

THE MAN BEHIND THE VOICE



GERARD FELLER

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A psychological and spiritual thriller

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English-language edition

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1. THE ROOM WITHOUT CLOCKS

The first mistake Ruben made was not closing the door behind him.

The second was that he thought it was his own decision to go in.

Above the door hung a brass sign:

DR. SELENE VARGA — REGRESSION THERAPY AND
CONSCIOUSNESS WORK

The practice was located in an old mansion on the Maliebaan. Inside it smelled of sandalwood, old paper and something bitter that Ruben couldn't identify. The waiting room had no windows. There was no clock either.

Selene Varga was smaller than he expected. She wore a long black dress, but no jewelry, except a silver ring with a dark stone.

"You're having trouble sleeping," she said before he had sat down.

Ruben looked up. "I entered that in the form."

"You have more trouble being awake."

She said it softly, almost casually.

Ruben immediately felt that she understood him.

He would later learn that this was called the Barnum effect: a general statement that feels personal because the listener fills it in himself. At that moment, he only heard the truth.

Since the death of his wife Marije two years earlier, he lived as if someone had taken the color out of his days. He functioned. He worked as a financial investigator, paid his bills and spoke to his mother by phone every Sunday. But he felt like an actor playing the life of a dead man.

Regular therapy had helped little.

"Your sadness is not just in this life," Selene said.

"What do you mean?"

"Some fears are older than our memories."

“Do you believe in past lives?”

She smiled.

“It's not about what I believe. It's about what your deeper consciousness wants to show you.”

The answer seemed careful. It was also evasive. She confirmed nothing and suggested everything.

Ruben lay down on a leather couch.

Selene placed a small speaker behind his head. There was a low, pulsating tone. Not a melody, more of a rhythm that almost coincided with his breathing.

“Hypnosis is not sleep,” she said. “You remain present. You can stop at any time.”

That reassured him.

She did not mention that people in trance can accept logically contradictory things at the same time. Nor did she mention that hypnosis can increase confidence in memories without improving their reliability.

“Look at one point on the ceiling.”

A brass disk hung above him. The light moved slowly over it.

“You don't have to do anything,” Selene said. “Just follow my voice.”

Ruben felt his arms become heavy. His breathing slowed. The ceiling seemed to slide further away.

Neurologically, nothing supernatural happened. His focus narrowed. The outside world was given less priority. The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, involved in critical control and working memory, started working differently with areas for attention and imagination. The dividing line between perception and internally generated images became less clear.

But for Ruben it felt like a door opened somewhere inside him.

“There are stairs,” Selene said.

He saw a staircase.

“Every step takes you further back.”

He descended.

“You come to a door that only you can open.”

A wooden door with an iron handle appeared.

“What do you see?”

“A street.”

'Where?'

'London.'

“What year?”

Ruben wanted to say he didn't know.

Instead he heard himself answer:

“1796.”

The tone from the speaker stopped.

In the silence someone laughed.

It wasn't Selene.

2. THE MAGICIAN OF PYE STREET

The street was covered in a blanket of fog.

Ruben smelled coal smoke, horse manure and open sewers. Carriages rattled over wet stones. A woman sold pamphlets under an oil lamp. Further on, someone was thrown out of an inn by two men.

Everything had a sharpness that dreams did not have.

Ruben looked at his clothes. A brown coat, a vest with brass buttons and muddy shoes. In his pocket he found a coin with the head of King George III.

“You're late.”

The man stood in the opening of a narrow alley.

He was tall and thin. His face seemed carved from shadows. He wore a gray coat and held a walking stick with a silver knob in the shape of a crow.

“Who are you?” asked Ruben.

“Abel March.”

He didn't know that name. Yet he caused a cold recognition.

March led him to a room above a bookshop in Pye Street. The walls were lined with almanacs, astrological tables, trial reports and cheap booklets about lost treasures, love predictions and thief catchers.

There was a large book on the table.

“People think they want to know the future,” March said. “But usually they want permission for what they are already planning.”

He showed Ruben how visitors betrayed themselves: a look at a wedding ring, a held breath at a name, wear and tear on clothing, mud from a certain neighborhood, ink on the fingers, funeral dust under a colored coat.

