

# Nicole

By C. Jade Wyton

*Waking up in a dark room slowly filling with seawater, a new soul in the world discovers each of their senses one-by-one before being rescued by a crew of pirates.*

***Contains descriptions of memory loss, drowning, and other traumas.***

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It all started in a lonely, dark room.

There was nothing.

No light.

No sound.

Just the feeling of cold, salty water, soaking their side as they slowly blinked awake and clicked their... beak?

*That didn't feel right.*

Unfamiliar sensations pricked their skin, poking them in a way they had never felt before.

They slowly pushed themselves up, then, and realised... *everything* was an unfamiliar sensation.

*Nothing* was familiar. Nothing was....

Had they even existed, before this moment?

They stumbled, falling with a thump and a splash into the shallow water on the wooden floorboards. The sound frightened them, and they let out a cry that frightened them again.

They scrambled to sit, the sound of their sharp nails clattering through the silence in a way they could barely comprehend.

Then they froze, falling still, and calmed as the sounds went quiet.

Like the feeling of the water, and the feeling of their beak, and the feeling of their own skin— Sounds had been a new and unfamiliar sensation.

But as they calmed they thought, perhaps, they liked the noises. The silence and dark was so full of *nothing*, after all.... So, slowly, they raised a hand and smacked it against the floor with a wet thump.

*Beautiful.*

It was a beautiful feeling, to *hear*.

It tickled their brain, so they did it again and again, until a new sound escaped their throat; a short and sharp exclamation of *HAH* that caused them to reel back in surprise and fall over again.

They lay on the floor, their hands over their beak, and then slowly, tentatively, deliberately, gave another:

*'Hah. Hah. Hah! HAH!'*

And then, they were laughing.

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*Where were they?*

It was a question that eventually touched their mind, as the water lapped at their waist.

The cold sensation had moved as they sat in the water and splashed around. Up and up and up. Biting them in a way they were sure was some kind of painful.

They rose to their feet again, so the water only bit halfway up their legs, and began feeling their way through the darkness.

It was like there should have been more, to how they sensed the world. Something other than *black*.

They could feel; the water, the wood, the air. The sharp pain in their stomach, rumbling and screaming at them for something they didn't understand.

And they could hear; their laughter, the splashing, the thumping of their feet. The creaking of the air around them, almost sounding like a deep moan from the back of their throat but larger and more imposing.

And they could smell and taste; salt, overpowering everything as the water they sat in got in their nostrils and on their tongue.

But something was missing.

They didn't have time to dwell on it, as they touched a new sensation. Ice-cold and hard, rounded and smooth. Running up and down from the floor to as high as they could reach was some kind of metallic bar. And beside it another. And then another. And the way across both ways, until the bars touched each side of the room and boxed them in.

*Strange*, they thought, feeling around the wall further as it gave another creaking moan. *Strange, strange, strange*.

They bumped into something long and square, and felt around it.

Another sensation touched them. Similar to the strange heavy things hanging loosely off their body, that soaked the water up and made it hard to stand.

*Soft fabric*.

They crawled onto the strange softness, curling up and sighing with relief as their ice-cold toes were pulled from the freezing water, and closed their eyes again.

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The cold lapped at them again, and they opened their eyes to find the water had risen to meet them on the bed.

They tried to stay asleep; but as the salty taste filled their beak they found themselves choking, pain filling their throat as they coughed and sputtered up the unbreathable water and sat up on their knees.

They climbed off the bed and found themselves standing waist-deep in the cold.

They didn't like it, and so began groping their way around the darkness again, searching for something taller than the bed to climb on.

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They were treading water, now.

Vicious, salty cold lapped at their chin as they grasped where the metal bars connected to the roof. They tried to heave themselves up, keep their nose above the water. But it was hard. And they were tired.

They felt like they needed to sleep, again. But something inside them —some instinct— told them to hold off. To fight closing their eyes for as long as possible. At least while in the water.

So they kept holding on, their beak pressing against the soaked wood roof as they tried to gasp in the last of the air they could.

Then, there was no more air to breathe, and their hands slipped from the bars and they let themselves float, slowly down, into the room.

That was when the light appeared. Floating in from somewhere below them, illuminating the room in green.

*This* was the missing sense.

Sight!

But it was blurred and obscured, painful, even, with the salty water stinging their eyes, and they couldn't make out the source of the light.

The last thing they saw before the darkness returned was a bubble, floating up from their own lungs, vanish away as something yanked them sideways.

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Something was pumping against their chest.

