

Who I Am

Nicole Kelly

I am awake now. I blink my eyes, let them grow accustomed to the light, attempt to remember where I am. My eyes flick around the room, only seeing shadows of movement. I breathe slowly, trying not to let panic overwhelm me. I am sitting up in a chair; I can feel it against my back and arms. My legs are held with straps. I can't lean forward to see them, but I can feel them against my skin. They're tight and uncomfortable.

The sensation of the straps shoots fear through me—I'm trapped. I can't get out of this chair. I can't get out of this body. I can't escape this cave I'm confined to. I've tried to before. I've fought against these walls surrounding me, but they are immovable. Here in this place I am my voice is gone. My strength is gone. Everything but the very essence of who I am has been stolen from me.

My hands lash out, an attempt to move myself from where I sit, uncomfortable, as if I've been in this position too long, but my movements are jerky. How long have I been sleeping here? I scrunch my eyes, closing them against the blinding brightness of the sun streaming through the window. It's hot. I can feel it burning on my skin, magnified from the glass pane, but I can't move away from its scorching intensity. I turn my focus from my arm, dragging my mind back. Forcing myself to try and remember. Where am I? What do I know?

I am Elise. Yes, I know that. I know my mother would rock me and call me her 'little Leesy'. Where is my mother now? I can't hear her. I can't see her. I can't see anyone clearly, only vague outlines moving around me. They're too far away. There are noises in the room around me though. I hear other voices and sharp banging on the table. The noises are as painful to my ears as the burning sun on my arm.

How long have I been trapped in this traitorous body of mine? Maybe a day or two? No, it feels longer than that. Maybe a life time? But it can't be a lifetime—has it always been like this? It all swims in my consciousness, confusion greying any definite memories.

Do they know I'm here? Why won't they see me? Where are the people I know? My mother? Other faces swim in my mind, but I can't put a name to them. A warm face above me, smiling and reaching for my face tenderly. Her touch is light but full of meaning. I know her thoughts without needing even a word from her. Where is she now? When did I see her last? Being trapped in here makes me so confused. I cannot remember. Have those people left me? Forgotten me? I open my mouth to scream as the panic breaks through. I need to tell them I'm here.

'Help. Help me!' The noise I hear isn't the words in my mind. 'Can you hear me? I'm in here.' Only a strangled cry escapes me. A soft thudding approaches me: footsteps. I cry out once more and again hear my own strangled groan escaping my lips.

Then a face appears, but there are no smiles on this one. Her voice is hard on my ears. Her hands that yank at me are rough. She moves the chair out of the sun and the relief is instant. Her face is close to mine again, and she looks angry. I know it can't be at me. I've done nothing, but the face stays the same. This is not the voice I have longed to hear. Where are the smiles and the warm words? I am locked in this cave but this face is not the rescue I have yearned for.

The groan is unintelligible from the young woman in the chair. Marg is rough as she moves the chair away from the window. Thinking about her upcoming lunch break.

'Give us a hand will you, Claire. I need to change her for her hydro session and she stinks to high heaven.'

Marg's voice cuts above the noise of the other students in the room, all of them keeping busy in some way or another. Anyone standing outside the classroom could have heard her cruel words and harsh tone.

Claire moves away from the young man, putting puzzle pieces next to each other. Some right. Some wrong. She follows the older woman out from the classroom, to the bathroom. Standing beside the young woman in the chair, she watches her eyes following each of them. An arm reaches out towards them; the

fingers curled in on themselves, unable to grasp anything. It lifts and then drops. Lifts and then drops.

The young carer is new here: unhardened. Her heart is filled with optimism and humanity. She takes joy in the young people she works with, and wonders at what the older woman has endured to make her words and actions so callous.

Bending down to eye level with Elise, she watches those green eyes following her. The wheelchair is positioned next to the change bed, and she readies the lift to move her onto it. Claire grabs the hand that reached out and gives it a rub of greeting.

