

Those Who Love the World and Their Animals Madly: A Travelogue

KEVIN HOLOWACK

AND SO I CAME TO LIVE, FOR A SHORT TIME, at this farm some fifty kilometres north of Katowice, Poland. I was told in advance which platform at the Katowice train station I should wait at, and which train to get on at which time, and at which stop I should disembark, so I felt like I had an invisible hand on my jacket, tugging me forward all morning.

It was early, and it was February, and everyone on the train had this dull pink sunrise light spilling over them.

When I got off I found myself in the company of a few birch trees, a stray horse going *krumph*, and a ragged blue car. J__ stepped out of the vehicle and said, “I hope you like isolated places.”

The fog was coming in and wouldn’t disappear for weeks.

J__ lived in a village whose name I wrote down and then forgot because there was no sign and I never heard it mentioned again.

On the drive in, J__ explained his life story in brief: he was born in Pakistan and lived most of his life in England. He had his master’s degree in forestry and taught high school biology on the Isle of Wight for fifteen years. Then he left everything to come to Poland where he sells vegetables in the summertime and Christmas trees in the wintertime, reads two novels a week, studies Polish, and gives free English lessons to all the village children.

“I have two houses,” he said, “one for me and one for volunteers and books, so you have a whole house to yourself if you don’t mind sleeping in a library.”

I had volunteered, in fact, to alphabetize his library. I would also chop firewood. For these things, I would be repaid with room and board.

“Also, I have two dogs—do you mind animals? No? Good. And my father is visiting from Pakistan at the moment. You don’t mind, do you? No? Good. He has some trouble walking, so I might ask you to help get him to the dinner table and things. Oh, and he can be a hateful person, so don’t bother listening to what he says.”

The library was upstairs; it contained thousands of books, including a smattering of texts on world religions and everything written by Leo Tolstoy in several translations. I fell asleep the first night on a makeshift cot, flipping through Tolstoy’s *A Confession* for no particular reason.

Apparently one of J__’s dogs, a massive German Shepherd named Leila, ate the leg of the other dog, a small Pomeranian named Lily. I learned this as we were eating cereal the first morning in the kitchen of the main house. His father was there, too.

J__ explained that he was just on his way to the airport because he was going to visit his sister in England. The dogs were left in the yard, and there was a friend of his coming later that day to feed them. But just as J__ was pulling out of the driveway he heard the most blood-curdling sound.

“That’s disgusting, J__,” the father interjected mid-story and looked at his son disdainfully. His eyes were the colour of nicotine stains.

“It *was* disgusting,” J__ went on brightly. “There was blood everywhere, and Leila was tossing the leg around like a rubber toy.”

“Not while I’m eating, J__.”

“So I called the neighbour over to take care of the situation. It was terrible, but I couldn’t miss my flight! But don’t worry, these days the dogs are good friends.”

We finished our cereal promptly.

“Now put some bacon on for me, J__,” the father said. Then he looked at me. “Do you want some bacon, then, hmm?”



I told him I was a vegetarian.
“Suit yourself.”

The library contained one heavily marked forty-year-old edition of Thoreau’s *Walden*. It was wedged somewhere between a primer on Theosophy and a prose version of the Ramayana. I pulled some books onto the carpet to arrange them by author’s last name. Then J__ called from downstairs to ask me to fetch his father for lunch.

The father walked with a cane and had to link his left arm tightly with my right. For some reason he started telling me that cannabis grows wild everywhere in Pakistan and that when he was a young man he used to mock Americans for being so crazy about something that he could just find in the park. “You know, the reason I really hate America is—”

“Fresh chapatis!” J__ announced as we reached the table.

J__ and his father rarely spoke to each other directly, and when they did so it was agitatedly and in Urdu. One day after supper I was sitting with J__ and feeding scraps to Lily.

“I don’t believe that man,” he said. “Today he told me Polish is a stupid language. Why is Polish a stupid language? Just because he doesn’t understand it? He’s so privileged, and he’s been making these terrible comments ever since I’ve known him. He was a rich businessman in Pakistan,

and you wouldn’t believe the things I’ve seen him say to the poor people there. I’ve seen him spit on begging kids on the street. That’s why I left that bloody country as soon as I could.”