Pressing firm and rhythmic. Over and over. And over and over.

Then it stopped and a sensation of something around their beak, clasping at the edges to create a seal. And then air being pressed into their lungs.

They sputtered, the water that had filled them being forced out, and their eyes flung open as they were released and rolled to their side.

A billion new stimuli shook them, as the spinning world filled their eyes, though they couldn't react as they gasped and wheezed and choked.

'There yae go, there yae go,' a new sound —a voice— spoke softly in their ear. 'Yae breathing, now. Yae gonna be 'right. Get it outta yae. Atta girl.'

The words were new, but familiar at the same time. They found they understood the meaning behind what was said, even if they couldn't pinpoint each word for what it was.

The tone of the speaker was soft, like the fabric they had slept on, and not sharp like the bite of the cold water, they felt no fear at the sound of the voice as they lay on their side and caught their breath.

They heard shuffling, then, as whatever had been speaking to them moved back.

'Right, gimme a minute 'fore yae turn 'round, I need t' get proper dressed,' said the voice, sounding a little less soft as it spoke from further away.

They didn't have the energy to lift their head to look. All they could do, once they had finished coughing the foul and salty water from their lungs, was flop to their back —their wings awkwardly being pressed down under their weight— and squint their eyes at the brightness of the night above them.

It was magical.

A rainbow of dotted lights against a deep purple-blue that was so dark it looked almost black enchanted their vision, as they tried to blink away the pain that came with their eyes adjusting to the bright light of the world.

A brighter light then swung towards them, harsh and yellow and flicking; turning whatever held it into a blurry, glowing mess that they couldn't make out as they curled within themselves and lifted their arms and wings to shield their sensitive eyes.

'Is the candle t' bright for yae?' the voice asked.

Unsure how to tell the voice *yes*, they simply opened their beak and let whatever noise they could make escape them.

It was a quiet, high-pitched whine of distress. And it was followed by the voice giving a low *puff* of air that snuffed out the candle.

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Arguing.

The many people that had appeared in the bright of the night, summoned by the call of the one who had spoke softly and put out the candle, were arguing.

It was all too much.

Too loud.

Too bright.

They had to shield their eyes, as a lantern was swung their way to illuminate them; an act that was doubled by the one who had pulled them from the water.

'Leave her alone! She's been in the dark t' long fer bright torches! Give 'er some time t' adjust, right?'

'Donca, I'm just trying to *look* at her!' one of the voices, the one with the bright lantern, snapped. 'She's noble, ain't she! For that in all I say we don't throw her back. For it, there's prob'ly a good reward for getting her home!'

'Ain't nobody on that ship gonna be payed up for,' another voice mumbled. 'Ain't nobody on that ship cared for, 'cept by others on that ship.'

A second light swung towards them —her? They'd called her a *her*. Was she really a *her*?— and she shielded her eyes again with a confused, fearful cry as she scabbled back against the smooth, hard wooden deck. Her feet and hands made *plap-bap* and *skrrrt* sounds as she rolled uselessly over and hid behind the soft-but-firm *Donca* voice.

'And all else but her from that ship will be long drowned, now. I say he was mad for saving her! Waste of time!'

'Oh, don't be so heartless!' another voice —this one more rasped and less deep than the others— growled. 'Donca weren't gonna leave no young soul as hers to drown, and yer knowing it! Ugh... Hm...' the new voice softened to a coo, then, and its owner crouched down to look at her. 'C'ere, lass. Yer'll be right. Let mae take a look at ye, hm? Yer look like yer got seawater burns from being in them damp clothes too long.'

She let out a loud, open-beak shout as a third light assaulted her; throwing air uselessly from her lungs as she turned her head away and grunted and wailed.

The light was promptly removed, as the raspy voice muttered a kindly apology

and backed away.

‘Is she *deaf*?’ came the harshly-asked question. ‘She’s making noises like she’s deaf.’

A firm pair of hands *clapped* loudly behind her ear and she let out a fearful cry and spun around; pressing backwards into Donca as the owner of the hands was shooed away.

‘Look’it that! She ain’t deaf,’ was the verdict.

‘Then what’s *wrong* with her?’

‘Brain damage from the lack of air, I’d bet,’ a humoured scoff spoke from the crowd.

‘I dunno, she’s noble!’ another bright lamp found her eyes, and a hand gripped her under the beak to hold her still as a terrifying face examined her eyes. ‘Maybe her husband had her lobotomised—’

‘Right! Enough!’ Donca slapped the face away from her, his hand colliding loudly with a cheek, before he rose to his feet. He put his hands on his hips and glared around the group. ‘Yae all need t’ back away and stop *gawking* at th’ poor lass, fer five damn minutes, so I can try an’ *talk t’* her!’

