

The Other Nancy
by Neal McKenna
- Taken from *Evil Little Stories* -

“Jamie?” Nancy Bannert called into the back yard. “Jamie! Time to come in. It’s getting dark!” *Damn*, she swore in her mind, *where in hell is that kid?* “Jamie! Supper’s almost ready. Jamie!”

“I’m right *here*, Mom,” called a small voice from somewhere in the dusky backyard.

Nancy Bannert was both relieved and exasperated at the discovery of her four-year-old. “How many times have I told you about going outside when it’s getting dark?”

“Well, I was just in the yard.” He spoke as if talking to someone not quite blessed of all their faculties. He stepped into the light of the back porch, hands poised on his hips, emphasizing his remark.

Inside, she wanted to laugh but maintained a serious, motherly façade.

“Maybe so, but the rule is that you’re supposed to be inside when it gets dark.”

“Well, it wasn’t dark when I went out. It got dark while I was doin’ it.”

“Doing what?”

“Bein’ out.”

Nancy Bannert again smiled inwardly. He had his father’s forthright chin and serious brown eyes. He had her cheekbones and smile. He was a cute kid and she would have liked him, even if he had belonged to someone else. She was suddenly grateful he was hers and would be forever.

“Well, young man, it’s time to be in. If you hurry, you can have a bath before supper.”

“I don’t like baths.”

“Sure you do,” she hugged him. “But I don’t like a grubby little boy at the dinner table, and you are the grubbiest.” She kissed a grimy cheek. “You really stink!”

“I do not!”

“To your bath, sir.” She patted his bottom. “Let’s go!”

Jamie raced up the stairs. “Can Roscoe take a bath with me?”

“Certainly not.”

“Well, he needs a bath better ‘n me.”

“*More* than you,” she corrected.

“Yeah. Why can’t he?”

“Sheepdogs and little boys do not bathe together.”

“Why not?” he laughed, turning to run down the hall.

“Oh, I’m sure there’s a law against it.”

“Aww, Mom, you *always* say that.”

She half-whispered to herself. “And from the start, you never did buy it, did you?”

In the bathroom, she started the water and tested the temperature.

“Okay, get undressed.”

“Not ‘til you leave the room.”

“What?”

“Well, you’re a girl. I don’t take my clothes off in front of no girls.”

“I see. Exactly when did I become a girl?”

“You always were. I just didn’t know it before.”

“Well, then, how am I supposed to get you clean?”

“Hmmm, let’s see.” He stroked his chin. “I know.” His eyes shone. “We can use some Mr. Sudzee, then you won’t be able to see me.”

“Okay, Mr. Modesty, we have the solution.”

“Where is it?”

“Under the basin.”

Jamie gleefully opened the cabinet and took out the bright pink-and-blue box. He vigorously shook the powder into the tub.

“Hey, hey, take it easy, we want to be friendly to the environment.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tell you later. Okay, Bucko, it’s time to peel!”

“Oh, no. Not with you lookin’.”

“Fine, I’ll turn my back and count to ten. One. Two. Three...”

Jamie giggled, shrugged off his dirty clothes, and scrambled for the tub. His chubby foot slid through a bubbly blob of Mr. Sudzee that splashed onto the tile floor. Nancy saw the movement from the corner of her eye. Her reflexes took over, and she caught him in midair.

“Whoa!” Jamie shouted. She hugged his naked body to her. “Wow! That was a close one. You have to be careful around the tub. The floor can be slippery.”

“Yeah,” he agreed.

She sat him into the warm water. “Now, you be careful, okay?”

“Okay. Can I have my blue boat?”

She got up from the side of the tub, placing the box of Mr. Sudzee on a high shelf. “Sure, where is it?”

“Right there,” he said pointing. “There under the sink.”

* * *

Nancy busied herself setting the dining room table, using the good silver and china. Upstairs, she heard the water running into the bathtub. Dinner smelled good, even if she had prepared it herself. This was anniversary number seven. She wanted to spend it at home, sharing it with both her men. “Oh, Brian, don’t be late tonight,” she said out loud.

Switching on the wall intercom, she asked, “Is everything okay up there?”

The hissing sound of running water poured from the speaker. “Yeah,” Jamie said.

“Why is the water running again?”

“I was gettin’ cold an’ I want more bubbles. Can I have some more Mr. Sudzee?”

“No. I’m coming up in a couple of minutes to get you dried off.”

“Aw, Mom.”

“Five more minutes.”

