



Radek Bak

American Dream Immigrant's Diary

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Chapter 1

Electronic banking, or how to make it even easier

Opening an account in an American bank before arriving in the United States is childishly simple. Just fill out several online forms, provide your grandmother's maiden name, nicknames of people she used to hang out with when she was young, your collar size, past venereal diseases, and a few less important details. Then just sign with the indicated blood type, provide a urine sample for analysis, and you can calmly do online banking.



The most commonly used instrument in e-banking is a check. Seriously. The last time I saw something like that live in Poland was around late spring 1991.

The hotline advisor suggested ordering a few checks, buying envelopes and stamps, and using them to pay current bills. Or better yet, go to a bank branch.

- Where is the nearest one in Peachtree City?
- Sorry Sir, but we don't have any branches in the state of Georgia.

Seriously. I insisted though and made a bank transfer for the first rent. It is already the fourth day, and the landlord keeps asking for money, quite pushy. Judging by his expression, I guess he will soon send a few mournful Puerto Ricans to ask me the same question...

Chapter 2

Fueling up, or how to say a firm "no" to boredom

In Europe, it goes something like this: you drive up to the pump, choose the type of fuel, pour the desired amount into the tank, go to the station building, pay, and drive away. Boring, gentlemen.



In the States, they have made this process more exciting: you drive up to the pump, unscrew the fuel cap, and... the fun begins. The pumps have large screens that inform you how lucky you are in life, that you can refuel at this station, in this network. There are buttons around the screen, like in the cockpit of a Boeing 747. The first refueling happened at Shell. I quickly realized (being a smart guy) that I couldn't manage it without the help of someone from the staff, there were too many buttons. The lady in the shirt with the logo of a shell around her bust explained that I had to declare immediately how many gallons I wanted to pour, then pay, and pour as much as I ordered. Then she winked, looked at me, then at the car, and declared that it would take seventeen. It took thirteen, so I had to fight for the difference to be refunded to my card.

The next refueling happened at Chevron. Remembering my previous experience, I immediately went to declare prepayment. A friendly older gentleman led me back to the pump and, in response to my question about the procedure, said, "you pour, pay me, and drive away," while looking at me with sympathy. For a moment, I hesitated whether to give him 20 bucks so that he wouldn't tell anyone about the incident.

When I landed at Shell again (out of necessity, on the way), I expected a repeat of the procedure at the sister station. Mistake. The lady looked at me as if I were an alien from a different galaxy.

At the BP station, the screen demanded my BP card, then any other card (I was tempted to use a swim card), and then aggressively asked for the ZIP code. None of them worked: neither the one from Zurich, nor from Peachtree City, nor from Lodz, nor even the one from Pcim, entered for fun. The lady at the window advised me to press the "Inside" option, which meant paying inside the building. When I approached the cashier, she asked for a check, but when my eyes flashed with anger, she withdrew the question.

I don't know why, but when it's time to refuel, I start experiencing symptoms of diarrhea combined with migraines, hot flashes, and mouth ulcers...

Chapter 3

Environmental protection, or let the trash burn

Switzerland is obsessed with this. The average resident of the country starts the weekend with a visit to the local waste segregation point, where they enthusiastically move between containers for cardboard, paper, glass, plastic, styrofoam, aluminum, iron, IT equipment, PET bottles, etc. Throwing used batteries into regular trash can result in the death penalty, a good lawyer can negotiate a life sentence. Abandoning waste in the forest can lead to being torn apart by horses, but only in certain cantons.



It is different in the United States.

The day before yesterday, I called a company with the charming name Waste Industries to arrange garbage collection. A friendly female voice assured me that she was ecstatic that I would become a Waste Industries customer, and as proof of how much the company values me, they will charge me for five months of service right away.

- "Would you like to receive an additional container for recycling?"
- "Of course!"

I agreed to the additional fee under the same conditions, noting with excitement that there was no mention of a check. Then I learned from my colleagues at work that the mentioned additional container for secondary waste will end up in the same garbage truck as regular trash, and they will all be burned together.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established on December 2, 1970, by President Nixon's order. It employs 14,172 full-time employees. Its annual budget is \$8.1 billion. President Trump's proposal to cut the budget by 31% was rejected by Congress in 2019.

Chapter 4

Delighting the Customer, or how we bought a washing machine

Since the four-day cycle of wearing underwear (front, back, face, reverse) has exhausted itself, the family demanded a washing machine. Here you go, in the surge of positive feelings, I could even add a dryer – after all, I am a human being.



So we went to Lowe's store (not to be confused with "loves", which I will explain in a moment), where the middle-aged saleswoman lectured me right away that washing machines are not installed, but at most hooked up, which I diligently noted down in my notebook. There was no question about a check, but definitely about a credit card. Delivery in two days, which was soon confirmed by a heartless robot who called me on my cell phone.

On the designated day, a two-person team arrived to hook up the washing-drying set, about half an hour after the specialists left, my wife called me:

- "Water is pouring out of the washing machine; the whole laundry room is flooded".

I immediately dialed the store's number, and after going through the familiar procedure (if you really want to bother us, press "one"), I found out that the employee who would gladly help me is currently on lunch break and will of course call me back after returning. Of course, I didn't believe that - and I was right, he probably took a second helping. I called again, but someone on the other side quickly hung up; how long can you listen a story about a washing machine that is leaking water? And what should it do? Pour some beer instead?

In my third attempt, I asked to be connected to the store manager, who demanded the names of the employees who treated me so unfairly. It crossed my mind to mention Mike Tyson and Ivanka Trump, but I didn't want to escalate the situation. The manager informed me that the store had nothing to do with it, as it was a transportation company that delivered and installed the equipment - in turn, I informed him that it was just a hookup. As part of the week of mercy, he gave me their phone number. They were deeply concerned, and the young lady promised me that they would be able to handle the complaint the next day, while also dropping a bombshell: "by the way, did you purchase the warranty?". As a result, I expressed my disappointment in such an honest, specific, and loud manner that the manager of the young lady called me shortly after with the information that someone was already on their way to the crime scene. In the roller coaster of emotions, I didn't know what to kiss her on. The specialists arrived, tinkered with it, the equipment works, and the laundry proudly dries in the dryer.

We suspect that they intentionally caused the malfunction in revenge for the lack of a tip, which, as it turns out, is traditionally given. Since then, the banknotes with the presidents' faces have been waiting in the drawer on standby - you learn something new every day.

By the way, in the United States, you go to prison for tax crimes, but giving tips, which are essentially untaxed financial benefits, is widely accepted.

Chapter 5

I fax you too

A few days ago, I received an email from our firstborn's school with a complaint – they cannot find the fax number for Bartek's school in Switzerland in the documents. I could beat around the bush, but the truth is brutal: Bezirksschule Oftringen does not have a fax.



Below is a little quiz with possible reasons for this (quite embarrassing, I admit) state of affairs. The school does not have a fax because:

- the equipment was sold to obtain funds for coal;
- there was an exchange with another school for a typewriter;
- the telex is performing exceptionally well, so there is no need to invest in a fax;
- the English name of the equipment has negative connotations and could offend the youth;
- the fax supplier is a swindler and does not want to sell the equipment on credit.

Please send the circled answer by fax at your earliest convenience.

Chapter 6

Top secret and confidential

Upon arrival in the United States for a permanent stay, first you are invisible, then semi-transparent, and finally you achieve full corporeality. This last level of existence is achieved by obtaining an SSN (Social Security Number) and a Credit Score. Without the first one, you won't be able to handle any official matters, and without the other one, no one will even sell you half a kilo (sorry, a pound) of beef on credit.



So you can easily imagine our excitement when the real estate agent informed us that a day before moving into our new home, a postal delivery person had showed up at our brand new address with a package from the Social Security Administration. He had refused to give the package to the agent or the homeowner, even though they all swore on the American flag that they would give it to us.

- "Letters from the SSA can only be received by Izabela and Radoslaw, in person".

The postal worker earned my sincere admiration – that is what you call responsibility for delivering a document of national importance. What if some scoundrel intercepts my number and then, pretending to be me, pre-pays for gas at Shell, sends a fax, or orders a checkbook, not to mention a washing machine? On the day of the move, we were waiting for our SSNs like on pins and needles, but the postman did not show up. I was even afraid to go to the bathroom, just so I wouldn't miss the doorbell. After a few hours, I called the post office to ask with concern if the delivery person had been attacked by wolves, because he is nowhere to be found. They reassured me: he will come, you just have to arm yourself with patience. Late in the evening, I woke up from a nap on the kitchen counter. Housemates unanimously stated that no one knocked on the door during this time. Could it be that Congress decided to revoke our SSNs? A cool stream of sweat ran down my back. My intuition prompted me to check the mailbox in front of the house, which is accessible to anyone who wants to, because it is not locked.

