MY
#BLACKPROTEST

GREAT COALITION
FOR EQUALITY AND CHOICE
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CONTENTS

MY #BLACKPROTEST

Foreword by Marie Arena, Malin Björk, Terry Reintke and Angelika Mlinar, Members of the European Parliament ................................................................. 4

Introduction by Kinga Dunin and Kazimiera Szczuka ........................................... 6

Monika Pacyfka Tichy – Coming out .................................................................... 10

Katarzyna Krzysztofik – Poles, why aren’t you pro-life? ........................................ 16

Anonymous – So others won’t have to lie ............................................................. 18

Izabela Smętek – An introvert who joined a protest ............................................ 22

Olga Żmijewska – Sex & the city 2016 ................................................................. 26

Maria Trojanowicz-Kasprzak – Protest dilemmas ............................................... 30

Lady Pasztet- Katarzyna Barczyk – The hen’s eye view: brooding feminism ....... 34

Aleksandra Zakrzewska – 3 October, Monday ..................................................... 38

Jarosław Bloch – Mourning ................................................................................ 42

Katarzyna Chołuj – It’s difficult to dream ............................................................. 46

Katarzyna Durajska – *** .................................................................................. 50

Anna Be – A short story of brotherly love ........................................................... 54

Supernova – My Black Protest started a long time ago ..................................... 58

Photos ................................................................................................................. 62
As initiators and active Members of the European Parliament’s pro-choice network ALL OF US, we have been following the latest developments on women’s rights and gender equality in Poland with great concern.

In recent years, we have seen a societal backlash in relation to women’s rights – not only in different member states but also all over the world. Fights that we thought we had won have become battlegrounds once again. In Poland particularly, increasingly restrictive legislative proposals from the government on women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights and voluntary interruption of pregnancy have been put forward. These proposals would limit access to essential contraceptive services for thousands of women and girls throughout Poland; they also disproportionately discriminate against women who are unable to access gynaecological services at the moment they need them, and those who can’t afford a private facility.

In November 2016, the Polish Minister of Health announced that he was finalising a project to restrict access to UPA ECPs (emergency contraceptive pill) and reinstated the need for a mandatory doctor’s prescription for emergency contraceptives, citing the ‘misuse of the pill’ by teenage girls in Poland, but without offering any evidence. Last July, this restriction came into force, making Poland one of only two EU countries to require doctor’s prescription for emergency contraception.

We deeply regret this development. It is a fundamental human right for women to decide about their own bodies. Women’s and adolescent’s right to contraceptive information and services is grounded in basic human rights protections. The Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development recognised “the right of men and women to be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice”. Likewise, the CEDAW Committee has stated that reproductive rights include the right of women to autonomous decision-making about their health and that emergency contraception should be available without a prescription. Accessible and affordable ECPs need to be part of the method mix offered to women, especially in countries where access to safe and legal abortion is as restrictions as in Poland.
We, as Members of the European Parliament, stand in solidarity with Polish women and will continue to fight for their rights. We will continue to fight for the defence of women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights in Europe — and around the world — and for EU funding to safeguard the important work of non-governmental organisations in this area. Polish women’s rights organisations have played a significant role in advocating and mobilising forces, both inside the country and abroad—fighting for their rights. We were deeply impressed by the intensity of the Black Protest Movement which created a strong feminist chain all around the world and brought us together to stand up for our sisters in Poland.

It was a pleasure joining you on the streets, successfully pushing this crucial matter onto the European agenda and securing a victory after the worst-case scenario was averted. It is campaigns like this, defending the respect of fundamental rights, which we support as European parliamentarians. The voice of citizens is embodied in these crucial debates, and we see it as our responsibility to make them heard at all levels, European and national. The testimonies from this struggle must be kept alive to help future mobilisations whenever our rights are breached. It is a great honour for us to contribute to the translation of this collection of the testimonies and, in doing so, reach out to the new and future generations of feminists.

Marie Arena, Malin Björk, Terry Reintke, Angelika Mlinar
The stories in this volume describe contemporary Poland mostly from the perspective of medium-size cities and small towns. The authors, one of whom is a man, present the moment when they questioned the ordinary scheme of everyday life, the moment when the personal became political. Rebellion was born. Poland as seen by the contributors to this book is, above all, a land of hypocrisy. The Black Protest was a unique time when this hypocrisy was unmasked and rejected. The truth was finally stated – shouted out, in fact – about what it means to live one’s life in a country chosen by religious fundamentalists for an experimental battleground, the first stage of their effort to “re-Christianize Europe”.

According to official statistics, 1055 legal abortions were performed in Poland in 2016. And how many illegal ones? Probably around 100,000. Thanks to pharmacological abortion, abortion tourism, and the silence pact of doctors, the general public knows little about the dramatic reality of the underground abortion, of the women who have lost their health or even their lives. Such incidents do occur – we know they do, because occasionally we hear news of a doctor who has lost his or her medical license as a result of an abortion-related incident. There are also media scandals – comparatively rare ones, considering the scale of the problem – such as the infamous “Chazan case,” where an ob-gyn professor forced his patient to give birth to a baby with no scull. Such stories rarely hit the headlines, because women who have been put through such trauma don’t often have the will and the strength to pursue legal action, or to collaborate with journalists.

Most of those who are theoretically entitled to a legal termination nonetheless decide to fend for themselves and abort illegally. The official list of abortions kept by the Ministry of Health includes only terminations due to serious fetal deformation and damage. Cases of abortion where pregnancy is a result of rape, incest, or sex with a minor are not on the list at all, even though they are allowed by law. Rape victims and mothers of pregnant minors – especially in small towns – are scared of misinformation, delays, endless referrals (the “try Warsaw” strategy); they fear humiliation and smear campaigns engineered by local anti-choice groups; they know that gossip travels fast. Individual doctors and whole public health institutions use the ‘conscience clause’ as
their excuse to send women away. In effect, women are left to use the internet and to travel to clinics located close to the border, on the Czech, Slovak or German side. The patients there are mostly Polish women, who are not legally entitled to abortions in their own country, or who might be entitled in theory but would rather not face the ‘conscience’ of their local public hospital.

Women’s position vis-à-vis the law and the medical establishment has been deteriorating steadily since 1993, the year when the so called ‘compromise bill’ was voted in, banning abortion with very few exceptions. Sex education has been pushed out of Polish schools as controversial and possibly demoralizing; hormonal contraception not only has to be paid for out of pocket (public health insurance does not cover it), but is increasingly hard to obtain. The final instrument limiting women’s freedom was the 2015 verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal, which legitimated use of the ‘conscience clause’ by entire hospitals, and even regions. In this situation, the electoral victory of the populist right in 2015 put in danger not just the institutions of liberal democracy, but – quite directly – the lives and health of women. The anger that has been simmering for years finally erupted.

The Black Protest – such is the general name of all the demonstrations, petitions and pickets – went on for six months. The story begins on March 14th, when the “Stop Abortion” committee was officially registered. The organization behind this effort was the international hardline Catholic group Ordo Iuris, whose aim is “re-Christianize” Europe, mostly by eradicating women’s reproductive rights. It was not the first such effort, but this time the religious fanatics had a unique “now or never” chance to get their proposal due to the political setting in Polish parliament. Their initiative of a total ban on abortion was greeted with enthusiasm both by the Prime Minister Beata Szydło and by the leader of the ruling party, Jarosław Kaczyński.

Outside the Parliament, left wing political groups and women’s organizations decided to introduce a counter-initiative in reaction to the one proposed by Ordo Iuris. On May 11th, “Save the Women” committee began collecting the required 100,000 citizens’ signatures in support of a law draft entitled “On the Rights of Women and Conscious Parenthood,” which contained the full standard of reproductive rights.

On September 23rd, both proposal were put before the Parliament. “Stop Abortion” was sent for further proceeding to the Justice and Human Rights Committee, while the
“Save the Women” was rejected upon first reading, despite the 215,000 signatures the committee had collected. This rejection was the initial cause of the feminist-civic awakening that came after the Summer vacation. This wave of activism reached its peak on Black Monday – 3 October 2016 – an event that surpassed its organizer’s boldest dreams and expectations. For many hours, until late evening, thousands of people stood in protest in pouring rain (hence the umbrella as the demonstrations’ emblem). On October 6th, the Parliament somewhat nervously voted to reject the bill proposed by “Stop Abortion” Committee. The battle had been won.

What were the women really fighting for in the Black Protest and other pro-choice initiatives of 2016? The answer is: they were fighting for everything. They were fighting for their very lives. Law and Justice added a single stone to the huge pile that women in Poland are forced to carry, and that one stone started an avalanche. The experience is recorded in the stories collected in this volume.

Kinga Dunin, Kazimiera Szcuka
I saw him in the front row, among the people standing opposite the stage. My father, a rosary in his hand. “Women’s Rights! Human Rights!” – the crowd was shouting and moving like a wave. “At least now he will see for himself, with his own eyes, that things are really different from what they say on the news, that only a hundred people came” – that was my first thought. Then his eyes met my eyes. And fear came.

Solidarity Square was filled to the rim. Gray pavement, drab buildings, dark graphite-colored Freedom Angel commemorating December 1970. Gray leaden clouds. And ice-white walls of the Philharmonic Hall. Black clothes. Signs printed black on white. Only the red of our lipstick stands out in this monochromatic landscape, that and the rainbow-colored flag held high above my head.

The letters on my flag spell “PACE” – peace in Italian. I bought it in Assisi, next to the Basilica of Saint Francis. That is what the rainbow means over there: peace. But here I use it to say something different. Just as light is the mixture of all colors, each of them equally important, so, too, our country, Poland, should be a place where there is room for every color. A place where everyone can live in peace, just as their conscience tells them to live. Not just the white guys with blond hair, heterosexual, catholic, and unable to speak any foreign language.

A long time ago, I was a young girl who prayed constantly, read the Bible, and served at mass three times a week. Then I was a sacramental wife. A woman who believed all the bullshit patriarchy served me, wrapped as it was in the lyrical sacredness my father believes in.

My father knows I no longer believe. I don’t talk with him about anything that matters, though I see him from time to time, because my mom occasionally takes care of my son. At this moment, as always on Wednesday afternoons, the boy is with his grandma, but I am not at work, as I would normally be. I am on strike.
My father doesn’t know that my husband, who has been working abroad for a while, is involved with someone else, and so am I. My father doesn’t know the race, gender or age of our new partners. Why should I tell him, when I know without asking they are “the sort” he does not accept?

My father doesn’t know that I have attended every anti-government protest – both local and national – since the Party got into power. His Party. My father is a Party member.

So what is he doing here?
And what will happen next? Will my mom still want to help me, once she finds out that I attended an “abortionist” rally, while she took care of my child???

I approached him to say hello. He did not extend his hand to me, holding out the rosary instead. As if he thought the touch of the wooden beads would expel the devil from me.

I recently found a print-out of the anti-abortion vote: a list of parliamentarians stating who is for and who is against. It was among my childhood papers. I kept it for a future time, when I am grown up, so I would never vote for any of the “child-murderers”.

And now, here I am.
I’ve come a long way.

The way of the cross: each station is another human life, sentenced, whipped, nailed to the dead wood of ancient rules and romantic fantasies, another person, another living human being, known or unknown, some of them friends. All these people who made terrible decisions, just to avoid going to hell – be it the real eternal one, or the earthly hell of social disapproval. Because sex with your fiancée is a sin, because a condom is the devil’s invention, because the man who beats you and rapes you is your husband, and the sacred vows were made at the altar....

