

## As If We Never Said Goodbye

It's my husband Mark who convinces me to take the trip from the North East to London.

'Go for two nights. There's no point travelling all that way for a single evening,' he says.

I've been invited to a party for writers. I know a handful through social media, but we've never met in real-life. I nearly slip on a muddy patch outside the venue, wine bag flying in the air like I'm in a comedy sketch. Inside, I gravitate towards the people who tell funny stories about death. No-one knows that I have been on sick leave for three months, or that this is the final weekend before I go back to work on Monday.

One attendee is curious about my thoughts on television. Who do I like? Who do I hate? I monologue about the lack of women writers in telly. He agrees, vociferously, with genuine interest. He has some brilliant stories about awards events and I don't think to wonder what he was doing there, hanging out with all the celebrities. Later that night, whilst eating a Pret A Manger chocolate cookie in my hotel bed, I look him up and discover a Wikipedia entry as long as your arm. He's the creator of *Friday Night Dinner*. He produced BAFTA award-winning *Peep Show*. The BAFTAs! Flippin' *Peep Show*!

I send the link to Mark.

'Look who I met?!'

Followed by: 'He wrote for Zig and Zag.'

Then: 'Didn't have a clue who he was. I banged on about women in telly. See, this is why I shouldn't be allowed out.'

After I discover I've been talking to a legendary comedy producer, writer, and actor, I lie on my side under my crumpled white hotel sheets which are now smeared with flecks of chocolate, scrolling through Instagram. It's nearly midnight and I should really be taking the opportunity to sleep but I can't get the adrenaline down. I'm going to see Nicole Scherzinger sing her pants off in *Sunset Boulevard* tomorrow.

The reviews for the revival of *Sunset Boulevard* at the Savoy Theatre have been mixed, but audiences talk of bold stagecraft, love-it-or-hate-it direction, and Scherzinger's exposing performance. She's been getting standing ovations *during* songs. The show has a limited run – only a few weeks left.

I get to the theatre an hour early. I hover in the vestibule, leaning against a wall, trying to look relaxed, watching giggling pairs of women and well-heeled couples carry bottles of bubbly and handfuls of clinking glasses.

The seats are tiny. When a couple sit next to my left, the man closest to me shifts uneasily, as if he's trying to get away. He wears a neck-scarf and smells amazing. They are both Very Posh. They talk about Scherzinger as though they're creating a piece for a broadsheet.

'Well, I'm intrigued,' Neck-scarf drawls.

'Oh, I *know*,' his partner replies, raising an eyebrow. 'Far be it for me to offer an opinion, but where's Elaine Paige when you need her?'

I look down at my jeans with the mayonnaise stain from the Marks & Spencer sandwich I had earlier. I bet they weren't shoving a baguette into their chops on the pigeon-stained stairs at Trafalgar Square a couple of hours ago.

The floor from the gallery above hangs over the upper circle, and we are swallowed inside the bowels of the auditorium. The room fills with inaudible chatter, musical in its rhythms. It swarms and wanes, and swarms again, peppered by coughs or the sound of a chair swinging back suddenly.

There's a net curtain hanging from the stage. I check my watch. The show should have started by now. The chatter rises again. No-one seems to notice the woman who walks out on stage and stands in the centre, directly behind the black netting. She is dressed in a silk negligee; bare legs, arms and feet.

'It's her,' my companions whisper.

Scherzinger is a revelation. In the middle of her first song, I feel compelled to jump to my feet with the rest of the people in the dark. Neck-scarf purrs 'Wow' and we catch each other's eye, smiling and clapping and smiling and weeping.

When the cast are on stage, the audience is rapt. Silent in the blackness. No phone screens. No munching. We lean forward as one, waiting. Waiting for them to sing.

Then, at the start of the second Act, something spectacular happens. Something I've never seen before on stage. Something that makes my heart pound and the hands in my lap turn outwards and up like receiving a blessing. My brain bursts into a thousand pieces and comes back together again. As the live orchestra surges, the audience screams in delight. We roar; our hands colliding together like thunder.

When the show ends hundreds of theatre-goers tumble out into the city at night, into the smell of smoke and booze and perfume and the bustling madness, into the warm air and the traffic lights changing. I walk with my hands in my coat pockets, pull my shoulders up high,

and take a full, deep breath. I am changed. There is meaning in my life, as it is now, and as it will be going forwards. I will not waste time imagining what could or should have been, with that little boy that lived for six days.

On my return to work, I catch up with a supportive colleague who is part of the senior management team.

‘Just do your job,’ she says. ‘That’s enough. It’s always been enough.’

I have shattered into pieces. Some parts of me have danced up and away in blustery winds. Some have been stamped into the ground, disappearing into dark earth. In their place, new fragments have emerged. I have sewn myself back together; a patchwork of what I was and what I can be.

This won’t be the last time it happens.

But here and now, I am enough. I am alive. I will live.