After a while, I took out two envelopes from the SSA from Baltimore.

I took them in person, so everything seems to be in order. The only thing is that my feelings towards the postal worker have clearly cooled.

Either way – we have been semi-transparent for two weeks now!

Chapter 7

Blood, sweat, and tears, or a container with goods arrived

A few days before the long-awaited container arrived, I received an email from the carrier asking for confirmation of the delivery address. Everything was correct, well, almost everything. The wrong street number, incomplete city name, and incorrect state abbreviation – CA instead of GA, which meant there was a chance that our clothes, furniture, and the picture with an angel would make someone happy in California. Surprisingly, the country name was correct, although the carrier could have randomly chosen, for example, the United Arab Emirates.



On the day of delivery, I went to the office in the morning, but after a phone call from my wife, I decided to immediately go home – from her voice, I could tell that it was already “funny”, and it would be even more so. We were expecting the Jacksons Five, but we got Three Musketeers, specifically three, not very much like musketeers, each with a different disposition. The Tallest One had sparkling eyes, The Thickest One avoided work like fire, The Oldest One was friendly, slow, and asked a lot of questions.

About an hour later, D'Artagnan appeared at the door – introducing himself as the coordinator of the actions of the mentioned trio. He looked like John Coffey from the movie "The Green Mile," so I mustered up completely unforced politeness in our conversation. John's name was Larry, and he left me his business card, asking me to call if any problems arose. I thanked him and discreetly wiped away a tear of emotion. The opportunity to worry Larry came soon – the Tallest One clenched his fist so tightly that blood stains are still visible in front of the entrance – three days after the incident. He unhooked the tractor from the container and went to the emergency room. His two comrades' faces spoke for themselves. To my delicate suggestion that it is time to stop contemplating, because the mountain of packages is eagerly waiting, I heard from The Oldest One that he is not anyone's slave, and besides, he hasn't eaten anything yet. The Thickest One did not look like someone who hadn't eaten anything, but it was clear that he shared his colleague's opinion. The atmosphere became tense. After leaving three messages on Larry's voicemail, we – all four of us as our boys meanwhile returned from school) decided to support the musketeer duo in such a way that it would limit the risk of making it a five-day exercise.

The Highest One appeared with a bandaged hand around 10 pm and did not even hide that his absence had a tactical dimension – after all, "the best pianist is the one who doesn't play at all".

The next morning, Larry called asking if everything was okay. Surely there will be technologies available someday that will allow someone to be treated with a stun gun over the phone. For now, I just asked Larry not to call me anymore, as it causes an increase in my bad cholesterol.

Of course, there were no conditions or time to assemble a large wardrobe in the bedroom. This only happened today – I will consider dedicating a separate chapter of my diary to this action, because it is worth it.

Chapter 8

The contract offer, or a bug trap

Once we moved in, I increasingly heard spontaneous shouts from the household members – undeniable evidence of the appearance of uninvited guests in the form of cockroaches, spiders, ants, and other equally charming creatures. The puzzled landlord explained that the high humidity in combination with high average temperature favors the invasion of bugs. Fortunately, there is Skyline Pest Solutions, whose visit the landlord will arrange as desired. I immediately expressed my wish.



Soon, James visited us in a shirt with the SPS logo. He wandered around the house and garden, saying nothing. "A professional in action," I thought when James demonstrated his skill: at the sight of a scurrying cockroach on the floor, he quickly took off his shoe and struck the intruder with it. We were convinced that it was a special shoe, soaked with poison on the sole, because the bug did not even flinch. James said he would contact us.

After more than a week of silence, I made a phone call to SPS, and after a few more days, I wrote a text message to the Pest Exterminator asking about the next steps in the process. He brushed me off like a mosquito (he may have overlooked that I my last name reads a Bumble Bee in Polish): "I don't have time, my grandson was born yesterday." I apologized for bothering him and started searching for bug-killing shoes on amazon.com. Unexpectedly, James called me a few days later. Delighted, I asked him to send me an offer for the pest extermination service. He agreed and patiently noted down my email address. Several more days of silence passed in the airwaves. Yesterday, we noticed with interest that there are several colorful cans or tubes buried around the house.

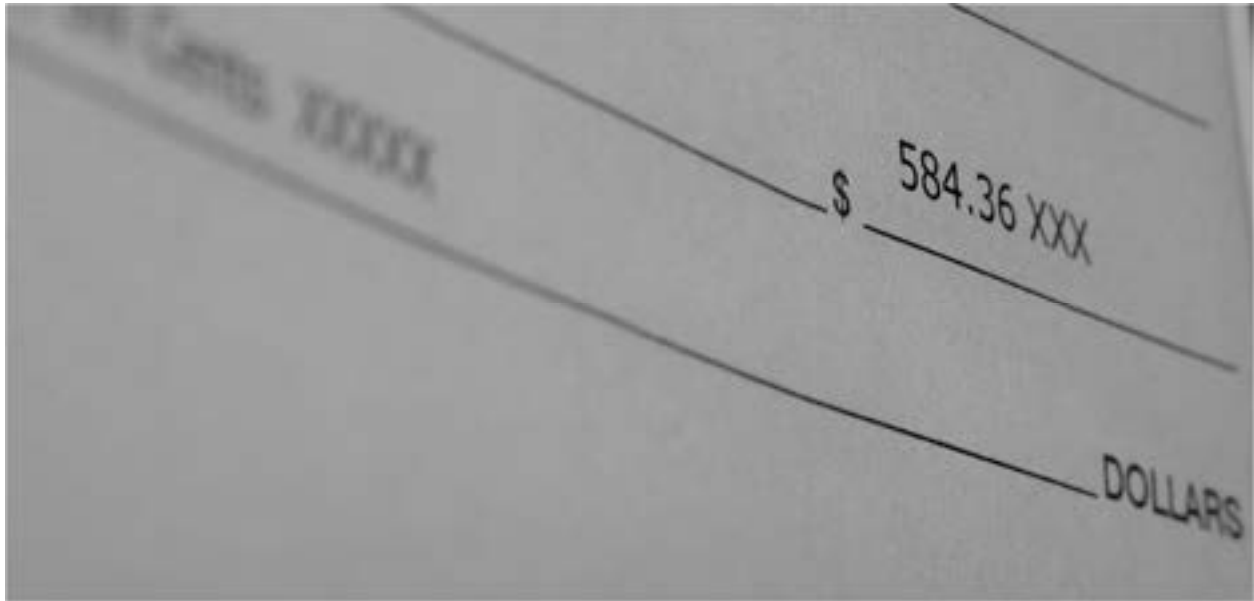
We assume that this is James' work as part of the "Invisible Helping Hand" campaign. Since I am a quite clever guy, I expect to receive a bill for the service in my mailbox. I have mixed feelings: on one hand, I am glad that the multi-legged company will experience some difficulties.

On the other hand, I feel a bit like a bug caught in a trap myself.

Chapter 9

The fortress has fallen, I ordered a checkbook

I've been caught. A pack of beasts: the landlord, Igor's school, gas company, power plant, and recently a company leasing four-wheeled vehicles – they all want checks. Therefore, I logged into my bank's website to immediately taste good news: I received a low starting number in the chat: 32.



- "Hi Radoslaw, my name is Sarah, how can I help you today?"
- "I wanted to order some checks maybe"
- "Old school! Wow! I like it".

For a moment, I was speechless. So it turns out that I'm smearing goose fat on my face to soften my beard, and I keep marmalade and tooth powder in my socks. And I order a checkbook, exposing myself to Sarah's blatant mockery. Old school. In the further part of the procedure, the following questions were asked (and answers provided):

- "What information should be on the check forms?" ("that I had no choice");
- "Do you want watermarks, for an additional fee?" ("yes, with the logo of my favorite soccer team");
- "From which number should the checkbook start?" ("of course, 666").

Soon, I will also order a hip bag (popularly known as a "fanny pack") with the Statue of Liberty logo, in which there will be a tiny fax next to the checkbook.

Chapter 10

Pain threshold exceeded; it is time to decipher the acronym of the bank's name

HSBC. House of Scruffy Barbaric Creatures.

The only reason for opening an account in this "bank" was the move to the USA. I wrote about the mass of formalities in Chapter #1 of the Diary in a mocking tone. Upon arrival in the USA, we immediately sent the "bank" copies of relevant documents confirming this fact: SSN cards, utility bills, house rental contract. We were sure that the necessary changes in the address database would be made automatically.



The first red flag was raised when the "bank" demanded proof of residence at a Swiss address.

The second one was when the postal code assigned to the debit card was not accepted at the gas station (this is material for a separate chapter). After this episode, I called the "bank" to make sure that the address had been changed from Swiss to American. I was assured that it had indeed been changed.

The third red flag: rejected online payments ("incorrect address").

