

A person with their hair in a bun, wearing a white t-shirt and dark pants, is sitting on a dirt path, looking out over a rural landscape. The scene is filled with trees and a church spire in the distance. The text is overlaid on a semi-transparent white box.

Welcome to Hopeland

Interactive novel

Vojtěch Žák

Welcome to Hopeland

Text © Vojtech Žák, 2023

Editorial © Šárka Prevrátilová 2023

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*This is an experimental interactive novel
created as a means to support you in bringing
some self-care into your life.*

*You will need a notebook and a pen
(or any alternative that fits you the best).*

*The pacing we suggest is to read one chapter per day
and do the task at the end of each chapter.*

Enjoy, and let us know how it worked for you!

**INspire, z. s.
Hopeland**

Chapter 1.

Why am I here

The road up is steep and rocky, and your butt is shaking on the old scooter as if it was a communist-era centrifuge. It's mid-summer, the air is dry, burning the lungs, the path dusty, fields grey and brown and bleak.

Finally, your old scooter, the Rocking Betty – the nickname came from a friend, who once knew a burlesque dancer with the same name. She lost pieces of clothing with the same enthusiasm with which your scooter loses screws and bolts while on the road, just inches from falling apart like a castle from LEGO – well, finally, your old scooter, the Rocking Betty, reaches the turn and an open gate slips into view.

Here is the place you heard so much about. A place that will finally fix you.

Hopeland.

You leave Rocking Betty on the side next to a big white van that looks like it remembers the dawn of the human race and take a look around.

On the slope to your left are two caravans, one of them equipped with an awning and some chairs, the second one much less decorated. As you walk through the gate, you feel nervous chills

run up your back. You see a small round building ahead of you and a small decline leading to a bigger building on your right. Small building it is... you approach it and knock on the wooden door. "What's up?" you hear from the inside, so you enter.

It is much cooler inside, with a fan running merrily in the corner. There's a big plastic round table in the middle of the room, with several smaller tables on the sides, one with a printer on it. As you take a step inside you almost trip over a big hairy dog lying on the floor and breathing heavily. Behind the round table sits a big Greek man with black hair and a beard. "Hmm," he said. "You are...?"

You answer.

"Ah! We have been waiting for you. Come in!"

He offers his bear-like hand to you.

"Panagiotis," he shakes your hand with a smile. "Welcome. Quite hot outside, isn't it?"

After exchanging a few polite phrases with you, he addresses the truly important things.

"So, you wanted to come here for a two-month-long retreat. To get your life in order. Tell me, what is it that's not working out that much in your life? Or you know what? You don't have to tell me, it's even better if you tell yourself. Here," he gives you a notebook and a pen. "Write it down for yourself. Write down what your everyday life looks like. Write what's not working about that for you.

And then write down what your everyday life should look like, and why. Okay?"

1. *Take your notebook.*
2. *Write down what your everyday life looks like. When do you wake up? What do you eat? What do you do? How do you feel?*
3. *Write down what in your everyday life is not working for you.*
4. *Write down what your everyday life should look like. Explain why you think that would be better.*



Chapter 2.

Disconnection experiment

Panagiotis is absently petting the hairy dog, who waggles his tail lazily (or maybe it's heat exhaustion) in response. He's constantly doing something with his phone, either tapping away or picking it up and calling someone in Greek, while patiently waiting for you to finish your task.

"It's crazy with electricity here," he says suddenly. "This whole place runs on solar panels, and when there's not a lot of sun, or whenever there are too many people, we run out of electricity. And that means no printer, no computers, no phone, but most importantly no refrigerator and no cooking."

"Too many people?" you ask. "How many people live here?"

"Usually around seven people, but we also organise different international projects or retreats, and then, there can be up to fifty. And then the electricity goes down almost every day. Unless we do a mass disconnection," he laughs.

"Disconnection?"

"We take people's phones, lock them in a box, put a lock on it and hide it for a few days."

“Surely you wouldn’t manage that long without your phone, would you?”

“Of course I would. But now I am working. Would you like to try disconnection as well?”

“What for?”

“Well, to just spend some time with yourself for one. Our phone is the easiest runaway strategy we have. When you are bored, uncomfortable, whatever, you take out your phone, and whoosh, you hide in cyberspace. It’s the best way to hide from emotion and other people alike. But yeah, try to put your phone away for a while, and see what will start happening to you.”

“Hmm?”

“Well, most probably you will get bored really quickly. And that’s good. Being bored might make you want to go out. To spend some time in nature. Or to talk to other people. Or to give some space to the things you are feeling. Would you like to give it a shot?”

If you would like to try this, the weekend might be the best time for it... or any day on which you can “procrastinate” successfully.

Take your phone, and inform everyone who should know that you will be unreachable for the next 24 hours. Then turn off your phone. Do the same with your computer. The same goes for your television, radio, or anything that could disturb you easily.

And then see how you can spend your time. Maybe it would be nice to go for a walk outside?

It might be a good idea to take your notebook with you and note down all the things that are coming to your head.

After 24 hours, reflect on the experience. What did it bring to you? Would you maybe consider doing this next weekend again?

If you feel like it, you can continue reading the third chapter.



Chapter 3.

In touch with Nature

“Let’s begin the tour,” says Panagiotis, and takes you out of the office. The dog seems to consider following you but changes his mind quickly once the door opens and the outside heat seeps into the room.

Surprisingly, Panagiotis doesn’t take you up, but down. Below the round building is a path going downhill that eventually turns into fifteen stone steps leading down the slope, and then turns right. To your left is a big field. “This is our food forest,” explains Panagiotis, even though the word ‘forest’ seems a bit generous. “We plant and grow many different edible plants there.”

“How do you do it with water here?”

“It’s difficult. We have to water everything properly and water is scarce, but we manage. I know it looks quite dry here now, but during autumn and spring this whole place is lush and green.”

“Maybe I came here at the wrong time?”

