

Whispered Thoughts

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Preface

This is a translated version of *Geflüsterte Gedanken* by kleeder, published to Battle of the Bits' "Very Rare Formats II" and originally written in German. The description reads:

Imagine that you continue to exist as a disembodied spirit after your death and then realize that you can still interact with the world around you.

You can jump into other people's bodies and take possession of them - or talk to them.

But your power is not unlimited. You realize that you will become weaker if you don't find someone you can stay with permanently.

What would you do? How would you act?

"Whispered Thoughts" shows the potential and conflicts that can arise from such a situation. And it shows that it's never too late to take your life into your own hands and do what moves you forward.

The translation is mostly provided by DeepL, with some minor proofreading edits done by kleeder and me. Kleeder has both endorsed using DeepL to translate the text as well as reviewed this translation. With that in mind, I think this should be fairly representative of the original work.

Thanks to kleeder for providing the original .tex sources, which greatly helped with the translation process and recompiling the PDF, and for reviewing and providing feedback on the translation.

Chapter 1

End

It all started with me dying and living on. I don't know how that can be possible, nor how it happened, but when I died, my consciousness detached from my body and did nothing but drift around. My death came quickly and I probably could have prevented it, but it didn't matter now. I had lived for twenty years and now I was dead.

But was I really? Thoughts that were my own and a sense of self-worth still existed. It floated through the room like a wisp of fog. What was I? Somehow the electrical impulses from my brain that made up my consciousness had found a way out and were now swirling around in the air. I couldn't pinpoint where I was or what I was. But the thoughts existed and did not fade away. And I no longer had a body - nothing that could have been my home. I felt naked. And after a while, helpless too. Was I condemned to drift around for the rest of the time and indulge in my fantasies?

Then, after what felt like an eternity, I felt a change. I realized how my focus was drifting away. A moment ago, my thoughts had been clear and distinct, but then they lost their outline and became blurred. I tried to keep my memories together, but I just couldn't do it. The helplessness was compounded by panic. Was I really going to die? Would my thoughts and memories fade and never come back?

When I surrendered to my fate and stopped concentrating, it was as if someone had flipped a switch. All of a sudden I felt external impressions, I saw and I heard things. Like a torrent of sensory impressions, it poured over me and blinded me. I was confused. And it was far too much at once. I focused on myself again and suddenly everything was dark and lonely around me again.

It was working inside me. I thought about what had just happened. Then I began to let my concentration subside only minimally, bit by bit. Instead of a tidal

wave, I was now only greeted by a gentle wave of impressions and sensations. I listened to them for a while and realized that I could smell freshly baked bread rolls. And I heard an unmelodious whistling. Then I saw my hands close around a baking tray, pull it out of the oven and a row of fresh rolls fell into the basket next to it. Then I realized that it was my lips that were whistling the tuneless melody. And I became even more aware of my surroundings. A bakery, just before it opened. It was still dark outside the glass front door. The strangest thing, however, was that I was moving and doing things without even giving it a conscious thought. In fact, I felt like I was on autopilot. Shortly afterwards, I realized that my hands were much bigger than before and also that I was short-sighted, even though I had never needed glasses before.

And then I realized that it wasn't me at all whose sensory impressions I was perceiving. How could it have been, I had died after all. Once I had processed this realization, I tried to get a better picture of my situation from my observer position. This person's life played out like a movie tape in front of me while I racked my brains about what I was going through.

First of all, I asked myself where I was. Was I in this other person's head? Or was I just catching their stream of thoughts as I continued to drift through a vast emptiness? Was it possible for me to give this person's body my own instructions? Could I virtually take possession of it? And how had I found my way here in the first place? Had my presence been noticed?

As I watched the person wipe down the tables and then unlock the front door, I made some discoveries. I didn't seem to be part of the person or their thoughts. Instead, I just perceived them and they flushed through my own. Nor was I able to intervene or act myself. I could only watch and listen. I could smell and feel what the person smelled and felt. But that was all. It didn't seem as if the person had noticed their silent observer. I did, however, realize that the main character of my new reality show was a man in his 30s. And when I opened my focus a little further, taking my concentration away from myself, I also noticed his thoughts and memories. When I had listened to this constant stream of impressions for a while, I understood what had confused me so much at the beginning. I had access to all the memories and thoughts that he also had access to. What a strange construct the human brain was. His thoughts raced from one thing to the next and didn't linger anywhere. It was virtually impossible to follow this flood if it wasn't my own.

I turned my focus back to the sensory impressions and observed what was happening. Gradually, I learned how to limit the amount of information I was bombarded with and select it in a more targeted way. That's how I noticed another person entering the bakery. It was an older gentleman with a briefcase in his hand, who was obviously on his way to work and wanted to buy his breakfast. Then I started to speak. But of course it wasn't me talking. It was the man whose sensory impressions I had just shared. I didn't know what he was going to say and yet I could feel the words forming in his throat and hear them echoing around the room.

Trying to figure out what he was thinking, I shifted my focus again, searching for his stream of thoughts and memories. But just when I thought I had found him, I noticed a second one. Curious, I tried to let my focus wander to where the previously unknown stream of thoughts was flowing. And within a fraction of a second, I jumped from the baker's head to the customer's head. Just like that. As if nothing else was going on. Blinded by the memories, I blocked them out and returned to the sensory impressions. In fact, I was now watching the baker from the exact spot where I had just seen the older man standing.

It was like watching a movie where the camera angle changed during a dialog. I was starting to enjoy it and, as the conversation progressed, I tried to improve my body-jumping technique.

When the customer left the bakery, it was almost child's play for me to jump into another person. I attached myself to him and watched him run along the sidewalk to a train station. Once there, he stood on the platform for a few minutes until a train pulled in and he got on.

The train wasn't overly full, but the carriage my protagonist sat in had enough other people to allow me to change. I found that jumping into another consciousness went better with some people than others. Some people seemed rude and unpleasant to me, even if they made a different impression on the outside. It seemed as if my mind was sometimes more, sometimes less compatible with that of another person.

During the train ride, I continued to feel my way forward and expanded my understanding of what I could do. It was possible for me to read the thoughts and sensory impressions of any person, as long as they were close enough to my previous protagonist that I could virtually jump over to them. There were some people for whom this was more awkward than others, but it always worked. Then

I also realized that I couldn't interact with anyone or even intervene in any way and make myself known. I was just a silent, unnoticed observer. I assumed that no matter what I was, I had to be somewhere around these people, albeit unseen and unnoticeable. Otherwise, it made no sense why the body jump was limited to the immediate area. The only option for me to be aware of my surroundings was to do it through other people. And I couldn't interact myself at all.

I spent almost the whole day jumping from one person to the next, aimlessly and restlessly, because I didn't get tired and I had no physical sensations of my own. If I was watching someone and that person started to get tired or hungry, I would just look for a body that was more satisfied. At some point I also began to immerse myself more in the streams of thoughts and memories until I was able to understand most types of thoughts. Of course, everyone had their own way of thinking, but on the whole they were very similar and once I got the hang of it, it was easy to listen to the worries and fears of a lot of faceless people, which I immediately left behind. I didn't really let any of it get to me. I watched it with moderate interest and then changed the channel like a boring evening of television. Soon everything blurred into a uniform mishmash.

It only became interesting when, late in the afternoon, I made the routine leap into the next consciousness and suddenly found myself inside a dog. It was the first time in hours that I had really been consciously and attentively observing. For some time I followed the dog as he ran a lap of the park with his master. His thoughts were not unlike those of humans, with the difference that he used less complex language and more imagery. But the basic concepts remained the same.

After a while, even watching the dog became too boring and I isolated myself from everything for a moment. Immediately everything around me disappeared and I was back in a timeless and spaceless prison with myself.

Again I asked myself: What am I? Are there others like me? Does everyone become a silent observer after death? And if so, where is the benefit? The meaning and purpose? I had already become bored after half a day and was longing for a change. Of course, countless people offered an exciting life with a lot of variety, but just watching other people do something all day is draining and frustrating if you're not able to do it yourself.

And then, with a mental sigh, exhaustion overcame me and all my concentration evaporated. I no longer had one percent focus, not even a spark. And instead of jumping back to a specific person in my head, a web of thoughts ap-

peared before me instead. A huge construct from the consciousness of countless people. Countless sensory impressions of all the people who were in my area flooded into me. At first I couldn't tell what this area even was, but then I noticed a certain event horizon that I couldn't see beyond. Instead of closing myself off, I let it all wash over me in the hope that it would satisfy my craving for variety.

But it didn't. Everything remained as one-sided as before. The difference now was that I no longer had to access just one specific individual in order to have a point of orientation, but I used all individuals simultaneously. With one corner of my consciousness I followed the doves in the sky, with the other I kept an eye on the moles in the ground. Then I watched the people and their pets at the same time. And everything else whose streams reached me. The amount of information was overwhelming and it took me some time before I was able to use it to my advantage.

With the help of all my informers, who provided me with information at the same time, I was easily able to get a complete picture of the district I was in. And finally, for the first time since my death, I had a sense of control.

I was everything and everyone. And yet I was nothing. This realization almost threatened to crush me and send me back into the darkness of loneliness, but I forced myself to stay calm. In my current situation, I felt knowing, I felt good.

And then I suddenly realized how my strength was waning.

Chapter 2

Fall

At first it was just a tugging inside me. But then it took hold of me, the feeling of weakness. I couldn't attach myself to every organism that crossed my path for a long period of time, it seemed. Whatever I was, I wasn't infinitely powerful. In fact, I was probably the exact opposite. I had to find a solution before the feeling of weakness engulfed me and erased my self-confidence forever.

So I did what every cornered animal does. I did something rash. I acted instinctively. And all of a sudden, my perception shrank back to one person. Out of the countless streams of thoughts, it had been the one that had seemed the most pleasant to me and I immersed myself in it, like one immerses oneself in a pleasant bubble bath. The feeling of weakness became duller, but it didn't disappear.

