

The chill spring wind raced through the morning, grabbing a hold of Nicole's dark, curly hair, making it stand on end as it were desperately trying to escape the confines of her scalp. Had the thought occurred to her and she'd been in the mood, she would have laughed out loud. As it was she was in no mood to laugh and the idea didn't cross her mind. Instead she was standing on the metal guard of the foot bridge that spanned the river, desperately racking her brain for a reason why she shouldn't do what she had gotten up there to do.

Nicole had bad days before but this was now the undisputed champ. Less than twenty-four hours ago she had been at work, minding her own business when her phone rang.

"Nicole Duffeck." She answered distractedly.

"Hello, is this Nicole Duffeck?" A polite, professional voice inquired from the other end.

Nicole tried to suppress a sigh but was only partially successful. "Yes." She answered.

"Hello Nicole, my name is Dr. Amelia Lanhor; I'm one of the attending physicians at the Milwaukee Veteran's Hospital." The voice had gotten a little gentler since it realized it had reached its intended recipient, however the warmth in her voice did nothing to stave off the chill that suddenly found its way into the pit of Nicole's stomach. "Mhmm." Nicole managed to supply, the shuffling of the files on her desk entirely forgotten.

"As you know your father has been receiving treatments at the hospital for his cancer..."

"How is he?" Nicole cut in, oblivious to the fact that in most conventional situations that would be considered rude.

Following Nicole's lead, the voice stopped being overly polite and warm and decided to cut to the chase. "In the best of circumstances the radiation and chemo treatments are trying. Unfortunately your father was not in the greatest physical shape..." a strange buzzing noise filled Nicole's ears, which would account for her thinking she misheard the voice. "I'm sorry." The voice concluded

"My Dad can't be dead. He's in the hospital, there are doctors and nurses and defibrillators..."

"The heart attack was very sudden and very strong. He passed away almost instantly."

Nicole tried to say something that would change the facts; that would make the doctor admit that there may have been some mistake and that her father may yet be alive. "He can't be dead." Nicole said softly. "I saw him two days ago; he didn't look like he was going to die..." She let her voice trail off. He didn't look healthy. He looked tired, gray and stick-thin.

The good doctor's voice continued on; sensing that Nicole had started to grasp the futility of arguing with a doctor about whether someone was alive or not.

"Thank you, but I have to go now." Nicole said rather lamely. Not waiting for the voice to respond Nicole returned the phone back to its cradle and marched numbly over to her supervisor's desk. Without waiting for her to look up Nicole blurted "Kris, my Dad just died; I think I should go home."

By the time the words had registered in Kris's brain Nicole was already heading back to her desk. She couldn't bear to have to explain, not when she still desperately needed to hear that it wasn't true.

Normally, walking out of the building and through the parking ramp without remembering having done so would have scared the life out of Nicole. Today however she not only didn't remember leaving the building, she didn't remember much more of the thirty-minute drive home than about five minutes worth. One resounding thought kept crashing into reality, clouding everything else around her so she could focus on nothing else. Dad's dead. I just saw him last week and he looked fine. Skinny and tired but fine; He had been eating Jell-O. Oh God, Dad's dead. After this thought ran through her mind her brain seemed to disengage again. Perhaps too over stimulated to function it collapsed in on itself.

After the abyss of the drive home Nicole pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex. A momentary flicker of something sprung up in her mind when she noticed that her husband's car was in its parking space--he should have been at work. But the thought was drowned by a sudden and terrifyingly powerful need to see him. She needed to put her head on his shoulder, to bury her face in his smell and hear him tell her over and over that it was going to be ok, that he'd make it ok.

The tears that she had been too dazed and numb to shed earlier sprung to the ready as she mounted the flight of stairs to her second floor apartment. As she opened the door she heard a strange, very female, very surprised voice state. "What the hell? Who's coming in?"

Oh this can't be good. Nicole thought dumbly.

A strong metallic taste rose in the back of her mouth as Jason came out of the bedroom pulling a shirt over his head, followed by a woman Nicole didn't get a good look at but who at least had the decency to get out of the apartment quickly without trying to say anything to either of them.

Again her hearing seemed to be impeded by that strange buzzing noise so she could only catch snippets of Jason's words like "you weren't there for me sexually" then there would be this huge gap where his mouth was obviously moving but her ears weren't catching his words so that when she did start processing again the words "I want this to work..." could have meant anything.