“Depends. At least you’re not cold,” Panagiotis giggles, and takes you to a big oak tree a few paces down the road. It’s beautiful, with thick branches laden with green leaves sprawling in every direction. “This beauty is the reason why Hopeland exists. It’s over four hundred years old. Maybe more. When this area was for sale, one

Greek psychologist – Erato – got afraid that this tree would be cut down if the land was bought by some developer. So she bought it herself. And then Hopeland started to develop.”

He takes you further away, around some bushes and up the hill. In this area, you see several tents and a simple wooden cabin, as well as outdoor bathrooms.

“We call this area the Hood. Poor neighbourhood. It’s an area for people who live in Hopeland long-term. You will have your tent here as well.”

“Tent?”

“Yeah. There are cabins as well, but we don’t have enough for everybody. So a tent. We will provide you with one but I hope you know how to set it up.”

He takes you higher up the hill. There are two big containers and a lot of wood around.

“In here is where we store our equipment.”

Further on, there are several recreational areas. A little tea place – a teahouse-like area hidden in the shadow of a few bushes, a yoga place – an artificially made flat area similar to a very small football field, directly in the sun. Then a zen area – a small sacred place hidden in the shadow of the bushes growing around as well. The last two are the Rich area – a place full of glamping tents, where short-term visitors of Hopeland usually reside, and then an area for animals.

“We have chickens, cats, and dogs. We almost had pandas, but it didn’t work out because of the tigers.”

“What?”

“Never mind, it’s an inside joke, it would be too complicated to explain. There are also jackals, you will hear them at night, but don’t worry, they will not come here, the dogs keep them away. So if you get woken up by their barking in the middle of the night, you can come out, pet them and say: ‘Thanks for protecting me.’”

You hope he is joking, but have a feeling he isn’t.

“And finally, this is the Guest house.”

The last stop of your tour is a big one-story building, with a semi-open dining area with three long tables and an indoor kitchen. There is a nice wooden pergola connected to the building as well.

“One of the first buildings that were built here. It’s the work of a specialist on eco-buildings and some volunteers. You see, all we have here are eco-buildings. So if we would disappear from here and people would stop coming, in two hundred years this would all just become a part of nature again.”

“Okay, what should I do now?”

“Now? Well, maybe it is about time you get to know the Tree. The oak tree. Just go to him and tell him about yourself. Share the things you wrote down for yourself earlier.”

You nod and begin walking down the slope, around the round building in which you started your tour (You learned that the people here call it the Office). You continue down the stairs, to the right around the food forest, and stop once you reach the shadow of the big old tree. You take out the notebook Panagiotis gave to you.

What now?

Choose the option that fits you the best.

Option 1: Spend some time meditating. If you don't have any experience with it, you can put on your headphones and listen to this meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inpok4MKVLM>

Option 2: Go for a walk, ideally to the forest. Find a tree that speaks to you. Introduce yourself to it. Hug it, if you feel like it. Then, read the things you wrote down for yourself out loud – it's helpful to give these things a voice. After you're done, spend some time in silence with the tree and just listen to it.

Chapter 4.

Cold showers

You tried to wash away the dust from the road yesterday evening, but the water in the outdoor shower was so scalding you weren't able to stay in it for longer than two seconds.

Panagiotis laughed when you told him: "Well, all our showers are heated by the sun. That means that during the day, the water is super hot. During the summer, we have to shower late at night or early in the morning."

You built yourself a tent, and then it felt like too much effort to get up again and walk those horrible thirty metres back to the showers. So you stayed inside, lying on a sleeping bag and wishing for sleep, but you felt haunted by things of the past, like a widow/er in a house still holding memories of their deceased partner. Just closing your eyes meant facing memories of your past experiences, mistakes, embarrassments, arguments, conflicts and traumas, with every one of them making you look like the worst person on the planet.

And then, when you finally dozed off, you got suddenly woken up by the howling of the jackals, and the barking of the dogs, who decided that the best spot for scaring off the furry enemies is right behind your tent.

After managing to fall asleep again, you get woken up after what feels like mere minutes, because the early morning sun is hitting

you straight in the face. You try to hide from it in your sleeping bag, but that makes it hard to breathe; you hide your eyes in your elbow, but your hand starts to hurt; you put a jacket over your face, but you're too alert now to fall asleep again anyway.

So you surrender to your fate and head for the showers.

The water isn't scalding yet.

It's not even lukewarm.

And you really need a shower.

Become a true Hopelander (remote-style) and take a cold shower.

If it is too challenging for you, then spend at least 10 seconds under cold water.

You can do it!

P.S.: Still too much? Then just play around with the warm water switch in your shower and make the water a little colder than is your usual. Go slightly beyond your comfort level, but not too much.

Most importantly: remember to do it again tomorrow!

Chapter 5.

Exercise

As you get dressed and head for the kitchen, you notice a tall Italian guy in running shorts. His name is Luca, you remember, one of the local work-awayers. “Morning. Did you also get woken up by the sun?” you ask him.

“Nah,” he smiles. “I’m just about to go for a morning jog. How are you doing so far?”

“Eh. Not good,” you admit. “It’s hard to fall asleep.”

“Jackals?”

“That too. But... I don’t know... sometimes... you know, I want to sleep and I feel tired, but whenever I close my eyes, my mind gets flooded with memories.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling,” Luca nods his head with sympathy.

“Does it happen to you too?”

“Used to.”

“What changed?”

“I started taking cold showers,” he smiles. “Whenever there was too much on my mind, I just went to take a cold shower instead. The thing is, the water is so cold that there’s no space to think about bullshit, I just feel fully present in my body. Give it a shot. Whenever your head feels full, when you feel distressed or whatever, just take a cold shower and see what happens.”

If you feel like it, give it a shot. The next time you feel disturbed, go take a cold shower instead of thinking about the topic over and over again (that usually doesn’t do anyone any good anyway).

“I also started running,” Luca continues. “You know, physical activity. It’s good for the mind, body, and emotions too. Hey, would you like to go for a run with me?”

“But I just took a shower.”

“So what? You can take another one later. Don’t worry, we can run really slow. It will be fun.”

Your next task is to do some physical exercise.

