it out. "Two hours of good, two hours of bad, that's wasting half your time," he concluded. The daoshi had a different view, and the TV analogy didn't work. That's what happens when you stick to your point. Then the daoshi shifted to inner alchemy, neidan, and virtues, de, and more. But New God was thinking only about his shows. "No, I don't want you guys," he said in the end. "You're not going to make me waste time on crappy TV. I'm going back to heaven to watch something constructive. Something with a happy ending." He said goodbye politely and returned to heaven. On his way up, he fell asleep. He didn't sleep long, but he slept hard. And when he arrived, woken up, he couldn't remember even getting out of bed. Only two episodes of his favorite show were missing. Gone. And now, how will he figure out what happened? How the story moved forward? What events unfolded? Exactly. The eternal question. To be continued.

## eleventh refinement

New God was flipping through pages. Someone had given him *The Lord of the Rings*, but he thought it was too thick. So he skimmed, reading only selected parts, whichever ones fate or divine whim suggested. "Where are the pictures," muttered the tired God. "Who even writes books without illustrations? Just maps. What am I, a cartographer?" Bored with the book, he decided to head down to Earth. There was always more going on down there. Noise. Half-eaten dogs. Other curiosities. So let's see, he thought. And he saw. This time, he went to visit the Shintoists. He stood outside the jinja, waiting. Maybe someone would come out and talk. He didn't wait long. A geisha stepped out. New God tried to convince her, of his views, his posture, his divine presence. But she didn't seem to listen. "I'll play something for you," she said, "and make some tea." But New God didn't fall for the charms of beautiful women. At least not while on duty. And now, he was working. So he stayed. A moment later, a crane emerged from the jinja and transformed into a beautiful woman. New God couldn't believe his eyes. He rubbed them. Asked what was going on. The woman said she was there to repay the man who saved her life. But it wasn't the God. She wasn't interested in ads or divine promos. She vanished just as quickly as she appeared. And then came the kannushi. Out from the jinja, and a real conversation began. About gods, spirits, the world. But drawing New God into their tradition didn't go well. The kannushi said he and other Shinto followers preferred the kami, spirits of this world. Ones that manifest in many ways. That act here and now. "One god can't handle everything," said the kannushi. "It's too much for one being." New God had no comeback. So they changed the subject. That didn't go any better. It was about the new being better. The kannushi said Shinto is built on tradition. No dogmas, no sacred books, just myths and legends. No focus on the self, but on ancestor worship. "There is no tradition of the new. Only repetition of old festivals." God knew he was toast. No point trying. He said a polite goodbye. But he was given a parting gift, an omamori with a short prayer written in calligraphy. "Calligraphy really is something beautiful," said God, and vanished. And the kannushi, now alone, muttered, "But even calligraphy is old," and returned to his tasks. Meanwhile, New God couldn't sleep. Someone was hammering with an angle grinder. Then switched to a drill. Renovations in heaven. Apparently, one of the gods was expanding. "Some have it good," said God, drifting off into a short, but honest sleep. Though what he dreamt about, and why honesty matters, remained a mystery. At least until the neighbor changed drill bits. Amen.

## twelfth refinement

New God was in a mood. A bad one. The power bill had arrived. Higher again. And no installment plan. You pay or you're cut off. No way around it. He'd have to take out a payday loan, he thought. And so he did. Came down to Earth to get one. But the place was packed. A line out the door. So he figured he'd come back right before closing. Meanwhile, since he was already down here, why not try to win over some new followers? So off to Bali he went, to the devotees of Agama Tirtha. Maybe they'd be interested. Maybe they'd be open to a chat. So he waited by a Pura Desa, a type of temple dedicated to guardian deities. And out came "Care." New God asked who she cared for. "Whoever needs caring for," she replied, and vanished. New God paused and wondered: maybe he could use some care. Oh well. On to Pura Dalem, a temple for ancestor spirits and the rebirth of Durga. There, he met "Future." She asked why he was just standing there. "Looking for happiness," he said. "Can't help you," she replied. "Happiness belongs to the present. I'm about other things," and disappeared. New God didn't get it, but he didn't lose hope. He moved to Pura Puseh, a temple focused on village origins. There he met a pemangku, a temple caretaker. They talked. New God tried to convince him that he was the best deal for the Balinese. The pemangku asked why he was drinking so much water. "Hungover," the God replied. "That's life." The pemangku said, "Water is sacred to us, Tirtha. It purifies. It means a great deal. But to you, it means nothing." And another thing: "You're not a real god. Real gods live on Mount Agung, led by Sang Hyang Widhi Wasa." New God started bluffing. "I was on Agung," he claimed, "but it got too hot. Active volcano, you know. Had to come down." The pemangku didn't buy it and kicked him out. "There's no place for you here," he said. "Agama Tirtha is working just fine." So New God went back to the payday loan place. Even sadder now. And when he saw the interest rates, he got even sadder. But what can you do. You have to pay the power bill or they'll cut you off. And then what, no more console gaming? And a new FIFA's about to drop. Gotta buy that. But EA Sports really know how to milk it. Outrageous. So the God returned to heaven and played a few matches. "La Liga's overrated," he muttered, and fell asleep. When he woke up, he didn't even remember who he'd played against, or the final score, let alone anything about Balinese religion. So yeah. That's that.

## the chosen

New God was having a good day, good mood, good everything. Everything was going his way. The toast didn't burn. The bathwater didn't evaporate. Even the mountains smiled at him. And in case anyone doesn't know, yes, there are mountains in heaven. And not just any mountains. But not for climbing, for basking in their view. That's how it is. And now, New God had a new plan. But first, let's rewind to how he got the idea. He was sipping apple juice from a bottle. Looked under the cap. A message, "Not believing is an art too." Bingo. That was it, he thought. I'll become the God of nonbelievers. The first God of atheists. No lines for them. No gods fighting over them. No one wants them, I'll take them. And boom, he landed on Earth. Right at some atheist convention. Or congress, or whatever. Didn't matter. What mattered was that they were there. Hundreds of people. Atheists, he thought. He jumped on stage, grabbed the mic, and started speaking. "It's me. Your new God. The only God you don't have to believe in. Other gods say, worship me, praise me. But I say, salvation lies in disbelief. The one who doesn't believe will be saved. Will earn heaven. Will get to pass me the Cheetos. We'll drink beer together. Bang some hotties. All it takes is a little unbelief. Just a desire to be a true atheist. Because I'm the God of atheists." Thunderous applause. Everyone was fascinated. Ecstatic. Some were shy. Others couldn't believe it, which meant they were already saved. Because they didn't believe. Didn't worship. Huge success. News of New God spread across the globe. People reacted with euphoric optimism. Because often, what kept them from atheism was the lack of a god. But now they had one. Just the way they wanted, within unbelief. And it sold like crazy. Faith in non-faith. A god who doesn't want to demand or harm. Who doesn't want to help or meddle. And so it happened. The other gods got jealous. When they saw more and more people switching to atheism, to be under the wing of a God they didn't believe in. But there was nothing they could do. Because one rule among gods is sacred, God does not mess with God. Forbidden. But success stings. Always pokes someone in the eye. And New God was pleased. He did it. It worked. I've got followers who don't believe in me. Who don't ask for this or that. Because how can you demand something from someone you don't believe in? Exactly. So New God could stay on the couch. Play video games. Sip beer. Order prostitutes. He'd made it. Famous. Respected. Now it was time to enjoy. Now this was living. But at some point you've got to sleep, so God laid down. And when he woke up, he didn't remember a thing from the day before. Nothing about the fame, the atheists, what had happened. So maybe don't fall asleep. Or maybe, it's safer that way.