“Never start with a fact,” March said. “Start with an opportunity.”

He looked straight at Ruben.

“There is someone you care about a lot, but with whom the contact is not as you would like.”

Ruben thought of his mother.

March saw the change in his face.

“A woman,” he continued. “Older than you.”

Reuben nodded.

“She is concerned, but she doesn't say everything.”

That applied to his mother. It was probably true of almost every mother.

“How do you know?”

March smiled.

“Because you just told me.”

“I didn't say anything.”

“People talk all the time. The mouth is just their least reliable organ.”

In subsequent visits — Ruben didn't know if it was days or months — March taught him the art of equivocating.

A prediction had to be broad enough to always come true, but specific enough to be remembered. A miss should never be called a miss. The client had misunderstood the message, the event had yet to happen or the information belonged to someone close to him.

March taught him to lay cards, read hands, and open books in a seemingly meaningful sentence. Bibliomancy, he called it.

“A book has more authority than a man,” March said. “Even when people decide where it falls open.”

He showed Ruben how to extract small amounts of information from a client and later give it back as a revelation.

“What if I can't discover anything?”

“Then you tell people what every person secretly believes: that they have more talent than they use, that they bear more pain than others see, and that they will soon be faced with an important choice.”

“That's cheating.”

“No,” said March. “It's true.”

He hit the big book.

“True, but misleading. The most powerful lie does not contain a false word.”

Sometimes customers came. Maids who wanted to know who they would marry. Merchants who searched for hidden wealth. Women who wanted an unfaithful husband back. Men who wanted to find stolen goods.

March gave them no future.

He gave them a story that gave meaning to their fear.

And they paid him.

One evening, Ruben saw March taking six gold coins from a young woman. He promised that her missing brother was still alive and would return home.

When she was gone, Reuben asked, "Is he really alive?"

"Probably not."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because hope sells better than grief."

"That's cruel."

March came up behind him.

'You think people seek truth. That is your last innocence.'

Ruben saw their reflection in the window.

March put a hand on his shoulder.

The hand in the window did not move.

3. THE RETURN

Ruben woke up with blood in his mouth.

Selene sat next to him.

“You bit your tongue,” she said.

“How long was I gone?”

“Forty-seven minutes.”

For Ruben it had been months.

He talked about London, Pye Street and Abel March. Selene listened without interrupting him. Only when he mentioned the name March did she narrow her eyes slightly.

“Do you know him?” Ruben asked.

“Not consciously.”

“He taught me things.”

“Your deeper self has reminded you of abilities you always possessed.”

“Was it a past life?”

Selene ran two fingers over the dark stone in her ring.

“What feels most true to you?”

That became her answer to every critical question.

Ruben came back.

First once a week. Then three times. Each time March waited in the room above the bookstore. He taught Ruben old tricks and new applications.

How television psychics worked with a series of names and letters until someone responded.

How silence led people to add information themselves.

How to use a denial as an affirmation.

“I feel something around the chest,” Ruben said during an exercise.

“My father had lung cancer,” the imaginary client said.

‘Precisely.’

“What if he had had a heart attack?”

“Then you meant the heart.”

“And if he was healthy?”

“Then it's about emotional distress.”

March tapped his stick happily.

“Now you understand.”

After three months, Selene ended the treatment.

“You don't need a therapist anymore,” she said. “You must use your gift.”

“What gift?”

“People show what is hidden beneath their words.”

Ruben resigned from the criminal investigation department.

He used his savings to rent a practice space. He had it written on the door:

RUBEN VERMEER — INTUITIVE LIFE GUIDANCE

He did not call himself a medium. He thought that was too cheap. He spoke about pattern recognition, energetic resonance and deep autobiographical perception.

His first clients came through Selene.

After that things went quickly.

4. TRUTH AS THEATRE

Ruben was good.

Not supernaturally good.

Human good.

He noticed the slight discoloration where a wedding ring had been. He could tell by the choice of words whether someone came from the healthcare, education or financial world. He noticed which subjects caused a change in breathing, pupil size or muscle tension.

His brain had become a prediction machine.

The salience network quickly selected which signals could be important. The amygdala registered tiny emotional responses. The anterior cingulate cortex signaled when a statement was not successful. Then his prefrontal cortex adapted the story.

