

**Yasmine B. Rana**

**Pannonica in Damascus**

CALIFORNIA. THE SANTA MONICA PIER.

LATE SUMMER. DUSK.

**ANTHONY, AN AMERICAN JAZZ MUSICIAN IN HIS EARLY 40s** AWAITS **NICA, SYRIAN, 19**. THE PIER IS LIVELY WITH THE SOUNDS OF VISITORS ENJOYING THE FERRIS WHEEL AND AMUSEMENTS ON A WARM AUGUST EVENING. ANTHONY HOLDS TWO MELTING ICE-CREAM CONES AND WEARS A TRUMPET CASE STRAPPED TO HIS BACK. NICA, WEARING A BACKPACK AND CARRYING A FLUTE CASE, APPROACHES ANTHONY WHO CONTINUES TO SEARCH FOR SOMEONE UNTIL NICA APPROACHES.

NICA: Are you, you?

ANTHONY (JARRED): I'm me. Anthony.

NICA: I know your face from photos and online but wasn't sure. I was early. I've been watching you from over there, pacing, looking for me. Then I knew it was you.

(ANTHONY STRUGGLES TO RESPOND.)

NICA (Cont'd): I'm Nica. Is that ice-cream for me?

ANTHONY (AWED): What's left of it. (HANDS NICA THE MELTING ICE-CREAM CONE)

ANTHONY (Cont'd): I'm sorry.

NICA: For what?

ANTHONY: Melted ice-cream.

NICA: That's it? I'm just kidding. It's all good. Meaning, the ice-cream.

ANTHONY: Can I hold your flute for you?

NICA (PROTECTIVE OF FLUTE): No. Sorry, but here, in the U.S., I'm afraid once I lay it down, I'll never see it again which is so weird, that I'm afraid of having my flute stolen, after coming from where I come from. But I am afraid, which is odd to be afraid of something so minor in the greater scheme of things, but you hear things. There are so many people on the beach today. Not that anyone would want a second-hand flute.

ANTHONY: Anyone would want anything. Second hand?

NICA: Or third.

ANTHONY: Are you a woodwind major?

NICA: Flute, which is stronger than my piano, which both cancel out my voice. I can't sing. I wouldn't want to even if I could.

ANTHONY: It's so crowded. We could go somewhere else, someone quieter. I don't know why I picked this place, except I thought it would be (SEARCHING) fun.

NICA: Fun?

ANTHONY: I don't know what I'm saying. I'm nervous.

NICA: Why?

ANTHONY: Why? Because this is the first time I'm meeting you, in person, and I know what you're going to say, "Who's fault is that?" And I would respond, "Mine."

NICA: I honestly wasn't thinking that. I haven't been thinking of any of this today because I just needed to get through with what I needed to get through. Moving in. Starting classes. Meeting people which I guess includes you. I'm not thinking of all that other stuff. Not right now.

ANTHONY: Today is all I've been thinking about for a long time.

NICA: Don't be offended, but I think if I were a little kid, it would matter more, it would be different. Not that you don't matter, but now that I'm older, there are other things to think about.

ANTHONY: I am older.

NICA: But we're from different places. You're an American. You have a lot of time on your hands.

ANTHONY: I do?

NICA: Yeah, I've noticed the same with the other students, worried about stupid, meaningless stuff.

ANTHONY: Stupid and meaningless?

NICA: Did I mention narcissistic as well? No, I'm sorry. This isn't stupid and meaningless.

ANTHONY: You don't have to edit yourself.

NICA: I feel like I do.

ANTHONY: Well don't.

NICA: You're not all narcissistic. Maybe just, overly sensitive.

ANTHONY: Uninformed.

NICA: That's it.

ANTHONY: Your English is perfect.

NICA: Didn't you know, Anthony? It's a globalized world. You can't escape it.

ANTHONY: Did you learn at school?

NICA: Yes, but mainly from my mother. We spoke in both Arabic and English. Mostly Arabic, but I think she wanted me to be perfect for this moment. Coming to America to study.

ANTHONY: She was a good teacher.

NICA: It's a funny meeting spot. Did you think we'd ride the Ferris wheel?

ANTHONY: Do you want to?

NICA: No. There are a lot of kids waiting.

ANTHONY: A lot of families. I'm sorry. Is this uncomfortable for you?

NICA: Being among families? No. What's over there?

ANTHONY: We could walk and see. (ANTHONY AND NICA BEGIN TO WALK ALONG THE PIER.) You're a flute major at ...?

NICA: Jazz flute.

ANTHONY: Of course.

NICA: Why “of course”? Because of you?

ANTHONY: Because of her. Right?

NICA: Right, because of her. Cal State.

