

The Fallen "Princess"

Iri is 39 years old, very intelligent, and quite charming. She has a classic style, a sensual voice, speaks slowly and steadily without outbursts, and appears reserved, serious, and composed. Although she lives in Switzerland, she visited me five years ago in my office in Athens, where her parents live and where she originates from. She had returned to her family home for a few months because some events had deeply saddened her. Her father had developed a health problem, and she wanted to be close to him. Additionally, she had moved out of the house she shared with her then-partner, Gabriel, because in their seven-year relationship they had not had sex due to his erectile dysfunction, and Iri could no longer endure the anguish. At the same time, she had been rejected for a position at CERN, despite having worked there for the past few years on fixed-term contracts. When I later revisited her request for therapy, considering Solms' model, Iri added that she felt ashamed that her parents saw her so sad and crying (over Gabriel and CERN).

Her Story

Iri grew up in a middle-class family. Her father is a lawyer, intelligent, well-educated, distant, passive, stoic, and an idealist. He always spoke to her about great ideas. When Iri was troubled or sad, he would quote philosophers, telling her that emotions are superficial and unreliable guides, that she should avoid passions in order to serve higher ideals and values. He has a son from a previous marriage, which ended because his ex-wife cheated on him. Iri's mother is a physiotherapist, very beautiful like a model, intelligent, dynamic, educated, and opinionated. She charmed men but maintained impeccable morals and set firm boundaries. Her first husband was a mature, adventurous charmer who tragically died in a car accident. With her second husband—Iri's father—they had been friends for a long time (they spent time together as couples while in their first marriages). She was never in love with him, but he was a good and worthy man, and she wanted to start a family. He was also very timid in romantic matters. As she explained to Iri, she had had to "thrust herself upon her husband" in order to have children. Besides Iri, they have a son, a year and a half younger.

Iri received a classical education, learning foreign languages, ballet, and piano. Everything in her family—from furniture and habits to values, ethics, and ideals—was of high quality and standards. Iri was an excellent student, as was her brother. She was terrified of embarrassing herself at music school concerts. Throughout school, she was unattractive (acne, braces, awkward hair parting) and looked down on other girls who cared about "superficial matters" like appearance. From an early age, she struggled with friendships, was sensitive to rejection, often felt excluded, and withdrew into herself.

From fragmented stories, it seems the birth of her brother affected her deeply, making her angry at her mother for losing her exclusive attention. She resented her brother for freely seeking their mother's affection while she felt she had to appear superior. She often fought with her brother (sibling rivalry) and felt injustice, anger, and bitterness when their parents ignored her grievances or, worse, took his side. During adolescence, she envied him for being adept at many things and for being entrusted with tasks she couldn't manage, like fixing the TV. As a child, she remembers playing on top of him as if they were having sex, leading their parents to

intervene. She also recalls being infatuated with her paternal uncle and feeling aroused. Iri felt she could not measure up to her family's beauty, intelligence, skills, and knowledge. She needed something of her own, where she could stand out. She developed a passion for physics and dreamed of working at CERN.

She studied Applied Mathematical and Physical Sciences. After high school, her appearance improved and she began taking care of herself. When she realized men found her attractive, she saw it as an opportunity to get revenge for the rejection she had previously felt. She dated fellow students but ended relationships abruptly if something displeased her. She ended things with one good guy because she prioritized her academic and career ambitions over serious commitment. The only man who captivated her during her university years was the "sadist," as she calls him. He criticized her relentlessly, irritated by Iri's and her family's arrogance. Their relationship was a sadomasochistic game of control, rejection, and breakups. The sex was passionate due to their competitive dynamic. She stayed with him solely because she didn't want to lose.

However, the most significant relationship of that period was with her friend Jim, a fellow student. He was the only one she could share everything with—from sadomasochistic fantasies to philosophical and existential anxieties about death. She was in love with him and ready to give herself completely but never told him, waiting for him to make the first move. She subtly provoked him by discussing her romantic relationships. When Jim disapproved of a boyfriend, she would break it off without hesitation. She saw him as a rare case, valuing his intellect and feeling he was her soulmate. Their friendship was proof that someone worthy accepted the darkness within her, making her feel less alone in the world.

Although CERN was her ultimate dream, it never occurred to her to apply until a professor encouraged her. She completed her PhD there and continued working on research projects. University and CERN were her golden age: everything she tried succeeded, she received accolades, and she never faced rejection. However, her latent anxieties about her adequacy and others' perceptions of her were always ready to surface.