I learned later that J__ bought this farm off the inheritance from his father’s side of the family.

J__ and his father had business in Katowice one day, so I was left alone on the farm. J__ told me not to open the door if any neighbours come by because usually they’ll try to evangelize you.

“People here are incredibly Catholic,” he explained. “Religion is stupid. Sometimes when the neighbours come by I grab a Bible and show them Deuteronomy 2:33. That’s where God tells Moses to go into some city and kill absolutely *everyone* inside. How could they tell me *I’m* immoral for not believing in *that*? People here are incredibly Catholic, but at least Christmas tree sales are good.”

J__ and his father didn’t return home until late in the evening. I later found out that his father was bankrupt and only came to visit his son because he had some sort of bone disease and the treatment was cheaper in Poland than in Pakistan.

Ironically, J__ wouldn’t let me work on the Sabbath, so I spent Sundays walking through the countryside with Lily. On the first day that it snowed, she had a hard time lifting ▶

her three legs through the powder. Once, when we arrived back, the massive Leila sprang up from behind the corner of the house and nearly trampled Lily and me into the frozen mud. She had all the restraint of derailed train.

“She’s a sweetie,” the father said, who was watching through an open window. He laughed a cold, wheezy laugh: *heb, heb*.

It was also my job to make sure the dogs were fed, and that Leila was properly chained up when she wasn’t exercising. This was the most difficult task I had to do for J__. I did it by tossing a stone by Lily’s doghouse, which would drive her into a frenzy. While she was fixated on the object, I’d run up and fasten the chain to her collar.

Then I’d see those eyes on me. Big wet eyes like a baby.

There is nothing as simultaneously triumphant and heart-wrenching as chaining up a giant that could rip your leg off if she were in the right mood.

J__ told me once that his dream was to live “off the grid,” which means that he would produce all or most of his own food and use no electricity. In fact, he owned a large machine called a straw burner; every morning it would swallow four bales of hay and a match and generate one day’s worth of hot water.

J__ told me he likes to live simply, but of course he’s going to enjoy a hot shower every day.

He was also interested in converting part of his garden into a mini ecosystem for some type of endangered frog.

“My father thinks this is stupid,” he said. “And the government sure as hell isn’t going to fund me for this. But if no one takes it upon themselves to preserve the planet, then what?”

At some point after I learned about J__’s appreciation of hot water, I asked him about the forty-year-old marked-up edition of *Walden*.

“I don’t know, it was years ago,” he replied and shrugged. At which point he assured me that Tolstoy was the greatest writer of all time. “But *War and Peace* is drivel—*Anna Karenina*, now *that’s* the best story about love and hate ever written.”

All unhappy families are unhappy in their own way.

J__ was very economical with his words and his love.

So I finished with the library. A few days after J__ told me *Anna Karenina* is the greatest story of love and hate ever written, I left the farm. I was dropped off in Katowice and then boarded some ugly bus. The bus was late and full of young people going weekendening in Budapest.

And so I came to live, for a short time, in a village some twenty kilometres north of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. It was a warm and pleasant June at that point. I arrived later than expected and had no phone to call S__ to ask where his property was. I knew almost no Bulgarian, but I accosted a couple locals by the village pub and asked them where the French tomato farmer lived, using words like *français* and *domati*.

One bearded man said, “*Da, da,*” so I followed him up the main road, which turned into a dirt road. At some point he picked up a stick, gave it to me, and then pointed to a stray dog, shaking his head.

I gathered that people here are afraid of dogs, which was odd because this particular dog was the size of a rabbit and was so emaciated that it looked like its ribs were about to poke through its skin.

The man brought me to S__’s farm, where I was greeted warmly and then immediately driven back down to the pub at the bottom of the road to have a round.

“I used to be a big-shot investment banker,” S__ told me in his thick French accent and took a long swig of his fifth beer. “Lived in Paris, London, Prague, Sofia. But now I say fuck all that. I’ve been here for ten years now. Why Bulgaria? Because this is the closest you can get to anarchy in Europe, that’s why. If this doesn’t work out I’m going to Siberia, I don’t care.”

