HERE by Lindsay Rodden

Synopsis

**Act 1**

**The Beginning**

An actor is in the library looking for stories. She finds a book called ‘Pauline’. She reaches inside the book, and takes out a hat. She becomes the character of Pauline.

More actors arrive, and they become the characters of Salim and Janet.

Salim, Janet and Pauline introduce the story they will tell us. It’s a hidden story, from the city underneath the city. It’s about a girl who came here, and then disappeared. A girl called Lulja. The story is called HERE.

**Chapter One: April (Spring)**

The story starts on a cold spring morning on a city estate: flats, houses, and blossom blowing down from the trees.

Lulja and Pauline meet for the first time, up on the roof. Lulja is new here, living with a foster family. She doesn’t speak much English. Pauline lives next door.

They look down on the streets. Pauline tells Lulja about her new home, the different people and places, and where it is safe to go and where’s it’s not safe.

Janet arrives with all her bags, she is looking for the library, she is lost. Everything looks different from last time she was here. Salim helps her find it. Janet is the new librarian.

Pauline and Lulja talk about Catwoman – Lulja’s foster mother (Pauline’s neighbour) who knits hats and scarves. Pauline teaches Lulja to speak some Geordie (how they speak in Newcastle). They hear the police coming, Lulja is worried. Pauline says the police won’t come. They make each other laugh, they are warming to each other. They watch the blossom falling.

Pauline and Lulja become good friends, they do everything together. Salim and Janet go about their daily routines.

Someone paints graffiti on the library wall – FOREIGNERS OUT

**Chapter Two – June (Summer)**

The weather is bad, rain and thunder.

Janet is trying to clear out some of the library books.

Pauline and Lulja are graffitiing the library wall. With a peace sign, Lulja and Pauline best friends forever, and a llama. They practise their Geordie words. Janet catches them. They pretend they can’t understand English. She says she will tell Pauline’s mum.

Lulja has to go to meet her social worker for her home office interview. She takes the metro train. She practises what she will say. She makes up stories – that she is a dragon, that the Prime Minister is her father. She doesn’t want to tell her true story.

More graffiti appears on the library wall.

**Chapter Three – August (Summer)**

It’s the school holidays. Lots of children are in the library for activities and free lunch. There has been a fire in the street – Lulja was there.

Salim is reading in the library and Janet is on the phone to her boss, who is ‘streamlining’ the library services. Janet is angry and swearing. She has to put money in the swear jar.

Pauline and Lulja are helping to clear out some books. They ask Janet to sign a form saying Lulja has been attending English classes at the library to help her asylum case. She hasn’t been attending the classes, Janet says she’ll think about it.

Pauline says she wants to go to university, that Lulja has encouraged her. They have plans to get a flat together and work in Nando’s.

They find love letters written in a book. It’s quite personal! Pauline has an idea – what if they encouraged people to write their stories in the books, around the library, on the toilet doors! Janet is not impressed.

The girls leave, Janet and Salim speak – this doesn’t happen often. She wants to know what he is reading. She finds out he is Kurdish. They swap books – poetry books. Poets of resistance. Janet asks him to get a library card, to give his details. He doesn’t want to. He leaves.

**Chapter 4 – September (Autumn)**

Leaves fall. Pauline is collecting stories, she tries to ask Salim, he doesn’t want to share his story with her.

Lulja has been to the home office. Her book comes to life and we can hear some of the story of what happened at the home office interview with the man with the pen that goes ‘click’.

He asks questions she doesn’t like, the interpreter wants her to say the right things so she can be free but she doesn’t want to give the man anything. He doesn’t believe her age, so she tells him that she is really an old woman from the Albanian mountains, who has lived like a man.

Lulja breaks into the library whilst Pauline keeps watch. She gets the library stamp for her letter and steals the money from the swear jar. Janet catches them, they run and climb up on to the roof of the flats, Janet follows them.

They reach the top and look at the city. Janet tells them she lived here as a little girl, Lulja goes near to edge. Janet and Lulja argue. Janet is angry she broke into the library. Lulja thinks Janet looks down on them. She says “You don’t know what it’s like to run for your life.” Lulja tells them about her dad escaping the Kosovan war. Janet is sorry for her dad. But Lulja knows that Janet doesn’t understand. Lulja had to escape from her father. She won’t tell her what happened.

They bring her away from the edge of the roof and they see all the lights come on in the houses and flats and wonder about the stories of all the people who live in them. Pauline wants to imagine all their stories. They climb down and see Salim in his window.