ANTHONY: That’s a good program. You moved into the dorm? Is it okay?  
Safe?

NICA: Safe? Yeah, another weird comparison, but super safe from my experience. It’s fine. I haven’t spent too much time there. It’s only been a week, but it’s okay.

ANTHONY: Do you have a roommate?

NICA: Another girl from Syria who’s been here longer, a bio major. We should be speaking English with each other to practice, but we never do.

ANTHONY: You don’t need the practice.

NICA: Music has its own language which I know very well, so I think I’ll be fine. Do you have a gig tonight? Or is your trumpet an appendage to your body?

ANTHONY: Both.

NICA: What’s the gig? A club? A festival?

ANTHONY: A friend’s restaurant. He’s the manager. Work is work, right?

NICA: All for art.

ANTHONY: Things dry up. There’s always someone younger and newer and hotter, and that’s just the way it is. Maybe you’ll be the next name in this business.

NICA: I doubt it. I’m an outsider.

ANTHONY: Not for long.

NICA: Didn’t you teach at Cal State? I read that in your bio.

ANTHONY: Among others. Schools. Residencies. Conservatories. Workshops. You name it.

NICA: Aren’t the jobs permanent?

ANTHONY: Very few are tenured. I’m not a scholar. Just a musician.

NICA: I’d like to be a music scholar. I don’t think I’m a performer. I’m taking education courses as well. Just to be safe, not safe, just, wise.

ANTHONY: Yeah, that’s wise, but how do you know you’re not a performer?

NICA: Because I can’t fake joy.

ANTHONY: It’s not always joy up on that stage.

NICA: Look at these street performers, giving their art and soul for some coins. They look happy as if they like what they’re doing, riding a unicycle, walking on their hands, tossing balls in the air ...

ANTHONY: But we don’t know that. You don’t like playing out?

NICA: Not all the time.

ANTHONY: Neither do I.

NICA: So why do we keep doing it?

ANTHONY: Because we have to. It isn’t joy, it’s the air we breathe.

NICA: For my mother it was pure joy. Playing music was her oxygen and her joy, more than anything or anyone could offer. Does that hurt?

ANTHONY: Was it meant to hurt?

NICA: Not really. I have no reason to hurt you. You're just a bystander.

ANTHONY: Now that hurts. But you're right, about your mother's joy and playing. I recognize her flute.

NICA: I should get a new one.

ANTHONY: Why?

NICA: It's what my teachers have said.

ANTHONY: To deflect from their poor instruction. But if you want a new flute, just to have in reserve, I could ...

NICA: Please don't. Melted ice-cream is fine.

ANTHONY: It's not enough.

NICA: Nothing will ever be enough. Unless you could transport her here, walking with us along the sand, along the Pacific Ocean, at this time, in the summer, in the evening, right now.

ANTHONY: I wish I could.

NICA: Even now?

ANTHONY: Especially now.

NICA: But you're old, older. Isn't it better to love when you're younger and you don't know any better?

ANTHONY: I'm older and I don't know any better because I only knew Maryam when she was young. I only knew your mother at one point in life, not as a child or as a teen or as an adult, and I mean, my age now. But I knew your mother at that magical time, you know, or you will know, when you're not a child, but you're still child-like, nostalgic, wistful, wishful, without edits or repetition.

NICA: Not without scars.

ANTHONY: There are scars here too.

NICA: On the Santa Monica Pier under a Ferris wheel?

ANTHONY: Bandages to cover the scars. None of this is real.

NICA: It looks real to me.

(ANTHONY AND NICA CONTINUE THEIR WALK ALONG THE PIER, ENCOUNTERING FAMILIES. A SOCCER BALL FALLS IN FRONT OF NICA WHO KICKS IT BACK.)

NICA: Sorry!

ANTHONY: That was a strong kick.

NICA: Hope he's ok.

ANTHONY: I'm sure he's fine.

NICA: But it's America. I have to be careful.

ANTHONY: Of what?

NICA: Of doing the wrong thing. Of saying something I shouldn't. Of thinking something that will lead me to saying something I shouldn't say. I don't know. I always thought war was more complicated, but it isn't. This is hard. Being here is hard. Back home. War? Conflict? Borders? Identity? Death? They're all very clear. But this. Just walking along this beach and

walking next to you and not knowing what to say or what to do or what to feel, is hard.

ANTHONY: I wish . . . .

NICA: Me too.

(ANTHONY AND NICA APPROACH A BENCH.)

NICA: I'm trying to think if I'm the same age my mother was when you first met. What were you, her teacher?

ANTHONY (QUICK TO CORRECT): Mentor! Student mentor. And she was a little older than you.

NICA: Doesn't your wife mind?

ANTHONY: Who?

