The Heart Doesn't Work Remotely

Miles can be crossed. Unspoken feelings remain



Laura Bellini

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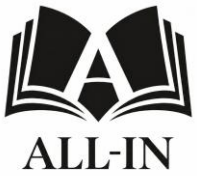

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INTRO

Gdańsk, Monday, 7:18 a.m.

Rain lashed against the tall windows of the small office I had been calling my place in the world for the past three weeks. It wasn't furnished the way I wanted it to be yet. Samples of paper covered one wall, three versions of a visual identity design hung on another, and cardboard boxes filled with things I hadn't had time to unpack stood beneath my desk. The coffee machine only worked when approached with an unreasonable amount of patience. Even so, I liked coming here. Every object reminded me that, this time, I wasn't creating a space for someone else. I was building something of my own.

I was twenty-nine, with several years of experience in visual identity design and an increasingly strong desire to stop proving to people that I could work without supervision. Moving to Gdańsk hadn't been an escape or a romantic whim. It had been a professional decision. I wanted to grow my own studio, choose the clients and projects that genuinely interested me, and, above all, stop treating my ambitions as something I could pursue only after meeting everyone else's expectations.

My plan for the coming months was straightforward. Finish two commissions, stabilise my income, establish a few new professional contacts, and avoid taking on anything that would require constant travel. I already had enough work without looking for additional commitments. Or at least that was what I kept telling myself whenever I opened my inbox at seven in the morning and found another message marked URGENT.

That morning, there was an offer waiting for me that I had initially intended to turn down.

The project involved a new podcast series. It wasn't simply a matter of designing a cover and a few graphics for social media. The commission included a complete visual identity, a promotional materials system, artwork for subsequent episodes, and collaboration with the creator responsible for the concept and production. The project was expected to run for several months, and the budget was reasonable enough that I couldn't pretend it didn't appeal to me.

There was just one problem.

The creator lived in Wrocław.

I read the message again, my eyes settling on the name: Florian Wrona. I recognised it from the brief project description, but I couldn't have told anyone much else about him. I wasn't in the habit of thoroughly researching every person I might potentially work with. I preferred to see how someone communicated professionally first. That usually told me more than carefully curated online profiles ever could.

I opened the attachment. Inside, I found a schedule, a preliminary description of the concept, and a link to a demo recording. I put on my headphones, pressed play, and reached for my coffee.

First, there were a few seconds of silence, followed by the distinctive rustle of paper being moved.

"Some places stay with us far longer than the people we once visited them with."

His voice was calm and low, without any of the exaggerated polish of a radio presenter. There was

something about it that made you want to keep listening, even when the sentence itself wasn't promising some dramatic revelation. Florian spoke clearly but never mechanically. Every now and then, he paused briefly, as though allowing the listener to fill in the rest for themselves.

I rewound the recording and listened to that section again.

I had no intention of drawing conclusions about a person based on his voice. Still, paying attention to details was a professional habit of mine, and this voice was one of them. It suited the project, although not in an obvious way. He wasn't trying to sell anything. He wasn't begging for attention. He simply had it.

At the end of the recording, there was a short technical note, followed immediately by a comment of his own.

"If we're going to work on this together, I'd like us not to do everything through a screen. I know it's convenient, but some things are better discussed around the same table."

I took off my headphones.

That was exactly what I didn't want. Not another collaboration where the word "flexibility" meant I was expected to be available anywhere, at any time. I didn't want to spend half the month on trains, reschedule my other clients, or explain why I couldn't travel to Wrocław for a meeting that could just as easily take place online.

I opened my calendar. The coming weeks were already filled with appointments I had chosen myself. On Friday, I had a meeting with the printing company. The following week, I was scheduled to present a proposal to a new client, and two weeks later, I wanted to devote an entire weekend to finally putting together my own portfolio. Every single

entry was part of a plan that had taken considerable effort to establish.

I wasn't about to abandon it for one attractive commission.

And yet, I didn't close the offer.

Instead, I returned to the recording and began analysing the way Florian handled the narration. Some sections were excellent; others needed substantial editing. He had a feel for rhythm, but occasionally lingered too long on a single image. He certainly wasn't short of ideas. What he lacked was someone capable of giving them a coherent form.

That, at least, I knew how to do.

At noon, I replied to the message, suggesting a brief online conversation. I made it clear that I could take responsibility for the entire visual identity, but wanted to establish the scope of our responsibilities, the decision-making process, and a realistic schedule for meetings. I also mentioned that my studio was based in Gdańsk and that I had no intention of relocating my workplace for the duration of the project.

