

The Sappho Club

Memoir

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For all the late bloomers.

Prologue

ROOM 12

12 April 2022

Although I had booked the hotel room in Barcelona hoping this would happen, I was still somewhat surprised when I woke up that morning and saw her lying next to me. This night had been a new first. Outside, the city was slowly coming to life at this early hour. I heard the cars, a single siren, some drunken singing. Gradually, this April night was giving way to morning. The night I wanted to burn into my memory, every detail of it. I lay on my back in bed, my arms pinned above the sheets. I stared at the ceiling and could think only one thing: *I had had sex with a woman.*

A thin strip of light shone through the fluttering curtain we had failed to close properly. We were on the third floor; no one could have seen us. The room was washed in a soft, hazy glow. My eyes drifted to the balcony where my shoes were basking in the Spanish morning sun. On the otherwise tidy desk, two paper cups sagged slightly from the leftover wine. My suitcase waiting in the little hallway. Details.

I had barely slept. Maybe it was the excitement of it all. Or maybe it was the amount of alcohol we had drunk to gather the courage. Next to me I heard her snoring, sweet but loud. Her mouth hung slightly open. She was unaware of everything.

My mind kept replaying the night in fragments, over and over. So much of it had been new to me: the night was strung together with ‘never-felt-before’ sensations, and the tension I’d felt before the sex was one of them. It hadn’t scared me off, it excited me. I wanted this. I had felt adventurous as I roamed the dark streets of Barcelona and when I eventually

“took her home”. Watching her undress herself first and me after, kissing my neck, touching me everywhere and constantly, tenderly asking for permission. And I had felt confident enough to do the same: I let my hands drift down her back and over her breasts. It was the first time I had touched – not just *her* – but any woman’s body. Quite an important milestone for a new lesbian.

I was twenty-nine years old, which meant I could safely be considered “pretty late to the lesbian party.” Lately, it felt as though I was retracing all the steps I thought I’d completed as a heterosexual teenager: dates, crushes, feelings, and yes, losing my virginity. The difference was that this time I felt none of the awkwardness or dread of my teens. In fact, I had wholeheartedly thrown myself into this journey, and the past few months had felt like an intense crash course in lesbianism; in being gay, in being queer.

‘I would never have predicted this six months ago,’ I’d confessed to her a few hours earlier in the small bar where we had just ordered our third Long Island.

‘What?’ she asked. ‘That you’d be in Barcelona right now?’

‘No, that I’d be on a date with a woman.’

‘Oh wow,’ she replied. ‘I didn’t realize you’d only been out for *such* a short time.’

I shook my head. I could hardly believe it myself.

Next to me, her snoring softened as she rolled onto her side. Suddenly, I had even less space in the bed, and feared I might fall out at any moment. It didn’t seem like she would wake up soon, not even when I inched closer to her under the sheets.

She hadn’t reacted negatively to my late coming-out. On the contrary. She had been respectful, genuinely interested in my story: how I had figured it out and why it had taken so long. We talked about it, and she listened carefully as I told

her about the exact moment it all clicked; about the role compulsory heterosexuality had played in it, about coming out to my friends and family; and about what it felt like living as my true lesbian self.

Don't worry, we'll come back to all of that. But that night, I talked, and she listened. And by talking and listening – and ordering one last round of Jägermeister shots – she would eventually take on an important role in the story that followed.

This is that story.

I

GETTING OUT

1.

RAFAEL

December 2020

1.5 YEARS EARLIER

‘I see someone reading,’ Rafael wrote. ‘Is that you?’

I looked up from my book again. The guy I had seen pacing back and forth along the boulevard was now staring at his phone, confirming that he was, indeed, the guy from my date. His gaze flicked between his screen and the spot on the beach where I had laid out a blanket and sat against a propped-up surfboard. At a safe distance from the water, we could watch the sun go down.

I was staying in an apartment in Sitges, right on the beach where I had asked Rafael to meet me. Four flights down, that was all it took. *Oh, those delicious moments of anticipation.*

I watched Rafael take off his glasses, tuck them away, and slog through the soft sand in my direction. ‘Hi!’ I waved as he approached. I took one last deep breath, put my book away, and stood up to greet him. Yup, there was no backing out now. I would have to sit through this date.