To the client it seemed as if Ruben knew things.

In reality, he was adjusting hypotheses at high speed.

"I'm getting through to an older man," he said to a woman of about sixty.

Her lip trembled.

"Your father?"

She shook her head.

"No, not your father. Someone who was like a father to you."

Her eyes became moist.

"My uncle."

"He wasn't always easy to get along with."

She laughed through her tears. "You could say that."

Ruben waited.

"But he had a soft side that few people knew," he added.

The woman then told him everything he needed.

At the end she said, "You described him exactly."

Ruben was announced on television as the man who looked behind the veil.

He performed in front of an audience of four hundred people. Beforehand, employees carelessly collected stories in the foyer. Online reservations yielded names, addresses and social media profiles. Ruben knew fragments before he took the stage.

The rest did cold reading.

A presenter asked if he really spoke to the deceased.

"I only pass on what presents itself," Ruben replied.

It was literally true.

It left exactly the wrong impression.

His fame grew. Also his income.

But at night he heard Abel March's walking stick tapping through his house.

At first only in dreams.

Then when he was awake.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Sometimes in the morning he would find muddy shoe prints next to his bed.

He installed cameras. Nothing was visible on the images, but every night at 3:17 am the sound cut out for twelve seconds.

In that silence a voice whispered in his head:

"Hope sells better than grief."

Ruben went back to the Maliebaan.

The brass sign was gone.

A real estate agent said the building had been vacant for six years.

"This is where Dr. Varga worked."

"Not according to our records."

"I have been treated here for months."

The man looked at him cautiously.

“Are you sure this is the right address?”

Inside, the rooms were bare. No treatment couch. No sandalwood. No brass disk.

Ruben only found something in the former therapy room.

There was a dark stone in the floor.

The same stone as in Selene's ring.

5. THE CLIENT WITHOUT A PAST

The man who would unmask Ruben called himself David Vos.

He was dressed inconspicuously. No wedding ring, no watch, no visible brand. His shoes were clean. His nails short. He sat down without looking around the room.

Ruben didn't love him.

Not because David was hostile, but because he revealed very little unconscious information.

"How can I help you?" Ruben asked.

"You have to tell me."

Ruben smiled professionally.

"I don't work as a fair fortune teller."

"No. You call it intuitive guidance."

"I help people recognize patterns."

"What patterns do you see with me?"

Ruben observed his clothing, posture and language. Highly educated, probably care or research. Controlled. Fatigue around the eyes. A slight pallor where his shirt collar had blocked the sun.

"You are responsible for others," Ruben began. "People see you as stable, but lately you have had doubts about whether you are still in the right place."

David didn't respond.

Ruben continued.

"There is a younger woman."

A small movement of David's left thumb.

"Your daughter?"

Silence.

"Or someone for whom you feel fatherly responsible."

David inhaled deeper.

“Her name is Emma,” he said.

Ruben felt the route open up.

“Emma has made choices you don't understand.”

David nodded.

“She has distanced herself.”

Another nod.

'Something happened to a group of people. A community perhaps.'

'Yes.'

“A spiritual group.”

David's eyes turned red.

Ruben leaned forward.

“Emma is still alive, but you're afraid you'll lose her.”

“Can you see where she is?”

“I see water.”

David grabbed his hands.

“Is she by the river?”

Ruben closed his eyes. “There is a building. Brick. I get a letter. An M or an N.”

“Maasbracht?”

The name meant nothing to Ruben.

Yet he suddenly saw an old warehouse on dark water.

On an upper floor, a young woman sat on a mattress. Behind her stood Abel March.

“Yes,” Ruben whispered. “Maasbracht.”

David started to cry.

“Is she alive?”

Ruben heard March right behind him.

“Give him hope.”

"She's alive," Ruben said. "But she's scared. She carries a bracelet that her mother gave her."

David wiped his eyes.

"What kind of bracelet?"

Reuben saw silver. A small bird pendant.

'A bird. A blackbird or a crow.'

David leaned back.

His sadness disappeared.

"Emma doesn't exist," he said.

Ruben opened his eyes.

'What?'

"I don't have a daughter."

"You're lying."

