

Krystyna's Story - The Hero Journey

It was a beautiful, sunny, and very hot summer day—maybe July, or still June. A woman in sports clothes, with a scarf on her head and dark sunglasses, came out of the thick pine forest. She was heading toward the sea. Actually, she was running, as if she couldn't wait to reach the water. Her bare feet sank into the warm sand—it must have been burning hot, so she sped up to cool them in the foamy waves.

She was lovely to watch. She enjoyed the sea like a happy child. Then she walked along the shoreline, sometimes playing with the waves, sometimes chasing her own shadow. People lay lazily on the sand, surrounded by windbreakers, but she kept moving—sometimes with quick, strong steps, sometimes dancing in the water. Finally, when she reached an empty part of the beach, she sat down. Suddenly, she started crying, but the sound of her cry was lost in the noise of the waves.

She had arrived in Kołobrzeg today, to a spa. She hadn't even unpacked yet—she just felt the urge to see the sea. It was her first time in Kołobrzeg, her first stay at a spa, and the first time she had been to the sea as an adult.

Krystyna is 70 years old. She has two children and has been a widow for the last six years. When she introduces herself, she always talks about her children and grandchildren—never about her husband or being a widow. She doesn't want people to offer her condolences. The truth is, she doesn't miss her husband. She doesn't grieve. Because now, she is free. Her husband, Stefan, died six years ago, but their marriage had been dead for more than forty years. Now, she sometimes feels sad for herself. But she is also learning how to live again and to enjoy her freedom.

When she was young, she didn't know how to create a happy marriage. She had never really had a home—she was raised by aunts and even spent time living with strangers, always working to support herself. That's why she was happy when she met Stefan at a village party. After a few weeks, he said he wanted to marry her. Back then, she thought it was the best thing that could happen—finally, she would have a family of her own. Soon, they had children, one after the other. She thought having kids would make a happy home.

Krystyna doesn't remember when she stopped being happy in her marriage. Maybe she never was. When did she become Stefan's victim, a prisoner in her own home? For over forty years, she had nothing for herself. Stefan was an alcoholic. The neighbors liked him—he was funny, the local "joker," always making people laugh. But at home, he was different. And Krystyna's face became sadder, often covered in bruises. She looked in the mirror and saw an old woman with no future.

Did she ever think about leaving? No—she had nowhere to go. And she had children. She thought she had to stay for them. She pretended everything was fine, hoping they could at least be happy. And for a while, it worked.

But later, she felt like they were ashamed of her. They started pulling away. Sometimes, she thought she would go crazy. The neighbors gossiped, and she knew they avoided her. The only thing that kept her going was work. Simple work—cleaning homes, schools, and offices. There, she met different people, people who were kind to her. But what could she do? Divorce Stefan? The law wasn't on her side. Even if they divorced, he would have the right to stay in the apartment. So what was the point?

And the priest at church always told her that God gives people burdens to carry. So she carried hers—heavy, painful—but with faith. Later, she started feeling disappointed when the

priest talked about suffering. It felt like he was talking about her. She thought the neighbors knew it too. And her children. She felt ashamed. So she stayed silent.

Now, at 70, she feels like she is finally learning who she is. Learning about emotions, feelings.

She had moments when she wanted to leave Stefan. She needed support. But her friends told her it was better to have a bad husband than to be alone. That raising children without a father would be too hard.

Her children moved out quickly. She was happy for them—they found better lives than she had. Then she got the courage to divorce Stefan. But just when she was ready, he got sick. How could she leave a sick man? She hoped his illness would change him, make him better.

It didn't. He got better—and became even crueler. She fell into deep depression. She doesn't remember how long she stayed in bed. She only remembers the pain, in her body and in her heart. Stefan disappeared for a while—months, maybe a year. She was happy then. But it wasn't real happiness, because she was always afraid that one day he would return.

When he died, she couldn't even cry. Her children didn't cry either. And if they did, it was for her.

She wanted to move away, start over. But how? She had no money.

Then her children helped—they bought her a small apartment. In a new neighborhood, fresh and clean, full of possibilities. She moved in alone. She felt like her new life was beginning. That now, everything was in her hands. *In her hands*. It sounded wonderful. And scary. Could she handle it? At her age?

A few weeks ago, she finished cancer treatment. Now, she is in Kołobrzeg, in a spa.

She takes a deep breath and believes this is her chance for a new beginning.

But how do you start over when the world says your best years are already behind you?