M.

**cancer of renewal**



## prologue

The year is 2136. A turning point. Much has changed. Much has matured within humanity. But for the better? That's the question. So let's begin, at the beginning. With what happened in that memorable year. It all started with observation and analysis. People began paying attention to what was happening to the sick. The terminally ill. That's right. They noticed that when someone was diagnosed with incurable cancer, or another disease that amounted to a death sentence, they often spoke of a new life. Not just one or two. Many. Many patients claimed that illness gave them a new lease on life. That it opened their eyes. That each day had become extraordinary. They spoke of spiritual renewal. Some even thanked God for what had happened to them, for the disease they were battling, for each day that followed. And someone noticed. That the beauty of life can only be seen in the face of death. And then came the famous "what if." Though perhaps "famous" should be replaced with "fatal." That might be more fitting. Either way, people began to ask, what if we grew cancer on purpose? What if we forced ourselves to face death, just to finally start living? To experience spiritual renewal. To make every single day magnificent. They saw no other way. Without cancer, they would live out their days in dull routine. In repetition. Reproducing what had already been done. So maybe, just maybe, cancer could be the path to new life. Short, but breathtaking. To live in awe, if only for a month. For ten days. That was their premise. And indeed, people began cultivating cancer in their bodies. Because who could stop them? The topic was controversial, so the media jumped on it. And once something hits the media, it hits the mind. The whole world learned about it. That the first brave souls were trying it. Cancer breeders. That they were pleased. That it worked. That at last they were living life to the fullest. The story spread. And it became trendy. Doctors picked up the trend. Began to specialize in cancer cultivation. Naturally, there was money to be made. And demand was sky-high. Lines formed, and so specialists were needed. And a doctor, as we know, cannot refuse. It's all for the patient's benefit. To help them reclaim the beauty of life. To awaken their spirit. To help them see that each day has value. So they began to grow tumors. And 2136 became the culmination. People now go into debt just to afford cancer implantation. They borrow money here and there. They wait in queues. Some even tattoo themselves with labels, "lung cancer," "pancreas failure", on their arms, their hands, everywhere. They want to show they're part of something. Part of a newly formed community. Enlightened by the beauty of the day. And that's how they see themselves. With their cancers. Their illnesses. Their afflictions. But the beauty of the day, they say, makes it all worthwhile. Supposedly. So let's follow this story. See how it all unfolded. In that unforgettable year of 2136. Let's begin.

### first image

Ela scrubbed the streets. Day and night. That was her job. She also had a husband and children. Illegitimate ones. It was the trend these days. And she liked to keep up with trends. So she kept up. So she grew cancer. First she went to see if it was possible. What were the chances the cancer would develop properly. The forecast was positive, so some consideration, and a decision. The specialist signed what needed signing. She signed too. And the money, borrowed. She got it from her grandma, who to lend it, sold her apartment. She'd now spend the rest of her life under a bridge. But what won't you do for your granddaughter. And Ela. The clinic. The procedure. Implanting penile cancer. And it worked. And it took off. A few weeks and it was in full bloom. Chemotherapy and fighting the cancer. The oncology ward. Others there like her, daredevils. But now she's happy. Now she understands she has something to live for. She was accepted into the community of "those enlightened by the beauty of the day." She even got it tattooed on her ankle. So it'd show. And she suffers. And the cancer makes itself known. That's how it was supposed to be. But life finally has meaning. Now she understands what the beauty of the day is. Every day. No exceptions. She always cries when her children visit. When her husband brings grave marker samples. What stone she'd like. What color. Gloss or matte. Whole catalogs. Lots to choose from. Lots to strive for. That's it, cancer makes you try harder. Another great feature. But after chemo, there's little strength. You're weak. But content. That you're still alive. That there's another day. One step forward. But the bliss didn't last. A month after starting treatment, her body gave in. Ela died. And her last words: "Make cancer on demand reimbursable. For everyone." The nurse, hearing this, broke down in tears. She's dying, and she's thinking about others. Wants to change the world. Even on her deathbed. That's what marks the greatest. The greatest minds. Who want to help. Who don't focus on their own suffering, but fight for a better tomorrow. The funeral was packed. Members of the community came. Ela had become one of them. At last. Some speeches. Some weeping. Then the drop into the ground. The burial. And no more Ela. But the people from the community want the same. They want spiritual renewal like Ela. That's why they'll do everything, they'll do a lot, to grow cancer like she did. To implant it, however possible. As long as it's there. As long as it finishes them off. A glorious idea. Worthy of the year 2136. A splendid year. The year of the great success of cancer cultivators. And the year of cancer as fashion. Who's next? We'll see. But at least we're not lying still.

## second image

2136 continues. Edek and his story. He dreamed of cervical cancer. A well-behaved man. A civil servant. Stamping documents. A quiet life. And then, a dream like that. But he had it. And he tried to make it real. He wanted to join the community. To become one of “those enlightened by the beauty of the day.” So he tried. So he started a crowdfunding campaign online. For his dream. Not a cheap one. And a visit to the clinic. Samples were taken for testing. To see if the cancer would take. If it would grow as it should. After payment, two months of waiting for the procedure. There were queues. You had to wait. So Edek waited. And in the end, he got it. Got his cancer. It took hold and began finishing him off just right. That’s what Edek was waiting for. For death to come close. To face it, eye to eye. And he did. And it hit him, he was afraid of it. Of death. But the fear gave him motivation. He truly began to appreciate every day. He truly experienced a spiritual renewal. Now he went to church daily. And they accepted him into the community. Just like he wanted. Just like he dreamed. They even confirmed it with a Facebook post. Got lots of likes. Lots of people supporting Edek. On this final journey. In this failed treatment. Because what can succeed with such a diagnosis. With aggressive cancer. But that’s what it was meant to be. That’s exactly the kind of cancer Edek wished for. And he got it. And his loved ones cried, while he smiled. At last they were paying attention. At last they felt sorry for him. He even got oranges in the hospital. That’s no small thing. It’s good to be cared for. Appreciated. But nothing lasts forever. Especially not the fight with a terminal illness. So it didn’t. After a few weeks of agony, Edek died. And hop, into the grave. His body tossed in. Covered up. Not even a plaque saying it was Edek. The family was poor. Maybe one day they’ll raise enough for a plaque. But not yet. Maybe it’ll stay like this. Maybe that’s better. A sad post from the community “enlightened by the beauty of the day.” That Edek is no more. That his beautiful moments with illness had ended. Everything beautiful... But also everything ugly. That’s what life is. At least that’s what the community says. At least that’s what echoes around. And it will stay.