Some people managed to get out, others stayed, drugged with the opium, till the day they died.
More often they were the living dead, stuck, vegetating in toxic arrangements, falling into a state of bitterness and hatred for everyone, especially for those who had the courage to live differently. But there was death, as well. Like the girl from the prayer community at the cathedral, who bled to death while giving birth to her fifth child. Like the “saint” who refused to treat her cancer, because the treatment might endanger her pregnancy, and so she died and left three little kids behind,
orphaned, instead of living for them. Those are the kinds of decisions they want to force on us, those are the models they want us to follow.

They are like the Pharisees of whom Jesus said: “They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.” Lay next to your wife on the fertile nights, but don’t even touch her! Give birth to six children! And raise them! Allow him to beat you when he comes home drunk. Bear a disabled child and take care of her till the end of your days, and then die, filled with anxiety about what might become of her when you’re gone! Which one of them – the men who lead comfortable lives in their parish homes, or in the bishop’s residence – which one of them has even once smelled a dirty diaper?

And how about these sweet girls, deeply immersed in prayer, and these young boys with acne, taking part in “marches for life”? “Life”???

Are they ready to promise: “I will adopt your disabled child, I will devote my whole life to it, all you have to do is give birth”? No? What you are saying is this: “I believe that YOU will devote your entire LIFE to this child.” You are not defenders of life. You are Pharisees.

“The government is not a pregnancy! It can be aborted!” – chants the crowd. A hand-made sign, marker on cardboard: “You are not a woman. You are not a father. You’d better take care of your cat.” Next to it, a portrait of Uber-Chairman Kaczyński: “Women did not want me, so now they will pay for it.”

Soon, it will be my turn to speak. My father will be listening. Should I say it all as planned, or should I change or cut something?

“We demand decent sexual education in schools!” – Bogna shouts. WE-DE-MAND – several thousand voices repeat. “We demand access to contraception” – WE-DE-MAND.

Solidarity square has an unusual shape, like a wave. Its two opposite ends rise, creating something like an auditorium. Pale faces above dark clothes, like droplets of foam on an ascending storm wave, dark and cold. Above them – like so many sails – the signs: “No women, no country,” “Sentenced to Chazan,” “We have brains, not just uteri,” “I don’t want to die for someone else’s faith.”

At long last, it is my turn to go up on the stage and take the mike in my hand.
Dear Girls, Dear Boys – I begin. I have spoken at rallies before, but never to so many people. They are listening to me.

Sterilization – a safe medical procedure that gives practically a 100% protection against pregnancy – is illegal in Poland. If a doctor performs it at the patient’s request, he or she risks a ten year prison sentence, based on the same law that would penalize gouging someone’s eye out during a fight – infliction of serious bodily harm.

I hear my own voice, multiplied by the echo that comes from the hill-like structure in front of me. My own words, reflected from thousands of faces, thousands of heads, hundreds of banners. They return to me with a strange sort of force. I feel extraordinary energy rising up inside me. And I can feel myself making that decision. I will say it all.

Doctors refuse to perform treatment when the side-effect may be infertility. A woman with lumps on her cervix that need to be removed, hears her doctor say: “No, you MUST NOT do this. You may still give birth.” Must not? He tells her what she must and must not do to save her own health and life? I am the mother of a special needs child, a child with an incurable genetic dysfunction. And in order to get myself sterilized, I had to go to Germany!

Neither my father nor my mother know about this. That will be my second coming-out in a single hour.

Listen to me! Prenzlau is just sixty kilometers away, but it’s a different world. Nobody asked me over there: “Do you have children? How many? Why don’t you think it over? What if you come to regret it?” Why is someone always trying to force “happiness” on us? Why do they INSIST that we are too STUPID to make our own decisions about our own lives?

– Yes! She is right! It’s true! – I hear voices in the crowd.

We work for Poland, we pay taxes and health insurance, we bear children – so why is it that this country treats us as though we were legally incapacitated? Nobody else will bear the consequences of decisions they want to force on us, only WE will! If I have another child, if that child is disabled like the first one, whose burden will that be? MINE, and mine only.

No parish priest – I am shouting now – no bishop, no MP, no chairman, no “kindly master,” no puppet who pretends to be the prime minister today...
NOBODY WILL LIVE YOUR LIFE FOR YOU!
That’s why we have the right to decide!
Not some childless old man in a suit or in a cassock, living in a palace or a villa in Żoliborz.

I am looking straight ahead, at the people gathered in the square. Not at my father. I have no idea what the look in his eyes is, as I speak about his beloved Führer. About the merciless functionaries of his merciful God. The God he and his party buddies talk about so much, while they hold stones in their fists, ready to be thrust at witches such as myself.

Freedom is the highest value!
Freedom, which means I live as I want to live!
I make my own decisions about my own life!
NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US!

NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US! – thousands of voices take up the shout – NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US!

A dark-haired girl approaches me, holding a large banner, the one about brains. There are tears in her eyes. “Thank you for what you said. It is my story. They refuse to give me surgery. A doctor kicked me out of his office. And I had a cyst filled with a liter of blood. I could have died any moment. Still can. They don’t give a damn. They either say I am exaggerating, or they admit they don’t want to rot in prison for my sake. They see only a uterus, they don’t notice the human being. So thank you for saying this.”

I look at her filled with despair. I have no idea how I could help her. I don’t think you can go to Germany for this sort of procedure. At the same time, I feel that delivering my speech was really worth it. I was able to give strength to at least one person. So it was worth it to reveal myself to the Party agent. I give the dark-haired girl a hug, tears streaming down my face. The wind is tearing at my rainbow flag.

The rainbow is also a sign of hope.
As far as I can tell, women are the last group that can still inspire hope. The government did not give in to any other pressure. Thousands of people in the streets defending the constitution, defending the free media – none of this impressed them. Confronted with the regime’s self-confidence, these protests were like a wave hitting a concrete pillar. They don’t give a damn about the opinion of the EU or
international institutions. The only step back they have made so far was under the
pressure of women.
Hope has the face of thousands of women. It has their sad tired eyes, their clenched
lipstick-covered lips.
Poland is a woman.
She is not dead, as long as we….¹

My father leaves the gathering. This means that when I arrive at their place to pick
up my son, an hour or so from now, he will be there. Suddenly, I feel relief. As if
a huge weight fell off my shoulders. As if fear had suddenly disappeared. I am no
longer afraid.
If I am to help others fight for their rights, I first have to claim these rights for myself,
even in front of the harshest of judges, judges with no right to judge me – my parents.
So perhaps it was worth it, coming out to them. Perhaps it was worth growing up,
at last, at forty.

¹ Reference to Polish national anthem, which begins with the words: Poland is not dead as long as we are alive.
I’ve been standing in the hospital hallway for forty minutes. There are elevators on the left, on the right the door to the operating block. It’s cold. My feet are cold, I’m wearing only flip-flops. My mom brought them down when she heard I’m bleeding. She quickly packed a bathrobe and some basic hospital stuff. She thought she was bringing things I’ll need during the hospital bed rest. We’re standing there, all six of us, because the nurse summoned all the D&Cs to the hallway and took us to the procedure room. And left us there. I wait only for forty minutes because I go in second. Then, there’s the room, the chair, and under the chair the yellow bucket. There are quite a few people there, some of them doctors; get undressed and sit on the chair – the order is tossed in my direction. Barefoot and bare-assed, I climb the chair. When I wake up from the anesthesia, I will be in the recovery room. I will never find out what happened to my flip-flops and the bathrobe my mother brought. Or the contents of the yellow bucket.

Had I decided to abort a twelve-week fetus, I’d be a child-murderer. When the fetus died of its own, I wasn’t a mother who lost a baby. I was a D&C scheduled for Thursday.

I’m looking at a photograph from a protest against in vitro. Banners show Kasia, Macius, and Franio – children who want to live, but they have been frozen. I wonder why these life-defenders did not show up in front of the Parliament when the mothers of the disabled Kasia, Macius, and Franio fought for a decent life for them? Life means more than breathing and a beating heart. It means dignity, joy, the presence of another human being, fulfillment, satisfaction, self-realization. Kasia with Down syndrome needs all of that as much as Kasia from the corporation does. What kind of life awaits Kasia who, after being born, was placed an orphanage, and on turning 18 was moved to the nursing home where she will vegetate until
her death among the elderly? What kind of self-fulfillment is possible, when all the people with disabilities from the borough are assembled to sit and paint stained-glass windows or sculpt in clay, whether they have sick legs and good head or the other way around? I remember those ‘integration’ events where the only people to show up besides the families of the disabled were the representatives of the town hall. I remember the stares hovering over my disabled sister in the tram, in the café, in the club, in the cinema. I chuckle when I think about those people who protest against children making too much noise in the restaurant being confronted with an ugly, twisted child in a wheelchair, salivating all over. Not to worry, the parents of those children – single mothers most of them – can’t afford your restaurants.

I’m travelling through the city with an eight-months’ pregnant belly and a stroller with a sleeping three-year-old. I have to change three times. No one shows any interest in me. No one offers to help. Well, perhaps if I block the exit with the stroller, then they are bound to notice. Most likely if I was smoking and walking unsteady on my feet, no one would give me a second glance. It’s my life, right? And if I grabbed and cursed at the three year old? Fat chance. Then why is everybody so interested all of a sudden when I want prenatal tests?

Poles, why aren’t you pro-life? Why does the fight end for you on the other side of the woman’s belly? And let us be clear. You are bothered by noisy brats. You don’t care about the screams next door. You have a problem with strollers blocking the sidewalk. You are disgusted with the disabled and pissed off with the pregnant women. You feel mothers on maternity leave are lazy and calculating.

And suddenly, I really don’t understand why, you begin to think that it’s enough to wave a banner and you’re PRO?
My Black Protest is 16 years old; he has brown hair, loose curls. Every day before leaving for school, he tells me he loves me. I love him, too; after all, he does have my genes, though not only mine... Part of my child’s genetic pool comes from a stranger. My child was not conceived in love.

As I walk in the Black Protest, tears are streaming from my eyes. Once again, I am re-living the trauma of years ago. What happened then is still inside me, though time has taught me to live again. I had no choice but to learn.

Seventeen years ago, something happened that made me want to die. I couldn’t face another day. Ten minutes can change a lot in a person’s life. It can turn a life upside down. It can even end it. Though I survived physically, I felt my wounds pull me down. Psychological wounds do not heal as easily as those inflicted on the body.

I had to tell the story of what happened at 11 p.m. on a winter night to the police and again at the hospital. I had to submit to a medical examination. I had to wait before I could finally wash off the filth and the smell of the stranger’s body, the intruder’s body. After many hours of loneliness in public institutions, I was finally allowed to go home and shower. It was a long shower: two hours. I used my nails trying to scratch off my body an invisible layer. The shower did not help, I still felt dirty. My body was all red, covered in cuts, it felt old. I was just over twenty and still a student, and I had experienced something no woman should ever have to go through. No woman, ever.
During the months that followed, I lived in a daze. I would lie in bed for hours, making strange noises, utterly indifferent to the spring outside my window. I slept constantly. I took medications that stupefied me, but made it possible to keep on living, even if it was mere vegetation, nothing more.

After those first few months, I was brutally awakened from my daze. I was pregnant. I couldn’t believe the horror would have to go on. At the hospital, I had been told that rape very rarely leads to pregnancy, because the body instinctively rejects such a possibility. They gave me many different pills at the time, but not one of them was emergency contraception.

I had a panic attack. I thought I would choke, I couldn’t catch my breath. I felt my heart beating like crazy. My parents called an ambulance. I got a shot and fell asleep.