In her romantic life, the "sadist" had emotionally crushed her, so when she moved to CERN she was afraid to stay in a relationship until she met Gabriel, a good-looking, intelligent, and talented Swiss man. She couldn't believe she could have such a perfect partner. She initiated the relationship because, although Gabriel liked her, he was too shy to make the first move. For the first two years, they had a long-distance relationship, seeing each other every three weeks while she was working in England. Everything seemed ideal.

Essentially, Gabriel mirrored every move, every action of hers to align perfectly with what Iri expected. He was like the echo of her voice. He watched how Iri made the bed and arranged it in exactly the same way. He saw her clearing the table after meals and did it in precisely the same manner. He gave her gifts and planned surprises that he prepared a month in advance. He anticipated every detail before Iri even had to think about it. She could trust him completely because Gabriel's behavior fit precisely into the model Iri had learned from her family, especially her mother. They never argued, they never fought—except on one issue: sex.

Gabriel had significant difficulties with erection from the very beginning of his sexual life. His only real experience before Iri was with a girl he dated, who probably left him because they didn't have sex. The same difficulty appeared from the start with Iri as well. After the first few months of their relationship, Iri suggested that he see a doctor. Gabriel did start taking some pharmaceutical aids but, as usual, this only increased his anxiety. Additionally, he suffered from headaches, so he stopped following the doctor's instructions. Every attempt at sex ended in failure. After each failed attempt, Iri would become upset, cry silently, and isolate herself. Gabriel, who was always well-mannered, would lash out in anger by hitting an object and then go for a walk to calm down.

Iri had reached such a point of despair that, in an attempt to provoke him, she would say that she wanted to have sex with a black man and other similar things. This situation lasted for about seven years, until Iri left the home they shared. She could no longer bear feeling undesirable and failing as a woman, especially when her mother would tell her that if someone else were in her place they would have taken the upper hand to make it work. However, she couldn't bring herself to break up with him completely because she didn't want to lose such a rare person (in fact, she didn't believe she could ever have someone like him in her life again). After all, Gabriel was like a member of Iri's family, like a child to them; he fit perfectly with their values, manners, and habits. Everyone spoke highly of him, even her grandmother, and Iri felt jealous. Therefore, she left their home, first out of a sense of morality and respect for him, as she was on the verge of cheating, and second, to wake him up. She hoped it would be just a temporary break.

At that time, she was also angry with him for another reason. Iri believed she would secure a position at CERN, but instead her team leader promoted a colleague she had been working with. Iri asked Gabriel to follow her to Germany, but Gabriel argued that it wasn't in his best interest, as he was supposed to leave CERN and work in the private sector in Switzerland with a good salary. However, an opportunity at CERN became available for him.

For Iri, the narcissistic blow was twofold; she lost her footing and fell into depression. Both her colleague and Gabriel remained at the coveted CERN, while she was left out (a situation that probably reminded her of the "CERN" of her childhood and the defeat she had suffered when her brother was born). Just as she can't imagine her life without the perfect Gabriel, she can't imagine working anywhere else but at the prestigious CERN. Both losses became an obsession, as if nothing else in the world is worthwhile, as if she has completely failed. Deep down, I believe, she feels that neither of the two truly belongs to her, which is why she has lost all hope of ever having—at least in the eyes of others—a partner and a career that would meet her high childhood and family ideals.

Since then, she tries to avoid anything related to Gabriel and CERN because she feels ashamed and resentful, so isolates and punishes herself (psychosomatic symptoms, suicidal thoughts). Nevertheless, she always finds herself returning to both in some way, hoping to disprove the rejection, like someone who keeps scratching a wound to check or negate the pain.

History of Therapy: Dilemmas, Deadlocks, Traps, and Mistakes

From the very beginning, there were indications that she was preoccupied with whether I would like her or what opinion I would form about her. During the sessions, she seemed somewhat

uncomfortable, careful about what she would say, how she stood or moved in the space. She always came well-groomed, and from the early sessions she brought up dreams about me. When the time came to remove the masks we wore due to the pandemic, Iri refused. When I discussed it with her, she admitted with difficulty that she was afraid I wouldn't like her face.

She placed particular emphasis on the fact that we had studied at the same school (I was a year ahead of her; I didn't even remember her face or having ever met her), that I had done a PhD in mathematics, studied music, and had taught at the university. I perfectly fit the criteria by which she strictly chose friends and romantic partners. A psychologist she had visited previously had nothing substantial to offer her, according to her own words, so she stopped seeing him.

In short, she idealized me and felt an intellectual kinship with me, believing that as a versatile and philosophical person, in her eyes, I could understand her deep existential anxieties and cosmic loneliness. Although I felt somewhat uncomfortable, I thought that in order to help her, I shouldn't rush to deconstruct the idealization she had towards me but rather allow her to develop her transference feelings. Only with someone she admired could she gradually work through her difficulties.