### third image

That's how it is with cancer. Sometimes it helps. Allegedly. Or at least that's what those who want it claim. Including Justicia. Justicia had been planning this for a long time. Like a breast augmentation. But this was something bigger. The breasts hadn't been a hit. So maybe implanting cancer would be. Planting it. So she went to a specialist. A doctor. A "cancer grower." Took a catalog and browsed through all the available cancers. There was one for every occasion. But what caught her eye was an ad, "Cancer of the Day - Special Offer," two cancers for the price of one. Today only. It would be a sin not to take advantage. So she did. A glioblastoma and some other one. Hard to remember which is which. One for this, one for that. Anyway, she took two. And then came the wait. The surgery. And the collection of a large amount of money. She didn't earn much, so she started selling her body. Became a prostitute to afford her "spiritual renewal." But not the ordinary kind. People say "whore" and show no respect. She became an exclusive escort. High rates only. Full payment in advance for the whole night. Sometimes full weekends, or vacation companionship. All expenses paid, of course. She had strong motivation, because the goal was noble. At least that's what she thought. So she pushed. And collected. And in the end, she had enough. And got her surgery. Two cancers implanted. And she walked around smiling. Going to treatment. Because with cancer comes treatment. No jokes. She even had a tattoo made. That she chose cancer. That she chose to be "enlightened by the beauty of the day." And she was welcomed into that noble group. They announced it, as usual, with a Facebook post. That she was here. Another brave soul. Someone fighting illness. But she already knew. Knew what the beauty of each day looked like. Because she appreciated the short time she had left. Because she was changing every day for the better. But can it get better, when it's already perfect? When she had exactly what she waited for all this time. The closeness of death. And the understanding of how deeply meaningful life really is. So she counted down. From treatment to treatment. Hospital visits. Collapses. And the end. A few weeks was enough. And that was that. It all wrapped up in a single, unforgettable year, 2136. Yes, that year. The year of farewell. And of realizing how much a human life is worth. Yes. You can repeat that endlessly. In fact, you should. It's proper. Yes, exactly.

#### **fourth image**

That's how it goes. Some have it better, others worse. Stefan had it worse. The daily grind. The same routine. Nothing surprised him anymore. And that's what crushed him, this "nothing surprising." So he dove into the cancer trend. In 2136, it was in fashion. The most common escape route. And people took it. And suffered. Just to feel a fleeting moment of elevation. A moment of spiritual renewal. And Stefan felt it too. But first he had to sell his TV and furniture. Leave his dog at the shelter. He had to cut costs to save up for a cancer implant. And he saved up. Just enough. Then came the visit to the "cancer growers." The specialists. The surgery. The implant. Thankfully, it didn't need watering. It took hold without much effort. That's how it is with cancer. Evil things don't require tending or nurturing. Evil thrives on little. And Stefan suffered. Just as he wanted. Lung cancer hit hard. Treatments, scans, and everything else. Trying to save him. But it was hopeless. Stefan didn't think about that. He took pride in the tattoo on his forearm, "Enlightened by the beauty of the day." And he flaunted it. And boasted. He even called all his friends. Bragged about it. Because it was an occasion. So much happening. So much attention to the time he had left. Every day. He worked hard to make that time count. Tried to prove his choice was the right one. Because that's how it is with choices. Once we make one, we defend it. Doesn't matter what year it is. That's human nature. We cling to our own. "Mine is right." And Stefan clung to it. At least while he lived. But he didn't live long. That kind of cancer breaks you quickly. And it broke him too. Just like so many others. It destroyed him. The grave. The burial. A few people from the "Enlightened by the beauty of the day" community came to see it. But to bring a wreath? Not even that. Just for a photo. Just to check off the box. Pretend they were saying goodbye to "one of their own." So they said goodbye. And now, what does Stefan think? After death. Was it worth it? No one asks that. No one ever asks the dead. They might actually answer. And that would be inconvenient. It's safer this way. No questions. Just a marker. And leave it. Forever and ever. Amen.

### **fifth image**

That's how it goes, and that's how it stays. It's 2136. And him. Rafał, waiting for change. The life he's been living doesn't excite him anymore. It's not enough. He wants to try something different. He tried escaping into substances. Into drugs. Into suicidal motorcycle rides. He survived. But what kind of life is that? It wasn't enough. So, "cancer action." He did his research. Went to a clinic for tests. To see if he qualified for cancer implantation. If he was fit. If his body could take it. And, positive. Rafał walked around beaming for a whole week. It would work. He'd get his cancer, and his spiritual renewal. And then the wait. Two months for the operation. Waiting is like chasing a rabbit. The fun is in the chase, not the catch. Once you catch it, the thrill is gone. It's the same with Rafał's waiting. The excitement built up each day. Until the day came. And it happened. And the bubble burst. Nothing big, just pain. As it goes with surgery. Then the cancer settled in and began its work. One organ after another, until one gave out. And that's it. But before the end, there were emotions. Because he was accepted into the "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day" community. Because the doctors, the "cancer growers", nodded with respect. Yes. This one is brave. Another person who wants more. Not just to live day by day. Who won't settle for the ordinary. And Rafał didn't settle. He wanted more. And he got exactly what he wanted. But in the end, he cried over his fate. When his liver began to fail. He didn't have to wait long for that. And that tear. The tear of realization. That maybe ordinary life wasn't so bad after all. That maybe, just maybe, he deserved another chance. But he didn't even know who to ask. No one told him. Besides, there was no time, no opportunity for a second chance. The milk had already spilled. The glass had tipped. A quick death. But painful. And a sad funeral. Only the "cancer growers" were smiling, watching their bank accounts. That's how it rolls. That's how the money flows. In the year 2136.

## sixth image

The year is 2136. The party goes on. And temptation. And people fall for it. And keep going. And another one, Stefek, with a dream of cancer. Because how long can you stay in the everyday grind? How long in old poverty? Some say “same old poverty” and settle into it. Stefek doesn’t. Stefek sees poverty as a failure. And that’s what he thinks of his life. That it’s lost. And he wants to win. So he goes for cancer. Thinks that’ll get him the win. But will it? The cost is high. He has to sell his house. Will have to rent, or something. He doesn’t worry about the future. You don’t live long with cancer, after all. So why worry? He rolls up his sleeves and heads to the clinic. With a bag of money. Tests, and he’s approved. Eligible for cancer implantation. The “cancer growers” are over the moon. Another one to milk dry. And off they go. A few weeks of waiting, and then the slicing. The cancer goes in. This time, occipital cancer. Or something like that. I get those names mixed up. But it doesn’t matter. What matters is the effect. The cancer takes hold and starts tearing him down. And this case was no different. But first, the welcome into the “Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day” community. And the tattoo. Tattoos are in. To show off. So everyone knows you belong. Stefek proudly takes off his shirt at the beach, showing the ink to all. “Look, I have cancer. Look, now I cherish every day. Now every day is beautiful and unique. Because it might be my last. Because it helps me grasp the mystery of existence.” That’s what Stefek drilled into his head. Maybe the tumor’s pressing too hard. Makes a man dumb. Either way, even fools don’t live forever. And Stefek proved that. He died quickly, but in agony. Because that’s how it should be. Real men don’t cry. Unless they’re dying. Too soon. Too forcefully. Unsliced. Because it’s good when a person is sliced, meaning he’s spent years carving off little pieces of himself, giving them to others. Piece by piece, until there’s nothing left. And only then, he may die. In peace. That’s quiet and beautiful dying. The dying of the sliced. But when it’s sudden, and cancerous. And even worse, your dream cancer. They say “haste makes waste.” And when you pay that devil. For his time. For his effort. You’re an idiot. Or just the statistical average of a human being in 2136.