Make it fairly easy and pleasant for yourself. Either go for a jog (just for 15 minutes) or take a longer walk (at least half an hour) or go for a swim. You can also visit a sauna, download an app with some stretching exercises, or just work out. If none of that sounds good right

now, then lock yourself in your room, put on at least 3 songs in a row, and dance!

Do this daily as much as possible (with max 2 days off during a week).



Chapter 6.

Growing a plant

That morning, you work in the garden.

Hopeland has many gardens, big and vast. There are trees to water, weeds to pluck, fruits to pick, and so on. It's hard work and you quickly start to sweat in the heat of the sun. Hiding your face under a big straw hat, you wipe your forehead and pant heavily.

"Hey," Martins approaches you. He's the Hopeland manager, the one who makes sure everything is running smoothly and as it should. "Don't forget to take a break."

"But the work is not finished."

"The work will never be finished, but if you won't take any breaks, you will be finished pretty soon."

"Yeah," Panagiotis hums from behind you. His hands are not dirty, as he mainly lets his fingers work on computer keyboards and phone screens. "Don't be like Martins when he first came here, overworking himself all the time. No matter how hard you work, there will always be something new that will need to be done. The work is endless. You are not."

"I remember one story," Martins continues. "It's about a young woodcutter, who just started his first day of work. He chops down

fifteen trees in one day and his boss is very happy with him. 'I am gonna make it twenty tomorrow,' the woodcutter promises, and the next day, he starts to work, full of enthusiasm, but no matter how hard he tries, he takes down only fifteen trees again. 'Never mind, I will do better tomorrow,' he decides, but the next day, despite all his effort, he takes down only twelve trees. And the next day, only ten. After two weeks, while still trying with all he has, he manages to take down only five trees a day, and he is completely exhausted. So he goes to his boss and says: 'Boss, I'm done. I'm not as good as I thought. So I quit.' The boss listens to him carefully, asks a few questions here and there and then stops to think: 'Well, my friend, tell me: during these two weeks, did you ever stop to take a break and sharpen that pretty axe of yours?'"

You giggle. "And you are telling me that I'm a woodcutter?"

"No, you are an axe! I'm the woodcutter, and you are my tool. And I'm telling you to take a rest and sharpen yourself. And possibly eat some ice cream."

And Martins makes you sit down, jumps into the car and drives off. In fifteen minutes he's back and hands you an ice cream cone. It's delicious.

Then, he passes a little flower pot with a small flower in it into your hands. "Here, take this."

"What is it?" you ask.

"This is a flower you are now assigned to take care of. You need to water it, replant it when need be, and talk to it. And this flower has

the same name as you. So whenever you are taking care of this flower, you should remember that it's time to take care of yourself as well. Cut yourself some slack. Take a break and give yourself a treat and some love and care. Capish?"

"Capish, captain."

"Aya."

Option 1: *Get a flower and give it your name. Put it somewhere you can see it often. Whenever you take care of your flower, remember that you need to care for yourself as well. Give yourself proper nourishment. Treat yourself with love and care.*

Option 2: *If you use a calendar, make a space in it for at least half a day each week. Dedicate this time solely to your self-care. It's not a time for working, but for relaxing! Follow it thoroughly.*



Chapter 7.

Hug

The night howling is relentless. The coyotes sound like they're having a hard-core techno party, and the Hopeland guardian dogs are running back and forth around your tent, answering them in a defensive staccato of booming barks. It's enough to make a dead man leave his grave just to have a bit of peace.

A dead man maybe.

Not you.

You stare at the vaulted ceiling of your tent, shrouded in the dark, sighing, grumbling, turning from left to right, shifting, itching, grasping at every moment of silence, hoping to fall into a deep sleep like a stone in a well but to no avail. The best you get is a superficial slumber, filled with semi-controlled dreams of your past. All the mistakes you have made, all the guilt chasing you like a pack of wolves, it's like the ozone of shame is evaporating from your skin and forming an inescapable mist all around you.

A Bark! sounds right behind your ear and you are fully awake again, listening to the animal serenade of the Peloponnesian night.

Jeez, you ponder. How long am I going to just stay here and do nothing?

It might be around three in the morning, right after one dog hits your tent so hard it almost collapses, when you finally sprint outside, full of frustration and bright hot anger.

“Would you shut the hell up?!”

You want to scream at the top of your lungs, but end up giving just a half-voiced grunt, as you don't wish to wake up the other Hopelanders... even though you doubt any of them could sleep in this cacophony of noise.

There is a middle-sized beige dog just beyond your tent. What was his - or her? - name, it's at the tip of your tongue. Kodos?

“Silence!” you whisper to him. He bows his head, tail in between his legs and moves a few steps away, but still doesn't stray too far, growling lightly, not at you, but at the invisible coyotes still screaming in the distance. “Silence!”

Moved by a sudden angry impulse, you grab a rock, ready to throw it at him, but as he twitches away from your sudden movement, you pause. You look at him again, his scared eyes looking back at you, expecting punishment. But for what? For keeping the coyotes at bay? What a shoddy payment that would be, don't you think?

With a sigh, you drop the rock to the ground and then slump down next to it. “I'm sorry,” you whisper. “I'm so sorry.”

And somehow, you think of all the moments when they were throwing rocks at you. Not real rocks of course, it's only a metaphor for all the insults, injustices, misunderstandings, bullying, maleficent

people, or simply bad luck that you've encountered throughout your life.

Suddenly, you notice Kodos coming closer. He puts his head on your lap. So you hug him. You hug him, and you pet him, and then you begin to cry, thinking about all the painful things of the past. And as you cry, Kodos climbs fully into your lap, makes himself comfortable, and starts licking your hand soothingly.

"Would you like to come back to the tent with me?" you ask him.

And Kodos happily follows you, curling into a comfortable ball next to you, as you hide in your sleeping bag again, and like this, with one hand on his fur, you finally fall asleep.

So, hey. Animals, right?

Your task is to get a date with a dog, a cat, a horse, a cow, or any animal you prefer and which is within your reach. Visit a cat cafe, meet with friends who have pets, or hang outside until you find your prey. Your goal is to spend at least 30 minutes in the company of a friendly animal. Pet it, hug it, play with it, and enjoy each other's company. Why? Well, if nothing else, cuddling (even with animals) releases oxytocin into your body, and that can be a lovely boost to your current mood.

