

Autobiography

My fall was just a beginning

We met a few months after our interviews in the same café where we used to talk. Natalia¹ and I were quite nervous because we hadn't seen each other in a long time, and this encounter wasn't like previous ones. The goal was clear, and we knew that the product of our earlier talks would be a kind of test for which we would both hold each other accountable. For the writer, the test is one of reliability and trust. for the story's heroine—confrontation with her own vision of life and the value of the stories that shaped her.

We've read subsequent paragraphs of the written autobiography with laudable laughter and sometimes shredding tears. Hours had passed, the sun had already set, and so did the tension. Discussions and amendments were made, and in that moment, we knew it was a significant milestone for both of us that we will cherish forever.

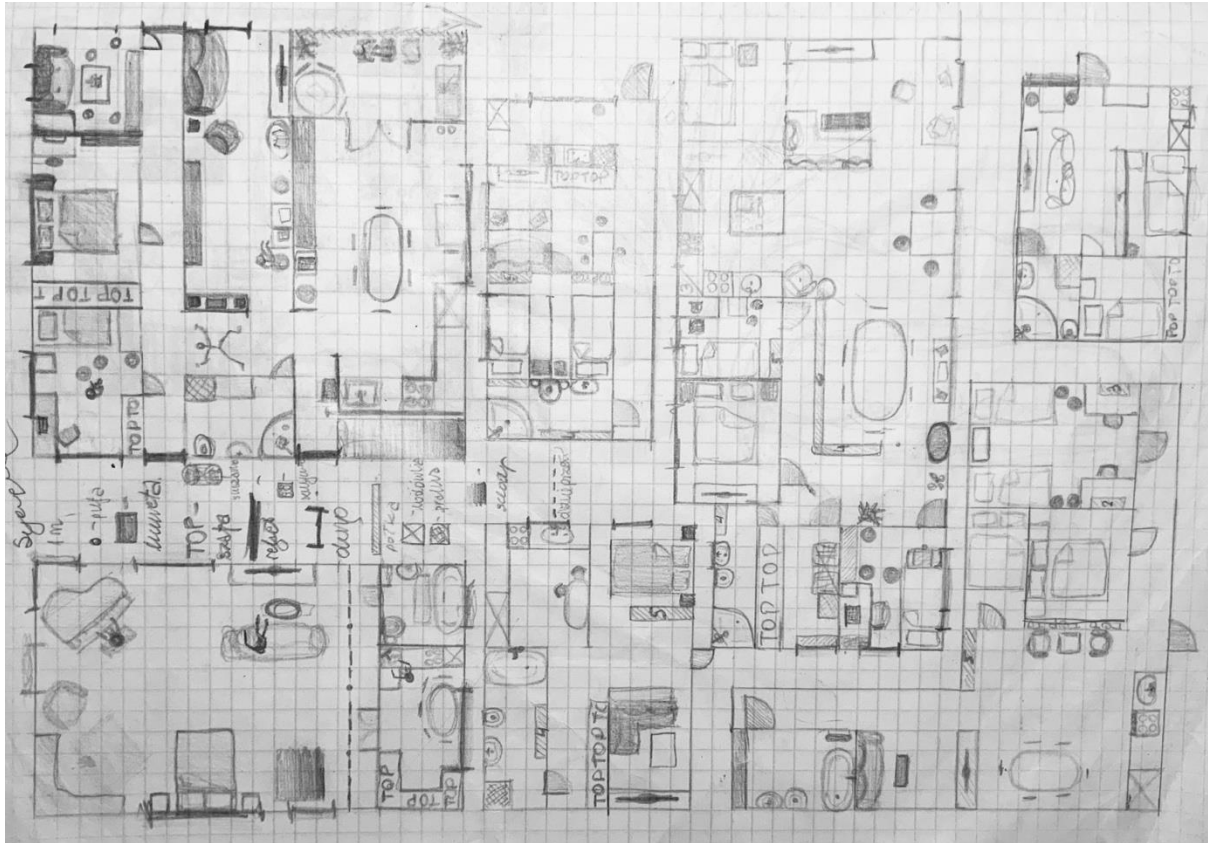
Black and white childhood

Natalia was born in Gdynia, Pomerania, in the northern part of Poland, on February 16, 1999. As an avid reader of astrology, she believes she embraces many Aquarius qualities like creativity, unpredictability, a love for freedom, and sometimes being absent-minded and aloof. She loves telling the story about how the timing of the labour process was so convenient that her mother ideally ate breakfast, packed herself for the hospital, and quickly delivered Natalia without painful contractions and hours spent in the medical facility.