### seventh image

And here we go again. Back to the spotlight. Enter Gloria. Ready for cancer. She dreams about it. Can't forget it. She wants it. Needs it. Thinks about it constantly. About the spiritual experience. About the meaning she might find. The meaning of life. Of breathing. Of sighing. So she sighs. And she saves up. It takes a lot. Cancer implantation doesn't come cheap. As the classic says, it's not budget stuff. But she managed. Stole a bit. Borrowed some. Who cares about paying it back. Why bother. What matters is the here and now. What matters is that they'll put cancer in her. A new life. Better than a child. They say a child is a new life, but this is more. A child leaves a woman and starts a life of its own. But cancer stays inside. Until the end. It's brutal, but it's a lasting bond. Gloria feels excitement. Tests, appointment, implantation, payment. Or maybe payment first. Of course. What if something went wrong. If it didn't take. But now it's all paid. Everything's good. Time to party. So Gloria parties, with a tracheal tumor or some other crap. What matters is the pain. That she feels she has little time left. Because the cancer took. And it's spreading. And it's a party. And the tattoo, obviously. The welcome into the enlightened community, "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day." So she shines. Not for me to say whether that's good. Her loved ones cry. Friends wail. Shame about her. Shame about Gloria. She lived a quiet life. Why did she need this. The tumor. The torment. Now some radiation therapy and other weird stuff. But we all know this is a fight against windmills. Lost from the start. It's just a matter of time before the cancer wins. And it did. And nothing's left. Gloria is no more. Just a gravestone, and a Facebook post. A post from the "Enlightened." Right. Is that appropriate. Gloria doesn't care anymore. Not much of her remains. Just some memories in those who knew her. Just traces. Echoes. Of decisions. Reckless ones. Of thoughts that led to disaster. But she got what she wanted. She realized that life is short. That you've got to live. Too bad she had so little life left to live. But that's the trend. That's the twisted path of people in 2136. And it's happening. And no sign of it stopping. So that's that.



## **eighth image**

It's cooling off. There's beer in the fridge. But beer no longer does it for Benek. He doesn't feel any will to live. Keeps saying he needs renewal. A new spirit. Or at least a freshly scrubbed one, if a new one's not possible. Right. Not everything's possible. But in the year 2136, cancer can be implanted. And people do. And Benek decides to go that route too. Right. But to afford it, he gets a job in a quarry. Smashes rocks. Eventually exceeds the quota. A true Stakhanovite. There are bonuses for that. So the pile grows. Penny by penny, and he'll have enough for cancer. A visit to the clinic. Appointments. His wife tries to talk him out of it. Says he'll ruin his life. That he has someone to live for. But Benek doesn't listen. Spiritual renewal is more important to him. Because that spirit of his, it's corroded. Doesn't work. And it should. But after the cancer, it'll start. At least that's Benek's theory. That's how he's reasoned it out. Though, what does that word even mean. Benek likes to ponder words he doesn't know. Makes up meanings for them. Just like with cancer. Before it's implanted, it's an unknown. Maybe even a little romantic. There's a kind of hidden romance in the idea of suffering. Until it actually happens. Until the pain begins, the grueling treatment. The weakness. The loss of control over the body. But hey, those who seek shall be given... cancer. Benek went through with the surgery. They implanted a brain tumor. He was a bit disappointed, tumor, not cancer. Doesn't sound as serious. But I'll get used to it, he thought. People don't need to know exactly what I'm dying from. That was his logic. So that's what he told everyone. Said it was cancer. And they pitied him. It's a nice feeling when people nod with disbelief. Really? You have cancer? Their hearts ache. And your own heart swells. From their heartbreak. That's how it was for Benek. A Facebook post wasn't enough. He visited the whole family. Friends. Everyone. Just to say, look, I have cancer, I'm dying. Isn't that horrifying? Doesn't it give you goosebumps? And yes, Benek's life changed. Since getting sick. Since dying at an accelerated pace. And his induction into the "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day." Nice folks, they support. They text every day to check if the guy's still alive. They like to stay updated. Gotta keep the records tidy. Without telling his wife, Benek signed over the apartment and the car to the Enlightened. They need something to make their morning coffee with, he thought. So he did it. Signed it over. And a day later, he was dead. Stroke, tumor rupture, or something else. Who cares. What matters is—dead body. He left a note. Something like "I lived like a king." Only kings are remembered. And Benek won't be. He wasn't. And he won't pass on. That's just how the mob works. Passage strictly prohibited.

## ninth image

Near the end of the year, the “cancer growers” raised their prices. No holiday specials. No discounts for pain. In fact, their slogan now read, “More pain - higher price.” And instead of scaring people off, it brought even more eager customers. Eager to have cancer implanted. To have it planted, like an acorn in a meadow. That’s how it goes. And here’s Eustachy. Eustachy got a job as a pearl diver to earn money for his cancer. Worked day and night. In harsh conditions. Underwater. Risking shark attacks. Even they didn’t stop him. Didn’t convince him it wasn’t worth the risk. Eustachy took every risk imaginable, just to afford cancer. To experience spiritual renewal. To give his life meaning. Because, as he claimed, life without cancer is wasted. Without something that kills you. Without something that reminds you of life’s value. Whatever floats your boat, I guess. And so. Tests. Qualification for the procedure. Cancer implantation. And joy. Opening his eyes in the hospital bed. The first look after the cancer was inside. Settled in, as some would say. And the world seemed the same, but different. Something had changed. Something inside felt off. And you could feel it. The fear rising to the surface. Through the skin. And so. Life. And a new perspective. Appreciation. Because that’s what life is about, right? Appreciating it. Then life smiles back at you. Life is like a woman. You have to compliment it. Appreciate and spoil it. Remember it. And we forget, day to day. We live without remembering why. For what. That it even is. No one’s surprised by their own breath. We take it for granted. That we breathe. That it’s supposed to be like this. Only when we stop breathing do we get surprised. But there’s not much time for surprise, because without breath, death comes quick. Exactly. People are only surprised when they die. That something suddenly stopped playing the right tune. Or refused to play. Got bored. Of life. And kicked the guy’s ass. That’s what happened to Eustachy. He finally appreciated life. Lived it full throttle. He partied. Cheap hookers and even cheaper coke. Maybe 20% cocaine in the cocaine. The rest, additives. Or “diluters,” as they say. Still packs a punch. For Eustachy. And he didn’t even begin treatment when he dropped dead from a heart attack. The heart couldn’t handle the marathon. That’s how it goes with marathons, if you’re not ready, you collapse. Everything needs pacing. Moderation. Not like a runaway train to the edge. Doesn’t work like that. Eustachy didn’t even manage to get the iconic tattoo. But the “Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day” remembered him. Logged him in the archives. Even though cancer wasn’t what got him. The ending still came. The cancer was there. It all checked out. Eustachy felt the end was near. He cleared the bar. Shame he landed in the blackberry thorns. At the end of that fateful year 2136, some priests declared war on the cancer trend. Decided they wouldn’t bury members of the Enlightened under the cross. Only secular funerals from now on. But, unsurprisingly, that didn’t stop a thing. Higher prices, no church funeral, people didn’t care. As long as they felt meaning. And the thorns. Yeah, those too.