I sent the message feeling that I had managed to protect every boundary that mattered.

His reply arrived sooner than I expected.

"Good afternoon, Ms Ofelia. Thank you for such a clear message. I agree regarding the scope of work and the schedule. However, I'd like us to start with a face-to-face meeting. I could suggest Wednesday in Wrocław. I realise that means travelling, but I'd like to show you something that can't be properly conveyed in an attachment. Florian."

I read the last sentence twice.

Something that can't be properly conveyed in an attachment.

I was tempted to reply that practically anything could be conveyed in an attachment if someone made enough effort. Instead, I pushed my laptop aside and walked over to the window. People were passing one another on the street beneath their umbrellas. Some hurried along, while others stopped at the crossing to check their phones. Gdańsk looked like a city that had no intention of apologising to anyone for the weather.

I thought about Wrocław. The railway stations, the connections, the hours spent on a train, and how easily an entire day could disappear because of a meeting that was supposed to last forty minutes.

Then I remembered the voice from the recording.

I couldn't explain why that particular sentence kept returning to me more often than the others. Perhaps because I had spent a long time trying to separate places from people myself. I kept convincing myself that it was possible to have your own life, your own space, and your own rules while remaining open to new experiences. But being open-minded didn't mean agreeing to have my boundaries constantly pushed aside.

I returned to my desk and looked at the message once more.

I typed a brief reply.

"Wednesday is possible. Please send me the time and address."

It wasn't a declaration that the project already belonged to me. Nor was it a promise that I would rearrange my entire schedule around it. It was supposed to be one meeting. One

journey. One man I knew, so far, only by his name and his voice.

As I was closing my laptop, my phone vibrated. A new message from Florian contained only the time, the address of the recording studio, and one additional line:

"I'll do my best to make the trip worthwhile."

I smiled, although I wasn't entirely sure whether I found his confidence amusing or whether it was the fact that I had started wondering what he would be like when he wasn't speaking into a microphone.

Outside, the rain continued to fall, and on my desk lay a calendar containing an meticulously organised plan for the coming months. Everything had its place, its deadline, and its justification. I knew where I was going, why I was working, and what I wasn't prepared to give up.

The only thing I didn't understand was why the thought of Wednesday in Wrocław had begun taking up so much more space in my mind than it should have.

And whether I would recognise the moment when ordinary professional curiosity stopped being a sufficient reason to keep coming back to someone.

Chapter 1 - The Man Behind the Voice

Wrocław, Wednesday, 10:42 a.m.

The train pulled into the Main Railway Station seven minutes late, which I considered a moderately good start to the day. I didn't particularly enjoy journeys whose purpose couldn't be summed up in a single sentence. This one was supposed to be a business meeting, so theoretically there was nothing complicated about it. I had come to meet a potential client, see the materials, and decide whether the commission was worth accepting. In the evening, I would return to Gdańsk. The following day, I intended to work at my own desk, with coffee whose taste I knew, and without having to check train schedules.

During the last twenty minutes of the journey, I had managed to go through Florian's messages three times. There weren't many of them. The studio address, a phone number, and a brief note saying he would be waiting by the entrance. No additional instructions, no excessive enthusiasm. His last message had arrived that morning.

"If you have any trouble finding the building, please give me a call. The entrance is rather inconspicuous."

An inconspicuous entrance wasn't much of a challenge. I was far more interested in what I would find behind it.

The studio was located in a renovated tenement building not far from Nadodrze. It had tall windows, heavy doors, and a staircase where the original wooden handrails had been preserved. A small plaque bearing the studio's name was fixed beside the intercom. I stopped in front of it, checked the address, and pressed the correct button.

"Yes?"

I recognised the voice immediately.

"Ofelia Kruk. We have an appointment at ten forty-five."

"Of course. I'll let you in."

The lock clicked briefly, and the door opened. I stepped inside and didn't take off my coat until I reached the half-landing, where a man was waiting, leaning one shoulder against the wall. He didn't look like someone preparing to deliver a formal welcome. He wore dark trousers and a grey shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His dark hair was slightly untidy, as though he had run his fingers through it several times in an unsuccessful attempt to make it behave. He was taller than I had imagined from his voice, and there was something about his expression that was difficult to describe as unapproachable. Attentive, perhaps. As if he preferred to establish who he was talking to before deciding what to say.

"Florian Wrona," he introduced himself, extending his hand.