**Act 2**

**Chapter 5 – November (winter)**

Pauline talks to the audience – she can feel everyone’s different stories – what they love, what they miss, what they dream and hope for. ‘These are your stories. This is mine.’

She talks about Angola and her mum and dad – how they have adapted to England. They were journalists, very successful, they had a swimming pool back home.

She talks about her super power – invisibility. She once had to pretend to be a boy so she could disappear and be safe. She likes to be able to be invisible sometimes. She talks about her heroes, her ambitions, her dreams.

Pauline imagines the city she lives in is the whole world, and she makes a map of the world with books.

She is Pauline, she’s a story collector and she contains multitudes. That’s what the book of her life will say.

**Chapter Six – December (winter)**

It’s cold. For Christmas Janet will be alone with a takeaway, Pauline will celebrate and eat salt cod (Angolan Christmas), Lulja will watch Newcastle United lose at football.

Salim says that even on this ordinary day, people will be forced to do extraordinary things, as bombs fall, as their homes are destroyed: even put their family in a boat. Salim prays.

They are in the library. Janet is stressed with the cuts to the library services. Lulja has her music on. They all dance.

It snows. Pauline asks Salim about Kurdistan.

He tells us he will give us a story but he wants a story first. He talks about the city and the city underneath, the place you can see through the cracks where some people live. He doesn’t want to be in the city underneath, he wants the story of the city in the clouds, the story of the city above the city. A place with mountains and birds and rivers in the clouds. A place where he can hear someone call his name.

**Chapter 7 – March (almost Spring)**

The library is closed now, most of the week. Janet is still reading the love letters people have written in one of the books.

The girls come with a gift for Janet: a book they made themselves for the library with all the stories from the people living on the estate. They let people secretly write their stories in places around the library and went to each house to meet people and talk to them. Janet thinks it is wonderful.

Lulja is planning to leave now they have finished the book. Pauline tries to persuade her that her home is here.

Janet can’t see Salim’s story in the book and she visits his house. She asks him why, when he is a writer? Three Kurdish stories but not his. He says he can’t write anymore.

He tells her how he came to England for a poetry festival, but the Home Office say it is a lie. He has been here for fifteen years and still his story is not believed. He tells her about Kurdistan, that it is invisible on a map, it is made of clouds.

His language is beautiful, Janet tells him “you are a writer”.

He tells her his story is in the girl’s book, he is the gay man who was tortured. He wrote about Kurdistan, and he also wrote about forbidden love.

Salim tries to teach Janet a Kurdish greeting: ‘I put you above my eyes’. They shorten this to make their own greeting: ‘eyebrows’.

They see a flames outside the window – the library is on fire. Janet is so angry. This library was sanctuary and learning and warmth and friendship for so many people.

The girl’s book is destroyed. Pauline wonders if it was Lulja who started the fire. Bravely, she climbs up the flats to write all the stories she collected all over the walls, so everyone can see. Lulja wants to help but the police are on their way. Pauline tells Lulja to go. We see and hear Salim’s story on the wall – the story of a poet who wrote about Kurdistan. He thought this would bring him trouble, but they never came for him. Then he wrote about love, a forbidden love and then they came for him.

**Chapter 8 – April (spring)**

The library is badly damaged by the fire. Janet finds the book with the love letters in it, still intact. She tells Lulja that the library will re-open, but she won’t have a job. The community have been raising money, and it will be run by volunteers.

Lulja and Janet discuss what they are worth. Lulja knows she can make money to send home to her family but she doesn’t want to do what she would have to for this money. She could wait for the Home Office to make their decision. They might imprison her – they do this now, right here. Or she could run away. She has made up her mind.

Janet and Salim give Lulja things to take with her. Pauline can’t bear to say goodbye.

**The Ending**

Lulja has gone, and Pauline is alone in the library, lost without her friend.

Janet is all packed and ready to leave – to set up a library in a refugee camp in Greece. Salim says goodbye. He has learned some of the poetry she gave him, just like she learned his.

Salim is looking after the library. And Pauline sits in his old chair, writing. She is writing about the library, and inviting everyone to be part of it – to share stories, to use words wisely, to make history.

Suddenly, Lulja’s book glows, and we see her again for one final moment. She tells us about the journey she has made, across Europe, and how her life changed when she met Pauline. And now she has kept moving, to the hills of Scotland. ‘My story is not finished. No way. My story is climbing a mountain.’

The actors have finished their story. They have a gift for you.