Nicole's mouth thawed quickly causing both of them to jump at her sudden yelling. She shouted things at him that she would never have said before but that at the time she felt were entirely justified. She was so caught up in her verbal assault of him that she didn't notice what was about to happen. Suddenly a bright light burst into her line of vision and her next realization was that she was inexplicably on the floor, nose deep in carpet. Jason was standing over her screaming but she couldn't make out the words. She knew he had gone back into the bedroom because her eyes were able to follow the heels of his feet until they disappeared through the doorframe.

"You can cry all you god damn well want too, I'm leaving; sick of this shit." Jason yelled, stepping over her and toting two garbage bags, presumably full of his clothes. "I'll be back for the rest of my stuff later."

It was dark when she finally got up off the floor; a good three hours having passed since she first wound up there. Nicole knew that she had probably just suffered a nervous breakdown of some kind but she didn't care. Her brain was numb; she didn't want to be around anyone, she didn't want to think. She wanted the rest of her body to become numb too so she wouldn't have to feel anything. No pain, no sadness. She just wanted to be numb.

She drove around for a while not knowing where she was going and with no agenda until she came across the park and decided she was safer not driving. Nicole sat on the park bench for hours, not crying, not thinking. It wasn't until the sun began to peek over the horizon that the first cognitive thought she'd had in hours entered her mind: She enjoyed this cold, this unfeeling; it didn't feel bad or good; actually it didn't feel at all. She wanted this. She stood up slowly, feeling her bones and muscles protest at having to move after they had been immobile for so long in the cold. Nicole didn't care. This would be the last time. She stood and walked over to the guardrail of the bridge and climbed onto the bottom rung. Her hands ran over the roughened paint which had bubbled and peeled after years of weathering and vandalism. She knew she would be hurting a lot of people, or at the very least pissing them off but she didn't care. She knew it was selfish and cruel, especially since her father had just died but at least she wasn't fooling herself into thinking she was doing the world a favor. A tear rolled down her cheek, stinging the already tender and bruised skin, burning it back to life after it was chilled by the long hours of night air. The wind picked up again, causing dried leaves to skitter across the pavement and the water's glassy surface to ripple with tiny waves. Nicole looked up to the sky and spoke a few words out loud to the world she was about to leave, a few birds and a passing airplane her only witness.

Vapor Trail, that what that white trail is behind the airplane. I wonder if everyone is sleeping, probably not the flight attendants. I wonder where it's been, where it's going. Maybe it's going to Europe; I always wanted to go to England. I've never even flown before.

Suddenly it hit her: She wanted something more than this. She looked down and nearly fell over the rail. Shaking and crying and colder than she'd ever been in her entire life and more afraid than she had ever felt she stumbled back to her car, realizing the only reason why she was alive was because of an airplane full of strangers.

If you are wondering it was a flight from Idaho to Wisconsin.

Terrified and still dazed Nicole drove slowly to the police department, an eerie hollow feeling, the kind you get when you see the sunrise from the wrong side, filling the pit of her stomach.

The bright fluorescent lights glared harshly on her eyes and she mutely walked up to the burly officer seated at the reception desk. Oddly enough Nicole felt a sense of comradory toward the officer who looked just as confused and lost as she felt.

“Can I help you miss?” He asked looking as if he wanted to run and find someone to back him up.

“I’m not sure really. My husband hit me last night; I don’t know where he is now...I left a few hours ago but he had left before that. I haven’t been home all night; I went to the park...” Nicole let her voice trail off, not knowing what she should do next.

“Janice, can you come here a moment please?” The officer asked imploringly. Moments later a woman a little older then Nicole appeared. There was a moment where the male officer whispered to the female officer before the latter moved forward looking kindly at Nicole.

“Hi Nicole, I’m Janice. Could you follow me please? I want to take care of those bruises and talk to you a little about what happened.”

Like an obedient child happy for some structure, Nicole followed Janice towards a small room near the back of the station. “First off, would you mind if I take some pictures of your injuries?” Nicole nodded mutely, turning her head when asked and raising her shirt sleeve as directed. “Do you know if you have any other marks?” Janice asked.

“Not that I know of.” Nicole mumbled.

“Alright, well just to be sure can I ask you to raise your shirt and turn around? Thank you very much. Last thing, could you lower your slacks so I can check your legs?” Feeling as if she had no humility left to spare Nicole did as she was asked. Curious she looked down as she saw Janice raise the camera again to shooting position.

“What is it?” Nicole asked plainly.

“You have a bruise on your thigh. Any idea how it got there?”

