Chapter 9: When everyone else passes us by

Grandma prepared her bed in the bedroom for us, while she settled onto the sofa. We lay there just like the old days, all of us together. I began to hum—as quietly and gently as I could:

I guess it’s time to go to sleep,
Nothing more will happen today,
I guess we can lay down now,
To dream the dreams for tomorrow…

Mom used to sing that to each of us, one by one, when we were little. Now, I wanted to be the one responsible for my brothers. As much as I knew how.

Ignacy grabbed my hand and sighed, falling into a peaceful sleep. On one hand, he was already twelve and had shown over the last twenty-four hours what he was capable of; on the other, he would always be my little brother. I remembered all those evenings when

Mom would come into my room. I’d already be in bed, talking her ear off, and he would always come running in then. He’d jump on the bed, trying to get our attention, and a moment later, he’d lie down next to me and grab my hand, just like today. Grandma Krysia used to say, “Yes, yes, Julcia, you’re like a second mother to him.” I liked hearing that.

We woke up very early. Only Grandma had packed a small backpack; we had nothing. We stopped by the "Ponik" bank to withdraw all her savings and drove off quickly. We figured if we were being followed, it was better to leave a trail in Wrocław than somewhere out on the road. By 6:15 AM, we reached the bypass and headed toward Zgorzelec. We used Grandma Tereska’s old navigation—a black, rectangular screen with a wire that refreshed at a snail's pace, but it worked! Before we left, Marmar, in a way only he knew, had uploaded the latest maps, and we managed to set a route toward Trento.

"Grandma, why did you actually go back to Widawa yesterday?" Gogo asked. "Mom and Dad told you to run, and you said we have to trust them. Couldn't you have stayed at Grandma Krysia’s?"

"I could have. Krysia was very worried about you and your parents. She said I could stay as long as I wanted. Actually, she was begging me to stay because she didn't know what to do and didn't want to be alone. Grandpa Wiesiu, as you know, is skiing on a

glacier right now. But I left my cell phone at Widawa and just wanted to go back to grab it. Of course, it sounds unreasonable, but I also had a dream that night... the same one from the night I moved to Wrocław after the war. I saw my shed, and above it, in the clouds, the outline of three cannons. I’ve told you about it before; I don't know what it means, but I felt I had to go back, even if just for a moment. And as you can see, there was a reason... I found you."

"I don't know what we would’ve done without you. Thank you for going back," Gogo said tenderly, pointing his finger at a gas station.

Grandma pulled over, but she didn't drive straight to the pump. Instead, she parked off to the side in a parking spot.

"Marcel, hand me my backpack," she said, almost with delight, and a moment later, she fished out of it: a checkered towel and a plastic bag full of hard-boiled eggs! We all started laughing, and for a moment, it felt like our annual road trip to summer vacation. It was a ritual—Grandma always boiled eggs for the road and had that blue-and-white, heavily starched towel. She pulled out a salt shaker, and we began our little feast. For a second, everything was normal again. We ate in silence, but everyone was smiling to themselves.

"Alright kids, enough of the good stuff. Let’s go fuel up. I’ll pump, and you boys go inside and pay, okay? Here’s 200 zlotys; it’ll cover the whole tank." Grandma handed the cash to Marcel and waved them off.

Tereska was fueling the car, while I sat inside looking toward the highway. Cars passed by, people walked past our Tico chatting about everyday things, and children were simply playing on a small playground by the station. For them, it was a day like any other, but I felt as if my life up until now... had just vanished, and I was running from I-didn't-even-know-who yet. It was a completely foreign feeling—like being in a movie.

Knock, knock! Someone tapped on the window, and I instantly snapped back to reality. It was impossible. Standing at the door were Kasia and Stasiu, grinning at me as if nothing had happened. I quickly rolled down the window.

"What are you guys doing here?" I blurted out with a smile to our friends from the Karłowice kindergarten days.

"What are you doing here in such a funny little car?" Kasia and Stasiu were giggling away. "Is Marcel here?"

"He went inside the station to pay, and we... we’re going on winter break... a late break," I replied, frantically wondering what I could

say and what to keep secret. "And you?"

"We're going to Bolesła—"

At that moment, we heard a crash and the sound of shattering glass. Everyone turned toward the station; every single window had blown out. Marcel ran out through the main doors, followed by Gogo. A second later, staggering and armed, the Eterna Corp agents appeared.

"Run! Quickly!" Grandma shouted, sliding behind the wheel.

As the boys started to get in, I noticed the agents regaining their senses and beginning to aim at us. Kasia and Stasiu stood there, completely terrified, caught between us and the agents.

"Save them!" I screamed to Ignacy.

Time stopped. Everything slowed down, but Gogo went into combat mode—every part of him was vibrating as if he were about to explode. In a fraction of a second, he lunged toward Kasia and Stasiu, grabbed them around their waists, and leaped fifteen meters away. People at the station dropped to the ground in panic.

"Twenty thousand hertz, tunnel-focused on the agents!" Marmar yelled.

I opened my mouth and let out a hollow sound toward the black-clad soldiers. The air between us began to shimmer and ripple, and they were hit as if by a wave, flying several meters back.

"Get in, now!" I called out, but Ignacy let go of our friends and ran in the opposite direction. He sprinted to the agents, snatched their weapons, and with all his might, swung and hurled them deep into the forest—the rifles flew high above the trees.

"Grandma, go!" Ignacy jumped into the Tico, and we sped off onto the A4 highway.

"We don't stand a chance. There are more of them nearby. They’re ahead of us on both the north and south sides of the road—I can see them. Plus, we're in a slow Tico, and the stunned agents from the station will be after us any second," Marmar analyzed. But at that moment, I could only focus on my youngest brother, who was pulsing and radiating energy. He was like a high-powered transmitter, and we had just drawn the attention of the entire Eterna Corp.

"Julka, calm him down! Now, at all costs! And Grandma, turn back," Marcel commanded instantly, pointing to the nearest exit.

I began to sing, as tenderly as I could—Gogo’s breathing slowed, and his skin stopped throbbing.

"Stop here," Marcel added after a few hundred meters. "We need to switch cars fast."

Marcel hopped out and ran toward a black Toyota RAV4.

/ Song of Andrzej Poniedzielski - Chyba już można iść spać - was cited in this chapter /