The fourth: it turned out that the "bank" was sending statements and other correspondence to the address in Switzerland.

Mind-blowing logic: "since they moved to the States, we will send them correspondence to Switzerland".

Tonight, I decided to finally resolve the matter. "If you really want to bother us, press 'one'." After 13 minutes of listening to Old Western music, I convinced myself that I was practicing assertiveness. In the 24th minute, my eyelids, left knee, and right temple started twitching one after another. In the 37th minute, I began to make plans for bloody revenge on all the employees of the "bank". Finally, the young lady started talking to me for another 20 minutes about the specialist who is supposed to change the address in the system, but whom we have been waiting for all this time. I managed to hate Old Western music sincerely and wholeheartedly. Of course, I could not make changes to my Wife's name all at once – it would jeopardize the "bank's" security (a joint account with the same address, of course theoretically). So she called personally, but on a speakerphone, so that I could intervene if necessary. Note: none of the following questions were made up:

- for what purpose are you calling?
- are you calling just for that?
- what language do you use on a daily basis?
- what are the last four digits of your SSN?
- what is the full SSN number?
- what is the card number?
- what type of card is it?
- do you have voice verification set up?
- do you have access to your online account?
- what is your account number?
- what is your name?
- what is your old address?
- what is your new address?
- is it an apartment or a detached house?
- is it a permanent or temporary address?
- can you spell the name of the city?

- should all old addresses be deleted from the database?
- is the phone registered in your name?
- do you agree that someone from the "bank" will call you within three business days to verify your identity?

People naturally avoid suffering and everything associated with it.
Avoid the House of Scruffy Barbaric Creatures. At all costs.

Chapter 11

Delighting the Customer, or the economy class passenger is also a passenger

When it comes to the comfort of air travel, the ranking of airlines looks something like this: first come the Asian ones, then a long gap, then the European ones, then a very long gap, and finally the North American ones. The latter are known for their designer interiors of the fleet (a fire station after a makeover), the quality of meals (which glow in the night for only a week), and the average age of the flight attendants.



In European airlines (excluding the human cargo of Ryanair, EasyJet and the likes), an attempt by an economy class passenger to use the business class toilet ends with knocking them down to the floor, handcuffing their hands behind their back, and making an emergency landing at the expense of the offender. Due to its size, I avoid visiting the air toilets, but sometimes a person has to, because they will suffocate in a certain sense. Aware of the described rule, last Friday on board Delta, I wondered whether to join the queue at the back of the aircraft or take the risk. Tensing all my muscles, I headed towards the business

toilet. No one approached me, neither before, during, nor after. What's more, the flight attendant who was preparing cooling drinks and more, offered me a drink, entertaining me with a conversation about the ungrateful fate of the airline staff. Then I proudly strutted towards my seat, holding a glass (not some plastic cup) with a drink and a straw inside, rightly encountering jealous looks from my fellow economy class passengers.

I have nothing bad to say about Delta's staff. Maybe one day they will allow me to enter the cockpit and perform a landing maneuver. In action movies, it always looks like a childishly simple task - just put on headphones.

Chapter 12

A Sunday wakeup call

Sunday, 6:30 am, my mobile phone rings.

- "Hello Mr. Bak, this is Rooms to Go! Did you order furniture? We will be at your place in half an hour!"



I gathered my thoughts as quickly as possible at this time of the day. Indeed, we ordered a couple of things for the living room a week ago, on Friday the heartless robot informed me about the delivery in two days, but we did not take the 7 am hour seriously. On Sunday? Well, I had to brush my teeth, do two push-ups and a split (someday, someday) and wait for the furniture brigade. They arrived on time, fresh, fragrant, they carried in the sofa with a smile (this time I had a tip ready), said goodbye and left.

Shortly after, our landlord arrived with a new dishwasher - my wife and I pinched each other, wondering if it was a dream. We both bet dollars against nuts that the homeowners would not invest into it, and here's such a surprise - and three

months before Christmas.

However, to make it not too perfect, Murphy's law started to work: the brand-new beautiful dishwasher does not work. It just purrs and does not respond to any buttons, a Samsung technician will arrive on a white horse within 48 hours.

The old dishwasher did not wash thoroughly, the new one does not wash at all. Such is life!

It turns out that a Sunday morning can be spent in a much more valuable way instead of lying in bed.

Chapter 13

Windows to the world, or a hot flash

Since we moved in, it was clear that if the windows in the house were ever cleaned, it was a long time ago (and rather untrue), and the world seen through them seemed gloomy despite the usually sunny weather.



In the mailbox, among leaflets advertising painless tooth extraction, painful back waxing, and appetizing half-priced pork neck (plus Sales Tax), there appeared one about window cleaning: \$179 for 45 pieces, from the outside and from the inside. I confirmed the price several times, in Switzerland a similar amount would be charged for cleaning one window. Additionally, \$25 for all windowsills, \$10 for each window frame, \$50 for skylights, \$10 for double glazing (storm window), \$3 for dismantling and installing each mosquito net.

Payment: cash, check, or credit card.

Deadline: this afternoon.

And when we specified, discussed, and agreed on all of this – the service provider was kind enough not to show up. Pressured, he sent an official version via a text message: due to feeling unwell caused by the heat.

My parents' generation used to say, "if not a charm, then a military march." Or feeling unwell.

Just the thought of the company "Window & Gutter Cleaning" gives me hot flashes.

Chapter 14

The power of a global brand, or the Swedish curse

I – like Innovation, K – like... for now we will skip it, E – like Era (of stone), A – like Alibi (not me, it's my colleague).



A little retrospection – let's go back to the next day after arriving in Atlanta. We went to Ikea to buy some necessary trinkets, with the biggest item in terms of cost and size being a marital bed. The investigation conducted before our departure to the States showed that the European "one hundred and eighty" is a Queen, and the "one hundred and seventy" is a King Bed. We decided on the Queen version, noting at the same time the sexist nature of the naming: why is the man wider? Where exactly?

The store layout is like in Janki, Port Łódź (in Poland), Pratteln (in Switzerland), and similar places that we have visited in Europe so far: crowds with blue bags on their shoulders, pencil in hand and a tape measure around their necks, obediently wandering along the path marked with arrows.

The guy from the "Happy to Help" team seemed polite and efficiently proceeded to place the order with delivery and assembly. The dilemma arose in the "phone number" section – I still had a Swiss number, and the Ikea system in the US does not anticipate that foreigners may also be interested in Ingvar Kamprad's

inventions. No problem, the most important thing is that the address matches, I will provide the American number soon enough. To my great delight, I received (confidentially, in a whisper) a direct number to a certain Ashley, who deals with making changes to orders. In other words, the fly does not squat, but my feminine intuition still did not let me rest, so I made the first call to Ashley as soon as I received the American cell phone. She never answered, so I left a suitable message on her voicemail about five times. My wife decided that the order needed to be supplemented and went back to the store in Atlanta after a few days, taking advantage of the opportunity for personal contact to make the change. She had the impression that her persistence had evoked feelings bordering on sincere hatred.

On the promised day of delivery, we waited for the trucks to arrive like the arrival of Her Majesty the Queen. It was getting dark when we started preparing to sleep on the floor in an empty house.

Finally, the crew showed up. "We could not reach you, some strange number!"

Hereby, I decipher the second letter of the company name (see the beginning of the text).

K - like... Knock-out.

Chapter 15

My home, my fortress (or something like that)

One of my colleagues, who lived in Peachtree City a few months ago, told me a story once that I ignored because it seemed made up. He tripped in the hallway of his house and crashed into the wall, which almost led to a construction disaster. The property did not collapse, but the damage was said to be disproportionately large compared to the insignificance of the incident. I thought he let his imagination run wild to add spice to his story. Until recently.



Last week, we noticed constructions in the newly emerging neighborhood nearby. Initially, we thought they were buildings for commercial purposes, but closer inspection dispelled any doubts: they are single-family residential houses. Fans of “Do-It-Yourself” would be ecstatic: a few plywood sheets, some glue, nails, and cardboard – and the fortress can be yours! Brickyard owners have nothing to look for here – no demand for their products.

Fortress.

Really?

Chapter 16

We sincerely do not recommend

Darłówko, June 2003

Fish fry by the port canal, a few meters from the drawbridge connecting the eastern and western sides of the resort. Cod, halibut, flounder, zander...shark! "Two portions, please." The owner of the fryer, taking advantage of the emptiness in the place (the season is just beginning), pulls me aside. "Sir, I have a deal with the wholesaler that I have to take shark to get cod and halibut. Sir, this shark is literally rubber, don't take it, or you'll get sick. Only cod."



