

Nancy in the Land of Smoke & Mirrors

Maxine Mellor

They found the bodies in the wardrobe.

Nancy sat staring while worms ate through the spreadsheet and tunneled endlessly into the black void onscreen.

She thought about their skin, burnt and sticky against bone. His skeleton shielding hers – hers, curling into itself, like some sort of fossilised shellfish amongst the sediment of ashen coats and hangers.

She was like that, Nancy thought: selfish. Even in dying, it now seemed.

He had told Nancy so as they lay together only days earlier on the bed that faced that wardrobe. He had put it more diplomatically, of course. He had said she was too ... And his ellipses infected the air – caution masking frustration.

Nancy connected the dots.

He said he didn't know how to please her anymore. This was perhaps a cue for Nancy to reassure him that he pleased she herself very much.

But instead, naked and propped up by countless decorative pillows now squished into ugly shapes, she lit a cigarette.

Nancy instinctively inhaled the smoke deeper when she saw the asthma puffer on the bedside table. And the hay-fever night capsules. And the exhaustive categorising of the relative pharmacy that became apparent there beside her. Canisters weaving around the silvery photo frame housing him and her and dog. Their faces slipping to sepia.

She thought of it now, all cindered. The ointments and balms bubbling, the pills popping, the photo shriveling to gelatin. She thought of the bed with the noisy feather duvet, the carpet that swallowed feet, the inconvenient lamp that could only be switched on or off at the power socket.

The dog.

Oh how it would have yapped. Frantic feet scratching at the laundry door, eyes even larger with terror. How it would have wished it never did early morning shits in the front hall, was never punished with a locked laundry, was never given such a small and ineffective voice-box. Fortunately for the dog, its little lungs would have succumbed to smoke long before its fur fire-crackered.

Nancy's eyes and ears unfocussed. He was speaking in clichés again. He and his wife weren't sparking. Essentially.

It wasn't until he asked Nancy if she really had to smoke and if so could she go outside because the bedcovers trap the smell and she'll tell that she actually looked at her backward self and the growing ash in the wardrobe mirror. She doubted the sensitivity of a hay-fever nose, but sighed and leant over to the bedside table where there would be – if she were home – an ashtray.

If she were home – and he dared to drive the station wagon where and when he pleased – there would be an ashtray. And her books, dog-eared and waiting. And her other things. Her things.

She collapsed the photo frame and beheaded the cigarette onto the glass above their smiling faces.

This was supposed to be a flippant action – perhaps a silent protest – if it weren't for the fleeting sensation that these ashen faces may be an omen for something, though, at the time, Nancy wasn't sure what.

She knew he cringed. It was things like this that probably prevented him from just driving the damn station wagon where and when he pleased – such as to Nancy's – to hell with it!

It would mean no turning back. It would be reckless. And he wasn't sure who or what was worth such abandon. Yet.

To think she'd smoke around a quitter! Especially when they've quit so bad they've gotten rid of the emergency drags at the bottom of the potpourri in the bathroom, gotten rid of anything used as an ashtray ever, had the house steam-cleaned and deodorised, and promised his wife he would not end up like his father-in-law, dying an untimely death from addiction to what she forever after called cancer sticks of doom.

Perhaps if they were at Nancy's – with ashtrays – it wouldn't be an issue. It actually didn't smell that bad. It smelt ...

Nostalgic ...

Really, why wouldn't he go?

Probably, she thought he thought, if he was going to tiptoe, it was better to do it through familiar spaces. Where he lived. Though there was little evidence of it once his wife redecorated.

Nancy rolled over to wink at him, suggesting the cigarette break was just that; a chance for him to get his breath back. He smiled as a wince, sensing this had something to do with his shortcomings and that now was his chance for concession.

He slid his legs out of the bed, feeling with his feet for his underwear, and pulling them on awkwardly before standing – he didn't want Nancy to see him white and hairy in the unforgiving light from the lamp she still had on.

Nancy knew what would happen next.

In the echoic ensuite he would pee in Morse, rasping his belly with his other hand, gargle, slap on sorbolene and examine his ageing face in the mirror, stippled white from ruthless tooth brushing. He would be flustered and pink from exertion, and he would question and immediately forget what he is doing.

