

In the two years that Leila remained a resident of Zurich, she isolated her old life to concentrate on herself. She kept in touch with her family, but it was not as regular as it could have been. She became sociable and did things she would not normally do. She had a couple of pointless affairs – nothing that was worthy of archive or debate, but helped her along her journey to self re-discovery. Amongst these was a French Business Analyst with whom she companied and conversed with regularly (well, daily really) at the bar in Raddison Blu. She thought him the epitome of all knowledge and nicknamed him 'Mr Google'. On the days when Mr Google was not available, she sat in the Angel Bar in the Raddisson Blu by herself watching people walk in and out. Her laptop was never too far away from her and she took notes. She chitchatted with strangers and was on first name basis with the staff. The wine bar intrigued Leila every day; it always felt like the first time her eyes had beheld its beguiling lure. It towered all the way up to the ceiling with dim lights that went on and off at intervals. The flying bar staff – or 'wine angels' – soared up and down the Wine Tower retrieving bottles of wine and champagne were led by a sequence of LED light to the correct bottles, and equipped with individual holding gear. This was cleverly executed by computers, which took them by ropes to the tower's top and then back down to the appropriate bottle. It was not unusual for them to serve guests hanging upside down. In addition, they entertained guests with acrobatic displays at regular intervals. Leila was a big fan. Deep down in the archives of her memory, it reminded her of the pole in the middle of her bedroom in the house she had shared with Akash a lifetime prior. She had loved that pole and learnt to assume impossible positions hanging off it.

One night, after her affair with Mr Google came to an end, she met two of the most random, but most interesting people. A seemingly ordinary guy – Ricky – he always looked tidy and sexy, and his best friend, Ricky – a girl, a lesbian tomboy, a dyke! She was always in some form of baggy, sagging jeans and displayed abdominal muscle that most spent lifetimes trying to attain. She was perpetually drooled at. She moulded a comfortable friendship with the pair and when they informed her that they were from Itzehoe in Germany, an instant bond was formed. They were referred to as 'Ricky Boy' and 'Ricky Girl'. For work purposes and taking over the little unfortunate magazine that went under, these two became her useful tour guides. What's more, on a not-so-drunken night, Leila had the pleasure of Ricky Girl's company in a one-on-one honest conversation. Ricky Girl told her about her life of solitude, with all her family dead or not speaking to her; Ricky Boy had rescued her from a self-destructive life of Class A drugs. Leila got adventurous and shared her own story. Completely drowned in a world of woe-is-me, Leila had her first and only lesbian encounter. It was new and intriguing and took sexual to a whole new level for Leila. It felt good to bare her soul to a stranger and dabble in a bit of excitement. It was emotionally safe, detached but helpful so Leila let it carry on for a couple of weeks, that is until Ricky Boy got a bit fed up of being the third wheel, and it ended just as quickly as it started. Nobody got hurt, nobody drew the short end of the stick. It was what it was. Leila noted a few conclusions from that experience – girls' kisses were more passionate. Only a

woman knows what a woman wants because it is what a woman wants. Leila archived the whole experience and thought about it sparingly with a cheeky smile. The end.

Leila took over the little magazine in Itzehoe on behalf of *Silent Symphonies* and although Itzehoe was a tiny, geographically insignificant town in the grand scheme of things, it ended up being one of the most fruitful ventures *Silent Symphonies* had acquired. Leila could not have pleased Gaurav any more than she did. Her bonus was huge; ultimately, Dahlia lacked nothing!

On an unplanned trip to the zoo in Zurich, Leila and Dahlia met a French mother and daughter – Chimene and her daughter, Chirene. So began regular weekend trips to Paris. On one of the trips, she rekindled things with Mr Google who took her on the most romantic nights out in Paris. When she reached the top of the Eiffel Tower, she wished Kaobi were with her. She gave Mr Google her all for the purpose of the moment, but he did ask: ‘what is Leila searching for?’ and Leila was unable to answer. Once again, just like that, it fizzled out, but not before she got him to make love to her with his reading glasses on. She loved the way he looked in those glasses. ☺

During her Zurich tenure, she dreamt of Kaobi twice. Both times he held her tenderly. The dream was always accompanied with the words – ‘I will always...always be with you.’ These words were usually timely and Leila found her comfort and strength to plunge on. Her journey of self-discovery had taken a new turn and she had found renewed strength. She was almost ready to face the ghosts of the past. Throughout her stay in Zurich, the wrinkly old fortune teller with the scrawny fingers had failed to make a significant appearance. She was probably uninterested in this little interlude of Leila’s life. Still, from time to time, her last sighting of the old witch resurfaced – she filed her nails in the east of whatever room Leila was in and watched with that same nonchalant look on her face, as she blew the nail chaff. Nothing new.

One Tuesday evening during a deep meditating yoga session, Leila realised two things. Firstly, she had not had a conversation with God in over two years. Secondly, she no longer had a craving for chicken soup followed by brandy. Dahlia had turned four and it was time for real school. That evening, Leila gave Radisson Blu a miss and went to church. She sat there with a hymn book. Choir practice was on but she paid them no mind; instead she heard her favourite hymns in her head as she read the words. She listened to ‘*All things bright and beautiful*’, ‘*How great thou art*’, ‘*This is the day that the Lord has made*’ and ‘*You are worthy*’. When her soul failed to connect deeply enough with these hymns, Leila wept; she dried her tears and sighed. The metaphoric winds blew and Leila knew it was time to go home. She spoke to

Gaurav, Asif and Mark and was convinced it was the right thing to do. Just like that, Leila, Dahlia, the nanny, Gucci and an obese Horatio packed up their belongings and returned to London. Her brother met her at the airport and indulged her in a hug that lasted a couple of minutes. The hug told so many stories that evoked a variety of emotions in Leila. In his arms, she wept refreshed tears.

'Do I fly or fall?' she asked out loud. Her brother's expression was vacant. 'Never mind, please find me a grande soya Americano.' He nodded. 'That, I recognise. I'm on it,' he replied, tangling himself free.

'What the fuck did you feed that cat, Leila? If I didn't know any better, I would think he ate Gucci!' he exclaimed as he flicked through photos of Zurich. Leila giggled. 'Ask Dahlia...and the nanny!'

'I would like to be a fly on the wall when you hand Horatio back to Paul Edwards!' When Leila smiled, she knew it was because for the first time in two years, she had picked up her laptop and written a few articles and some diary entries...straight from the heart! Maybe she would get her life back. A new era!

*"A change is as good as a rest."*

— *Stephen King, Hearts in Atlantis*