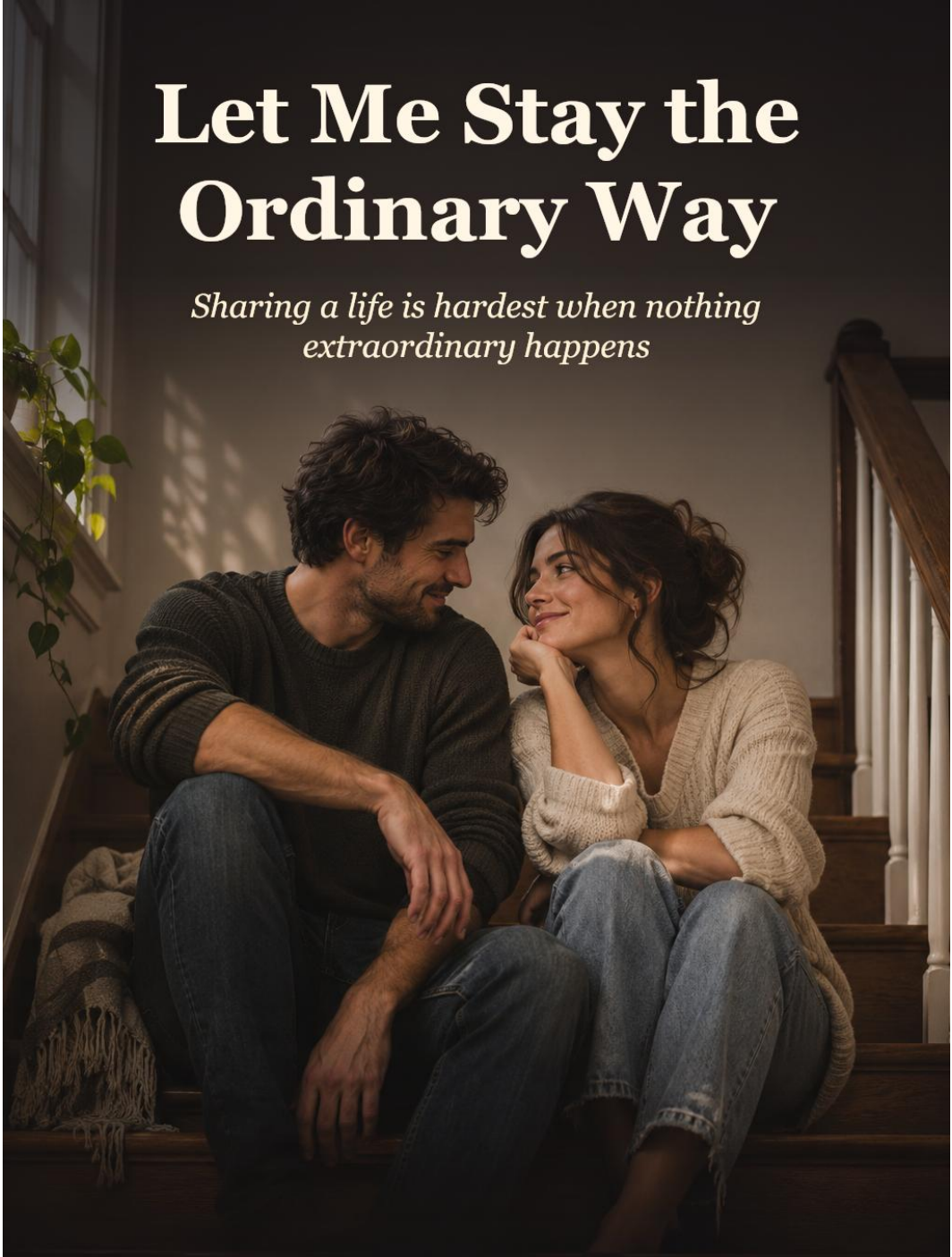
Let Me Stay the Ordinary Way

Sharing a life is hardest when nothing extraordinary happens



Laura Bellini

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I saw when I walked into the community cultural centre was a sheet of paper taped to the auditorium door. Someone had written on it in thick black marker:

"PLEASE DO NOT MOVE THE CHAIRS. THE FLOOR WON'T TAKE IT."