She grew up in Wejherowo, a charming town near a bigger agglomeration, Trójmiasto. Just a little bit more than 30 kilometres from the Baltic Sea. She is the daughter of a nurse and an architect, and she has an almost eight-year-old older brother, Łukasz, but the age difference has always made it easier for her to communicate with her cousins rather than a sibling. They lived in the suburbs of Wejherowo near the coniferous forest, and even though the sea was quite far away from where they were based, they could still breathe in the fresh, salty air on windy days. This may not be a surprise, but the house they lived in was designed by her father.

¹ Name was changed because person wanted to stay anonymous.

It was big, made from wood, glass, and had many metal elements, but still felt cozy. Natalia had her own room in the attic with a breath-taking view of the forest. Her parents never suppressed her creativity and allowed her to paint on the walls as much as she possibly could. She still recalls some of the "works of art" she made in her childhood, like a giant dinosaur and a house on a meadow of carrots.



Rough beginnings of Natalia's love for architecture and interior design, circa 11-years old.²

Not only in that area were Natalia's parents liberal. She was always allowed to choose her own clothes, hobbies, toys or the food she wanted to eat. They let her have as much freedom, choices, and possibilities as they could. The way she was raised was definitely influenced by the hybrid of her parents' two interesting personalities. The mother, Zofia, a burned-out introvert nurse, has always put others' happiness above her own. She grew up in poverty because her parents' and Natalia's grandparents' jobs in a state-owned factory were lost following the fall of communism and the transformation period in Poland. Zofia needed to start working exceptionally early in her life to help her support her parents and sisters. Later, she

² All drawings and images were provided by the kindness of the author Natalia.

was forced to go to nursing school because it was the only occupation that could give her money and allow her to take care of her sick parents. The lack of choices and hard teenage years made her the loving and liberal mother she was. However, Natalia fears that because her mother has a strong need to help others and tendencies to neglect herself, those habits may have a self-destructive impact on her life at retirement.

On the other hand, this is how our heroine describes her relationship with her father: *all Polish fathers are some kind of mystery for their children, because they don't say much, rather they silently live next to them.* Unlike her mother, Natalia's dad, Krzysztof, was always the life of the party, having numerous friends with whom he travelled and spent time. To this day, he is a workaholic, not being able to retire from the work he loves. Because of his occupation, he can be described as having an artistic soul but also being a bit reckless. His decisions were not always rational, but he is a person who does not look back into the past. Throughout the years, Natalia and her dad had their ups and downs, but she states that their connection is rather lukewarm.

When she was a kid, she was very close to her grandparents where she had spent most of her summers. Annually, she travelled to their house right next to the beach. This is where she has one of the most vivid and cheerful memories. Even though she described herself as a shy girl, she always had a lot of friends, with whom she played elaborate games like creating the whole house or city out of a simple street where her grandparents and their neighbours lived on. This is when her luxuriant imagination and the sense of space developed which helped her choose her life path in the future.

One of the most influential moments in Natalia's life was when her parents divorced. To this day, she says that this is one of the greatest traumas in her life. Natalia was only eight years old and did not understand the processes she was forced to go through. In court, she had to choose between living with her mother in her hometown and living with her father in a different city. Moreover, because she eventually stayed in her family home with her mother, she lost contact with the father, unlike her sibling. Natalia's brother was a teenager when the divorce was pending, and his reaction was calmer and more mature. He was also able to visit his parent and his new partner independently where they lived in different part of the country, so the meetings were more frequent. She was able to see her dad only a few times a year, during holidays. In those early years, the cognitive dissonance between her emotions and the position she was in, as well as her brother's maturity and the possibilities he had, took a significant toll on her mental

health. Years after that moment, she acknowledged she had lost many memories from that time in her life due to painful psychological wounds.

Stepping out of a comfort zone

When Natalia was a teenager, she was still an introvert but tried to push her own boundaries as much as she could. The big part of maturing at that age was going to middle school only with a few students she knew. There were other choices where she could stay with friends from the primary school, but she made her decision on her own. However, because of her shyness, she did not meet many friends at that time and closed herself off to new people. She began to move her life into the virtual world. The time she was spending online was consistently getting longer, and there were days when she was staring at her laptop from the moment she woke up until the time she went to bed. The reason why Natalia was so chronically addicted to the internet was because she was able to find people there that were so similar to her and shared her deepest interests. Online forums, social media, and computer games were the ideal places to get to know others without the stress and discomfort of face-to-face interactions.