She checked the meat in the oven for the tenth time. *Well, Brian, she thought to herself, if you don't get home soon, the Veal Prince Orloff is going to be a sacrifice! Why didn't I just make meatloaf?*

The dog was suddenly in the kitchen. He paced and whined, moving between Nancy and the stove.

“Roscoe,” she spoke sharply, “I have no time for this!” In a fluid and efficient move, she slipped her hand beneath the dog's collar and was walking him to the sundeck doors. She sniffed the air and made a face. “God! You *do* stink!” Roscoe trotted out onto the deck. Nancy closed the sliding glass behind him. He pawed at the door for a moment, and then lay down glumly, looking through the glass.

The drive was suddenly alight as the gray Audi came to a stop at the garage door. Nancy watched from the kitchen window as her husband exited the car.

Nancy Bannert looked at the clock. *Almost six*, she thought absently, *dinner can be out of the way by seven-thirty*. She heard something. It did not quite register. It was the sound of something trickling.

She went to the intercom and switched it on. Water continued to run into the tub. “Jamie?” There was no reply. “Jamie?” The trickling sound was now closer.

Not exactly knowing why, she moved to the stairs. Wetness steadily flowed.

“Jamie,” she shouted, bolting up the sodden stairway.

Warm water streamed from the bathroom at the end of the hall. She ran miles before reaching the door. The room was empty. Bubbles billowed in the tub and overflowed onto the floor. The box of Mr. Sudzee floated lazily, moving with the flow of the water.

Not wanting to, she knelt beside the tub. She held her breath, looking at the bubbles. Someone else's hands reached in, parting the white froth. Nancy Bannert screamed, thinking she would go mad.

* * *

She sat bolt upright in the bed and screamed. “Oh, my God. Oh my God! Jamie is dead. Jamie is dead.”

“Nancy, what is it?” A strange voice came from the dark. “What's the matter?”

A bedside lamp was switched on. Nils put his arms around her. “Honey, what is it?”

“Oh God, Nils, Jamie is dead.”

“Jamie? *Who's* Jamie?”

She continued to sob, her body shuddering.

“Nancy, who is Jamie?”

“Jamie is my little boy. He drowned in the bathtub.”

“No, honey, it was a dream. A bad dream.” Nils Jamison comforted his wife.

“We don't have a little boy. We can't ever have a little boy.”

“But he drowned. I saw him. The water was running over the side of the bathtub. The box of Mr. Sudzee was floating and he was under all that water, just staring up at me. Oh, dear God, Nils, he was dead.” She broke into uncontrollable sobs.

“Nancy, listen to me.” Nils Jamison firmly grasped his wife’s shoulders. “There is no Jamie, so he couldn’t have drowned. We don’t have children. We’ll never have children. You know that. Try to go back to sleep. We both have work in the morning.”

Nancy Jamison prepared breakfast. She placed the hashbrowns next to the sausages and scrambled eggs already in the warmer, thinking there was likely too much cholesterol in their diet. This morning, she looked around her house with fresh eyes. She and Nils had shared their high-tech architectural showpiece for nearly seven years. Yet today, the expanses of glass and redwood and chrome felt somehow alien. The mirror-black appliances in the kitchen, the dusty rose and gray colors of the living room, the streamlined furniture, the art-deco paintings, seemed slightly untrue. It was her home, yet it was not. She sipped coffee while sitting at a table with a smoked-glass top.

“Morning, Hon.” Nils Jamison breezed into the breakfast room. “Did you get back to sleep after your bad dream?”

“Bad dream?”

“Yeah. The one about *Jamie* drowning in the bathtub.”

She studied the man before her. He was blond and good-looking, with chiseled Nordic features and tanned skin. For a moment, she wondered who he was.

“You do remember waking up screaming, don’t you?”

“Uh, yeah,” she said hesitantly. “It was so real. So unsettling.” She gulped more coffee and closed her eyes.

“It must have been.” He moved to the warmer and served himself a portion of breakfast. “You want some of this?” He waited for her to answer. “Nancy?”

“What?”

“Breakfast. Are you having any?”

“No.”

Nils Jamison sat next to his wife at the glass-topped table. “Do you have any showings today?” He poured a glass of juice.

“Showings?” She had difficulty concentrating. The dream crowded her mind.

She was caught in a hangover of emotions. Nancy Jamison grieved the death of her dream son. “What showings?”

“House showings. Work. Real Estate?”

“Oh, yeah. Three today. Why?”

“Then, you’ll need the Thunderbird.”

“I guess so.”

“Fine, I’ll take Morris G.”