I stood in front of the notice with a folder tucked under my arm, a phone pressed to my ear, and a plan that had seemed absolutely perfect just an hour earlier.

"Of course we'll make it," I said into the phone. "Six weeks is plenty of time. I just need confirmation of the funding and a signed contract with the contractor."

Silence settled at the other end of the line. I knew that particular kind of silence. It usually meant someone was about to say something unpleasant and was trying to find a way of making sure the responsibility wouldn't fall on them.

"Nadia, remember that the money is for the event, not a complete renovation," Marta, my coordinator at the foundation, finally said.

"I'm not planning a complete renovation."

I looked at the crack running down the wall, from the windowsill to the skirting board that was coming away from the plaster.

"More of a refresh."

"With you, a refresh always turns into a gala."

"Because people deserve more than plastic chairs and a thermos of tea."

"Sometimes people just want a cup of tea."

I smiled, although she couldn't see me.

"That's why there'll be tea. Served in porcelain."

I hung up before she could protest. I was thirty-seven, had twelve years of experience producing cultural events, and possessed a dangerous tendency to treat every limitation as an invitation to negotiate. It was how I'd managed to organise a concert in an unheated barn, persuade a famous actress to perform without a fee, and transform a neglected little square into a place half the voivodeship was talking about for an entire week.

What I couldn't do was calmly accept that something might be good enough without my involvement.

Naturally, that last detail never appeared on my professional CV.

The cultural centre stood on the edge of a small town in Podlasie, between a grocery shop and a road leading out towards the fields. It had wooden steps, a roof that had seen several decades, and a smell that couldn't possibly be mistaken for anything else: dust, old floorboards, oil-based paint, and tea that had been left to brew too long. October light streamed through the tall windows, illuminating the empty hall that, in six weeks, I intended to fill with local residents, music, and conversation.

I already knew what the event would be called.

"A Place for Us."

I had a poster design, a preliminary programme, and a list of people I wanted to invite. Only one essential thing was missing: a hall that was actually safe to use.

I nudged a loose piece of linoleum with my shoe and took out my phone to photograph it. The frame captured the floor, a streak of sunlight, and someone's work boots.

"You'd be better off not photographing that," a voice said.

I looked up.

The man standing on the other side of the hall was holding a small metal angle bracket. He wore a dark sweater with the sleeves rolled up and trousers marked with sawdust. I noticed the first streaks of grey in his hair and the sort of calm expression that, on people who worked with their hands, could be more convincing than the finest suit.

He didn't look like someone waiting for my instructions.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because if you want to show what needs fixing, you won't be able to see it from there."

He crouched beside one of the floorboards and pressed his thumb against it. The wood gave way with a dry crack.

"Here's the problem. Not where the flooring is peeling up."

I moved closer.

"Are you the contractor?"

"Przemysław Dąb."

He straightened and held out his hand. His handshake was firm, but he made no attempt to prove his strength with it.

"Nadia Ryś. I'm in charge of the project."

"I know."

"How?"

He nodded towards the documents spread across the windowsill.

"Your name is on every sheet."

I gave a short laugh.

"I like to have everything under control."

"I noticed."

It didn't sound like a compliment. Curiously enough, it didn't sound like a criticism either.

Przemysław returned to examining the floor, and I watched him for a little longer than politeness required. He looked to be somewhere in his mid-forties. He moved without hurry, as though he had nothing to prove to anyone. There was something irritating about that, particularly to a woman who had already answered seventeen phone calls that morning and revised her schedule three times.

"I need a cost estimate by tomorrow," I announced.

"By tomorrow, I can tell you what's urgent."

"And the rest?"

"Once I've checked the structure."

"We have six weeks."

"The floor doesn't know that."

For a moment, we regarded each other in silence.

"Are you always this optimistic?"

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"When it comes to wood? Always."

I wanted to come back with something equally cutting, but then I noticed an old table standing against the wall. Its surface was scratched, and one leg was propped up with a

piece of brick. On the tabletop lay a wooden playing piece, worn smooth by hundreds of hands.