S__ had an organic farm where he grew tomatoes, various leafy vegetables, and *courgettes*. But he was most renowned for his chili peppers, an imported variety of Trinidad scorpion, which could literally kill someone with a high enough dosage. S__ put them in every meal.

He also explained he was running out of money, because last year’s harvest was poor, because Bulgarians don’t see the importance of organic food, and because he spent his savings on three houses and three properties, which he called *maison un*, *maison deux*, and *maison trois*.

I lived in *maison deux*, which was infested with spiders and had a balcony overlooking a greenhouse and a cherry tree.

This particular village was jokingly referred to as a new British colony because of the number of British expats who moved there to buy cheap property after Bulgaria’s induction into the European Union.

The Brits I met mostly enjoyed tea and long discussions about the weather. They were stark foil to S__, who talked every day about how 9/11 was masterminded by the American government, how the moon landing was a hoax, and how the Freemasons control the world.

S__ was also an isolated vegan anarchist which, as one grey-haired British lady told me, was a “dangerous game to be playing.” This woman bought most of her vegetables from S__, but was also incessantly worried about him. “Everybody’s got their quirks,” she said, “but in S__’s case, it made him a scared and lonely man. Anarchy’s not my game, either.”

There were many jobs to be done at S__’s farm, including staking the tomatoes, weeding the gardens, and spreading manure on all the freshly planted seedlings. Sometimes S__ would bring a stereo onto the patio and blast the Ramones to keep spirits up and to “fuck with the man,” who was probably a Freemason.

One day, as I was pulling nettles out of a kale patch, S__ came up and started musing on the beauty of the birds, which could faintly be heard over “Judy is a Punk.”

After a brief conversation about wildlife, he unexpectedly said, “Nature is my God,” and opened his arms wide to Nature. A short while later he asked, “Have you ever read *Walden*?”

We ceased our work that day in order to drink beer and talk about Thoreau. Apparently *Walden* was one of S__’s favourites, but someone had borrowed his copy and never returned it.

S__ had three dogs, and he referred to them as his children. The most loyal of them was a stray that he’d taken in and named Sputnik, after the Soviet satellite. Sputnik was a village celebrity and was renowned for his promiscuity. He discovered a hole in the fence and would occasionally disappear for days at a time to be fruitful and multiply.

S__ took in one of Sputnik’s many children and named him Gagarin, after the Soviet cosmonaut and the first person to ever travel into outer space. Gagarin was just teething, and according to S__ he was “a perfect baby, just starting his education.” It was an effort to make sure he didn’t eat any Trinidad scorpions.

The third dog lived alone in a small chain-link compound at *maison deux* because he couldn’t live with other dogs. Apparently he had been brutalized by his former owner, who S__ got back at by naming the dog after the former owner’s father: Nestor.

Nestor survived on white bread and nothing else. In fact, all the village dogs survived on bread because it was the cheapest available food.

S__ was a vegan because he believed it cured his cancer.

“Five years ago, my bladder was fucked. I had to stop farming, and I was in this fucking hospital in Sofia where the doctors told me I had maybe six months to live if I didn’t get treatment immediately. They told me that I might survive, but I’d spend the rest of my life with a bag attached to my dick. And you know what I did? I looked them in the eye and said *fuck that*. I declined the treatment and came back to the farm.”

Apparently he spent a week visiting various traditional healers scattered around the Balkan Mountains before giving up and doing research into veganism.

“The next week I was a vegan, drinking fucking cabbage juice and eating lentils every day. Over the next couple of months, the cancer went away. Now stronger and happier than ever.”

His smile was contagious.

“What?” he said, “No, it was no *miracle*. It’s fucking science.”

It wasn’t until a month after my arrival that S__ told me to be careful when I’m walking around bushes because this part of Bulgaria is home to Europe’s most dangerous snake, the horned viper. Every year there’s a case of someone in this or the surrounding villages being bitten, sometimes killed.

One evening we were drunk in the pub with a few Brits.

“These days I’m not just lookin’ for a shag,” one man said.

“Yes! We older guys need *partners*,” S__ affirmed. “Someone to share in the beauties of life. Someone who looks at the tomatoes with me and says, ‘Those are fucking amazing tomatoes.’ That’s true love.”

“You oughta give up the farm then, S__,” the man joked. “You ain’t gonna find a lady of your type when you’re covered in shit all the time.”