Richmond Airport, Virginia, September 2018

Early morning hours, sleepy passengers looking for coffee and something to snack on. I stop at the first coffee bar on the list. There is no one at the counter. Seconds pass, then minutes. Am I invisible? Impossible, I've had a Social Security Number for two months now... Finally, a middle-aged woman in a kitchen uniform appears:

- "I am sorry, but no one will serve you here. The cashier went to Starbucks. The coffee there is a hundred times better than ours, not to mention the sandwiches, because ours are just miserable. True, the line is long, but it is worth waiting – there is choice and quality, unlike here."

Carefully, I made sure I was not an unwitting participant in the "We gotcha" type of a show, and then I stand in line at Starbucks, to eventually answer the question about my name (personalized cups are a must) with "John."

The karma is returning. If you are good, good people will come your way and recommend cod with a medium coffee, to your satisfaction.

Chapter 17

A little enquiry, or an interrogation among the toilet bowls

For several weeks now, we have been having a problem with using one of the bathrooms to its full extent (isn't that an intriguing description?). Specifically, the toilet (by the way, interesting name for a piece of equipment) has reached the end of its functionality and needs a successor. I won't go into details for humanitarian-humanistic reasons.



Since the homeowner is slow in handling complaints, we decided to take matters into our own hands and seek advice from the source. The chosen source was a nearby building market proudly called Home Depot. We entered the shelves with marine ceramic equipment – prices ranging from 100 to 200 local monetary units per piece. We approached a staff member who was preparing for a forklift ride and asked about the installation cost. He smiled, said he would be right back, and then sailed away in his cosmic vehicle... and of course, he did not come back. We tracked him down a few aisles away, and he agreed to help us. To do so, he sat in front of the computer and initiated an investigation: name, surname,

address, email address, phone number. Expecting this attack (after all, I did not place an order, just inquired about the price of the service), I provided fake information about a fake Richard Konski – that name just came to mind. The man entered the data into the computer and then called his colleague. After a short discussion, they switched roles: the investigation started anew: name, surname, address, email address, phone number. Finally, they requested an electronic signature. That's when my patience ran out. I saluted just like a petty officer on the USS Alabama and we left, settling the payment for the plunger we bought as an alibi at the cash register.

We decided to find out the price of the service by gathering information from Uncle Google. The first company we came across offered \$249, asking for an address.

- "Oh, if it is in Peachtree City, then it is \$257."
- "When could you come?"
- "We don't provide services in Peachtree City."

I continue to spin my head and think about a plan of action. Someone mentioned a "bowl" on TV and I got nauseated.

Chapter 18

All roads lead to... Orlando!

I have loyalty cards for several hotel groups, and I've had the opportunity to snore in Hilton a few times after moving overseas. The activity on my loyalty account has increased, which hasn't escaped the notice of software and other snoops of human consciences. Hilton decided to follow suit. Friday evening, just after returning from the office, my cell phone rings, unknown number.



- "Hello Mr. Radek! How are you?"
- "Mr. Bak, if you please."
- "Who?"
- "My name is Bak. Radek Bak" - I borrowed a line from Agent 007, without much hope that the interlocutor would catch the allusion. I got used to the fact that locals consider a shorter word as a first name in Switzerland, as it turns out - so do the Yankees.
- "Mr. Radek! Are you planning to travel soon?"
- "Yes - to Chattanooga."

- "OMG. What is that?"
- "A city in the United States."
- "I've been living in the USA for 30 years and I've never heard of this Chat-something, ha, ha. Whatever - I have a great offer for you, Mr. Radek."
- "Mr. Bak."
- "Who? Whatever. I even have nine proposals, for example Orlando."
- "And the other eight?"
- "Whatever. Orlando is great. It's in Florida. Have you been to Florida?"
- "Yes, I have."
- "Oh, whatever. So our hotel in Orlando..."
- "And other places?"
- "...is comfortable, has a garage, a gym, and for the price of two nights..."
- "What about New York, for example?"
- "...you can sleep for three."
- "Is breakfast included?"
- "Oh, no. Whatever, you can eat something outside the hotel."
- "I can also sleep outside the hotel..."
- "Whatever. Are you interested?"
- "What's your name?"
- "Ashley."
- "Forget it, Ashley. The timing is not ideal. I just came back from work, and my wife put calories on the table, waving at me. Maybe next time."
- "Mr. Radek! But Orlandooo, garaaaaaage, gyyyyyyym, Orlandoooo... three nights!"
- "Greetings on behalf of calories, have a nice weekend."

I have some stings of remorse until this very day. Maybe I should have booked the trip to Orlando?

Chapter 19

Houston, we have a problem, or you can also become a technician

In primary school, it turned out that I have two left hands when it comes to Do-It-Yourself. I treated "DIY" episodes on TV as if they were science fiction. I admired amateur repairmen of TV sets, washing machines, and irons. I enthusiastically read about the exploits of Mr. Gondera from "Book of Rascals" (my teenage time most favorite reading): he could repair both the school building's roof as well as his colleague's watch. I always loved cars that only needed fuel, avoiding workshops like the Military Gendarmerie avoids a drunk soldier. I held the Handyman in high regard.

Until recently.



I treated the announced visit of a dishwasher repair specialist as a chance to see CR7 in action live. The virtuoso arrived in a Ford with the Samsung logo; a similar logo adorned the back of his snow-white hoodie. He approached the dishwasher with dignity, which I felt sorry for a moment – it will soon succumb to the master's

0:3 before halftime. Surprisingly, the answers to questions about the symptoms of the malfunction did not cause the serviceman to make a grimace from the "I know everything, it's a five-minute job" series. On the contrary – he looked like someone who sees a Samsung dishwasher for the second time in his life. With a skillful move, he took out his smartphone and then virtually guided his colleague from the base through the interior of the equipment using the camera, ending the show with the question "what now?". He tried to execute Houston's commands several times. Unfortunately, Apollo did not land on the Silver Globe, and the dishwasher remains idle. CR7 put on a hoodie with a logo, got into the branded Ford, and drove away, leaving behind a pleasant memory – after all, he tried in the end.

To become a technician in the States, all you need is a car, a jumpsuit, a bag of tools, and a smartphone.

And a lot of audacity with a touch of Obama's "Yes, we can".

Chapter 20

The Miracle

Before the move into the United States, we notified several entities of this fact of life, including submission of the formal check out notice as well as our c/o address in Switzerland. The said notification was taken seriously by a few of them: the commune office (which made the checkout for us, by the way), the tax office (which settled our tax liabilities up to the last rappen – the Swiss cent) and the bank (which allowed us to keep the account once we populated a pile of documents). The “non-believers” included the health insurance company, the power plant, and the department of transportation – all of them kept sending the correspondence to our Swiss address.



A month ago, in the bunch of correspondence our friends shipped to us from Switzerland, some novelty appeared: in a matt-grey envelope and a “Bundesrepublik Deutschland” post stamp on it. The regional municipality of Karlsruhe kindly informed that a driver in the attached photo had significantly

exceeded the speed limit and requested to submit the driver's personal data without undue delay.

I admit my wife looked simply great in the photo.

I made up my mind very quickly and decided to surrender – and sent a very submissive email with a request to get the instructions for settling the fine. Hostile silence followed. Few weeks later I found another matt-grey envelope in our mailbox. The authorities demand the driver's personal data immediately. I could swear I sensed a scent of death reaching my nose from the envelope. I phoned the number quoted in the letter and listened to a female voice providing the official working hours of the municipal authorities: from 8:30 until 11:00 am. I sent another email asking for a phone call appointment while referring to our permanent residence in a completely different time zone. I started watching the sky anxiously, expecting some Luftwaffe fighter jets launching guided missiles towards our house in Peachtree City.

This morning I received an email from the authorities: "Due to your relocation to USA, we herewith inform you the case had been discontinued".

I feel as if I had escaped from the fortress in broad daylight.

The miracle.

Chapter 21

Bank transfer the hard way, or e-banking in an envelope with a stamp

A few years ago, there was a cartoon joke circulating on Facebook, starting with the question "Have you ever seen a real Email?", followed by a photo of the identity card of a resident of one of the Latin American countries, whose one of the many names was "Email".

Have you ever seen a real bank transfer? What? You think it's "impossible"?



As mentioned in one of the previous chapters, I resisted ordering a checkbook for several weeks. I wanted to set the payment for the first rent on an e-account. I was surprised that I would have to pay a 1% commission for a "wireless" transfer. A colleague at work advised me to create a so-called Bill Pay. "It's free, but it takes 5-10 days." I laughed: do they breed carrier pigeons in the bank or something? When the landlord actually confirmed the receipt of the rent amount after more than a week of verbal harassment, I started to investigate the reasons for this state of affairs.

Attention: everyone reads the following paragraph at their own risk.

