

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE FORTY RULES OF LOVE

ELIF SHAFAK

• 10 Minutes

'One of the most
important writers
at work today'
INDEPENDENT

38 Seconds in this
Strange
World •



Elif Shafak

10 MINUTES 38 SECONDS IN THIS STRANGE
WORLD



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About the Author

Elif Shafak is an award-winning British-Turkish novelist and the most widely read female author in Turkey. She writes in both Turkish and English, and has published seventeen books, eleven of which are novels. Her work has been translated into fifty languages. Shafak holds a PhD in political science and she has taught at various universities in Turkey, the US and the UK, including St Anne's College, Oxford University, where she is an honorary fellow. She is a member of World Economic Forum Global Agenda Council on Creative Economy and a founding member of the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR). An advocate for women's rights, LGBT rights and freedom of speech, Shafak is an inspiring public speaker and twice a TED global speaker, each time receiving a standing ovation. Shafak contributes to many major publications around the world and she has been awarded the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. In 2017 she was chosen by Politico as one of the twelve people who would make the world better. She has judged numerous literary prizes and is chairing the Wellcome Prize 2019. Find out more about Elif Shafak on her website: www.elifshafak.com

By the same author

The Architect's Apprentice

The Bastard of Istanbul

Black Milk

The Flea Palace

The Forty Rules of Love

The Gaze

The Happiness of Blond People

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*To the women of Istanbul and to the city of Istanbul, which is,
and has always been, a she-city*

Now he has again preceded me a little in parting from this strange world. This has no importance. For people like us who believe in physics, the separation between past, present and future has only the importance of an admittedly tenacious illusion.

Albert Einstein upon the death of his closest friend, Michele
Besso



1. Bosphorus Bridge
2. The Street of Brothels
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4. A synagogue
5. Saint Antoine Church
6. Istiklal Street
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12. Mevlevi/ Sufi dervishes lodge

The End

Her name was Leila.

Tequila Leila, as she was known to her friends and her clients. Tequila Leila as she was called at home and at work, in that rosewood-coloured house on a cobblestoned cul-de-sac down by the wharf, nestled between a church and a synagogue, among lamp shops and kebab shops – the street that harboured the oldest licensed brothels in Istanbul.

Still, if she were to hear you put it like that, she might take offence and playfully hurl a shoe – one of her high-heeled stilettos.

'Is, darling, not was ... My name is Tequila Leila.'

Never in a thousand years would she agree to be spoken of in the past tense. The very thought of it would make her feel small and defeated, and the last thing she wanted in this world was to feel that way. No, she would insist on the present tense – even though she now realized with a sinking feeling that her heart had just stopped beating, and her breathing had abruptly ceased, and whichever way she looked at her situation there was no denying that she was dead.

None of her friends knew it yet. This early in the morning they would be fast asleep, each trying to find the way out of their own labyrinth of dreams. Leila wished she were at home too, enveloped in the warmth of bed covers with her cat curled at her feet, purring in drowsy contentment. Her cat was stone deaf and black – except for a patch of snow on one paw. She had named him Mr Chaplin, after Charlie Chaplin, for, just like the heroes of early cinema, he lived in a silent world of his own.

Tequila Leila would have given anything to be in her apartment now. Instead she was here, somewhere on the outskirts of Istanbul, across from a dark, damp football field, inside a metal rubbish bin with rusty handles and flaking paint. It was a wheelie bin; at least four feet high and half as wide. Leila herself was five foot seven – plus the eight inches of her purple slingback stilettos, still on her feet.

There was so much she wanted to know. In her mind she kept replaying the last moments of her life, asking herself where things had gone wrong – a futile exercise since time could not be unravelled as though it were a ball of yarn. Her skin was already turning greyish-white, even though her cells were still abuzz with activity. She could not help but notice that there was a great deal happening inside her organs and limbs. People always assumed that a corpse was no more alive than a fallen tree or a hollow stump, devoid of consciousness. But given half a chance, Leila would have testified that, on the contrary, a corpse was brimming with life.

She could not believe that her mortal existence was over and done with. Only the day before she had crossed the neighbourhood of Pera, her shadow gliding along streets named after military leaders and national heroes, streets named after men. Just that week her laughter had echoed in the low-ceilinged taverns of Galata and Kurtulush, and the small, stuffy dens of Tophane, none of which ever appeared in travel guides or on tourist maps. The Istanbul that

Leila had known was not the Istanbul that the Ministry of Tourism would have wanted foreigners to see.