She was lucky enough to meet her best friend during one of the meetups for Facebook groups. It was another event in her life where she needed to stretch her boundaries, because not only was this encounter taking place in another city, but she also realized she would be meeting 30 people she only knew through the internet for the first time. Natalia described this event as crazy but life-changing. Eventually, roughly fifty people met in the shopping center, all sharing an interest in one of the Polish comedy YouTubers, screaming and quoting the funniest moments from his movies. Till this day, she has a good relationship with some of the people she met there, and most importantly, it was the first time she talked to her internet best friend, Mery. She is still strongly present in Natalia's life despite their long-distance friendship and having previously lived on literally opposite sides of the country.

From this time on, our heroine started being a bit more confident in her contact with other teenagers. She started talking to her classmates outside of necessary conversations about schoolwork. Nonetheless, her mother was worried she was spending so much time in front of her computer, so she signed her up for therapy. It was the first time she ever talked seriously about her feelings and trauma after a divorce. The process allowed her to work through difficult feelings that made her withdraw from her peers and helped her to at least partially forgive her father. Despite that, Natalia admits that this therapy, which lasted for almost three years, was

able to heal her only partially. She still stayed online for long hours, and later in life, it took her many years to form friend groups because it was so hard for her to open up and to trust someone before letting them know her.

Besides the relationship aspect of her early teens, she was also exploring many artistic opportunities. First and foremost, she was a part of high school television, where she produced more or less sophisticated movies and programs. Even though she was not as confident as other students, she tried just as hard as them to contribute to the collective work. For example, the school director commissioned a school film crew to make a movie on recycling. For the whole week, a dozen sixteen-year-olds were playing truant legally, writing scripts, making numerous movie sets, filming each other, and then editing the material just to make a 5-minute, almost home-made video. The creative freedom that they were given was a blessing and a great opportunity to explore new media of artistic expression for Natalia.

Following that, she was also experimenting with drawing and expanding her skills. In order to get into the Academy of Fine Arts, she needed to show the jury her versatile portfolio, which included not only architectural projections but also 3D interior design propositions. The compulsion to develop her skills made Natalia explore the art of making portraits, which she eventually fell in love with. On the contrary, she also started getting into hyperrealistic digital paintings and collages made of plastic that couldn't be recycled. One of those works depicted a turtle made from green pieces of plastic bottles and caps swimming in an ocean of real garbage like pieces of fabric, plastic forks, crumpled paper, or artificial flowers. With this collage, she had won the regional contest for promoting a less-waste ideology, which can currently be seen in her high school. The whole process of making this piece took almost two weeks and contained excessive sketching and planning, looking for non-disposable garbage, preparing it to be stuck to the canvas, and then sticking everything in place. Natalia also recalls that everything couldn't happen without tears, which motivated her to finish everything just on time. Eventually, all those experiences made her a different person with a wider perception not only of relationships in her life but also of art and work in general.



Examples of Natalia's digital art in high school and university.

Tragedy on a way to the new future

Natalia is a person who knew what she wanted to do with her life. Her choice to be an architect was highly influenced by her father, who worked in that field. Her life has been surrounded by his works and stories about architecture and art history since she was a child, which helped her develop a sense of aesthetics, artistic sensitivity, and a love for beautiful surroundings. Additionally, because of her specific relationship with dad, and the sense of abandonment she has always felt, she says I needed to prove my worth and equal him. Natalia had made up her mind to go to the best university with an architecture program in Poland. Therefore, she studied hard in high school and attended drawing lessons for three years *[to be] an awesome architect with vision and a fresh perspective*, as she states.

Her typical day in school would start at six in the morning. She fixed herself breakfast, and then she needed to commute from Władysławowo to school in Trójmiasto, which took her sometimes more than two hours. She used to spend her time in the train doing homework that she couldn't finish at night or studying for tests and exams that were held that day. Usually, she was at school from nine to three or four o'clock and again for two hours on the train back home. She mostly napped on the way back to regain some energy. When she was at home, circa 5 or

6 p.m., she was starting to do work for the next day of lessons. Natalia was majoring in mathematics and physics, so her schedule was quite packed. Sometimes she was forced to stay up all night learning the most demanding subjects just to wake up with the sunrise and repeat it all again. On weekends, she was catching up on schoolwork and going to drawing lessons. From her perspective, she admits now that it was exhausting, but at the time, she knew why she was doing all those things. The motivation she had was not like most people her age – the money. She wanted to make something good out of her talent and prove something to the world. Natalia knew all those years of hard work and sacrifice would pay off.