It became increasingly clear that I represented, in her mind, her father, her brother, Jim, and Gabriel—in other words, the wise, distant, forbidden Oedipal father whom she could never truly have, mainly due to her own perceived inadequacy (compared to her mother, her brother, and their relationship).

In the first phase of therapy, she took refuge behind grand and contemplative ideas such as the universe, time, and death. While these intrigued me intellectually, I gradually realized that her philosophical pursuits lacked depth and merely covered her inner void, symbolizing aspects of her overall sense of failure and, equivalently, her fear of social isolation. For example, at one point she admitted that she worried about aging because men would no longer find her attractive, and she would end up alone. Similarly, her disdain for the human race and her youthful dream of saving endangered animals seemed to reflect her sensitive self and a sense of failure in human relationships. Even her love for physics seemed to stem primarily from the status of excelling in a challenging scientific field rather than a genuine interest in uncovering the mysteries of the physical world. I realized that she had learned to seek attention and admiration from her father only through “big” issues, albeit without much success due to his cold, distant, “anal” character. Lately, she has admitted that deep within her is the belief that something must involve pain and difficulty to be worthwhile.

I formed the same impression regarding how she presented her romantic life. Initially, she talked about adventures with men, how easily she dismissed them if they didn't meet her expectations, and even about daring, sexual, masochistic fantasies (e.g., being beaten or having sex with black men while tied in a cage). While her words provoked my dominant sexual instincts and psychoanalytic curiosity, they simultaneously seemed somewhat exaggerated and even silly, given her profile.

When I tried to explore her romantic life, I felt as though I was crossing a boundary, as her prudish demeanor made the topic somewhat arousing for both of us. Gradually, I realized that she was wearing a childish mask—that of the daring female who is hard to conquer and satisfy

and does not forgive indifference. In other words, Iri lived in the shadow of her unattainable Oedipal mother, playing the role of the ideal erotic, assertive woman she wished to be. Everything she described was essentially unfulfilled loves, acquaintanceships that led nowhere, failed short-term relationships (for validation or revenge), and rather common sexual desires (e.g., having her hair pulled or being spanked during sex). After all, she had stayed in a relationship for seven years without sex. At that stage, I lightly thought: "What a pity, my innocent girl, that I can't show you what real sex means".

While I thought my emotions were under control and that I was simply enjoying (and learning from) a highly interesting case of a hysterical personality, the atmosphere began to grow particularly charged. In every session, even via Skype while she was in Switzerland, I could clearly sense from her non-verbal communication (e.g., abrupt pauses and awkwardness, nice dresses, hair styling, makeup, a blouse with a heart or a love-related message) that she had strong feelings for me or thoughts she hesitated to share. There was never a time when I asked her and she didn't admit—at least seemingly—with great hesitation and emotional tension things she had been hiding and the reasons she struggled to reveal them. Some of the most notable revelations included: 1) She likes me, admires me, and would like us to be a couple, but first, she considers it inappropriate, and second, she never opens up first unless she's sure of the other person's intentions; 2) Sexual fantasies about me, but while they are inappropriate, she also feels vulnerable because they are one-sided; 3) She needs me but sees it as futile to grow attached since she will eventually lose me when therapy ends; 4) Thoughts or incidents involving other men, but she fears that if she talks about them, she will eliminate any chance of me taking her feelings for me seriously; 5) Deep sadness and pessimistic thoughts, but she worries that if she speaks about them she will lose my respect and I won't like her.

Once again, I felt like I was playing on the edge, as if I was stripping her down and she was playing hard to get but ultimately gave in (a mixture of pleasure and pain). She complained that it was unfair for me to know so much about her while she knew nothing about me. When I asked what she imagined, she said she thought I might be married with a child, and at another time, she speculated I might be sexually impotent (which I found humorous), as in her mind intellect and eroticism did not go together (like with her father and Gabriel). That's why she preferred to get to know me first: she didn't want to feel like a fool if I were already committed or uninterested, but she also didn't want to get trapped in a relationship if we weren't compatible, as she didn't make changes easily.

Once, when she was in Greece, she came to the session very well-dressed and subtly told me that I should make the first move if I wanted something to happen between us, as she had already exposed herself enough and wouldn't take another step. To my great surprise, she actually expected me to make a move during the session. Another time, she mentioned discussing with her mother that I was a good match, and her mother asked why she remained passive and why we didn't move forward. At another time, she thought that if we got together, it would be unfair for her to have to change countries because of my job and endure my long working hours.

