

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Nancyland

Wendy Rainey · Thursday, August 23rd, 2012

It all seems like a dream since I made my way out of Nancyland. The world is a different place to me now, bigger and bolder. Sometimes I feel as if I have to grab hold of life right here and now while I still can before my flesh and bone become part of the great compost heap we all must return to when our bodies can no longer endure prison or war or even freedom. Sometimes I still have nightmares about Nancy but I don't give them much credence anymore. It's the hum-drum day to day details that trip me up. The slapping of thongs, the smell of strawberry preserves, any Beatles song, even the bastardized elevator version can trigger disturbed and restless musings that are a part of a landscape that I myself have created. At one time, the idea of having God's love and protection was meaningless to me. But now, when I see someone lying in the fetal position on the steps of the library, or dazed and speaking in tongues at the bus stop I think, "there but for the grace of God go I." It is odd the way certain events can happen in one's life that change a person forever. Through the Pasadena smog I saw the beast and was confronted with my own animal nature. It was then that I finally cast off the burden of youth and made my way out of Nancyland. My name is Catherine. This is my story:

It was 1999. I was twenty-seven years old, living in Pasadena, working as a waitress, and renting a room in an old Victorian house. Every night I could smell marijuana wafting up the stairs to my room. And every night down below in the drawing room was Nancy, my landlady and roommate. She smoked for medicinal purposes, she told me. She was fifty-nine. She had AIDS. The day before, after I came home from waiting tables for ten hours, Nancy wanted to have one of her talks with me, a "powwow," as I later called them. No sooner had I walked through the side door, when Nancy appeared in front of me, hands on hips, wanting to know if we could "touch base." Here we go again, I thought, as I dragged my weary body into the kitchen. She motioned for me to take a seat at her breakfast table which I immediately dubbed "Nancyland." Plopping into a chair, I noticed the wooden table in front of me. There were burn marks and dents in it. Knife cuts were slashed across it as if she had been butchering raw meat. At Nancy's place at the table, there were hundreds of coffee mug rings stained into the wood, indicating that she had been sitting in the same spot, at the same table every day over the course of decades. She started talking in a concerned and animated way, though I wasn't listening because my hair, face, and body were drenched in perspiration. I could feel the sweat trickling down my back. Water rolled into my eyes. The flimsy sundress I wore looked like a wet paper towel somebody had thrown on my body. I was worried that my breasts were showing through the wet fabric. After missing the bus, rather than wait thirty five minutes for the next bus, I had decided to walk home from work in the 101 degree Pasadena heat. Can't Nancy see what a mess I am, I thought. I took a bandana from my leather back pack and wiped my face. Then I took a water bottle out of my pack and drank from it. Nancy had already been talking for a few moments when I was finally settled down enough to actually listen

to what she was saying. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.



"Look, I don't know if you were married before or abused or beaten or raped," she said, "or if you belonged to some cult somewhere. For all I know, you may have just gotten out of prison. I mean I don't know what your life situation may have been, but I do know that there is something really wrong with your interpersonal relationships."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, putting my water bottle down on the table. "I've lived here, what, all of ten days? You don't know anything about my "interpersonal relationships." I raised both hands to make rabbit ear quotes with my fingers around the phrase interpersonal relationships. You are not qualified to make any statements about my personal life, Nancy. And as far as my life situation, that is none of your business."

"Oooohhhhhhhhhh, well, Catherine, I've observed you long enough to know that there is something very negative about you." Nancy lifted a mug to her lips: "UNLEASH THE GODDESS WITHIN," it said in large block style letters. "Look, just use the brains God gave you. Most people like a certain amount of chit chat, but you just don't seem to have much in you!" She raised both of her arms and shrugged her shoulders.

"Look, Nancy," I said, sighing and running my fingers through my wet hair, just use the brains God gave you. I'm a waitress. I chit chat all day long. You know that seven hundred dollars I gave you for rent ten days ago? That represents a lot of chit chat. By the time I come home, I'm all chitted and I'm all chatted out. There's no more chit chat for you, Nancy, I'm sorry." I started to rise out of my chair.

"Hold on, there are a few other issues I have to discuss with you. Please remain seated," she said. I sat back down in my chair again. She looked at me, adjusting her bifocals, "Ever since you've been living here my Herpes sores have been flaring up. It must be all that negative energy you're putting out there." Nancy made gestures with her thick fingers as if she were popping little invisible bubbles in the air.