And then something pinched me. Something pinched me right in my thoughts.

In my fit of panic, I had clung to the person's consciousness tighter than I would have thought possible before. Somehow, I had broken through the wall that had previously been a natural barrier to not being able to interact with the world I was observing. But now I was sitting in the middle of another person's brain and I knew she must have noticed me because I sensed her astonishment and felt what she was feeling. I wasn't sure whether she could also sense my astonishment and thoughts or just my presence, but I didn't give myself time to find out because I immediately distanced myself again and closed myself off completely from my outside world.

In the silence that enveloped me, I racked my brains about what had just happened and, above all, whether I should repeat it. I tried to remember whether my presence had been taken as a threat or whether the other person had simply noticed something unusual and unfamiliar. I was sure that I hadn't caused any pain or discomfort, because I would have noticed that. It had just been a big surprise.

I wondered if and how I could make contact with other people through this new kind of presence. Should I repeat the same thing again and possibly go one step further?

I tossed arguments back and forth and then came to the conclusion that ignorance would weigh me down more than anything I could expect. So I opened myself up to the currents of the outside world again and found the consciousness from before within a few moments.

At first I observed the person's thoughts from a distance, hoping that I had regained the same distance as before. I could still feel the hint of astonishment emanating from her, but there was nothing else. No malice, no fear. I decided to make a second approach and dived deeper into the stream of consciousness, as I had done before.

This time I was better prepared for it and was already expecting the tweak that seemed to be right there in my mind. I also noticed the huge question mark that was emanating from the person with astonishment. I realized that my feeling of weakness was fading and only throbbed dully inside me like a healing wound.

I looked around me. And to my surprise, I actually looked around. The body I was in was following my commands.

However, the involuntary movement of my head and eyes caused a number of other things to happen at the same time, so quickly that I struggled to process them all in the correct order.

First the other person's astonishment turned to fear, then to panic. Then a psychic punch hit me right in the middle of my thoughts and I was catapulted out of the person's consciousness with a huge leap. When I returned to the blackness of my loneliness, the tug of weakness inside me intensified again. As a result, my focus immediately drifted away from me so that I was back in the situation where I was observing everything and everyone. Which only made the feeling of weakness spread even faster.

I had to get out of here.

Afraid of once again entering a consciousness near my attacker and suffering even worse consequences, I jumped back and forth between organisms in such rapid succession that it felt less like a purposeful jump to me and more like a wave rolling across the land. My distance meant that no one probably noticed me, but I was also twice as careful now and expected another psychic punch at any moment if I lingered anywhere too long.

I left the town where I had spent the first few hours after my death and which was also the town where I had spent most of my life.

Soon I was rolling across more rural areas, but again I never stopped. It was like a chase, just running away from myself. With every kilometer I leapt across the countryside, the feeling of weakness inside me grew stronger and stronger. Part of me knew that if I gave in to it, I really would disappear completely and die.

But I didn't want to give up just yet. I was sure there were still options for me, a chance. Even if I couldn't say what they would be.

I don't remember how long I was out like this, but when night gave way to day again and I saw the first rays of sunlight through countless eyes, I was hit by such a powerful wave of exhaustion that I was thrown back into solitude for a moment. I sought out the consciousness of a deer and watched for a while as it passed between the trees of a small wood before stopping at the edge of a town and gazing up at the towering skyscrapers. When a pigeon flew past, I took the opportunity and jumped over.

From the air, I was able to get a good overview and was also taken deeper into the city center. I knew that very soon I would have to find a stream of thought that would take me in and tolerate me. It seemed to be the only way to stop the progression of weakness and keep me alive. When I had flown a good distance with the pigeon, I opened myself up to all living beings again and kept an eye out for a suitable stream of thought. I ignored the throbbing feeling of weakness that was spreading through me more and more as I combed through district after district in search of the ideal protagonist.

And then, just before it threatened to tear me apart, I found a stream of thought that seemed so familiar that I was absolutely certain I had found the right one. If I was wrong, that was the end of me. I didn't hesitate for a second and dived deep into the stream.

Chapter 3

Arrival

This time I was smarter. Instead of consciously interacting directly with the body I was in, I concentrated on myself for the time being. I was still peripherally aware of what the person was doing and thinking, but I didn't intervene or make a sound. In fact, the questioning pinch didn't happen this time, let alone the punch, which would probably have destroyed me immediately in my current state. So I just buried myself in a corner of the brain that I now had access to.

In fact, most of the human brain is used little to not at all, so I had a lot of space without disturbing or even touching important thoughts and memories of my protagonist. I prayed I hadn't been noticed, because it would have been the end of me. But it seemed that my stream of thoughts was so similar to my protagonist's that they merged perfectly and got lost in the hustle and bustle.

So I retreated into the deepest recesses of my brain and concentrated on the throbbing of my feeling of weakness, which had become much weaker now that I was in a body.

I couldn't sleep, because this tiredness comes from the body, not the mind. However, I spent the next few days alone and secluded in the thought currents of my new home, without paying the slightest attention to the outside world. I felt safe here.

Of course, I knew that this phase couldn't last. The fact that I had gone unnoticed was probably mainly due to my condition. But now I was getting stronger every day and it was probably only a matter of time before my protagonist noticed me. I dreaded the moment, because I remembered the punch all too well.

I devised a thousand strategies to find the best way to reveal myself. But in the end I discarded them all and chose the simplest method. I just wanted to say hello.

About four days after quietly vegging out, I felt ready enough to give it a go.

I watched my protagonist and waited for a moment when we were alone and had some time. She lived in a tidy apartment and was studying something. I hadn't paid attention to the details, but it seemed to be the weekend, so my protagonist was on her own and at home. Maybe I should use a name instead of just talking about "my protagonist". But names had become meaningless to me. I'm sure she had a nice name, and everyone is allowed to come up with a personal favorite.

In any case, I waited until she had sat down on the sofa and answered meaningless messages on her cell phone. Then I emerged from the depths of her brain and gently stroked her consciousness to announce myself before sending a silent greeting into her stream of consciousness.

As I expected, a great wave of wonder came back, but also curiosity. So I gathered all my remaining courage and began to communicate with her.

Me: Hey... um... don't be scared, please!

Her: How? What? Who?

That had worked out really well. I could have chosen a hundred better greetings, but I chose the worst one instead. Of course she would be startled if someone suddenly spoke to her in her head. But it was too late now and couldn't be helped.

Me: Just listen to me. I can explain everything to you.

Her: ...

Me: I can imagine how strange this must be for you, but please listen to me.

Her: ...

She panicked, I could tell. I could feel it spreading and penetrating into the areas of her consciousness where I was. Slowly but inexorably, I was crushed by the emotions.

Me: Please... don't...

I realized that everything I was saying was only helping to fuel her panic, so I changed my tactics and just sent her a series of emotions and images. Fear, freedom, weakness, power, memories... I hurled all this at her because I was really running out of space and if she kept going, I wouldn't be around in a few seconds.

But then she stopped. I eagerly gave more reminders to her, I put in as many details and explanations as I could. And I realized that words were just a barrier, especially when you could communicate directly with impressions, experiences and feelings.

And finally she let go. Released me again and gave me space. I sent her a wave of relief and almost immediately I got a wave of skepticism and worry back. She wasn't sure if she had done the right thing.

But at least she had listened and paused. The most critical step had been taken. I could build from here.

Chapter 4

Approach

Her: I'm going crazy. Clearly. I'm starting to imagine voices.

Me: Is there anything I can do or say to convince you otherwise?

Her: I don't know, can you? Oh, I'm even talking to you now. You're not real. Get out of my head or at least explain to me what you're doing in here.

Me: I'm so weak, I'd die without you. Disintegrate. Cease to exist... whatever. I need a place like your consciousness to live on.

Her: And who or what are you then?

Me: I'd like to know that too, honestly. But I'm not conceited, you have to believe me. I'd like to prove that to you somehow.

Her: If you were just a figment of my imagination, then you could only know things that I know, right? So tell me something that I can't know but is easy for me to look up on the Internet.

Me: I can do that.

I started by telling her stories from my hometown and then watching her check the authenticity of my accounts on her cell phone.

At first I only told the bigger and easy to look up things, some of which she might even already know. But after a while, with every anecdote I told, I tried to tell something crazier and funnier. In most cases, after some searching, she found a source that could back up my account.

When we had spent some time on this and I was slowly running out of good stories from my hometown, my protagonist switched off her cell phone and leaned back on the sofa.

A troubled sigh flooded her consciousness and enveloped me for a moment. I realized that she was beginning to believe that I wasn't just imagining things, but she was still afraid of my presence and didn't understand what I was.

Her: You're probably right. I mean, maybe I really am crazy and imagining voices, but I can't possibly know all those things you just told me. So there might be something to your account after all.

I didn't answer immediately, but just let my emotions drift dully around in her head. I assumed that she could already deduce an answer from these emotions. How easy it was to have a conversation when you didn't have to put everything into words.

Her: Hey, just because you don't have to put everything into words doesn't mean you can just leave our conversation hanging in the air. Besides, I still have a lot of questions for you and you owe me some answers.

Oh right. She could hear everything I was thinking if I didn't consciously shield myself from her stream of thoughts.

Me: Sorry. You're right. We still have some things to work out and I can already guess your questions. So fire away.

Her: Who or what are you?

Me: You already asked that and I can't tell you exactly. My body is dead, but it looks like my consciousness is surviving for whatever reason.

Her: You're dead? Then how did you get here with me? That doesn't make any sense at all.

Me: I wish I could answer that for you. It's as much a mystery to me as it is to you. All I know is that I can dive into other people's consciousness, interact with them or just watch them. And if I wanted to, I could also interact with the world through that person's body.

Her: That means you can take possession of me?

Me: The last time I accidentally did that to a person, I almost got wiped out, so I don't put any increased emphasis on trying again.

Her: I thought you were already dead. Then how can you be erased?