I never discouraged her romantic feelings; I treated them as something natural that could happen. I explained that through them she could better understand herself, and when she

complained about not wanting to lose me, I comforted her by saying that we could stay in touch after therapy and—why not?—become friends.

Iri's ongoing struggle to make decisions about important pending matters in her personal and professional life persisted. Periodically, triggered by various events—sometimes trivial—that reminded her of past glories (CERN, Gabriel), she would feel utterly defeated, retreat into herself out of shame, lose hope, and sink into inertia, sadness, and suicidal thoughts. (This pattern continues to this day, with the only difference being that she now better understands the deeper causes and recovers more quickly.)

She occasionally complained that I wasn't helping her, that I wasn't telling her what to do with her life—because that's what she thought therapy was about. During holidays, she envied the idea that I might be having a good time with another woman while she was thinking about me. When her mother noticed that Iri was feeling down, she would express doubts about the therapy (“Maybe he's not helping you”) and urged her to put pressure on me, not to sit idly by. As an example, she told Iri that when she once visited a psychologist, within a few sessions he gave her some instructions, she followed them, and everything was fixed—no further effort was needed.

Iri gradually began to realize that her mother couldn't understand her sensitivities and had always given her contradictory messages. However, since I didn't give her direct advice, she continued to turn to her mother whenever she felt, as usual, that she couldn't judge what was best for her life. And her mother continued to tell her, for example, that she needed to lose weight but also not to isolate herself in her shell. It was during this time that Iri also began to realize that she was a person who avoided risk at all costs because she was afraid of failure.

I started feeling a significant responsibility for her emotional state. At the same time, her resistance to seeking a new partner after Gabriel became insurmountable—she didn't see happy marriages around her, had never had a good relationship, and didn't believe she could be happy. This brought to the surface the teachings of her family to ignore feelings, be autonomous in life and not depend on anyone. In other words, under the influence of her parents, Iri's fear of dependency, to avoid rejection, took the defensive form in her mind of “Don't be a weak woman”.

I vividly remember how deeply one of her dreams affected me and the dramatic tone with which she narrated it: She was at a small vacation house trying to recover from her poor psychological state. She went to bed feeling anxious. Time passed erratically—6:00 a.m., then 1:00 a.m., then time rerunning again—and she started experiencing heart palpitations, chest pressure, and pain. The same time-loop occurred again. She tried to unlock her phone, but her sweaty fingers couldn't operate the touch screen. She desperately wanted to call me for help but couldn't reach the phone. Despite her desperation, she believed I wouldn't come even in an emergency. She worried that she might not have locked the door. Suddenly, she heard noises and felt a heavy presence in the darkness. Hands grabbed her throat and stomach, someone attacked and strangled her. She couldn't call for help anymore and felt herself sinking into the bed from the pressure. She woke up in terror, touched herself to ensure it wasn't real, and turned on the light to confirm that nobody was in the room. Her heart was indeed racing, and her chest hurt.

For a period, I found myself trapped in my own fantasies and thoughts: 1) She has no hope. Only I can save her from despair by showing her what true romantic love means in practice; 2) A charming, intelligent woman with common interests admires me and is willing to give herself to me completely, body and soul; 3) Do we really match? She is very confused; am I getting myself into trouble? 4) I've made shit of everything; I should refer her to another therapist; 5) I can't abandon her. She would see it as a failure/rejection and collapse.

I was increasingly worried because she seemed to act out her feelings for me without awareness. A characteristic example was when, after Gabriel, she got into a relationship with Paul, whom—despite not admitting it easily—she doesn't particularly respect, and thus she continues flirting with other men and seeking opportunities. During a trip to Greece, we had an in-person session, and she was visibly upset and started crying. The night before, she had slept with a Greek man she had met earlier on a flight. She felt guilty about Paul and considered it unacceptable for her moral standards. She couldn't understand why she had given in when she didn't truly want to. Upon further exploration, it became clear that she didn't want to lose the Greek man's interest and, at the same time, was trying to deny her feelings for me to avoid feeling weak and defeated by unrequited love. Such incidents, along with my projected troubling interest, finally led me to ask her if she could openly share her thoughts despite her feelings. She couldn't even entertain the thought of stopping therapy with me and starting over with another therapist.

It was the first and only time since I started working as a trainee therapist in 2013 that I seriously considered terminating therapy due to my romantic feelings. I thought about explaining that I couldn't help her because I wasn't neutral and considered suggesting, if she wanted to date me, that we should wait at least six months to see how we felt outside therapy. At the same time, it was clear to me that, due to my character, I wouldn't be able to sustain a relationship with a former client for various reasons. Despite the temptation, it was also clear to me that I don't want such difficult individuals in my life (I typically choose partners who are happier, more relaxed, and extroverted). I reminded myself that I'm not providing therapy to solve my own problems but to help others solve theirs. Eventually, I put my personal and professional life in order and regained my composure; that is, I still like her, but I no longer hesitate in doing my job out of fear that I might be swayed by self-serving motives.