"What's that?"

Przemysław followed my gaze.

"A playing piece. Years ago, some older gentlemen used to meet here on Thursdays. Then other people started coming too. Someone would bring cake, someone else a pack of cards. Apparently, they'd sometimes sit here until late in the evening."

"And they stopped?"

"The hall started leaking. Then other problems came along."

He picked up the wooden piece and put it back in exactly the same spot.

"It would be a shame to make this place beautiful if, afterwards, nobody had anywhere to sit again."

That sentence stopped me more effectively than any of his earlier remarks about the floor.

I glanced at my documents. Everything was there: the opening ceremony plan, proposed performances, media partnerships, and promotional strategy. What I didn't have was an answer to the question of who would come here on an ordinary Thursday, once the lights had gone out and the photographers had gone home.

"The event is supposed to bring people in," I said.

"I believe it will. But then you have to give them a reason to stay."

I didn't answer immediately.

From the corridor came the sound of a door closing. Outside the window, the wind stirred the branches of an old lime tree. Przemysław bent down to collect his tools, and I suddenly felt a strange urge to keep our conversation from ending.

"Do you have any ideas?" I asked.

He straightened.

"For the hall?"

"For making people want to come back."

He studied me for a moment, as though deciding whether I was asking seriously.

"First, you have to ask them what they need."

"I've prepared a questionnaire."

"But have you actually talked to anyone?"

My fingers tightened around the folder.

"I've only been here two hours."

"That's a good start."

He said it gently. Without superiority, without triumph. And that was precisely why I felt unexpectedly exposed.

I usually knew how to make a good first impression. I knew when to raise my voice, when to smile, and how to convince someone that the idea they'd been worried about only moments earlier was exactly what they needed. Around Przemysław, none of those instincts seemed particularly useful.

My phone vibrated. A message from Marta appeared on the screen:

"Remember the promotional materials. The sponsor wants to see people at work."

Instinctively, I raised my phone.

"May I take your photograph? For the project documentation."

Przemysław looked at the phone first, then at me.

"Not today."

I lowered my hand.

"All right."

He nodded, as though that response were the most natural thing in the world, and returned to measuring the floorboards.

What surprised me was how badly I wanted to know what lay behind his refusal. Not because I needed the photograph. I wanted to understand a man who could say no without hesitation to a woman accustomed to finding a way around everything.

When I went out onto the wooden steps a few minutes later, I saw that Przemysław had appeared in the doorway holding my folder.

"You left your plans."

He handed me the documents but didn't immediately step away. We stood close enough for me to catch the faint scent of fresh wood clinging to his sweater.

"Thank you."

"Ms Ryś?"

"Yes?"

"Come back tomorrow without your camera, please."

I raised my eyebrows.

"And what should I bring instead?"

He glanced towards the empty hall.

"Time."

He closed the door before I could answer.

I remained on the steps, the cool air against my face and the folder pressed to my chest. My calendar was filled with appointments scheduled down to the nearest fifteen minutes. I couldn't remember the last time someone had asked me for my time without promising anything in return.

I looked at the closed door.

Could I come back tomorrow, not to organise something, but simply to stay with someone and truly be present?

Chapter 1 - Conditions I Hadn't Anticipated

The following morning, I arrived at the cultural centre fifteen minutes before our agreed time, carrying a paper cup of coffee, my laptop, and a firm determination not to let anyone unsettle me this time.

I'd left my camera in the car.

It wasn't a particularly heroic gesture, but it had cost me more than I cared to admit. In my profession, documenting reality had become almost instinctive. When I saw beautiful light, I thought about taking a photograph. When someone said something moving, I remembered the sentence as a potential quotation for promotional materials. I could even turn chance encounters into stories that later helped secure funding for new projects.

That morning, however, I intended to listen first.

Przemysław was standing beside the open auditorium window, bent over a pencil sketch on a piece of cardboard. He wore a light grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up. When he heard my footsteps, he raised his head and glanced at my hands.

"No camera," he observed.

"But I have coffee and arguments."