Me: It's difficult to explain, but through whatever energy my consciousness continues to exist, it is not available to me indefinitely. If I am outside of another consciousness for too long, then I become weaker and weaker. I'm afraid of dis-

appearing completely if I don't strengthen myself again by nesting in another consciousness.

Her: That means I'm your gas station, so to speak. How nice.

Me: I wouldn't call it that, but if that's what you want to call it, fine by me. All I know is that you're by far the most compatible person I've interacted with since I died. That's why I exist temporarily in your head. Of course, you can always kick me out or ask me to leave. However, that would almost certainly be the end of me.

Her: Great, now you're appealing to my compassion and making me feel guilty if I don't keep you in my head.

Me: What other choice do I have?

Her: The worst thing is that it even seems to be working. I don't think I'd want to just throw you out at the moment. The whole thing is far too interesting for me.

Me: Thank you. Really! I'll be off again really quickly too, as soon as I've regenerated sufficiently, I promise!

Her: I hope I won't regret this. And can we talk about this possession thing again? You can just take control of me like that?

Me: I've never consciously tried it before and I would never do it without your consent.

Her: Then you've got it now. I want to know what it feels like. Move my hand.

The last time I had controlled someone else's body through my thoughts, it had been involuntary and had also triggered a huge mental punch as a counterreaction. So I was very careful as I slowly reached out a little more into my protagonist's consciousness and focused on her hands, which I saw through her eyes.

It took a few seconds before I was actually able to establish a focus where I could exert conscious control over her hands, but once I found it, it was easy to raise both hands in the air in front of us and spread them apart several times.

I felt both the physical, surprised gasp and the great surge of astonishment that flowed through her mind.

Then I placed her hands back in her lap and withdrew from the focus I had been using to exert control over her body.

I waited anxiously for her response.

Her: Wow. That was crazy.

Me: Is that positive or negative?

Her: I don't know, to be honest. I don't know what I was expecting. It's just unfamiliar and strange, I guess. But it wasn't unpleasant or bad in any way.

Me: That reassures me. I won't repeat it without your express permission.

Her: Thank you.

Me: No problem.

We fell into a brief silence in which we thought about what had just happened. For one thing, the first exchange had gone well and I had found a temporary place to stay. Also, I still had a real way of interacting with the world through her. I could theoretically re-establish old contacts and interact with friends, for example via chats online, where it didn't matter which body I was in.

I could also still create things.

In my old life, I had learned to play the piano. I wondered if I still could and if I would be able to achieve the same feats with my protagonist's hands as I had with my own back then.

On the other hand, my protagonist had her own life, which she had to live 24 hours a day and in which I had no place and which I didn't want to impose myself on.

Strictly speaking, I only existed at the moment for the simple reason that she hadn't yet sent me into the stratosphere with a psychic punch.

Her: Don't worry so much about it, I wouldn't even know how to control my mental hand, let alone clench it into a fist. Besides, I spend a huge chunk of my time every day just looking at memes on the Internet. You really don't have to feel bad about taking an hour or two for yourself.

Me: They were just thought experiments. I don't think I should go back to my own old life, not even a small part of it. After all, I am dead and the natural consequence is therefore that my old life is over.

Her: Then I ask you, what do you expect from this stay in my body?

Me: I don't expect anything at all.

Her: That's not quite true. After all, you expect to continue to exist as a consciousness in my consciousness, don't you?

Me: Yes, okay, you're right. But I don't want to force myself on you. If you allow

me to stay here for a while longer, then I would like to give you something back. Share my knowledge with you or whatever else is possible.

Her: You want to pay rent, very commendable.

Me: In that sense, yes. I pay rent for being allowed to exist in this gas station for a while.

Her: I thought you wouldn't call it that?

A surge of amusement swept through her consciousness and in response I gently nipped a passing stream of her thoughts.

We were getting along well, I had a feeling. It was a dynamic that made me feel comfortable. And by all appearances, she was fine with it too, at least for the moment.

Nevertheless, I didn't want to force myself on her any longer than necessary because, unlike me, she still had a life to live.

Me: Maybe you shouldn't completely forget about your everyday life today. I'm going to withdraw for a while and not disturb you any more, as I have done in the past few days. But if you want anything from me, I'll hear about it.

Her: Should I just ring through or what?

Me: Just shout *Hey!* really loudly in your head and I'll notice.

Her: *Hey!*

Me: You see? That works wonderfully.

Her: And what if I want to have a few private moments? Will you still always be here?

Me: I'm in your head, so you won't be able to get rid of me completely. But I can cut myself off from all external impressions and most of your stream of thoughts to give you the privacy you deserve. Don't worry.

Her: If you say so... We'll see how well that works over the next few days.

Me: If anything becomes or is unpleasant, please let me know immediately.

Her: You'll notice it anyway.

Me: Maybe.

She laughed nervously and then turned her attention away from me and towards her surroundings. I could feel her thoughts still revolving around me and this new situation, but I didn't want to disturb her any further, so I retreated back

into the corners of her consciousness where I had been before.

Chapter 5

Coexistence

In many situations in her life, it was easy for me to become preoccupied with myself and pay little attention to what she was doing. She spent most of the day either at university or at home studying and working on homework.

While she slept, I too switched my consciousness into a temporary mode of inactivity, where I adapted to her brainwaves and entered a sleep-like state, even though I probably didn't need to without a body. The rhythm I imposed on myself was good for my mind and allowed me to feel something like normality, even if I was of course far from it.

It was only on days when my protagonist spent time with her partner, and especially when the evenings became wilder and more intimate between the two of them, that I found it difficult to play the bystander who was oblivious to their lives.

The wildest emotions and positive feelings washed through her consciousness almost constantly and reached me everywhere, no matter where I tried to hide.

She was almost obsessed with him. I could feel how she was attracted to him and how happy he made her, while she invested her time and energy into the relationship with the utmost dedication.

I did my best to stay out of it all and, above all, not to show her that I couldn't simply block out these most private of moments from her.

She, on the other hand, tried her best to either completely ignore and block out my presence or accept it as best she could.

I often noticed how she would dwell on worried thoughts about me and I realized that she was still not comfortable with me living in her head.

That's why we spoke to each other every day.

Especially when she was alone with her thoughts, she would turn to me. I knew that she was doing her best to give me a chance, but I also sensed that I was scary to her.

By talking to her regularly, I tried to allay her fears and show her that she could trust me and that I was not a threat.

I told her about my past life or showed her pictures, sounds and other impressions that I had been able to gather. In return, I also got a lot of memories back from her.

On other days, we talked about things that had just happened and were on her mind.

Even though I stayed out of her life and the happenings around her during her daily routine, I noticed when something was bothering her and would occasionally talk to her about it in a quiet moment.

We developed mutual trust faster than I had expected and understood each other better and better. After a few weeks, there was no longer any sign of the initial uncertainty, mistrust and fear.

I suspected that this was also due to the fact that I had chosen the consciousness with which I harmonized best from the mass of consciousnesses I had been in contact with. As a result, she harmonized with me just as much in return and it was easy to deepen and expand our relationship. We already had the perfect basis for this.

After a while, with her consent, I ventured a little further out of the deepest corners of her consciousness and settled into an area where I could both exist undisturbed for myself and have a good view of everything that was going on in her life. Depending on what I felt like at the time.

As a result, I was able to understand and comprehend her emotions and thoughts much better.

She was studying a technical subject at a university that was less than a ten minute walk from her apartment. The apartment wasn't very big, but as she lived there alone and spent most of her time at university during the week, it wasn't really a problem.

She received financial support from her family, with whom she regularly exchanged long phone calls. She hardly had any friends, apart from a few online

contacts.

Most of her social interaction came down to short conversations with fellow students in practice groups and, of course, when she met up with her partner.

Her partner was also a student and usually appeared relatively spontaneously in her everyday life, but then stayed for several days at a time.

He turned my protagonist's life upside down every time, changed the otherwise structured daily routine and sometimes made sure that she couldn't meet deadlines because she was distracted by joint activities.

He was a go-getter who swam with the chaos that raged around him and for which he was often partly responsible.

Whenever he entered our lives, I retreated a little deeper into the less accessible corners of her consciousness and hoped it would pass quickly.

I didn't have a problem with her boyfriend in general, and I was happy for her that he made her so happy, but I was an orderly person and the clutter he carried with him constantly caused me an unpleasant stress.

When she was in a lecture, I followed the content with ever-growing interest. It was a pleasant change and, above all, it revitalized my otherwise sluggish mind.

Interestingly, I was able to follow the content without any problems, even when she was focused on other things. For example, when she was reading messages on her smartphone, I simply ignored the visual and mental input she was engaging with and focused my own attention on her hearing, which she was still using to take in the content of the lecture.

This form of division of labor, where she paid attention to something other than me, excited me more and more.

It gave me the feeling of being useful.

And so it happened that she was working on an exercise and suddenly didn't know what to do because she had been somewhere else in her mind at the time when the necessary material was being taught.

Just before she was about to look at the lecture notes to see how the concept worked, I intervened and told her the solution.

Her: How do you know that so suddenly?

Me: Unlike you, I pay attention in lectures.

She was visibly surprised and didn't immediately believe me. However, when she read my statement again and was then able to solve the problem, she showed open enthusiasm.

Her: Oh my! How cool is that?

Me: Thank you. Of course, it would be cooler if you paid attention yourself.

Her: Don't be a spoilsport now. I'm focused most of the time. But having you as a backup is super reassuring to know.

Me: Please remember that I was only human and it's not guaranteed that I can remember and understand everything. This was just a lucky coincidence in the first place.

Her: Maybe, but two people can see and hear more than one. We can be a good team and nobody will notice anything!

She had jumped up from the desk in her living room and was pacing up and down her apartment excitedly.

Her: Now I wonder what else we can achieve if we work on something together.

Me: Apparently not even successfully completing the exercises, when you've just decided you'd rather run from room to room.