“No.” Nicole said shaking her head and staring at huge purple bruise on her upper thigh then shifted her glance to the second picture that showed her upper arm covered in a ghastly bruise. “Maybe it happened at the park or something...”

Janice nodded thoughtfully before replying “Why don’t you tell me how this all came about. Start from the beginning of your day if you don’t mind. I do want you to be aware that what you are giving me is a statement. This will be used to prosecute your husband.”

“Do you know where he is?” Nicole asked, an insane desire to see him grabbing a hold of her brain. Every time something bad happened the first person Nicole could think of was Jason. Some childish mechanism in her brain was trained to believe that he could fix anything. If her car broke down he would rescue her, if she had a bad day at work he would rant with her, if she got into a fight with someone he would take her side. Now she wanted him to tell her this wasn’t real, to make it alright.

“I can check with booking and see if they have any information.”

“Booking.” Nicole repeated the word, conjuring an image in her mind of Jason being brought in wearing a black and white stripped jumper. Tears flooded out of her, sobs so wretched she felt her ribs were going to collapse with sheer agony.

Janice must have had a lot of experience with these types of situations as she sat by quietly; waiting for the worst of it to pass as she gently patted Nicole’s hand.

“I know this is difficult and there’s nothing I can say to make this any easier. I can’t explain why this happened...the only thing I can do is ask you to tell me what happened. That’s going to hurt like hell and you can hate me for it if you want, I deserve it.” Janice said empathetically.

Nicole gave a watery smile. “Ok. My day started out like every other day; I was running late to get to work...” For an hour she related the tale of the tragic day. When she began she thought Janice was being nice and trying to lighten the mood by saying Nicole could hate her if she wanted. By the end, after having to fill in details to areas of the story she would rather gloss over for the hundredth time she felt she was pretty close to hating the female officer.

“Thanks, I know that wasn’t easy. Just keep in mind that it’s common for people to not remember everything about a traumatizing occurrence. Take my card and if you remember

anything else give me a call. Don't be surprised if it takes a few days, we deal with this sort of thing pretty often; no one will think you are making things up. Honestly I'd be more skeptical if you were able to remember everything."

"The pictures; the bruises. I don't know...do you think he hit me more than once?" Nicole asked feeling, if at all possible, worse.

"I can't answer that." Janice replied kindly. "But it's been a long night; is there anyone I can call for you? A family member or a friend?"

"Yea, Renee. She's both." Nicole replied, writing down Renee's home phone number and cell phone number for Janice.

Just as Janice was leaving a plump early forties looking woman appeared in the door. "Hi Nicole, my name is Shelly and I'm from the victim's support program at Family Services, how are you feeling?"

"I don't really feel like talking about my feelings right now." Nicole replied not looking at the woman. She felt raw, like everything in her that felt anything had been sand blasted and the slightest nudge or question or pitying look would feel like torture.

"I understand. I just wanted to let you know that there are a lot of support groups and therapist and other resources we'd like you to take advantage of. What you went through is difficult and changing. It would be to your best interest to talk to a professional about it." Shelly said holding out a couple of pamphlets.

Nicole looked down at the pamphlet on the top; the picture on the outside was of a woman squatting against a wall, her arms wrapped around her knees. At first glance the picture looked dark and depressing as the colors were shadowed. Upon further inspection Nicole realized the dark colors were because there was a shadow of a man looming large above the woman, his posture aggressive. Tears began to sting her eyes and blur the words at the bottom: "Love shouldn't hurt."

Shelly hovered around the open door, seemingly unaffected by Nicole's silence until Janice returned. Vaguely Nicole realized that they were making sure she wasn't left alone. Oh well, it's not like she hadn't done anything to deserve being monitored for erratic behavior.

Minutes later Janice returned with a file in her hands and two uniformed officers at her sides. Panic rose in Nicole at the thought that the officers were there to arrest her. Her eyes darted from one's face, to his hands then to the other's hands, expecting to see them reach for their handcuffs or guns.

"Hi Nicole, I'm officer Williams. I wanted to let ya' know that Jason came in last night and gave his statement. He's in holding right now waiting to go before the judge. If you don't mind I need to ask you a few more questions; I know you already gave a statement to Janice but I need to clear up some details."

Nicole nodded mutely and stared at the table top wishing she could crawl underneath it and go to sleep.

Officer Williams smiled kindly "Long night, hu?" Nicole nodded again. "I'll make this quick; I know Ms. Brunner is on her way here to take you home." True to his word Officer Williams only asked Nicole a few questions and after only five minutes thanked her for her time and said good bye.

