Only We Know Where to Turn

Not every connection needs a place on the map



Laura Bellini

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INTRO

The first time I got lost on a route I had drawn myself was on a Thursday at 9:17 in the morning.

It was not a detail I intended to include in my report to the publisher.

I stood at a fork in two forest tracks in the Beskid Sądecki Mountains, holding my phone in one hand and a paper map in the other, trying to convince myself that the problem lay with outdated satellite data. Ahead of me rose a hillside covered in beech trees. To the left, a path descended gently between the trunks. To the right, another disappeared around a bend that, according to my design, should not have existed at all.

Both paths looked well used. Neither was marked.

"Fantastic," I muttered.

Mist hung low over the valley. The damp air smelled of earth, wet leaves, and smoke drifting from distant houses. It was colder than the forecast had promised, and my wool sweater, purchased mainly because I liked its colour, had proved a poor defence against the November chill.

A blue dot blinked on my phone screen. According to the app, I was standing several metres away from the planned route. According to my own eyes, I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

I was thirty-one years old, had eight years of experience producing hiking maps, and harboured a professional dislike of people who insisted that all you had to do was keep walking.

Unfortunately, I had just run out of better ideas.

I took the right-hand path.

After a dozen or so steps, I spotted a man standing beside a wooden post. He wore a dark jacket, a thick grey sweater, and muddy hiking boots. He was tall, with short dark hair and a face on which several days' worth of stubble looked more like a deliberate choice than neglect.

He was studying my map from a few metres away.

"You won't get there that way," he said.

He hadn't asked where I was going. That irritated me immediately.

"And how do you know where I'm trying to get?"

"Because this track ends."

I looked past him.

"On my map, it carries on."

"Then your map has more ambitious plans than the track."

I should have ignored the comment. Instead, I folded the sheet and moved closer.

"Has the track been closed?"

"No. It simply doesn't lead where you think it does."

He spoke calmly, without a trace of condescension. His voice was deep and slightly rough, as though he'd drunk his morning coffee too hot or had spent most of his life talking outdoors.

"I'm a cartographer," I announced.

One corner of his mouth lifted almost imperceptibly.

"That explains a lot."

"What, exactly?"

"Why you trust a line more than your own boots."

I had a reply ready, but stopped myself at the last moment. The man wasn't looking down on me. If anything, he seemed genuinely curious about what I would do next.

That was considerably more unsettling.

"Kaja Soból," I introduced myself, holding out my hand. "I'm designing a new walking route for a guidebook to the Beskid Sądecki Mountains."

He took my hand. His fingers were cool, his skin roughened by working outdoors. His handshake was firm, but he made no attempt to hold on longer than the greeting required.

"Szczepan Roj. Guide."

I recognised the name immediately.

Szczepan Roj was on the list of regional collaborators the publisher had sent me. He was responsible for field consultations, safety assessments, and liaising with local residents. We were supposed to meet the following day in Piwniczna-Zdrój.

"You were supposed to be here tomorrow."

"And you were supposed to start with the western section."

I eyed him suspiciously.

"How do you know that?"

"I received the schedule."

"The schedule is only a guideline."

"I noticed."

There was amusement in his expression, but also something harder to define. Attentiveness. As though, rather than searching for a way to win the conversation, he was

trying to work out why it mattered so much to me to get my own way.

That was uncomfortable, because I already knew the answer.

After two years of preparing other people's projects, I had finally been given the opportunity to put my name on a guidebook of my own. Not as a subcontractor, not as the person correcting mistakes made by someone more important. My name would appear on the title page, and the route I had designed would become one of the publication's most significant features.

I didn't want to begin this collaboration by admitting that I couldn't find the right path.

Szczepan looked towards the fork.

"What do you want people to see?"

"A gentle, accessible route. Views, a few places to rest, and the option of walking a complete loop without having to retrace their steps."

"Sounds reasonable."

"Thank you."

"Until you draw it straight through someone's backyard."

I froze.

"I checked the route against all the available materials."

"I know. Which is why I'm suggesting we check it here as well."

He turned and pointed towards a narrow path between the beech trees. I hadn't noticed it before. It was little more than a faint strip of compacted earth, partly hidden beneath fallen leaves.

"A shortcut?" I asked.

"More like another way of finding the answer."

I didn't move immediately.

"Do you always speak in riddles?"