Her: Be quiet, I'm excited!

Me: I'm happy to help you and share my knowledge with you instead of just playing the silent observer or relieving your boredom from time to time. But that shouldn't be a reason for you to get lazy.

Her: You mean even more than I already am?

Me: Exactly.

She stopped in the middle of her kitchen and turned around as if she had made a decision.

Then she went back to her desk and sat down to work on her exercises again.

Her: Then let's not waste any time. Let's solve these tasks!

Chapter 6

Cooperation

I grew stronger with each passing day.

I felt how her life energy nourished me and how the feeling of weakness, which had accompanied me throughout and throbbed dully in my subconscious, gradually flattened out and appeared less and less often.

I felt good and was infinitely grateful to my protagonist for taking me in and accepting me so well.

I did my best to give her something in return. Working on exercises together was no longer an exception and we learned from each other very effectively. Of course, it didn't benefit me personally whether I understood the material from the lectures or not, but seeing how happy she was when she passed a task was reward enough for me. Likewise, these moments of shared productivity were a reassurance to me that I was doing my bit.

As the exam period approached, she hardly ever went to the extra practice groups, but mostly just studied with me.

I could tell that she was proud of what she had learned and how well she understood the material. Our collaboration and the unique situation we found ourselves in had visibly improved her performance.

The night before the first exam of the semester, however, I felt an undefined worry and anxiety creeping through her mind and asked her about it.

Me: What's bothering you? Are you worried that you're not sufficiently prepared for the exam?

Her: No, that's not it. I don't think I've ever been so prepared for an exam. It's just... I'm uncomfortable with the idea of talking to you during the exam and having you help me, even if I could.

Me: You mean it would be cheating if you got help from me during the exam?

Her: Exactly. It was different during the exercises and exam preparation, because there collaboration with others is not only allowed but also encouraged, but in the exam itself it is explicitly not allowed. That's why I'm worried. Even if no one would notice. It would be a question of my own morals and whether I could feel comfortable with it.

Me: To be honest, I don't think you need my help at all during the exam. You're very well prepared for it. And I also understand your worries. Of course, in the end you want to do your own work and not be dependent on others, especially not on me. That's a good thing and I'm not angry with you because you won't be asking me for advice.

Her: That reassures me already, thank you. I was worried that you would resent me if I didn't include you in the exam. However, I still feel like I'd be taking a cheat sheet into the exam hall if you were there. After all, I could always ask you something.

Me: That's right, you're right here too. Would you feel better if I left your head?

I didn't mean it as leaving for good, but as a temporary disengagement during the exam.

In any case, I hadn't been a silent observer of other people for a long time now and was already wondering whether I had lost my touch.

However, the wave of surprise and uncertainty that met me showed me that my offer had been received differently than I had intended.

Me: Sorry, I didn't mean forever, I meant during the exam period.

Her: You've just given me a real fright, don't do that again!

Me: But you do realize that I feel much better since our first contact and that I don't want to be a burden to you forever?

Her: You're not a burden and I'm grateful for your advice and support. I like having you by my side and I want you to stay. If you want to move on at some point, I won't be able to stop you, but I... I like you. You've become a part of my everyday life.

Me: I like existing with you and I'm happy to stay a little longer, don't worry. However, my offer still stands. I can leave you for the duration of the exam and keep myself busy elsewhere until you're finished.

Her: Yes, I think that would be a good thing. It would make me feel better and I'd probably be able to focus better.

Me: Let me try it out right now and see if I still find it so easy to slip into another consciousness or completely isolate myself. I haven't done it for a long time.

Her: All right, go ahead.

I tried to remember back to how I had jumped from consciousness to consciousness after my death.

The first thing I did was detach myself from my protagonist's thought streams, so that although I was still in her head, we could no longer communicate directly with each other. I noticed a surprised sigh of relief from her when she lost the connection to me and at the same moment also felt the emptiness around me, although I could still feel her thoughts passing by.

We had become so used to each other over the past few weeks that it now felt strange to be alone again.

Then I relaxed and let my mind slip into a state of meditation where I no longer allowed any conscious control over myself and my presence. I felt everything in and around me become calmer and then, all of a sudden, I was alone again.

Airless space around me and no sensory impressions whatsoever. Just me and myself.

After all this time in another consciousness, it felt strange and wrong to be here again, but I also realized that I felt almost as strong and full of energy as I had after I had died.

I let myself drift for a while, then the question arose in my mind as to whether I might have just floated out of my protagonist's reach. Concerned, I opened my mind and felt for her consciousness.

Not a second later, I found it again. I had been close to her the whole time.

Relieved, I slipped back into her head and broke through the wall between her consciousness and mine. Immediately, the familiar stream of thoughts surrounded me and I greeted it like an old friend.

Her: There you are again. I was worried for a moment that you wouldn't find your way back.

Me: I was near you the whole time.

Her: It was still strangely quiet and empty without you.

Me: Same here.

Her: ...

Me: ...

Her: I wonder if I can actually concentrate better during the exam with this emptiness inside me.

Me: I can't tell you that. But I think it makes sense for us to separate from each other from time to time. Then it will also be easier to say goodbye at the end.

Her: Yes, you're right. Then let's try it this way. You pass the time while I write the exam.

Me: I'll just play silent observer and see how the other students get on.

By sharing feelings and memories, I had already given her a good idea of what it felt like to sit in other people's heads as an observer, so she had a rough idea of how I would spend my time while she cut her teeth on the exam papers.

We agreed that I would leave her at the beginning of exam time and sit in the lecture hall as an observer in other people's heads. I could have stayed in her head as an observer, but I had to admit that in that case the temptation for me to intervene and help her with an assignment would have been too great. As soon as she handed in her exam and left the room, I could immediately slip back into her consciousness.

On the day of the exam, we put this plan into action.

My protagonist was perfectly prepared for the exam and I was admittedly already looking forward to the trip into other people's minds.

We arrived at the lecture hall where the exam was being written a few minutes before it was due to start and after wishing her good luck, I withdrew from her stream of thought.

First I stayed in her head for a few minutes and watched as the exams were handed out. But then I focused on one of the student assistants and jumped over.

It was a bit like riding a bike. Since I had learned it once, I quickly got used to jumping from consciousness to consciousness again and even though I was still a bit wobbly at the beginning, I mastered it almost perfectly after the fifth jump.

Once again, I noticed how some people were much more compatible with my mind than others, and also that my protagonist was once again very different

from the rest of the people here. Barely ten minutes had passed before I began to miss the familiar stream of thoughts and became bored with those of the others.

But I had promised her I wouldn't return to her during the exam period, so instead I sought the awareness of the examiner who was standing at the front of the lecture hall, watching the students intently. That way, I could keep an eye on my protagonist and watch her solve the tasks.

As exam time drew to a close, my protagonist was one of the first people to hand in their exam and leave the hall.

When I noticed her looking around somewhat perplexedly in all directions before heading for the exit, I jumped over into her consciousness and pushed down the wall around her thought streams to merge with them again. She immediately noticed my presence and a wave of joy flowed around me.

Me: And? How did it go?

Her: Perfect! I knew everything and was able to solve everything. In the end, I even had enough time to proofread everything again.

Me: Well done. I was bored in the meantime.

Her: Admit that you missed me!

Me: A little bit of that too, yes.

Her: I missed you a bit too. It was a good decision that I was able to focus fully on myself and working on the assignments during the exam, but this uncomfortable emptiness inside me was irritating.

Me: You know I could have just been quiet.

Her: Yes, maybe we'll try it out next time we take an exam, where you stay in my head but we don't talk to each other at any time. And then I'll decide how it suits me better. Even if I still can't quite get rid of the idea that it would technically be cheating.

Me: I doubt that there are any rules or prohibitions on smuggling the consciousness of a deceased person into the exam.

She laughed to herself. Then she suddenly had a spontaneous idea and paused.

Her: Tell me, what do you say we take a detour into the city center and celebrate the successful exam? You've contributed just as much as I have. Let's go to

a café and give my brain a break.

Me: Nice of you to ask me. But I'm just a guest at your place anyway, so if you'd like to do that, I'm fine with that too.

Her: I was just being polite!

Me: Then I'll politely accept your offer.

We made our way into the city center to sit down in a café in the shopping center. She seemed exuberant and relaxed now that the exam was behind her. On the way, we exchanged ideas largely wordlessly and shared the impressions we had each gathered during the exam. She showed me the tasks she had to solve and I was able to show her how other students in the lecture hall had problems with the tasks.

When we reached the café, she ordered a coffee and sat down at a table in the corner.

It was quiet at this time of day. It was still mid-morning and most people were currently at work or school. Only a few people hurriedly walked past, ignoring my protagonist as she sat alone in the café with her cup. To an outsider, she probably just looked lost in thought. And in fact, she was. Engrossed in an exchange of ideas with me.

We talked about all kinds of things and let our thoughts drift. It was just a nice togetherness and we were happy to be aware of each other. After a while, we observed the people walking past outside the café and made up stories about where they had come from and where they were going.

Then we extended our stories to other stores and the customers coming and going. We also noticed a piano on the upper floor of the shopping center, which apparently could be played by anyone who came by and wanted to try it.

My curiosity was immediately aroused.

Me: I haven't played the piano since I died, I wonder if I still could.

Her: I've never played an instrument and wouldn't know where to start at all.

Me: Have I never shared memories of me playing the piano with you?

I collected some of my favorite memories and showed them to her. Back then, I had learned new pieces for my relatives' birthdays and presented them afterwards. I had also performed at school concerts from time to time.

Her: You played beautifully.

Me: Thank you. I wonder if you could do it too. Or the two of us together.

Her: Just like that? I don't think I could learn from you that quickly.

Me: And what if I play over your hands?

Her: You want to take control of me and play on the piano there?

Me: If you let me, I'd like to try it out.