Last night she had left her fingerprints on a whisky glass, and a trace of her perfume – Paloma Picasso, a birthday present from her friends – on the silk scarf she had tossed aside on the bed of a stranger, in the top-floor suite of a luxury hotel. In the sky high above, a sliver of yesterday's moon was visible, bright and unreachable, like the vestige of a happy memory. She was still part of this world, and there was still life inside her, so how could she be gone? How could she be no more, as though she were a dream that fades at the first hint of daylight? Only a few hours ago she was singing, smoking, swearing, thinking ... well, even now she was thinking. It was remarkable that her mind was working at full tilt – though who knew for how long. She wished she could go back and tell everyone that the dead did not die instantly, that they could, in fact, continue to reflect on things, including their own demise. People would be scared if they learned this, she reckoned. She certainly would have been when she was alive. But she felt it was important that they knew.

It seemed to Leila that human beings exhibited a profound impatience with the milestones of their existence. For one thing, they assumed that you automatically became a wife or a husband the moment you said, 'I do!' But the truth was, it took years to learn how to be married. Similarly, society expected maternal – or paternal – instincts to kick in as soon as one had a child. In fact, it could take quite a while to figure out how to be a parent – or a grandparent, for that matter. Ditto with retirement and old age. How could you possibly change gears the moment you walked out of an office where you had spent half your life and squandered most of your dreams? Not that easy. Leila had known retired teachers who woke up at seven, showered and dressed neatly, just to slump at the breakfast table, only then remembering they no longer had a job. They were still adjusting.

Perhaps it was not that different when it came to death. People thought you changed into a corpse the instant you exhaled your last breath. But things were not clear-cut like that. Just as there were countless shades between jet black and brilliant white, so there were multiple stages of this thing called 'eternal rest'. If a border existed between the Realm of Life and the Realm of Afterlife, Leila decided, it must be as permeable as sandstone.

She was waiting for the sun to rise. Surely then someone would find her and get her out of this filthy bin. She did not expect the authorities to take long to figure out who she was. All they had to do was locate her file. Throughout the years, she had been searched, photographed, fingerprinted and kept in custody more often than she cared to admit. Those back-street police stations, they had a distinctive smell to them: ashtrays piled high with yesterday's cigarette butts, dregs of coffee in chipped cups, sour breath, wet rags, and a sharp stench from the urinals that no amount of bleach could ever suppress. Officers and offenders shared cramped rooms. Leila had always found it fascinating that the cops and the criminals shed their dead skin cells on the same floor, and the same dust mites gobbled them up, without favour or partiality. At some level invisible to the human eye, opposites blended in the most unexpected ways.

Once the authorities had identified her, she supposed they would inform her family. Her parents lived in the historic city of Van – a thousand miles away. But she did not expect them to come and fetch her dead body, considering they had rejected her long ago.

You've brought us shame. Everyone is talking behind our backs.

So the police would have to go to her friends instead. The five of them: Sabotage Sinan, Nostalgia Nalan, Jameelah, Zaynab122 and Hollywood Humeyra.

Tequila Leila had no doubt that her friends would come as fast as they could. She could almost see them sprinting towards her, their footsteps hurried and yet hesitant, their eyes wide

with shock and a sorrow still incipient, a raw grief that had not sunk in, not just yet. She felt awful for having to put them through what was clearly going to be a painful ordeal. But it was a relief to know that they would give her a brilliant funeral. Camphor and frankincense. Music and flowers – particularly, roses. Burning red, bright yellow, deep burgundy ... Classic, timeless, unbeatable. Tulips were too imperial, daffodils too delicate, and lilies made her sneeze, but roses were perfect, a mixture of sultry glamour and sharp thorns.

Slowly, dawn was breaking. Streaks of colour – peach bellinis, orange martinis, strawberry margaritas, frozen negronis – streamed above the horizon, east to west. Within a matter of seconds, calls to prayer from the surrounding mosques reverberated around her, none of them synchronized. Far in the distance, the Bosphorus, waking from its turquoise sleep, yawned with force. A fishing boat headed back to port, its engine coughing smoke. A heavy swell rolled languidly towards the waterfront. The area had once been graced with olive groves and fig orchards, all of which were bulldozed to make way for more buildings and car parks. Somewhere in the semi-darkness a dog was barking, more out of a sense of duty than excitement. Nearby a bird chirped, bold and loud, and another one trilled in return, though not as jovially. A dawn chorus. Leila could now hear a delivery truck rumble on the pockmarked road, hitting one pothole after another. Soon the hum of early morning traffic would become deafening. Life at full blast.

