

Zell and the Golden Thread

Could you ever believe such a drab building would hold a terrible secret? Zell couldn't when he stepped out of his small council flat that afternoon.

Manoeuvring Baby La's pushchair through the narrow fire door into the main hall with young Ciprian in tow was his main preoccupation. It was his week to take the children to nursery and Zell was late for his afternoon taxi shift.

'Remember to buy some milk and nappies for tonight,' Anca called from behind the half-closed front door. Zell noticed his wife's tired appearance and decided they should discuss affording some kind of a holiday this year. Working alternating shifts respectively as taxi driver and nurse was hard. Anca came home to a few hours in bed before looking after the children when Zell went out to work, assuming the same duties on his return. The past few years, they had swapped this routine cycle. They were saving up for the deposit on a house of their own. Two young ones and saving on babysitting fees was worth all the effort, but Anca's eyes were circled with dark shadows and Zell realised they both needed a break. Cramped living in a one-bedroom council flat with two small children was taking its toll, despite being on the ground floor and with a small garden. Zell's mind was half-attentive when four year-old Ciprian saw it.

'Daddy, look. A golden spider has spun a silk.'

Then Baby La's chubby finger pointed, the little girl shrieking with delight from her pushchair. Zell was in a hurry but glanced rapidly up the stairs. In the light streaming into the building from the stairwell window above, was a golden thread that snaked down over the steps to his front door. It shimmered. It glimmered.

'You're right. But probably not a golden spider. It's the sun that makes it shine like that.'

'A money spider, then, Daddy?'

'I wish it were. Then we could move to a house where you and Baby La had a bedroom each.'

'And a big garden so I can play outside?'

'Of course. But Mummy and Daddy have to work hard before that happens. One day, son. One day when you are older. Come on, enough talk, Daddy's late for work.' Zell dismissed what he saw as a trick of the light.

'Daddy look! The spider's still there.' Ciprian pointed to the stairs on the second afternoon. Two intertwined golden threads this time. Zell stared, puzzled and bent down for a closer look. Two, yes, two, no figment of his imagination. He touched the silks gently. They shrank and recoiled back up the stairwell. He stepped back in surprise.

'Daddy!'

'Sorry, Ciprian. Did I step on your toes?'

'No. The spider says you mustn't touch.'

'And how do you know that?'

'Because I know. The spider says it won't be happy.'

'I'm not sure it is a spider...'

‘It is. It’s a spider and she lives upstairs. She told me.’ His son’s imagination never ceased to surprise him. ‘Bunica says spiders talk. You have to put your ear close to the silk and listen.’

Ciprian’s Romanian grandmother, Bunica, came to visit them regularly, bringing her Carpathian traditions and superstitions into his children’s education. Anca and Zell were glad of his mother’s thrice annual visits and the efforts she made to preserve his children’s heritage and language. It was impossible for them to visit Romania as a family. Buying their own home was their absolute priority and additional expense was out of the question. Bunica made the trip religiously and with great pleasure. Since their birth she had sung them Romanian lullabies, taught them Romanian nursery rhymes. Zell had been a promising engineering student under the dictator Ceaucescu. He had also known secret police, raids and threats as an activist. It didn’t matter if he was British and had been in the country for over twenty years. His heart still beat strongly to Romanian rhythms and with the desire to transmit his heritage to Ciprian and Baby La. *Never forget your roots never forget who you are and your place in the world. Never ever forget others around you*, his mother often said.

Was the spider silk a sign, a call for help? He rarely met the neighbours in his seven story stairwell. Brief encounters at the lift outside his front door. Mostly silent, some disapproving glances at his evidently foreign looks and accent. Zell however, continued to say hellos cheerfully, refusing to forget neighbourly gestures. *Never forget others around you. No man stands alone in this world.* Zell squinted up through the sunny stairwell and resolved to investigate later.

The next day, the two silk threads had been joined by another. Three intertwined threads waiting for him as he opened his front door, a fine golden skein shimmering, reaching along the narrow entry corridor to under the fire door and outside to the stairs.

‘Anca. Come and take a look.’

Anca peered through her dishevelled curls. ‘Look at what?’

‘That.’ Zell pointed to the doormat.

‘I can’t see anything.’

‘The spider threads, along the floor. Don’t you see them?’

‘Zell,’ Anca stared at her husband, ‘you are working too hard. I don’t see anything.’

‘Ciprian can see them,’ he whispered. His wife frowned.

‘If a child sees it, then it must be. What do you think it means?’