Her: I don't know. The thought makes me uncomfortable. What if it doesn't work out well and everyone stares at me? The piano is certainly loud and everyone will be able to hear it. *They* won't be able to look at you if something goes wrong. They'll only see me.

Me: Don't worry so much. We can start very slowly and then I'll see how well it works. Besides, there are hardly any people here at this time of day. And the few that are here are busy with themselves. Trust me, everything will work out.

She was still a little hesitant, but after a while she agreed and we left the café and walked up the stairs to the public piano.

When we reached it and stood right in front of it, I could feel her discomfort, but I also noticed how she overcame herself for my sake and then sat down on the stool.

Her: Okay. Help. I don't know what to do now.

Me: Don't worry and relax. I'll take control of your hands and feet now, if that's okay with you, and play something simple to warm up.

Her: The feet too? Why is that?

Me: The piano has pedals that I have to press with your feet. But we can start with just the hands.

Her: ...fine, then take over with my hands.

She was very insecure and hesitant, but I tried to calm her down with some gentle and warm emotions. Then I took control of her hands and began to play a simple piece that I had mastered in my sleep before I died.

At first I had to get used to the fact that her hands were different from mine. I wasn't sure if it was the size of the palm, the length of the fingers or the general articulation, but some of it, if not all of it together, was different from the body I

had been used to playing this instrument with.

However, it took me less than a minute to get used to it and I was able to hit the keys I wanted to without too much trouble. Even though I didn't remember every movement correctly straight away due to the long break caused by my death, I still had the feeling that everything was going quite well.

My protagonist also quickly relaxed after the initial uncertainty when she realized that it was working well. When I then began to play complicated pieces and to use the pedals as well with control over her feet, our consciousnesses went into a frenzy where after a while we could hardly tell where my consciousness began, which was playing with her hands, and where her consciousness ended, which was listening to the music and following her hands with her eyes.

After a while, she began to understand and learn my movements and gradually joined in the game herself. At first she only experimented with the pedals, then I let her play with her left hand while I continued to play with my right.

Of course, we didn't put on a flawless performance with her support, after all she was a beginner on the instrument. But that was no longer important. What was important was that we enjoyed what we were doing. And on the whole, I thought our improvisation was anything but bad.

I gave her split-second information about which piano keys she could and should press to continue the piece we were playing. At the very end, I even let her play a simple part completely on her own by guiding her in her mind.

As we finished our game, a deep sense of satisfaction and happiness flowed through our minds. We had accomplished something great together and had immeasurable joy and fun as a result. I quietly withdrew from controlling her limbs.

It was only when the last note slowly faded away that we looked up and noticed that a small group of onlookers had gathered around us, listening spellbound to our game.

My protagonist smiled uncertainly at the group. Then those present applauded her and she, who was visibly uncomfortable, quickly stood up and left the stage of attention. Nevertheless, she seemed proud of what she had just done together with me. And on the way home, I could feel her quivering with positive excitement.

Her: That was absolutely fantastic!

Me: You learned incredibly quickly and played really well.

Her: I only helped out a little. You, on the other hand, did most of it.

Me: We're a great team. Did it also feel like you were in a frenzy in which you merged completely selflessly with the instrument?

Her: You described it perfectly. I felt like there was nothing but the two of us and the piano.

Me: The people watching us seemed to enjoy it too.

Her: That's true. But you said no one would listen to us anyway!

Me: And I actually didn't think so. Still, you can't say we disappointed them or embarrassed ourselves, can you?

Her: That's true.

Me: There you go. Then just be happy about how great we played together.

Her: That's what I'm doing. I'm doing that a lot right now. What an incredible day it's been so far. First the exam, which went really well, and now this.

She was pulsating with joy and I was also very happy. Together we were able to achieve really great things. We were an unbeatable team.

We arrived at my protagonist's apartment and were still reminiscing about the morning when she noticed her boyfriend next to the front door, looking upset and a little angry.

Chapter 7

Conflict

From my vantage point deep inside her consciousness, I was able to follow their conversation.

Normally, when her partner arrived, I withdrew further back to give them both a little more privacy, but today his appearance had been too unexpected for me to be able to retreat quickly. I also wanted to find out what had made him so angry.

And so I watched as the two of them went into their apartment. He then asked her how the exam had gone and she happily told him how well prepared she had been and that everything had gone really well. He asked if that was the reason why she seemed so exuberant and she replied that it definitely helped.

That didn't seem to be enough information for him, because he went on to ask what else was responsible for her glowing and she hesitated briefly, searching for a suitable answer. She seemed to notice that he didn't usually ask such insistent questions. She didn't want to tell him the whole truth about our stay at the mall, but then she had an idea and just told him that she had heard some great piano playing at the mall after she had gone there after the exam.

He still seemed upset after this explanation, but tried to hide his dissatisfaction by smiling and changing the subject. I decided to withdraw and leave the two of them to their own devices. Still, I was a little concerned that her boyfriend seemed unhappy and it obviously had to do with her behavior and me.

When me and my protagonist spoke again a day later, she also seemed a little disgruntled and I gently tried to talk to her about it,

Me: Everything all right? Did anything else happen yesterday after you got home?

Her: It's nothing in particular... Just... I have the feeling that he's more suspicious of me than he was a few weeks ago.

She was referring to her boyfriend, of course. I didn't have to ask to make the connection.

Me: Distrustful of you? Why? What did he say?

Her: When I got home, he really wanted to know what exactly I'd done that morning. You remembered that, didn't you? After that we talked about unimportant things, but after a while he started asking me again if I had done anything else after the exam and if anyone else had been there. I think I seemed a lot happier than usual to him and maybe he thinks he has competition?

Me: What did you say to him?

Her: I responded evasively. After all, I can't explain to him that you're in my head. He wouldn't believe me anyway and would think I was hiding something from him.

Me: Hmm...

Her: He then said that I've been doing a lot less with him recently. But if that's true, it's only because of the exam period and because I'm busy studying every day. What should I say to that? I'm sure it all sounded like excuses to him and somehow I sense that he doesn't believe me and thinks I'm withholding something from him.

Me: Well, so...

Her: Exactly. And here's the point I've been mulling over since yesterday. Actually, I'm keeping something from him. I'm keeping one crucial thing from him, and that's you. Since you've been in my life, I feel so much more alive and productive. I finally feel like I'm making progress and getting things done. And apparently you can tell. But I can't explain why to anyone. I can't tell anyone the truth because no one would believe me and everyone would think I'm crazy. But what should I tell those who ask instead? First and foremost him, of course. But also my parents, who are sure to notice something soon.

I noticed that with every thought she gave to the subject, she became more and more involved and her initial uncertainty turned into genuine fear. So I thought feverishly about a solution to the dilemma.

The only problem was that I couldn't think of the ideal solution. All the options that crossed my mind brought new problems with them. But I gave myself a push and shared my thoughts with her.

Me: If I'm seeing this correctly, then there are a few options we can consider.
Her: Let's hear it.

Me: Option number one: I get out of your head and then there's nothing left for you to hide from anyone.

Her: Have you gone crazy? If you leave now, I'll be even more aware that something is wrong because I'll be super sad.

Me: Okay, option two: I stay with you and we stick to the status quo, in which I simply co-exist with you. We'll wait and see what happens and those around you will have to adjust to the new you and accept that you've changed.

Her: That might actually work after a while and with most people I wouldn't mind not telling them the whole truth, but with my boyfriend I feel really bad at the thought of keeping something from him.

Me: Then we have option three: you tell him the whole situation, the full truth and...

Her: He would never believe me. I wouldn't believe myself.

Me: ...and I'll help you by talking to him.

Her: ...

Me: If I talk to him, then it will be easier for him to understand and harder to argue away.

Her: ...

Me: What do you say to the third option?

Her: I don't know if that's a good idea...

Me: But?

Her: But it's the best of the options you've mentioned so far.

Me: You can think about it for a while and then we can still decide if and how we want to do it.

Her: Thank you. I really need the time to think about it. And maybe we'll come up with something even better. I'm not comfortable with the idea of telling him about it and letting you talk to him. I can't even quite put into words why.

Me: The first step will be to wait and see how he reacts the next time you see each other. Maybe he'll have gotten used to your new way by the next time and

it won't have to come to this conversation.

Her: You're right. We'll wait and see.

I could tell that she didn't really believe that her boyfriend could just put the matter behind him and not bring it up again. But for the moment, there was nothing more we could do about it, so we went back to business as usual.

Over the next few days, she continued to study for the next exam and I helped her. The rhythm we had found for studying made us much more efficient and also gave her the feeling that she was really making progress.

Her boyfriend didn't show up. I assumed that he was also in his exam period and was busy with his own exams. A fact that I welcomed, as it helped us to forget the unpleasant situation after the first exam and concentrate fully on studying.

When we had worked through another big chapter, she leaned back in her desk chair and sighed.

Her: We've been studying all day now. I need some time out.

Me: Whenever you want. I think we're very much on schedule and even if we weren't, you could do whatever you want.

Her: I want to play the piano with you again. Really, I haven't thought about anything else for days. It's always in my head.

Me: I've had a thought or two about it and maybe even contributed a few myself. There's nothing wrong with that as far as I'm concerned!

Her: Shall we go back to the shopping center and see if the piano is free?

Me: That would be easiest. If we can't play there, I'm sure we can find another option. Or we could just spend some time there without playing.

Her: Sounds good, let's do it that way.

So we set off.

Whenever we left the house, I enjoyed the impressions that I could perceive through her senses. While we were studying, we often only left the apartment to do some shopping, which we always did in the local area so as not to waste too much time.

It was a gray, rainy afternoon and sporadic drops fell on her face as we walked deeper into the city. As the rain got heavier, my protagonist boarded a bus, where

I spent my time studying the other passengers. I hadn't been on a bus for ages, so it was an exciting situation for me. Before I died, I had used public transport regularly, but my protagonist almost always walked.