In case this exercise doesn't vibe with you fully, you can also have a hugging session with a partner or a friend. The point is that the hug should

be at least 5 min long (it can be quite a while, right? Especially if you are afraid of human contact. So do it with someone you are truly comfortable with). The human body needs some time to start producing oxytocin. We are like machines in that sense. The engine needs time to start.

And if neither of these options is for you, give yourself a cuddling session. Hug your knees, pat and massage your body... at least for fifteen minutes. We can also release oxytocin by ourselves, for ourselves. Give yourself the love and care you deserve. Because you do deserve it.

Shortly after five, Kodos wakes you up with another bark, but it's much easier to calm him down when he's cuddled up next to you. After that, sleep won't come again, and you feel dead tired.

Then, you hear steps outside. Luca. With this small reminder, you decide that it's time for a morning shower and a bit of running. It makes your day much better.

Chapter 8.

Cooking

“I miss meat,” you muse while eating beans mashed into some weird paste.

One cannot eat meat in Hopeland, it’s forbidden for any to even cross its borders. When someone craves it badly, they board a van and head to Malandreni for kebab, souvlaki, or a proper restaurant. But for native Hopelanders - the ones who live there long-term - this happens less and less, as the craving begins to shut down, and all of them are slowly but surely turning vegetarian, or even vegan. It’s up for debate whether the biggest meat eaters on site are the dogs, or international project participants, who suddenly have to live for more than a week as vegetarians. Though surprisingly enough, most of them don’t even miss meat, as Hopeland chefs are very skilled.

But there are no participants now, only you, Panagiotis, Martins, Luca, Despoina – the Hopeland director, Richie – a volunteer from Latvia, Eszter – a young entrepreneur from Hungary, and Jean – a work-awayer.

Usually, it’s Irene, one of the Hopelanders and a professional chef, who cooks, but today, she took a day off and went to Napflío to enjoy some time by the sea. So Jean offered his help. Truth be told, Jean was from the Netherlands, and Dutch national cuisine was everything but recognized as a world treasure. What was also

probably not helping was the fact that during his study years, Jean kept himself alive mostly on boiled sausages and frozen pizza with ketchup.

“Why did you want to cook then?” Panagiotis grumbles, as he takes a spoonful, chews it slowly and then hides his obvious disgust with a stony expression.

“Why not? I found this recipe online and I thought it could be fun to try. But then I kinda got bored, so I quickly mashed everything together, and voilà!”

“Voilà, you cannot eat it,” you snap.

“You can stay hungry if you like,” Martins reminds you. “But in the afternoon, we will be working as normal.”

“This is not how you cook,” Luca says. “If you cook, you have to put all your heart, love, and passion into it. If you don’t like it, find a way to enjoy it. Otherwise, it will end up like this.”

“I bet if you had made your sausages or pizza, it would taste better,” Panagiotis adds to that.

“Because I wouldn’t be the one actually making those?”

“No, because you would enjoy the creation of the meal more.”

“I can show you how to enjoy cooking,” Luca offers, but Jean has different preferences:

“I would rather help prune the trees.”

“I can cook,” you offer then. “I don’t have much experience with cooking, but I would be happy to give it a shot.”

“Why not,” Martins says. “I guess it cannot be worse than this,” he adds even as he takes another mouthful. Food is food, and if you work hard, you need the energy.

This is a cooking challenge for you. Let’s break it into parts to make it both accessible and challenging enough to be realistic, not annoying.

The first question is: do you like cooking? If yes, great, skip to the second question. If not, amazing. Let’s find a way for you to enjoy it. Just this one time.

The challenge for non-cookers: *Let’s enjoy cooking! What would support you? To have a friend to cook with? To listen to music, audiobooks, movies, or podcasts while cooking? To drink wine/beer while cooking? To have someone else clean the mess after you (if rewarded with dinner)? Simply find anything that will make the whole ordeal more enjoyable for you, so that you can put your heart, soul, and mainly joy into the process. Then choose a recipe. Something more difficult than sausages or frozen pizza. Lasagna might be a good try, it’s surprisingly easy to make and very tasty. After you’ve made your choice, just go for it.*

The second question is: do you know how to cook vegetarian food? And we don't mean just fries or fried cheese. Something healthy. Something that has at least a 30 % portion of proteins. If yes, great, skip to the third question. If not, amazing. Let's learn it.

Vegetarian challenge for cooks: Find a healthy vegetarian recipe and make it for dinner.

The third question is: do you know how to cook vegan food? Something nutritious, again with at least 30 % of proteins? If yes, great, skip one paragraph ahead. If not, amazing, let's learn it.

The vegan challenge for cooks: Find a vegan recipe you would enjoy cooking and make it.

A challenge for the rest: Learn a new vegan recipe.

To all of you: Make it into a festive occasion for yourself, invite a friend for a nice dinner, or even ask them to help you cook. Don't rush it. Give the whole process (including cleaning up) at least four hours.

P.S.: If you want to, feel free to do all of the challenges and have fun!

Chapter 9.

Sharing

It's been a lovely evening so far. Everybody enjoyed your food greatly, and you yourself were oddly pleased with the result. Maybe because they were so happy. It makes a difference to hear praise.

Of course, you try to belittle yourself. "I think I put too much salt in it," you say towards the end of the meal, focusing on the slightest imperfection in front of your eyes.

"Sure," Panagiotis grumbles. "And also too much spice."

"And you left it in the oven two minutes longer than you should," Martins nods.

"Completely shameful."

"Unacceptable."

"So, now that we are done with all the unnecessary self-punishment," Panagiotis continues, "repeat after me." He lifts his right hand and pats himself on the left shoulder, then lifts his left hand and he pats himself on the right shoulder. "Good job," he says. "Now, you do it."

So you do it. You praise yourself for your cooking.

"Now, you will start doing this after everything you do, all right? You have to learn it somehow."

“Learn what?” you wonder.