‘The boy says I mustn’t touch because the spider upstairs won’t be happy.’ The whispered conversation hadn’t escaped their son’s ears.

‘She says you must visit soon. She wants to talk to you Daddy.’

‘Go later and see who lives upstairs, Zell. I have to go to bed now,’ Anca pecked her husband on the cheek and returned indoors.

Fourth day and four strands. Zell took the children to nursery earlier than usual and returned to the growing golden skein that snaked upwards over the linoleum-covered treads. He mounted the stairs to the first floor where two flats faced each other, a set-up repeated on each landing. The threads continued their shimmering journey further up the stairwell. Zell followed. Second, third, fourth... on the seventh floor landing they disappeared under the

entrance to the top flat. Zell pushed the heavy fire door that cut off the narrow corridor leading to the front door. He knocked. Nothing stirred. Zell put his ear to the wood and listened. He couldn't hear any human presence. The corridor was dusty. No treads marked the grainy linoleum flooring.

'Anyone there?' Zell knocked louder. Thumped with his fist. 'Do you need help?' The skein at his feet trembled, came alive, reached out towards his feet. Sweat ran from Zell's armpits. Turning away rapidly as the four golden threads began to dance in the half-light around his ankles, he raced through the fire door out onto the landing.

Zell propped his body against the wall next to the lift and looked back at the flat allowing the hairs on the back of his neck subside. Number forty-five. He would ask the wardens who lived there. Zell took the stairs three by three, his sturdy frame leaping down the seven floors, and ran along the hall towards the main entrance. The two wardens were fixed to the computer screens, biscuits and tea on desk.

'How about this one...' they were shopping on Ebay.

'Hello.' Zell said to them. The older warden, Tony, peered over the edge of the screen at him.

'Yes?'

It was always like that. No first names. Reserved uniquely for the older residents who had lived in the building for over forty years since construction in the nineteen-sixties. No *good morning Mr Gregoria*. A Romanian surname that was surely easy enough to pronounce. He was the outsider.

'Does someone live in number forty-five, Tony?'

'Why?'

'Just wondering...' Zell scrambled his brain for a reason. 'If it's empty and bigger, I'd be interested in a swap.'

'It's not a council flat. Belongs to a family, never see them. Never rented out either. But owned flats aren't my business.'

'Can you find out who owns it?'

'Not my job. Ask the housing office, or why not Harry? He's lived here since the sixties. Old guy with the scooter.'

'Where does Harry live?' Zell knew the conversation was going nowhere. Better ask Harry.

'Number twenty-eight.' Tony's head disappeared behind the computer screen. 'Did you put in a bid?' he asked his colleague who grunted in reply.

Fifth day, five threads intertwined. They were of an intense gold. They formed a distinct skein that wound from Zell's front door and up the stairwell to number forty-five. Ciprian was at the bottom of the stairs on his knees, head cocked, whispering.

'Get up, Ciprian. The floor is dirty.'

'I'm talking to the spider. She wants to speak to you soon.'

'What if I talk to her here?'

'No. You have to go to her. She has to see you up there.' Ciprian raised his head and pointed a finger. 'That's where she lives.'

'No one lives up there, son. I've tried knocking on the door.'

‘She says you haven’t tried hard enough.’ With that, Zell’s son stood and walked towards the main hall. ‘Come on Daddy, we’ll be late.’ Zell stood perplexed. *I haven’t tried hard enough?* Anca and Zell’s weekly shifts changed tomorrow. He would have time to talk to Harry in the evening. Zell raced the pushchair along the entrance hall, Baby La laughing with excitement at the sudden acceleration.

‘Harry is elderly so go before teatime,’ Anca told her husband when he came home that night. ‘You won’t want to disturb him too late.’ She too was disturbed by Ciprian’s incessant chatter about his conversations with *the spider upstairs*. ‘There is a meaning to all this and you have to find out. Perhaps someone needs our help?’

‘Hmm,’ Zell placed the mug on the small dining table. Anca had, as she did each week, replaced the vase with fresh flowers from the local market. *A clean house should always have the scent of flowers to bring it alive*, was house proud Anca’s mantra. This week, freesias and dahlias. The freesias’ heady scent had met him at the front door. ‘I’ll chat with Harry tomorrow. In the meantime, we have to discuss taking a break.’

‘No holidays. Not yet. Buying our home is more important, you know that. We must think of our babies and their future.’

‘You are tired. Working full-time and then coming home to two little ones. We have to manage a holiday with the children this year. It will be their first and ours together. Just think how much fun it will be? We can go out of season. Ciprian will be starting school next year and we won’t be able to afford a holiday after that. What do you think?’