"Only when someone arrives with the answer already worked out."

I should have felt nothing but irritation. Instead, for the first time that morning, I genuinely wanted to smile.

I took out my phone to check the direction of the path, but Szczepan raised a hand.

"Please don't record this section just yet."

"Why?"

For a moment, he studied the trees.

"Because not everything that can be found should immediately end up in a guidebook."

I didn't like that statement. Especially coming from the man who was supposed to be helping me create a map.

"My job is to show people places worth visiting."

"And mine is to make sure they're still worth visiting after people have been there."

For a moment, we looked at each other without speaking.

I already knew he wasn't going to be an easy colleague. He wasn't the kind of person who signed off on everything just to keep the peace. Worse still, he possessed that particular kind of composure that could turn an ordinary exchange into a challenge.

I slipped my phone into my pocket.

"Can I see where this path leads without promising to leave it off the map?"

Szczepan looked at me differently then. More carefully, without his earlier amusement.

"Yes," he answered. "That's fair."

We set off between the trees.

The path was narrower than I had expected. Beech branches formed a canopy overhead, and mist seeped between the trunks like spilled milk. Szczepan walked ahead of me, but when the ground became steeper, he slowed down, allowing me to choose my own pace.

He didn't offer help I didn't need. He made no comments about my boots or my decisions. Only when we reached a slippery root did he stop and point out a safer way across.

"It's firmer on the left."

"I can see that."

"I know."

I smiled despite myself.

A few minutes later, the forest began to thin. Ahead of us lay a small clearing sheltered from the wind. An old wooden bench stood there, and beyond it the valley dropped away towards a cluster of houses whose rooftops barely emerged above the mist.

There was no information board, no rubbish bin, and no broad, well-trodden approach. Yet someone had been looking after the bench. Its planks appeared to have been replaced recently, and beside it a neatly stacked pile of firewood rested beneath a small shelter.

Someone had carved a tiny heart and two letters into one section of the backrest.

Szczepan stopped at the edge of the clearing.

"It's beautiful here," I said quietly.

He didn't answer straight away.

"Exactly."

I took out my camera. The light was perfect, soft and silvery, and the place had everything I had been searching for: peace, a view, and the feeling of discovering something extraordinary.

Through the viewfinder, I saw Szczepan.

He stood a few steps away, his hands tucked into his jacket pockets. He was looking at the clearing with a tenderness he made no attempt to hide. Suddenly, he was no longer merely a handsome, stubborn mountain guide. I saw a man for whom this small piece of land meant something deeply personal.

I lowered the camera before taking the picture.

"Szczepan?"

He turned his head.

"Yes?"

"Why don't you really want me to put this place on the map?"

He looked at the bench, then at me. There was more caution in his silence than there had been in our entire earlier conversation.

"Because sometimes a map doesn't show what matters most."

I moved closer until barely a step separated us. The scent of damp wool mingled with the cold air. He didn't move away, but left me free to decide how close I wanted to stand.

"And what if I can draw something you haven't seen yet?" I asked.

For a moment, he looked directly into my eyes.

"Then I'll have to learn to trust you."

I didn't know why those words sounded more intimate than a compliment. I only knew that, for the first time in a long while, someone else's opinion had begun to matter to me more than it should after less than an hour of acquaintance.

Szczepan turned his gaze towards the valley, giving me room to think.

And I looked at the unmarked path and thought that I could still choose my own direction.

The only question was whether I really wanted to go back alone.

Chapter 1 - The Line I Refused to Move

As we made our way down from the clearing, Szczepan made no attempt to convince me that I should remove it from my project. That was almost more irritating than his earlier remarks. I had expected arguments, warnings, and another helping of mountain wisdom about people who came from the city believing they knew everything. Instead, he guided me through the forest, pointed out slippery roots, and answered my questions about the gradient of the terrain. He behaved like a professional entrusted with a specific task. Only when I stole a glance at him did I notice the tension in his jaw.

I decided not to return to the subject until we had gathered more data.

My resolution lasted eleven minutes.

"You do realise I can't leave a blank spot in the guidebook simply because someone happens to like a particular place?" I asked, jumping across a small stream.

Szczepan stopped on the opposite bank.

"I didn't ask you to leave a blank spot."

"You asked me not to mark anything."

"For now."

"That's a rather convenient expression."