"What?" I said, half laughing, although I was starting to feel sick to my stomach. "You're blaming me for your Herpes sores? You can't be serious. Are you joking?" I looked at her. She was pouring herself another cup of coffee from the automatic coffee machine she kept on her table. She had a little canister of cubed sugar and a little pitcher of cream. I glared at her as she doctored up her new cup of coffee. Ignoring me, Nancy charged forth.

"Also, I'd like to remind you that I DO HAVE AIDS and I need to make sure that I get adequate rest, so I'd appreciate you not using the blender at six o'clock in the morning. What kind of person gets up at that hour and puts the blender on? Just stop and think about it. Would you phone a friend at six in the morning? Of course not! It would be entirely inappropriate. By the same token, you do not put the blender on at six A.M., got it? But mainly I want to emphasize to you that your attitude is really the culprit here. I'd like to see some improvements over the next few weeks. So think about what I've said. I'd like you to act more like a GUEST in my home. And keep in mind that it is a PRIVILEGE for you to live here, a privilege that I can revoke as I see fit." Nancy took her glasses off and put them on the table next to the burn marks and knife slashes. Then she picked up her mug of goddess coffee and took a sip. I stared at her. She's off her rocker, I thought. Maybe the disease she has is making her insane. It's a tough break getting AIDS, and she had cancer too. It's got to be horrible for her. I feel for her in a way, but she's too touched in the head for me to be able to live here for any real length of time. I've got to get away from her, otherwise, she's just going to take her hard luck out on me. "You're free to go now," she said, waving me off. I got up out of my chair. As I walked past her, I was calculating how long it would take to save up enough money to

get the hell out of here. I'm sure I can say goodbye to that five hundred dollar security deposit I gave her. She'll find some excuse to keep it. With my modest salary at the café I can probably count on being here for another three fucking months. I grabbed the bannister and started to climb the stairs to my room. It's strange the way some people seem to change once I get to know them on their own turf. When I called Nancy's phone number from the ad she had placed in the Pasadena Star News, I was relieved by what I thought I heard in her voice; intelligence, competence, and stability. Dizziness overtook me as I entered my room and sat down on the queen-sized bed. It must have been close to a hundred degrees inside my room, even with all the windows open and the ceiling fan on. Falling backwards onto the bed, I started to remember arriving for the initial interview with Nancy and being impressed by her elegant and immaculately kept two-story Victorian home. Nancy invited me outside to look at her vegetable and herb garden. Lemon and orange trees lined the path down to a huge patch of land covered with an abundance of delectables. Twenty foot sunflowers rose amid watermelon, zucchini, tomato, and strawberry plants. Endive, rosemary, tarragon, thyme, mint, parsley, chives, catnip, lavender, sage, basil, marjoram, garlic, and onions were thriving. Three avocado trees stood by an old well encircled by stones and mortar. The rusted pump looked ancient.

"It's beautiful," I said, "I feel like Dorothy landing in Oz. Everything's in Technicolor. You must love it here, Nancy!"

"This house was built in 1874," she said, her long, grey hair blowing in the wind. "The property used to stretch all the way down to the end of the block." Nancy pointed to a line of charming bungalows built in the twenties. "This is where the horseman would have lived." She pointed to a well preserved structure, "It was converted into a toolshed in the thirties. The servant's quarters and stables are long gone, of course. Cows, chickens, and horses were kept somewhere down there." I looked in the direction she was pointing. A kid with a baseball cap turned backwards was balancing a ghetto blaster on his shoulder with one hand, and giving a passing car the finger with the other. She turned around and examined the leaves of a Cecil Bruner. The miniature rose was climbing up a white trellis. "Yes, it was an era when people grew their own food and lived off the land and their wits. She pinched off a brown bud from the rose bush and threw it over her shoulder. I remembered the first time I sat in Nancy's living room. It was filled with heirlooms. The windows were framed with delicate white lace curtains. A large antique vase contained an assortment of flowers and herbs from her garden. From where I sat I could see two Shaker chairs in the sunlight. "Hands to work, heart to God," I said. Nancy looked at me inquisitively. "The Shaker Creed," I said, pointing to the two chairs. "Oh, yes" she said smiling. She was wearing Bermuda shorts and a white t-shirt. I noticed her white gym socks and athletic shoes. Her bifocals hung from a decorative chain around her neck. "It's wonderful the way you've managed to retain the old fashioned charm. It's like being transported back in time," I said.

"Well, I've made certain adjustments here and there, but the integrity of the original structure has never been compromised. The antiques," she motioned with her hand, "are a passion of mine. I pick them up at estate sales all over Pasadena."