‘But the deposit for the house? We are so far off from what we need to obtain a mortgage. My salary is the only stable income. We need a large deposit, then there’s the moving and decorating ... I’m not sure. Our dream home seems so far away.’ Anca stared intently into her coffee dregs as if her whole future was held amidst the dark-brown mud. ‘I wonder what answer your mother would find if she read these coffee dregs tonight.’

‘Well, she’s coming next week. You can ask her yourself. But I guess she would probably say you needed a holiday.’ Zell squeezed his wife’s hand. ‘Come on. Off to bed with you, beautiful woman. We’ll work something out tomorrow.’

Five in the morning and early light filtered down the stairwell, illuminating the six strands of a thicker golden skein. Checking no one was in the vicinity, Zell knelt and whispered. ‘I’m coming for you, I promise.’ The threads remained still. He gingerly outstretched one finger and touched. No quiver, no tremble, no retracting and coiling suddenly up the stairs, as on the first day. ‘Are you dead?’ he whispered. The threads quivered and twisted in response. He touched them again. This time they moved in a concerted caress over his fingers and hand. Zell gazed on in wonderment as their warmth made his skin tingle. ‘I have to work, Spider upstairs. I’ll be back later.’ Although he heard nothing, he believed his son. The skein was growing in luminosity and strength... it was alive.

‘Good evening. I’m Zell from number thirty-one on the ground floor. You’re Harry, aren’t you?’

Harry stood tottering on the doorstep. ‘Yes I am. I have seen you in the main entrance several times. Lovely children you have and what a beautiful wife. You are both so polite and

always ask me if I need help. Not like the others in this building. What can I do for you, Zell? Is that Romanian?’

‘Yes, it is. I’m surprised you know that.’

‘Second World War, lad. Quite a few Romanians came here. Jewish they were. Most left for London, but a couple of families stayed in Portsmouth.’

‘Really? My mother is Jewish Romanian. But there aren’t many left in the country now. The last sixty years has been very harsh for them. The country has a history of intolerance towards Jews. My mother married a *goy* so remaining in Romania was easier for her. In theory, that makes me Jewish - through the mother’s blood, you know...’

‘Intolerance. Oh yes, I suffer intolerance because I’m elderly, as if I’m good for the rubbish heap. You, well, I doubt whether many people in this building display civil behaviour towards you and your family.’

‘Outside the building too,’ Zell smiled.

‘People are selfish and ill-mannered these days, Zell. Come on in. I suppose you want a chat about something and I’d be better seated. Into my eighties now and my old pins don’t hold as well as they did.’

Zell gazed at the wall covered in framed photos, some colour, but most black and white.

‘You were in the Navy?’ he asked the old man.

‘Yep. A Navy lad I was. Good times. Sailed all over the world. Just made a pot of brew. Do you want one? The cups are in the sideboard. Get yourself one, will you?’

‘Allow me to help you,’ Zell poured the steaming tea saying: ‘This is an unusual teapot...’

‘Ah yes, a present from a dear friend. Zelda. She lived at number forty-five.’

‘What a coincidence. I was going to ask you about the flat. A friend of yours, Harry?’ Zell saw Harry’s eyes brim with moisture. From old age, or were they tears?

‘A very dear friend. Such a stunner but not for the likes of me. Knew her as a young girl when her family first came to Portsmouth. They opposed it when we began seeing each other, so I joined the Navy. Zelda was Jewish Romanian. Not many relatives left, she told me. They first lived where those new houses have been built in Buckland. Most of the streets had been bombed out, but her father still had his jewellery shop standing after the war. He had a good business, quite well-off they were. Then the houses were pulled down and they were given one of these flats. Her father died and her mother was, well, not quite right. Zelda told me about how all her family had gone during the war and it had affected her mother. She bought the flat later under Thatcher. Said she needed a place to call home.’

‘Number forty-five.’

‘Yes,’ Harry put the empty cup onto the dining room table. ‘I was ill and sent to a nursing home for a couple of months. When I came back, her daughter told me she had put Zelda into a residential home. I never married, always hoped I could be with her one day, and she was gone. Her daughter wouldn’t say where. Didn’t even have her address to write.’

‘When was that Harry? Her daughter, you say?’

‘A few years back. Probably around the time you moved here.’

‘And she has a daughter? Why isn’t the flat sold, then?’