These motions would take what seemed like an hour, by which time the night had exhausted him and he'd have only enough oomph to haul through the sluggish carpet and thump into bed, diagonally. With a hot, heavy arm thrown over her, disrupting the comfort she has mustered in an unfamiliar bed, and trapping her into his uncompromising form.

There would only ever be a few hours of light reverie – not sleep – before being startled by the obnoxious, blocky alarm of his phone and him hissing harshly, whispering, unusually animated, that she has to leave – now – in case she's back early – go, go, I'll see you tomorrow – already emptying the ash from the photo frame into his hand.

And Nancy would end up on the street downstairs, trying to get a cold car to start, while he sunk into another few hours of sleep in twisted, hurriedly-negotiated clothing.

Instead, Nancy thought, as the ensuite light extinguished behind the closing door that night, she would do something she should have done long before.

She would ask him.

But not while he was peeing.

A sliver of sleeve was caught in the wardrobe door. What colour was that? A nothing colour. Watered down. Homeopathic. Nancy would never wear it.

She thought about the wife at work. Fatigued and fatalistic. Puffy eyes and ankles. Tending to moans and midnight walkers down fluorescent corridors with clipboard. Pulling up in the dark drive of a mortgage and marriage. Slipping out of her shoes soundlessly, unclipping her bra, looking upon the lump in bed. Has he eaten anything?

Oh what would she do if she knew?

Will he wake this time and flatten her under him to work on a baby? That was always the plan. It was always her plan, anyway.

He probably pretended to sleep, Nancy thought. It was easier than not being in the mood.

So the wife slides in. A cold metal spoon.

Nancy thought the wife had looked the infertile sort at the staff Christmas party. Antibiotic. Giving a tight-lipped kiss to her husband when a cheery colleague waved the plastic mistletoe above their heads.

Nancy had noticed when the wife's eyes had landed on her bust: heavy, like full moons bursting at the buttons on her blouse.

“Careful, you’ll take an eye out!” he said when he leant in to kiss Nancy’s cheek, tilting his head to avoid the red tinsel antlers. “Thanks for all your work this year”.

And she looked valiantly into the wife’s eyes, trying quite deliberately to cause suspicion. Even though, back then, there was nothing to suspect except Nancy’s decision just then that he would become her project. She would liberate him.

She hoped later that night, when he went home to wherever home was, he would feel the burn mark her hand left on his shoulder, and remember her albeit smudged red lips mouthing: my pleasure.

She had built a picture of him: a husband forged by a wife. Handsome in a piteous sort of way. If you retraced his chin. If you sucked in his stomach. If you gave him six months alone in the wilderness with only a stone flint and a Swiss army knife.

Waking to a wife slack-jawed and sideways as he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his socks must be disappointing. He covered it well.

She watched his pattern. She watched as he entered the empty toilets each afternoon, exiting several minutes later with ruddy cheeks and rolled-up sleeves. At ease. She could imagine him: jerky panic eyes, ears on end for the squeal of a hinge, the desperate containment of surging relief and shame.

And once she had found this chink, the rest was easy.

“Would you like a hand?” she said to him as he passed her desk on his way there after lunch. And he looked at her strangely.

“What?” Surely she didn’t mean it that way? But his cheeks were already prickling with a hot flush.

Nancy smiled, especially when he reemerged from the bathroom consciously faster as if to prove that she was wrong. She knew she had him.

Soon it was longer-than-usual glances, not-so-accidental photocopier encounters, post-it-note confessions, and even a few puffs from the same cigarette one break – something that seemed to expand his chest and warm his face – though he denied it happened ever since.

It had been thrilling. And, yes, perhaps she had been attracted to him – perhaps that was why she set herself this project – really. She saw he could be more than he was. Different from what his wife wanted.

She could hear his toothbrush.

She had heard a lot. Too much. It was all so domestic now. Without the comfort.

Hadn’t she achieved what she had set out to? She had liberated him. In some way, surely. Or, at the least, she had given him a hand. Didn’t she deserve a reward for being so good?

She would ask him.

“Who’ll fill Pam’s position when she’s on Maternity?”

He spat into the sink. “I suppose we’ll advertise it.”

“You won’t look internally?”

“No-one’s got the skills.”

I do. I’ve got the skills, you turd, and you know it, thought Nancy, unable to stop the scowl spreading on her face. She tried to x-ray the flimsy ensuite wall to see his eyes. Panic and shame? Disappointment?