He extended his hand, pointing towards a stone where I could safely place my foot. I accepted the advice, but not his assistance. He made no comment.

"Kaja, I haven't seen your entire project yet. And you don't know the whole area. Perhaps we should first establish what we're dealing with?"

The way he said my name softened his words slightly. It didn't sound like an order or a patronising reprimand. It sounded more like an invitation to a conversation in which each of us was entitled to disagree with the other.

"All right," I replied. "But I want to know what your objections are before I make any changes."

"Fair enough."

"Do you use that phrase whenever you can't think of a better answer?"

"I use it when someone sets a reasonable condition."

"So not very often, then?"

He smiled.

"That's twice today already."

For the next half hour, we followed a section that my design described as an easy family walking route. In reality, it included two steep climbs, one badly eroded descent, and a stretch where rainwater ran directly down the middle of the path. I took photographs, recorded coordinates, and made notes. Szczepan didn't peer over my shoulder. Whenever he wanted to show me something, he waited until I had finished.

I was beginning to admire that patience.

We stopped for longer at an old culvert. Water had undermined the stones, and the makeshift wooden footbridge looked like the work of someone who had possessed more optimism than suitable building materials.

"Do local people really use this crossing?" I asked.

"They do. But they know what to expect."

"Tourists won't."

"Exactly."

I crouched down and examined the structure from the side. One of the planks was coming away from a crossbeam, and the support on the opposite bank had subsided by several centimetres.

"I'm not approving this section," I announced.

Szczepan nodded.

"I agree."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Just like that?"

"Would you prefer me to object for the sake of balance?"

"It would be consistent."

He laughed. It wasn't a loud laugh, but his face suddenly looked younger, more relaxed. I noticed a small crease beside his left eye and unexpectedly found myself wanting to discover how often it appeared.

I quickly returned to my notes.

"We could take the route higher, across the ridge," I said. "It would add about six hundred metres, but the gradient would be gentler."

"Provided you don't send people across a private meadow."

"There's a right of way."

"On the older maps."

I sighed.

"I'm beginning to get the impression that the entire Beskid Sądecki exists solely to make a fool of me."

"Not all of it. Some parts have other things to do."

I handed him my tablet with the map open.

"Then show me where people can walk."

He studied the screen for a moment. I stood beside him, close enough to see beads of moisture on his sleeve and a small scar crossing the knuckle of his right thumb. He smelled of forest, coffee, and something warm, perhaps cedarwood soap. I wondered whether I had always paid quite so much attention to my colleagues.

No. Absolutely not.

Szczepan pointed to a narrow strip of land.

"Here. An old farm track. It's still publicly accessible, although the entrance is overgrown."

"Are you certain?"

"We'll verify the route and the land status. I don't want us basing a decision solely on my memory."

Those words sounded better than any declaration of expertise could have.

I marked the alternative as provisional.

"So you admit technology can sometimes be useful."

"I never claimed otherwise."

"You simply have a personal grudge against my tablet."

"Not your tablet. Just your certainty that it's always right."

I closed the case.

"That certainty is what allows me to earn a living."

Szczepan grew serious.

"Then I understand why you guard it so fiercely."

I didn't answer. Not because I had run out of arguments, but because his observation had touched something I had never intended to reveal.

A former supervisor had once told me that I was excellent at improving other people's ideas but lacked the courage to defend my own. I had left that company six months later. Ever since, I had treated every project as proof that he had been wrong.

Szczepan couldn't possibly have known that. Yet the way he looked at me made me want to explain far more than was appropriate on the first day of our acquaintance.

We returned to our cars in the afternoon. The mist had lifted, revealing hillsides covered in late-autumn colours. My legs were pleasantly tired, but my mind was already assembling a list of corrections. Before leaving, I wanted to review the entire route and determine which sections required further verification.

Szczepan spread a paper map across the bonnet of his four-wheel-drive vehicle. He weighed down its corners with two stones and a thermos, then pointed to the middle section of the proposed loop.

"We have a problem here."

"I know. The culvert."

"Not just that."

He indicated an area that also included the clearing.

"If we establish a marked walking route through here, it will change the flow of visitors across the entire hillside."

"We're talking about a walking trail, not a motorway."

"I understand the difference."

"Then?"

"Then I'd like us to talk to the people who live there before approving the route."

I rested my hands on the bonnet.

"Public consultations aren't part of my contract."