## tenth image

Henio was an avid wiper. He wiped off everything he could. Paint from walls. Nail polish from fingers. Blood from the back seat. Because taxi driver. Because he delivered. He learned about cancer cultivation from a passenger. That's when he started delivering pizzas instead. More money in that than in people. Everyone likes pizza, and hardly anyone likes people. Pizza doesn't talk too much. Doesn't lie. Doesn't provoke. And it brings better tips. People are happy when they see pizza. So they give. But when you drive someone to work or to a meeting, it's nerves and stress. Not a tipping mood. That's just how it goes. Henio waited, and his time came. He earned enough for a cancer. Maybe one of the cheaper ones, but still. Because cancers also have price tags. There are the expensive ones and the budget ones. Some torment longer, some kill quickly. Some hurt more, some less. It's a bit like ordering pizza. You pick from the menu. This one, that one. Same with cancers. But Henio could only afford the cheapest, skin cancer. That's what it was supposed to be. But they messed up his order, and it turned into leukemia. Henio was actually happy. He paid for the cheap one and got an upgrade. But blood cancer is no joke. The "cancer growers" wanted to fix it. Cover the costs. But Henio had already bonded with his leukemia. Decided to keep it. That was that. And it stayed. Stayed how it knew. And so it went. Treatment. Torment. But also acceptance. Into the "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day." And the tattoo. That makes it easy to tell who you're dealing with. They even invited Henio to a radio show. Yes. In 2136, they still had radio. Why not. Radio's cool. And Henio talked. About the tattoo. About the community. About how he sees more now. That he finally understands. That he's enlightened. That life has meaning. That it should be respected. But he didn't notice that shortening one's life probably isn't the most respectful thing to do. That's how it is. People know what's right, but do the opposite. They speak of good and march into bad. Thinking the bad isn't so bad. That it's fine just the way it is. But it wasn't fine for Henio. It was upside-down. And it weighed on him. Before dying, he decided to confess. That he sinned with the cancer. That it violated "thou shalt not kill." That it was all pointless. That he regretted it. But the priest was imaginary. He confessed to a hallucination. A ghost. The real priest was late. Missed his chance at last rites and absolution. When he arrived, Henio was already gone. Just a lifeless shell left. And that's how the story ended. Another member of the "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day." Supposedly, he felt the value of life, but paid the ultimate price for it. Hell.

### eleventh image

Sofocles. That's what they called him. And they gave him hell. People. He was rejected. Disregarded. "Fetch this, help with that, clean up." Nothing important. Nothing meaningful. People shoved the darkest or the most meaningless tasks onto Sofocles. Maybe it was his life stance. His indecisiveness. His withdrawal. Or maybe it was simply his fate. To endure some form of torment here on Earth. Or a test. Those two don't necessarily cancel each other out. Right. So Sofocles decided to relieve himself. With cancer. He figured that would earn him respect. People with cancer are respected, after all. "Then they'll respect me too," he thought. So he went to a clinic. Got all the necessary tests done. Qualified. Implant scheduled in two months. Alright then. Time to gather the money. He took a job harvesting yogurts. The kind they later add fruit to. Or sometimes not even that. The work was light. Yogurts weren't heavy. And he could sneak a bite here and there. No crouching, no kneeling. Yogurts just sat there asking to be picked and dropped into a basket. Easy money. And he did it. Got the full amount together. So, the operation. Cancer implanted. Peripheral or whatever it was called. What matters is it hurt. It made itself known. It was gaining momentum. And as the cancer sped up, Sofocles slowed down. Welcomed with a free tattoo and official entry into the "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day." But where was the respect? Sofocles looked for it everywhere. Couldn't find it. Under a stone. Under a fiberboard plank. Nowhere. That damn respect was nowhere to be found. People didn't respect him any more than they used to. Still laughed at him. Pointed fingers. Said he got suckered into the cancer trend. That he was even dumber than they thought. Maybe they were right. Maybe it was a downfall. Either way, he was fading. The cancer pressed on. Treatment didn't do much. Besides, he didn't have money for it. Yogurt season was over. Now all he could do was rack up debt. And every syringe cost money. Every bandage. Every last bit. The treatment didn't last long though. And it didn't work. His funeral wasn't covered either. The church had to pitch in. A collection. A few donation boxes, other stuff. Back in the day they'd have tossed him in a river. Burned or not. But in 2136, that's illegal. He had to be buried. And burial costs. So there he lies. Buried. And Sofocles, oh, how clever he thought he was. Thought cancer would earn him respect. All he got was hollow laughter. From fate. From circumstance. From the community.

## Wizerunek dwunasty

Sprzączek, that's what they called him. He heard about cancer cultivation from a friend. Because a friend of a friend had it implanted and was thrilled. Even wrote thank-you letters, supposedly, to the cancer growers. Said he regretted not getting two. What a riot that would've been. Two tumors are better than one. But back to Sprzączek. He heard it and tucked it away. That's how it goes sometimes. You hear something, don't react much, and the idea starts to live inside you. It sprouts. And eventually blooms in full force. And you dive in. Just like Sprzączek did. Because who's going to stop him? Exactly. The state doesn't. And if only there were laws... But in 2136, we live in the age of freedom. The state bans almost nothing. Doesn't control. Do what you want. At your own risk. There are still a few who want the old days back. When abortion or drugs were illegal. But they're a dying breed. Bible-thumpers or diehard followers of other faiths. Not many left. But they exist. Just not around Sprzączek. He always surrounded himself with modern folk. The free thinkers. Sometimes even Masons. Because, again, who's to say no? Times change, Masons remain. Though they don't seem too keen on the "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day." Maybe it's a bit much for them. Not my place to judge. Anyway, there's Sprzączek. And his new job. He landed a gig repossessing old ladies' property. It pays. And he needs the money. Badly. Not for rent. For cancer. Naturally. So he grinds. Whether honestly or not, the cash comes in. Debt collection pays commission. The more you squeeze, the more you earn. Or at least a cut. Fine. So be it. Let the old ladies suffer, they had the nerve to get old, thought Sprzączek, and kept collecting. After a few months, he'd scraped enough together. Off to the clinic. Tests. Everything by the book. And then: cancer. Cancer of the gray matter. Because who said gray cells can't get cancer? They can. And according to Sprzączek, they must. And now they did. The cancer growers, qualified professionals, doctors, you could say, implanted it. And he was off. But brain cancer isn't a joke. His gray cells weren't too sharp to begin with. And now, riddled with cancer? They went completely haywire. A day after the implant, they convinced Sprzączek that the best way to understand the meaning of life was to lose it. They told him to jump off a bridge. And the fool did. Believed two cancer-infected gray cells. Not that he had more. But even those two were one too many. And that was that. Nothing left to tattoo. You don't tattoo corpses. The "Enlightened by the Beauty of the Day" received the news with mild distaste. You're supposed to enjoy the day, at least for a moment. Not take advice from a pair of malfunctioning neurons. But that's life. No other way around it. Welcome to the year 2136. Or maybe it's time to say goodbye to it? Who's to say.