The bartender had the interesting position of being the only unmarried woman in the village. She was in her early twenties. S__, catching her eye, suddenly burst out a flawless rendition of a Rimbaud poem in French, which he had memorized. It went on for about two minutes. When S__ realized she was no longer paying attention, he took a long swig of his beer and began again with, “*Beat on the brat, beat on the brat, beat on the brat with a baseball bat, oh yeah!*”

Some of the Brits joined in.

A few of the locals, mostly chain-smoking farmers who understood neither French nor English, just smirked. They were used to S__ by now. ►

S__ claimed to be an exceptional cook, and he was. In the evenings, he would sometimes deliver vegan soup and fresh bread to me at *maison deux*. I would eat these things alone on the balcony, surrounded by the sounds of rustling leaves of the cherry tree, and the occasional bells from a herd of goats being led back from the river by their shepherd. This was also the first time I'd ever seen fireflies.

Sometimes one of S__'s cats would join me and bury itself in the nook of my arm. I never learned its name.

One day this cat was bitten by a horned viper and paralyzed. S__ laid the body gently in the car and drove to another town, to see the only vet between here and Plovdiv. The vet's clinic was closed.

A few days after the nameless cat was bitten by a horned viper, S__ drove me to the motorway so I could hitchhike to the Black Sea.

In the car, he told me that he was planning to write a book so that he had something to rely on if his farm went bust. It would be called Primate Diet and would explain how veganism cured his cancer. "It would be fun to read though," he said. "People love that shit."

I promised to help him, if he ever finished, to translate the book from his "shitty English" into "good English."

As I hopped out of the car he said, "You'll come back someday? You're always welcome."

Loyal Sputnik and his son Gagarin were in the car with us, too. They smelled like dog, intense dog. I imagined S__ going home that night, getting drunk, preparing a kale salad, pulling Gagarin close to his side, and whispering into the animal's ear: *mon garçon, mon....*

And so I came to live, for a short time, in a squatter's community outside of Šibenik, Croatia. I had fallen in love with someone (maybe), a girl from London, and we ended up there because we wanted to spend September far away from any noisy city, someplace where we could live for free. Her name was T__.

T__ and I were told to take the #4 bus to the last stop, far out in some industrial zone near a slate mining operation, and then walk east, up a gravel trail, and into the forest.

The place was run by M__, a Croatian man who had claimed these woods—which were technically government land—and set up a cabin, an old motorhome with Yugoslavian plates still on it, a dozen tents, and a few gardens of tomatoes, herbs, and peppers.

M__ was an artist, actually a sculptor of some fame, and had large public installations in Dubrovnik and Zagreb. Maybe that's why the government didn't evict him.

His sculptures were always made of stone and usually

interactive, like enormous stone chairs or enormous stone hammers for cracking coconuts. The forest was full of these things.

When we arrived, M__ was in a clearing, chiselling a boulder into the shape of a face. We asked if we were in the right place.

"No," he said. He meant *yes*. He was always enigmatic like that.

M__ lived in his cabin, and everyone else lived in small tents because the motorhome was infested with ants. There was a young South African couple living in the forest, as well as a man from Israel who had just finished his military service, and a retired American woman who was now a nomadic portrait artist.

The work was extremely minimal: clearing out bushes to make room for more tents, chopping wood for the fire, and tending the gardens. M__ wouldn't allow us to work more than four hours a day. "Work is not a rabbit," he said. "It will not run away."

It rained almost every day.

There was no electricity and everyone bathed in captured rainwater. We cooked all our meals over a fire and spent long, long nights chatting as the darkness drew in around us.

The presence of the Israeli man brought a flood of memories to M__, who explained that when he was younger he'd ran away from Croatia to spend five years living in Israel on a Kibbutz, where he fell in love with an Irish girl before they both became disillusioned with the authorities of the place. She went home to Dublin, and M__ was determined to find her there and propose. He hitchhiked all the way from Israel to Ireland but could never track down the love of his life because she had "one of those confusing Irish names" that he could never remember. In despair, M__ decided to hitchhike back to Croatia, but was robbed in Germany of all his money and his passport. He thus began living as a homeless foreigner, at which point he taught himself German and found odd jobs as an artist and a line cook.