Nicole walked out of the interview room, her body so sore she thought she'd never feel anything but this ache for the rest of her life.

"Thank GOD!" A woman cried. Suddenly before Nicole had a chance to register anything more than red hair and a blue fleece jacket she found herself compressed in an embrace that could have brought Hitler to his knees. "Sweetie I was so worried about you. I got a call from Jason...Oh God..." Nicole closed her eyes and forgot everything else but the feeling of being held and safe again. Funny how even as an adult it's our mother's we turn back to for comfort.

"Sweet heart, I know you've been through a lot and I know you've had a very hard time of things but do you really have to leave?" Nicole was sitting at the kitchen table Renee's house. Years ago Nicole had given Renee the title of 'common law Mom' Since Renee couldn't really adopt her but acted so much like a mother for so long it seemed only fitting. Now, like a typical mother would, she was trying to convince Nicole to not leave.

"The inheritance from Dad's estate will be enough for me to live on for at least a year...Not that I intend to stay for that long!" Nicole hurried to say after noticing the look of terror on Renee's face.

"I know a change of scenery would do some good, by why England? Why not Door County or Main? Or anyplace that is still in North America?" Renee's hazzle eyes were large and pleading and uncharacteristically threatening tears.

"It's sort of a reaffirmation of life. I want to start over and prove to myself that I can do something this big without Jason. I want to know I can stand alone." Nicole replied quietly, looking down at the old scratched table top. "Besides, Grandma and Grandpa have been complaining for years that I never went to see them, so this will be like killing two birds with one stone."

Renee sighed and looked depressed. She wouldn't argue against Nicole going to see her family, but she wouldn't like it either.

"You know, you could always come with me? Grandma and Grandpa would love to see you, they've always liked you and I know they wouldn't mind your staying there."

Renee laughed an honest laugh for the first time since The Night. "Could you imagine trying to get Pete on an airplane? None the less one that will be flying over the ocean? He'd divorce me first." Renee said brushing her straight hair off her face, causing it to stand wildly on end. Despite having been married for nearly a decade, there were still things Renee couldn't get Pete to do; the big one being anything to do with water in greater amounts than a bath tub. Pete was adamant that he had no buoyancy thus he would sink like a very hairy rock and die. The second being that he would never fly on an airplane since he was convinced that, due to Murphy's Law, the plane would have some emergency that would require a water landing and he would end up drowning.

The two women spent a few blissful moments laughing at Pete's expense before Renee sobered up and looked seriously at Nicole. "So what's happening with the case anyway?"

"Well, since Jason confessed right away to the police and pleaded guilty to the charges in court the only thing that's left is the sentencing..."

"I hope he gets the electric chair, or a firing squad, or better yet--death by stoning!!!"

"I really don't think they are going to give him the death penalty for domestic abuse."

Nicole said wryly, trying not to notice how weird the words 'Jason' and 'domestic abuse' felt in her mouth.

"Well they should." Renee replied ruefully. "So since I can't change your mind you have to agree to a few simple things. The first is that you keep in touch. I know phone calls are going to cost a boat load so you don't have to call all the time, just once in a while would be nice so I can hear your voice. I do expect a lot of emails and letters; otherwise there'll be hell to pay. Oh, and if you can, bring back Sean Connery.

Nicole laughed at this request "I don't think they have those in the airport gift shops but if I can find him I definitely will. Wait a second, what would Pete say?"

"Nothing, I would kick him out before Sean got here of course." Renee replied seriously.

"Nice one Mom."

"Oh I am going to miss you!" Renee cried, pulling Nicole into a strong-armed bear hug.

Nicole was about to say something but it got lost in Renee's shoulder and her own sudden swell of emotions.

The next day, sick of everything beneficial and good for her she called her best friend Jamie and coerced her to go out for a 'special coffee'. They spent three happy hours sitting in the coffee bar sipping cappuccinos spiked with brandy and smoking too many cigarettes.

"You know, the funniest thing about you is you never smoke unless you're drinking."

Jamie said languidly pulling a long drag off her own cigarette with all the flair of French woman in Paris.

"Well, if one is going to be self-destructive may as well have it all out at once rather than allow it to drip incessantly and become a long term habit." Nicole replied.

"Speaking of bad habits, did I tell you Scott and I are talking about having a baby?"

"No! That's great! You'd make a wonderful mother." Nicole cheered.