## stainless

The year 2136 comes to a close. A new one begins. January 1st. And an Angel who finally bothers to descend to Earth. He's had enough. Of everything going on. Of this mad, unforgettable year. Of how wildly it all spun out. So he decides to intervene. Calls a press conference and says: "You've completely lost your fucking minds! With these cancers. Who's ever heard of such a thing? Choosing death in order to feel reborn? Opting to cut your life short to experience renewal? It's absurd. No one in heaven's ever heard a bigger load of crap. But all it takes is a step down to Earth, and there it is. In full swing. A goddamn trend. Give it a rest already. Get your heads together. If you're searching for spiritual renewal, go to church. Or a synagogue. Don't like that religion? Pick another. But pick one. And be devout. Religion holds renewal. Fresh blood and elevation. Not this nonsense. Not this life-cutting bullshit. This teetering on the edge. Death isn't a motivator, it's dread. The fear of being alone. Of crossing over. Don't go down that road. Throw your sprouting tumors in the trash. Stop implanting them in people. Come to your senses. So you're not remembered in the afterlife as fools. As those too afraid to live. Who chose death instead. Exactly. I won't be coming again. Do what you want." Someone watching the TV mutters, "Who's ever seen an Angel trying to chase clout through a press conference? Meddling in our affairs. We look good with cancer. And religion? Just superstition. That Angel's probably a plant. Paid off. Bribed. But cancer growers? Certified. With diplomas. Besides, people can't be wrong. So many have chosen to implant cancer. That has to mean something. That has to give something. A sense of renewal. And religion? Just a gust of wind. Always in the way. In cancer, there is freedom. In humanity, there is hope. Not in some winged freaks."

And instead of sacred wisdom, all that's left is godless stupidity.

Exactly.

But why?

Because humanity is a fool through and through.

**apostrophes  
of the case**

## prologue

What does it mean to be an accident? Exactly. Sometimes a child finds out they were unplanned, that they came into the world by accident. But is that really an accident? Probably not entirely. Here, we speak of true accidents. Flesh and bone. This is what this reflection is about. This meditation. This story. Because it's a story of a certain accident. And another. And yet another. Because it's never just one. They come in bulk. One after the other. They meet us. Ask how we're doing. And how we respond, that's another matter. Our path. One way or another. Sometimes the accidents we encounter are obstacles. Sometimes, a kind of help. Or so we tell ourselves. That's what we call them. Good, or bad. We like that split. That labeling. That something is good, or bad. Useful, or damaging. Damning. Self-proclaimed. Words are just words. They don't always carry the full meaning. And meaning is what this story is about. What's between the words. And maybe that's how it is with accidents. They never play the lead. They linger on the side. In between. Because we prefer what's planned. That's what we choose. And the accidents? They appear and vanish. I think they might feel underappreciated. We don't pour love into them. Not enough. We don't feed them with flattery or gratitude. Or any words, really. We don't want to talk to them. Because we think they're just accidents. Nothing major. We don't appreciate accidents. That's how it is. A bit like a certain kind of people. But not by birth. By our choice. We've got this species. This category. That we don't really value. Accidents. That's right. Who understands them, we think. And I believe we don't even try. We don't want to. We're big, and accidents are small. Nothing important. Clearly. And so it goes. This story. The story of accidents, written here. Whether it helps or not. Who cares? At least, no one should. Because why would they.



## case 1

A certain case wandered the world in search of a human. It leaned toward science. It was science. It fed on it. This was a case of encouragement, an invitation to deepen one's knowledge. Or to gain it from scratch. Depends on who's looking. The mechanism is the same either way. It functions identically. And someone initially interested showed up. A human, who else. But upon hearing that it involved actual work, he bailed. After a while, another one appeared. Also human. He observed the case, gave it some thought, then decided that he wouldn't meet anyone worthwhile that way. It was all solo learning. No group work. No flirting. No chance to pinch a rear, perky or not. So he bailed too. And then came a third. This one claimed to know everything already. And if you know it all, why bother with more!? Exactly. So this case went unused. Unsold. Unhugged. People don't seem to have much affection for cases. I don't know why. Neither does the case. But irritated now, it stops a local vagrant and says, "Sir of the lower stratum. Open your eyes. Let your pupils breathe. Let them find meaning in this drudgery. Let them prove to themselves they still matter. I offer you learning. Knowledge. Entertainment. Growth. Depending on your disposition and how you choose to use it. Everything beautiful. Sugar-coated. If only you understand, believe, and apply." The vagrant grabbed the case and made it sit on the cup in his place. Then he went off to enjoy some cheap wine. And the case collected 2.50 and fell asleep on a gifted piece of cardboard.

## case 2

A certain case was wandering aimlessly. Or maybe it was the goal that was trying to find it. Either way, this one had to do with children. It was a case of conceiving offspring. And it pondered. And it tried. In every possible way. A refined lady stopped beside it at one point, examining it briefly. But no. She decided it didn't match her current aesthetic. Later came a group of high school kids. Technically adults. But their logic was childlike. They only asked the case if it had any smokes. Even one. Just something to light up. Then came a third person. A wealthy man. The case caught him by surprise, but he quickly grabbed a broom and chased it off as far as he could. And so the case drifted, sad and dejected. Until it crossed paths with a certain vagrant. And the case said to him: "Dear conductor of the jobless crowd. Grand printer of post-alcoholic philosophies. Make use of me properly. Even a rape would do, if kept in good taste. If only basic decorum were observed." The homeless man replied, "And who's supposed to be eating whom here?" The case clarified, "It's about seizing opportunity. A chance. A possibility." The vagrant: "Well then, here's a squeegee. Go clean windshields in the parking lot. At least I won't have to look at you." The case went. But he searched for the parking lot for the next forty years. You don't need a desert. Cities are enough. Definitely. Oh yes.

### case 3

Because cases walk among people. And this one walked too. A case of offering help. Of extending it. Of doing something. Precisely. It showed up here and there. First, to a young man. But the boy said he was too young for opportunities like that. After some time, it showed itself to an old man. But the old man said he was too old for such endeavors. So the case appeared before a sick person. And the sick person replied, "I don't even know how to help myself," and also turned the case down. Exactly. So then, onto the vagrant. The case stood before the vagrant and said: "Dear gatherer. Each day you collect bottles, cigarette butts, and other gems left behind by the hurried man. And now, here I am. An opportunity. A case. Not just any case. Perhaps in me you'll find solace. Fulfillment. A chance to see what you're made of. Because sometimes it's good to test our limits." To that, the vagrant replied: "Then let's test what you can handle. I've got half a bottle of unfinished wine here. It's yours. But you've got to drink it in one go. All of it. One breath." So the case drank it. And blacked out. There was no one around to help him. He woke up the next morning, head pounding. Weak and weary. That's how it is. And that's how it must be. Allegedly. Or so says the urban legend. No point asking who creates them. Maybe they're born like cases. Or maybe they die like them. That's just the nature of things. Around things. For things. Doesn't deny it.

#### case 4

Because cases walk among people. And they call. And they ask. Like this one, the case of cracking a nut. Go on, crack it. Make use of it. But no. No takers. Like the first person the case approached, a leper. It presented itself from every angle, but the leper gave it a kick in the ass. He'd had enough. Of looking, and understanding. And he kicked so hard his hand fell off. Next came a cripple. And again, the case showed itself. But nothing. The man couldn't care less. Didn't want the nut. Maybe he was full. Maybe he'd just eaten two kilos of walnuts. Who knows. The third was mute. And that's where it ended, mute. He fought all cases. So he fought this one too. But lost to himself. Because every fight ends that way. And so it goes. And so it went. Then, a vagrant wandered by. And the case, with elegance, spoke: "O brave conqueror! Mountain that weeps. Wind that blows. Have mercy on the one who longs for uplift. For guidance to the peak. For reward at the summit. This is your moment. Stirred into the now. Help yourself!" And the vagrant replied: "I stepped in some shit. Mud or worse. Clean my shoes, will you? Since you're a case, you might as well make yourself useful by accident." And so the case did as it was asked. Remaining, yet again, uncracked. Indeed.