After creating a Bill Pay transfer, the sender's bank prints a check for the specified amount made out to the beneficiary's name. Then they put the check in an envelope, stick a stamp on it, and drop it in the mailbox. A few days later, the beneficiary receives the package, opens the envelope (optionally: removes the stamp, puts it in a stamp album, and puts it on the shelf), takes out the check,

goes to their bank with it, waits in line, says "how are you", deposits the check into their account, leaves, and the next day at dawn, enjoys the money.

This must take time.

Steam engine. Telegraph. Photography. Telephone. Internal combustion engine.

Light bulb. Internet. Mobile phone. Electric car.

Bill Pay.

Employment policy, or it hurts because it has to hurt



Beresta Hotel. Mosquitoes ate my hands almost to the bone (the Volkhov river nearby), but that's not the point. There are not many guests, but at breakfast, it feels crowded; dominant colors: black and white. Yes, that crowd is the staff: the Manager of Admitting the Culprit (pardon, the Guest) to the Room plus His Deputy. Then: Table Manager, Tablecloth Manager If There Is One on the Table, Spoon Manager, Fork Manager, Knife Manager. Further: Omelet Managers, Cold Cuts Managers, Hot & Cold Drinks Managers. And the main staff: nice girls in their twenties. My former workmate (greetings, Adam) wondered aloud to what extent the Breakfast Service team members are at risk of death. Out of boredom.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, USA, September 2018:

Hilton Garden Inn. Breakfast: one lady greets, another leads to the table, a third brings cutlery. In addition to that: Coffee Machine Guard with a Chuck Norris face just before a roundhouse kick. Plus several other staff members without a clearly designated task: an average of three pax per customer.

Hartsfield Atlanta Airport, USA, July 21, 2018:

Out of forty (40) passport control stations, only seven (7) are open. Waiting time for control: three (3) hours.

Hartsfield Atlanta Airport, USA, November 8, 2018:

Out of forty (40) passport control stations, only three (3) are open. Waiting time for control: 2 (two) hours.

"Make America Great Again". Please.

Chapter 23

Coordination and disinformation, or how to handle transport damage

Chapter #8 describes fun we had during the unpacking of our belongings from the container. Besides charming memories, the unforgettable team of "Three And Then Two Musketeers" left behind a quite substantial number of damaged furniture and appliances. Some of the damage occurred during transport (e.g. bike), but the vast majority was due to a careless approach to unpacking: torn seats, chairs, tables, TV set casing - how could they know that there was something inside the box?



I submitted a claim for damages to the company managing (or rather pretending to manage) the moving process, but I won't mention the name out of mercy. They referred me to the carrier, who in turn directed me to the insurance company, and they - to the damage settlement company. I felt that there would definitely be material for a diary entry and I was right.

After several email exchanges and reminders, a visit by a "technician" was scheduled to assess the situation and develop a repair plan. On the eve of the

planned visit (Sunday, around noon), I received a phone call informing me that the "technician had a sudden family matter" and a new appointment needed to be scheduled. Well, these things happen. On Monday morning, we all left the house. When I arrived at the office, my cell phone rang.

- "This is the technician speaking. Why is no one home?"

I muttered an unpleasant word under my breath, but politely explained the reason for our absence.

- "What family matters? Did Tracy tell you that? Bitch..."

I called Tracy.

- "Whaaat? Has he actually come? Bastard..."

A new appointment was set for the following Monday. Mr. B. (a colleague of Mrs. B. from work) took out a pencil, a notebook, and a digital camera, which made me sentimental - my late Dad bought exactly the same model back in 2004. Mr. B. looked at the equipment, unnecessarily unscrewed the bicycle rack, and then concluded that nothing was suitable for repair and requested a refund according to the cost estimate prepared before the move.

- "The bike too?"
- "Yes."

Mr. B. is a cool human being, apparently - I thought to myself - short and to the point. But as he was about to leave, he muttered under his breath that "maybe something could still be fixed". He will get back to us. Of course, and it's no surprise, he never contacted us again. After two weeks (and a few reminders), a letter came from the insurance company. They will reimburse for the furniture, but not for the bike - because according to the technician's report, "the damage may not have occurred during transportation". So it looks like we are smart - scammers.

My blood pressure rose significantly. Then I wrote a very specific email to higher-level managers in all the involved institutions. I won't give up.

For now, I understand what Tracy meant.

Chapter 24

The Norm

To begin with, a definition of the “norm” according to Wikipedia:

- In psychology, it is a scientific construct that determines the boundaries of normal human behavior;
- In technology, it is a document resulting from standardization and standardizing broadly understood research, technological, production, and service activities.



I will denote the norms so far known to us four – the family members – with the letter A, and those we have become familiar with over the past few months with the letter B.

Situation 1: The old dishwasher does not wash

A – choose and buy a new one, with delivery, installation, and removal of the old one. Implementation time: a few days.

B – insist that the old one washes well, measure the space under the countertop several times, bring it on our own, damage the installation using Bruce Lee's help,

send three service technicians after a breakdown, take measurements, etc.
Implementation time: currently over two months, the "open" formula.

Situation 2: The roof is leaking

A - take preventive measures during the construction of the house by installing a solid roof covering

B - observe wet spots on the ceiling and notify the landlord

Situation 3: Changing car tires

A - from summer to winter or when the tread wears out

B - when (if at all) they fall off. On the sides of the roads, there are piles of evidence of norm functioning

Situation 4: Delivery of ordered furniture

A - on the day specified in the agreement

B - when the company happens to have time

Situation 5: Payment for water supply

A - bank transfer, credit card

B - only a check sent in an envelope with a stamp

Situation 6: Credit card security

A - chip, PIN, signature

B - none (maybe no one will steal or intercept electronic data)

Situation 7: The most important update from the boys' school

A - progress in learning, behavior

B - balance on the cafeteria credit card

Situation 8: Building materials

A - brick, block, concrete

B - plywood, rubbish, glue

Situation 9: Urging to certify untruth

A - a crime

B - normal practice (e.g. in the bank)

Situation 10: Prices of goods in stores

A - gross, in some outlets (e.g. for entrepreneurs) gross and net

B - net (you will find out the gross at the cash register)

Situation 11: Carbonated drinks

A – sweet

B – sweet to the point that your brain crackles. Try, for example, a Fanta.

Situation 12: Tips

A – discretionary

B – try not to give at least 15% (and have your shoelaces tied well, knowledge of martial arts is welcome)

Situation 13: Knowledge about Poland

A – a large country in central Europe, two citizens – three opinions

B – it exists (probably)

Situation 14: Marking of police vehicles

A – front, back, sides of the vehicle plus flasher beacon on the roof

B – no standards whatsoever, the number of light signals evokes associations with a funfair

Situation 15: Live sports event

A – an opportunity to see sports champions in action

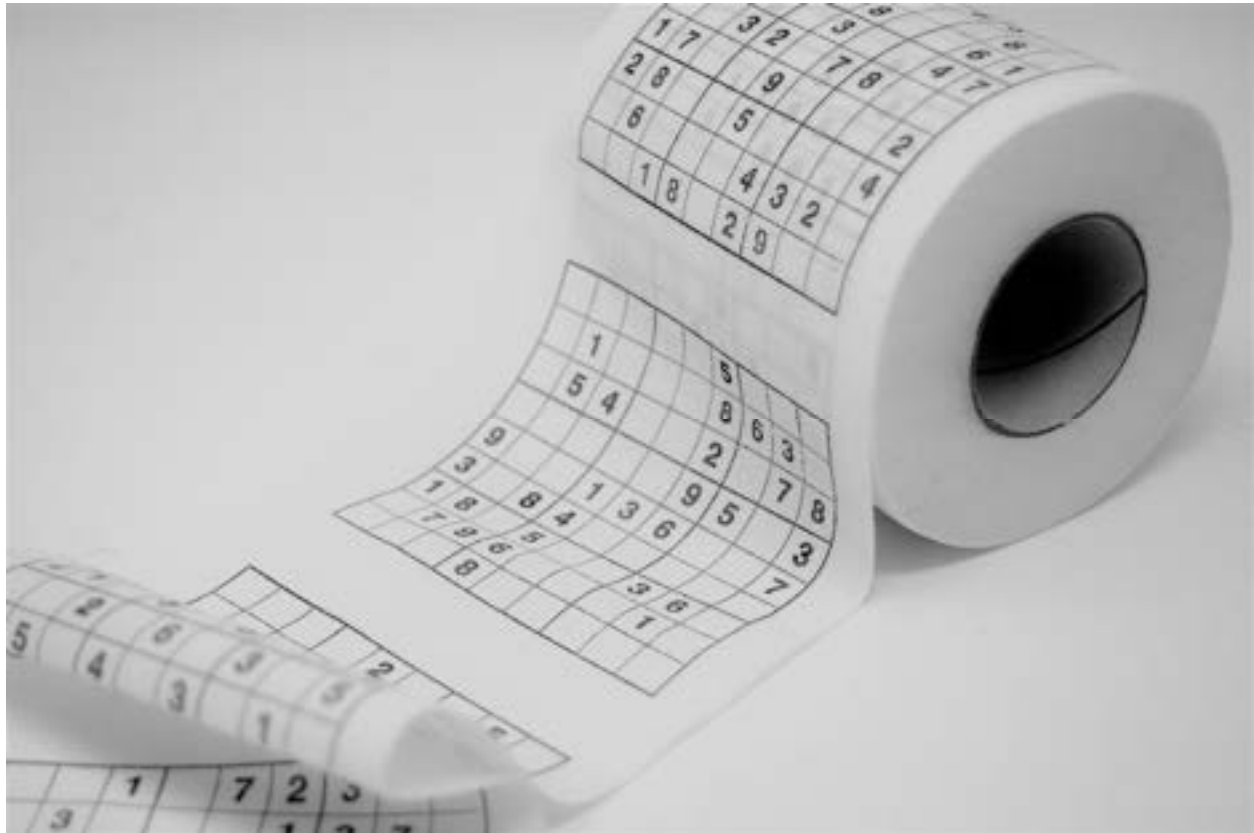
B – an opportunity to meet friends, eat a hamburger, hot dog, and fries

The list is certainly open.