The time on the bus passed quickly and we arrived at the shopping center. Due to the weather, we wanted to warm up a bit before playing the piano again. So we strolled through the brightly lit, warm stores. There were a lot more people out and about that day than the morning after the retreat. However, we were both looking forward to playing together again, so the idea of more people being able to hear us didn't put us off at all.

When we felt that our fingers were warmed up enough to play again, we went upstairs to the piano, which was once again standing unused in a side corridor. She sat down on the stool and then paused for a moment.

Her: Ready?

Me: Ready.

We took a deep breath and then we started to play. This time I tried to give her more freedom and supported what she was playing rather than dictating anything specific. We quickly got back into a state where our thoughts were intertwined and it was no longer clear to us who was actually in control. I'm not sure whether it would be self-praise to say that we did a really great job. She was still a complete beginner, but because of our unique situation, I was able to share my knowledge with her and she was able to implement her ideas through me.

I don't know how long we played like that, but after a while it felt right to finish the piece and so we let it gently fade away. Again, we didn't really realize we had an audience until the applause started behind us.

We felt good. I could feel her pulsating with excitement, just like last time. She was happy and tilted her head slightly towards the audience to thank them for their applause.

Then we stood up and were about to leave when our eyes fell on someone standing a little to one side who was also looking over at us. It was her boyfriend, who was looking back and forth between her and the piano in disbelief. I could feel her suddenly looking very insecure and smiling nervously at him.

I quickly withdrew a little more from her consciousness so as not to distract

her when she spoke to him. Then I noticed her walk towards him and stop in front of him.

Her boyfriend immediately asked, confused, how long she had known how to play the piano and where she had learned. He also wanted to know why she had never told him about it.

It was obvious that my protagonist couldn't come up with a convincing explanation so quickly and that she only increased his confusion with every answer she gave him.

After a while, his confusion turned to anger and he told her clearly that he felt she was keeping something from him and lying to him. I could sense how difficult it was for her to stay calm. She was sad and upset because she couldn't tell him the whole truth.

So I tried to give her some reassuring thoughts and non-verbally signal to her that she should postpone the conflict so that we could think comprehensively about how she could tell him about me.

After a while, she pulled herself together and promised her boyfriend that he should come and visit her tomorrow and she would explain everything to him there. He was visibly unhappy, but made do and promised to be with her in the early afternoon. Then he left.

The whole way back from the shopping center to her apartment, we didn't exchange a word with each other but just let our thoughts melt into each other to take away some of our worries.

It wasn't until we arrived home that she let her emotions get the better of her and spoke to me.

Her: That was awful... the worst way it could have gone. Why did he have to be there and watch us play? Now we have until tomorrow to figure out how to explain it all to him without him thinking I'm crazy or accusing me of hiding half my life from him.

Me: Yes, you're right. It could have gone better. Nevertheless, we should see it as an opportunity. The only thing to do now is to move forward. Let's talk about what we're going to tell him tomorrow.

Her: That's the thing. I have no idea. What should we tell him?

Me: Maybe just try to tell him first that you've got your life much more under

control in the last few months and that you're much more motivated to try new things and move your life forward.

Her: I've already told him that. That's what he sees. But he'll still accuse me of hiding something big from him.

Me: Then maybe the next step is to tell him that you met someone a while ago. A person who supports you in your studies and in organizing your thoughts.

Her: He'll immediately see it as an attack on himself and think I'd rather spend time with you than with him. I have to make him understand that there is no competition for him.

Me: Then explain the whole situation to him in the next step. I'm sure he'll understand. Even if he doesn't believe you at first. Start at the beginning, tell him about our first contact and then how we worked together. Then tell him that I can also speak to him directly and talk to him if that helps to convince him.

Her: I'm afraid to do that because I don't know if he'll listen to me fully and understand.

Me: I still think you should try to be completely honest with him now that we're in this situation anyway.

Her: What if he doesn't let me finish? What if he labels me crazy and leaves me? Or... What if he doesn't like you?

I hadn't paid any attention to external impressions during our conversation, but now I noticed that tears were running down her cheeks. She was very worried about the outcome of the conversation and under no circumstances did she want her relationship with her boyfriend to be strained or suffer because of me. But she didn't want our relationship to suffer either. She wanted to please everyone and have perfect harmony between everyone.

I didn't tell her that not being able to please everyone was part of life. I didn't tell her that her boyfriend wasn't worth it if he didn't hear her out to the end. I didn't tell her that she would be happy even if I stopped supporting her.

Instead, I kept quiet and let myself drift through her anxious stream of thoughts, trying to think of a better response.

Her: You've become so quiet.

Me: I don't know what I could say in response.

Her: Say something to make me feel better...

Me: It will be fine tomorrow.

Her: It will be fine? ... That was by far the stupidest thing you could have said. You sound like some kind of emotionless trainer who wants to motivate his student.

However, I could feel her giggling a little.

Her: Honestly. *It will be fine.* Never become a motivational coach, please.

Me: I wasn't going to, don't worry. But you're feeling a bit better, aren't you? A complete success.

Her: You're stupid.

She had to giggle again.

Her: But thank you. I think you're right. We'll have to wait and see what happens tomorrow. And until then, I'll distract myself by watching a movie.

I was glad that she could distract herself and take her mind off things, but I could feel that she had a sinking feeling in her stomach all evening.

When she lay in bed at night, she tossed and turned for hours without being able to rest until I collected some nice memories from my life in my mind and then sent them to her in a steady stream to distract her.

The next morning she could hardly swallow anything for breakfast. I could sympathize with her. Not only because we shared the same stomach and the same impressions, but also because I myself was equally perplexed about what the day would bring.

Additionally, I was very worried about the possibility that I might actually have to reveal myself to her boyfriend and slip into his head. It had been months, but still the memory of that mental punch was all too vivid in my mind.

We spent the morning walking restlessly up and down her apartment, distracting ourselves with irrelevant conversations.

When the doorbell rang, we both got nervous and I positioned myself at the front of her consciousness.

Her boyfriend didn't spend much time greeting her, but got straight to the point. He stood in front of her in the living room and demanded a full explanation.

So she did what we had discussed yesterday and went into great detail. She tried to describe the whole context to him and even though I could see him getting more and more impatient, he didn't interrupt her.

As she had expected, he always asked questions when she had finished an explanation and new questions arose. So she carried on talking. She told him that she had been getting support from me for a few months, but she didn't mention that I was just a voice in her head. He became increasingly annoyed that she hadn't told him anything, but remained an attentive listener. I could imagine that it took him a lot of self-control not to immediately interrupt her, and I respected him for that.

However, when she had finished her explanation, he grudgingly asked why she had kept me from him all this time and we both knew that the time had come for her to take the critical step and explain to him that I was not a living person.

As she struggled haltingly for words and gradually told him how I had emerged in her consciousness and we had gradually become friends, I could see his expression change from angry to disbelieving and then completely dismissive.

Just before she was able to tell him about the exam and the subsequent piano playing, he was no longer able to hold back and interrupted her.

He asked her why she was feeding him such nonsense and who she thought he was for buying into it.

My protagonist was depressed and sad, I could feel it. Nevertheless, she replied that I could speak to him directly if he wanted, so that he had proof of my existence.

He barely thought about the suggestion and immediately dismissed it as nonsense.

Then I made up my mind and jumped over to him.

Chapter 8

Dilemma

I was aware that he was angry and could have hurt me very badly at any time if I invaded his consciousness, but I was worried that he would otherwise leave the apartment and not come back and I didn't want to do that to my protagonist.

When I jumped over to him, I immediately realized that he was the complete opposite of her. We were in no way compatible with each other. I felt downright uncomfortable, as if I'd been in a bathtub full of oil. It permeated my entire mind. I would have liked to jump right back in, but I forced myself to stay for her sake.

Due to our incompatibility, it took me a while before I broke through the wall that had shielded me from him, so that I could only see as an observer how my protagonist fell silent with widened eyes when she noticed my disappearance. Then I saw her fall backwards onto the sofa and sit there dejectedly, while her boyfriend, whose position I was now tracking, turned around in the room in a rage and wanted to go to the front door to leave the apartment.

Then I finally managed to break through the wall to his consciousness and instead of saying anything to him, I simply shared all the memories I had collected together with his girlfriend, giving special focus to my own impressions of how happy and fulfilled she seemed to me. I threw it all at him in a torrent of emotions and images, so that I noticed how he staggered in the hallway and had to lean against a wall for a moment.

Him: What the...?

I let the stream of impressions die down and instead shared a few brief memories of myself from my old life to show him who I had been. Only then did I allow myself to speak to him directly. He seemed to have forgotten his anger for the moment.

Me: I hope you at least believe me if you don't want to believe her.

Him: What kind of trick is that?

Me: It's not a trick. I'm real and I've been sharing my consciousness with your girlfriend for a few months now.

Him: I've never heard more nonsense than that. You're completely insane if you're imagining voices.

Me: So you're insane?

Him: I'm not imagining voices.

Me: Then who are you talking to right now?

Him: It's some kind of trick. It can't be real.

Me: Just because you're repeating it doesn't make it any more true. This isn't a trick and you're not insane. I don't know how this can be here myself, I just know that it is.

Him: But...

Me: Don't you think that if your girlfriend was really keeping something else from you, she'd come up with a better excuse than this? And don't you think this must be a pretty good trick, if it is? Maybe even a bit exaggerated if she wanted to keep something from you.

Him: ...could be.

Me: And if we just assume that I'm for real and your girlfriend has just really overcome herself to tell you all this, don't you think she deserves a better reaction than being yelled at and then seeing you leave her apartment in a huff?

He didn't answer, but just turned slowly towards the living room, where she was still sitting on her sofa and looking at him with wide eyes. Then he talked to her and his voice replayed in sync in his head. It was as if he was putting all his focus on what he was saying.

Him: You really live with that voice in your head?

She nodded uncertainly. She couldn't know what was going on in his head.

Him: I want her to get out of my head and stop bothering me. If you like being talked at, that's fine by me. But I don't want that.

