

Nicola, Rosie, Michael & Simon

By Eliza Victoria

Nicola spotted the guy with the cane before he spotted her. When he did, he gave a little start, but his expression was hidden by the mask and the dark sunglasses he was inexplicably wearing at six in the evening. She glanced at the cane, wondering if he were blind, but he seemed to be staring at her now, searching her face.

“Oh!” she said, making him jump again. Jumpy little guy. “Wait, are we supposed to wear masks when walking outside?” She couldn’t keep up with the rules anymore, they kept changing every day.

He shook his head. “Not required, really, but it’s required indoors.” He held up a folder he had been holding. “Do you live in this building? Someone dropped this.”

He was speaking very softly, his words muffled by his mask. She couldn’t quite place his accent, but he didn’t sound Australian. Nicola took the folder from him and rifled through the papers inside, pausing when she saw Rosie’s name. “Damn it,” Nicola said.

“Pardon?”

“She dropped this, you said? Did she throw it away or did she put it down somewhere and just forgot to pick it back up?”

“I don’t—”

“No worries,” she said. “I got this.” She walked up to the intercom and punched in Rosie’s unit number. Nicola glanced back and saw him still standing there, like he was waiting for something. “Thank you so much,” she said. “These are very important papers.” Do you want a reward? Jeez. “Thanks,” she said again, when he didn’t move.

“Right,” he said, nodding. “Have a good night.” He took a deep breath, dimpling his mask, and turned to make his way down the building’s front steps. His little nod as he spoke reminded Nicola of someone, but she couldn’t remember who.

The intercom started squawking. “Yes? Who is it?”

“It’s me.” Nicola could see her own face on the intercom camera, the bright light at the entrance shining straight down and hiding her face in shadow. “Let me in, Rosie.”

It was a posh, high-rise building, with a posh chandelier in the lobby and a posh-looking engraving on the door announcing that this was unit 4301. Nicola had asked Simon if they could actually afford to live in a place like this, last year before the world changed and before they signed the tenancy agreement, and he got all hurt and offended by the question, and how could she even ask? Who did she think she is? And now look what happened.

Rosie had not done any packing at all. Nicola walked in on her sitting in front of her computer in the lounge, wearing rumpled pajamas she must have been wearing the whole day if not the whole week, looking from the screen to the dining table behind her and back again.

“If I walk back home and the police happens to stop me,” Nicola said, “what should I say? Am I facilitating a move to a new residence or providing care to a vulnerable person?”

“They’ve eased the restrictions,” Rosie replied without taking her eyes off her computer screen. “You can even sit inside the restaurants now.”

“Oh, is that what you did, had dinner at a restaurant?” Nicola let the folder hit the keyboard with a smack. “I think you dropped this.”

Rosie shoved the folder aside and pointed at the screen. “I need you to look at this.”

Nicola pointed at the folder. “That’s your new tenancy agreement. You’re getting out of here in six days. You haven’t even sold the TV!”

“Just look.”

Onscreen is a photo of Rosie and Simon at their housewarming party, standing behind the dining table covered with dishes their friends brought for the potluck—sisig and rice and lumpia and a small cake with a tiny Australian flag stuck in it.

“Do you notice anything different?”

“My brother’s still alive,” Nicola replied without missing a beat.

She didn’t delight in watching Rosie’s face crumple. Nicola sat on the sofa with a heavy sigh. “Sorry,” she said, putting her face in her hands. She gestured at the photo. “What am I looking at?”

“Look at the table in this photo and the table in this room.”

The table in the photo had rounded edges with a blonde oak veneer tabletop. Nicola knew this because she and Simon bought the same table at the same time, using Nicola’s IKEA voucher. It was the cheapest dining table they had in the store.

The table in the room looked the same.

“I don’t get it,” Nicola said.

“Look closer,” Rosie said.

Nicola stood up to take a closer look. The tabletop was the same blonde color, but it wasn’t a solid piece. It was made of planks.

“It’s called a farmhouse table,” Rosie said. “Rustic. You know?”

Nicola tried to lift up the edge. Heavy. Not particleboard. This might actually be actual oak.

“So you’re telling me,” Nicola said, “that in the week you’re supposed to move out of here, you ordered a heavy, expensive table to replace the IKEA one that Simon bought.

“What? No.” Rosie looked affronted. “I woke up this morning and this table is already here.”

Nicola said nothing, and Rosie pointed at her computer screen again. "That's why I've been studying this photo because this doesn't make sense."

Nicola sat back down as Rosie continued to explain. "Look, this will sound insane, but weeks before Simon went to the hospital we were thinking of upgrading. I mentioned that a farmhouse table made of actual wood would look great, but we can't afford it."

Nicola frowned. "So?"

Rosie took a moment to reply. "So I think," she said, with some hesitation, "so I think Simon bought it for me."

"You mean he ordered it online?" Nicola said. "Before he died? A table like this costs thousands of dollars." Like the flight back home for their uncle, an Australian citizen and their only relative who had the means to pay for a plane ticket and a quarantine hotel stay so he could hand over the urn containing his nephew to his sister.