I knew I had to get rid of “it” as soon as possible; otherwise, I would never return to the world of the living. I started going to various doctors, standing in lines, getting referrals from one hospital to the next. Time was passing quickly. They even tried to undermine my credibility: I must have wanted it myself, and now I was just trying to get rid of the problem so I could continue my carefree student life. I was sent to a psychologist, who told me abortion would be yet another trauma and would not help me. No hospital was willing to take responsibility. Again and again, I was sent away with nothing by people whose faces told me that to them I was “the sort of woman” who did not deserve to be helped. Time went by and I was losing the power to fight. Finally, it was too late.

My pregnancy was no miracle to me, no blessing. It was all fear and anxiety, regrets, pain and despair. I did not stroll through shops in search of baby things, I did not wonder about the child’s sex, or plan how to name it. In fact, I didn’t even think of it as a child, my child. For me it was an “it,” something I needed to get rid of as soon as possible. Fetal movements made me furious. While the prospect of delivery terrified me, I also couldn’t wait for it to happen, so I could finally expel the last remnants of sexual violence from inside of me. Make it leave my body; give it up for adoption – that was the plan. Get it out and forget about it. I would return to my suspended studies, but in another city, where I would be anonymous and other students would
see me as just another girl and not a woman with a history, a woman to be avoided, as no-one knows what to say to her.

The labor was horrible and went on for over ten hours. “It” would not leave my body. The midwife told me later that I screamed “Take it away from me!” while giving birth. It ended with a c-section. Unaware of the prospective adoption, the nurse brought me my son and placed him on top of me. I looked at him once, and then again, I touched his tiny hand, I saw my eyes in his eyes. And I knew he would stay with me. My parents were surprised and so was I, but something was born inside me on the emotional level to make me think of my child as having only one parent, myself. I believe it was a subconscious defensive reaction, a way to cut myself off from the sexual violence of which was a victim.

I was told at the hospital that seventy percent of the women who become pregnant as a result of rape do not terminate. At that point I no longer trusted hospitals, I didn’t want to hear any more sensible advice, any more opinions. I threw myself into the work of caring for the baby, the constant sleeplessness, the exhaustion. In a way, it helped me, because I finally stopped thinking about what had happened a few months earlier.

Though I raised my child as a single mother – the boy’s documents state: “father unknown” – and though I love him more than anything in the world, I take part in the Black March, because I still believe a woman should have choice. It is her body, her temple, no one else has the right to decide for her. My pregnancy and birth were not my decision. The fact that I raised the child of a rapist, and that I would give my life for my son today – this does not mean I think what happened was good. My basic right to self-determination was taken from me, my body became a tool.

By taking part in the march, I want to express my opposition to the objectification of women. We are subjects, we belong to ourselves. One MP came up with the idea of “rape-pay” of four thousand zloty for women who give birth to children conceived through rape. I consider this idea degrading and it’s not because of the amount. My story, contrary to what it may seem, does not have a happy ending, because my life, until its very end, will involve lying – my son will never know the truth about his own
origin. He asked me once and all I told him was that I was involved with his father very briefly, but I was very happy with him during that time. As I said it, I felt a painful spasm go through my body and did my best to control it. The lie disgusts me, but my son does not deserve the bitter truth.
I’m an introvert. I do comment on posts online, I share posts on facebook, hoping to influence those among my friends who are still unconvinced. I don’t have many such friends, mostly those I met at the university and my partner’s friends. In day-to-day contexts I remain silent for as long as I can, since I’ve learned that some people don’t recognize my arguments because I’m a woman. Others ignore them because they’re convinced that they’re right.

I’m an introvert. I remember the first heated debates with my partner. I can spend hours arguing my point and responding to counterarguments. But I do it rarely: only with people I know. I get emotional, I have tears in my eyes, my entire body tells me: I’d rather write, I’d rather write, I’d rather write. But when I did debate him, I raised my voice and stood my ground. I told him about things he knew nothing about:

How it feels to walk a street and be afraid, to know that half the people I pass are stronger than me and can hurt me and there is nothing to stop them. How it feels to consider where and when to go and how to dress. How it feels to have two sets of clothing: the ones for the bus (loose jeans, oversize sweaters) and the ones for the rest of the week (low-cut black and pink dresses, ones I feel great in until somebody looks at me as if I was a piece of meat, or had just offered a wild evening of sexual exploits). How it feels to exit the bus with the door at the other end because the one that is closer is blocked by a group of men animated by warm weather and warm beer. How it hurts to be saying bye to a girlfriend then and giving each other that look of recognition. We don’t say anything because she knows.

How it feels to not shave one’s legs because it’s unnecessary, but then feel bad that someone might think worse of me. How it feels to have food issues, when you just about fit the current beauty standard, but are too close to the fat-and-ugly zone.
How it feels to learn in college that even eating a banana is a challenge for women and that they are biologically predisposed to suck at math. And that boys have it tough, too, because their handwriting is so often illegible. How it feels to talk in a group about sexual violence and toxic relationships and hear that if she is stupid enough to be with him, then it’s her own fault, or if I were her, I would report or leave him! Because we have to think about the kids.

How it felt, when I still had to attend religion classes at school, to say that I was planning to attend the Equality March [organized to fight homophobia in Poland - translator’s note] and hear that another student would attend, too: he’d take a baseball bat and attack the march participants. How it felt when the priest said nothing, deciding it’s a joke, and moved on with the lesson.

How it felt to attend a krav maga class for the first time and to have my hand shaken as equal by a man. How it felt to kick the ass of a newbie who claimed he won’t fight a girl. How it felt not to be afraid.

How it felt to be twelve and dying of menstrual pain. What relief I felt when the hormones and the pills made it possible to get me back on my feet because it almost didn’t hurt. How it feels to wash the blood off of the sheets and panties. How it feels to want to vomit out of fear and disgust, when it is late, and something must be wrong... And how it feels when it is only late, and it comes, and you feel the relief.

I’m an introvert. I told him, I cried out, and screamed all of it at him. All my pain and fear and anger, and all of the injustice and the reality completely foreign to him. He got it.

He is his father’s son: a son of sexism, family tradition, and small town. And I am proud of him. Here is one person who was convinced by my arguments, and my history taught him something, changed something, opened him up.

He is a son of patriarchy. He doesn’t know how to show his emotions. A hurt child inside an adult. He doesn’t know how to talk about his feelings. He is impossibly slow at learning to be tender. A man must be tough, right? He has to have a home and kids, a good car and a job. And if he doesn’t, then what? He’s a pussy, a fag.

I’m an introvert. I am not shy. I can argue and give a piece of my mind, though my father has never approved of it. He would say: “You think you know it all,” “Kids are supposed to be silent,” “You want it all.” I didn’t want it all, I just knew what I wanted. And what I did not want. What I object to, and what I deserve. I reach for it, I demand it, and...
laugh at those who laugh at me. I’m proud of who I am, who I have become. I still
don’t have the courage to tell my parents that they are not right, I don’t have to stay silent. I am a cool person. A cool daughter. I’d rather write. I’m shocked by people’s lack of empathy. I tell them: this is anecdotal evidence, this is an argumentum ad personam, correlation is not causation. To them it sounds like: I’m stupid, you’re right, I have no arguments.

I’m constantly afraid of what we are all afraid of: death, unwanted pregnancy, losing my rights, losing someone close to me. I’m afraid someone might hit me if I attend a march or a protest. I’m afraid that someone will grab my ass or my breasts at a store, and then leave as if nothing had happened, and I will be too slow to react, too shocked and shaken. I’m afraid to walk at night to the neighborhood store. I’m afraid I’ll forget my arguments when discussing something, and my opponent will think that he won, that all feminist are stupid, but what else would you expect from a woman. When I get angry, I begin to shriek, a hysterical woman.

I’m an introvert, like my mom. The difference is that I speak a lot and she doesn’t. She keeps her opinions to herself, remains silent when others share theirs. I’m almost at the age when she became pregnant with me. If I were her—21 and pregnant—I wouldn’t have done what she did. I would search, write, collect money for a trip to Czechia or Slovakia. I would have an opportunity to see something, afterwards. I wouldn’t tell my mom. She’s a Catholic. She doesn’t support abortion. She supports common sense, and maybe justice, maybe choice, and full rights? I don’t know. She never told me. She’s not a rebel, like me.

She asked me, point blank: are you going? We went together. I wanted to give her a pin, but she didn’t want one. I made them myself, and I still wear them: one with a uterus flipping off, and one with the words “black protest.” Short and sweet. You don’t always have to say a lot.

I don’t know if I would have gone, was it not for her. I was afraid. I was afraid of that school friend with the baseball bat, though that happened over four years of krav maga practices ago. I was afraid of flares and riots. I was afraid of them coming and threatening us. I was afraid no one would show up. That we’d be laughed at.

But my mom went. And I went. I don’t know if I went to defend her, or to be proud of her, or maybe to just be there. But I went because it was right. My best friend was also there with her mom. It was raining. It was the first protest for all of us. We stood there at the square, several hundred of us at Silesia’s biggest square, umbrellas in our hands. In a big circle, we passed a banner between us. I saw a few familiar faces. I smiled
when I heard some slogans sung in Silesian. My private homeland, the only one that I’m grateful to. A lot of people used the mike to share what they think and feel, why they protest. I wanted to tell them:

*Don’t be afraid to be angry. Don’t be ashamed to feel angry. They should be the ones afraid.*

But I’m an introvert. We stood there surrounded by other women, surrounded by a black armor, as if we were one organism, one angry organism, an organism who said: *we won’t give up without a fight.*

It was good. No one challenged us. We were a force, we sang songs. For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by people similar to me, thinking like me. We all agreed.

Later, we went to the market together. My mom bought a fish. An elderly woman asked her: *excuse me were there a lot of us?* We told her there were, that we were a force. *Good. I couldn’t come. Had to pick up my grandkids. But I wanted to. I was there in spirit.* She was dressed in black, shorter than me and she smiled. She also was a force.

This was the moment I felt it was good, it had a point, and it was worth it. To be an introvert and leave the house. Despite the fear. To go out. For a moment. To get angry. My parents told me: *you can’t take it all so seriously, get so engaged, you can’t live like that.* This day showed me that I can. I have to. You can’t do it differently, you have to do it this way. I had tears in my eyes, goose bumps and a twisted stomach—from insecurity and fear, but also excitement and a sense of justice. A feeling that something important was happening.

Whatever would happen next, I felt I belonged, I was not alone. I was a part of a community. We are all there for one another.

I skipped classes that day and it was excused. The boys also wanted to get a pass, since it was only *fair.* In response, they learned that their absence will get excused if they send a picture proving that they attended the protest. I was never more proud of my uni.

I was there. I attended the March 8th women’s march too. We were a force. It was cold, and we were loud. With our sheer numbers we overpowered the small group of counter-protesters holding a banner with a fragmented fetus on it. I was being myself. I was proud to be me.

I’m an introvert and I joined a protest. And I will continue to march.
Say what, Mister, you say we’re playing?
Ooh yeah, Minister, we are playing hard!
The hardest playing were those marching with the Batucada…but let me start from the beginning.

In the morning, there is a rapid exchange of messages: last touches to our Sisterly arrangements. On facebook some young father is frying pancakes. Then, in a flash, tea goes into the thermos and a slightly indecent pic goes to Sisters in Germany and in the South of Poland. They’re being missed!

As if to spite us, Praga South is uncommonly colorful today. The largest numbers of Black Sisters are in the City Center, but then it’s only 9:45! A sizable crowd is gathered already at Law and Justice headquarters. And here’s the young father with his kids, his wife, and a pot full of pancakes. ARD, the German public television team adores them.