[It is worth mentioning that two years before taking on Iri, I had gone through a major life upheaval. I closed my office to move to the U.S. with my then-partner, who was pursuing further training while I was seeking opportunities, since I was very disappointed with my country. Due to certain circumstances, it was a rushed decision without fully understanding the challenges I would face. Finding jobs without securing a visa was agonizing.]

I returned out of necessity to Greece, and after the separation, having previously applied as a teaching assistant, I was offered a permanent position at the university where my ex was studying. It was a difficult decision, as I was emotionally drained, unemployed and broke, but a permanent job in mathematics would have drawn me away from psychoanalysis and embroiled me once again in adventures with my ex, who had previously and irrevocably disappointed me with her behavior. Eventually, I chose to stay in Greece, borrowed money from my family, and restarted my practice under challenging circumstances, especially with the onset of the

pandemic and the illness of my mentor in psychotherapy. Iri was one of my first clients after reopening my practice.

Interestingly, Iri also reminded me of aspects of my first long-term partner—an exceptionally educated, remarkable, and talented woman I met at 17 as a classmate and spent eight years together. (Today, she also lives in Switzerland, like many ambitious and capable Greeks who, I believe, have a personality type shaped by PLAY.) It was a deeply romantic relationship that played a formative role in shaping me as a person. After our breakup, I felt for the first time the need to understand my emotional blockages and insecurities, women, relationships, and the meaning of life. Through some random events, I met my mentor in psychotherapy, who also significantly influenced me.

Similar difficult dilemmas to those troubling Iri have been (and still are) a part of my own neurosis: as a teenager, I abandoned my love for sports to focus on studying; as a university student, I left behind my passion for music to focus on mathematics; as a professional, I gave up my love for mathematics to focus on psychoanalysis. I wanted it all (a sense of omnipotence), and therefore, the choices I had to make inevitably involved sacrifices—important losses of fascinating, meaningful things within my own value system.]

Beyond my own projections onto Iri, the content of my countertransference (“She has no hope, only I can save her”) led me to the following hypothesis, which I have been gradually sharing with her:

When she fails to live up to her contradictory childhood ideals (successful, dynamic mother; idealist, passive father), instead of reevaluating her goals, she remains stuck, withdraws into herself out of shame, and punishes herself. Anything else would feel like injustice, a sign of weakness, and humiliation. The result is profound loneliness. Through her suffering, she hopes—as a last resort—to indirectly gain attention, recognition, understanding and support. (This likely explains the masochistic aspects of her personality.) If this method also fails, she feels that life is no longer worth living. In other words, she would rather die than admit her defeat. This reaction likely corresponds to the loss of her mother’s love with the birth of her brother.

Iri recalled several incidents that, I think, confirm this hypothesis: 1) When she felt unfairly treated for not winning her parents’ favor during arguments with her brother, she would retreat bitterly to her room. Only then would her mother approach her, trying to comfort her with words like, “What’s wrong, my little Iri?”; 2) Often feeling alone and excluded by her family, she had the habit of wandering off and getting lost at the beach or in the village, secretly hoping that her parents would worry and come searching for her. It was her way of seeking validation and proving her worth to herself; 3) She started having suicidal thoughts when the “sadist” completely dismantled the narcissistic shield she had built around herself—being an accomplished and self-sufficient individual who needed no one—when she entered a prestigious university. 4) She had partly left for Switzerland because of the “sadist.” There, a persistent suitor appeared, portraying himself as a knight in shining armor, promising to soothe the wounds of her past. One night, he pressured her to sleep at his place. Iri found herself in a dilemma, as she hadn’t emotionally moved on from the “sadist.” She began having thoughts of dying and

ultimately decided to leave in her car because she didn't have her contact lens solution with her. On the way, she got into a severe accident—she could have truly died.

While at times I worried about my romantic feelings, I did not allow them—at least consciously—to interfere with the therapy. On the contrary, they helped me better understand things about both of us. However, I have doubts about whether Iri's pathology (“I deserve the best. If I don't have it, then life is not worth living”) and my subsequent countertransference (“Don't worry, I'll help you regain your worth. Since you can't do it alone, I will do it for you”) involved me more than it should have in Iri's major deadlocks. At the same time, I think—perhaps defensively—that I was simply fulfilling my duty by showing her reality, no matter how disappointing and painful it was for her. I will conclude the account of the therapy by describing how I usually manage her suicidal thoughts, as well as the most significant dilemmas she faced, for which I sometimes feel responsible for the emotional consequences of her decisions.