I rejoined the conversation before my protagonist could answer him and continued our conversation in his head.

Me: Hey, just so you know. I'm not her lapdog who gets bossed around by her. I decide on my own what to do next.

Him: Fine by me. I don't want you in here anymore.

Me: I wasn't planning to stay in here with you for long. I just wanted you to believe her.

Him: Yeah okay, I believe her. But I don't know if I like it. All this self-discovery nonsense is all well and good, but at what cost? Running around with a voice in your head?

Me: I'm not staying with her forever. I'm just helping her to be happier.

Him: Thanks, but that's my job. I'll take over again from here.

Me: I don't want to interfere in your relationship.

Him: But you did. If only because she's always on your mind. Have you been eavesdropping on us the whole time? Watching us?

Me: I've already shown you everything I've overheard and I can assure you that I've given you your privacy and will continue to do so.

Him: Maybe so. But I still don't trust you. I want you to disappear. Not just out of my head, but out of hers too.

Me: That's not for you to decide.

Him: I have a say in it. You two are welcome to discuss it. But I don't want you to keep haunting her mind.

Me: I'll talk to her about it.

Him: You do that. Now get out of here.

Before I could get punched, I hurriedly got out of his head and jumped back into the familiar consciousness of my protagonist in no time at all.

I saw him shake his head, give her a quick glance and then walk out the door. He left my protagonist alone.

For a moment, we didn't talk about what had just happened, we just hugged each other in thought. I could sense that she felt terrible and I also felt uneasy at the thought that her boyfriend had just given us a choice. It was him or me.

After she had composed herself a little, she asked me what he had said to me. So I told her about our conversation and what else I had shared with him. I tried to make it clear to her that I had done my best and really wanted him to understand the situation. Nevertheless, in the end I had to tell her about his ultimatum.

She slumped her shoulders in disappointment.

Her: I had feared that he wouldn't tolerate competition, not even if it merely existed in the form of thoughts in my head.

Me: He struck me as someone who is used to getting his own way.

Her: You may be right about that. But he's also super sweet to me and I don't want to lose him.

She paused for a moment and collected her thoughts.

Her: But I don't want to lose you either. What am I supposed to do?

Me: I never wanted your life to be turned upside down by me. I also don't want you to have to part with people who mean something to you just because of me. I never intended to stay in your life forever and I can move on at any time, even if it would make me sad.

Her: I don't want you to move on. Right now, you give me so much motivation to achieve my goals and you enrich my life so much.

Me: And your boyfriend?

Her: He enriches my life too. It's just that he lives in the here and now rather than worrying about the future. It's not important to him whether I learn new things or improve my own performance.

Me: I hate to break it to you, but when I was in his head, I couldn't tell that anything was really important to him except himself.

Her: Don't say that. I know he cares about me.

Me: It may be that your relationship is important to him, but it's not you as a person, it's what you stand for. You are a status symbol for him. He has an image of you as a person in his head and if you deviate from this, as is the case now, then it no longer matches his ideal.

Her: Shut up, I don't want to hear that.

Me: He doesn't seem like a person who actually appreciates you for who you are.

Her: I told you to be quiet.

I didn't say anything else and left her to her own thoughts. I didn't want to provoke any conflict, but everything I had learned about him in his mind gave me the impression that she would be much better off without him. But I found it difficult to distinguish between what she wanted and what I wanted. Besides, I couldn't rule out the possibility that I was thinking completely altruistically in this matter.

It wasn't an easy situation. In the end, I just wanted her to be happy and have a good life. Maybe I also wanted that because I hadn't been able to lead a good life myself.

For me, her boyfriend stood more and more between her and a more fulfilling life. But I couldn't take this decision away from her and I didn't want to manipulate her. She had to make her own decision on this matter. And if she saw herself at his side rather than having me in her head, then I would accept that.

One problem I did see was that her boyfriend would probably remain skeptical even if I disappeared. From my perspective, their relationship had been permanently damaged and I couldn't ignore the fact that I was the reason. An intruder in her life who was directly to blame for the conflicts that were now arising.

Her: The conflicts would probably have flared up at some point anyway, I'm afraid.

Me: Where did that suddenly come from?

Her: You were thinking out loud.

Me: Damn, really?

Her: Yes, I heard your whole train of thought and I'm glad I did, because I realized that you might be right about what you're saying.

Me: Referring to what exactly?

Her: That you only want the best for me, I believe you. I'm sure you're biased by your closeness to me, but I also realize that I have to make my own life choices and I've gone through some positive changes lately that you've been a part of. Whereas my boyfriend never gave me anything other than moments that passed again. I've never experienced the support from him that came from you. I can't see him doing me any good in the long run.

Me: But that was a quick change of heart.

Her: It feels more like I've really woken up all of a sudden. You've given me clarity and finally let me see what's moving me forward in my life and what's holding me back. Anyway, things won't be the same between us after this argument, even if you leave me and we go back to our relationship as before.

Me: So what are you going to do now?

Her: I'm going to tell him it's over. I don't want to live in the shadow of my own abilities and never be able to bring them out. And I want you to help me pursue my goals. No one should have to tell me how to live my life and while you give me advice, you never force me to make a decision. My boyfriend, on the other hand, pushes me in directions and imposes decisions on me that I don't always stand behind.

Me: But one day I will move on and then you will have to organize your life on your own.

Her: I'm already doing that. You're just a good friend and advisor who I enjoy talking to. My partner makes decisions for me and doesn't question whether I would have supported them. If you decide to leave me, then I'll be able to move on, because you've only ever shown me the way instead of taking me by the hand.

Me: You've changed since our first contact. And I mean that as a compliment.

Her: Thank you. However, that doesn't make the next step any easier for me.

Me: So what do you intend to do?

Her: I'm going to meet him and tell him it's over. I don't need him to lead a fulfilling life, even if the break-up makes me sad. But like you said, it won't be a healthy relationship if I continue to be attached to him. I've realized that now.

Me: You should think about it carefully and ideally sleep on it for a night.

Her: You're right. But putting it off won't help either. I'm going to see him tomorrow.

I was surprised and impressed by how determined she was once she had made the decision. But I also assumed that she wanted to get it over with and look to the future.

For the rest of the day, I left her alone to think about everything and passed the time with my own thoughts.

I was worried about how her boyfriend would react to her rejection. He didn't strike me as someone who would just accept something like that. However, I was glad when things came to an end and my protagonist was finally able to move

forward with her life on her own and no longer be held back. So I eagerly awaited the next day.

Chapter 9

Hope

You can achieve anything you set your mind to. It's your life and it's your goals. No one can stop you from living the life you want. You can achieve anything you set your mind to. It's your life.

Since the early morning, these words echoed through her consciousness as she prepared to break up with her boyfriend.

I had to admit that I didn't envy her. She knew it was the right decision and would make her life better, but that didn't make it any easier.

I kept a low profile through it all. Nothing I thought would have helped her and I wasn't going to make this an issue between me and her. I had caused enough chaos. But even regardless of my interference in her life, I felt that sooner or later it would have come to this. I noticed that she had realized this too.

When she had gathered enough courage, she got up and prepared to leave the apartment. It was a stormy day, as if the weather wanted to reflect our emotions.

She walked straight to his apartment. I had never been there before because he had always come to her place, but from her memories I knew what it looked like. I found it strange to be sitting in her consciousness during this, but I didn't want to just disengage, I wanted to give her support if necessary. I could tell that she was grateful for my presence.

We reached the front door after a short walk and she rang the bell. He opened it for her immediately.

The apartment resembled the memories my protagonist had shared with me. A narrow, small hallway. A tiny kitchen to the right, a cramped bathroom next to it and a single room with a bed to the left. It was clear that he hardly spent any time here, preferring to stay with friends. It fitted in with the image I had gotten

of him, that he was always on the move. It also explained why he always came to visit instead of inviting his girlfriend over.

My protagonist didn't go in, but just stopped at the front door. I only followed part of the conversation that followed and stayed deeper in her consciousness as far as possible so as not to disturb her. It was only when I noticed her turning around and wanting to leave the house that I let my guard down a little.

I could still hear him shouting rude things after her, then he slammed his front door shut. My protagonist seemed upset, but also glad to have put the situation behind her. We talked to each other again on the way back.

Me: How did it go?

Her: Shitty. But it's done. I made it clear to him that there was no more room for him in my life.

Me: What did he say?

Her: That I was crazy. I think he's telling himself that yesterday was some kind of dream or fantasy with you and that I manipulated him into imagining it too. To be honest, it's probably better that way. If he doesn't believe it, then no one will believe him if he tells anyone.

Me: But that also means that if there's one thing we've learned from this, it's that you shouldn't tell anyone else about it either.

Her: You're probably right. I don't have much interest in sharing it with anyone again either.

Me: Then the question is, where do we go from here?

Her: On a more positive note. I want to get through the next exams just as well as the first one. And I want to do what *I* feel like doing and not what someone else feels like doing. I realize how much I've let myself procrastinate.

Me: And me?

Her: What kind of question is that? You're with me, of course. You will accompany and support me.

Me: I've already spent so much time in your consciousness. I feel stronger than ever and I don't want to be a burden to you in the long term.

Her: You don't at the moment, so there's nothing wrong with you staying.

Me: If you say so.

I sensed that she felt liberated. Free from the worries and fears that had

plagued her just a short time ago. She could finally breathe freely again and look to the future with a positive feeling.

I hadn't realized how the shadow of her ex-boyfriend had constantly weighed on her mind, even if she hadn't wanted to admit it to herself.

Now I could feel her joy and hope for the near future vibrating through her mind.

Her: I should buy a piano.

Me: Then start saving up.

Her: Then just a small one. Or any other instrument. I want to be creative. All my life I've only consumed things and learned stuff from school and university. You showed me how wonderful it can be to create something yourself.

Me: In that case, I'm sure you can find a cheap, electronic version that you can practice with in your apartment.

The next few weeks flew by.