The crowd is chanting: Mr. Chairman, it’s women that will topple this government! (“panie prezesie, niestety, ten rząd obalą kobiety!”).

11:15 Defilad Sq., Agnieszka Graff reads passages from her texts. They’re intense and unfortunately most of her prognoses checked out. We’re holding hands in a great circle of women. A very moving moment. The police cleverly intercept an intruder.

12:15 We proceed to march into the city, and more specifically to the headquarters of the Women’s Congress at Zbawiciela Sq. We are greeted by a warm welcome
after the Summer Academy of the Women’s Congress. A moment later, I receive the first news from Strasbourg, where a co-participant of the Summer Academy, Katarzyna Wenta-Mielcarek, has organized a protest at the Cathedral. It’s the first day of the EU Parliament’s plenary session and some of the Polish deputies gave their employees a day off for protests. A young advisor of one of the Euro deputies is also at the Cathedral. Thanks to Twitter we have current photos and even a short video!
Oh, these young men!

1:30 pm “So how about lunch?”
We decide to go where they will feed us hearty and well, and serve cherry brandy to finish off the meal: to Berek at Jasna.

2:30 ooops, we were supposed to be making banners at Biały Koniczek, but the black crowds at Berek held us up. Quickly, we make our way to Kredytowa. We stop at Club Miłość where (and not only there!!!) there’s free black coffee for every woman. A huge racket can already be heard from Krakowskie Przedmieście. The ladies are making more than some noise.
They are arriving from everywhere.
It’s raining.
The sound of sirens can be heard.
The atmosphere is truly apocalyptic.

3 pm Białej Koniczek (Little White Horse), the bar at Muzeum Etnograficzne has been renamed Czarny Koniczek (Little Black Horse). Sisters are finishing a poster. There are, among others, Tanna Jakubowicz-Mount and sex coach Karo Akabal.
Where else a sex coach if not here?
At the Church of St. Anna’s we greet our Brothers in Black.
Sweet guys, they also support us, only their collars are white.
When we’re already under the statue of King Zygmunt, and it’s raining hard, we get a message from Foxy who couldn’t be with us: “Are there many people?”
Trusted YoJo unfailingly retorts: “a vulgar uncountable number W *&^^!”
Holly, our chief political adviser writes from Germany. Once a wise sister from Liberia initiated a sexual strike and got a Nobel prize for it.
Alright girl. This may be the right occasion.
In fact, that would solve the problem entirely.
5:30 We return for the grand finale...: silence. What happened?? Everybody’s gone. We’re confused.

5:45 YoJo! heads out to the other side of the river.
I get a text from Maciej that he’s marching with the drum band Batucada.
OK, Mr. Minister. They’re playing, and, for God’s sake, I gotta be with them!
I catch up with them by the poster “Copernicus was a woman,” that is, by the building of the Polish Academy of Sciences, at the corner of Świętokrzyska and Nowy Świat.
We march in the middle of the street toward the Parliament. In Aleje Ujazdowskie elderly men on balconies wave at us and dance to the Batucada.
The traffic in the city center waits patiently.
Women intone: My pussy is my business, not chairman Kaczynski’s). (“Moja broszka- moja sprawa. Nie- prezesa Jarosława”)
This city has probably never seen so many bad words and diagrams of the female reproductive organs.

Sex & the city
PiS & the pussy
In gushing Warsaw rain the march produces a blast and paralyzes the city center.
At the Parliament, the drums have the party going.
Gallons of water on the concrete and prime revelry: joy, peace & pussy.
No rude excesses, nobody’s offensive.

6:30: we’re making our way back. We don’t fit on the sidewalk, we pour out onto the square of Three Crosses, between the cars, and continue down the street. We block car traffic, we block the trams.
Only beyond the de Gaulle roundabout the police are trying to control it.
Yeah!
I have a personal reunion at the Menora at Grzybowski square, but the place is on strike, all dark.
There is a new bistro in the Jewish Theater building, so I go in, and fold my umbrella: my hair is wet, my dress is a disaster.
Phew! Hot borsht, jazz, hummus and leaflets.
8:00 pm My Reunion got stuck at the airport because the city is still paralyzed. Geez & jazz!

Hey ‘sup? Mr. Bohema?

Where is the uterus,

Oops-I-don’t have one!

But then, we were only playing¹.

¹ The final lines allude to “It’s all the same” (Wszysto jedno), a sexist song by rapper Taco Hemingway, popular among Polish teens. The song’s lyrics go: “Hey, ‘sup? Mr. Bohema? Where’s the condom, oops-don’t have one!”
Ping! The computer announces a new message. It’s *Gals for Gals*, with information that another protest is coming up. My doubts were put to rest after the last demonstration, but now they return.

“What do you need this for?” enquires reason. “Leave the protests to the young. A septuagenarian deserves a warm blanket, a book, and a cat by her side.”

I guess so. None of the Gals will even mention my absence. But then... I am really one that can go. I have nothing to lose. If not me, none of us will be there. My daughter is at the other end of the world, my daughter-in-law obsesses about her job and even if she doesn’t try to stop me, she is hardly eager to go herself. My granddaughter is ten and politics is luckily still an abstraction to her. So it comes down to me.

“No, this doesn’t make sense!” another wave of resistance comes to the surface. “Why do I need this? I have my blog, my pension, my cats... I have signed a contract for these new children’s books. Here! I have my duties. Time to get back to the keyboard. Even if I’m not there, the younger ones will be. I will watch the rally on TV,” I decide.

“Darn, but I could just go to the meeting. Just to see what they’re planning. This flow of energy, when the group feverishly searches for ideas, when people debate, take sides ... that’s better than a spa. That is, I imagine it is, I’ve never been... Ok, it won’t cost me anything, I’ll drop by the meeting.

The room is exceptionally full this time. I know most of the faces, but a few strangers introduce themselves. Maybe I’ll remember the names. B., as usual full energy, her eyes glowing, announces the plan.
“Magda is dealing with the sound system, Wiktoria is managing the collection for the Single Mother’s Home in the town of Police, we have drums and women on stilts. There will be a group who will sing the “Song of the Witches”... We have banners and slogans. I’m sure people will bring their own, too. Anything else?”

A young man speaks up. He’s weighing his words, clearly an idea is being formulated as he talks.

“I have this bale of paper, there must be something like sixty meters... If we placed it ... on tables, on boards ... people could write down their impressions, their emotions, their wishes...”

An almost physically palpable spark travels around the gathering. One quick suggestion follows another:

“This could be the beginning of a newspaper...”

“I’ll ask the guys to print pictures from previous protests...”

“I know! The Voice of the Sovereign! This will be our title!”

“Ok, the guys will also print the title...”

“Markers! We need many markers. People can write between the pictures...”

Voices and emotions momentarily subside. People are taking notes. Our hosts bring out more cups with hot tea.

I have an idea.

“Remember how impressive were those red cards people raised simultaneously at the last protest? Red cards for the government. Maybe we could give them grades now? They would have to be ones¹ ...”

The proposition passes. Shucks! And what did I need that for? Now these cards have to be printed. My own printer is dead. Where do I ask? But hands are raised already.

¹ In Poland the grade system goes from 1 to 5 with 1 as the lowest grade.
One guy declares two hundred, one girl a hundred. Not enough. Oh, well. I’ll post it on Gals. Someone will turn up.

I get responses in the evening. Monika will print at work, batch by batch, so as not to alert her boss. How stupid would it be to lose your job over ones… There are two more posts. I’m already falling asleep when the thought strikes me: what if not a thousand people show up, but two or three thousand? Holy Mary, what have I gotten myself into! I grab the phone receiver.

“Son! I need ones! Many. Large ones! A-4, Arial…”

“Mom, what are you talking about, I was already asleep... Ok, alright, I’ll print them. Yes, I’ll bring them over to you…”

The eighth of March is cloudy and cold. Near Solidarity Square there is a bar where you can get free tea and coffee. The owners solidarize with the Protest. But there is no time for this. Volunteers show up to hand out the ones. We circle among people who greedily grab the cards. Almost everybody reacts in the same manner:

“One is too much! You don’t have any zeros? Minus one would be even better....”

I feel the same way. The energy of the crowd makes me forget my ID number, my blanket, and my keyboard which will have to wait this time. I watch a number of people come up to the table with the *Voice of the Sovereign*. Before they enter their requests and comments about what Polish reality has visited on us, they use thick black markers to add the minus before their ones.

The crowd thickens. There must be a thousand already, or maybe two? Later it will turn out that there were three thousand. Women, crowds of women, but also quite a few men. A bus arrives with the students of the Third Age University from a nearby town. But this time there are also many young women, girls, children... I see the team of female stilt-walkers. I can hear the regular beat of wooden spoons girls use to pound the drums... There is power. Magda’s sound system is working perfectly. The “Song of the Witches” begins... I can feel a shiver down my spine and it is not from the cold.

Ok, I’ll leave the next protest to the young.
For a moment, I see the small face of my granddaughter laughing and calling: “Grandma, you’re taking the black umbrella from the basket. You’re probably going to the protest again…”

Maybe we’ll go together?
There won’t be a better time for writing. The mythical calm of a woman’s room straight from Virginia Woolf is being marred by my boyfriend’s hammering. The cat jumps on my lap, turning round in circles, trying to find a spot to lie down. And I have been hesitating for a few days.

I hesitate because as a victim of the Polish patriarchal socialization model, I’m not sure if I have anything to tell. Will it be important? Or won’t it? Maybe a different person could do it better? So what is the point of trying, if I know it doesn’t make sense? I believe this type of thinking is precisely what prevents women as beings from just doing things. Women are beings. That’s right, I’m going to generalize. It seems to me that women need an important reason to make the tiniest decision. They can’t just make them. They can’t just decide to say: “I don’t give a fuck about all of you.”

I just sat in front of my computer with these words on my mind, or rather in my fingers. I mean, I don’t give a fuck if I send it or not; if it is going to be good enough, or very poor. Whatever, it will be mine. Just like the black protest was mine. A Grottger-painting-like insurrection of women. Women unite! They united in a brief moment of self-awareness that someone didn’t give a fuck about them, or actually about us, because I am one of these women. How long did we have to wait for all of us to realize that this is not some science fiction future.

You can say that Polish feminists have been brooding this protest. They have been sitting on this egg for years, but it still didn’t give signs of life. The shell was hard
and wouldn’t crack. Some of them must have lost all hope. And suddenly, a crack! First a tiny one, and then the whole thing. Feminist chickens woke up and started to rub their eyes in disbelief to be living in a patriarchy that doesn’t give a fuck about their lives or health. Great. I mean, great that they woke up because it was not a certainty that they would.

I didn’t believe they would wake up. When I saw that on the facebook group of my small town of 15,000 there is a discussion about the toughening up of abortion laws, I thought I would fall off my chair. I was shocked. I started to read the comments and discovered to my great surprise that there is a shouting match between generous boys who would accept any and all babies under their roofs, and pissed off girls, who for the first time in their lives tried to articulate their right to choose. I went to grab some wine. I came back and decided that I might be witnessing the shell cracking. I joined my argumentative online friends and was pleased to notice the few sound male voices. Then I went to sleep tired of talking with dimwits.

In the morning I checked facebook to find an event, #BlackProtest in my town. My first thought: this will be a disaster. I became preemptively sad. No mobilization attempts other than the nazi-football hooligan variety had ever taken place in my cute little town. I got scared that it would be a colossal flop, that all these newly hatched chickens would lose their feathers and fail to follow their feminist mother hen. For now, I decided to join the protest. I was expecting to maybe meet one person at the bar, which was the pre-demo meeting place. Maybe two or three.