“To appreciate yourself.”

This sentence hits home. A lump starts to form in your throat suddenly, and you feel a big heaviness in your chest that seems to want to burst out any second. You feel your eyes prickle with tears.

“Are you all right?” Eszter leans towards you and touches your knee gently.

“Yes,” you mumble.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” you breathe a little faster to try and get a hold of yourself. You don’t want to cry, to make a scene, not here, not in front of everybody.

“Well,” Eszter whispers soothingly, “in case you want to share at some point, my door is open to you.”

You avoid her eyes at first, feeling awkward and ashamed of your weakness, but as the evening continues – as volunteers clean the dishes, a bottle of wine is opened, and everyone is drinking and chatting happily while you and Eszter watch the stars – you suddenly feel a strange desire and urge to share. To reveal yourself as you are – a flawed human being, haunted by traumas from the past that won’t let you sleep at night, nor enjoy your life fully.

Eszter notices you looking at her, and asks carefully: “Hey. Is there something you would like to talk about?”

And you surrender to it.

You start to speak about your parents, about your friends, about your ex-lovers, and partners, about your school, about your job, about your repetitive life, and all the things that are not working in it. You tell her about your addictions, and your inability to run away from them. And Eszter is just there. From time to time, she asks a question, and you explain what you mean. Actually, the questions help you go deeper, to understand your own emotions better. And as you finish, she says: “So if I understand it correctly...” and she briefly summarises what you told her. You correct her in a few cases, but mostly you nod along. Surprisingly, it gives you quite a good perspective to hear her summarise it like this.

“Thank you for sharing this with me,” Eszter says. “It is a valuable gift. And I’m sorry that things are so hard.”

She offers you a hug, and you accept it.

The sharing challenge. This can be a bit of a pickle for the ones who feel like they should not be burdening others.

Well, let me tell you, sharing yourself with others is a gift, not a burden. But it needs to be done mindfully.

Firstly, if there is a person to whom you are constantly complaining – this is not the person you should be doing this challenge with. They are most likely already carrying a heavy load of your past on their shoulders, and there is only a limited amount a human being can carry.

Find somebody you are willing to trust, but probably didn't open yourself that greatly to yet. Ask them if they would be willing to listen to you sharing your feelings for at least half an hour. Ask them to uphold this condition: 'All you can do is ask me questions. No interruptions. And definitely, no advice.' If they ask 'why', tell them it is a part of the exercise, and that they can write to info@czechinspire.eu, and the reason will be explained to them.

If they agree, schedule a date. Use this half an hour as a space where you can share anything you want about yourself and the things that are bothering you in life. Let them ask you questions, but stop them if they try to advise you. When your sharing is over, ask your friend if they could summarise what you told them.

How was this experience? Did you choose a good listener? And if so, do you feel any benefits from the sharing process? Would you consider doing it more often... or offering yourself as a listener to somebody?

If you are caring enough, you might also ask your friend how the experience was for them, and offer them a big thanks for being there for you.

Chapter 10.

Children among us

You feel much lighter that night. Kodos comes to sleep in your tent again, and together, you fall asleep quickly and easily, even though he snores like a drunken sailor. He wakes you up during the night with his barking, but you manage to calm him fairly easily, and the other dogs who are still running around are somehow less of a nuisance than they were on previous nights. Strange.

You sleep soundly until the very morning when you are woken up by the sun. Actually, you wake up so late the water is almost too hot for a shower!

Happily, you realise that so far, it's shaping up to be a really nice Saturday. On Saturdays, Hopelanders don't work. "It's important to rest," Martins reminds you. "We are going to Napflio to climb, in case you would like to join."

You decide to stay in Hopeland and enjoy a little bit of peace and quiet.

However, peace and quiet start to get boring very quickly. It seems too hot just to lie in a hammock and read a book, too hot to meditate, too hot for yoga, too hot even for breathing.

It's close to noon when Martins and the gang get back. "Back so soon?" you ask.

“Yeah. There is a huge storm in Nafplio. Climbing is impossible in such weather, so we decided to come back and play Dungeon & Dragons.”

“What’s that?”

“Ech. Well, did you see Lord of the Rings?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, so, I’m the so-called Dungeon Master, or Keeper, or Storyteller. I tell a story, let’s say I would be telling some sort of Lord of the Rings story. And the others play different characters in it. For example a dwarf warrior, an elf mage, a hobbit thief, et cetera.”

“I think I saw that in Stranger Things.”

“Exactly!”

“Isn’t it for kids?”

“Is it? Hmm, maybe,” he scratches behind his ear. “Well, it is healthy to let yourself be a kid from time to time. Otherwise you can go mad from constantly pretending to be a responsible adult.”

“Pretending?”

“Well, is it anything else? Do you really feel like an adult? Personally, I always wonder why somebody lets me drive, lead people, or even hold a drill, but I don’t protest, ‘cause drilling is fun. I say cut that

pretentious adult crap out for once. Do me a favour and just be silly for a bit.”

“Silly... like what?”

“Well... wanna play Hide & Seek?”

If you don't know how to play, you don't know how to live. So take on one (or more) of the following challenges:

Challenge 1: *Play like a kid. Spend 1 hour with a colouring book (doesn't matter if it's for kids or adults), build a house from Lego, draw on a sidewalk with chalk or try play-pretending. Drop any feelings of being an adult.*

Challenge 2: *Play with kids. Offer somebody to take care of their children and actively play with them for at least 30 minutes. Don't be just a passive supporter, be an active player.*

Challenge 3: *Grab a bunch of friends, and organise a game of Hide & Seek, Capture the Flag, or any other game you liked to play as a kid in your local park.*



Chapter 11.

Self-expression

As you crouch in the bushes behind the caravan, you are suddenly chased out of your hiding spot by a violent storm that hits Hopeland like the wrath of Poseidon.

Is Poseidon only the god of sea storms or is he behind the ones on land as well? you wonder while sprinting for the cover of the Guest house. Everyone is already gathered there, smiling happily because if Hopeland is in desperate need of something, it's water. "I just hope it won't hurt the plants," Richie ponders while letting the dogs in, and he bends down to give them reassuring pats and hugs. They are probably the only ones who are not pleased by the raging gullywasher.