## case 5

There was once a case standing in line, waiting to be used. But it never got its turn. So it went off to find people on its own. It was the case of kindling fire. It offered warmth to the first person it met, but they said they preferred the cold. It moved on. The second person it met was offered light, but they said they liked darkness better. Then a third person came by, and it offered them a sense of safety. But the third replied they were into risk and challenge. No one was interested in this case. Over and over again. So the case, disheartened, went for a walk. On this walk, it came upon a vagrant, just as the man was about to end his life, standing on a bridge, ready to jump. But here was this guy. So the case, in a grand tone, said: "Dear savior. You are one who knows the city. Who knows life. Now know me. Cleanse what was, with warmth and calm. Heat what is, with a gentle mood." And the vagrant answered: "Here's some paint. Go and use it. Red and white war stripes. Today I'm begging outside the stadium. Our team's playing. I'll get more with national colors." The case painted a flag on the vagrant's face and sank into the ground. Couldn't be dug up. Still can't. Or drained.

## case 6

That's how it is. Just like with this particular case, the case of removing a door. It tried everything. Advertised itself in every possible way. Just to be of use to someone. Just to matter. The first person said that doors are there for protection. They didn't want to take theirs down. The second person said the door looked good. They'd paid a lot for it. And the third person said their door matched their lipstick color. And like lipstick, it wasn't meant for just anyone to kiss. The case couldn't understand that metaphor. Who the hell kisses a door, anyway? Right. After a while, a vagrant appeared. The case asked if he could spare a tenner. "Boss," of course. The case had something stashed away for a rainy day, this seemed rainy enough, so it gave it to him. And then said: "Oh great beggar. There is no one bolder when it comes to pulling money from a poor case's pocket. No one less aware of the greatness before them. I am a case. You could gain greatly. You could dethrone kings. Rise above all. If only you carry out a door." The vagrant thought for a bit. Then went to a furniture store. Stole a door. Sold it for two bottles of vodka. Told the case to stand lookout. It wasn't the kind of door the case had in mind, but what's done is done. The vagrant grinned and thanked the case. "Today we drink on you! Wild ideas or not, you're still good for something." And that's how it went.

## case 7

That's the thing with cases, they either make sense, or they don't. Either you go to war with them, or bury them in your backyard. This case was special. It was a case of escalation. Good or bad? That's not the point. It's easy to confuse good with evil. Maybe evil is just indecision. And people struggled with that. The first person said fire hurt their eyes. The second said it interfered with their hearing. And the third looked up "escalation" in a dictionary. Didn't find it. But then a vagrant showed up. He found it. The case. Held onto it for a moment. Then tossed it in a dumpster. Said you couldn't eat it or sell it, so what's the point? That's how it is. But even from the trash, the case had something to say. It fired up one last time. "Oh great conqueror of the streets, why did you cast me aside? Why did you do everything backward? Seek wisdom. Escalate the matter. The intentions. The accumulation. Use the time you have. Fulfill the hopes placed in you." But the vagrant was gone. Already drinking cheap wine. No one was there. Nothing came, nothing left. And no bones to scatter, so nothing to walk away from. And so it was. Flat on its back.

## case 8

And this case, where was it hiding? Right, there was this one that decided it would hide itself. Figured it had a better chance of being found that way. People don't notice what's right in front of them. They couldn't care less. But something hidden? That's a different story. That sparks curiosity and desire. Exactly, desire. That's what cases need. Without desire, there's no use, no processing, no digestion. And this case wanted to be digested. It was a case of stripping lettuce. That's right. Nothing more, nothing less. The first soul to find it said lettuce was peasant food and walked away. Then came a second soul who claimed lettuce gave her gas. And the third one, she started haggling, demanded to be paid to take advantage of the case. Such will, such half-hearted desire. And then came the curse. Naturally. Along with a vagrant. And the case said to him: "Use me well. Prove that my life has meaning. That I can be fulfilled. Rise to the heights of creativity. Show that not every flight has to nosedive." Hearing that, the vagrant smiled, grabbed the case, and wiped his ass with it. After all, there had been something about lettuce. No one said it had to be food. And besides, the moment demanded it. And in that moment, the case realized, cases walk all over cases. Damn it!



## case 9

For the case that's shaped just right, and the elevator out of sight, and the things that ought to be, on the steppe or near the sea. And here it is, a new temptation, luring in its bold flirtation. And the call, from balcony blown, and the trees like rules full-grown. Yes, indeed. A balcony's demise, a case appears with watchful eyes. It seeks and seeks and finds three souls, all lined up like bowling goals. First one says, "I've no real need. A balcony? No use, indeed." The second frowns, "It's out of taste. Such space just takes up precious space." The third one hums a little song, and twirls away, not staying long. And so it was, in this parade, this rhyme of rules the world has made. A whispered dream, a flake of sound, this gossip floating all around. And the vagrant comes to play his part, our rogue, our hero, street-born heart. And the balcony, too, begins to speak, with turtles trailing cheek to cheek. The case, it stammers, starts to plead, "Please take me up, fulfill this need! No time for fear, no time to pause, be bold and live outside the laws! Intention counts, forget the shame, don't treat this like a guessing game. From dusty steppes, to Eastern lands, this may just fall into your hands." The homeless man, with missing teeth, starts to chase the turtles beneath. He grabs the case and cooks it slow, then makes the case itself stir the dough. Turtle soup, the final dish, sold with flair, and quite delish. A case once lost, now paid its debt, with dinner served and all things set.

## case 10

For the dodges, for the fall, and the case that breaks through all. Assumptions lie like windswept cries, stairs exposed to empty skies. And the case, a bleak surrender, no one here will be its defender. Twists and turns on flimsy ground, what was planned now spins around. The first one crumbles, says with dread: "That tuna catch will leave me dead." The second quakes, he cannot stay, he's terrified of tuna prey. The third, a glutton full of cheer, sees tuna as a lucky year. For this case speaks with no disguise: the tuna catch, a grand surprise. And then appears our cloaked-out friend, a vagrant with a smile to lend. He asks the case, "How do you fare?" The case looks up, gasps for air. "A conversation calms the night, I'm not afraid, I'll be alright. It all aligns, there's charm in chase, such noble fish, a life's embrace. Let us form a firm alliance, find the joy in ocean science. To swing like bottles tossed by fate, and spill their jokes on empty plates." The vagabond, now leaning strong, declares, "Here's where you now belong. Join the tribe of pavement-born, we'll hold you close though you look worn. You'll learn the flavor of the street, a salty life that's not so sweet." The case, with hopes now set adrift, expects no miracle, no gift. Just rumors left, and something fractured, the dream of purpose long enraptured. This street, it's madness in disguise, it takes your soul, your sense, your ties. It costs you more than mere survival, yet here you learn what's truly vital. Wind beats down on rag and bone, the homeless roll through every zone. Stalls are tipped by gusts surreal, dragged along by something real. Standards high or freedom loose, both twist inside this street-bound noose. And in the end, what still remains? The case gets tossed into the chains of some forgotten recognition, once born of spark, now superstition.