"Ofelia Kruk."

His handshake was firm without being demonstrative. I also noticed that he didn't try to prolong the greeting or take over my bag.

"Did you have a trouble-free journey?"

"Almost. I was sitting opposite a man who watched a film without headphones for the entire trip."

"Then you have my sympathy."

"No need. I survived. I just hope your studio offers better acoustic conditions."

He smiled faintly.

"That's exactly why I invited you here."

He led me upstairs to the first floor. The studio consisted of two rooms connected by a wide opening. The first was a modest office with a large table, two monitors, and a bookcase filled with books. The second housed the recording equipment. Dark acoustic panels covered the walls, and a chair with visibly worn armrests stood in front of the microphone. The place wasn't excessively tidy, but neither was it chaotic. The cables were organised, the equipment labelled, and the materials for our meeting were laid out on the table.

"Would you like some coffee?" Florian asked.

"Gladly."

"Black or with milk?"

"Black."

"Good. At least we've already settled one decision."

I didn't answer immediately. I noticed that he spoke much as he had in the recording. Calmly, without rushing, although his voice had more shades to it in person. It wasn't quite as even as it had seemed through my headphones. When he smiled, certain words sounded warmer.

I sat down at the table and took out my notebook. I wasn't going to let a pleasant voice replace a proper assessment of the project.

Florian placed a cup in front of me and then switched on the screen.

"Let's start with what you've already heard. The working title of the series is Places That Stay. I want to tell stories about spaces that matter to people. Not just buildings or

streets, but what people associate with them. Decisions, returns, departures, and the things we can't take with us."

"So, personal documentary storytelling?"

"Partly. I don't want to make a conventional documentary series. I'm more interested in stories that begin with a place and end with a person."

"And who will the subjects be?"

"People I invite. Not celebrities. Not experts on everything. People who have something to say and know how to express it in their own words."

He pushed several printed pages towards me. They contained brief descriptions of potential episodes, excerpts from conversations, and notes about the audio. I looked through the first page, then the second. The idea had potential, but the execution needed work. In some places, Florian used too many metaphors; in others, he left information without sufficient context. Even so, the texts had character. They didn't look like materials prepared solely to make a good impression during a presentation.

"You need an identity that reflects the content without illustrating it too literally," I said.

"Exactly."

"I'm not going to suggest map pins, sound waves, or city silhouettes."

"Good."

I looked up.

"Just like that?"

"I was hoping you'd say that."

"So you invited me here to hear me reject your ideas?"

"No. I invited you because I'd seen your portfolio. I like the way you build visual systems. But I'm not going to pretend I know what this series should look like. If I did, I wouldn't need a designer."

It was a sensible answer. And a slightly disarming one.

I opened another page.

"Then tell me what you're expecting. Not in terms of aesthetics, but the effect you want to achieve."

Florian rested his hands on the table.

"I want someone to look at an episode cover and feel that there's a real story behind it. I don't want nostalgia sold in attractive packaging. I also don't want to pretend that every memory is beautiful. Some places remind people of things they'd rather not revisit."

"Now that's much more interesting."

"Why?"

"Because at least you're not trying to turn it into a postcard."

He looked at me with unmistakable interest.

"Do you like postcards?"

"I like it when people understand that an image doesn't have to be beautiful to be true."

He was silent for a moment. Then he slid a tablet towards me.

"In that case, I'd like you to hear something else."

He opened a folder containing recordings. They weren't finished episodes, just excerpts from conversations conducted during preliminary meetings. Florian selected several short files. The first featured a woman talking about

an apartment she had sold after her mother's death. The second was a conversation with a man who had run a small watch repair shop for thirty years. The third was a recording from an empty railway station, where the sounds of rolling suitcases, announcements, and footsteps could be heard.

I listened without interrupting. Florian didn't watch me the entire time. He monitored the audio levels on the screen and made brief notes, as though he wanted me to experience the material without additional commentary.

At one point, he paused the recording.

"What do you think?"

"That you shouldn't explain everything."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Excuse me?"

"In the second excerpt, the woman says she can't remember the last time she entered that apartment. Then, for a few seconds, all you can hear is her breathing. And in the edit, you immediately add a comment explaining how she feels. There's no need. The listener has already understood."

Florian studied me more closely.

"I agree."

"Really?"

"Yes. That's one of the things I wanted to improve myself."

"Then why haven't you done it?"

"Because I'm not sure I should be making every decision about the material myself when I'm starting to work with someone else."

I leaned back in my chair.