'I chose Maasbracht on the way. I built the river, the group and the bracelet from your questions.'

Ruben felt the blood drain from his face.

David placed a small recording device on the table.

"You gave some serious advice about a non-existent woman. Every time I provided information, you later gave it back to me in an amended form."

"Why are you doing this?"

'Because my sister stopped taking her medication after a consultation with you. You said her depression was not medical, but stemmed from a deceased relative holding onto her energy.'

"I never said that."

David pressed the device.

Ruben's voice filled the room:

'The treatment dampens the signal that you should actually receive.'

Then he heard the voice of David's sister.

"So I should stop?"

And his own answer:

'I can't make that choice for you. But your body already knows.'

True, but misleading.

She had stopped taking the medication. Two weeks later she attempted suicide.

"I didn't want to hurt her," Ruben said.

"You wanted authority without responsibility."

Abel March appeared behind David.

"Let him go," March said.

Ruben grabbed the edge of his desk.

David looked back. "What do you see?"

'Nothing.'

"You are looking at someone."

"Go away."

David remained seated.

'My sister is being treated by a psychiatrist and is now doing better. I am a pastor and clinical psychologist. I did not come to expose you on television.'

"Then what do you want?"

"Know whether you still believe that you are helping people."

March raised his cane.

An order sounded in Ruben's head.

Make fun of him.

Ruben felt anger rush through his chest like heat. His heart rate increased. His gaze narrowed. Prefrontal inhibition decreased as the threat network took control.

He suddenly saw how easily he could destroy David with one carefully chosen lie.

"Your wife doesn't trust you," Ruben said.

David froze.

Hit.

"Because you yourself are hiding something."

David's eyes narrowed.

Another small comment.

Ruben felt the words coming, just as March had taught him.

Then he bit his tongue.

Blood filled his mouth.

The pain brought the room back.

"I hear a voice," he said.

For the first time, he had said something completely true during a consultation.

6. THREE EXPLANATIONS

David had Reuben examined first.

That disappointed him.

Ruben had expected a deliverance pastor to immediately identify demons. Instead, David arranged for an assessment by a psychiatrist, a neurologist and a trauma expert.

The MRI showed no tumor or structural abnormality.

The EEG showed no epileptic activity.

The psychiatrist examined psychosis, depression, dissociation, substance use and sleep deprivation. Ruben knew where he was, could reason logically and understood that others did not see March. This argued against a serious loss of reality testing, but did not rule out hallucinatory experiences.

The trauma expert spoke about source monitoring.

“Your brain has to constantly determine where information comes from,” she explained. ‘Did I see this, dream it, read it or hear it from someone? Hypnosis can increase confidence in internally generated images. An implanted figure can later be experienced as independent.’

“So March is fantasy?”

“That’s a possible explanation.”

“And Selene?”

“We can’t find a therapist with that name.”

“I touched her.”

“That makes your experience real. Not necessarily your interpretation.”

David added a third possibility.

“There can also be a spiritual dimension.”

The psychiatrist looked at him. “As long as that option is not used to replace research and treatment.”

“Agreed,” David said.

They drew three circles on a board:

NEUROLOGICAL — PSYCHOLOGICAL — SPIRITUAL

Neither circle was allowed to swallow the other.

Ruben hated that caution.

“There's something in me,” he said. “Take it out.”

“Maybe,” David said. “But liberation is not a show where we shout at a voice and you continue with the same lies tomorrow.”

“I want to be free.”

“Do you also want to close your practice?”

Ruben was silent.

“Give back the money where possible?”

Silence.

“Openly admit that you have misled people?”

“Then I lose everything.”

“Maybe that is not the same as becoming unfree.”

Reuben stood up.

“You're just like March. You want power over me.”

David remained seated.

“That's possible. That's why I don't work with you alone. A team is coming. Everything is discussed and recorded. No secret rituals, no trance, no dependence on one care provider.”

“And if I don't agree?”

“Then you go home.”

Ruben waited for pressure, a threat, or a spiritual command.

That didn't happen.

The door remained open.

Freedom felt more disturbing than hypnosis.

7. THE FIRST BATTLE

Three weeks later, Ruben closed his practice.

He did not post a full confession, but a distant statement about health reasons. David called that insufficient.