Donca was not listened to, as the voices continued to whisper and gossip.

‘She must’ve been down there that whole time. That ship was sunk for near a week. I’m s’prised she’s alive.’

‘Someone should get her some water; she looks so ill!’

‘Who do you think she is?’

‘I don’t know any seagull nobles.’

‘Maybe she married into a family?’

‘She’s wearin’ a locket! Let’s see what’s in it!’

Donca gave an angry shout as he was shoved aside by several people from the crowd, and he failed to bat them away as they took ahold of her and held her still so they could open the small, gold locket that hung around her neck.

‘Ah, that’s more like it,’ the one examining the necklace chuckled. ‘Elf. Now *that’s* a noble! You bagged yourself a noble elf, huh, gully?’

The necklace was thrown carelessly back against her chest, and she was released to skitter back and back and back, giving her breathless cries of confusion and fright all the way until she pressed into the railing on the side of the boat.

Donca followed her, taking her in his arms to still her and breathing comforting *shushes* into the side of her head.

As soon as her breathing was settled to a pant instead of a gasp, he released her; turning back to the bright lights and mumbling voices, and gave a furious hissing shout:

‘WHAT IS WRONG WITH YE LOT!?! THE GIRL ALMOST DROWNS AND YAE BE HANDLIN’ER LIKE A GODDAMN JEWEL FER ASSESSIN’! GIVE HER SOME BREATHIN’ ROOM!’

Many of the voices went quiet; though others grew agitated and several lights stepped forward to argue— But nothing came of it, as that was when a loud *thump-thump-thump!* sound approached, and a new person hurried their way to face Donca; cutting him off from the rest of the people on the ship.

‘Donca!’ they exclaimed. ‘Captain wants to know what’s going on!’

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Donca and *Captain* had been talking for a long, long time. And all she had done was sit in the corner and listen, confused by almost every part of the conversation she heard.

There had been very few words directed at her. Mostly questions.

*Who are you?*

*What's your name?*

*Can you speak?*

*Are you hurt at all?*

*Do you understand what's going on?*

She hadn't been able to answer any of them.

Captain heaved a sigh as she (she was also a she! What a strange thing, when they looked so different) finished speaking with Donca, and turned herself around, her many metallic legs that she sat atop of *clunk-clunk-clunking* on the floor as the legs that were attached to her remained motionless.

'What's your name?' Captain asked, again. That was at least five times, now. But, unlike the last few times she'd asked it, Captain didn't turn away when there was no answer. Instead, Captain leant in close, her eyes tightening, and asked again, firmly: 'What. Is. Your. Name?'

There was no name to answer with; but it was clear Captain would not leave her be until she said *something*.

So, she opened her beak and —with all the might she could muster— made the loudest noise she could.

'Sweet Neptune's beard!' Donca exclaimed, flinching in surprise and nearly slipping off his seat.

And Captain cringed, slowly raising a hand to her ear as she squeezed her eyes shut tight. 'Ow,' she breathed.

'Ay, least we know her lungs are cleared up?' if she had known what humour was, she may have laughed at Donca's attempt at a joke.

Captain didn't find it funny, either, as she step-step-stepped closer and sniffed, looming in close in a severe way. 'Do you know what a name is?'

Slowly, she nodded; just as she had seen Donca doing when he had agreed with things Captain had said before.

And Donca lit up. 'Ah! Ah! Yae *do* understand what's bein' said!'

Captain didn't acknowledge him, as she stared down with tight eyes. 'So. If you know what a name is, what is yours?'

Eyes flicking up to Donca, she recalled another motion he had made. The motion for *no*, when he had disagreed with Captain. It didn't seem *quite* right, but it was all she had to try and communicate.

So, even slower than she had nodded, she shook her head.

Captain didn't look impressed. But, after a moment to take a deep breath, she spoke slowly. 'Are you refusing to answer me, or are you trying to say you have no name?'

She shook her head. Then nodded. Then shook her head again— Then, confused, she gave a breathless, open mouthed cry that barked out of her in

frustration.

'Maybe she can write it,' Donca suggested; suddenly at her side with a quill and paper. 'Hm? Can you write?'

She watched as he scribbled on the paper, leaving a long black line of ink on the floppy page.... When she was offered the quill she hesitated to take it. But, trying to be understood, she mimicked Donca's actions and scribbled ink all over the page.