"The arguments might come in handy. Please keep the coffee away from the wood."

I moved the cup onto the windowsill.

"Good morning to you too."

He smiled, quite openly this time.

"Good morning, Ms Ryś."

I didn't know why the way he said my name made it sound as though he was genuinely pleased I'd come. Perhaps because he wasn't trying to be excessively polite. He looked at me attentively, without hurry, then returned to his work as though he assumed I didn't need to remain the centre of his attention every second.

It was pleasant and unbearable at the same time.

I spread my documents across the table, whose wobbly leg was still resting on a brick.

"I've prepared a schedule. Week one: safety measures. Weeks two and three: repairs. Week four: painting and furnishings. Week five: rehearsals, arranging the space, promotion. Week six: opening."

Przemysław came over and studied the printout.

"And when do we find out what actually needs repairing?"

"In the first week."

"So your schedule assumes we'll discover exactly as many problems as we have time to solve?"

"It assumes we'll work efficiently."

"Wood doesn't work to a schedule."

"Neither do people, but I somehow manage to organise events."

He looked at me with what might have been amusement.

"That must be interesting."

"What?"

"Trying to organise everyone."

I suppressed a smile.

"Not everyone. Just the people who don't read my messages."

Przemysław leaned over the floor plan and marked three areas with a red pencil. He explained that the flooring needed to be inspected along the external wall, where moisture had been getting in for years. Some of the old floorboards might be worth keeping, but he wasn't prepared to promise that before removing part of the covering. One window didn't close properly, and the joists beneath the stage needed checking.

I listened while simultaneously trying to translate his words into money and days.

"How long will it take?"

"Depends on what we find."

"An approximate date?"

"An estimate will only be honest once I've inspected everything."

"Do you realise that sentence drives cultural producers to despair?"

"I'd rather have a producer in despair than a guest putting their foot through the floor."

I couldn't argue with that.

I showed him the visualisation the graphic designer had prepared. Pale walls, rows of chairs, a small stage, strings of delicate lights, and a large sign reading "A Place for Us" hanging above the entrance.

Przemysław examined the image, but his finger stopped on something else.

"Where will the tables go?"

"What tables?"

"For people to gather around. Cards, sewing, conversations, whatever they need the place for."

"We can bring them in when necessary."

"And where will you store them?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it again.

I hadn't anticipated that.

Przemysław took a tape measure from his pocket, extended it, and pointed towards a recess along the side wall.

"We could make folding tabletops. Benches too. The hall doesn't have to look like an auditorium all the time."

"But we need seating for a hundred people at the opening."

"And for the other three hundred days?"

I planted my hands on my hips.

"I'm not intending to leave an empty hall behind when the project ends."

"Then please let me design it so people will still need it afterwards."

I fell silent.

Not because I didn't have an answer. I had several, all reasonable and supported by experience. But I suddenly saw the difference between the way we thought. I imagined a hall full of people at one perfectly planned moment. He imagined it on an ordinary Tuesday, when three people might turn up and want to sit together at a single table.

"What are you proposing?" I asked.

"Two conditions."

"I'm listening."

"First, no work will be rushed at the expense of safety. Second, I won't install decorations that interfere with how people use the hall afterwards."

I raised my eyebrows.

"And if the sponsor insists on decorations?"

"Then the sponsor can take them down after the event."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Przemysław watched me for a moment, then smiled as well. It wasn't a broad, demonstrative smile, but a brief moment of relaxation that completely changed his face.

"You really don't like compromises," I said.

"I like good compromises."

"And who decides which ones are good?"

"We both can."

That final sentence sounded different from our earlier exchanges. It was an invitation, not a challenge.

Before I could answer, a woman in a navy-blue sweater entered the hall, carrying a shopping bag full of bread and a large thermos. She introduced herself as Helena Wysocka, the manager of the cultural centre. She greeted Przemysław with obvious warmth and shook my hand so energetically that I almost dropped my pen.

"I'm glad you've met," she said. "Because I haven't got the strength to keep explaining to everyone separately that this isn't just about a pretty opening ceremony."

I looked at her.