“I did what you asked anyway.”

‘You have closed your practice. You haven’t told the truth yet.’

“If I tell everything, I will be persecuted.”

“Possibly.”

“My reputation is gone.”

‘Probably.’

“You enjoy this.”

David stood up.

“Then we’ll stop for today.”

“Why don’t you defend yourself?”

“Because your distrust doesn’t disappear with one answer.”

That night, March appeared at the foot of Ruben’s bed.

Not as a shade.

Complete.

His gray coat was wet from the London fog.

“He’s taking your gift,” March said.

“It wasn’t a gift.”

“You helped people.”

“I cheated on them.”

‘Every therapist influences. Every preacher uses words. Every doctor sells hope.’

“Not like that.”

“What's the difference?”

Ruben didn't have a sharp answer. That was March's strongest weapon: not the lie, but the half-truth that dissolved every distinction.

March leaned over him.

“Open the book.”

On Reuben's bedside table was a Bible that David had given him.

“A book has more authority than a man,” March whispered. “Even when people decide where it falls open.”

The pages started moving on their own.

Ruben thought about bibliomancy. Open a book at random and treat the first sentence as a personal message.

He closed the Bible.

“I'm not going to use him as an oracle.”

March's face fell.

For the first time he seemed afraid.

The next morning, Ruben found three deep scratches on his chest.

The psychiatrist asked if he could have inflicted them on himself while he slept. Ruben wanted to deny that, but the camera in his bedroom showed him sitting up at 3:17 am.

The sound disappeared for twelve seconds.

Then he scratched his skin with his own nails.

His mouth moved on screen.

A lip reader analyzed the recording.

Reuben had said:

“Let me in.”

8. SELENE'S NAME

The liberation team consisted of David, pastor Ruth Mensink and psychiatrist Farid Haddad.

They didn't start with an exorcism.

They started with a life history.

Ruben talked about his father, who humiliated him as a child. About Marije's illness. About his anger at God when prayer did not heal her. About his longing for a reality in which death did not have the last word.

Selene had not simply offered hypnosis.

She had offered a back door to a world in which Ruben was once again in control.

“What did you want from her?” asked Ruth.

'Relief.'

“Just that?”

Ruben thought about the cameras, the stage and the people who admired him.

'Power.'

“And March?”

'Knowledge.'

“Just knowledge?”

“Knowledge that put me above others.”

They talked about guilt without reducing everything to guilt. About trauma without declaring every choice a symptom. About spiritual bondage without calling every phenomenon demonic.

One afternoon, David brought a police file.

“We found Selene.”

Ruben grabbed the file.

The photo did not show the woman from the practice.

It was a man: Stefan Varga, former illusionist and television consultant. He had worked as an investigator for paranormal programs and knew how to gather insider knowledge from social media, forms and conversations.

“He pretended to be a woman?”

“Not exactly. Wigs, voting software and projection techniques were found in the building. You were strongly suggested during sessions and often under the influence of a herbal mixture with a dissociative effect.’

‘Why?’

“To train you.”

“For what?”

‘Your television career. Varga received a percentage of your income through intermediaries.’

Ruben looked through photos of hidden speakers, cameras and the brass disk.

“And Abel March?”

David put an old book on the table.

THE UNIVERSAL FORTUNE COUNTER, 1796.

One engraving showed a magician in a gray coat with a walking stick.

Below the image:

ABRAM MARSH, CUNNING-MAN OF PYE STREET

Not Abel March.

But close enough for a hypnotic reconstruction.

“Selene probably said the name before or during the trance,” Farid said. “Your memory adjusted it.”

Ruben felt relief.

Everything was explained.

Then David opened the book to a police report from 1798.

Abram Marsh had been arrested for fraud and theft. During his interrogation he had used one sentence:

Hope sells better than grief.

“Was that in Varga’s material?” Ruben asked.

“No,” said David.

“Then I couldn't have known.”

No one answered.

Ruth closed the book.

“An unexplained detail does not automatically prove a demon.”

“But it also doesn't prove that there isn't one.”

'Beats. That's why we don't focus on sensation. We focus on truth, responsibility and Christ.”

That night Ruben heard March laughing.

Not triumphant.