## case 11

He's exploding, what a fall, and imploding through it all. Every waiting expectation, for the case, a small sensation. And what's left of what just was, for this case, it gained applause. A little bridge, a liberation, like a flirt on short vacation. This case sought meaning's revelation, longing for some elevation. To let these people now unwind, not waste their hours in their minds. Assumptions framed like marshy flats, meanings offered just for laughs. The first man said, "What holy notion, no thanks, I skip that kind of potion." Not for him, no sacred chase, this case found no resting place. Then the second, with a flare, claimed divine weight might be there. But not for him, he's full of spite, his mind sewn wrong, too taut, too tight. All his tales blow up like toast, a puffed-up ego at the most. Then one more soul, a hopeful trier, chasing meanings, but a liar. Spinning cards, distorting story, this case ends bound in superstition's glory. Then appeared the clumsy hand of a vagrant in the land. Grabs the case without a plea, no chatter, just sincerity. The case rejoices, it's been seen, not glorified, but not demeaned. "Oh noble vagrant, I declare, I offer choice, you've much to spare. Potential paths, as yet unknown, within this case, the seeds are sown. Grace ahead, now show your flair, don't trip on flaws, you're nearly there. Stay steadfast through what comes about, this meaning might just let you out." But the vagrant's got a scheme, sends the case to sell a dream. Puts it under neon lights, earns his profit through the nights. "Other girls just can't compete, you, dear case, will sell the heat." And so the case, now quite deflated, slumped and broken, over-rated. What a job, what a disgrace, a sense once proud, now out of place. Gossip thick and tongues are lashing, rumors whip like lashes thrashing. "Such a case!" they all decry, "Once divine, now sold to lie." The end was clear, the end was earned, a promo price for what once burned. The joy of madness, zeal now thinned, a case concluded, as fate had pinned.

## case 12

An apostrophe in motion, a multiplying notion. A case all geared for battle now, with grand ambitions to avow. Once it grabs, it won't let go, fed by fat men in the know. And their conquest, just one kind: to conquer all and leave none behind. Their finery unending glows, their bumps and bruises barely show. Like emperors they boast and talk, while the case says, "Leave your wife and walk." And so it waits for someone fast, a man of action who won't be last. A case becoming cancer's guise, dressed in growth and new disguise. But the man won't eat such meat, he's wearing faith like Sunday's sheet. So to the priest the case now pleads, as if salvation met his needs. But the priest just stretches palm for cash, "whatever you wish," then makes a dash. He slams the door and storms away, and the case goes mad that day. And then comes number three in line, out hunting ice cream, killing time. A young Ukrainian, high-class sort, who offers services as sport. But she won't chase this case's dream, she scoffs at "growth" and self-esteem. She's a pro, she's not amused, she sees the trap and stays unmoved. So the case, still full of fire, turns to a hobo with desire. And he delivers half a speech, then rants with words too wide to reach. As if the bits he's cobbled in were made from what she'd wear as skin. Then the case begins to preach, the madness flowing, well in reach: "Take me in, you'll find your grace. Even demons have a place. Rebirth waits with no resistance, choose me now, and find existence. Know the loss you won't regret, know your mind is not quite set. In the crowd, this spell will shine, I'm the task that's yours and mine. Be a man and take the cancer. Stop pretending leaves give answers. Don't line up for false elation, this is my true invocation." And the hobo now replies, scratching his scalp, rolling his eyes: "Cut my hair and trim my claws, instead of spitting this wild applause. I need to look like I've got cash, to pass inspection in a flash." So goes the method for that day, a special plan in vagrant's way. To hustle hairless and well-trimmed, while the case grows dark and dimmed. That's how life then shuffles past, in quiet awe that doesn't last. The hobo struts through alley's din, his case now shaggy, wearing thin. It's all chaos, ever braver, cloaked in rumor, dressed in labor. Peering through to whom it lands, that's the way it takes command. Some release it, some just gorge, a sudden riot they can't forge. With livers bold and bile so dense, this is freedom's odd pretense. Professional floods of insight swell, one shared mania from that well. Until all days are rightly cursed, and someone's gnawing on a banana first. A delicate weaving, smooth and slack, so ends this herd of cases in a pack.

## closure

Apostrophes begin to gather, and the case splits wide and rather. Watching others drift and tumble, seeing innocence start to crumble. Seeing how the cases fall, how they offer hands and all. It wants no more of what's deluded, pain-bound and convoluted. It yearns for something else instead, this case seeks what lies ahead. Inventing meetings, big and small, even mayor's office calls. Events are held, and customs thrive, the case joins in, just to survive. And now it's got a fresh idea: to work at Mac, flipping pitas. That's its plan, in all its lack, this case, now drowning in the cracks. Fast-food duties, swift and bland, behind the counter, fries in hand. It seems to function all too well, there's even queues, so hard to quell. People chewing, what to say? The case just slumps and fades away. Served up greasy, wrapped and rotten, hope discarded, joy forgotten. Awaited like a guilty prayer, another fix in stagnant air. For the case that feeds this grind, with food that clogs the thoughts and mind. Words mean nothing, only fat, illusions wide, and that is that. What do people think they see? Swans in a pond of misery. Cooling slowly, aimless routes, the brothel buzz of mental doubts. A speech now bubbles to the top, this poor case can't seem to stop: "Mighty people, pose and flaunt, for the case, pretend you want. In this slow and passive dying, born of chance and daily sighing. Think of taxes yet to come, of fats defended, bellies numb. So you get what you desire, choices shaped by sheer satire. And the ticket won't be cheap, you'll keep serving, in too deep." But almost none could understand, few could take their lives in hand. They kept munching, unaware, waiting for the next affair. Such is fate when driven blindly, not quite new, but still unkindly. What's the goal in all this choosing? Ask yourself, what are you losing? What's been granted, what's forsaken? What remains now, once awakened? What's the verdict of your will? What's the silence left to fill? And as the conscience lingers, aching, another buzzer's set to waking, for the next round of fat to fry, always ready, never shy.



## List of images:

*Cover illustration:* Illustration generated with the assistance of artificial intelligence

*Final image:* Marsin, [i.](#)



### **Marsin**

born December 2, 1986 – present

What might occur, when one helps oneself for sure. Author of books that move the soul. Sometimes written in rhyme, sometimes not at all. But can we survive, without the rhymed kind? Marsin's books are available for free online. You can find them at: [wilusz.org](http://wilusz.org) Under the cycles section. There is also an "in English" tab.

Everything might unfold, when we look into the soul, out in the cold. The court belongs to the Lord, and the story will be explored. You can read two beautiful spiritual guides by Marsin: "lectures. the mystical Path" and "letters. a journey into the Self." A great addition to these works is a set of parables under the title "tales with Meaning". In English, Marsin also published a poetry collection about Love: "the centipede they called Love" and four debut short stories gathered into one work titled "with a touch of Irony". It's worth it, the pages are still wet

with fresh paint. And so it shall remain, the  
human task, clear and plain.

Contact Marsin:  
[szulif@gmail.com](mailto:szulif@gmail.com)