And then on Donca's shirt.

'Ay! Ay,' Donca quickly took her wrist in a gentle hold to redirect her. 'C'mon, this is me good shirt.'

'This is going nowhere,' Captain sighed.

'Aye,' Donca agreed. 'Hm. Reckon whatever happened t' her's messed her up bad. Must have been real traumatic.'

'Mm,' grunted Captain. 'Maybe she saw whatever it was that sunk the ship.'

'Aye,' Donca turned back to her, now. 'Do yae remember anything, 'fore I picked yae up?'

Slowly, she shook her head.

'Ah, so it's *no* name, then,' Captain huffed, rubbing her eyes in an annoyed way.

'Yae really got no memories, 'fore now?'

Again, she shook her head.

*She didn't remember anything.*

'Hm... *well*,' Donca gave a slow, drawling note on his tongue. 'Yae can't be having no name— Right, Cap'n? She be needing a name?'

Captain nodded, though she didn't say anything as Donca put a hand to his chin and hummed in thought.

'Yae look like...' he paused, examining her closely. '*Nicole*.'

Captain scoffed a laugh.

But Nicole clapped in joy and gave a loud gasp.

It was a pretty name!

Such a pretty, pretty name!

'*Preeetty!*' the word escaped her beak, frightening her so bad she leapt to her feet with a scream and fell over.

'Whoa! Whoa,' Donca caught her, stumbling under her limp weight before gently lowering her onto the floor.

She was placed down into a kneel as she caught her bearings. She barely noticed the pair staring at her, as she opened her beak wide again and tested that frightening new sound she'd made.

'*Itty*,' she breathed. '*Itty! Prrrrrrr.... Rrrrr!*'

'Hm,' Captain gave a low hum as she examined Nicole. She inclined her head towards Donca, as she spoke, clearly addressing him. 'You said she was in a cell?'

'Yes, though, she weren't locked in,' he explained. 'Th' ship was upside down, meanin' she was trapped by the door being on th' roof. But th' cell weren't locked.'

'Still, there's a chance she was a prisoner...' said Captain, giving a small puff of air through her nose; not quite a sigh, not quite a snort.

Nicole mimicked the sound, much to Donca's amusement.

‘If she’s a criminal, taking her back to shore could be a death-sentence,’ Captain continued, tapping her fingers loud and rhythmically on the side of one of her metal legs. ‘Which would be such a waste.... Hm. She might as well stay,’ she waved a dismissive hand. ‘For now, anyway. I want you to get her something to eat and then get her settled in to rest.’

‘Can do, Cap’n.’

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Nicole tore into the bread she’d been given like a wild animal; shredding it vigorously into pieces as she devoured it with an energy she hadn’t known she’d had.

That horrible painful feeling in her stomach, that she had known since she’d first awoke, had finally vanished into a blissful feeling of *full* that had made the entire world feel less intense and confusing.

‘Yae eat like yer’ve never eaten ‘fore,’ Donca joked, sliding her another new food; it was long and green and dry, and tasted like the ocean as Nicole all but swallowed it whole. ‘Right, now. Not too much. Yae don’t want t’ be sick after so long with no food.’

Nicole didn’t want to stop eating, but when Donca didn’t provide her with more food, and she finished what was in front of her, she realised she didn’t have a choice. The last bite was the best one, she thought as she put her hands to her beak and made a happy, muffled laughing noise. Then she swallowed and turned to Donca as he rose to his feet.

‘Right, yae let that settle in yer,’ he instructed, retrieving a long, straight, wooden stick from the corner. ‘An’ I’ll get t’ cleaning.’

Nicole nodded, though she wasn’t sure what exactly she was agreeing to, and watched as Donca began to rub the end of the stick (which, was covered in a strange wet mess of what resembled the hair on his head) against the floor.

She watched this strange ritual for a long, long while, before she stumbled to her feet and retrieved the other stick from the corner.

This one was less wet, and the hair-like end was stiffer than Donca’s own, but regardless she still put it to the floor and swung it in the same motion Donca was doing with his own.

He simply laughed, petting Nicole on the back and grinning wide. ‘Ah! So yae wanting to earn yer way, ay?’

‘Ay!’ she forced the sound out with a struggle, mimicking Donca loudly. ‘Ay! *Eaaarn* way!’

Another laugh, and another pat on her shoulder, and Donca went back to his wet floor-rubbing.

‘Ay ay!’ Nicole continued, mimicking every motion and chuckle Donca gave. ‘Ay!’

—END—

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