Back when she was alive, Tequila Leila had always been somewhat surprised, unsettled even, by people who derived satisfaction from speculating obsessively about the end of the world. How could seemingly sane minds be so consumed with all those crazy scenarios of asteroids, fireballs and comets wreaking havoc on the planet? As far as she was concerned, the apocalypse was not the worst thing that could happen. The possibility of an immediate and wholesale decimation of civilization was not half as frightening as the simple realization that our individual passing had no impact on the order of things, and life would go on just the same with or without us. Now *that*, she had always thought, was terrifying.



The breeze shifted direction, whipping across the football field. Then she saw them. Four adolescent boys. Scavengers out early to sift through rubbish. Two of them were pushing a cart packed with plastic bottles and crushed cans. Another, with slouched shoulders and buckled knees, tagged along behind, carrying a grimy sack containing something of great weight. The fourth, clearly their leader, was walking ahead with a distinctive swagger, his bony chest puffed out like a cockerel in a fight. They were making their way towards her, joking among themselves.

Keep walking.

They stopped by a waste container across the street and started rummaging through it. Shampoo bottles, juice cartons, yogurt tubs, egg boxes ... each treasure was plucked and piled on to the cart. Their movements were deft, expert. One of them found an old leather hat. Laughing, he put it on and walked with an exaggerated, uppity strut, hands tucked into his back pockets, mimicking some gangster he must have seen in a film. Instantly, the leader snatched the hat away and placed it on his own head. Nobody objected. Having picked the rubbish clean, they were ready to go. To Leila's dismay they seemed to be turning back, headed in the opposite direction.

Hey, I'm over here!

Slowly, as though he had heard Leila's plea, the leader lifted his chin and squinted into the rising sun. Under the shifting light, he scanned the horizon, his gaze wandering until he caught sight of her. His eyebrows shot up, his lips trembling slightly.

Please, don't run away.

He didn't. Instead he said something inaudible to the others, and now they too were staring at her with the same stunned expression. She realized how young they were. They were still children, mere striplings, these boys pretending to be men.

The leader took the smallest step forward. And another. He walked towards her the way a mouse approached a fallen apple – timid and uneasy, but equally determined and fast. His face darkened as he drew closer and saw the state she was in.

Don't be afraid.

He was by her side now, so close she could see the whites of his eyes, bloodshot and flecked with yellow. She could tell he had been sniffing glue, this boy who was no older than fifteen, whom Istanbul would pretend to welcome and accommodate, and, when he least expected it, throw aside like an old rag doll.

Call the police, son. Call the police so they can inform my friends.

He glanced left and right, making sure there was no one watching, no surveillance cameras nearby. Lurching forward he reached for Leila's necklace – a golden locket with a tiny emerald in the centre. Gingerly, as if afraid it might explode in the palm of his hand, he touched the pendant, feeling the comforting chill of the metal. He opened the locket. There was a photo inside. He took out the photo and inspected it for a moment. He recognized the woman, a younger version of her – and a man with green eyes, a gentle smile and long hair, combed in a style from another era. They seemed happy together, in love.

On the back of the photo there was an inscription: *D/Ali and I ... Spring 1976.*

Swiftly, the leader yanked off the pendant and stuffed his prize into his pocket. If the others, standing quietly behind him, were aware of what he had just done, they chose to ignore it. They might be young but they had enough experience in this city to know when to act smart and when to play dumb.

Only one of them took a step forward and dared to ask, his voice merely a whisper, 'Is she ... is she alive?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said the leader. 'She's as dead as a cooked duck.'

'Poor woman. Who is she?'

Cocking his head to the side, the leader studied Leila, as though noticing her for the first time. He looked her up and down, a smile spreading on his face like ink spilled across a page. 'Can't you see, you moron? She's a whore.'

'You think so?' the other boy asked with earnestness – too shy, too innocent to repeat the word.

'I know so, idiot.' The leader now turned halfway towards the group, and said, loudly and emphatically, 'It'll be all over the papers. And TV channels! We're going to be famous! When journalists get here, let me do the talking, okay?'

In the distance a car revved its engine and roared up the road towards the motorway, skidding as it turned. The smell of exhaust mingled with the sting of salt in the wind. Even at so early an hour, sunlight just beginning to brush the minarets, the rooftops and the uppermost branches of the Judas trees, people were already rushing in this city, already late for somewhere else.