“Why?” he asked after an infected ellipse and with what Nancy detected as forced casualness. How would she respond? To remain intact.

“I was just thinking about babies.” she said, smugly letting her ellipses swell up all pregnant.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, your wife keeps an ovulation chart on her bedside.” And Nancy didn’t need x-ray to see his relief.

“Ugh, I know, that’s one of her *things*. Don’t get me started.”

But he started anyway. As if all his words would dilute those ellipses to nothing.

What was she doing here?

Nancy became aware of solemn shuffling past her desk. An elderly couple were being ushered towards an office by a sympathetic-eyed co-worker carrying an empty cardboard archive box.

“This is him,” whispered the co-worker. “This was his office.” He nervously unlocked the door and opened it slowly; uncovering a tomb, untouched by oxygen. He got

caught between gesturing them in, and passing them the box. This wasn't in the job description!

“Please, here,” and they took the box. “Take your time. I'll – I'll leave you to it. I'm just down the hall.”

And the old people stepped inside with bewildered twig legs.

There was something in her chest. The screensaver worms were eating holes in her heart, devouring the walls, letting the outside in, tunneling further into the void.

These were his parents. In there, in his office, collapsing the photo frames and unhooking the diplomas, placing them carefully into that box to take with them.

He had never mentioned his parents. Had he? Had she ever asked?

Shit.

She swished the mouse to make the worms go away and caught her reflection in the spreadsheet.

“What are you doing?” he asked when he saw her tracing her mouth with a stubby red lipstick in the bedroom mirror, dressed to her shoes.

“I'll have to go soon anyway.”

“Stay.”

Their busy fingers irritated her. Translucent and bloodless like bugs nesting in his things. His things. What were they doing in his drawers? Searching for pieces of him amongst pie charts and annual reports? Seeking something special? Handwritten?

Oh shit, thought Nancy. Shit shit shit.

What had he done with all their notes? Those endearingly pathetic little post-it-notes beaming yellow for importance? What had they written?

They'd figure it out, they'd decipher it, those sleuths – those old cryptologists – shit! She had to stop them.

She was at his office doorway too fast; she didn't know what to do now. The old people were looking at her with polite, sad smiles. The old woman – his mother – interrupted in reading, glasses low on her nose, the paper she's holding trembling unawares.

Ellipses.

Then, finally, Nancy blurts, "Would you like a hand?"

It could have been funny any other time. Good one, Nancy, bravo. The old people look at one another – eyes ringed red but unwet; contained – and say something like thank you, we'll manage, something like that, Nancy was gone.

Good one, Nancy, bravo, she snarled into the mirror of the staff toilets. Her handbag was perched on the sink – she couldn't find her lighter. She couldn't find her lighter and she really needed a cigarette. She looked pale – her buttons were too tight – she couldn't catch her breath. It was hot, wasn't it, all of a sudden? And antiseptic. She was sweating. She splashed her face with water, her makeup ran.

He stood behind her in the mirror.

"You don't deserve this ... You know, if you asked, I'd leave her."

Nancy slammed the door of the cubicle shut, jittery fingers fumbling with the catch.

Engaged!

She bit the cigarette in her teeth, flicked the flint and drew in deeply, slumping onto the turned-down toilet lid. He used to do that.

So that was that then. No more secrets. No more hiding.

She closed her eyes and tried to think of a warm ball of light. Moving from the kitchen to the hall to the lounge to their door. No. From head to toe.

No, damn it!

What had she done?

Suddenly a siren screamed – she cupped her ears – the fucking fire alarm! She climbed the seat, snatching at the smoke but it wouldn't stop! It wouldn't go quiet, it won't!

What had she done that night her car didn't start? Did she watch the wife from the dark outside: emptying cold tea in the sink, rinsing the little spoon, slipping upstairs? How long did she wait with her face in two – the panes of glass, a sliver apart. Enough, just enough, to leave a spark.

What did she do?!

In the office the fire warden called – helmeted and megaphoned – for a calm evacuation downstairs please to the street!

Take nothing with you! Leave everything behind!

Nancy thought of the old people. And their brown archive box ...

And she howled. As loud as the siren – relief and shame uncontained – she bawled.

“Nancy?! Is that you?!” called the warden at her cubicle door.

And Nancy couldn't answer.

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