‘*Should I go on a date if I really don’t feel like it?*’ I had asked Google earlier that afternoon, in the absence of other company. Because I *really* didn’t feel like it. I wanted to stay in my apartment, write a bit, watch a series, maybe take a short walk along the boulevard, but even I realized how that sounded. I turned to the internet, hoping some forum would either convince me to go, or give me enough solid reasons to cancel. Okay Google, do I listen to my feelings, or do I just need a kick in the ass?

The article “*Ten reasons to say yes to a date you’re not sure about*” gave me a hefty (socially desirable) push toward the door.

And as always, I listened. I'd become very good at listening to that internalized societal voice telling me what counted as "normal." Dating is part of life. It fits the expectation that we all eventually end up as part of a couple, that no one can feel truly happy or complete without their other half. Wanting to be alone – more than simply *being* alone – was deeply frowned upon.

That societal voice had long since taken up residence inside my body; a soft, simmering hum at the back of my mind. Not because I was looking for a relationship or because I believed that *I* alone was not enough, but because I didn't want to deviate. It had become a voice that occasionally, but not too often, nudged me to say yes when boys asked to take me out and spend the night. It expressed the part of me that knew how to play the game; how to reel boys in; how to flirt; how to show interest and ensure I wouldn't be entirely sidelined in this love game. The voice did the work. It was the voice that kept me inside the norm and said: *'For god's sake, just go on the damn date.'* And so, somewhere between reason number one: *"he might be The One"*, and reason number seven: *"if you don't like him, you've got nothing to lose"*, I decided to go.

'Mucho gusto,' I said, nice to meet you. We stood there awkwardly, because: how close were we allowed to get in this one-and-a-half-meter society? The pandemic hadn't made dating easier. Here in Catalonia, we weren't allowed to leave our municipality on weekends, terraces were barely open, and as if that wasn't bad enough, we had to be inside by 10 p.m. It made me feel fourteen again. I was allowed to meet up, but had to be home before dark.

Rafael was shorter than I expected, I noticed once he stood right in front of me. He barely topped my height. *Was that it?* Had I dreaded the date simply because I wasn't attracted enough to him? No, I scolded myself, don't fall back on superficialities. The main reason I had said yes was that

Rafael had felt different. Among all the Tinder profiles I had been scrolling through on a couch-potato evening, his had stood out. It seemed kinder, more thoughtful. That's why I had wanted to talk to him, and he hadn't disappointed me. We shared the same interests and hobbies, the same taste in films and music. On paper, he ticked more than a few boxes.

Besides, that same voice had comforted me: no one *actually* likes going on dates. Especially first dates: those are the worst. And people who claim to enjoy them are either desperate or have nothing important to do. It told me that the feeling; that knot in your stomach when someone asks you out, that choking sensation when a casual conversation suddenly becomes more serious, is just a natural reaction, a physical check-in: *Are you really interested? Is this worth it?* And the only way to find out is to give the person a fair chance.

I gestured for Rafael to sit down next to me. He had come straight from work. His formal clothes contrasted with the setting. Carefully, he rolled up the legs of his trousers as he sat down on the blanket. While he adjusted his posture, I saw how his shirt pulled a bit too tight, revealing a sliver of his stomach.

'It's so nice you thought of that!' he said when I pulled a bottle of wine and two small cups from my bag. I hoped he wasn't picky; this certainly wasn't an expensive bottle. As I filled the cups, I watched him try to find a comfortable position. He slid back and forth on the blanket before settling into a cross-legged pose. He brushed the sand off his pants and quickly tugged his shirt down once he realized what was showing. *He's totally nervous*, I grinned to myself. *Let me speed up the alcohol.*

I handed him his cup, we toasted, and I asked how his day had been. We had been chatting for about two weeks, so we already knew the basics about each other: where we worked, lived, came from. The details were yet to be filled in. I knew

he worked as a lawyer in Barcelona and lived with two housemates in the village where he grew up, about twenty minutes away. He knew I had recently moved from the Netherlands to Sitges, an unemployed anthropologist trying to find direction again under the Spanish sun. That was the version he saw of me. One without too much background, a story that could still go anywhere. He had to figure out who the person behind it was, to find out – just like I was doing – whether I was someone he could potentially end up with. If I was that other half.