NICA: Her. She. Meeting me. Planning our meeting. Emailing and texting about our meeting. Where to meet. What day, what time. Anticipation. Plan B for weather conflicts. Plan C for flight delays. Plan D for visa delays. Plan E for a bomb delay. Me, from my mother, Maryam, your past, your former, friend, lover, girlfriend.

ANTHONY: Soul.

NICA: Soul? Then she must be angry.

ANTHONY: There is no "she."

NICA: Or he?

ANTHONY: There isn't anyone. What makes you think there was?

NICA: You're a musician.

ANTHONY: A jazz musician.

NICA: A jazz musician, which is worse, on the road, playing gigs, getting old.

ANTHONY: Older than I was when I knew Maryam.

NICA: Lucky you. Coming from a place where so many people have died, it's almost blasphemous to curse getting older.

ANTHONY: I don't curse getting older, but I curse getting older without your mother.

NICA: No kids?

ANTHONY: No one besides you.

NICA: That you're aware of.

ANTHONY: I'm confident.

NICA: So you've halted your life for someone who's been away from it for almost 20 years.

ANTHONY: I haven't taken a vow of chastity.

NICA: And music can't be our replacement.

ANTHONY: There were others. Some would have been absolutely fine. But like you, maybe I also can't fake the joy. I think I had always hoped that Maryam and I would find each other again.

NICA: How?

ANTHONY: Fate? God?

NICA: I don't believe in either.

ANTHONY: At just that moment, you looked exactly how your mother looked at me, when we spoke about serious things.

NICA: “Serious”? Like what? Like Syria? Like war? Like music? Like Thelonious?

ANTHONY: Always Thelonious Monk.

NICA: There were lapses, very few, but lapses, of not exactly peace, but not exactly absolute horror, and during those lapses, when there was some battery left on her phone, she’d play Thelonious for me. All of it, all that she had in reserve, almost like oxygen.

ANTHONY: Which piece was your favorite?

NICA: You know.

ANTHONY: “Pannonica.”

NICA: Did the name give it away?

ANTHONY: We played it together.

NICA: “Pannonica” does what you and I can never do, find joy in melancholy. (NICA REMOVES HER SHOES AND SITS ON THE SAND) Your sand is different.

ANTHONY: California sand.

NICA: Your home.

ANTHONY: Now yours.

NICA: For now.

ANTHONY: Where else would you go?

NICA: Anywhere. I could go to Copenhagen like Monk or Montreux or Vevey or Lucerne, Montreal. London, Berlin.

ANTHONY: I’ve played them all.

NICA: Always the performer.

ANTHONY: Who doesn’t fake it. I wish you could have gone anywhere before, like here. You could have been here.

NICA: While you toured? Without my mother, knowing she was back there? No way.

ANTHONY: I tried.

NICA: With ice-cream cones and shiny flutes; it’s just never enough. Did you meet my grandparents?

ANTHONY: Once. When the secret was out. They hated me.

NICA: For being an American? A musician? A jazz musician?

ANTHONY: For all of it.

NICA: But they supported her music, even in Damascus.

ANTHONY: Because they hoped she would be a classical musician, not jazz.

NICA: Was that your influence?

ANTHONY: No one could influence Maryam.

NICA: Not even you, when you tried to marry her so she could stay.

ANTHONY: Not even I. And that angered me.

NICA: She couldn’t leave her parents or her brother, and they couldn’t stay, after overstaying. There was nowhere to go except back.

ANTHONY: And if she had married me . . . .

NICA: You would have saved everybody?

ANTHONY: She had a student visa.

NICA: Which had an expiration date.

ANTHONY: I wanted to marry her.

NICA: As a favor?

ANTHONY: Because I loved her. Maryam was a part of me.

NICA: Like your trumpet? An appendage?

ANTHONY: Completely. She shouldn't have gone back with them.

NICA: Them? You don't get it do you? You just see yourself. It's not about one person, it's a unit. It was our family. They were her appendages and she couldn't abandon them. You have no right to judge the dead!

ANTHONY: No, I don't, but I have every right to be mad for losing my daughter's first nineteen years of her life and almost losing her in a war zone, thanks to Maryam's choices, without even giving me the dignity to have any say.

NICA: Dignity? What dignity? There's no dignity in war. You have no right to use that word. Not now. Not about that time. You have no say.

ANTHONY: She should have told me before she left.

NICA: She didn't know.

ANTHONY: That's what she told you?

NICA: Yeah, that's what she told me.

ANTHONY: She kept me from you for nineteen years. And only after she died, you contacted me.

NICA: Died? She didn't die. "Die." She more than "died." She was killed.

ANTHONY: I can't say it out loud.