When Iri has suicidal thoughts, I try to appeal to her rational side, explaining to her directly but supportively that such a reaction is not normal, but part of her pathology. Once, when I was particularly worried, I asked her honestly if she thought she needed psychiatric help. I also try to interpret the causes indirectly (e.g., “Does it make sense to want to end your life just because a guy rejected you or you got turned down for a job?”). I extend our sessions for a few minutes when necessary and sometimes explain that, while I have a responsibility to her, I cannot guess the moments when she might need help. Exactly because of the content of her transference (“I'm in trouble. Please save me!”), I ask her if she can commit to contacting me if she needs help and if she would reach out to a psychiatric clinic if her life were in danger. She hesitantly gives me her word, and she often adds that if it weren't for the shame she would feel toward her family and the sorrow she would cause them, she would have ended her life long ago. If she asks for an additional session, I remain flexible, but it happens rarely. Overall, due to Iri's psychological makeup (unrealistic ego ideal and sadistic superego), I try to use more relaxed language with her. Occasionally, without revealing unnecessary details, I share a related personal story (placing it in the distant past even if it's not true) to show my human side and the weaknesses we all have.

Below, I will end with a summary of Iri's dilemmas and deadlocks that arose during therapy and my interventions, about which I have doubts:

- 1) After leaving their shared home with Gabriel due to the lack of a sex, Iri remained passive for a long time, tormented by her thoughts. They had never openly discussed their difficulties or taken meaningful steps to address them. Iri was in denial, and so was Gabriel. At some point, I told her that seven years was too long to leave the issue unresolved. Gabriel could have sought therapy, or they could have tried couples therapy. I suggested seeing him alone once and then seeing them together—since my formal training is in psychoanalytic group, couples, and family therapy—hoping I could understand what was happening with him and particularly how Iri might be affecting him, thus offering some guidance. They both agreed willingly—they had already visited a psychiatrist as a couple.

Gabriel indeed seemed like a very good guy and that he was hiding his emotions behind a very formal and polite character. I did not “press” him, as I was the one who had suggested the session. When I saw them together, I observed the following dynamic: Gabriel, being the “good boy”, seemed to believe that simply stating in my presence that he liked Iri was enough. Meanwhile, Iri listened with a cold, strict demeanor and later blamed him for his inaction regarding their problem.

What I realized was that they wouldn't be able to move forward as long as Iri continued to punish him for not affirming her romantically. I discreetly explained Iri's reaction to them and how it might be exacerbating Gabriel's anxiety. (I later discussed these sessions extensively with Iri.) They both agreed. I also recommended a few couples therapists with whom I could collaborate while continuing Iri's individual therapy. My reasoning was this: Given Gabriel's prolonged inaction and the pressure he faced from Iri, I doubted he would take the initiative to seriously address his problem alone. Couples therapy could, in the first phase, hold their relationship and allow them to openly discuss their feelings, and explore their sexual difficulties. Later, Gabriel could consider individual therapy as well.

In the following period, Iri informed me that Gabriel had found a “relationship coach”. I was disheartened by their choice but didn't say anything. They attended two sessions, and Iri found the exercises suggested—such as writing letters to each other about their positive traits—ridiculous. The third session was canceled by the coach, and they stopped altogether. Gabriel later told her he planned to visit a doctor in Italy for a mechanical intervention, but as far as I know, nothing came of it. Eventually, Iri told me that they had broken up for good because she couldn't take it anymore.

I feel guilty every time Iri reminisces about how rare a person Gabriel was, as well as when she reaches out to him as a pretext, hoping he will have something meaningful to say about their relationship. I am also hesitant when I remind her that things weren't as ideal as she describes them. In reality, she was alone in that relationship. Truly, I think that if I were their friend, I would bluntly tell them they were both being foolish: if they really want each other, they should honestly discuss their problem—either alone or with a specialist. However, in therapy, I limit myself to analyzing why she expects him to take the initiative after so many years and still finds it difficult to openly talk to him when they communicate.

Recently, they got in touch again. Iri tried to tell him that she misses him, but he responded that he cannot trust her again and that she should not have left their home. Once again, Iri fell into depression and suicidal thoughts. She feels it is unfair that he does not take responsibility and instead places the blame on her, failing to acknowledge the suffering she endured while waiting for him for seven long years.