Her dream university was placed in Warsaw, and this is where she wanted to start her new life. It was the summer following her Matura exams, which she knew she had aced. In Poland, the period between ending high school and starting university lasts for some people almost five months, so for all graduates, it is a time to start thinking seriously about the next few years of higher education. Natalia decided that regardless of whether she is admitted to the school of her dreams, she will start living in Warsaw. If she didn't pass the entry exams, she would have to work, and obviously, the capital cities always have the most opportunities for young people.

It was a hot, sunny July morning. Natalia was driving on a highway on her way to Warsaw to look at the apartments where she could move in next month. Unfortunately, she got into a serious car accident. Emergency services came quickly and took her to the hospital. But the last thing she can recall is just the road she was on and the music that was playing right before the crash. She survived and woke up at the hospital after two days of being in a coma from a lifesaving operation. Immediately she sensed something was wrong because she couldn't scratch her nose. Her entire left side was paralyzed. Moreover, Natalia was left-handed. Doctors did not try to give her any false hope about possible improvements in health but strongly insisted on her going to physical therapy as soon as she possibly could. She realized soon she would not be able to pass the architecture exams that were held a few days after the accident, nor those in the years that followed. It was the most difficult realization for her to accept that she could not pursue her life's greatest dream.

Days had passed, and Natalia couldn't believe that her vision of the future was absolutely unattainable. She was sinking deeper into depression. There were days she wouldn't brush her teeth or speak to anyone. She was just staring at the ceiling. After some weeks, she couldn't even cry, because, as she says, there were no tears left in her eye sockets. Even now, she says that the nights were the worst part of the period after the accident. Eight hours in darkness with sometimes unbearable pain that even the strongest painkillers couldn't tame being so exhausted

but not able to sleep. Adrenaline rushed each time she moved in the wrong way, and broken ribs moved the way they never should. Her mother was always trying to be by her side, and as a professional medical worker, she took the best care of her, but the nights were when she needed to fight her demons alone.



Natalia's painting as a representation of sleepless nights after the accident.

Wind of change

As doctors said, Natalia needed to be heavily rehabilitated. She attended physical therapy almost daily, and it paid off. Thankfully, after weeks of hard work, she started gaining feeling in her leg. But she wasn't as happy about that as her loved ones were. She was furious: *Why in the leg?! Why not my hand? This is so unfair! I don't need my leg to draw!* She screamed at her mom. Moreover, at that time, all her friends from school had gone to their schools of choice

and were studying or working as she wanted. For some time, Natalia even quit social media, because she couldn't bear watching people live her dreams. This state lasted for about six months, because soon everything in her life changed.

During one of the appointments, she met her former boyfriend, Adam, who helped her look for a new purpose in life. The way they met wasn't like a typical love story we read about in romances. It was rather... interesting. Our heroine was waiting for one of her physical therapy sessions when she saw a person her age with a laptop on his lap. She thought he looked kind of interesting, so she came near him with the crutches because she was still using them to move, so she couldn't be discreet and unnoticeable even if she tried. The boy was focused and was typing vigorously on the keyboard, and Natalia, instead of asking him about that, looked creepily into his screen, trying to be sneaky. The boy immediately noticed someone's eyes on him and was slightly confused because of that whole ridiculous situation. She ran away as fast as she possibly could from the embarrassment.

They had a few more encounters after that because they had the same doctor and physical therapist. Finally, when the rehabilitation person noticed they may be interested in each other, he decided he wanted to be their matchmaker. Everything went the best way possible, and they started talking and, after a few weeks, eventually saw each other. Adam was also a person with disabilities, but it did not hold him back from being independent. He was a graphic designer working on commission. He learned this craft in the free online program for people with disadvantages in life. Because of that relationship, Natalia was exposed to new possibilities for the future. Adam taught her how to use Photoshop, InDesign and other tools for graphics and helped her get contacts in the industry. She says he gave her a new life and a reason to wake up each morning.