NICA: You have to. My mother didn't "die." She was killed in a bomb in our home that killed her, her parents, my grandparents, her brother, my uncle, but luckily, not me! I should have been killed. I'm smaller. I was younger. Children are easy to kill in war. But luckily, my saviors pulled me from the rubble. At first I was grateful, but when I realized I was the only one in the home who had survived, who was left, I wasn't grateful. I even wished they hadn't found me and saved me.

ANTHONY: And now?

NICA: Guilty, but grateful.

ANTHONY: I'm glad, for the grateful part.

NICA: I don't know what this is, what you want it to be.

ANTHONY: Whatever you want it to be.

NICA: I should be more curious, ask you more questions.

ANTHONY: We have time.

NICA: But I'm not.

NICA (Cont'd): I'm not curious. I should be, but I don't know why I'm not.

ANTHONY (DISAPPOINTED): It's early. You've just arrived. We've just met. It may be too much today.

NICA: You don't get it. "This" isn't too much. Losing everyone, including my best friend back home, that was too much.

ANTHONY: I'm not comparing.

NICA (REALIZATION): But I don't think you can help it. I don't think you understand, or could ever understand. I don't mean to hurt you, but like I said, you're just a bystander.

ANTHONY: I knew your mother. We were together . . . .

NICA: For how long? One year? Two years? No more than three?

ANTHONY (HURT): Something like that. We were a couple . . . .

NICA: In a strange place for her, far from home. Being here was an appendage to her life, but it wasn't her whole existence. Please don't be hurt. That's not my intention today.

ANTHONY: Then what is? I want you in my life. I want to get to know you. I want to take care of you. To . . . .

NICA: Buy me a shiny new flute?

ANTHONY: If that's what it takes. You're going to need help. You don't know anyone here. You're going to need money, support.

NICA: And you really have that?

(PAUSE)

ANTHONY: Enough for you, yeah.

NICA: I didn't come today for your money.

ANTHONY: Is there any chance I could be someone to you?

NICA: Yes, but I don't know when or how or who.

ANTHONY: Do you want me to be in your life?

NICA: I should say yes, but I don't know.

ANTHONY: What did Maryam say about me? Did she say anything?

NICA: That you were her American boyfriend, a jazz musician, who played music with her, and was kind and smart, and talented, and the first real American friend she met.

ANTHONY: Her "first real American friend."

NICA: Which obviously turned into love.

ANTHONY: Obviously.

(PAUSE)

NICA: She didn't have anyone else in her life, just me and our family. In war, there was no room for anyone else. Besides, so many people were gone. Gone? (LAUGHS) Now I'm dancing around death, softening it, keeping it away from me. I've just arrived and I've already learned the dance.

ANTHONY: Hopefully you won't, so you could stay as is.

NICA: I'll try.

ANTHONY: Fossilized memories. Still. Dormant. My memories of your mother and me with her are just the same, without time or growth or change. That's the mistake they carry. That's my mistake in thinking, hoping, imagining, what this could be.

NICA: Maybe it could be.



ANTHONY: And maybe not. Maybe we'll just leave today as is.

NICA: For now.

ANTHONY: And if you ever need anything like shiny new flutes or an ice-cream cone, or a person to jam with.

NICA: Thank you. (CHECKS TIME) I know we thought we'd have dinner, but ...

ANTHONY: You're busy.

NICA: I just found out today that there's this thing, this event at school for freshmen, and I should . . . .

ANTHONY: Go.

NICA: I don't have to, but,

ANTHONY: You should.

(ANTHONY AND NICA PREPARE TO LEAVE.)

NICA (SURVEYING THE BEACH): I know what I said about performing, and I haven't done any since I've arrived, except in practice rooms. What if I tried here? Do you think I could, without a permit or whatever? Just for a minute, just to say I played out on the Santa Monica Pier, on California sand?

ANTHONY: I think that would be fine.

(NICA OPENS HER FLUTE CASE AND ASSEMBLES THE INSTRUMENT.)

ANTHONY: You know, Monk wrote "Pannonica" for his Pannonica. Do you know the story?

NICA (WARMING UP): She was his friend.

ANTHONY (DISAPPOINTED): His friend.

NICA: But more than a lover, like, a soulmate? At least that's what my mother told me. Am I right?

ANTHONY: Yeah, that's right.

NICA: I wouldn't mind if you want to play together, now, if you don't mind.

(NICA CONTINUES TO WARM UP WHILE ANTHONY PREPARES HIS TRUMPET AND JOINS IN.)

ANTHONY: On three.

NICA: One.

ANTHONY: Two.

(ON THE THIRD BEAT, NICA AND ANTHONY PROCEED TO PLAY "PANNONICA.")

**END OF PLAY**