"Yea, I think I'm ready for it too. I love how you left Scott out of that though." Jamie said smiling evilly.

"I told you when you got engaged I won't say anything negative about him, so don't push it." Nicole replied.

"Just tell me why you don't like him and I promise I will never bring it up again." Jamie pleaded.

"You are such a liar! You'll harp on it for months if not years. And besides, if I do say anything bad about him then you'll always feel as if you have to defend him when we talk about him and I won't be able to make jokes about him because you'll think I'm being serious and then what would we talk about?"

The two friends had this conversation about once a month since Jamie announced her engagement to Scott four years ago.

"He's not a bad guy, you know. He makes me happy and I can trust him; well about as much as anyone can trust a guy." Jamie said laughing.

"I know. I think it's just one of those personality things. It's not that he's ever done or not done anything to make me dislike him, it's just that our personalities don't seem to mesh so well." Nicole replied stirring her coffee to ensure an even disbursement of alcohol and caffeine.

"See and I thought you two would have hit it off wonderfully, you are so much alike."

"First of all there's no need to insult me. I don't think he and I are alike at all, secondly, if that were the case, which it's not, but if it were then that would probably be why we don't get along. We remind each other too much of our own selves. But if it makes you feel better I know that you will make sure he's a great Dad to your baby." Nicole added.

"Praise indeed!" Jamie cheered raising her glass in a toast to Nicole. "So when do you leave for England?"

"Next week Monday. I've got everything done that can be done, everyone that needs to know has been notified and all the arrangements have been made for when I get there. All's that's left is the flight."

"You've gotta promise me one thing though. Write to me a lot and I don't mean just emails. I want real postcards and letters and stuff with stamps from England."

"I will but only if you promise to let me know right away when I'm going to be an aunt." Nicole replied.

The two friends spent the rest of the afternoon in down town Appleton window shopping at the incredibly overpriced specialty shops, day dreaming about what they would buy if they were millionaires.

They had reached the parking ramp and were standing in front of Jamie's car, holding off the moment of truth where they would have to admit that for the first time in ten years they'd be more than a twenty minute drive away from each other.

"This is right you know; you going to England? You've wanted to do this since the seventh grade when you read *Sense and Sensibility*. And I promise I won't be jealous or anything as long as you promise to send good long letters and tons of pictures."

"I promise."

"Alright, I'll see you later ok?" Jamie said grabbing Nicole in a quick hug before she hurried to her driver's side door to leave.

The flight out of Austen Strauble was uneventful, thankfully, but very different from what she expected. In the movies the time between boarding to take off happened within about three minutes. In reality it took much, much longer. First there was the obligatory 2 hr wait to get on the plane due to heightened security. Nicole didn't mind this though; the tragedy and horror of nine-eleven was an eye-opener for the nation and if waiting for two hours meant she wasn't going to end up having to call her friends on a cell phone for the last time as her plane hurtled toward an open field for a crash landing then so be it. The small inconvenience was worth it. After boarding there was about five minute's wait while nothing happened. Passengers put their carry-ons in the overhead storage and flight attendants walked around aimlessly but that was it. Then the engines turned on. Twenty minutes later the pilot came on and said that they were preparing for take off. (What the hell was the twenty minutes prior for?) Finally the plane began to drive very slowly around the airport. It was like grandpa driving around the parking lot of the grocery store for ten minutes looking for a good parking spot.

Suddenly and without warning the plane began to taxi down the runway, slowly at first then gaining speed until she was pressed so hard into her seat she was sure she was leaving an imprint on the other side.

Again the movies got it wrong. They showed the g-force lasting no more than about thirty seconds. In real life it took about ten minutes as the plane continued to gain speed and reach cruising altitude. Nicole was chewing her gum so hard and fast to keep her ears from popping she was sure her jaw was a blur. While she was adjusting her white knuckled death grip on the armrest she was sure she over heard a flight attendant mention to one of her colleagues 'This must be her first time flying.' Sounding as if she were amused. Nicole decided she didn't like her. After forty five minutes of no incidents Nicole dared to take a calming breath and looked out her window. Due to the altitude and the non-descript New England landscape there wasn't much to see, which actually helped to her ease her mind more. Until the plane fell out from underneath her.

"Is the plane supposed to do that?" Nicole bleated to everyone and no one in particular.

"Do what?" The flight attendant asked calmly. Of course it had to be the amused one.

Had Nicole not been busy finding God at that moment she would have attempted to incinerate the horrible woman with a fiery glare. Five minutes later the pilot announced they would be beginning the final decent. Nicole was so relieved she nearly cried out for joy.