2) When she was rejected from CERN, she fell into depression. However, she had alternatives: she was offered significant positions at research institutes in Germany and the UK. Some of the main reasons why she hesitated to accept these positions, as revealed in our sessions, were the following: i) Only CERN was worthy; everything else felt like a substitute and seemed like a failure in comparison; ii) Accepting one of the two positions and relocating to another country would mean closing the “Gabriel” chapter permanently; iii) She also feared being alone. Her

brother and his partner live in Switzerland, and they have been her primary social support since she left CERN; iv) At a deeper level, she experienced impostor syndrome, feeling inadequate to independently lead a particle physics laboratory.

It was clear to me that her indecision was a way of denying the reality that she would have to part with CERN and that she was highly unlikely to move to another country alone. I asked her why she wasn't considering working in the industry, given that she preferred living in Switzerland and considering the significant risk of staying at CERN and facing the same dead-end situation in a few years. If she could find a way to extend her contract, she would have one last opportunity to apply for a permanent position, which, according to her, had very slim chances of success. After that, she would no longer be able to work at CERN.

After encouraging her to explore alternatives in Data Science—often a viable option for physicists and mathematicians leaving academia, as well as for many of her former colleagues from CERN—she decided to take a related course at a Swiss university. She successfully completed it within six months and soon secured a job at a major Swiss bank with a fairly good salary. Initially, she was very happy, but soon the familiar concerns about her performance and how others perceived her resurfaced. She began complaining that nothing other than physics suited her and was frustrated that her work was not purely in Data Science. Additionally, she found the banking sector uninteresting. On a deeper level, she did not feel as competitive as she did in physics.

I pointed out the obvious: it was no small feat to have transitioned into a new field so quickly, she needed a job urgently as her savings had run out, and over time, as she gained experience, she would have opportunities to seek more interesting jobs. Over the following period, triggered by various incidents, she periodically exhibited symptoms of depression, including crying, isolation, feelings of futility, worthlessness, helplessness, and somatic complaints. Some indicative incidents include: i) Gabriel secured a permanent position at CERN; ii) A former CERN colleague working at the same bank returned to CERN; iii) The bank experienced a collapse, resulting in layoffs and internal restructuring; iv) Her annual performance evaluation did not distinguish her above average; she was used to excelling in physics; v) She applied for more interesting positions in Data Science but faced rejections; vi) New job openings at CERN and other research institutes arose, but she hesitated to apply for fear of rejection.

All of this made me question whether I had influenced her, even though I had asked her multiple times why she wasn't applying for physics-related positions if that was what she truly wanted. It is also clear to me that if she hadn't found a job at the bank, she would have been forced to return to her parents' home and lament her situation.

4) When she finally broke up with Gabriel, she once again fell into depression and suicidal thoughts. I told her she needed companionship, love, sex, etc. She strongly disliked the idea of needing another person, especially needing a romantic relationship. Her denial was so intense that I appealed to her scientific mindset and encouraged her to research the subject herself. Gradually, she softened. She resumed dance lessons, and when she realized that men were flirting with her, her spirits quickly lifted, and the depression disappeared completely.

Besides her usual insecurities about her body, appearance, and dance performance compared to other women dancers, what also troubled her was the pressure of choosing one of the men who had shown interest without knowing if he would truly suit her. She felt that if she slept with one, she would automatically eliminate the others as potential partners. It wouldn't be ethical to date another from the same dance class if she didn't like the first one. If it became known, people would form a negative opinion of her, and she feared losing everything.

Eventually, she chose Paul—an eight-years younger, attractive black man of Caribbean origin who worked as a nurse. She hoped that making an antithetical mate choice would be beneficial. She believed that being with someone more easygoing than her would prevent the issues she had faced in the past with partners who were more aligned with academia or intellectual pursuits—individuals who, according to Iri, focused more on their careers and themselves, and less on expressing their emotions and being romantic. Paul seemed like a safer choice; with him, she could enjoy the passion and sex she had been deprived of in previous years, without the risk of being hurt as she had been before.

However, in my eyes, it was clear that this was an act of desperation and, deep down, a form of revenge against Gabriel and everything he represented for her. Sooner or later, she would have to face her choice. Nevertheless, I felt it was not right to insist on further probing. In the initial phase of their relationship, I simply reminded her that she did not see him as a life partner due to their incompatibility and that if she got too attached, it would not be easy to disengage.

And indeed, when she became attached to him, doubts and complaints of being deprived, uncared for and ignored quickly surfaced. She started comparing Paul to Gabriel and even to her mother—both of whom took care of every detail efficiently without her needing to ask or get involved. Furthermore, Paul did not speak English, so they communicated in French, a language in which Iri was not very fluent, making communication difficult. He had promised to take English lessons but kept postponing it. In contrast, Gabriel had even started learning Greek for her. With Gabriel, she felt proud to introduce him to her family and social circle, whereas with Paul, she was embarrassed. She didn't even invite him to her brother's wedding in Greece; instead, she considered inviting Gabriel or even me as her companion.