Before you start getting bored, somebody proposes a game of Monopoly – yet Monopoly gets annoying very quickly when you end up in the prison on the first round.

"This is so annoying!" you burst out angrily.

"Maybe you just don't know how to play," Richie provokes you well-meaningly, but you are not in the mood to appreciate it.

"Wanna draw yourself out of it?" Eszter suggests with a smile and passes you a piece of paper and a crayon, which is, fittingly, black. You start to violently draw black lines up and down, creating a black

blob, which surprisingly starts to take shape after a while. So you start to play with its edges, adding a curve here, maybe a little bit more colour there, and some hatching at the edges.

“Do you have more papers?” you ask after a while, feeling not only released from your anger but also curious and intrigued to see what else can come out of you...

Art is one of the best tools for emotion management. It allows us to express, release, and understand them. Different art forms hold different qualities. Choose the one that suits you the best. Whether it's dancing, singing, music, drawing, painting, writing, poetry (or anything else). Ignore the jackal voice telling you “I can't sing/draw/...” and remember that there will be no judges of your piece and that it is not the final form, but the process that matters.

Dedicate yourself to it for at least an hour. Connect with the emotions you feel at the moment. Let yourself express them through art. You can just do automatic writing (you put a pen to paper, and write everything that comes to your head, without editing, or thinking about it. There's no need to keep a continuous line), or drawing/painting (again, whatever is coming is good, no need to overthink it) or anything else that suits your fancy.

After you finish, reflect upon:

- 1) *How did I feel before?*

- 2) *How do I feel now?*
- 3) *What was happening to me?*
- 4) *Do I want to do this again in the future?*



Chapter 12.

Novelty

As the rain subsides and darkness falls, people slowly start to disappear, wishing you a good night. In the end, only you and Luca remain. Somehow, you feel full of energy, and can't really imagine going to sleep right now. As you mention it out loud, Luca suggests the only thing an energetic Italian who is travelling the world on his bike could say: "How about we go for a run?"

"A run? Now?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"I always run in the morning," you protest.

"So? About time you did something differently."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... doing things regularly is good for discipline, of course, and the creation of habit. But do things the same way all the time and you'll go crazy. I mean... it gets boring, right? When everything is constantly the same. Calculable."

"I don't know, I think I enjoy it... I used to have everything but discipline, or routine. I could never say what the next day would bring."

“Ain’t that kinda routine as well? I mean, it is a routine of chaos and unpredictability... but in the end, it’s always the same. But yeah, it’s definitely better to have some discipline.”

“Well... that’s what I’m doing here. Getting discipline.”

“Good. So tomorrow I’ll pick you up for a morning run like usual,” he smiles. “And will you go for a run with me now?”

“But why, if we are going tomorrow morning as well?”

“Well, why not? Just to do something differently. If living is to keep its spark, we need to do something differently every once in a while. Routine is good, but it’s important to not chain yourself to it completely. Even if it seems difficult, scary, or uncomfortable. In the end, it usually turns out to be fun.”

Bloody smart-ass, you think to yourself... but then you surrender to his prodding.

Today (or tomorrow), your task is to do something differently.

Maybe you can switch to your non-dominant hand while brushing your teeth or eating. You can take a different route to work/school than you usually do. You can visit a part of the city/town you have never been to. Go to the cinema instead of watching Netflix, see a theatre play instead of watching a movie, go see an opera instead of ballet, play a game in-

stead of running, paint instead of singing, etc. Simply, do something new. Something different. And observe how it feels, and if there is something you can take from it.

At least one new thing every month keeps life spicy.



Chapter 13.

Routines

Every morning, you go for a run, take a cold shower, then take care of your little plant, and since you were asked to treat yourself right after it, you usually have a piece of chocolate or give yourself a foot massage.

You help Richie take care of the animals – feed the dogs and cats, and get eggs from the chickens. You discuss a new art piece for the round building serving as a training room during a project with Eszter – so far there is a mosaic of the sun and moon, and it would be great to figure out a pretty way to keep flipchart papers on the walls. You help water flowers in the area. Since today is a Sunday, a non-working day, all things are carried out in a lazy tempo and in the cheerful mood of working out of pleasure, not necessity.

It is surprising how much peace it brings you. Moving your body regularly. Focusing on helping others. Cooking, cleaning, and serving, but without the feeling of obligation, always being reminded that you are a priority and you need to take care of yourself first – because if you are not sharp enough, a woodcutter cannot wield you. And to be sharp enough, you need to take proper care of yourself regularly. To do so, you need to both love and care for your tool (yourself) and to maintain discipline in loving and caring for it.

Do a review of your habits, routines, and self-care strategies. Are you regular and consistent in them? Are you truly doing something daily for your body (exercise...), mind (learning...), emotions (reflection, introspection, art...), and soul (prayer, meditation, serving a bigger cause, i.e. voluntarily work...)?

If not, aren't you missing something? Don't you feel that something is off?

Is there a regular self-care routine you could implement? What would be the specific steps?

The invitation is to make them small and simple. Only if they are small and simple, you will be able to do them every day, or at least five times a week.

Chapter 14.

Letting go

As the days pass, Hopeland is turning colder and greener. It's still very hot during the day, but at night you are very happy to huddle in your sleeping bag. You have already experienced the presence of the participants of international projects, and got annoyed by their loudness and overwhelming presence, eagerly welcoming their departure. You have three more days before another group comes.

As the evening approaches, Despi comes to you. "Hey. Do you have something planned for tonight?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, since today is the Autumnal Equinox, we were thinking about doing a small ritual. Starting with a fire."

"I thought you can't make a fire in September in Greece?"

"You can't make an open fire. That's why it's gonna be only a small fire, and only on the grill."

Hopeland's grill is an old and rusty thing on wheels, reminiscent of metal caskets for newborns, or the remains of an alien probe sent to Earth sometime in the Neolithic period.

“I mean, there might be some museums willing to pay for this,” you ponder while helping Martins bring it by the bonfire area surrounded by three semi-circled eco-benches.