"Contact with local residents is part of mine."

"That doesn't mean every homeowner gets to decide what goes into the guidebook."

"I'm not proposing a vote on your map."

"Then what are you proposing?"

"That you don't publish the precise course of this alternative until we've established who will be affected by the increased foot traffic."

I felt the familiar resistance rising inside me. The publisher expected a specific product, the schedule was tight, and part of my fee depended on delivering the material on time. I couldn't allow the project to turn into an endless series of discussions.

"I have four weeks to complete the fieldwork," I said. "I'm not going to wait months for some undefined approval."

"I'm not asking for months."

"And what if the residents say no?"

Szczepan was silent for a moment.

"Then we'll have to consider whether there's a solution that doesn't force them to bear the entire cost of our work."

"Our work?"

"We'll both be signing the field documentation."

I gave him a sharper look.

"That doesn't give you the right to block my project."

"It doesn't. But I can refuse to confirm that the route is safe and consistent with the actual conditions if I don't have sufficient grounds to do so."

He said it calmly. Without a threat, without raising his voice. That was precisely why I took his words seriously.

"Are you giving me an ultimatum?"

"I'm setting a condition for my own signature."

For several seconds, all I could hear was the sound of a car travelling along the road below the car park.

"You realise I could ask the publisher to appoint a different consultant?"

"Yes."

"And that doesn't worry you?"

He regarded me carefully.

"What worries me more is that we wouldn't be having this conversation."

I turned my head, pretending to study the map. He possessed an almost indecent ability to answer in a way that made a person lose the desire to continue arguing without actually feeling convinced.

I took out my phone and called Magda, the editor managing the project.

She answered on the third ring.

"Kaja? How's the fieldwork going?"

"More interesting than we expected. I have a proposal to revise one section, and I need to confirm how far we can move the deadline for final route approval."

"A major change?"

"Potentially significant. I don't want to approve something we haven't properly checked."

Magda sighed.

"Layout starts in five weeks. If you can give me the finalised route within three, we'll manage. But no later."

"Understood."

I ended the call and looked at Szczepan.

"Three weeks. That's how long we have for verification and discussions. No endless consultations."

"Enough to get started."

"And no keeping information from me."

His expression went still for a moment.

"Agreed."

"Szczepan, I'm serious."

"So am I."

I extended my hand across the map.

"Then we're working together. But decisions about the guidebook's content are mine. You assess the terrain, the safety issues, and present the residents' position. If we disagree, we document the differences."

He shook my hand.

"And if it turns out you're right?"

"You'll have to admit it."

"Sounds painful."

"You'll get used to it."

He didn't release my hand immediately, although he made no attempt to hold it either. I was the one who hesitated for a fraction of a second before withdrawing my fingers. He noticed, I was almost certain of it, but he had enough tact not to comment.

Eventually, I pulled my hand away and began folding the map.

"Nine tomorrow?" I asked.

"Nine. By the bridge in Rytro. I'll show you an alternative that isn't in your materials."

"Another mysterious path?"

"This time, one I'd actually like to see in the guidebook."

That surprised me.

"So you're not opposed to tourism?"

"I never was."

"You have a very complicated way of showing your support."

"And you have a very straightforward way of assuming someone is against you."

I opened my mouth, but couldn't find an answer that wouldn't sound childish.

Szczepan removed the stones from the map and folded it carefully.

"I want this guidebook to be good, Kaja. I really do. Not because my name will appear in the documentation. Simply because people are going to use what we produce."

There was no professional politeness in his voice. He sounded like someone who had already witnessed the consequences of other people's seemingly minor decisions.

"It matters to me too," I replied more quietly.

"I know."

"You don't."

He hesitated.

"You're right. Not yet."

That one word brought me unexpected relief. He didn't pretend to understand my motivations. He didn't try to solve problems in two sentences that I hadn't even told him about.

That evening, I spread my materials across the table in my rented apartment in Piwniczna-Zdrój. Rain fell outside the window, and a mug of tea that had long since gone cold stood on the windowsill. Three versions of the proposed route were open on my monitor. Each solved one problem while creating another.

I worked for almost two hours before realising that I kept returning to the section containing the clearing.

I had no photograph of it.

I remembered the moment when I had lowered my camera. At the time, it had been a spontaneous decision prompted by something in Szczepan's face. Now I wondered whether I had made a professional mistake. Photographic documentation should be complete regardless of personal feelings.