"Does everyone here think I only want to organise a pretty opening ceremony?"

Helena considered the question for a moment.

"No. But you do have an awful lot of photographs in your presentation."

Przemysław turned towards the window.

I was almost certain he was smiling.

We sat down beside the thermos, and Helena told us about the residents who had regularly gathered here before the hall closed. About Mrs Zofia, who taught children to crochet. About two retired teachers who used to organise chess evenings. About a group of women who wanted to arrange shared reading sessions but had nowhere to set out chairs.

I took notes. At first out of professional habit, then increasingly out of genuine curiosity.

"When was the last time a meeting like that took place here?" I asked.

"Almost two years ago," Helena answered. "First we closed part of the hall, then the whole thing. For a while, people kept asking when things would return to normal. Eventually, they stopped asking."

Przemysław looked at the wooden playing piece lying on the table.

"That's precisely why I don't want to do a half-hearted job," he said.

Helena nodded, and for a moment I felt uncomfortable. Not because anyone was accusing me of anything. It was simply the first time I'd felt the weight of this place in terms other than its budget.

After breakfast, we began the inspection. Przemysław showed me where I could stand safely while he lifted part of the old floor covering. He removed several boards, exposing darker timber beneath. The smell of damp mingled with dust, and I crouched beside him to get a better look at the structure.

"This joist needs replacing," he explained. "But the rest might still be usable."

"So it's not that bad?"

"I didn't say that."

"You can take away a person's hope with a single sentence."

"At least I don't sell false hope."

I looked at him from close up. He had a small scar near his left eyebrow and light-coloured eyes that didn't shy away from meeting mine. There was an old burn mark on his wrist. He noticed my interest but said nothing about it.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"You can hold the torch."

"I studied cultural management, and now I've been promoted to torch assistant."

"It's a position of responsibility. Please don't shine it in my eyes."

We worked in silence for a dozen or so minutes. There was something surprisingly enjoyable about it. I didn't have to keep a conversation going or prove that I was competent. All I had to do was follow simple instructions, observe, and ask questions whenever I didn't understand something.

When we finally stood up, Przemysław dusted off his hands and offered me a clean cloth.

"You've got dust on your cheek."

I instinctively rubbed my face.

"Now it's on the other side," he observed.

I sighed.

"Please don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing yet."

He reached towards me but stopped halfway.

"May I?"

For a second, I looked at his hand.

"Yes."

He gently wiped the streak of dust from my cheek with the edge of the cloth. It was a brief, entirely practical gesture. Even so, I noticed the warmth of his hand and how quickly he stepped back, restoring a polite distance between us.

He made no attempt to prolong the moment.

I, however, found myself thinking that I could have.

My phone rang before I could say anything sensible.

Marta.

I answered and walked a few steps away.

"I've got good news," she announced. "The sponsor has approved the preliminary amount. But they want promotional material showing the progress of the work. Preferably featuring the contractor. We could tell the story of the man bringing an old place back to life."

I looked at Przemysław. He was holding his tape measure against a doorframe, absorbed in his work.

"I'll have to discuss it with him," I replied.

"Of course. Just try to get him to agree. It's a fantastic story."

After the call ended, I stood still for a moment. I knew how easily I could persuade someone that a few photographs were no trouble at all. I also knew that Przemysław had already refused once.

I returned to the table.

"We have funding for the first stage," I said. "Subject to providing a detailed cost estimate."

"That's good news."

"There's also the matter of promotion. The sponsor would like to feature the person responsible for the renovation."

Przemysław slowly retracted his tape measure.

"No."

"I wasn't going to try to persuade you. I only wanted to explain the situation."

"In that case, you've explained it very clearly."

I studied him carefully.

"Do you not want to be photographed, or do you not want to be part of the project?"

"Those are two different things."

"I know. That's why I'm asking."

He put the tape measure down.

"I want to repair the hall. I don't want to appear in a story about how we're repairing it."

"Sometimes stories like that help raise money."

"I understand. But my face doesn't have to be one of them."

I didn't answer immediately.