“Who?”

“Nancy, what the hell is the matter with you this morning?”

“I don’t know. I can’t seem to shake that dream.”

“Just let the feelings go. Remember, it *really* was only a dream. You’ll forget it soon enough.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Sure you will.” He rose from the table, not finishing his breakfast. “I’ve got to run. Shooting begins at nine at the old city wharf. I hate location shoots in the morning.” He kissed the top of her head. “With luck, I’ll be home by seven. Bye.”

“Nils?”

He stopped in mid-stride. “Yeah?”

“Who is Morris G.?”

He looked at her perplexed, then smiled a quizzical smile. “He’s the car. The MG? Remember? *Mr. Morris Garages*? Honey, are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said pulling her housecoat snugly around her. “You better hurry or you’ll be late.”

He looked at his wristwatch. “Yeah, you’re right.” He wore one of those worried looks Nancy knew all too well. “We can talk about this tonight, if you like.”

“Sure. You better go.”

Nancy Jamison dressed in clothing that appeared to be hers and went to work.

She knew where to go, though it seemed as though she had never been there before. She sat at her desk, talked on the telephone, and showed three clients large, exclusive homes. She was detached, both observer and participant. The day passed in a blur. She aimed the maroon Thunderbird along the highway. The car knew the way home.

She ran a bath, pouring scented oil into the water. It foamed into millions of soft bubbles. She watched them grow in the rush of water, filling the sunken oval tub. She placed a glass of wine on the tiled floor. Spacious and filled with plants, this bathroom was nothing like the one Jamie had drowned in.

She slipped into the tingling water. It was slightly too hot to be comfortable, but the almost-approaching pain reassured her she was in the real world. She leaned back into the yielding softness of the padded tub. Nancy Jamison melted into the bubbles, drifting into a light sleep.

* * *

Suddenly, she was in that other bathroom. Water cascaded down the side of the tub. Her hands parted the suds. Jamie lay at the bottom. His eyes were open. She screamed, pulling him from the water. Limp and heavy, he was a soaked rag doll.

She hugged him to her, rocking him. The water continued to pour.

“Oh God, Nancy. What’s happened?” Brian Bannert stood frozen at the door.

“What’s happened to Jamie?”

“I don’t know,” she cried still rocking the body. “He must have fallen.”

“Did you phone nine-one-one?”

“No, not yet.”

Her husband vanished from the room.

* * *

Nancy Jamison woke with a fright amid bubbles and cooling water. She instinctively felt about the bottom of the tub. Nothing. She laughed with relief and reached for the glass of wine.

True to his word, Nils arrived home with Morris G. shortly before seven o'clock.

She sat in the sunroom, watching the evening gather.

"Mmmmm," Nils Jamison sniffed. "Something smells good. When did you take to cooking?" He hugged his wife.

She enjoyed the warmth of his arms. "Like some wine before we eat?"

"Sure. What's for dinner? Smells great."

"Veal Prince Orloff. It was what I was cooking in that weird dream I had last night. I figured *what the hey* and found a cookbook."

"Home-cooking? I am impressed. This is most definitely out of character for you, my love. But if it takes a nightmare to get you domesticated, I'm all for it."

Nils took his last swallow of coffee. The candles burned low in their holders. He watched in silence as his wife toyed with her dessert. "You want to talk about it?"

"I don't know how to start."

"Hard to remember?"

"Too hard to forget."

"This thing is driving you crazy, Nance. Hell, it's driving me crazy. Start anywhere."

She drew a deep breath. "Nils, in this dream, I am me but I'm not *me*. I'm *another* Nancy. I'm a mother. I live in a nice house, but not this house, *somewhere*, with my son Jamie and my husband..."

"Who is not me." He completed her sentence.

"Right." She continued to pick at the cream-filled pastry before her. "He's nothing at all like you. He has dark hair, and brown eyes, but he is kind of handsome."

"Thanks a lot."

She touched his hand. "You know what I mean. He's just not you. I think his name is Brian. Brian Bannert. And he's an accountant."

"Terrific. I lead a glamorous life in show biz and you choose an accountant for a fantasy husband. It's a good thing I'm the secure type."

"I'm trying to be serious, Nils. You wanted to know about the dream." She stared into the flickering candlelight. "I'm trying to tell you."

"All right, go ahead. I won't interrupt."