‘Yes. But Zelda never married, and she kept quiet about the father. Some kind of scandal. I was away at sea and came back to find her pregnant. Offered to marry her, but she refused. I don’t know why her daughter has kept the flat. Probably waiting for Zelda to pass away

before claiming the inheritance. A right one, I can tell you. Nasty piece of work. Never treated her mother properly and was up and out of there as soon as she could. Lives somewhere up north. No kids, selfish witch. I see her sometimes. Just pops in occasionally then leaves. I had a right ruckus with her once. Wanted me to give back the key to Zelda's flat. I was the only one who visited her, nearly every day when she became frail. Not that ungrateful daughter of hers.'

'A key?'

'I still have it,' Harry winked at Zell. 'That witch daughter couldn't get it off me.' Harry gazed at a framed painting. 'She gave me that too. Said it was important.'

Zell had been too absorbed with Harry's tale of Zelda from number forty-five to notice the painting. But when he did he gasped in surprise. 'But that's a view of Iasi? It's my hometown!'

Harry's eyes squinted into Zell's. 'That's what she meant,' he murmured. Then a laugh broke his mouth wide open. 'You old gal. So that's what you wanted me to do,' and he stood unsteadily, moved towards the sideboard and pulled at one of the drawers. 'Here it is. Just as you said it would happen, beautiful Zelda.'

'What is it?'

'Ha!' Harry chuckled, he couldn't contain his mirth. 'Here, look at this,' and he thrust a small brown envelope towards him. There was a set of keys inside. Zell's heart raced trying to fit the pieces together: the spider, the skein of golden threads that wove a shimmering path from Zelda's flat to his own front door, the painting, his son's insistence *she wants to talk to you*.

'Are you alright, lad? You look a little pale,' Harry's voice brought Zell back to reality. 'She gave me this the last time I saw her. Said I should keep it for the first person who showed her some kindness. Always was a dark horse, knew things, read cards, you know.'

'But if Zelda's been in a home for a few years, the threads...' Zell murmured.

'What threads, lad?'

'My son keeps saying he can see golden threads.' He wasn't going to admit he saw them as well. 'Was Zelda blonde?'

'Oh yes!' Harry said, 'Golden blond hair, a real beauty. Not the kind from a bottle, believe me. She had never cut it since coming to England. Said it was to remind her of the past when people were good and kind. Why do you ask?'

'It's nothing.' But the image of quivering golden strands remained with him. 'So what do I do now?'

'Zelda was a very smart woman. She always knew what to do.' They both looked at the key in Zell's hand.

'I'll go and have a look I suppose. Would you like to come?'

Harry hesitated, then spoke softly, 'I loved her from the first time I saw her. It breaks my heart not being in touch, to think of her all alone somewhere. Perhaps we can find a clue to her whereabouts?'

'We will, I promise.'

'Then let's go. I would like that. You are a good man. Zelda was right in doing things this way...'

Harry and Zell stood outside the lift. Harry supported by his walking frame, with Zell's arm under one elbow. 'Are you sure you'll be alright?'

'I'll be fine. Just a few good memories coming to mind.'

They took the central staircase lift to the ground floor and made their way slowly to the end of the long entrance hall and the lift outside Zell's flat. He could see the golden threads quivering so hard they coiled and twisted in an excited dance up the stairwell. *I'm coming Zelda*, he whispered.

The shimmering skein coming from under Zelda's front door entwined threads around Zell's ankles, tugging him inside. It danced along the hall and into another room. *Follow the threads*, Zell walked into the bedroom where they were surprised to see a large freezer. Electricity was still on, he noticed. *The daughter must have taken over Zelda's bank account and is still paying the bills. But why?* The skein of gold came from the freezer. Harry stood behind him.

'That's new. Wasn't here the last time I visited. Odd...'

'I'm going to open it,' Zell saw the golden threads agitating wildly, he could almost hear them hum they were vibrating so rapidly. He placed his hands either side of the skein which wrapped itself around his fingers. He couldn't let go even if he wanted to. They were compelling him to open the freezer. Zell lifted the heavy lid and cried out.

Zelda lay perfectly frozen, eyes wide open looking at him. A thick skein of golden hair grew from a gaping wound in her skull. As Zell stood transfixed, Zelda's jaw fell open. He could have sworn he heard her whisper, *thank you*. Then the dark eyes glazed over and the strands fell limp and grey. Zell could hear Harry sobbing at his shoulder.

'That witch. She did it. Her own daughter killed my beloved Zelda. She knew it would happen this way. How could a daughter...'

Harry sobbed and lost his balance as emotion shook his body. Zell caught the frail man as he fell.

'Come Harry. Let's sit you down. I'll phone the police.'