“You think so? Maybe. Maybe. But for Hopeland it is priceless,” he retorts, and then starts to pet the top cover of the grill: “Don’t worry, baby, darling, they didn’t mean it like that, they are just mean. What are you saying? That we should burn them? Oh well, we definitely could burn them,” and he looks at you with a maniacal smile and a scary gleam in his eyes.

“Dude, you can be so scary sometimes, you know that?”

“Of course I do. I am Latvian. All Latvians are scary.”

As the dusk slowly settles, all Hopelanders gather around the grill where there is a small flame gently flickering. “As the summer ends,” Despi says, “it is a good time to look back at what happened and leave behind everything that does not serve us anymore. Therefore, we invite you to do the following...”

Do a small ritual by yourself. Dedicate the proper time, place, and atmosphere to it.

What you are going to need is paper, a pen, a candle in a pot (or an open fire, if you can have something of that sort), and matches, of course.

You can make it festive by preparing some hot cocoa, or tea for yourself, or by playing some meditative music in the background.

Start with reflecting on your life. Think about all the things that were present in your life but are not working for you anymore. Bad habit you don't want to follow. Fears you wish to give up. Write each of them on a single piece of paper, and then say the following formula.

"I thank you for being in my life, because you were there for a reason. There was a time you were serving me, but now I need to let go of you to grow. So I am giving you back to Earth."¹

Then, slowly, burn the paper, and let the trait go.

Remember, if you want to bring real change to your life, you need to truly decide to let those things go. So if you are burning your addiction to cigarettes but you're running to the store for another pack the next day, you are probably not really dedicated to letting go. Remember, we are not doing magic here, but psychological work. Rituals have meaning for the human psyche, but the rituals themselves won't bring change, it's your decisions and actions that will.

¹ This formula is based on systemic principles (you can do more studies on the topic if you are curious). It is meaningful to express gratitude before letting anything go – even more so if it is something that you currently perceive as a burden. Don't rush, give yourself time. You might want to think about a time when those traits (fears, habits, etc.) were bringing something positive to your life. Only then let them burn. If you can't do that, you are not ready to let those traits go. Maybe you still need them in your life. Try and introspect yourself to understand why they still might be important or meaningful for you in your current state. What are they protecting you from? See if you can be grateful for having them.



Chapter 15.

Planting a tree

With every piece of paper you fill, you feel the heavy stones gathering inside of your chest. With every thought of gratitude, your eyes fill with tears. And with every burned paper, there's a sigh of relief and a strange emptiness, followed by the fear of the unknown, the fear of failure.

"If you want to plant something new, you first need to make space for it," Despi whispers. "And planting, as you might have noticed, is a tradition for Hopeland. We pledged to plant a tree for every group that comes to this place. Originally, it was the groups themselves who were planting them, but that turned out to not be the best strategy, as many of the trees planted in spring didn't survive the summer. So our new tradition is to plant the trees in autumn, all at once, for all the groups that have been here before but left already.

When we plant something, we are giving life to something new. Therefore it's quite meaningful to, along with the young tree, put an intention, a wish, into the ground. Something we want to bring into our life and let it grow. And as the tree grows bigger and stronger, so does our resolution."

So you take a moment – quite a long moment – and you put everything you wish to bring into your life on paper. All the power, joy, and strength, all the happiness, and excitement.

Then, with a headlamp firmly strapped on to navigate in the dark, you join the others and dig a hole for your tree. You often just use your own hands to dig, wanting to feel the dirt, to feel a connection with the Earth as you ask it to give nourishment to your wish for the future. Then you put the paper with your wish into the ground, and place a young olive tree atop it, sending a silent prayer to the universe for your wishes to come true. You add fertilizer made of sheep dung, cover the rest of the hole with soil, and pour two buckets of water on the newly planted tree.

And then it is done.

You let your intention, wishes, and dreams grow.

I guess you know what to do.

If you don't have the opportunity to plant a tree, plant a flower. Bring something to life, and together with it, bring something into your life.

Chapter 16.

Last day

Somehow, they are all gone. Eszter returned to Hungary. Luca went to continue with his bike trip around the world. Jean started his university studies in the Czech Republic. Martins and his wife went back to Latvia, Richie is educating himself on solar panels somewhere in Sweden, and Despi and Irene are in the Canary Islands to help facilitate some new project. Even Panagiotis is gone, though he's always coming and going. He's coming back today. To say goodbye.

Other people are coming every day. New volunteers, both long-term and short-term, work-awayers, young entrepreneurs, and curious visitors. Everyone comes and goes, but Hopeland stays and serves, and grows.

Who is here for whom? Are the people here for Hopeland, or is Hopeland here for the people? Sometimes, you are not sure, and it probably doesn't really matter anyway.

As you are the oldest Hopelander present, you make sure that everybody is doing their duties as they should, even though it's not your responsibility. Just as you are correcting some silly mistakes the newbies made in the garden, you get startled by the loud noise of Panagiotis' beloved motorbike.

He parks it beneath an olive tree, pulls off his helmet and opens his biker's jacket. "Hey!" he welcomes you with open arms, offering his bear-like hug. "So. How are you?" he starts. "Your last day. Have enough of this place yet? Did you get what you came here for? Some ideas? A new direction in life?"

"I think so," you admit.

"Great. So tell me."

"Tell you?"

"What are things going to look like now? How do you want to live when you get back home?"

"Well, mostly, I want to have the courage to live."

"Hmm, courage. Great. And if you are going to be courageous, what are you going to get?"

"I don't know. Happiness, I hope. Excitement."

"Which one is it, happiness, or excitement?"

Both, you wish to say, but knowing Panagiotis, he won't leave you be until you choose one of them. "Excitement," you decide finally.

"Great. And I know that digging in the dirt for eight weeks isn't the exciting part. So what will it be?"

"I would like to speak with my parents. There are some things they need to know about me. About who I really am."

"Good. What else?"

"I want to start singing. So I'm thinking about applying for a course. Or joining a choir."

"Nice. Anything else?"