"That sounds reasonable, but it could also be a convenient way of avoiding responsibility."

He didn't take offence. On the contrary, the corner of his mouth lifted into a smile.

"Do you always judge people so quickly?"

"Only when they give me enough material to work with."

"I'll have to be careful."

"All you need to do is speak directly."

For the next several dozen minutes, we discussed the project's assumptions. I showed him examples from my portfolio, explaining why I had used typography as the main element in some projects, while in others I had built the identity around photography and distinctive compositions. Florian asked questions that were anything but superficial. He wanted to know why I had chosen a particular solution, what its limitations were, and whether it could be adapted to different formats.

I liked that he didn't pretend to be an expert in my field.

What I didn't like was that every so often he returned to his insistence on face-to-face meetings.

"I'm not going to travel to Wrocław every week," I said eventually.

"I haven't asked you to."

"But you keep talking about regular meetings at the studio."

"Because the recordings will take place here. I'd like you to be present during at least the more important stages of the project."

"I can work with recordings. I can send designs, discuss them over video calls, and travel whenever it's genuinely necessary. I don't need to sit beside you to do my job properly."

"I'm not saying you do."

"Then where does this requirement come from?"

Florian moved the tablet aside and studied the screen, where an audio waveform had frozen.

"Because things happen during recordings that you can't predict. Someone brings a photograph, changes the subject, shows an object, or tells us something that wasn't in the original plan. Sometimes that's where the best part of an episode comes from. I'd like the visual identity to have some connection with what we're actually doing, rather than just with my descriptions afterwards."

"I can understand that need. But it doesn't mean I'll be working in a state of constant availability."

"I don't expect that."

"Good, because I'm not part of your studio. I run my own business, and I have other clients."

"I know."

"And you still want me here."

"I want someone who understands the project. Not someone who simply follows a list of tasks."

He didn't say it as though he were trying to convince me at any cost. It sounded more like something he considered self-evident. For some reason, that was precisely what made me stop searching for an immediate response.

I looked at the materials. There was something in them I couldn't ignore. The stories weren't organised according to any obvious pattern, but they shared a common tone. They weren't really about places, but about what people left behind in them, even after physically walking away. I could create an identity for this project without pretending that everything could be contained within a single definition.

"I need full access to the materials," I said. "Not just the excerpts you consider ready. I want to see the raw recordings, the notes, and the episode structures."

"Of course."

"And I won't make decisions based on your personal taste. I'll propose solutions, explain my reasoning, and expect you to assess them in the context of the entire project."

"That works for me."

"I'm not finished. I also don't want every change of concept to automatically mean another round of work without an additional agreement about the scope."

"I understand."

I closed my notebook.

"Then we have something to discuss."

This time Florian smiled more openly.

"I think that's the best news I've heard today."

I didn't respond. Instead, I returned to one of the recordings. I wanted to hear the excerpt from the empty railway station again. In the background, between the announcements, someone laughed briefly before a departing train drowned out the remaining sounds.

"That shouldn't be just background noise," I said.

"What?"

"That moment. The laughter, then the train. There's more in it than in your entire description."

Florian leaned towards the screen. He didn't touch my hand or try to take the tablet from me. He simply moved closer to get a better look at the section I had highlighted.

"You're right."

"Please don't say that too often. I might get used to it."

"That could be dangerous."

We looked at each other for a brief moment. Nothing happened that could be called particularly significant. There was no gesture that needed interpreting. And yet, for the first time, I thought Florian might be more interesting than his professional profile suggested.

When the meeting came to an end, we hadn't signed a contract or agreed on a final price. I gathered my notes, copied the materials to my own drive, and asked him to send the missing files. Florian walked me to the door.

"Thank you for coming," he said.

"Thank you for showing me the materials. At least now I know what I'm dealing with."

"And what's your decision?"

"I haven't made one yet."

"I understand."

"But I'm not ruling out working together."

"That's more than I had this morning."

I put on my coat and adjusted the strap of my bag.

"Don't get too pleased with yourself. I still have no intention of moving to Wrocław."

"I haven't suggested you move here."

"Not yet."

He laughed quietly.

"See you, Ms Kruk."

"Goodbye, Mr Wrona."

When I stepped outside, I took out my phone and checked the time. I had more than enough time to grab something to eat before returning to the station. I should have felt satisfied that the meeting had gone according to plan. Instead, I kept thinking about one sentence he'd said at the table: that he didn't want someone who simply followed a list of tasks, but someone who understood the project.