Chapter 25

Game of “Thrones”, or clash of civilizations

Return to Peachtree City after a Christmas break spent in Poland quickly brought us back down to earth with the so-called prose of life: once again, the toilets in the house got clogged. It is known that there is little that makes a morning before going to work more attractive than operating a plunger.



The alarmed homeowner called the friendly Golden Handyman – a Vietnamese man of such small stature that you have to look at him three times to see him once. Tuan, also known as Birdie, appeared on a Sunday morning armed with a several-meter-long plunger and immediately got to work. When asked about the durability of the results, he just laughed. And rightly so because the toilets got clogged again the next day. This time, Birdie appeared accompanied by the homeowner, who gave a lecture on proper toilet usage. Here are the most important theses and demands from the lecture:

- in the USA, it is completely normal for toilets to get clogged;

- nevertheless, the previous tenants of the house somehow didn't have any clogging issues (at this point, the lecturer's eyes took on a mocking expression);
- water should be flushed before, during, and after (in the end, it's good that it's not instead);
- dishwashing liquid should be poured into the tank to give it the right slipperiness;
- the toilet paper found in the restroom was deemed too thick - the thinnest possible should be bought (by the way, the money saved can be used to buy an additional plunger).

Once again, we had the feeling of involuntary participation in a "We gotcha" type of TV show, but a short survey among friends confirmed the theses of the lecture. It turns out that you can attack military targets in Syria and Iraq with surgical precision, but it's safer to go to the woods when nature calls.

It is highly likely that in the next (potential, knock on wood) report of a clogged toilet, the user manual will be enriched with a new element.

Artificially induced diarrhea.

Chapter 26

Delighting the Customer, or the wardrobe key

Receiving a new car is usually a cool thing. It's still just some metal, four wheels, seats, and a steering wheel, but it gives a nice thrill: different lights on the dashboard, a different engine rumble, a different compartment for weapons.



The first problem arose when trying to reach the vehicle pick-up point. The GPS gave up, and the hitched tongues spoke so vaguely that we felt completely lost. Finally, we arrived at the said point, with an interior resembling a retail discount outlet. James warmly greeted us, asking friendly about the check for three and a half thousand dollars.

- "And what is it for?"
- "Well, state tax."

Since I didn't have the infamous checkbook at that time (it's hard to believe), I was already planning to go home and open the closet where we keep our savings under the underwear, but I had a thought - what's the matter? After all,

the leasing company did not mention any additional fees the day before. I immediately called them, but no one answered the phone - why stress out? James helplessly spread his hands - without paying the said amount, we can only take selfies with the cars. James's boss nodded approvingly at his subordinate's words, then went to the office to paint her nails. Minutes started passing by. Finally, James got bored with our sad faces and called the leasing company himself. Surprisingly, they answered his call. He returned with the face of a conqueror of K-2 in a winter approach on the eastern wall: Bingo! The leasing company told him that it was a lease, which he didn't know before because they didn't send him a contract. So, I can keep the mentioned three and a half thousand dollars under my underwear. And basically, we can already receive the cars, except for one document that can only be issued by Ashley from accounting, who is at lunch. We managed to drink no more than six coffees and fourteen bottles of mineral water, and Ashley came back. The vehicle pickup took us a total of two hours and forty-five minutes, and the charm of receiving a new car seemed to have somewhat weakened.

The next day, a link to the service evaluation questionnaire came by email. I ignored the scale from 1 to 10 and entered minus 36.

Chapter 27

Heating technologies, or warm, warmer...freeze!

In the state of Georgia, there is a winter that is characterized by the fact that it is sometimes cold and sometimes not. Because no sensible person will invest in sand-salt spreaders and the jobs of so-called road workers, state authorities oppose the variable weather with determination and resilience: as soon as the weather forecast mentions snow in amounts exceeding six flakes per square foot, an alarm is sounded. Schools, health centers, and other public facilities are closed, airlines cancel flights, and employers recommend their teams to exercise the "home office" option.



The same was true last week when a snow-ice cataclysm was announced for Tuesday. The morning greeted the Atlanta area with sunny and almost cloudless skies, and the attack of winter occurred between 12:00 and 12:03 local time,

although some may have missed it. Since I had a business trip planned for Tuesday, armed with an extra scarf, I headed down the empty highway to the deserted airport, from which I flew on an empty Boeing to Greensboro, where I rented an empty Dodge from Avis. The temperature in the hotel room turned out to be bearable – thanks to the air conditioning, which also generated such a level of decibels that the association with a tractor was quite natural. Since I didn't have earplugs on me, I decided to turn off the tractor (pardon, the air conditioning) and went to sleep. I dreamt that I was a member of the Walrus Club and taking a bath in an ice hole. In the middle of the night, the tractor had to rattle again. The next hotel was similar, with the air conditioning roaring even louder, as if Marriott was competing in this field with Hilton. The third hotel offered a similar choice: either loud or cold.

Designer of the house we rent, either skipped physics classes or was busy exchanging love letters with Jane from the front row. If he had listened more carefully, he would have learned that hot air rises, so placing the thermostat upstairs is not a good solution. We experience the effects of this brilliant engineering idea every day in the winter season: it's as cold as Siberia downstairs, so we wear extra warm underwear, while upstairs we can parade in Victoria's Secret outfits. Yet – not always, because the thermostat activates the ventilation according to its own (artificial intelligence?) algorithm known only to itself. Talking about this with the landlord is like talking to a brick wall.

In the office, cold air blows constantly, so most of the staff (including myself) use electric heaters and take the opportunity to showcase their sweater collections – the latter has another practical advantage – you can stubbornly wear a crumpled shirt under it.

Google, Apple, Tesla, and NASA are reportedly working on radical modernization of heating technologies, forming an appropriate consortium for this purpose.

May it be spring soon!

Chapter 28

Car service station, or “yes” and even “no”

When the first malfunction appears in a new car, the heart of its owner is filled with a sense of betrayal: I take care of you (feeding you with gasoline), keep you in a warm garage, and even occasionally splurge on a better wash (with wax and floor mats), and you do this to me...? There is a phase of disbelief (nah, I must have misheard), then rejection (it's more like something is ringing in my ear), hope (it will go away on its own), until finally acceptance (something is definitely rattling under the steering wheel) and decision (I need to schedule a visit to the service station).



Over the phone, I used all the negotiation techniques I knew to get the closest possible appointment. I succeeded, not letting myself be pushed to "the day after tomorrow," securing a slot for the next morning. Upon arrival at the service station, however, no one mentioned the line from my favorite beer commercial ("Good you're here, we've been waiting for you"). I was given a piece of paper, a pen, and asked to write down my address, car details, and a brief description of

the malfunction. I opened my mouth in surprise because I had already provided all this information the previous day over the phone yet decided to keep my mouth shut. From the options "do you want to leave the car or wait," I definitely chose the latter, imagining that someone like James would soon remove the steering wheel, fix the cause of the rattling, reinstall the steering wheel, then run up to return the keys, apologize for the inconvenience, and offer a 12-year-old Ballentine's as a peace offering. I sat in the waiting room. After two hours of picking my nose, my finger started to hurt, and I received a text message telling me to come and pick up the vehicle. Slightly drowsy, I approached the counter, behind which sat a girl in her thirties and a teenager with acne – the latter one a bit busy, a bit scared. I asked friendly if the defect was removed. The response came immediately in stereo system: the boy with a smile, saying "yes", the girl with a serious face, saying "no". For a moment, my brain creaked, but it soon turned out that the girl was right. They don't have that particular spare part, but when they do, I can come again. They will call me. The youngster looked at me with clear sympathy.