"And that," he concluded, "is why I am so good at chopping vegetables."

One day a stray kitten wandered into the woods, and was taken in by the South African couple who named it Spock. Spock had a skin condition and required some sort of cream to be applied to it twice a day. The South Africans went into Šibenik to buy the proper stuff, and became the primary caregivers of the kitten. Over time, the animal grew on

everyone, even M__, who learned a trick where the cat stands on his shoulder like a parrot.

When the South Africans left, M__ continued looking after Spock and probably does so to this day.

On one day of relatively little rain, M__ asked the volunteers to dig a new garden. Having spent the past few days hiding from the torrents in an ant-infested motorhome, everyone jumped at the opportunity.

The cloud-covered sun cast a cool white light on us as we dug.

At one point T__ turned to me, smiling. She leaned over her shovel and said, "I bet the government thinks that M__ is a crazy forest man. They probably think he's taking care of the trees, not chopping them down and digging holes everywhere."

We laughed.

T__ and I laughed a lot. We laughed when we uncovered new stone faces scattered randomly throughout the woods, and we laughed every time we brushed our teeth in rain-water and gazed up at the intense white stars, we laughed at the fact that our tents were continuously flooded and miserable, and we laughed at the fact that M__ called us "you kids" all the time.

I decided that living in the woods takes ten years off.

We continued digging.

A while later M__ came by. "Thank you for all the work today," he said, pulling out a pile of broccoli seeds from his pocket to show us what he would be planting. "This is what keeps me alive."

One day M__ left on his bicycle and ventured out into the industrial zone to procure some fresh vegetables for dinner from an undisclosed source. The rest of us started a fire and waited patiently. We grew increasingly apprehensive as the darkness came in. T__ and I sat up waiting.

When M__ finally did return, his eyes were wide and his mouth was trembling.

"If I teach you kids anything," he said, "it's this: *humans are monsters.*"

"What do you mean?" asked T__.

He answered slowly: "Someone's cat had a litter of kittens." Darkness filled all the creases of his face, and I thought about his age for the first time (sixty? sixty-five?). "I found them in a dumpster. I tried to rescue them."

The fire crackled. Our stomachs growled. T__ took in a deep breath.

"What happened?" she asked.

M__ handed us a bushel of carrots and walked away.

One evening after dinner, M__ employed us to make jam for the winter. He had several kilograms of plums that needed to be boiled down over the fire for a couple hours. A few hours turned into five or six hours.

T__ and the others were too tired to stay up. This left M__ and me to make the jam alone.

I asked him if he'd ever read *Walden*.

"No," he replied, "what the hell is that?"

Then he drank a bottle of wine, which he had gotten from an undisclosed source, and fell asleep in his chair. I stayed up until not-quite-dawn, stirring plum jam over a dying flame as the black trees swayed all around and animal sounds came in bursts from near and far.

While I was inhaling the sweet steam and listening to M__ snore, a pale figure suddenly emerged out of the bush. It stood about three metres from me. In the moonlight it looked remarkably alien, even mythical. It was skinny and shaped like a shrunken deer. But I wasn't fooling myself—it was just a dog, a greyhound (maybe).

Then it dashed off.

I laughed, but I didn't tell T__ about it—she was deathly afraid of dogs.

One day T__ left. Her Tory-voting family had been begging her to come back to London and find a job. So she disappeared, too.

Eventually it was just M__, Spock, the American woman, and me.

One day the American woman, the portrait artist, decided to do a character study. She sketched both M__ and me. After the drawings were done, she smiled and said, "M__, you would benefit from a haircut."

"Never!" he said, laughing.

"And you, too," she said, looking at me.

I agreed. She cut my hair while I sat in one of M__'s enormous stone chairs. The whole thing felt oddly motherly.

The birds came and took the clippings.

A few days after the birds, I left the forest. The last image I have of the place was M__ and the American woman standing before the cabin. M__ was holding Spock. A slight breeze was shaking raindrops off the surrounding trees.

"Travel safe, son," M__ said jokingly (maybe).

"Come to Minnesota someday," the American woman said.

I took the #4 bus back to Šibenik, and was determined to go somewhere where it didn't rain so much. 🌧️