The hour long flight from Wisconsin to New York ended without incident; no flaming balls of shrapnel or screaming death, and no spontaneously combusting stewardesses; it was as much as Nicole could have hoped for. As transatlantic flights from central United States haven't evolved enough to capacitate a straight, non stop flight Nicole had to sit in JFK for a two hour lay over to wait for a connecting flight to London Heathrow.

Though the flight itself had past with no real trouble Nicole was paranoid that she may get lost in JFK and miss her connecting flight, so instead she grabbed a cup of coffee and set herself on a hard plastic chair just before the departure gate for her last flight.

As the minutes ticked by, (she knew this because she kept checking her watch, determined to know she wasn't late) apprehension started to mount an attack on her courage. Nicole tried to think of the flight from Green Bay to New York as sort of a warm up flight but that warm up flight didn't take place over an ocean. Suddenly the world seemed a whole lot bigger and stranger and she was small and alone. Her heart began to race and she could taste copper in the back of her mouth as her head filled with a strange buzzing feeling. She couldn't do this. It was a different country, a different continent and she had to fly over an ocean. What the hell had she been thinking? This wasn't her, this was a stranger that acted stupidly and rashly and she had had enough. She stood up and gathered her carry on bag then headed towards the airline desk intending to change her ticket to a domestic one headed back to Green Bay.

As she passed the Border's book store her reflection caught her eye causing her to stop dead in her tracks. Even though the bruising had long since gone away and even excusing the fact that she was suffering from jet lag she looked terrible. Her eyes were wide and suspicious looking, giving her the air of a person who was ready to run screaming if someone said 'boo' to her. She had lost a lot of weight and was dangerously close to looking skinny-gross. To complete the image she was wearing a black t-shirt that was at least two sizes too big and a pair of worn faded jeans that had seen better days.

This wasn't her. Nicole wasn't they type of woman to spend hours in front of a mirror, primping herself to Magazine perfection, however she did take care to look acceptable when she was out in public, not to mention maintain her health. Since The Night she knew she had slacked off but hadn't realized how badly until she caught sight of her own reflection, so foreign looking and intensified more by the unfamiliar surroundings.

Pissed off at herself for allowing things to have gotten this bad in her head she stomped back to her seat like a storm trooper and sat down so resolutely that she hurt her butt. What Jason had done changed her life; she could no longer proudly proclaim that she and her relationships were normal but it was still her life and she'd be damned if he was going to take that away too.

With vast amounts of relief Nicole stood up and joined the line of passengers boarding the flight after the airport rep announced they could begin loading on. Trembling slightly she

fingered the strap of her back pack, trying to squash the feeling of homesickness that threatened her. No, it wouldn't be easy, but it wouldn't be bad either, nothing could be as bad as what she was leaving.

This take off was a little less unnerving as she now knew a little more of what to expect. Had the flight attendants known her from the first flight they would have appreciated how much less like she was acting like a first time flier.

Nicole was looking out the window at what she thought had to be the sky as it was such a vast expanse of blue when a male flight attendant walked by and looked out too. His spoke with a soft Jamaican accent, almost totally American now. "The ocean is beautiful isn't it?" He asked.

"That's the ocean?" Nicole asked amazed.

"Yea, see the little white lines there? Those are white caps of the waves." Smiling he pointed out the window past Nicole and toward the rolling ocean below. Upon closer inspection Nicole realized he was right, the white lines were too thin to be cloud wisps. With no intention of being rude she started out the window, completely forgetting the kind flight attendant.

Smiling the flight attendant turned and walked away, pleased that he was able to give one woman who looked as if she needed it a great moment in her day.

Two hours later Nicole got off the plane and nearly had a panic attack. Heathrow was ENORMOUS. The terminal itself was over four stories high, there were more gates than Nicole cared to think about and, though the structure was very open looking with white floors, chrome and steel designs and lots of glass windows, a hundred million people bustling around with 200 million suitcases made it feel claustrophobically small. Dizzy with terror at the thought of being lost she nearly cried for joy when she finally managed to find a porter.

"Sir, sorry to bother you but could direct me to baggage claims?"

"For what gate? Number 56a? Follow me." He said in a brisk Yorkshire accent and took off at high speeds. From a few paces behind him and nursing a stitch in her side Nicole could have sworn she recognized him as one of the top finishers of the Boston Marathon.