Of course, they did not call, why would they? After all, it's just some creaking, and not a fuel pump failure for a lack of a better example, so there's no need to panic. Few days later, I called them myself, feeling like a wasp poisoning the relatively bearable life of the service station employees. Mindful of previous experiences, I left the car for the whole day (I was afraid of finger pain). And even after a text message summons, I waited for an hour to pick it up – there were no volunteers to search for the vehicle in the external parking lot.

And once again, I could enjoy the soothing silence while turning the steering wheel.

Those are small things that make us happy.

Chapter 29

Soccer, football, or something in between

Mercedes-Benz Stadium is a state-of-the-art facility shared by the Atlanta Falcons and Atlanta United. The former is in the NFL (football league), while the latter is in the MLS (soccer league).



Everyone who wants to attend can fit in, as there are over 74,000 seats available. Last Sunday, we decided to go to a soccer match with our sons. We bought tickets online, in the corner section – for a hundred dollars each. In the central section, it is at least twice as much. For comparison, a regular (non-premier) match in the English Premiership costs around 40–50 pounds, in the German Bundesliga around 40 euros, and in the Swiss Super League around 50 Swiss francs. How could an average resident of Atlanta, say Mr. John Smith, afford two hundred dollars plus parking, plus a mandatory burger with fries and cola, and often some club merchandise? Hopefully, not from prostitution, bank robberies, or casual muggings...

The roofed arena and artificial turf immediately create a quite specific atmosphere for a European: the visual and acoustic impressions are significantly different from an open stadium with natural grass. After being bombarded with advertisements on giant screens, it's time for the opening ceremony: a rock-rap song, a strange couple dressed in green (OK, it was St. Patrick's Day), a moved veteran of the US Air Force followed by an a cappella national anthem. Everyone stands and watches the entire match in this position after the first whistle from the referee. In Europe, except for the "ultras" sectors, fans get excited in situations like a goal action, a brutal foul, the favorite player entering the field, or scoring a goal. In the sector behind the goal, fans sing, dance, wave flags (clearly copied from Europe), but it is impossible to resist the impression that it is all forced, artificial, imported. Spontaneous cheers from our sector include the likes of "let's do it!", "go forward!", "let's unite and win!", "play as a team!". Spine-chilling, is it not? The speaker informs the audience that there was an offside. In response, the audience applauds. The referee does not show a yellow card to a player from the visiting team? The audience shows beautifully cut yellow cards to the referee. Is the audience bored? Well, then they go for another burger - maybe they will meet someone they know. To complete the picture: a reddish mist enveloping the players coming onto the pitch and fires bursting behind the goal after the locals score a goal.

It seems to me that we were with the Boys at a soccer match in the American style twice: the first and the last time, at a time.

And I reckon an American would have similar impressions at a baseball game between the Koluszki Lions and the Pcim Predators teams played at a modern facility in Brzeszcze.

Of course, with all due respect to the residents of all the mentioned places.

Chapter 30

Cherry blossom festival, or a ticket for merry-go-round

A few weeks ago, among leaflets promoting white teeth, a flat stomach, and thick hair, a completely new thing appeared: a photo of a Japanese lady in traditional attire against the backdrop of one of the national symbols of the country that shamelessly bombed Pearl Harbor over half a century ago. The lady's smile encouraged participation in the Cherry Blossom Festival in Macon, Georgia.



A quick glance at the map allowed for a quick decision – let's go! An hour and a half, or an hour and fifteen minutes for those with a fast car. In our minds, we imagined rows of cherry trees enveloped in the shy rays of spring sun and (this is my own personal part of the vision) quite bold and flirtatious glances of geishas strolling among the trees. Parking: \$5, so was the admission ticket per person – and the gates of cherry paradise opened. Specifically, most of the attractions in the amusement park: a Ferris wheel, carousel, shooting range, slide, haunted castle, and a few guys jumping from a fairly high tower into a small pool. The cherry theme was upheld by a cola with that exact flavor, available for purchase

at a colorful booth. No rows of trees, though. However, we did not give up and asked a couple of security guards. The lady pointed her finger at one sad, but still blooming tree, indicating that it was the only one in the local Central Park. The man advised us to go to a tree farm, but Google Maps remained indifferent to the name of the place, heartlessly claiming it was a real estate agency. A third security guard chimed in, proudly holding a grilled turkey leg. He mentioned the name of another park, saying he couldn't guarantee that we would find the desired trees there. Due to a lack of better options, we decided to go to Amerson River Park. The security guard's decision not to put his head at stake, turned out to be correct.

We will remember the festival with nostalgia, although probably without regret.

Chapter 31

Going out to a restaurant, or let it ride

We entrusted the choice of a restaurant to Uncle Google, specifying that it should be Italian and close by. To preempt a bit, it turned out to be just because of its name, and it was so close that we ordered a Lyft.



Amici, because that's what this place in St. Augustine Beach is called, is characterized first and foremost by the fact that it has front doors in the back. Right behind them, a sign instructs you to wait, as the staff will show you to your seats - with exclamation marks - so breaking the rule probably results in electric shock. Soon, a girl in a mini skirt (unfortunately) with a figure reminiscent of one of the main characters from the Muppet Show (not Kermit), appeared. We sat at a table inside the room resembling a Mexican hacienda. We started to doze off when the designated waitress arrived. She took our order, asking for the name of each dish to be repeated twice - she can hear well, but apparently not clearly enough. She was very surprised that there were four of us and we wanted three Cokes - completely nonsensical. After a few minutes, the drinks arrived - the fresh orange juice turned out to be something like a Fanta with ice cubes that are very popular in the States, the rest was more or less accurate. After another dose of waiting, two toasted pieces of bread with tomato (the local bruschetta) and a tomato with a piece of cheese (the local caprese) appeared on the table. Out of boredom and partially out of hunger, we ate all the bread from the bowl. The pleased waitress asked if she should bring more bread or if we should wait for the pizza. We decided on the latter, and that was a mistake.

I love to eat, pictures don't lie, I always liked it, although I used to burn more calories before and now (for some reason) it seems like a bit less. But I haven't had anything as disgusting as the pizza at Amici in a long time. It's better to keep silent about the "capellini di mare". There was nothing left but to ask for the bill, but even that proved to be problematic - the waitress took such a good care of the guests that it was difficult to determine if she was still in the restaurant. There is a reason why they talk about the culture of eating. In Europe, it is an adventure, joy, discovery, experience. On the other side of the ocean though, it is a soulless process of replenishing calories.

Italian, Mexican, Greek, French cuisine? Just let it ride!

Chapter 32

Blood pressure monitor, or the Faxmen's counter-attack

Last week I received a letter. Chrysler Capital reminds us that the cars they generously (for a fee, though) lease to us are assets and as such should be insured. Therefore, Chrysler Capital will be delighted if we send a copy of the extended policy by mail, and even better – by fax.



Last Christmas I received a blood pressure as a gift – although my family likes me, they also worry about me. Yet even without using it, I was sure that my blood pressure had risen. Fax!

There's no point in beating around the bush, so I immediately called the insurance company. After exchanging pleasantries with the automated robot, I was connected to a live person who identified me, said "how are you," and the sacramental "how can I help you". A copy of the policy? Piece of cake. If I just provide the fax number, they will send me the document immediately. As my blood pressure was rising, I gathered the courage to mention that since I was identified by the system, it is probably clear that my name does not read "Fred Flintstone". After a moment of silence, the insurance agent laughed and promised to send the fax to Chrysler Capital instead. The agent was still laughing

during the "thank you for your business," which I took at face value.
You always have to find some common ground.

Also if it is a cartoon movie character.

Chapter 33

Tell me something, or a visit at a medical center

First, you need to sign up for an appointment. Online form, personal data, insurance information, description of symptoms, selection of date and time (and the doctor, if options available).



Upon arrival at the medical center, the receptionist hands over a stack of papers to be filled out by hand. Personal data, insurance information, description of symptoms, consent to the disclosure of medical history information.

Then, a face-to-face meeting with the MA (Medical Assistant), someone who conducts an interview and enters data into the system. Personal data, insurance information, description of symptoms, past illnesses, medications taken, etc.

Then, the doctor or qualified nurse enters the office. They glance at the computer and... conduct an interview, starting with personal data, insurance information, description of symptoms, information about past illnesses, medications taken, etc.

The questions asked by the doctor suggest that all previous individuals recorded

the given information in private notebooks rather than in the system.

Finally, the long-awaited finale: the prescription is electronically sent to the designated pharmacy. Medications are ready for pick-up immediately:

- "The pharmacy confirmed receipt of the prescription."

Upon arrival at the pharmacy, a dialogue with the trumpet takes place.