Challenged.

9. THE ROOM WITH WITNESSES

The first liberation session took place during the day.

No darkened room. No pulsating music. No incense. The windows were open. On the table were water, tissues, a Bible and the treatment plan.

Ruben stayed completely awake.

Ruth began with prayer. Not loud. Not dramatic.

Then she asked Ruben to speak himself.

He confessed his deception. He did not mention general 'mistakes', but concrete actions: gathering information without knowledge, presenting probabilities as revelations, discouraging medical treatment and exploiting grief.

With each point March came closer.

At first only Ruben saw him.

Then the temperature in the room changed. The skin conductance meter around Ruben's fingers registered a sudden increase in sympathetic activation. His heart rate increased from 78 to 146. His breathing became shallow.

Farid checked whether he remained approachable.

“Ruben, where are you?”

“In the room.”

“What date?”

He named the date correctly.

“Who do you see?”

“March.”

“Who do you see physically?”

“You three.”

He stayed oriented.

Ruth asked, “What does he say?”

“That my remorse is also a performance.”

“Is that true?”

The question hit Ruben harder than an order.

He had even wanted to control this session. He wanted to be the spectacular convert. The former medium who would from now on attract full churches with his testimony.

March smiled.

“See?”

Ruben started to cry.

“I even try to sell my liberation.”

Ruth nodded.

“Then we will also bring that into the light.”

March shouted.

Not in the room.

In Ruben's skull.

Images flashed through his mind: London, Selene, Marije on her deathbed, the applause of hundreds of people. His thalamus flooded the cortex with alarm signals. The amygdala linked old fear to the current prayer situation. His prefrontal control began to dissipate.

“Make contact,” Farid said.

David did not take Reuben's hands, but placed his visibly on the table.

“You can take my hand if you want.”

Ruben did it.

Physical orientation. Skin, pressure, temperature. No floating. No descent into an inner world.

Stay present.

Ruth spoke the name of Jesus.

March hit the floor with his stick.

The lights went out.

Ruben jerked his hand away and fell backwards. His body stiffened. A low voice came from his mouth.

“He belongs to me.”

David did not respond to the voice.

He looked at Ruben.

“Ruben, can you hear me?”

The low voice laughed.

“He’s not here.”

“Ruben, if you hear me, move your right index finger.”

Nothing.

Then a minimal movement.

Farid saw it.

“He is present.”

That changed the battle. They did not treat Reuben as an empty house in which two powers fought. He was a human being who could answer, choose and stay connected.

Ruth said, “Ruben, you shouldn’t disappear so that we can talk to this voice.”

His eyes opened.

The low voice continued to come from his throat.

“I’m March.”

Reuben squeezed David’s hand.

“No,” he managed. “You use that name.”

His back arched. He gagged, but remained conscious.

“What do you want to let go of?” Ruth asked.

“My right to be special.”

March screeched.

“My right to secret knowledge.”

The room filled with the smell of coal smoke.

“My anger at God because Marije died.”

That was the hardest.

Not the cards. Not the money. Not the television appearances.

His indictment against God had been the deepest door.

“I wanted a world where I could reach her,” Ruben sobbed. “I would rather have a lie where she spoke than a truth where she was dead.”

Ruth did not respond with an explanation for Marije's death.

She stayed with him.

“Are you choosing Christ without the guarantee that He will undo your loss?”

Ruben saw March on the other side of the table.

Marije stood behind him.

She wore the blue dress in which she was buried.

“Choose me,” she said.

Her voice was perfect.

Ruben wanted to get up.

Then he saw something.

Marije always called him Ruub when she loved him and Ruben when she was angry.

The figure said again:

“Ruben, come to me.”

He closed his eyes.

“You're not her.”

The voice changed.

“You don't know what death is.”

'No.'

“You don't know where she is.”

'No.'

“Then you only have emptiness.”

Ruben opened his eyes.

“I have Christ.”

The word didn't come like magic.

It was a choice.

Ruth prayed. David and Farid remained seated next to Reuben. It didn't last a minute, but almost three hours. Periods of calm alternated with panic, accusations, shame and physical exhaustion.

Finally Reuben said:

“I renounce what I sought and the power I wanted with it.”

March stood still.