Shaking, one from lost love and the other from stupor at the gruesome find, both men made their way to the small living room, the walls of which were covered in framed black and white photos of family portraits and groups. Zelda's lost family. Zell stared at a photo dated from before the war. A little girl attending a large family wedding. He recognised the photograph, his mother had the exact same one. *Oh good God. Is it possible?* Bunica had told him the little girl was her second cousin. He unhooked the photograph from the wall to examine it more closely. A wad of papers fell to the floor. Zell picked it up. It read: *The Last Will and Testament of Zelda Salomonovic*. 'My mother's maiden name is Salomonovic,' Zell told Harry handing him the pages.

'So that's where it went!' Harry sniffed. 'I'd forgotten about that. She told me to put the person's name in the will. See? There's no designated inheritor, just a blank space. She tried to tell me once, about the keys... it's you, Zell.'

'I suppose it's possible. But I...'

'Sign! It's all yours.' Harry fumbled around his pockets for a pen. 'Take the papers to the solicitor and register them so that daughter of hers can't claim a penny. I bet she's been looking for this all this time.'

'I can't believe this is happening.'

‘That daughter won’t get a penny. Well done Zelda, my lovely. You are such a smart woman.’

‘Harry should take what he wants from the flat,’ Anca shook her head in disbelief. ‘I can’t wait for your mother to come and find out what has happened. Her second cousin was living upstairs all this time. I still don’t understand it all. Ciprian and his *‘golden spider threads’*, Zelda calling you both. Incredible! Are you alright, Zell? Still getting flashbacks of the freezer?’

‘Yes. But that daughter has been locked up now and Zelda is in peace. I agree about Harry and what we discussed about selling the flat and putting some money aside for his nursing home fees. He was Zelda’s friend to the end.’

‘There won’t be enough money to buy a large house otherwise he could live with us. I can’t give up my work to take care of him.’

‘Harry knows that, Anca, He understands. But we will come and see him every other day and bring him home for lunch as much as we can. I have to go upstairs and fetch him so he can choose what he wants. I’ll see you later.’ Zell kissed his wife gently and went to the front door. Tony hailed him as he passed the wardens’ office. ‘Good afternoon, Mr Gregoria.’ Zell smiled. So that was what money did for you? His status in the building had suddenly elevated to respectable. All the occupants greeted him now. ‘Hello Tony. Yes, a lovely afternoon, thank you,’ and he sped on to Harry’s flat.

They both stared at the freezer contents. Half-filled bags of frozen peas, potatoes, and other vegetables that had lain underneath Zelda’s body. ‘It has to be done, Zell. Do you want me to help you?’ Harry queried.

‘No, I’m fine Harry. You go and choose some things you want to take and I’ll put all of this in binbags.’ Zell reached down for the first bag, stopped, weighed it in his hand, squeezed the contents with his fingers, then stopped again, puzzled. Gingerly, he opened it up and looked inside. His jaw clicked open so suddenly it hurt. Zell feverishly opened the others then emptied each one’s contents onto the bed. He was still gaping open-mouthed as Harry entered the room.

‘Well I never. So that’s what she did with it all,’ Harry chuckled. ‘Good old Zelda. Her daughter looking everywhere and all the time, my Zelda was lying on it.’ Harry grinned then laughed heartily. ‘Well, you are certainly a rich man now, Zell!’

The bed was strewn with jewellery, collector gold coins, loose gems. A fortune.

‘So that’s where her father’s stash went,’ Harry laughed.

Amongst the glittering jewels was a large envelope bound with tape to keep the contents dry.

‘What are these?’ Zell unravelled the tape carefully. ‘Letters addressed to you, Harry,’ as he handed them to the old man.

Harry sat next to the strewn gems and, fingers trembling, opened the letters one-by-one. Zell put a comforting arm around the frail shoulders. Harry was crying as he opened each one and read them.

‘Letters from Zelda?’

‘Yes.’ Then more sobs. ‘Letters she wasn’t allowed to send to a *goy*. The first one from when we met as teenagers. This one... it explains they married her off to a Jew, who emigrated to Israel a few months after the wedding, abandoning her. No news of him since, so she remained legally married all her life.’ Harry lifted his face wet with tears yet glowing with happiness. ‘Every single one says how she’d always loved me.’

Zell smiled then laughed. ‘So you are coming to live with us in our new *big* house, *uncle* Harry?’

‘Of course I am. That’s what Zelda wanted. What a smart beauty.’ Harry gazed at Zell through his tears, ‘I saw her hair, her beautiful golden hair one last time.’