He was calm, yet I heard a change in his voice. This wasn't simply an ordinary dislike of being photographed. He spoke as though he'd once had to explain something similar and had no intention of repeating that conversation.

"I'll respect that," I said.

Przemysław regarded me for a moment.

"Thank you."

I was surprised by how much pleasure those two simple words gave me.

That afternoon, I presented Helena with a revised concept for the hall. Fewer permanent rows of chairs, more movable elements, space for folding tables, and a small area that could be used independently of the stage. The manager listened with growing interest.

"That really could work," she said.

Przemysław was standing by the door.

"Provided we can find the money for the right materials."

"We'll find it," I replied.

He looked at me.

"This time, I believe you'll try."

I wasn't sure whether it was a compliment or a warning.

As I gathered my documents, he came closer.

"I'll be here earlier tomorrow. I want to check the remaining joists."

"I'll be here at eight."

"You don't have to be."

"I know."

For a moment, he looked at me as though that answer was the most interesting thing he'd heard all day.

"In that case, see you tomorrow, Nadia."

For the first time, he'd dropped the formal form of address.

I noticed immediately.

And just as immediately, I realised that I was looking forward to the next day for reasons that had very little to do with the renovation finally beginning to take sensible shape.

Chapter 2 - A Place at the Table

On the third day, I arrived at the cultural centre with two decisions I had no intention of changing. The first concerned the project: the hall would serve the residents long after the ceremonial opening. The second was more personal and considerably less sensible: I wanted to get to know Przemysław Dąb outside working hours.

I didn't yet know what I was going to do about that second decision.

The first, however, I intended to put into practice immediately.

Helena had prepared a small room at the back of the building where we could spread out our documents without the risk of covering them in dust. On the table stood an old electric kettle, three mismatched mugs, and a plate of shortbread biscuits. Through the window, we could see a garden where wet leaves covered a narrow path.

Przemysław brought the cost estimate.

It was precise, well organised, and left very little room for optimism.

"That much?" I asked, staring at the final figure.

"That's the cost of materials and labour. No decorations."

"And the decorations were the cheapest part."

"They usually are. Until you have to repair whatever they're hiding."

I sighed, but instead of launching into another argument, I opened the budget spreadsheet.

For the next hour, we went through every item. We gave up some furnishings that could wait. We agreed that the wooden benches would be made from material recovered during the renovation, provided its condition allowed it. Przemysław suggested a simpler solution for fitting out the recess, and I found funds for additional weatherproofing around the windows.

We worked surprisingly well together once we stopped treating every sentence as an invitation to a duel.

"Now we need to establish some ground rules," I said, sliding a blank sheet of paper towards him.

"I thought that was what we were doing."

"We're establishing costs. Rules are something else."

He settled more comfortably into his chair.

"I'm listening."

"We agree on all changes affecting the budget in advance. I'm responsible for funding and organisation, you're responsible for the technical work and safety. No making decisions behind each other's backs."

"Agreed. And no promising deadlines to sponsors without consulting me."

"I can promise them the date of the event."

"You can. But you can't promise that the floor will be ready sooner than the technical requirements allow."

I wrote down his point.

"Anything else?"

Przemysław hesitated.

"I'd like us not to speak to the residents only when we need them for the programme."

I looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"If we're preparing a place for people, we can't just ask them how they'd like it to look on opening day. We need to find out what they'll actually do here afterwards."

"That's exactly why I've changed the design."

"I know. And I appreciate it."

He said it calmly, without the slightest trace of irony. I felt an unexpected satisfaction, greater than I'd experienced after many professional compliments.

"In that case, I suggest a consultation meeting," I said.

Przemysław raised an eyebrow.

"With posters?"

"With tea."

"No microphone?"

"No microphone."

"We're beginning to understand each other."

I smiled.

"Don't get used to it too quickly."

Before he could answer, Helena entered the room. She brought news that several residents could come the following evening. I suggested an open meeting around a table, without a formal programme. Przemysław agreed to stay, provided the conversation didn't turn into a presentation of ideas we'd already decided on.

"And will you speak?" I asked.

"If someone asks about wood."

"And if they ask about something else?"