Adam hadn't been in her life for too long. Just after eight months, Natalia decided, since she could walk again, she wanted to move to Warsaw, where she wanted to live just before the accident, and that concluded their relationship. Nonetheless, in just under a year, this one person made an enormous impact on her future. She went to the University of Warsaw to study cultures and started living with her beloved cousin and his friends. She opened even more to new friendships and gained many more experiences because of her time in foreign city independently. The disability she has did not stop her from going to the parties, taking up the new hobbies and traveling: *I was fearless. I am fearless still. I couldn't do anything. I have lost my dreams and hopes, and the accident took everything from me. Do you even imagine? When you get your life back there is nothing you can't do.*

This time of freedom did not last that long. The pandemic began only after she had spent a half-year in a new city. Thankfully, she was already working remotely for various clients, so she did not need to worry about her income, but when her university moved to online sphere and doctors were not seeing their patients Natalia started worrying. Because of the restrictions, she couldn't go to her physical therapy as often as she did earlier, but with the help of her mom and her contacts, she was able to attend therapy through the computer. It wasn't ideal, but it was better than doing nothing.

Despite the uncertainty that everyone was facing in 2020, Natalia was open to new challenges and changes. So, when her best friend Mery told her she had a free room in her apartment in Rzeszów, a smaller city in southeast Poland, she immediately packed herself and moved there. There was nothing that held her back in an expensive capital city, so moving in with Mery was just ideal at that time. She admitted that being nearly a thousand kilometres away from home was a risky move, and she misses her mother, but that was necessary for her to mature even further.



Base reference sketches for one of the first commissions Natalia got as a graphic designer.

The more is yet to come

Even though Natalia never regained feeling in her left hand, she is now a successful graphic designer and has reevaluated her dreams for the future. She was able to set up her own business in graphic design and now can support herself financially, which most people her age can't afford. Now she is working remotely with numerous clients, like game developers, animation studios, corporations, and movie producers. Because of her work, she is getting new propositions every day and can even save some money for the future.

Recently, she went back to therapy so she could process the trauma of the accident, and even though she is a stronger, more conscious person today, she still needs help with her anxiety and panic attacks. She still focuses on training her left arm and hand because she believes it will work again in the future. Natalia also puts emphasis on appreciating her body, the things it went through, and how strong it is. She has her own little ritual when she massages it and says positive affirmations. It is especially important for her to show her disabled arm in public because there are not many people showing off bodies that are not conventionally beautiful. When asked if she considered it activism, she responded that this was just something that needed to be done in order to change the world.

When it comes to her dreams for the future, she wants to have a family. but not the conventional one. Natalia would love to live with a partner and the dogs she rescued from the shelter. Why not children? She does not find birthing kids ethical, but maybe if the time is right, she will adopt. The idea of going back to the architecture field is quite tempting, but even if she regains the feeling in her arm, it could take years for her to be able to sketch like she used to years ago, because it was hard enough for her to learn how to sign herself with her right hand. But the doors are not permanently closed. Natalia is thinking about designing interiors with virtual tools, but for now she is very content with her life. In a few days, she is flying to Spain, making her dreams of traveling and working abroad come true.

Her biggest aspiration is just to be a happy person and appreciating every single moment of it. Because even if she is not fully abled, she still can live her life to the fullest. Her disability is not something that defines her. Rather, it's something like a characteristic that we can't do anything with – the colour of the eye or freckles. She simply lives with it on a daily basis and can serve as an inspiration to others.

This young girl had the whole world in the palm of her hand, with dreams, aspirations, and high hopes for tomorrow. In a blink of an eye, she had lost everything she had worked hard for,

but with the help of her closest friends, she rose higher than before. Natalia in one of our conversations compared herself to the lizard. When something is holding their tail, they do not let it tame them. They just lose their tail and run forward. The accident held Natalia back and it was hard sometimes, but eventually she left her sadness, the feeling of injustice and dreams that became impossible to achieve and escaped from trap life prepared for her.

Just after the reading I have sensed that Natalia was a bit too overwhelmed, and I did not put the pressure of getting feedback instantly. She just said that she is extremely moved and does not know how she feels but still ensured me that she is positively impressed. I was slightly scared she felt bad because of the things I wrote but fortunately I was wrong.

Later that day, in the evening she messaged me and wrote that this experience helped sort uncomfortable and painful moments in her life and made her understand why some things needed to happen before she could be the person she is. We both thanked each other for this opportunity. It was a beautiful compositional brace of the whole process of writing the autobiography. It was how our story started and ended.