'Hi, Elise. It's Claire. We're going to move you out of your chair, okay? Get you all cleaned up ready to head down to the hydro room. You'll like that.'

There is no response from the girl in the chair, but the senior woman grunts at her.

'Don't know why you bother talking to her like she's listening.'

Grim-faced, she moves through the motions to hoist Elise from the chair to be dressed.

Claire knows little about Elise. She knows there was an accident and there is a name for her condition. When she started as an education assistant, she was told Elise had no speech and ate through a tube. She was told she didn't understand anything. But the green eyes that follow her tell her different.

They each put a hand beneath the back of the partially-paralysed woman rolling her from one side to the next. Changing her and putting on bathers; covered in bright patterns that suited her sixteen-year-old frame. Manoeuvring the chair back beside the change table, they hoist Elise down into it, shifting her erratic limbs and pulling the straps around her legs once more.

'Can't we leave those off? We're only heading to the hydro room.' Claire questions, but is ignored. Marg bends and tightens them.

'No. That's the rules. If you hit her legs on something there'll be hell to pay.'

Claire bends again, unable to argue any further.

‘Okay, Elise. All done, let’s head to the pool.’ She stands and turns to the older woman, ‘She’s watching us. She sees what’s happening.’

The older woman shoots her a hard look and rolls her eyes, but Claire ignores it.

‘I’ll take her down to the hydro room.’

The other one grunts.

‘Hurry up, then. It’s almost my lunch break and we’ve got to get others changed before then.’

Claire’s voice is kind and she doesn’t rush. Instead, she wheels Elise slowly, careful not to hit elbows on door frames. Speaking to her about the day, the sunshine and the students they pass in the wide hallways. They move through to a large outdoor courtyard and stop together to listen to the magpies which sing from the trees. She looks down at Elise in the wheelchair and reaches out a hand, brushing the hair from her face.

‘What a day, Elise! Blue skies and bright sunshine.’

Claire moves through the yard and pushes the door of the hydrotherapy room open. The smell of chlorine from the pool fills her nostrils. She locks the wheels of the chair near the entry and bends down in front of the girl.

‘There you go, Elise. You enjoy your swim today. I’ll be back to pick you up after your therapy.’

She grabs her hand again and holds it, just for a moment, her eyes making contact with Elise’s. There are no words between them, but she feels the connection anyway.

I like the warmth in this room. It calms me. My breathing slows and the tightness in my chest loosens. There is another face. Another voice. This one is soft and soothing. I had felt the sun and the breeze on me. Her touch was kind and I liked it.

I get moved again, more people, different faces. I can hear different noises in here—I think it is water splashing. I’m lifted into the air and the chair is gone from

beneath me. My muscles relax as I am lowered into the water. These hands are gentle as I go in: feet first, calves, knees, thighs and then around my belly. The water is like hands gently caressing my body. I smile.

She moves me around in the water, her face close to mind, her voice a constant hum against the splashing. I've had this feeling before; the weightlessness of being in the water. I think I remember a time in the water on my own. My legs were strong and I'd kick myself through the warm water. Or maybe that was a dream? I feel light in my body and my heart swells. I feel pleasure. The warmth, the smell and the freedom is enthralling. I move my hand towards the face. I want to tell her how wonderful this feels.

A laugh erupts from my mouth. I hear it, and it sounds like my own voice. I sound happy. The darkness of the cave is at bay. My arm reaches out towards this face, which is familiar, but I don't know her name.

I know who I am. I am Elise.

Nicole Kelly is a teacher and writer based in rural Victoria. In 2020 she won the Stringybark Twisted Tales short story competition with her story, Just Alice. Nicole has been published in The Victorian Writer, Outback Magazine and a number of anthologies. She writes regularly for The Footy Almanac. Her debut novel, Lament, published with Hawkeye Publishing was released in October 2020. Follow her on Twitter @ruralvicwriter