Without checking to make sure she had managed to follow him, the porter bustled past bag claim and on to whatever it was he was hurrying to.

Nicole stood by the baggage carousel and waited in apprehensive tension for her bags to make their appearance. After all, hadn't entire movies been based on people losing their luggage or grabbing the wrong person's?

By some brilliant stroke of luck her bags made it over the ocean too and were listlessly riding around the baggage conveyor belt, seemingly oblivious to the thousands of miles they had just traversed.

Fifteen minutes after the joyful realization that her clothes and other personal effects had made the international voyage with her, Nicole had them stacked on a cart and began the perilous task of finding her way through the throngs of people to the exit.

The escape from Heathrow proved to be as nerve wracking as the actual act of getting there via jet plane. Hordes of business people of all shapes, sizes and genders bustled to and from unknown origins to unknown destinations. Nicole could pick them out quite easily from the other people that were dressed in suits and the business people tended to be oblivious to their surroundings as they barreled towards their objective, brief case clutched firmly in one hand and cell phone pressed to their ear with the other. Nicole had to stop suddenly so often, lest she hit one of those that she was sure her suitcases were going to dive off the cart at any given moment. At long last she spotted the long wall covered in doors that opened to outside. Relieved she took a deep breath of foreign air, momentarily unconcerned by the 'humming' and other rude sounds that emitted from people behind her that were trying to make their own, less dramatic escape.

"See I told you we'd find her easier if we met her out front!" A low wheezy voice grumbled from the curb. Nicole looked up in time to see a small plumpish woman with short white hair that had been curled with hot rollers, dressed in white slacks and a heavy green sweater roll her eyes skyward as her tall male companion gloated over being correct.

"Fine, you're right, now go get her bags." The woman snapped. Nicole couldn't help but smile. After sixty-two years of marriage her grandparents had apparently learned how to argue and harp on one another while staying madly in love.

Or maybe they learned how love one another while arguing and harping madly...Nicole mused.

"Hi Nan." Nicole said walking up to her grandmother for a hug. Grandma was infamous in the family for three things; her Irish-Australian accent, her high calorie cooking, and her rib cracking hugs. Nicole found her self in the latter.

"Oh dear I have missed you!" Grandma cried pulling away to look at Nicole. "We are so sorry to hear about everything that had happened! Granted your father was sick but still for him to pass so suddenly..." Nicole knew she was just being nice. It was no secret that her maternal grandparents never approved of their youngest daughter marrying Christopher.

"You haven't been eating have you? I'm going to have to get some meat on those bones if you expect to make it through this English weather!"

"Hi sweetie." Grandpa rasped catching Nicole in a quick one-armed hug, Nicole's cheek brushing against the scratchy wool of his brown sweater. "Are those all your bags?" He asked indicating the trolley full of luggage."

"Yea but I can get them." Nicole replied hurriedly, catching a bag by the handle. She was unable to feel comfortable allowing an eighty year old man carry her suitcases; it seemed cruel.

Grandpa didn't see it that way. He grabbed the same suitcase by the handle and gave Nicole one withering look before taking off to the car, paying no attention to the fact that Nicole hadn't let go of the handle. Not wanting to have her arm dislocated from the socket she let go of the handle and took a step back. Grandpa, sensing victory, returned to the trolley and began to load the rest of the cases into the car, whistling a low tune. Nicole tried to not draw attention to the fact that she, a mid twenties healthy woman was standing idly by while her bald, liver spot decorated grandfather was heaving her luggage off her cart and into the trunk of a sedan. She felt like a heel.

"Let's see, we got your room set up, it's on the second floor and we're on the first so you will have your privacy from us old bats." Grandma said lightly, watching grandpa lift a duffel bag in the car.

"Grandma, I really wouldn't mind staying in the guest house."

"But you're not a guest, you're family. So you will stay in the house with us." She said with such finality Nicole thought it best not to pursue the subject.

After Grandpa had loaded up the trunk they piled into the dark blue car and headed out of the airport and towards the green of the countryside.

Along the country roads were small stone walls surrounding pastures, lush green hedgerows and deep green moors speckled with purple heathers, blue cornflowers and yellow pansies. Nicole had to restrain herself from pressing her nose against the glass and drooling over the beige interior. It was surreal to be there, like waking up and discovering that your dreams weren't dreams but the real thing.

"We'll show you how to drive the car, get you used to driving on the other side of the road." Grandma was saying.

"Alright, thanks." Nicole replied, feeling a bit guilty that she hadn't heard anything before that.