I didn't yet know whether it was a compliment or a warning that working with him might prove difficult.

What I did know was that I hadn't travelled to Wrocław for nothing.

Chapter 2 - Before We Set the Rules

I didn't go straight back to the station.

After leaving the studio, I walked along several streets, looking for somewhere I could calmly review my notes and eat something before the journey home. I knew Wrocław well enough not to feel like a complete stranger there, but not well enough to have favourite places of my own. I chose a small café on a side street. The air smelled of freshly ground coffee and cinnamon, and two tables by the window were unoccupied. I ordered tea and a sandwich, then spread my materials across the tabletop.

Professionally, I considered the meeting a success. Florian knew his project, understood its limitations, and hadn't tried to impose ready-made solutions on me. However, he was accustomed to working at his own pace, and his expectations regarding my presence at the studio needed clarification. I wasn't going to accept a commission where every meeting had to be renegotiated from scratch.

I began writing down possible stages of our collaboration. First — analysing the materials and developing a visual direction. Second — presenting two concepts. Third — selecting one and preparing the system. Then adaptations, templates, episode covers, and promotional materials. Everything could be organised in a way that wouldn't require my constant presence in another city.

My phone vibrated.

Florian: "I hope you didn't head straight to the station. I'd like to suggest one more conversation, this time without a screen between us. If you have time, I'd like to invite you to a late lunch."

I read the message and put down my pen.

There was nothing inappropriate about it. We were discussing a potential collaboration, and sharing a meal could be an ordinary way to continue the conversation. Even so, I sensed a difference between the invitation to the studio and the one I'd just received. That earlier meeting had been devoted to the project. This time, Florian was suggesting an encounter where we wouldn't have to sit opposite the same documents.

I replied that I could spare an hour.

"I know a place nearby. I'll send you the address."

Less than five minutes later, I received the location. The restaurant was about a fifteen-minute walk from the café, so I paid for my order and put my notes away in my bag.

Florian was waiting by the entrance. This time, his sleeves weren't rolled up. He wore a dark jacket over his shirt, although the overall effect was less formal than I might have expected from such an outfit. He held his phone in one hand, while the other rested in his pocket.

"I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind."

"I didn't have a reason to."

"That's good news."

"Don't read too much into it. I simply have an hour."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Inside, it was quiet. We chose a table against the wall, away from the entrance. Florian ordered water and coffee, while I decided on pasta with vegetables. For the first few minutes, we talked about the journey and the weather. It wasn't until the waiter brought our food that Florian put down his phone and looked at me.

"I wanted to ask you something. Do you genuinely dislike working with people in person, or do you simply dislike it when someone expects you to be available at their beck and call?"

I hadn't expected that question.

"The second one."

"I thought so."

"Why?"

"During our meeting, you mentioned your own studio several times. Not in the way people talk about their workplace. More like something they have no intention of giving up."

For a moment, I turned my fork between my fingers.

"Because it took me a long time to build what I have. I used to work at an agency where every project had five owners and not a single person willing to take responsibility. You could spend three days developing a concept, only to receive a message saying someone had changed their mind because a friend thought another colour looked more modern."

"That sounds familiar."

"When I started working independently, I promised myself I wouldn't build my career around other people's whims anymore. I can collaborate, I can change direction, and I can even admit that someone else has a better idea. But I don't want my availability to be taken for granted."

Florian nodded.

"I understand that more than you might think."

"Did you work at an agency too?"

"No. But for several years, I worked on projects where everything depended on whether I could be in the right place at the right time. Eventually, I began to feel as though my life consisted entirely of other people's deadlines."

"And that's why you started your own studio?"

"Among other things. I wanted to have a say in what I did and who I spoke to. The disadvantage of running your own business, though, is that when something goes wrong, there's no one else to blame."

"That sounds honest, at least."

"I'm not always happy about it."

I smiled, and he returned the gesture. There was something about him I was beginning to like. He didn't try to present his decisions as one continuous string of successes. He spoke about them without excessive modesty, but also without any need to prove that he had everything under control.

"Let's get back to the project," I said, taking out my notebook. "I have a few suggestions about how we could organise the work."

"I'm listening."

I presented my preliminary division of the stages. I suggested setting aside the first two weeks for analysing the recordings, discussing the target audience, and developing the visual direction. After that, I would prepare two concepts, and we would choose one. Once it was approved, we'd move on to building an identity system that could be developed alongside subsequent episodes without having to design everything from scratch each time.

Florian listened attentively.