My protagonist bought a small, electronic piano and practiced on it regularly without my help. She got better and better.

She was able to complete the exams without any further problems and when the results were published, her joy only increased because she had received top marks everywhere.

At the end of the exam period, she met up with fellow students for the first time in a long time and celebrated the end of the exams.

I kept a low profile most of the time and hardly got involved. There was practically nothing for me to do. Her life was going well and there was no reason for me to get involved.

I felt it was time to leave.

Chapter 10

Farewell

Her: Don't talk nonsense.

Me: We both knew the moment would come. I'm as strong as I could be and you have a happy life. It's time for me to move on and for you to live your life.

Her: I can live my life even if you don't move on but stay with me.

Me: But I have no reason to stay here.

Her: No reason? Isn't being good friends and liking each other reason enough?

Me: I like you a lot and I'm very happy to know you, but I want to see more of the world.

Her: We can travel together.

Me: I could always come back to you if I realize that there's nowhere as beautiful as you.

Her: Then you might as well stay here.

Me: That won't get you anywhere...

We'd been having these conversations in different variations for weeks. In the end, we always agreed that I would stay a little longer after all.

We both knew that this situation couldn't last, but I didn't want to argue with her and, admittedly, I really liked her and was a little worried about the great unknown that was waiting for me. I knew my way around her and felt at home. Nevertheless, I had the feeling that I had to move on at some point.

The days rippled by in the flow of time and every new morning brought something tough for me. A routine in which I began to feel trapped.

While my protagonist was enjoying life, making new friends and discovering new creative veins, I felt more and more out of place. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I was becoming dissatisfied.

I could have just left at any time. My protagonist wouldn't have been able to stop me. But I couldn't bring myself to leave her like that either. I wanted a nice goodbye for both of us, so that we could close this chapter of our memories and it would be easier to open a new one.

And so the days crept on.

Towards the end of the lecture-free period, before my protagonist began another period of learning and studying, she celebrated more and more at parties organized by her new friends and acquaintances. She spent almost every evening in a different apartment and forgot about the rest.

During this time, I hid deep in her consciousness as far as possible and left her alone. She didn't waste a thought on me. I had become as natural to her as her eyes, hands or legs were.

Only when we spent some time alone did we talk to each other. Often without words.

But then came the evening that was to change something.

As so often during parties, I stayed deep in her consciousness and only noticed the atmosphere and the noise from the sidelines. But when a wave of worry washed through her consciousness, my interest awoke and I went to see what had happened.

She had always avoided going to the same events as her ex-partner, but that evening she had forgotten to find out and only realized it when he arrived.

She was nervous and a little worried, but she didn't want to let it spoil her evening and ignored the emotions. Instead, she focused on having fun and partying hard.

I watched him through her eyes. He hadn't changed much since the last time we'd seen him, the day she'd broken up with him. However, after a while I noticed that he looked over at us an uncomfortable amount of times.

I didn't like this.

I did something I didn't usually do at parties and sent her an uncertain thought, expressing my concern about his presence. She replied, slightly annoyed, and I realized that she didn't want to think about it.

I continued to monitor the situation vigilantly while she tried with all her might not to think about his presence. But it became increasingly difficult to pre-

tend that nothing was wrong.

When she could no longer shake off the unpleasant feeling, she spoke to me.

Her: All right, you're right. I should go.

Me: He looks at you all the time.

Her: I know. I'm leaving now. My apartment is just around the corner anyway.

She quickly said goodbye to her friends and then looked for her jacket. Only when she stood in front of the door did she exhale with relief.

Me: Let's get out of here quickly.

Her: My apartment is only two streets away.

Me: I know. Go on then, let's get home.

Her: I shouldn't forget to ask again if he's invited. I won't make that mistake a second time. Did you notice how he was looking over at me the whole time?

Me: He already looked very drunk to me. Who knows what was going through his head.

Her: I don't want to know.

We walked briskly in the light of the street lamps on a direct route to her apartment. However, we hadn't gone a few meters when we heard footsteps behind us and a quick glance over our shoulders revealed that her ex-boyfriend had also set off and was following us.

She: I don't really feel like talking to him right now.

Me: Then tell him and keep walking.

She shouted to him as we walked that she didn't want to talk to him. I heard him laugh in response. Then he asked her if she preferred to talk to the voice in her head. She replied that he should leave her alone. He ignored this and stood directly in front of us with a few quick steps.

He stood in front of her and looked down at her.

He asked how she could dare to just leave him like that and then act as if there had never been anything between them. She replied that he had no right to demand anything from her and that they had nothing more to say to each other.

The conversation quickly turned into an argument. He was visibly drunk and after a while he no longer bothered to control himself. I realized how badly the break-up had hurt him. I knew it hadn't been easy for my protagonist either, but she had things she could distract herself with and work on instead. It seemed to me as if her ex-partner had fallen into a hole afterwards.

Now that I looked at him like that, I almost felt sorry for him. But as he was currently busy shouting at my protagonist, my sympathy was limited. The situation escalated visibly and I began to get scared. I realized that it was no different for her. He could barely hold on to himself.

And then, when she'd had more than enough and wanted to stall him and turn to leave, he took a swing and punched her in the face.

I don't know if he really intended to hit her that hard, but he did and my protagonist staggered backwards. A house wall rose up behind her, in front of her he came closer and closer. His eyes sparkled wildly. We were both scared.

I desperately searched for a way out, but I couldn't find one. We couldn't run away, he would have caught up with us immediately.

She was trembling. She was at a loss for words.

Then he started to swear at her. Quietly at first, then he got louder and louder and went on insulting her. I sensed that it was only a matter of time before he would lash out again and use violence.

A flash of thought went through my head and before my protagonist could catch it and try to stop me, I jumped from her to him.

The flames were blazing all around me. I felt like I was standing in a burning building. I had never been confronted with such rage and so much adrenaline. The alcohol in his blood clouded his conscience and made him see nothing but red. He felt he was in the right. She had hurt him. Now he wanted to hurt her. It was only fair to do so.

I hated his mind. I would have left immediately if it hadn't been for her. But for her sake, I gathered all my strength and kicked the wall that surrounded his consciousness. I tore down the barricades as quickly as I could, which wasn't easy due to his state of mind. But I had no choice and no time.

When I finally gained access to his mind and shook off the paralysis that threatened to take hold of me through his spirit, I wasted no more time.

I did something I had never done before. I attacked his mind.

My time in its consciousness had made me very strong. I could feel how crystal clear my thoughts were and I instinctively knew how to shape them to create spears and shards of glass that raged through his head and prevented him from acting.

Now I knew what it felt like to throw mental punches. I had the element of surprise on my side and dealt a dozen blows before he even understood what was going on.

My protagonist noticed my absence and realized that her opponent had become incapacitated and had stopped his tirade of hatred. On the edge of his consciousness, I saw her push past him and run away. I hoped that she would run straight to her apartment and then tell someone what had just happened.

But I didn't have time to cheer because my opponent was now ready to strike back. Although I had been prepared for the mental punch, it still hit me with full force. If I hadn't already dug deep into his consciousness, this blow would have catapulted me out of his head immediately.

But I stood firm. I would rather lose all my strength in this fight than allow it to reach my protagonist again.

And so we continued to beat each other. A battle that raged only in our minds. I noticed how I was becoming visibly weaker. I wasn't made for attacking other people's consciousness. Soon I no longer had the upper hand and realized how the energy that held me together was draining out of me.

With another effort, I took control of his upper body and shifted his center of gravity so far forward that he staggered and fell forward. Several things happened as he fell.

First, we had a fierce battle over who got to control his hands. I won this battle by the skin of my teeth and prevented him from supporting himself, causing him to fall lengthways onto the stones of the sidewalk. But before the fall was over, he took advantage of the fact that I was distracted by my focus on the hands and hurled a huge punch at me, which caught me off guard and threw me out of his head in a high arc.

Silence. Emptiness. Nothing but darkness around me.

And then the throbbing. This unpleasant throbbing of gradually consuming weakness that seemed to get stronger and stronger.

I no longer had a body, but I knew I was bleeding out. In a few moments, it could all be over. I floated around in a vacuum and let the stars circle in my mind.

Then I came to my senses and remembered my protagonist. I had to go to her. I had to see if she was all right.

I pulled myself together and used my remaining strength to find a way to her consciousness. Without thinking too hard, I shimmied my way past every person I could find until I reached her.

I was so weak that even with her I found it difficult to break through the wall. Then I finally succeeded and fell deep into her consciousness in the hope that my pain would be alleviated.

But there was no relief. It was still throbbing around me and the feeling of weakness remained constant. She noticed my presence immediately.

Her: What did you do?

Me: I saved you.

Her: You could have been killed!

Me: I'm already dead.

Her: You know what I mean. That was irresponsible of you. You could already no longer exist.

Me: Are you okay?

Her: I'm in shock. But otherwise I'm fine, don't worry. I've already called two friends and talked to them.

Me: And what's next?

Her: They'll take care of it. One of them has offered to come to me and be there for me.

Me: I hope you never have to see him again.

Her: We'll make sure of that.

Me: I'm glad you've made such good friends. I'm sure you have a long, good life ahead of you.

Her: What are you talking about? You're going to be part of that life!

Me: This fight with him has weakened me a lot. I realize that my wounds are too deep to heal this time. I'm just glad you're okay.

Her: Don't say that. We'll fix you, just like last time!

Me: You don't have to mourn me. You've made great friends and moved your life forward. You're a great person and I'm really glad I got to know you.

Her: Don't you dare leave just like that. I swear to you, if you leave now...

Me: Take care. Farewell.

I could hardly think straight and even though I would have loved to talk to her for longer, I knew it was time for me to go.

I had fulfilled my mission and she had a good, fulfilling life ahead of her. What could be better?

With the last of my strength, I passed on to her all the love and affection I felt for her and then I detached myself from her consciousness and floated away into eternal darkness.

END