"There was no charge on any of our credit cards. And I told you, I woke up and it was already here."

"So you think the table appeared here? Like magic?"

Rosie, still sitting in her computer chair, rolled over to the table to touch the planks. "I think this means he doesn't want me to leave."

Nicola felt like exploding. "You can't afford to live here on one salary, Rosie!"

Rosie had started to cry. "Try to explain this, then."

"You went to IKEA, bought a table, and assembled it yourself."

"I didn't go to IKEA!" Rosie said. "All they have are particleboards! This table is heavy!"

Nicola could feel the warmth and condensation of her breath building up behind her mask. "Simon's not coming back," she said. "Get your shit together."

The man who gave Nicola the folder was still outside the building when Nicola got to the lobby. She stood behind the glass doors, watching him. He was still

wearing a mask but he wasn't wearing his sunglasses anymore. He hadn't seen her yet. He leaned against the wall, placed his cane between his legs, and adjusted his mask, pulling it down a little bit to cover his chin better.

Nicola stepped out. "I know you," she said. "We've met before."

He stared at her for a second, and reached up to take off his mask.

"Oh, yeah," Nicola said. "Michael, right? The idiot." She glanced at the cane, at his deer-in-the-headlights eyes. "I see your knee is still busted."

Michael gripped his cane. "It's all right."

"I know it's all right," Nicola said. "You're still alive."

He looked away from her.

"Do you know you can sit inside restaurants now?" she said. "Come with me."

There was a dumpling restaurant right next to the apartment building. She could see people were sitting one table apart, but she still felt uneasy sitting inside. She sat outside with Michael.

"Was Rosie here earlier?"

He shook his head. "The café down the road," he said. He looked disturbed.

"She was wearing pajamas."

"Have you been following her?"

"I wanted to speak to her."

"So you have been following her."

When the server arrived, Michael burst into tears. Nicola couldn't believe she had just made two people cry in one night. "I'll come back," the server said in a tiny voice and fled.

"I wanted to," Michael began. "I just wanted to talk to her."

"What can you possibly say to her now?" Nicola didn't think she would be angry, but here it was, anger bubbling up so quick she started shaking. "Are you going to apologize for making her boyfriend play basketball drunk?" She got the basic outline of the story at the hospital: Michael and Simon were drinking after

work before the lockdown came into effect, they played at a half court at Sydney Olympic Park, Michael fell hard and hurt his knee, Simon had a small cut on his arm. The next day, Simon had a fever but tested negative for the virus, so he was sent home with paracetamol because the hospital was already operating at capacity. But the fever didn't go away. Simon had gone into septic shock.

"I wanted to kill you, you know," Nicola said. She still did.

"It was just a small cut. I didn't even know what sepsis was." Michael's tears kept rolling down his face. "I wish I could go back in time."

Nicola went back to the apartment, but she didn't bother with the intercom this time. She was surprised she could just enter without being buzzed in, but didn't question her luck.

Rosie wasn't in the lounge, but Simon was there pushing the farmhouse table into place. "Oh, good!" he said. "I could use some help." Nicola helped him unfurl a cream table runner, arrange pink flowers in a glass case.

"I got this free off Gumtree, can you believe it?" Simon said.

"Free? Did someone die on this table?" Nicola felt weird saying that. It was a phrase they used in the hospital. Died on the table.

"No! This guy had to suddenly move back to France and he was just giving his stuff away." Simon smoothed out the wrinkles from the table runner. "I wanted to surprise Rosie with it."

"That's nice." Her brother seemed happy. Maybe this wasn't the soundest decision, moving into such an expensive apartment, but he worked hard, he could make it work. He deserved nice things in his life. "Sorry I was such a bitch when I helped you guys move."

Simon laughed. "You were such a bitch!" When he scratched his cheek, Nicola noticed the adhesive bandage on his arm.

"Maybe we should clean that cut," she said, feeling a deep sorrow at the unfairness of it all.

Simon scoffed. "This?" he said. "Come on."

Nicola turned her head and found herself sitting at the dumpling restaurant again. "Are you okay?" Michael said. His eyes were still wet. "I think you nodded off."

She couldn't say anything for a long while. They sat in silence until Michael gestured to the menu. "I'm thinking—"

Nicola snapped to attention. "What?" she said sharply.

Michael looked defeated for a moment, but pushed on. "I'm thinking we can order some food for Rosie?"

Nicola looked inside the restaurant. The server who had attempted to take their order earlier was clearing one of the tables.

"My brother was showing me a table," she said, almost with wonder.

"What?" Michael said.

"Nothing," she said. "We can go see Rosie together."

"Really?"

"Just say yes before I change my mind."

"Sure." Michael wiped his eyes with the back of his arm. "Yes."

"Good." Nicola helped him stand up, and took a deep breath of the crisp, night air before putting her mask back on. "Let's go get some dumplings."