It was raining on Monday, October 3rd, 2016. I took my car to get to my hometown, where our food producing company is located. My brother supported the #BlackProtest, so he told the ladies at the company that if they wanted to go home or to protest, they were free to take leave. The ladies didn’t know what the #BlackProtest was. Thankfully, Agnieszka, who was standing next to me, took over the explaining. A bit of a disappointment early in the day. I drank my coffee. Finally, I went to this wretched bar, where we were supposed to meet. We were small-town dark conspirators.

It was like a film scene. One of the protesters sat in the middle of the bar. I came in with a few other black-clad women. We looked at each other with little trust, since you never knew if black had been a fashion choice or a sign of protest. There were a lot of people for this time of day. It was a Monday, there shouldn’t be anyone. My friend, Dagmara, who works as a camera operator in LA, to which she owes a certain American boldness, went up to the women in black and introduced
herself. I joined her, even though small talk is not my forte. I looked around, but I didn’t recognize any of the faces that were part of the facebook discussion. But there were others. Faces of ladies over 50, or as they say today, 50+. There were obviously some younger women too, but not many. We sat by the biggest table and initially the conversation was rather stiff. We agreed with one another and exchanged comments about the new law proposal, but it is different to write something than to say it aloud. But soon the constrained space of political topics unlocked and all begun to speak what was on their minds. Among the unfamiliar faces, I found the mother of my high school friend. We were talking, and one word led to another as we begun building a new network. It is popular to network today. So we networked about abortion, something you couldn’t talk about until recently. There was a girl I knew in high school, dressed in black, with her child in a stroller. A council member came, whom I did not know, the sweetest guy. We gathered slowly, like the raindrops outside, but we were already 30 strong. I read out my speech, which I prepared for the protest in Wrocław. My voice was shaking. Dagmara was taking photos. People clapped.

Finally, we decided to leave the safety of the bar and go outside, to show ourselves to the world. This was going to be the bravest part. The rain was pouring down, but we had our umbrellas. Back then, we didn’t know they would become the protest’s symbol. In a preschool habit we marched in pairs and slowly made our way to the town square. A local journalist appeared, took a photo and interviewed us. We marched under our umbrellas across the almost deserted town. We planned to walk around a bit to stir as much puzzlement as possible. Dagmara was filming our umbrella walk. We were together: for the first time in many years I don’t feel this sounds corny. Everyone wanted to tell something about herself, and why she was there. These once strange ladies were now my heroes, because I knew how much a protest in a small town costs. How much feminism in a small town costs. Their courage inspired me, gave me the strength to act, and was an almost mystical feeling. I was with them and I was so proud that we were together. One of the most beautiful rainy days in my life. And the best was still ahead of me.

Moved but soaking wet, I got into a conversation with the newly met council member, and we decided to drive to Wrocław together, picking up my boyfriend on the way. The demo at the pillory in the town square started at 5 pm. We were late, and it took us some time to get to the pillory. What impressed me most was that I had to squeeze through the crowd to get to the damn pillory. I saw a black wave of people before me. Women and men. There were more women, but whenever I bumped into someone and apologized saying that I have a speech to make, I was
surprised by the number of people present at the protest. Only later did I learn there were 20,000 of us. You can tell from the photos. And you could make it out from the makeshift stage built next to the pillory. I finally got to the stage in my black veil, which used to belong to my auntie. I got it as a joke, for dress up. Though it was meant as a prop, it fitted this mournful rainy afternoon perfectly.

I went on stage and begun to read my speech slowly into the microphone. I had written it in the morning, still unconvinced if it would be of any use. I had written honestly and from the heart that I would like to have kids, but not in a country, in which my life and health is decided by someone other than me. I had written that I’m afraid because if we are more interested in religion than in medicine, no one can feel safe. These were simple words, banal even, but they were important, and as it later turned out, not just to me. I did not believe in #Black Protest and yet I became a part of it. I was just one more pissed off girl, who let herself be lied to, allowed small deceptions, and averted her eyes when “acceptable” harm was done. But enough is enough. Enough came when all these small infractions accumulated and produced anger so great it couldn’t be contained.

I wasn’t alone in this. My boyfriend and my friends were in front of the stage. Strangers wanted to talk to me. This was the solidarity that I had read about, which happens in some generations. This time it happened to me.

Some of us are afraid that the energy has subsided. They worry that the anger has dissipated and a second such mobilization won’t work. We don’t know that, perhaps it won’t. But I believe that feminism has hatched, became a small hen, which won’t let herself be locked in a pen. True, on the surface, everything seems the same. Every revolution will be forgotten and replaced by the everyday, but I’m sure that something has moved.

Recently, a lot of girls in other towns were planning a National Women’s Strike. My mom asked me if I knew anything about what was happening in our town. She asked because she and her friend wanted to join, if a demonstration was being planned. That is why I think that the Black Protest is still standing strong. It is growing within us, maturing, and some day it will bear fruit... or eggs.
It’s raining. You’re asleep. I’m waiting for you to wake up. Five Mondays ago, you were still on the other side of my belly, stubbornly refusing to come out. The expected date of your arrival was already a week in the past, but you were in no hurry to come to this world.

Now, you are also in no hurry. You’re asleep. Have you forgotten we were going to the protest? I put a black umbrella in my bag, I get my black coat out of the closet. I suck in my post-baby belly bulge. The radio says there are already thousands in the streets in Warsaw. It’s still raining. I am still waiting and you’re still asleep.

Fifty Mondays ago, I was told you would probably never happen. Our city has several private fertility clinics, each of them modern, exclusive, staffed with polite lady nurses and sympathetic gentlemen doctors. One of these doctors ran a series of expensive tests and pronounced the verdict: hostile cervical mucus, negligible sperm survival, slim chances of natural fertilization. Solution: artificial insemination, possibly IVF treatment. Have you considered this option? You’ll find the price list on our website. Just as we began to consider it – to count the money, actually – you decided to surprise us and play a trick on the nice gentleman doctor. You moved into my belly, causing two lines on what must have been the 500th pregnancy test.

You wake up late; should I stay, or should I go? I feed you, I change you, I load the pram, and off we go to the march. It’s pouring now and the traffic jams are worse than ever. The academic year starts today, so our university town is, as usual, carmageddon. That on top of the weather. We pass many young girls, older girls, grrrl type girls, women. They are hiding from the vicious rain under umbrellas and hoods, all of them heading in THAT direction. I feel like stopping them all in their
tracks and asking: *How is this possible?! I cannot believe this! You don’t have enough? But are you really not afraid?*

I have had enough already, and I am worried it will get worse, as I drag you along, my son, through the puddles. I feeling the nagging pain of my c-section stitches, the c-section that wasn’t supposed to happen. Our city has many private birth schools, so your daddy and I conscientiously attended classes in one of them. We listened to smiling midwives, who claimed that only natural birth can provide you, my son, with the best possible start in life. We practiced breathing, we did kegel exercises, we massaged each other, we jumped up and down on exercise balls. Anything to bring you into this world together, efficiently, healthily and safely.

Sadly, in our city you cannot hire a midwife to attend the delivery; there are no private hospitals and no private birth clinics, where for several thousand zloty one can give birth together with one’s husband, with a doula, or in a tub of water, or under hypnosis. Our choices: the regional hospital, two clinical hospitals, and the not-if-you-can-avoid-it hospital. We choose the most popular one and get in touch with people we know, to get to people they might know, who might help us get a spot, since there is no chance of getting in without connections. Five Mondays ago, I had not yet started giving birth and I already had enough. Things that are the expected norm in a private clinic proved to be utterly unattainable in a public hospital.

The public insurance (NFZ) package includes, at the very best, impatience and indifference from your doctor, as well as a standard dose of condescension and bad jokes. But if you are a “difficult patient” – that is, if you ask questions – you may expect humiliation and intimidation. Twenty five years have passed since the “give birth like a human” (*Rodzić po ludzku*) campaign took off, the Perinatal Care Standards are well established, there are lectures and workshops at Birth Schools – and all of this turns out utterly useless. I am out of luck: the midwife knows better whether or not I need pain relief during delivery. She knows I don’t need any, because she herself has given birth to four kids without it. She also knows my contractions are too weak, so she gives me a large dose of oxytocin, which causes a contraction so huge that Your pulse drops dramatically and we are taken off to surgery. There is an anesthesiologist, a surgeon, and some sharp lights, and twenty minutes later you are being dragged out of my belly. I weep, happy to
have you. I weep, helpless, because I have lost this battle. I have failed to defend my rights, my dignity, my sense of selfhood and agency.

Forgive me, my son, it’s so loud here you cannot sleep, forgive, too, the rain falling on you, but I really have to be here, because, really and truly, I’ve had enough. I don’t know any more if I should laugh or cry. I am here with you, my Darling Little Boy, because in our country the politicians, the prime ministers, the MPs, the chairmen, the ministers, the bishops, the heads of hospital wards, the doctors and the midwives – they all know better what is good for me. They know better and they have the power to take away my right to self-determination. I am here because I am sick of the condescending tone, the scornful superiority pouring out of the mouths of all Those-Who-Know-Better. I am disgusted, because their attitude hides cynicism and opportunism, covered up with ideological mumbo jumbo. At my cost. I am here, because I will not allow them to claim my right to decide about my health, my personal safety, my life and my dignity. I am here, because nobody takes my voice seriously, despite the fact that for ten years I have been paying taxes and health insurance dues, so it is really I who support the army of Those-Who-Know-Better.

You are falling asleep. I look around, and I am moved because there are a dozen or so “pram ladies” like myself in this crowd of several thousand. The irony is that most of us, mothers, are standing near the huge banner of so called Pro-Lifers. I smile, I thank myself and I thank the gals that we are here. I suspect it will be hard to show a mother with a baby in a pram on the evening news, and call her a crazy leftist, feminist, baby-killer.

We are marching silently in the drizzle and I cannot stop thinking that I would like to do it again: bring into this world a brother or a sister for you, give birth to a new human person, take part in that miracle. But I would not want this decision to require heroic courage on my part. I wouldn’t want to be afraid. I would like to have access to free and professional medical care during my pregnancy and during the delivery. I would want obstacle-free access to pre-natal testing, and I would like to experience polite, friendly treatment from the medical personnel. I also dream of raising you in a country where “Down Syndrome” and “Fag” are not among the nastiest names that kids can call each, a country where waiters do not ask breastfeeding mothers to retire to the toilet.
The very thought of terminating a pregnancy terrifies me, but yes, I want to have such a choice. I know that nobody has the right to deny the right to such a choice to another person. That is why I brought you here with me, possibly the youngest participant of the Black Protest.

Hush, little baby, sleep, it’s not raining any more, we are going home.
When slowly opening the closet, Maria didn’t even consider wearing yesterday’s clothes that were peacefully hanging on a clothes’ hanger in the hall. A pair of slightly worn jeans and a comfortable navy sweater would guarantee safety. But would she be able to face herself in the evening? As a middle school history teacher she knew all too well that many revolutions would not have happened, had people stayed in the safety of their homes or passed unnoticed nodding to anyone met. Maybe she was a witness to historic change? Maybe that’s why, a few minutes later, she left the house in a black dress.

Halfway to school she passed Dorota in a flower print dress, who gave her a broad smile and a quick hello. She taught her once, like most kids in the neighborhood. Kids these days, thought Maria, don’t even know their rights, you have to fight in their stead, nurse them into adulthood. She wondered which of her colleagues will wear black in protest. Probably not many. They didn’t have much guts. We’ll see...

