

From Past to Present

Short story by Allison Fine

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Nicole is not the one that anyone important is looking for. On planes (she never takes plane trips), on road trips stopping at the gas station (she doesn't own a car), walking around the streets of her city or other cities, or country towns, there is no one she sees waving a hand, as if hailing a cab, asking for her attention and saying in various voices: *Hallo! And there you are! I've been looking for you!*

No one has ever been looking for her.

She has spent her entire life looking for other people, however, important ones or even just interesting but obscure ones, however lately she stopped looking altogether. She has people in her imagination and honestly, that seems quite enough.

The other day in the local coffee shop where artisanal coffee specialists lecture on the soft flavors of apricot and red fruit that compliment a finish of fudge and almond butter in the Organic Los Delirious just ordered as a *pour over*, Nicole sits on the end of the long bar on a stool, hanging her purse and tote bag on the tidy little hooks fastened underneath the counter and wonders, *will anyone notice me today?*

She also wonders if the *Los Delirious* made by Nicaraguans is made delirious by organized crime and their representative criminals waging bus attacks on innocent poor people traveling to get from one town to another so they can work, or is this just an ironic name? This makes her slightly delirious, just thinking about the Nicaraguans on buses without recourse from violent attacks by drug dealers

representing drug cartels probably controlled by the CIA. This line of thought excites her, she decides, and could certainly excite others as well if she told them about it.

Which she never does.

She feels sure about this, but not much else.

The soft flavors of fudge and apricot wind around her dull and uneducated coffee pallet, intriguing, yes, but the young man with a bun on top of his head enralls her. The authoritativeness to his explanation of why it is important for her to forego the usual blotch of cream in her coffee and drink this cup black in order truly appreciate the complexity of the experience makes her realize some things. One: she really misses being in the stream of the male/female gestalt as it is being practiced on the earth plane currently. Two: she has slipped into the age where the only way she can impersonate this dance is in her mind.

She does as he tells her.

He leaves.

She can no longer see him to thank him for giving her the experience of enjoying a complex garden of strange, acidic and bright colored flavors in a small cup of coffee.

But then he reappears suddenly with a fashionable bag from Italy slung over his shoulder and for the first time Nicole understands why older women sometimes like toying with younger men.

But those older women are Susan Sarandon and Jane Fonda—rich, skinny gorgeous stars with enough surgery to get rid of the pockets of ugliness but not too

much to make them look like cyborgs. Nicole is neither a cyborg nor rich. There are plenty of pockets of confused flesh all around her body, however; a complex veneer of 65 years of life and childbirth and pain and digestive difficulties.

Thanks for the advice. This was indeed a complex and rich experience, she tells him as he heads out the door.

As mentioned, no one is looking for Nicole. And in this case, no one is looking **at** her either. And on the street, no one sometimes looks in her direction as if she is an invisible cipher that is getting in the way of their navigating the entire sidewalk. This young man gives her a professional smile, but by then he has already forgotten what the conversation is about.

Nicole has just come back from the worst train trip of her life and she is eager to tell absolutely no one about it. The thought of recollecting 26 hours of the worst physical discomfort of the last thirty years recent memory, the sight of a Viet Nam veteran soiling himself, getting drunk on a 12-pack of beer and shouting to himself in the seat next to her, the screaming, bawling, desperate cries of an infant that the mother chose to neglect coming from two seats behind her—none of this feels even remotely like a funny story and try as she might, she cannot twist the manifestation into something humorous and entertaining. The best she can do is tell it flat and real and hope for a positive reaction. The best will be a listener deciding she is just another geriatric fool unhappy about life.

And they would be right.

Nicole remembers thinking the same damn thing about older people who complained when she was young. At a younger age, she figured they just needed to dope up on some positive thinking and look on the bright side of life.

She was a stupid young person then, you see, and so therefore her punishment is to be a stupid old person in the eyes of the imprudent and thoughtless young.

But even that statement is a sign that I've lost my mojo. And where the hell did I lose it? Certainly not on that train, she thinks.