I opened the orthophoto map. Near the clearing were several small buildings reached by a narrow road. On an older cartographic layer, the surrounding area looked

different. I marked the discrepancies, but couldn't determine which of them mattered.

My phone vibrated.

An unknown number.

"The ridge might be slippery tomorrow. Bring better gloves than you had today. Szczepan."

I read the message twice.

"My gloves were perfectly adequate."

His response arrived almost immediately.

"For holding your phone. Not for gripping wet handrails."

I smiled at the screen.

"Do you always assess your colleagues' equipment?"

"Only the ones who try to negotiate with gravity."

I leaned back in my chair.

"See you at nine."

For a moment, three dots indicated that he was typing a reply. Then they disappeared. Finally, the words appeared:

"See you tomorrow, Kaja. And don't work until midnight."

I looked at the clock. It was 11:48 p.m.

He had no right to know what my evening looked like. He was probably just guessing. Even so, I felt noticed in a way that neither professional praise nor another signed contract had ever quite managed.

I shut down my computer, but before going to bed, I returned once more to the paper map.

A red line ran across its centre, a line I had spent weeks drawing. I knew every bend and every proposed resting place. I was proud of it.

Now, after a single day in the field, I had to admit that not all the answers were where I had placed them.

What unsettled me most, however, was something else.

I didn't know whether I cared more about defending my own project or about seeing the man again tomorrow who had so effectively challenged my certainty.

Chapter 2 - Places We Return To

The following morning, I arrived in Rytro fifteen minutes before our agreed meeting time. I had new gloves, a thermos of coffee, and a firm resolution to behave like a sensible professional for the entire day.

The last of those proved the most difficult.

Szczepan was already waiting by the bridge. He was leaning against his car, talking on the phone and gesturing sparingly with his free hand. When he saw me, he nodded but didn't interrupt the conversation. Only a moment later did I hear his final sentence.

"I'll come by this afternoon. If anything needs moving, I'll take care of it before dark."

He slipped his phone into his pocket and approached me.

"Good morning, Ms Cartographer."

"Good morning, Mr Mountain Guide."

He glanced at my gloves.

"I see progress."

"I bought them of my own free will."

"Of course."

"And I'm not expecting a comment."

"Then I'll refrain from praising you."

He was in an excellent mood. I envied him that ease, because I had slept barely more than five hours. Before falling asleep, I had checked three more route alternatives, read my contract twice, and wondered once whether it

would be appropriate to send Szczepan a message about something unrelated to work.

Fortunately, I hadn't.

"We'll start with the path leading up to the ridge," he announced. "Then we'll descend along an older section of track. I'd like you to compare the two alternatives."

"And I'd like us to establish some rules before we start arguing over the map again."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Have you drawn up a set of regulations?"

"Almost."

I took out my notebook. He didn't laugh, although I could see he wanted to.

"First, every proposed change must have a justification. Second, we don't remove a section simply because someone doesn't like it. Third, we share information relevant to the project immediately."

"Sounds good."

"And fourth, if we want to discuss personal matters, we do it outside our official arrangements."

Now he really smiled.

"That last one is particularly interesting."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't realise you were planning to discuss personal matters."

Heat crept beneath the collar of my jacket.

"I'm not planning to. I want to avoid misunderstandings."

"I understand."

"Szczepan."

"Kaja."

He looked at me so calmly that I began to suspect he understood perfectly well what I was trying to conceal.

"Can we start walking now?" I asked.

"We can."

The new alternative turned out to be considerably better than I had expected. It followed a gentle slope, crossed a small clearing, and joined an existing marked hiking trail. It didn't offer the spectacular views that guidebook publishers loved, but it provided something equally valuable: a natural walking rhythm.

Szczepan allowed me to lead. When we reached a junction, he didn't automatically point out the correct direction. He waited until I had checked the route, assessed the terrain, and made my decision. Only then did he offer his observations.

After an hour, I began to understand that he was doing it deliberately.

"You don't have to test me," I said.

He stopped.

"I'm not testing you."

"Yesterday, you knew the answer to every question. Today, you're suddenly pretending you don't know which way to go."

"Because today we're checking whether someone unfamiliar with the area will be able to find their way."

I looked at him in surprise.

"So I'm your test subject?"