He was careful in his approach. Without asking why I had chosen Sitges, he glanced around the boulevard and confirmed what he assumed I wanted to hear: ‘What a beautiful place!’ I nodded. I loved Sitges. So I told him about the time I had lived here as an au pair and had fallen in love with the town known as the gay capital of Europe. The openness, the tolerance, the quiet sense that everyone was allowed to exist exactly as they were. How relaxed it felt, and how much I enjoyed my endless walks along the coastline. ‘Look at that Christmas tree.’ I pointed, laughing, at a pink plastic tree with rainbow-colored ornaments hanging from a balcony along the boulevard. *So gay*. ‘Typically Sitges,’ I grinned. ‘I love it.’ Rafael took his glasses from his breast pocket, put them on quickly to look in the right direction, then just as quickly put them away again. It was as if he didn’t want to reveal that side of himself. Which side was that? Slightly nerdy. A bit insecure. What was he afraid of? He looked at me shyly, unsure how to respond. Maybe he thought I genuinely liked that hideous tree and didn’t know if it was the right moment to disagree. I found it amusing.

I asked whether he had a place he always wanted to return to. He told me about a solo camper trip through Canada; a test, he admitted softly, to see if he could handle being completely alone. This was the kind of thing I loved hearing

on a date: someone drawn to the world, to themselves, to the edges of their own comfort. He didn't need to return to a particular place, he said. Just to that feeling, the world at his feet, time to think, time to write. 'That's what *you're* doing now, right?' he asked. I understood he wanted to steer the conversation back to me. He was shy, gentle, but thoughtful. Exactly the type of boy I imagined introducing to my parents. Right? Or was he maybe *too* gentle for me? Was he agreeing a bit too eagerly? Was this really his own opinion? And if he wanted to write so badly – as he'd put on his Tinder profile – why wasn't he doing it? 'Well... work,' he replied. His parents had encouraged him to choose a degree that offered security. And now that he had that career, there was little time left for his real passion: cinema. A shame. I would've liked to hear his stories.

Rafael kept making an effort all evening. To make me feel comfortable, to show interest, to truly listen. Occasionally it felt like he had prepared questions based on our earlier chats. Not very spontaneous, but attentive. And as the night went on, he seemed more at ease, less inclined to scan his surroundings instead of looking me in the eyes.

Does it just seem that way, I wondered at one point, or has he been sitting closer and closer? To create some distance, I placed my arms behind me and leaned back slightly. As I looked at the water, I realized it had gotten dark. The sun had disappeared without us noticing. While Rafael told me about his Erasmus experience in Italy, I felt my bladder fill from the wine we'd drunk. The bottle was empty. I glanced carefully at my watch. Three hours had passed. While I was genuinely interested, the pressure on my bladder was becoming stronger. *Can I leave yet?* I wondered. When he looked down at his empty cup, I seized my moment. 'Well then, we finished it all.'

‘Also, I think I’m gonna head back, cause I really need to go to the bathroom.’

‘Oh ja ja, of course,’ Rafael replied.

I shook the last drops from the cups, stood up, and stretched my legs after sitting in the sand for so long. As Rafael got up, he gave me an uneasy look.

‘Wait, *where* do you want to go?’ he asked nervously.

‘I really want to go to the bathroom,’ I repeated.

Rafael’s face flushed slightly, and for a moment I wondered whether it was inappropriate to say that out loud. He looked at me carefully and asked: ‘You want to go to the *bedroom*?’

Oh shit. Oh my god. I nearly burst out laughing.

‘No, not the bedroom, the *bathroom*. I really have to pee from all the wine.’

‘Oh! Okay!’ he said, and I wasn’t sure whether I heard relief or disappointment in his voice. Either way, we needed to move on from this *very* quickly.