She rushed into the teachers’ room. Whew, she thought, she wasn’t the only one wearing black. About thirty percent of the teachers joined the protest. Another thirty gave everyone the side eye for any difference in dress, views or even attitude to students. There were another thirty percent making mean comments and another ten doing the rounds. It could have been worse. She could have been the only one. She was waiting for the first reactions, and didn’t have to wait long, as Zygmuś, in the same old greasy sweater and a mean spark in his eye, begun, in the mouth-smacking disgusting way of his:

“I see my colleagues are in mourning today? A shared lover, perhaps, has died?,” he laughed his disgusting laugh, evidently proud of his little joke.

“Fuck you, Zygmuś,” retorted Zuza, the English teacher. “Even if, it is still better than your underage online porn chat.”

“Watch it!,” he reacted in a changed manner, signaled by the slight shaking of his hand.

“I will report you to the police for slander. They never proved anything. That’s offensive!”
No one touched that because they all knew that Zygmunt was an avid supporter of the political party that had been running the town for the last four terms and had the police on their leash. So what, that two years ago he was caught chatting up the more mature-looking students in the backroom of his classroom and they found kiddie porn in his laptop history. No witness ever officially stepped up, and the hard drive of the computer had an accidental crash the day after they found the porn. The bell rung interrupting the tense atmosphere. Maria didn’t think long, took the class register, and on her way out bumped into Jola, who was going downstairs after her rounds.

“Jola, you’re not wearing black?,” asked Maria surprised. “You were the one who convinced us.”

“It’s a bit embarrassing…,” Jola replied. “My daughter is christening her child in two months…”


“It’s complicated,” explained Jola. “My daughter’s mother-in-law, who is an ultra-Catholic, threatened to steal the baby to get it baptized, if we didn’t do it officially. So the parents decided to get it done, so the grandma doesn’t do the whole stealing-the-baby circus. I just don’t want to make it even more difficult for them. If the parish priest sees me in black, he might not baptize the child because he knows they don’t go to church. What can I say? You know my snoopy neighbors would report on me. It’s always the same thing here.”

Jolka was obviously embarrassed. She was ashamed. But they didn’t have time to analyze the situation, as they were in a hurry to get to class. Still it was a while before she could get to her lesson. The moment she entered the room, the students flooded her with questions about her unusual choice of clothing:

“Why are you wearing black, m’am?” the less aware of the group asked. “Did you have a death in the family?”

“M’am, what’s the deal with this protest?” the more informed of the girls inquired. She began to explain to them with a teacher’s patience that she was not in mourning, but protesting in defense of women’s rights, which include them too. She told them that women’s rights are being broken because they do the same work for smaller pay, because they do not always have access to proper medical care, because they work two shifts: at work and at home, and so they are overtired. But she forgot, she was teaching in a school whose students lived in homes with all rules reversed. This was her mistake, and soon enough a few of them began to challenge her.

“My dad would slap my ma, if she said anything like this,” joked one of the students in whose family the social worker has been a permanent fixture for years.
“My dad says that a woman’s place is in the kitchen,” another added.
“You’re an idiot, just like your old man,” a usually silent girl tried to defend her teacher.

Soon the classroom was filled with insults drawing out Maria’s screams. The noise attracted the attention of the principal, who upon learning of the reason for the disturbance told Maria off in front of her class, and asked her to come to the office during her free period.

“Why did you humiliate me in front of my class?” demanded Maria angrily once they were in the principal’s office. “Gośka! We’ve been working together for so long! I know it was a mistake to talk about it with these kids, but to chastise me in front of them like that?”

“What was I to say? Praise you for spreading this gibberish here? They will share it with their parents, and you know better…”

“I know, the parents are voters, conservative ones to boot. Ever since your Henieyk is in charge of political structures, we have begun to resemble a party not a public school.”

“But we get two classrooms renovated every six months. Once you’re the principal, you can have all the discussions and black Mondays you want. But for now, I’m in charge. I’m sorry, Maryśka, but if you don’t like it, I can’t force you to stay here.”

Still angry, she waited for the school day to end, avoiding people and the issue of her black dress. She took the longer route home to get her prescription at the clinic. A protest like that may fly in Warsaw, but not here, she thought. Life here followed a fixed track, with the parish priest on the one side, and the usually conservative Mayor on the other. Even if someone was thinking differently, he or she had to leave these views at the door of the apartment, pretending to be someone else whenever outside. Maybe the entire generation had to die off? Maybe the young can make a change?

As if by magic, Dorota from that morning appeared in the door of the clinic, always in a hurry. Her former student, who she spent years teaching progressive views to: young, liberated, and disappointingly… wearing flowers.

“Dorota, why are you not in black? So young, so modern?”

“Can you see this old fart there?,” Dorota pointed at the doctor leaving the clinic. “Doctor Jakubowski? The obgyn?,” asked Maria to make sure.

“That’s right. I’ve been working with him for the past year, pushing the most expensive stuff at him. He prescribes it to local young moms, who could pay half the price, if they were only capable of independent thought. But you know, anything
for the baby. The old fart has the conscience clause framed on his wall next to the picture of the Pope. But when last week I gave him a tax-free premium for these meds, his eyes were gleaming.”
“You’re not bothered by what you’re doing?”
“Why should I be bothered? I even sympathize with your protest, but this world is ruled by money. That’s why Jakubowski can be a saint with the conscience clause on the wall, but when a girl needs an abortion, he sends her to his brother’s private clinic in Czechia. Do you know why they hate independent women like yourself?”
“They’re hypocrites.”
“That too. You you’re destroying the facade that hides their small town stink. And the stink should stay where it is. They control it, and that’s how it is. Will anything change, once I admit you’re right? Will it change, if I wear black today? Only that Jakubowski will kick me out of his office and I lose a client. There will be another one in my place, who understands that independent thoughts don’t buy dresses.”
“Dorota... Here I was thinking that we taught you other values at school. In the West...”
“We’re not the West,” Dorota interrupts. “Wake up. We’re in the deep East. This is not going to be changed by any school, any European Union. The borders are somewhere in us, in our heads. Mentally we’re in the East, and those who wanted the West simply went there.”

For the rest of the day Maria was feeling down. “These borders remain in the head”... still resonated in her ears. She had known about it for a long time, but every day she would lock herself in an ivory tower. Maybe if she was married, she wouldn’t be so disconnected from reality... Maybe. Only now did she realize that in her small provincial town, so far away from Warsaw, every day, right in front of her eyes, a migration occurred. Her school, lessons taught by some of her colleagues, were the enclave of the West in a country that remained in the East, where women’s rights were still in the hands of men, who in their Eastern domestic kingdoms could do anything they wanted. These rights were measured by the rhythm of the Czech consultations at Jakubowski’s brother’s clinic, the rhythm of domestic violence blessed with holy water; they were marked by the eternal chase between laundry, dinner, and one’s own professional career. Careers were determined and judged by a man or the wife of some important man—like her boss, happy with the status she acquired as a wife to a husband who occupied the first row at each Sunday Mass, that was not a Mass, but a procession in which everyone knows his or her proper place and role to play. This was the country she lived in. So maybe, indeed, today’s black dress was not a sign of protest, but a sign of mourning over lost dreams?
They were watching me. I felt it, as I was walking to the bus stop. Black trainers, black jumpsuit and the dark navy vest inspired weird looks. It was almost two pm. I got on the bus, and felt the fellow passengers’ looks on me even more. I was scared. Not of their eyes. It awakened a memory of being under constant observation by strangers. I calmed myself down by telling myself that this time it was real. They are really staring. After twenty minutes, I got off in Radom city center.

I felt relieved. I didn’t feel other people’s eyes on me so much. I wasn’t alone. People in black were walking towards the town hall. I was to meet my mom and her friend by the Kochanowski statue in the park. I got there. We barely found each other. The unusual monument turned out to be the meeting point for many protesters.

I’ve never anticipated that I would get involved in any type of demonstration. For months, I tried not to listen, not to read, and not to see the political machinations. I failed. I kept running away from information, but it kept on bombarding me with more force. On Monday morning, October 3rd, I felt an irresistible need to join the women, men, and even children marching.

We were forced to take to the streets. The passing of the new, much stricter abortion law was becoming more likely. The bill proposed by citizens was reported for further deliberations. It was introduced by the far-right conservative pro-lifers, but to me it had nothing to do with actual citizens. The Members of Parliament hid behind the phrase “the will of the people,” blatantly ignoring another, much more liberal, bill that was also proposed by citizens.
I was born in 1980. When the previous law was passed in 1992, I was in 6th grade. I remember the day the teacher brought the entire class to the auditorium. She checked the class roster. Absence would result in an F in either religion or biology. I don’t remember now. What I do remember are the images from The Silent Scream anti-abortion film. The fragments of little hands and legs of the infants on a hospital room floor. Surgical equipment. I shut my eyes during the screening.

I cannot imagine that today’s young people could undergo a similar traumatic session. One maybe even more drastic. I couldn’t let it slide. Never before had I felt such a strong force pushing me into politics.

It was four pm. There were about 700 people by the city hall. All in black. Younger and older, pregnant and with their babies, women and some men of various ages. I didn’t expect there would be so many of us. I don’t like my hometown. For the first time I thought: “Maybe Radom is not so bad.”

On the steps in front of the city hall a few women were calmly explaining the purpose of the demonstration: we do not support death. We support life, as well as the woman’s right to choose. Some wanted an unlimited right to choose to terminate, others wanted the right to abortion in cases of severe fetal malformation or if the pregnancy was a result of rape. Never mind. We were all united by one thing. Life. Not a forced one, but a fully conscious one.

While some women were making speeches, among them one with her teenage daughter, a group representing the far-right youth organization appeared. I get it. They have the right to their own opinion, but these were kids. Boys and girls, maybe 15 years of age. We asked them to leave. For a short while they continued their “No to murderous women!” slogan, and then packed their flags and vanished in the crowd.

We were marching towards the town square, where Law and Justice has its local chapter. There was a feeling of friendship and sympathy. Amazing. Stopping at the monument of the late presidential couple was a must. The first one in Poland, a miniature of which is available for purchase in the municipal tourist office for 60 zloty. Some were carrying hangers. I regretted I’d failed to bring one from home. One of the men, about 60 years old, wore a metal hanger attached to his vest zipper with a sign saying “black protest” attached to it.
In one of the shops on the Radom promenade naked mannequins were covered in hangers and the shop window had posters saying “black protest.” I looked around and once in a while joined in shouting “We want doctors, not missionaries.” We reached our destination.

We filled the Radom main square. We called at the politicians, but no one expected any to show. After a few minutes of these calls, Marek Suski appeared in the door of the Radom offices of Law and Justice. The shouting became louder. The organizers asked us to be silent. The politician promised: “I can personally promise you that I will not vote for the new stricter law.” People started booing. Disbelief. A journalist from the local radio station was standing behind me. I heard her say: “He’s not lying. I know him. In this case, he’s telling the truth.” But the crowd wouldn’t stop shouting: “We don’t believe you!” Suski went back to his office. Those who had hangers walked up to the door and left them hanging there.

We dispersed. A woman with her young granddaughter was walking by me. “Honey, you might not understand it now, but remember that granny was here for you,” she said, wrapping her arm around her granddaughter.

Together with my mom and her friends, we were walking towards “Elektronik” cinema to see The Last Family. We stopped at a pedestrian crossing. Suddenly, an expensive car stopped, wheels squealing. Two young guys rolled the window down and screamed: “You should be wearing white!” “Idiots,” I thought. But this was not the end of it.