In another café, similar to the previous one only minus the artisanal and handsome young men who specialize in coffee, she sits next to a guy of indeterminate age, younger than her but older than most of the other customers, who turns toward her as if he knows her.

Yesterday there were no more people, he says, just slightly above whisper.

Huh? She asks, sipping her flat-tasting ordinary ground coffee.

No more people. There were no more people. And then he laughs. A Tourette kind of laugh—a tic, something he cannot control and looks away.

He's crazy, Nicole thinks to herself and leaves that coffee shop.

But the next day he is back there. She avoids him. She sits on the big leather couch, which no one is occupying at the moment. He comes and sits on the other end of the couch.

Yesterday there were no more people, he says, not looking at her; looking at the air in front of him and then comes the laugh.

Jesus, Nicole thinks, I'm going to have to go back to the other place and hear a lecture on buttery mouth feel and sweetness reminiscent of apple pie and ice cream. And why bother with the coffee? I can get an apple pie and ice cream desert at the restaurant I often frequent when I have the money and don't feel like coffee.

Apple pie and ice cream, she tells the man next to her. He looks at some point on her forehead and laughs the laugh. And laughs the laugh again.

It is time to leave.

Yesterday there were no more people and today there are too many, Nicole thinks as she pushes open the door, feeling the hot, muggy blast of an August day upon her face.

Anxiety stalks Nicole. She is just becoming aware of it. Even though people have been telling her practically her entire life that she is an overanxious, apprehensive, fretful human being, she is inside of this gestalt so how can she really see it? She keeps thinking that exercise, relaxation, yoga, walking, meditation and music among other things, will calm her down, but there is always the background hum of what she calls her *baseline* which is made up of fear, depression and phobic, fixated repetitive thinking; the same thoughts over and over, revisiting past experiences endlessly, recapping and replicating awful incidents or times when her behavior or her decisions resulted in trauma to herself and others, then following all this with self castigation.

At this point Nicole is beginning to realize that she is a self-abuser and her form of abuse is to beat herself up endlessly. She doesn't need a priest to confess her sins to or a hair shirt to wear at night.

I am a cruel human being, she thinks, I am not cruel to others; I am cruel to myself.

In the midst of these thoughts, thoughts about thoughts, Nicole notices a small dog lying underneath the shade of a tree next to the Mormon Church. The dog has no tag or ID of any kind and walking over she sees the bloody foot and leg and the heavy breathing of the creature. Clearly in pain, she bends down to pet the dog but he flinches from her, scared after being hit by a car, no doubt, and tossed off from the street to the curb. Poor thing.

I'm calling for help, Nicole tells the dog, putting a hand gently on its head hoping to calm the fear of the animal a little bit.

What are you doing with that dog? A young man approaches as she kneels down and pages through Google on her iPhone looking for a vet or an animal shelter.

Just found her here on the side of the road. Somebody hit her and—and left her.

Where's your car?

I don't drive.

Well, we need to take—how do you know it's a girl?

I looked. This is a lie. Nicole did not look. But as she speaks this, she peers underneath the injured leg and not seeing a penis, concludes the sex of the dog.

Ok. Well, she's probably in shock.

Indeed as he speaks the dog begins to tremble underneath her hand.

Take your hand off her.

Why? I'm trying to—

She might have something. And anyway, you could exacerbate the injury.

Oh well. I want to reassure her.

The young man finds a number and starts talking on his cell phone.

We found a dying dog on the side of the road. What's the name of that vet that Carey uses?

She's not dying.

Whatever.

Let's keep positive.

She probably sustained internal injuries.

The young man dials another number.

We've got a hit dog here on the side of road and somebody needs to come and pick it up. No tags or anything, small, furry terrier of some kind. We're on the corner of—he looks up at the street sign, Wrightwood and Sawyer. There's an older woman here who found the dog and she's kneeling down by the dog. Looks like an injured leg and foot, probably some internal injuries. How long will you be?