What I tried to work on with her during that phase was primarily her difficulty in communicating her desires and her immature reaction of withdrawing and sulking, unconsciously hoping it would bring the other person closer. We also discussed the high ideals and expectations she inherited from her family and the complications these created in her romantic and professional life. When she found numerous excuses to be angry with Paul and maintain a distance in their relationship, I reminded her that while Paul might be a great person, she knew from the start that he did not meet her criteria (in fact, he was the complete opposite).

Today, although they have broken up and reconciled multiple times (out of her fear of being alone), and despite the fact that Iri never stopped searching for something better (in this context Gabriel told her he could no longer trust her), she dislikes that Paul now feels exhausted and afraid of her demands and is questioning whether they should continue to be together. It's like Iri thinks: "I chose someone below me so I could feel like a princess (to be his top priority, to feel desired by him, and to know he cares about me), but instead, he completely ignores me, which

is unfair because it's not **what I deserve**." Sometimes I wonder if she was truly ready for a relationship after Gabriel, or if I should have insisted on examining her choice of Paul, or if it is correct to remind her that Paul does not meet her criteria as a life partner.

4) One of my worst therapy sessions ever was when Iri tearfully told me she was pregnant with Paul's child. At the time, she was preparing for the final stage of interviews at a company that develops machine learning applications for pregnancy screening! In my mind, I had the following thoughts: i) Her brother is planning to have a child and move to Greece. Iri feels **jealous** and upset that her brother and others in her circle are moving forward while she remains stagnant. Her belief that she didn't need to use protection during sex because she assumed she couldn't get pregnant at her age could have had unconscious motivations. I had similar suspicions about other seemingly innocent actions of hers (such as **sleeping with the Greek man to avoid feeling defeated by me**), even though I tend to view such interpretations by colleagues with skepticism; ii) She is extremely **negative in general about motherhood, associating it with dependency, sacrificing her career, her appearance, etc.**; iii) She doesn't trust Paul as a husband and father, and she has many doubts about their relationship—different culture, language, interests, etc.—as well as about the country she wants to live in. If she had a family with Paul, they would have to live in a French-speaking region. **She stays in Switzerland to be close to CERN**, Gabriel, her brother, and his partner; iv) Her professional career is entirely uncertain; v) I am not sure whether her feelings for me played any role in her pregnancy. If they did, it wouldn't surprise me in Iri's case.

During the session, Iri blamed herself for being so irresponsible, given that **she always calculates every detail and strives to keep everything under control**. She was afraid of having an abortion and, more importantly, saw it as a **failure**. The ever-present sense of failure that follows her was further amplified by her mother, who told her that if she decided to keep the child, she would help raise it, and also mentioned that Iri might not have many more opportunities to get pregnant. Her brother echoed what I was thinking: that having a child was not a good idea because she and Paul were not compatible. In fact, I personally thought that it would be a complete disaster for Iri to have a child at a time when she found no satisfaction in her life. She was still thinking about Gabriel and CERN and had not yet managed to adapt to her current reality.

I tried to relieve her guilt by telling her that it was understandable for her to struggle with such a decision, given her uncertainty about Paul, the country where she wanted to live, and the fact that she was in the midst of a career change. Throughout the session, I strongly sensed that she had thoughts about me, but I was afraid to address the issue. As the session was ending, seeing her in despair, I suggested that we might need some time to think things through and offered to discuss it further in an extra session if she wanted. She did not contact me. In the next session, she was depressed. She had gone through with the abortion and, as usual, had faced it alone because she felt deep **shame** about herself. She only told Paul about the abortion afterward.

Additionally, for the first time, she was very angry with me. She felt that I had an influence over her and was upset that I used the plural form when I suggested "we" should think about it. I acknowledged that my wording was unfortunate. However, what Iri truly meant was: if I had

feelings for her, why did I wait for her to get pregnant to say anything? I openly told her that she often seemed to have feelings for me or others that influenced her decisions, but she wouldn't discuss them unless I encouraged her to. Therefore, I also needed time to understand what was happening. With this explanation, Iri calmed down, and over the following period, it became clear to her that she had made the right decision. In contrast, I found myself wondering whether I am a masochist for choosing this profession.

This patient suffers from **PLAY** (shame, rivalry, jealousy, envy, etc.)

She plays to win, not to have fun.

She hangs back – **waiting to be discovered** – so as not to risk failure.

In this way, she assumes the *submissive* role in order to *dominate*.

The main defence seems to be **rationalization**.