I don’t understand where this hate is coming from? After the touching film, we went back home. My facebook-addicted mom logged onto her profile. She called me: “Kasia, come and see!” I couldn’t believe what I was reading: “So you are part of the technology of death. So you’re thinking how to best implement it. The child pulled out of his mother during an abortion was dying for an hour, I think. The doctors fled when he came alive. This is what’s going to happen, considering what you’re sharing from Gazeta Wyborcza’s profile. But it’s not going to happen. You are some retarded freak of nature and nothing more.” Another post read: “Following your line of thinking (looking at the photos you shared) you need to kill kids until they are three years old, because there is no difference if the child is three months or three years old. Both are dead. Next. They should publish a killing instruction with the use of, say, a screwdriver in the eye because you don’t expect the state to pay for it. I don’t know who’ll write such an instruction. Which ministry or department? I doubt
it would be the Ministry of Health? What else? You probably think that psychos should be killed before they’re ten years old? Maybe when they are younger or older? I’m genuinely anticipating your response.”

All this appeared under a photo my mom shared on her profile, which encouraged people to come to the protest. “Fuck me!,” was my reaction, though I rarely swear in front of my parents. My mom did not react. The anger showed in her eyes and her cheeks reddened. She didn’t tell dad. This was his colleague. She would sometimes have discussions with him, but I doubt she had any inkling how radical were his views. Now she knows. On November 2nd, an academic scholar and the author of the quoted passages, published another post. This time under a photo depicting the grave of Mikulski. The comment read “National traitor.” My mom removed him from her friends. She showed it to dad, but she never mentioned his previous posts.

I try not to judge. I try to understand. It’s difficult. Sometimes it’s impossible. I prefer to recall the pleasant atmosphere of the Black Monday. The man with the hanger on his vest, the elderly lady talking to her granddaughter, a run in with a school friend and colleagues from my former work. Unfortunately I’m still terrified. Of what is happening, of what might still happen. I’m scared as never before.
For as long as I can remember, my family apartment was filled with books. They were (and remain still) everywhere: on bookshelves, sofas, wardrobes, window sills, the coffee table, and in stacks on the floor. As a teenager, I loved browsing through various dictionaries and atlases, and when I found a term that interested me, I would continue my research online. In junior high school, I had an ambitious plan to read the entire encyclopedia, but I gave up on A. Among the books at home there were a lot of professional publications, mostly medical, which due to my fascination with *House, M.D.* I would read with pleasure. This is how I learned what Harlequin-type ichthyosis is. I saw an image depicting a strangely proportioned newborn whose body was covered with strange scales. This image scared me and remained with me for years. Children suffering from the disease usually die within a week from birth. Then I learned about Edward’s syndrome, Patau syndrome, and Anencephaly. Thanks to prenatal testing they can be all diagnosed during a pregnancy.

September 2016

I was never much interested in politics, but I strongly object to human suffering. The media are filled with information about the plan to introduce a stricter abortion law. I read the proposed bill and it seems to me barbaric and senseless. In my mind’s eye, I can already see those maternity wards filled with tragedy. Broken mothers, fathers in tears, sick and suffering children, deformed, without vital organs dying on huge doses of morphine. Women who know that all their children may expect is a very short life filled with pain, but they are still forced to give birth to them, not to end up in lock up. I try to imagine the raped or severely ill women forced to give birth under the penalty of incarceration. These horrors I wish I couldn’t imagine are becoming
a potential threat now. I hang posters about the strike in my hometown, where I’m spending the summer vacation.

October 3rd, 2016, Krakow

8:30 am, My Room

It’s raining outside. The academic year begins today. I’m sure I’m not going to class. I don’t have classes on Monday anyway. I stand before my closet trying to find some black clothes. It’s tough as most of my things are printed and colorful. Finally, I find a dress I usually wear for exams.

2 pm, Szczepański square

A lot is happening on that day in Krakow. I pop into a cafe, where there are lectures connected to the protest. The women are all wearing black, like at a funeral. I also had to go into a pharmacy. All the women working there were wearing black under their white lab coats. Most of the people I passed on the street were also wearing black. Apparently in our culture black is a symbol of death, night and sin. But the fashion magazines say it’s elegant and universal. Today, it symbolizes a protest. Now, I’m crossing the town with a huge bag of black clothes. I got them all from my roommate. “Take it. I was supposed to give them away anyway. Most of them are so ruined, I wouldn’t dare give them to the poor. At least now they can be of some use,” she said.

People are watching me with interest. Where am I going, wearing an elegant back dress and carrying a black garbage bag? I reach my destination. Other women with bags like mine appear, all full of black clothes. Women of various ages. The youngest ones must still be in high school, the oldest look like retirees. Then zero hour comes. We start pulling the clothes out of the bags and arrange them according to the idea of the woman who is the author of this happening. Eventually, a fat black spider with long legs made out of women’s black clothing appears in the center of the square. This simple street action is meant to make today’s protest, our determination in fighting for our rights, visible.
Apart from us, there are tourists, cab drivers and a group of priests on the square. The passersby observe with interest, but make sure to step away from the spider as if at any moment it could jump up and attack them. We appraise what we did, some of us take photos, and then we disperse leaving the clothes to get soaked in the rain. They will be lying there wet in the city center and expressing our protest, our lack of consent to becoming victims of a cruel law.

around 5 pm, Dębnicki bridge

It is raining constantly. The marching crowd needs to squeeze to get on the bridge. I lose sight of my friends. I am wet from the rain. I look as if I had taken a shower fully clothed. My shoes are soaked to the point where I can feel the water move between my toes as I walk. A girl my age smiles at me and invites me under her umbrella. Once under its protection, immediately I feel warmer. We talk a bit, and I learn that she is studying at the same department as my best friend. Now we’re marching arm in arm. I’m holding a sign, she’s holding the umbrella.

7 pm, Old Town square

I have never seen the square so filled with people and emotion. Usually, I feel uncomfortable in a crowd. Now I feel quite safe. I’m here to prevent human suffering and tragedy, and I am not alone in this. There are thousands of us.

When I am walking back home, a tourist, a lady in her fifties, stops to ask me what’s going on. From her accent I assume she is British. I tell her about the controversial bill proposed by an organization called Ordo Iuris, which forbids abortion even if the pregnancy poses a risk to a woman’s life and health, when prenatal tests indicate severe damage to the fetus, or when the pregnancy is the result of rape. She looks at me with her eyes wide open, filled with surprise and terror. I tell her about the lower chamber of the parliament that sent the proposed bill to committees. The woman is visibly moved and makes sure that the protest is aimed at the proposed law. She tells me such a law would be a nightmare, and that she’s going to support women in Poland, and that we’re doing the right thing.
8 pm, In my kitchen

I’m drinking tea with my friends. We are cold to the bone and tired.

“K called. She was also at the protest,” my roommate tells us. K is a mutual friend. She is rather shy, conservative and uninterested in politics. “So if K was there, then this really was something,” someone comments.

I still need to do the laundry. After all, tomorrow is just another day.
As I am writing this, Poland still makes me proud. I respect its history, its heroes, I draw from its culture, I love its cuisine and geography. My heart breaks that my country is becoming more and more foreign to me. I can’t stand the lack of tolerance and the hate, which spews from politicians’ mouths and lands on the shoulders of the nation like dust. I can’t stand that politicians have the audacity to deem themselves experts on family life and daily life, all the while living their lives of affluence that has nothing to do with our everyday experience. I can’t stand the hypocrisy, using God as an excuse, and hiding behind pseudo-patriotism or the broad knowledge they claim but lack in fact. But the thing that gets me the most is forcing women to have kids to increase the fertility rate.

Polish law allows abortion in three cases: if the pregnancy is the result of rape, if it threatens the life or health of the mother, or if the fetus is severely malformed. It is one of the strictest abortion laws in Europe, nevertheless the current government considers it still too lax. A party supported by only a fraction of the society wants to make abortion in Poland entirely illegal. Most Polish women are against this, and that is why on October 3rd, 2016, we decided to take to the streets. Our actions showed that we cannot be ignored. So if we have freedom of speech and freedom of belief, why are they trying to take away our free will?

According to a poll done by CBOS (The Center for Research on Public Opinion) in 2011, a whooping 95% of Poles consider themselves Catholic. I grew up in a Catholic family, too. Every trial or tribulation was met with the proverbial “you have to bear your cross.” So I did. I would run to church every Sunday, sing in the church choir, go on pilgrimages. I would drown my sorrows in prayer, but deep down inside I suffered, because as I entered puberty the good days were over. My looks became the subject
of ridicule. I had no support from parents, who couldn’t care less about my problems. Before I knew it, I developed depression and anorexia, which soon turned into bulimia. My self-esteem was crushed. I felt I was nothing... Only after a couple of years, in the last year of high school I felt that I’m beginning to stand more surely on my own two feet.

This is when I met Darek.

One day he came into my history class and sat next to me. For many days, one step at a time, we became closer and finally we became a couple. Well-read, smart, intelligent, with this hypnotic spark in his eye, supportive, but also a bit of a bad boy. I fell in love.

It turned out that my love for him was strong and blind. A few months before the final exams we moved in together, and I was introduced to an entire assortment of his flaws. Blackmail was a daily standard. He loved to stand in the window, with one leg dangling in the air, and whisper that he would jump, if I didn’t do what he told me to. That is why I cooked and cleaned, making sure that I did not make a sound, as he spent hours chatting with his buddies on skype and playing mindless video games.

Weeks passed. In the mornings, I would come to school late, and in the afternoon, I rushed to work, only to get to my books in the evening, telling myself that everything was fine. On Sunday afternoons we would meet with his family after mass. Mostly we waited outside. I remember him once pushing me violently in front of the church because we were short on cigarette money at the end of the month. He cursed at me and almost hit me. But he still loved me...

In the now popular lingo, Darek would be considered a “real Pole”: a self-proclaimed Catholic, a patriot, participant of nationalist marches, opponent of abortion rights, avid reader of Ziemkiewicz, and viewer of Republika TV, a PiS sympathizer, and an enemy of feminists, homosexual people, and anybody on the “left.” He explained that his love of premarital sex and bitching about our friends behind their backs was a sign of the wickedness of man.

Every day I would notice more hypocrisy in him. When what he professed and what he did became entirely incompatible, I said enough is enough. When he left the house, I packed my things and moved out.

I got good grades on my final exam and got to study what I wanted. October came fast, as did the disappointment with classes and the useless knowledge they offered.
One evening I run into Darek at the main square. He seemed different. He found a good job, took care of his looks, and exuded self-confidence. I thought he had changed. So we began to see each other again. We talked about the future, about living together, about kids. I thought that my childhood prayers were answered. His parents convinced us to attend a premarital course. I was happy until he forbade me to see my friends on my own. He got drunk and threatened to cheat on me. What started as an argument soon turned into pushing, and at some point he took a swing and hit me on the face. A few days of silent treatment resulted in a breakup.

After a week I noticed my period was late. A few days later, I knew I was pregnant. I sat on the toilet with three pregnancy tests in my hand. Six lines spelling “yes, yes, yes.” I cried. I was afraid. I was 19. I had to make a decision. Abortion? Adoption? Motherhood?

For a moment I thought that when told about the pregnancy, Darek would do the right thing. I called him and explained what was going on and asked if we could see each other. He said yes, but then I heard some girl’s voice screaming at the phone that now she was his girlfriend and that I chose a shitty way of getting him back. Their laughter felt like a slap on the face. I hung up. I realized that he was never going to change. Under the guise of normalcy, he was the same sick and unpredictable person.

When we met, they gave me an envelope with money for abortion. I refused.

It took me a while to decide, but finally I made up my mind: I felt strong enough to become a mother.

