

ANYWHERE BUT HERE

She opened her eyes as the familiar Neighbours theme song started. Was it that time already? She opened an eye and stared blearily at the tv, vaguely recalling the letter telling her the tv license needed renewing.

Nicole Wallace sat up and tried to clear her head, the caffeine had worn off. She stared at the clock on the wall, it had stopped and she checked her watch, half an hour to get showered and changed before work. Nicole yawned and tried to focus. She had been at work all day in one of the bigger department stores in town. The advertisement had extolled it as an ideal opportunity for school leavers; the basic rate was £4.85 an hour, they paid her £4.90. It had started as a Christmas job and last year it had been a good start, but then her flatmate had moved out with her boyfriend, leaving her to shoulder the rent, the council tax, and all the other bills.

Summer was here and the days were warmer. Management had promised to fix the air conditioning, but then an engineer had told them he was still waiting for a part to come from Bournemouth; it would be here in six weeks. She had felt like passing out today and had virtually run into the sunshine, desperate to escape the humidity. She had managed to talk her supervisor into allowing her a break every two hours to grab a drink of water from the canteen; at least the water was cold and free, the Irn Bru was not.

She pushed the pile of bills to one side and lit a cigarette.

Her mother had been sent to Cornton Vale for possession. Nicole had left Glasgow for Stirling and moved into Cornton to be closer to the prison; at least she could visit once a week without paying for a bus fare.

Nicole finished her cigarette and peeling off her clothes, walked to the shower and spun the taps. She stared balefully at her reflection in the mirror. She was nineteen, her mother was in jail, and her father was nowhere to be seen; her mother had once pointed out a man standing on a platform.

“That’s your dad.”

Nicole had seen the resemblance in the dark brown hair and his mouth, and when he looked up at her, he had that same distant look. He had recognised her mother, but there had been railway tracks separating them; the train had pulled out of Croy and she had never seen him again.

She stepped into the shower and let the water run over her body, forcing herself to concentrate on the task ahead. Five days a week she worked at the store, six nights a week she worked at the cafe, the seventh day she rested from her ordeals and slept.

She stepped out of the shower and dried herself, her body was not too fat but she ate sparingly. She got a free meal at the cafe if she worked more than two hours; Nicole made sure she worked four hours at least, it meant buying just one main meal a week from Tesco. She opened the cabinet and grabbed a box of painkillers; her head was thumping.

The box of sleeping pills stared at her, a full bottle; a doctor had prescribed them six months ago when she complained she couldn’t sleep. Her mother had hit the roof and made her promise never to take them; drugs where why she was in here she explained.

“Go for a long walk, take a second job, read a book, but don’t take drugs.”

“You don’t know what it’s like in here,” she finished abruptly.

Nicole had taken the second suggestion.

A full bottle could be washed down with a half bottle of vodka she had bought last week. She would drift off to sleep the peace of the damned; there would be pain of course, suicide always brought pain, but she wouldn’t be around to see it. The tv license people could go to hell, the council tax would never be paid, the gas and power people could wait till doomsday for their money, and the rent? How do you extract rent money from a corpse?

Is suicide a sin?

She closed the door slowly and stared at herself for a moment and then shuddered.

Had it come to this?

She backed away from herself and bumped into the wall.

The panic rose as she walked out of the bathroom and into the bedroom.

It would never end.

She sat down and touched the patch of hair between her legs. All of her friends had fallen pregnant before they left school, she had been the only good girl; she blamed her drug addicted mother for her obsession with morality.

Was it possible?

A council house, reduced council tax, benefits, not to mention something to love?

University education, a degree, and a better job.

She could see Stirling Castle from her bedroom window. Tourists flocked here in the warmer months to trek up the winding streets to the castle, Americans, Australians, Canadians, all on the ancestor trail. No one ever came into the Cornton, they drove past it on their way to the Wallace Monument and the Hillfoots.

She stroked her thighs and grabbing her clothes, dressed while she thought about him. He had been coming to the cafe for the last six weeks and they were on first name terms. He was from Australia and seemed nice enough, although she found his accent hard to understand. She had thought all Australian men were chauvinists, but he was surprisingly polite; maybe she could take him home and into her bed. She would part her legs for him, let him deflower her and take his seed deep inside. Then they could flee this country with its shite football team, shite weather, and neds who trampled on people's heads, while their social workers dreamed up politically correct terms to excuse their behaviour.

Nicole stared at her reflection in the wardrobe mirror, undid another button, and pulled the front of the white blouse further apart to expose some of her cleavage. She smiled when she remembered she hadn't been on the pill for three months. Her pulse quickened, it was Friday night; she would lean over him tonight and give him a glimpse of the black bra and her womanly charms. She had enough money to buy them a few drinks at Sportsters in town, not too much, but enough to chase away the demons and keep him hard; eventually she would fall pregnant.

Then they could go to Australia, New Zealand, America, Canada or Spain.

Anywhere but here.

Written by Alastair Rosie, July 2006 ©