"Well, I would like to travel."

"Sounds lovely. So what will change? What do you want to limit in your life?"

"Well, I feel like I should stop going to so many parties. Drink less. It is not bringing anything to me anymore."

"Hmm. And how about your well-being? Where is the self-care in all the things you just said?"

You smile. "Well, I would like to be kinder to myself. I want to keep running in the mornings, and taking cold showers. And I'm taking my flower with me as a reminder that I need to give myself nourishment."

"Good. Well, best luck to you. I hope it goes well."

You pack your stuff, hug everybody goodbye and look back behind your shoulder. These two months have been like a dream. But it seems that it is about time to wake up again.

Before you wake up, there is an action to be taken.

Your first action is connected to the VISION. To the quality, or value, that you would like to bring into your life. What do you want to be like in your life? Loving? Free? Courageous? Curious? Give the vision a name and a shape. Write it and draw it. If you don't know how, write the capital letters of the word, and then connect those letters to a rune, a symbol hiding the meaning of those words for you. By this, you are declaring what you want to bring to your life, and you can also use it as a regular check-up. You can always stop and ask: "Am I [insert the vision]?" If yes, good. If not, what do you need to change/do differently?

Your second action is to choose a goal. A direction. A thing you want to achieve. This goal should be SMART - Specific, Measurable (meaning that you are able to clearly say when you've achieved it), Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound (meaning that you give yourself a time frame). You can also give yourself some Objectives, aka sub-goals. Every objective is a step which leads to the reaching of the goal. If you have set objectives, reaching the goal will be easier. Those objectives should be SMART as well.

As you might have noticed, the Objectives of our protagonist are not that SMART. But we could change that if we formulate them a bit differently (ie):

1. *Meet my parents within 1 month and share with them that I smoke.*
2. *Join a choir within 2 months.*
3. *Visit 3 different countries over the course of next year.*
4. *Run at least 4 times a week.*
5. *Take at least 4 cold showers a week.*
6. *Take regular care of my flower; every time I do something for it, I also do something nice for myself, ie. eat a piece of chocolate, or self-massage*

Best of luck to you.



Chapter 17.

Return

The road up is steep and rocky, and your butt is shaking on the old scooter as if it was a communist-era centrifuge. It's mid-summer, the air is dry, burning the lungs, the path dusty, fields grey and brown and bleak.

Finally, your old scooter, the Rocking Betty, reaches the turn and an open gate slips into view. You are back, just like one year ago, as hopeless (yet in a different way) as when you first got here.

You park the scooter and hurry to the Office. To your relief, Panagiotis is there sitting behind his computer.

"Hey!" he exclaims in surprise. "You are here?"

"Yes. I came to visit," you mumble nervously.

"Well, come here," he offers you a hug. "It's good to see you. So, what's up with you?"

So you explain your situation to him. That your life is not going as well as you had hoped it would. That things are falling apart and it seems like everything is set against you. He listens, nods and grumbles here and there.

“I was hoping I could come back here for a while,” you finish your story. “When I was here, I was happy. Things were working the way I wanted them to. But back in my life...”

“Well,” he wonders, “could you remind me what were the goals and resolutions that you set for yourself last year?”

To your own surprise, you cannot remember.

“Hmm... So I suppose you didn’t really implement the changes in your life.”

“Well, I did, a little. I kept running for a while and continued with the cold showers. But then the winter had come and it was too cold for me to run outside or to take cold showers. So I stopped.”

“But now the winter is over.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t start again.”

“How come?”

“I... didn’t feel like it.”

“Heh. Of course. And the other things? Didn’t you want to talk to your parents? And... travel, right? Live a more exciting life. Something about parties.”

“Yes. Fewer parties.”

“So... how did that go?”

“Well... winter. As I stopped exercising... I started to drink again.”

“Hmm... There is always a need for something to fill the void. And your parents?”

“I talked to them. Somewhat. But they didn't really listen. And I didn't have the heart to tell them everything about me. I admitted some things... but not everything that I wanted. But, I did travel. I've visited Italy, and Monte Negro!”

“Great, great. And now you wish to come back here?”

“It would be nice.”

“And what after that?”

“Well... I don't know yet.”

“You know, we like it when people come back to us. We also prefer that they let us know in advance so that we can make some agreements with them. People should not just hang around here, they should be here with a purpose. So staying here is not impossible, but it's not as simple either. The thing is... whatever you're going to experience here – might help you, and might not – sooner or later you will have to come back to your everyday life. And then what? Will you crumble again, like old bread? Tell me... what happened with your flower?”

You stare at the floor, ashamed. “I gave it away. I couldn’t take care of it due to my travels, so I asked a friend to keep it for me. She’s been taking care of it ever since.”

“Hm... so you left your self-care as someone else’s responsibility. What a burden you can be, huh? I don’t think it would be wise for you to return to Hopeland now. First, you need to get your shit together on your own.”

“But what does that mean? What am I to do?”

“The same thing as last year. But this time properly. If you are going to run, keep running. If you are going to grow a flower, grow a flower. If you are to speak with your parents, speak with your parents. But don’t half-ass it. Be faithful to your vision. And maybe your vision has changed. And that’s okay. Your behaviour will change as well. What will not change is the need for self-care. For routine and discipline, for behaviour that serves you in the long run, and doesn’t speed up your downfall. Do you really want to change? Well, then change the place where you live. Cut out friends who drag you down. Come clean to your family. And most importantly, do things that are good for you. Can you do that?”

“I guess,” you whisper.

“Tell you what. Go back home. Start running again, and do all the things you were going to one year ago. And in one month, come back here and we can talk. And then, maybe, Hopeland will be willing to welcome you back.”

Welcome to Hopeland,

an eco-center in a midst
of Peloponese, Greece.

Some are coming here
to get in touch in nature,
some to learn more
about sustainability.

Some are coming to learn to live.

Welcome among us!

*Welcome to Hopeland
is an experimental interactive novel
created as a means to support you in bringing
some self-care into your life.*

*You will need a notebook and a pen
(or any alternative that fits you the best).*

Enjoy, and let us know how it worked for you!