The decision was thought-through, and it was entirely mine.

I quit my studies and went back to my parents’ rural home. I learned about the Black Protest from social media. The event was promoted by many of my friends. I looked at my son, thought about my experience, and how hard it is to be a young single mother in Poland today. How miserable it feels to be invisible at eight months pregnant or to bear the look of contempt from strangers looking at your belly. I know that it is hard to stand in a long line with a young child on your arm, to carry the heavy bags to the bus on your own, or to clean the house when the baby is constantly demanding attention. I know how it feels when you learn that the local public creche is full, or how it is to be a young ambitious girl, when the potential employer shuts his door in your face because “you do not have a diploma,” “you have a child,” or “you’re not flexible enough.”
Does anyone tell us about it in advance? Nobody makes us aware that motherhood is hard work. When we are pregnant our mothers say nothing, only to admit how restricting motherhood is once the baby is born. At the same time the childfree friends look at you with pity, as if you lost at life. Where is the person to tell us that though there is great beauty in motherhood, there is also a heap of disappointment? Resentment towards others, anger towards oneself, and loneliness?

You love your child. He is wonderful, but you can’t tell him about the sleepless nights, about a film at the cinema you want to see, a book you want to read, but have no money to buy because, contrary to common belief, you can’t have a decent life on welfare. You can’t talk with your son about his father, who is not there. You can’t tell your son that you would love to cut the semen donor’s balls off because he turned out to be a shit.

In theory, any one of us can find herself in a similar situation. Marriages meant to last break up like sand castles. The Central Statistical Office in Poland reports that there were 66 thousand divorces in 2013. The number has been growing for years. You might become a mother many years after the wedding, but one of you may not be able to deal with the pressure of the new roles. Unfortunately, men, more often than women, run away from responsibility. They are the ones who complain about the changes. I can’t even count the number of times, I heard from men something along the lines of “she sits around with the child, while I work my ass off,” “she got so fat after the pregnancy that I don’t feel like fucking her any more,” or “my wifey doesn’t put out, though all she does is sit around all day.” Not all women could bear something like this. Though we are strong, it can’t be denied that we are afraid to be left alone with everything. Women in Poland still get the short shrift.

Some think that motherhood is a woman’s responsibility. But not all of us want to be parents. Why are men not punished for leaving their pregnant partners? If men can decide not to be fathers, why are women forced to become mothers at all cost? Are we to blame, because instead of sperm we produce egg cells? Are we really going to allow our vision of women to be clouded by religion and indoctrinating books?

On October 3rd, 2016, I wore black. I went to the city and joined the crowd chanting “Beata, a shame, this government will fall by women’s hand.” An opportunity to manifest my opposition to the attempt to strip Polish women of their free will gave me strength. I felt pride. We fought for the right for each and every one of us to live according to her will and conscience. We objected to people forcing us to be mothers when they have no clue what motherhood is. We women are very strong. We won’t let any government ignore our loud voice. That is why, politicians, you better watch yourselves, because though you might try to cloud our eyes, we’re sticking to our umbrellas.
For five years, I was active in the abortion underground. I did not sell abortion pills. I was too worried about my family for that. But I felt that I could do something to thank for the help I received at the time my abortion. I’ve been helping women and girls by sharing my own experiences and reactions.

Nine years ago I got pregnant. It was an unwanted pregnancy; unplanned, hated, aborted from the start.

When it first crossed my mind that I might be pregnant for the third time, I was stunned. I quickly took stock. I have a two-year-old. The older one is in elementary school. My husband qualifies as the third child. Oh yes, there is also his daughter from a previous relationship. The bottom line: four children. I would have to go on maternal leave with the prospect of never returning to my job, a job that demanded nonstop involvement, travel, overtime, worry, and stress. I was never at home and even when I was there, it was never in spirit, because there was always more material to process, another presentation to prepare, the next campaign to plot. And no help from anywhere. The second pregnancy was a way to escape all this, but certainly not in order to drown in another round of diapers. Rather, I needed time to figure out the future. What am I to do, where and when, to combine family life and work? Thus far, I had no success. How was I supposed to manage with two kids at home, a 16-18 hour job, and a husband who doesn’t contribute? No, that was impossible.

I felt the first symptoms of pregnancy when I was on my way with the kids to our family holidays at the seaside. My husband was driving. I kept on feeling sick. I would ask him to stop. I would throw up. I thought I was car sick. And I had to pee. Maybe
something is wrong with my bladder? I was drinking a lot. But there was no pain, only this pressure all the time. Something was telling me I would have to do the test. There may be another reason for all this. It seemed impossible. We used condoms. I told my husband. He confirmed—it’s not possible, we have been careful. I couldn’t be pregnant, I couldn’t. When we arrived, I bought the test. Sweet Jeez, how I hate tests. I kept putting it off for later. I continued to plead with reality: this can’t be possible! Impossible! Impossible!!

I tried to focus on our trips to the beach, on things that needed to be brought, bought, cooked; on where we should go, on what we should see. I thought about hats, sunscreen, things to drink, blankets, beach chairs, perhaps a ball, a float, water wings, diapers, tissues, towels, and plastic bags for wet things. All my energy was focused on the task of spending quality time with the kids. At night we had sex. I stated bleeding. Yeah, I got my period!! What a relief. It can only mean one thing: I am not pregnant! I felt relief and joy. I thought I’d keep the test in case I needed it some other time. Who knows what might happen. But on the following day there was no bleeding; nor on the next. I went to sleep thinking that in the morning I would have to take the test, because the nausea and peeing continued, despite the medication for bladder infection I managed to obtain at the drugstore without prescription.

And there they were. Two lines.

It can’t be. What now? It’s impossible. Impossible!! Tears streamed down my face all day long. I didn’t know what I was doing. I was on automatic pilot. Breakfast, children, the beach, lunch, tears. Shopping, rain, umbrella, tears. Dinner, bath, pajamas, movie, tears. I didn’t sleep. In fact, it was from the first thought, when it first crossed my mind I may be pregnant that I knew I didn’t want it. I couldn’t do it. That option was simply not viable. A few more days passed and I reached the decision that this time I would not give in. I would not leave things to take their own course. Not this time. I would stand up for myself. This time I knew what I wanted. I knew I didn’t want more children.

From the beginning, I knew I would carry out my plan alone. I would terminate, without anyone knowing about it. Why would I tell anyone? I knew it’s my business and no one gets to influence me the way they always did. This time, I will stand my ground. I know, I know. If I told someone, they would say that it’s immoral, unethical. That I would come to regret it. Look at your children. Imagine that you don’t have one of them because you had an abortion. Would you be able to deal with that? Oh, no, I’m not going to buy that. If I had an abortion they simply wouldn’t be here! They are here because I wanted them! And I love them more than anything in the world. Had I not wanted them, I would have had an abortion and they wouldn’t be here, and that’s that. And now I know
I don’t want any more kids. It’s enough. I can’t afford any more, neither financially, nor psychologically. I can’t give any more. I know it. I know it better than biology which decided that perhaps I should get pregnant again and continue to manage. But I said: NO! That’s it, it’s enough! This time I decide. And I know what I want.

But I did tell my husband. I wanted to be honest. I didn’t want any secrets from him that would influence our relationship every day. I knew what I wanted to do, with or without him. He couldn’t believe I am pregnant. We had not planned more children and our financial and living conditions, the perspective of the several years ahead, would not allow us to welcome a new family member. Not now. Never, actually. He accepted my plan.

The rest of our holidays were devoted to children but also to what was to happen after we got back home. I read through the internet about abortion methods from A to Z. I had no holidays. My mind was racing and I felt anxious whether my plan would work. I ordered the set of abortion pills from Women on Web. I was afraid they would not come. If they don’t reach us, I will go to Germany or Slovakia — that was my plan B. And I did the affirmations. Marching with my family to the beach, I repeated in my mind: with every step I make myself not pregnant. This quieted my mind. I didn’t believe in those affirmations, because I don’t believe that from repeating words in one’s mind things happen on their own. But I’ve heard many times from someone wiser than myself that this is what happens; I also read about it. So I did it, without believing in it one bit, but feeling relief. Life didn’t seem so scary any more.

I calculated that in ten days, when we get back home, the package should arrive in Poland and reach us by then. I prayed to the Universe for this to happen. And when we came, on the following day the mailman-savior knocked on our door. I trembled from happiness when I opened the door—my door to heavens. I trembled when I received the envelope enunciating my freedom, when I signed for it like a prisoner upon being released from jail, when I closed the door to hell from which I managed to escape. I trembled from fear and excitement when I wolfishly tore open the envelope and checked its contents. I started crying. I felt happiness and relief that I’m holding my life in my own hands at last, that I can make my own decisions.

I swallowed the first pill right away. My dear husband-Judas advised me to do so. “Why wait? You’ll be done with it sooner. I’ll take care of the kids, everything will be ok,” he reassured me.

And it was. On the following day I took the rest of the pills. There was bleeding, diarrhea, pain; I tried to prevent the vomiting by hopping around, taking care of routine home activities. My daughter asked for popcorn. We loved popcorn. We ate it together
watching a story. I welcomed each wave of pain, every clot, every contraction, fever. After two hours there came a wave of stronger pain and a larger clot passed. I was bleeding profusely now. I was afraid. I wasn’t sure if that’s ok. Is it all over now? Slowly my body was calming down. The bleeding continued, but I had the feeling that the abortion was done. And then all the feelings came: regret, sadness, bitterness; but also joy and happiness. Above all, however, I felt a profound, overwhelming, unspeakably great relief.

But I was also afraid for myself. I wasn’t sure if I’m not bleeding too much. I wasn’t clear what is supposed to happen next. I didn’t know how long it’s supposed to last. The fear got the better of me. I started searching the internet for information. I discovered a forum where women were describing their experiences with the pill. And I found myself there: in the process, in the experiences and feelings, in the anxieties and fears. I started writing, asking, making sure that everything is ok with me. I received immediate answers and support. I wrote until the first menstruation, so called action. Action: that was the beginning for me of a great feminine transformation that gave me strength and the sense of inner power. I had power to decide about myself and my life. I stayed with the forum. I shared my own experiences, my strength, my power; I supported women in their actions: when they were waiting for the pills, during the abortion, and after, until they received the great gift of the Red Sea flood, until they had their first sonogram confirming there is no pregnancy, until they were sure that they have been released. The forum was working. Based on these experiences, I and my friends created an anonymous hotline. Every day we received calls from women/girls or their partners. We accompanied so many people who needed support in the process of controlled and safe pharmacological abortion.

Today, I don’t do it any more. Other women have stepped in. The support initiative has been taken over and continues. Supportive women will be there as long as there are those who need support. If one of them decides to give birth, she will. And she will be a loving mother. Those who decide to have an abortion will not be stopped, no matter what. Because nothing can stop the process of freeing oneself, the feeling of relief, the sense that one has power over one’s life and one’s body.

Today I work toward changing the attitudes of men and women in our country. I am active in the sphere of education and I do my best to carry the torch of knowledge and skills in the area of education related to reproductive rights. So my Black Protest has been going on for a long time, since the time of my abortion. October 3rd was a Great Day of Liberation, a demonstration of protest against those who pronounce what I’m supposed to think and feel. It was also the day of all those women who for years have been helping quietly, at their homes, anonymously, without much ado and splendor. They bring help to their sisters, close and distant friends, acquaintances and strangers. October 3rd was the day of solidarity and protest of all those who decided to say: Enough!
Gdy dorosnę
chce mieć
wybór

Miała
aborcji
nie zakończyć

Photo: JohnBob & Sophie art