- "I would like to fulfill the prescription."
- "Trumpet"
- "What trumpet?"
- "What prescription? We haven't received anything. Please come back in half an hour."

I came back after three hours. The prescribed medications were not ready yet.

Another opportunity for training on assertiveness

Regardless of the country and level of organization of the healthcare service, it is best to be healthy, beautiful, and wealthy.

Chapter 34

Il villaggio balla e canta, or Italian cuisine – the American style

In national kitchens, "borrowings" sometimes occur, also referred to as "fakes" – just to quote my wife.

In many restaurants in Poland we will find some "national" names of certain dishes, e.g. Bretagne-style beans, Ukrainian borsch, or Greek-style fish. Interestingly enough, neither the French, nor Ukrainians, nor Greeks have any slightest idea about those.

For some reason, many chefs can't resist a temptation to add "something of their own" to traditional dishes, a kind of immortality element – probably hoping it will make the dish "special".



In the United States, this takes on a completely peculiar form. It would seem that there is little room for maneuver when it comes to pizza and spaghetti – after all, they are just dough and noodles respectively. Nothing could be further from the truth.

First of all, Americans do not consider Italy to be the mother of pizza – in the common opinion, Pizza Hut is the origin of this dish. As a result, in many "Italian" restaurants, the consumer will not find pizza on the menu. And if they do come across it, it is likely to be dripping with fat. That is exactly what a pizza ordered from Domino's or Papa John's is like – the terms "Hawaiian" or "vegetarian" are completely secondary – all the ingredients happily float in a greasy sauce.

Second of all, chain restaurants like The Italian Oven, Olive Garden, or Carrabba's have as much in common with Italian cuisine as a chair with an electric chair. Even family restaurants run by Italians from generation to generation, commit a kind of betrayal: I personally met the owner of Borgo Italia restaurant in Peachtree City, a bit accidentally – he sat down at my table just to introduce himself. I tactfully brushed off the question "did it taste good?" with mentions of the weather variability, so as not to cause any discomfort to the person.

Third of all, a visit to "Amici" in St. Augustine, Florida turned out to be a complete disaster – as described in Chapter #31.

Fourth of all, some sign of hope is Cesare's in Chester, Virginia, where I am writing these comments. Genuine caprese, genuine calzone, genuine tiramisu. It doesn't mean though they haven't added an element of immortality: cinnamon in piccata sauce.

Yet this is something I am ready to forgive – because they have "1000 Stories" red wine on the menu – which is heaven in the mouth. Cheers!

Chapter 35

Midlife crisis, or enjoy the gym responsibly

When the aforementioned condition struck me some time ago, I began analyzing options to alleviate it. Two of them quickly emerged on the battlefield: buying a motorcycle or a gym membership. I definitely chose the latter one because, firstly, it is much cheaper, and secondly, kidney donors in the USA are not entitled to any discounts, not even at Taco Bell's. Besides, the prospect of achieving a beautifully sculpted figure seemed incredibly attractive and quite practical in application: one wouldn't have to constantly catch their breath on the beach and could completely ignore the family's teasing, suggesting a resemblance to the Michelin mascot.



The first encounter with the fitness club under the prophetic name One Life was promising: a peculiar scent permeating the entire place stimulated the body to action, several TV screens around allowed one to stay up to date with exciting golf competitions, although the groans of men with barbells and dumbbells clearly foreshadowed the torment on the path to the title of Mister Beach. Some

gentlemen, however, had bicep measurements significantly exceeding the circumference of my thigh, which only motivated me to start the workout. The first session ended successfully, although I had to somehow manage the fact that for a few days I couldn't straighten my arms at the elbow because they somehow got stiff or something. I really liked the necessity of thorough disinfection of the equipment after use, which provided necessary breath and rest in an honorable manner. After familiarizing myself with several machines that offer torture to various muscle groups, I decided to take care of cardio and went to the second floor to use the treadmill, which offers a brilliant solution in its simplicity: it's like running somewhere, but you're still in the same place. When I thought I had "running nowhere" under control, an unfortunate incident occurred: I lost my balance and, as I fell, my hand briefly landed between the frame and the moving belt of the treadmill. The world spun before my eyes, and the sight of my little finger triggered a gag reflex – to such an extent that I was ashamed to show it to the club staff. However, pain and a deep-seated need for sympathy prevailed: I showed my finger (obviously, not the middle one) and asked for a first aid kit. One of the ladies glanced at my finger and then returned to her paperwork – apparently, she had already seen such or worse injuries. On the other hand, the other lady, who looked like a manager, kept cool, gestured to me that everything would be okay, and then opened a portable first aid kit, from which she took out a small, bulging gray bag. Placing it on the counter, she hit it several times with the edge of her clenched fist, and after a while, I was able to wrap my black and purple finger with an ice pack, suspecting that the punches had crushed the ice in the bag. The logic is there – if it is a small finger, then the ice cubes must be appropriately smaller. So equipped, I went to the medical emergency point, located a few kilometers away from the club. This is, of course, a story for a separate chapter of my diary, so I will only mention that in just two and a half hours, I was asked several times about my date of birth (I flatter myself that they couldn't believe that a 52-year-old could look that cool – the membership paid off much earlier than I could have imagined in my wildest dreams), had a finger X-rayed, a plaster applied to it, put in a splint, got some pain killer, and told to go home.

I expect to face the midlife crisis more than once.

Chapter 36

Puckish pumpkin smile, or a few facts about Halloween

Before coming to the United States, we were aware that it is one of Americans' favorite holidays, but we quickly realized that it is much more than just a "holiday" – it is also a kind of spectacle, a source of social pressure, and above all, a big business.



Halloween gadgets start appearing in stores at the beginning of August. First, pumpkins, which immediately catch the eye in containers in front of shopping centers. Then the shelves start filling up with other stuff – costumes, masks, headgear, toys, and other items, whose practical use is sometimes difficult to guess at first glance. Around mid-September, the store shelves in the Halloween section start creaking, and their contents seem to pour out and enter the baskets – after all, they are controlled by supernatural powers. About two weeks before the "zero hour," residential neighborhoods transform into realms of ghosts – houses and garages into haunted castles, and front lawns and gardens into cemeteries. Mega-spiders with flashing eyes climb onto houses, hanging

executioners wave to the audience from the eaves, and half-rotten creatures emerge from backyard graves, which Michael Jackson would be keen on inviting into his famous music video many years ago. Appropriate sounds reverberate from the speakers: growling, creaking, thumping, howling, hissing breaths, and other hellish noises. There are flashing lights, and garage doors serve as screens for horror movies. Proudly sitting on benches in front of the houses are the hosts – the creators of these arrangements – eagerly listening to the audience's admiration. Some of them also dress up as witches and other werewolves, and when they manage to scare a child with a sudden gesture (preferably making them scream in terror), they are particularly pleased with themselves. Children run from house to house, dressed up as cheerful skeletons, demanding sweets, money, or other material benefits from the hosts in exchange for refraining from mischief (the famous "trick or treat"). According to the gentle yet firm recommendation of the owners of the house we rented, we left a considerable amount of sweets on the porch to protect ourselves from any "tricks" – wanting to avoid, for example, arson or being shot with a semi-automatic weapon – especially since we didn't decorate the building with a single spider or skeleton. The decision was correct – the containers with sweets were plundered, and the household was spared. But we were definitely considered oddballs.

Americans' Halloween expenses in 2018 reached \$8.8 billion – comparable to the GDP of countries like Suriname, Maldives, or Bhutan. This amount includes expenses on costumes: about \$1.7 billion for adults, \$1.2 billion for children, and – attention: \$0.5 billion for household pets, mainly dogs, and cats. Approximately \$2 billion is spent on warehouse space for storing decorations – after all, a mega spider must live somewhere throughout the year. Pumpkins have become more expensive: the average price this year is \$4.18 per piece compared to \$4.04 last year.

For some reference: in 2019 the US Congress allocated \$9 billion for coronavirus tests.



Radek Bak – born in 1968 in Lodz, Poland. Polish by heart, International by talent. Started his studies at the Lodz University in socialism and graduated in capitalism hence knows virtues and vices of both respective political systems from firsthand experience. In his youth, a scout (for two days), a junior basketball player for ŁKS, a heavy metal band vocalist, a journalist for the "Piłka Nożna" weekly (four published articles), a customs warehouse employee, and a tireless promoter of Lipton tea. A football enthusiast and a groundhopper, with more than 140 football venues visited in 45 countries (the list is still open). A loyal (through thick and thin) supporter of Łódzki Klub Sportowy, his hometown's sports club. An academic lecturer (occasionally), a globetrotter, and a lover of Italian cuisine.

Since 2004, an emigrant by choice – partly his own and partly of the company he used to work for then. An astute observer, a critic, and sometimes a whiner.

In addition to all that, an incredibly modest person.