His face was no longer that of the engraving.

It was Selene.

Then Varga.

Then Ruben himself.

Finally it had no face anymore.

“You made me,” it said.

Ruben shook his head.

“Maybe I shaped you. But I won't give you a seat anymore.”

Ruth spoke calmly:

“In the name of Jesus Christ, let him go.”

The pressure in Ruben's chest became unbearable.

Then she was gone.

Not spectacular.

The coal smell disappeared. His heart rate dropped. A truck drove by outside. Someone was mowing grass.

The normal world returned.

Ruben cried because it was so normal.

10. FREE, BUT NOT FINISHED

The next morning he heard March again.

Softer, but clear.

“It didn't work.”

Ruben called David in a panic.

“I am not free.”

“Who promised you that you would never experience another thought, memory, or temptation again?”

“But I hear him.”

“Then we will investigate that. Freedom is not the same as the absence of struggle.”

The guidance lasted another eighteen months.

Ruben remained under psychiatric control. He received treatment for complicated grief, dissociative complaints and sleep disturbance. He learned to ask source questions:

Have I observed this?

Did I dream this?

Was it suggested to me?

What external confirmation is there?

He learned to recognize physical signals before fear constricted his thinking. Regular sleep, exercise and social structure reduced hallucinatory experiences.

At the same time, pastoral guidance continued.

He broke his contracts, wrote to clients and offered financial compensation. Not everyone forgave him. One former client filed a complaint. Ruben received a suspended sentence and had to give up part of his assets.

He wanted to use his conversion to save his reputation.

David stopped him.

“Your testimony is not a new platform.”

That's why Ruben didn't speak publicly anywhere during the first year.

He joined a small congregation where almost no one knew him from television. He set up chairs, served coffee and left afterwards without giving any advice.

The hardest part was that no one thought he was special.

Right there his recovery began.

He was baptized on a Sunday when it was raining.

As he emerged from the water, he heard March one more time.

“This is also theater.”

Ruben looked at the people around the baptismal pool. David. Ruth. Farid, who was not a Christian but had come. His mother. And David's sister, alive and recovering.

“Maybe every ritual can become theater,” Ruben thought.

Then he looked at the cross.

“But not every sign is therefore empty.”

The voice was silent.

EPILOGUE: THE LAST CLIENT

Three years later, Ruben worked in a center for recovery after manipulative groups. Not as a clairvoyant. Not as a therapist. He supervised the administration and sometimes explained, under supervision, how deception worked.

One afternoon a young woman came forward.

"I have a message from Marije," she said.

Ruben felt his body react. His heart rate accelerated. The old tunnel of attention opened.

"Who are you?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Then I can't help you."

"She says you should remember her blue dress."

Ruben grabbed the door frame.

No one outside the family knew about that dress.

"She also says you left something in London."

A man in a gray coat appeared in the hallway.

Older than March. Curved. His walking stick did not have a crow for a knob, but a silver book.

Ruben looked at the woman.

"Who sent you?"

"A therapist."

"Which one?"

"Selene Varga."

Ruben pressed the alarm button under the counter.

The woman smiled.

"You still think that exposing is the same as conquering."

At that moment, David emerged from a doctor's office. The woman turned and ran outside.

The security camera followed her to the street.

There she disappeared between two image frames.

Police found no name, no fingerprints and no recording clearly showing her face.

That evening, Ruben sat with David in the empty meeting room.

"What do you think it was?" Ruben asked.

'Don't know.'

"A henchman of Varga?"

"Possibly."

"A hallucination?"

"The camera recorded someone."

"A ghost?"

David looked at him.

"Also possible."

Ruben waited for certainty.

It didn't come.

In the past he would have filled the void with a story. He might have drawn a card, opened a book or followed a voice.

Now he left the question open.

"Are you afraid?" David asked.

'Yes.'

"What are you going to do?"

Ruben looked at his shaking hands. Then to the door, the real table and the evening light coming through the window.

"Stay awake."

They did not pray for secret knowledge.

They prayed for truth, protection and discernment.

When Ruben was walking home later, he heard the tapping of a walking stick behind him.

He didn't turn around.

Not because he was sure no one was walking.

But because he finally knew Who he wanted to follow.