"Nancy, I'm very interested in renting from you," I said. "You have a beautiful house and a lovely garden. The rent is affordable for me and it's also close to my workplace." I looked at her, smiling. "Now, I want to be absolutely frank with you, Catherine," Nancy said, "I have AIDS. I also had a bout with cancer two years ago, which I survived and recovered from. I have health issues but I am functional, although I do get tired easily. I'm attending Pasadena City College in the hopes of reentering the workforce in the future. If you would like to take a day to think about what I have said, by all means do. Also, the two rooms you will be renting can get awfully hot as you may have noticed. I don't believe in air-conditioning. I've managed to survive here twenty-five years without it. "Putting my ice water glass back on its coaster, I considered what she said,

"I would like to put down a hundred dollars now as part of my deposit," I said, reaching into my bag for my wallet. "I can come back tomorrow and give you the rest of the deposit. I don't have a problem with you having AIDS. And I'm used to the heat. I lived in the desert for three years and I never had air-conditioning." She smiled and looked at me,

"Well, it's settled then. I hope you'll be happy here. I'll get you a receipt for that deposit. You're still welcome to think it over a day if you like."

"OK, I appreciate that. I suppose you might want some time to check the references I gave you." Nancy came back into the living room and handed me a receipt for the hundred dollars I had given her.

"Our meeting here, today, is reference enough for me. The rooms are yours if you so desire."

"Thank you, Nancy," I got up off the divan, "it was nice meeting you." I reached out, shook her hand, and smiled. "I will see you tomorrow after work at around 5:00."

As I walked down the front steps of the stately old house, I detected the intermingling of jasmine and magnolia. Rose bushes lined the long pathway that led out onto the sidewalk. Two squirrels were chasing each other in the grass. I turned around and looked at the sprawling house. An oasis from the madness of life, I thought. Off to the side something glimmering caught my eye, a fountain with a statue in the middle: a cherub spewing water from his little rose bud mouth. He looked as if he was ready to ascend to the heavens.

What a welcome change, I had thought, from the dark, decrepit, vermin infested hovel I had lived in at that time. Mr. Ruiz, the manager, never fixed the dripping kitchen faucet. He never replaced the cracked bathroom window, nor did he get rid of the cockroaches that crawled all over the walls of my apartment. One roach was so big, I could always identify her. She stood out from the crowd, a cut above. I named her Coco-Lisa. I tried so many times to kill her, but like so many of her kind, she would not be defeated. The population grew. I set off Raid Bombs, I sprinkled boric acid in the corners of the cupboards, I set up Roach Motels. Nothing worked. I could feel some of my little friends crawling on my face at night. I started to wear a ski mask to bed. It covered my entire head and face with openings for the eyes and mouth only. As spring approached it grew too hot to wear the ski mask. I got a long piece of cheese cloth and wrapped my head like a mummy every night. A white sheet enshrouded my body to complete the look. Eventually, I managed to poison myself with all of the chemicals and powders I was using. One evening, I had to be taken to the Emergency Room. Finally, I asked Ruiz if he would consider fumigating the entire building, "That way we can nip this problem in the bud, Mr. Ruiz," I said, "and I can stop poisoning myself." I told him about my trip to the Emergency room. "You got poisoned?" he said, oozing with concern, "Oh, my goodness," he gasped, "That is just horrible! Heavens to Betsy, are you alright now?" He said the whole problem could be traced back to the Aguilera's two bedroom apartment. "Those people are pigs," Ruiz said, "Ever since they moved in I've had nothing but trouble from those slobs." He said he would look into fumigating right away, but of course, he never did. But you can bet your sweet ass he wanted his rent on time. And it had to be in cash, no checks or money orders, shady bastard. Every month I would walk across the courtyard to his apartment and knock on his door. And every month he would greet me at the door with beer breath and a gold tooth, wearing his stained, wife beater undershirt. After he counted the cash he would thank me and hand me a receipt for seven hundred dollars. I knew I was being ripped off, but I couldn't find anything cheaper in Pasadena that would accept a cat without an additional five hundred dollars added onto the security deposit and sometimes an additional two to three hundred dollar bribe on top of that. Actually, I was lucky to get the apartment in the first place. If Carina's mother hadn't died, Carina never would have offered me her place. Carina was my friend from work. Her mother died suddenly and she had to move back into her house in Glendale to take care of her four young siblings. I could tell Ruiz was leery of renting to a Gringa, but he trusted Carina, so he let me have

the apartment. Well, adios Coco-Lisa and company. Adios Señor Ruiz, you lazy little fuckwad.

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