As I put my belongings back into my bag, I babbled about how far he had to drive home and whether he’d make it before curfew. Rafael shook out the blanket and handed it back to me, folded neatly, the sweetheart. While I fumbled in my bag for my mask, we walked back to the boulevard. I glanced sideways at Rafael trudging through the sand in his neat work shoes. Even now I wasn’t sure whether it was the glimpse of his bare stomach, his height, or his lingering nervousness, but the attraction simply wasn’t there.

‘That’s me,’ I said, pointing upwards to my apartment.

The goodbye, another dreadful date moment.

I sensed him wanting to move closer. He looked around awkwardly and took a step forward, but I felt a block rise inside me. I really didn’t want that goodbye kiss. Relieved, I felt the strap of my mask in my bag. I broke eye contact and pulled it up in an unnecessarily exaggerated gesture so I could

point at it apologetically. *Ugh, stupid corona, you can't do anything anymore these days.*

2.

GETTING OUT

December 2020

‘Hey Cara, are you coming in for a glass of wine?’ Matthew – my American downstairs neighbor – asked, as he stuck his head around their front door. The tea towel on his shoulder gave away what was going on inside. From the living room I could hear his partner Jeff and the tinkling of glasses. I was halfway up the stone staircase. The walls of the small apartment building which housed only four apartments – one on each floor – were white and roughly plastered, the occasional crack discolored by the damp sea air. For a brief moment I considered it. Stepping inside, kicking off my shoes, crashing on their couch, telling them about my evening. But my bladder didn’t care much for socializing.

‘Another time!’ I replied as I hurried up the stairs, key already in hand.

A few months earlier, I had asked my mother to sit down for a moment. ‘I want to tell you something,’ I’d said. I had gestured for her to take a seat as I put two glasses on the table. *(Now, you might think this is the introduction to my coming-out, but we’re not there yet. I was nowhere near that point yet. I still needed many more significant clues that I would continue to politely ignore for quite a while. Clues, signs, giveaways, red flags.)*

No, I’d asked my mother to sit down because I wanted to discuss a different important step. I was twenty-seven, and we were in the middle of the pandemic. I had been living and working in Amsterdam for over three years, and the remote work of that period had put a magnifying glass on the dissatisfactions I’d been carrying around for a while. I didn’t want to

go back to the office. I didn't want to keep living in Amsterdam. I didn't feel at home there, and my intuition was telling me I needed a change; a pull that only grew stronger every time I found myself looking up burnout symptoms during work hours. Fatigue, irritability, low mood... I scrolled down the list and wondered if it applied to me. Okay, no, I admit that was just me being dramatic. I knew I wasn't *actually* burned out, but I was searching for a more substantiated way out. Something more foundational than: I don't feel like this nine-to-five anymore, and I'm out.

'Mom,' I said that evening after filling our glasses with white wine, 'I've decided to quit my job and give up my apartment.' That more grounded reason had never come.

My mom was used to this side of me by now. I'd lived abroad before, I'd been an au pair, I'd worked as a flight attendant. All sorts of random plans that kept me occupied for a while. Always feeling the urge to leave; to start something new, to discover a new place. To get away from the small village I'd grown up in. Hoping to find my real path, because I still hadn't found it, not even in the big city. My mother stayed calm and asked, 'Okay, and what are you going to do?'

Honestly, I had no real answer yet. Not wanting to sound too reckless, I decided on the spot that I'd go abroad for two or three months to figure out what I really wanted in life. A bit of distance, some space for reflection. I tried to be convincing. 'Cause then, *surely*, a new plan would come my way. And the place I always ended up choosing whenever I needed a destination I could travel to on my own, and where I instantly felt at home, was Sitges.

'Look!' I said to my mother as I showed her photos of a gorgeous penthouse on Airbnb. 'This one is fantastic!'

The apartment itself wasn't big, but it had a massive rooftop terrace with a sea view. It was right next to the church tower Sitges is known for. Key location. Nothing could top it.

‘Ha,’ my mother laughed, ‘you couldn’t afford that.’