At this point Nicole is petting and soothing the little gray and white terrier, who is emitting small, wining noises, scared noises, the sounds of a terrified and hurting being. She puts her hand on the dog's head and moves across the body,

which causes the dog to start a low, whining yelping. At the same time she is contemplating how she feels about being called an *older woman*.

Stop touching her! You don't know what you're doing! It could make things worse!

You know, young man, stop telling me what to do. Until I stopped here she was left on the sidewalk.

And now I'm here.

And so what? Anger wells up in Nicole. Who knows, perhaps a lifetime of anger at arrogant young men who think they know everything.

I'm going to do what I think is best, she informs him, and you just do what you want.

The vet said she's coming with one of her assistants. Should be no more than twenty minutes.

I'll wait here.

Do what you want. This vet is a friend of a friend of mine. I'll wait here too.

The young man stands upright with his back to her. He is stiff and uncompromising even from the back; curt, with straight shoulders, perfectly fitted pants and deep burnished red tennis shoes that are too nice for tennis shoes but quite all right for some kind of hipster job environment. She is already beginning to form hatred toward this fellow, reminding herself at the same time that it isn't fair to do so.

Twenty minutes is a long time, she tells the man, but he deliberately ignores her. A few other people on bikes stop by.

Is everything all right? Asks one of them, a young girl in short shorts with a guitar on her back.

Hit and run dog. We're taking care of it, the arrogant man says in his self-important voice.

She's trembling and scared, Nicole adds.

Aww, poor thing, says the girl. *Well, as long as you guys got things under control..*

The girl looks over to her partner on his bike; then waves a small wave. Off they go down Wrightwood Avenue.

Most people won't stay, Nicole remarks, *I guess they feel the dog can die and so what?*

Twenty minutes seems to take forever. The little dog has stopped whining and is simply laying there, a small pool of blood around her foot, leg and tummy, breathing heavily. Nicole keeps a hand on her head anyway.

When the Subaru pulls up a young man and an older woman get out with a small stretcher and a black bag.

The woman, a bit younger than Nicole, is the vet.

Hi, I'm Dr. Stebner.

Nicole Kamin.

I'm a friend of Elizabeth's. She's one of your clients?

Stebner nods, clearly not interested in who he knows or doesn't know. She and her assistant move quickly toward the dog.

Who moved her here?

I found her here. Possibly the person that hit her.

OK.

Dr. Stebner pulls out her stethoscope, applies a tiny oxygen mask to the snout. The young man provides a small stretcher. Delicately, with great care, they both lift her onto the stretcher and strap her gently onto the flat back. Dr Stebner gives her a shot.

She not going to die, is she?

Not if we can help it. Who's is she?

No tags. I don't know. But I'll take her.

Ok, well we have to go through some paperwork.

Can I come with you?

We're going to the clinic on Kedzie.

I don't have a car.

All right, says the assistant.

Guess I'll be going, Mr. arrogance speaks, I've got an engagement.

Nicole decides not to tell him it is nice meeting him, because it is not. However she realizes he made the call so she ought to thank him for it.

Thanks for calling.

He sniffs in answer and walks off down Wrightwood in the same direction as the two bikers.

I hope she lives, Nicole tells Stebner.

Let's hope the internal injuries aren't too bad, the vet says. The two of them, Stebner and the assistant, hoist the tiny dog on the little stretcher into the back of the car. The assistant climbs in next to her and sets up a small IV for the dog. Stebner goes to the front of the car and starts up; Nicole enters into the passenger side.

Thanks for letting me go along. I care about this little dog.

Stebner nods and off they go to the clinic on Kedzie.

Anxiety has flown out of her consciousness and the only thought left in her mind is that one phrase the crazy man spoke to her in the café over and over.

Yesterday there were no more people.

But today, today is something else, Nicole thinks, hoping the dog will live. The dog may have even been looking for her, who knows? She isn't able to think farther than that. Emotion has a way of covering the distance from past to present.