"Oh and I got you a job, well at least the consideration for a job."

Nicole froze. "A what now?" She asked; her attention fully fixed on her grandmother.

"A job working as an office assistant."

"Grandma, I have a degree in Paralegalism; I'm NALA certified..."

"Honey, I know and I'm so incredibly proud of you, but that doesn't mean beans over here. The certifications don't carry over to our side of the pond."

Nicole felt as if she had been slapped in the face. She had spent six years of her life getting to this point in her career, accumulating enough of an education to become a strong attribute to any law firm that was lucky enough to hire her. Now to hear that it had been for, at least from this perspective, was distressing.

"Besides honey, the job offer is in a law office. But since you are not certified over here that limits the amount of work you can do. Gavin, the gentleman who owns the office, offered to interview you with the condition that you understand it wouldn't be as glamorous as what you were doing back home."

Nicole perked up a little at the words 'law office.' Maybe this would translate as a good experience she could take home. She imagined re-writing her resume to reflect that she worked internationally for another attorney.

"What kind of person is Gavin?" Nicole asked still thinking on her resume.

"Oh well, he's incredibly intelligent, very generous; he's always throwing charity benefits for the community. Oh what else..."

"Cranky." Grandpa offered approvingly.

"He's not cranky, he just likes his privacy, and when it comes to living here privacy is a precious commodity indeed!"

"Is he a recluse?" Nicole asked warily.

"He's not a recluse, he works with clients, and he goes to the office..."

"Gay?"

"No!" Grandma sounded scandalized. "Not that there's anything wrong with that." She added quickly.

Nicole was enjoying herself, "Does he like to dress up in fringed drapes and sing songs from 'Rocky Horror Picture Show?'"

"Lord, child I don't know where you come up with these things." Grandma said giggling. "He's a respectable man who just doesn't like other people getting their noses into his business. He's very passionate about his career and about helping those less fortunate and beyond that I don't think he sees a reason to divulge every detail of his personal life to the entire British Isle."

"Yea well if he's dancing around in a Buffalo Bill outfit when I go for my interview I'll give him privacy. When is the interview to be for anyway?"

"You have to call him to set that up, unless you want me to take you over to the office and introduce you?"

"No, that's OK. I don't think I would appear to be very professional or useful if I had to have my Nana take me to meet a potential boss."

"Alright then." Nan replied sounding a bit disappointed.

After another fifteen minutes of driving they pulled up to the house. Nicole felt her heart flutter as she took in the two-story structure which was quaint in a stone cottage kind of way. The lawn was gently manicured and a weeping willow graced the front yard; healthy green ivy clung to the walls of the house but were kept trimmed back so as not to interfere with the natural wood stained shutters or obstruct the spotlessly clean windows. Nicole was able to catch a glimpse of the pond in the back yard, which was free from weeds, probably more due to the weather than anything her grandparents had done to it. Beyond the small pond was a tiny guesthouse, which actually looked like a converted carriage house. The driveway was gravel and as they drove over it Nicole could hear the plink-plink of pebbles bouncing off the under carriage of the car.

The sound caused a wave of nostalgia to rush over her. Memories from Nicole's youth when she would go to her aunt and uncles house in Lake Geneva to spend weeks of summer vacation on their farm flowed into her mind, filling her with the remembrance of rope swings, hay lofts, and apples off the tree.

"Here we are!" Grandma cheered after the car stopped.

Nicole didn't even offer to take the luggage up to the house for fear of what her grandfather would do. Obviously he didn't miss the gesture since he smiled smugly at her as he grabbed the suitcases from the trunk. *'The boot', they call it the boot here in merry ol' England.'* Nicole thought to herself. She couldn't help but smile. Though the ambiance was similar in so many ways to her child hood in Wisconsin the reality was that this was not 1985 nor was it Wisconsin; her being here something huge.

Following behind Nan and Pops she took in the minute details of her surroundings much in the same way a child takes in Christmas decorations. She marveled with delight at the large flat stones that were used to form the steps going up to the front door and that the same type of stones, only in larger round forms, had been used to make the outer walls of the house for the first story. The second story was constructed of vertical wood that blended smoothly in with the first stories' stonework. The whole thing was capped off with a high peaked roof that was shingled in gray tiles, like something out of a movie.

Nan gave Nicole the grand tour, after which Nicole went up and unpacked. Grandpa insisted that she use the wardrobe, closets, even the back of the chair to put her clothes away. "You're going to be living here, may as well *live* here." He said winking.

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