‘Oh, but I can,’ I replied excitedly, and I immediately clicked “reserve”.

Three months later, I was living in that very apartment, freshly returned from my date with Rafael. Honestly, I never could have afforded the place if it hadn’t been for the pandemic. Now I was sitting there for a quarter of the usual rent. The things they did to lure in those travel-hungry tourists who *did* dare to cross the border. My job and apartment in Amsterdam already felt far behind me. Closing the door that last time had made me emotional, but only because it closed three years of my life, and goodbyes have never been my strong suit. But once I arrived in Sitges, I simply couldn’t have enjoyed it more. Every morning as I woke up, I would pause by the window for a moment and look out. That was my favorite place; that little town, that promenade. I listened to the street musician playing at the foot of the church. I entertained myself watching the group of older women doing Tai Chi on the beach on Thursday mornings. I loved seeing the room blush red each evening with the setting sun. And I loved my freedom, my empty schedule. Waking up and doing whatever the hell I wanted.

I felt myself slowly detaching from society. No more appointments, no obligations. And everything in me insisted that this was exactly what I needed. Little by little, I lost that gnawing gut feeling that I had built up over the past few years in the daily grind of “normal” life. Every now and then, when I called my parents, they asked how things were going. As parents do, they wanted to hear that I was happy, but also to get some sense of what I would do next. Time kept passing, and I still had no idea.

I walked onto the terrace overlooking the beaches of Sitges. I poured myself some water and sat down, thinking about the evening. None of my expectations had been met.

Once again. I felt myself falling back into an old pattern, wondering whether I was supposed to be disappointed about yet another date that had led nowhere. No romantic, all-consuming feelings. No ‘hey, why don’t you come inside for a bit,’ hoping to stretch the date a little longer. No sex. No, I’d just come home alone again and could quietly put my things back on the bedside table, the ones I’d moved earlier, just in case.

As the evening replayed itself in my mind, I burst out laughing. Did he really think I’d instantly been asking him to come to the bedroom? That *that* was my seductive, sensual line of the night? No ‘hey, would you like to come in for another drink?’ But just: ‘I *really* need to go to the bedroom,’ *wink wink*. Aren’t we Dutch known for our directness? Grinning, I looked at the dark waves.

But why *hadn’t* I done that? Not felt it? Not wanted it? Why had I felt that knot in my stomach again as soon as Rafael asked to meet up? An immediate and clear: *no, I really don’t want to*. Even though our conversations had shown how much we had in common. Finally, someone interested in reading and writing, someone who didn’t just move along with the rest of society. Someone who, right from the first messages, could easily talk about his feelings. Finally, someone who sent me new artists and understood what vibe I was looking for when I listened to music. All those similarities had excited me. I hadn’t experienced that very often. And that’s why I thought that maybe this time it could be different. The reason I kept pushing myself to go on that date was because I somehow thought (and hoped) that my doubt would flip into something positive. Like they say, attraction can grow when you hear someone talk, see them move. The fact that this hadn’t happened once again, *should* have disappointed me.

But instead of disappointment, I felt only one thing when I got home: relief. Phew, that was over. I'd made it through another one. As if it were a mandatory dental check-up: you don't want to go, but you know that every now and then you just have to. That's what dating felt like to me. At least now I had another date story to tell people. I could reassure them again. See? I go on dates too. I do meet guys. I'm normal too.

I was relieved to be back in my own bubble; I was perfectly happy on my own. I finally felt comfortable again. But truthfully, I felt anything *but* normal. Especially later that evening, when I received a message from Rafael, telling me how much he had enjoyed it and would love to see me again this week. That he was afraid of scaring me off by saying this so soon, but that I was worth the risk.

Ouch. That was confronting. Because this *was* what I wanted, wasn't it? A sweet, romantic gesture like that. The beginning of a new encounter, a new relationship. So why did I feel nothing? Or at least, not the right things. Because while my ego grew, my discomfort did too. And although this gave me all the more reason to continue, to give him *yet another* chance, I knew that wouldn't be fair. And so, I ended it the next morning.