"It's a special night. A wedding anniversary, I think, and I'm preparing a celebration dinner. I call Jamie into the house, it's getting dark, and I take him up to start his bath. After he's clean, I leave him there to play for a while. All mothers do it. My mother did it with me. Then, water starts running down the

stairs. I rush up to the bathroom and find him drowned in the tub. Oh God, Nils, it's so awful to see him in the water like that."

"Nancy, I don't know what to say to make things better for you. It's just a dream. It will pass."

"No. It's continuing. This afternoon, I fell asleep in the tub. The dream came back."

"You fell asleep in the tub? Christ, Nance, I could have come home and found *you* drowned."

"Don't lecture me. Not now, Nils. I know so much about them. I can see their house. It's traditional and homey. A Dutch Colonial, I think. It has an intercom system. Yes. I was talking to Jamie through the intercom. And Brian drives an Audi. A silver, four-door Audi."

"This guy sounds thrilling."

"Nils, have you ever had a dream with so much detail?"

"I suppose so."

"What if it's some sort of prophetic dream? What if Jamie is a real little boy who will come into danger?"

"What if Jamie is the conjuring of a burrito and sour cream?"

"All right, try this. What if there is another Nancy out there somewhere in a parallel universe, maybe? She could be leading an entirely separate life from the one I'm living but, somehow, we're connected. She is the me who is a mother and a homemaker. Maybe when this happened to her, it was so horrible, so overwhelming, that she called out to all the counterpart Nancys, in all the other parallel universes, to give her strength. What about that?"

"Majoring in cinematography left me a little light in quantum physics. I can't answer you on that one."

"I know it sounds stupid, but I can't help what I feel. And I feel a deep loss."

She held his hand. "Just be patient with me. I know you're right. It's just a dream. It'll go away soon. It has to."

Nancy Jamison slept fitfully. She dreamed of another life in a nameless suburb in the Dutch Colonial house. Her husband slept soundly beside her.

* * *

Brian Bannert used the CPR technique he'd learned in First Aid in a vain attempt to breathe life into his son. Jamie lay inert on the bathroom floor. One of them had thought to turn off the water. The box of Mr. Sudzee dipped below the surface, coming to rest on the bottom of the tub. Water dripped from the spout, making chirping sounds and forming perfect, concentric ripples. Brian Bannert continued to puff air into his son's lungs. Nancy Bannert stared blankly at her child. The faraway cry of a siren invaded the neighborhood, growing louder.

The bathroom was suddenly flooded with paramedics. She heard but did not comprehend voices filled with urgency. Someone was carrying Jamie away. She tried to stop them but hands grabbed her firmly. They would not let her go. The paramedic was saying something to her, and she began to scream.

She was a detached observer and participant again. She needed air. She needed to get away. She fought them. Nancy Bannert was aware of a sharp jab in her arm. Faces and voices became distorted. Time slowed to stop action. The room dissolved.

* * *

Nancy Jamison left her bed, pulling on a dressing gown. Nils still slept soundly. She could see him clearly in the bright moonlight, bare-chested, blond hair tousled. She was surprised to discover how vulnerable people looked when they slept.

Jamie had looked like he had been sleeping on the bathroom floor, but he was not.

She wanted to scream, shriek, wail, cry, curse—*anything* to be rid of the pain. The feeling suffocated her. She escaped the bedroom and descended a gracefully arcing staircase to the main floor.

She threw open the sliding glass doors to the deck. Her white satin gown fluttered in the strong ocean breeze. Far below, breakers crashed on jagged rocks spewing salty foam. The air was moist and cool. She drank in the night, watching the water splash high, then vanish into the dark.

Mesmerized, she stared at the crashing water. She was drawn to the railing. It would be so easy to jump.

“Nancy?”

Her heart leaped.

“Sweetheart, what are you doing out here? You’ll catch your death.”

She ran to him, holding him close. “Oh, Nils, I think I might be going out of my mind. I can’t stop thinking about him.”

“Maybe, we should make an appointment with Dr. Patterson. Maybe he could prescribe something.”

“I don’t want drugs. I just want some peace. I want this to stop.”

“Come back to bed.”

“No, I don’t want to.”

“Come on,” he said in a gentle, urging voice.

“If I go to bed, I’ll fall asleep. I don’t want to go back to that other house.”

“You have to sleep, honey.”

“No. Every time I sleep, it continues. The ambulance came, Nils. The paramedics couldn’t do anything for him. They took him away. I can’t go back there again. I don’t want to see any more.”

“Okay, okay. Then, we’ll both stay up. I’ll light a fire in the living room and make some of my X-rated hot chocolate. But let’s go inside. It’s freezing out here.”

He closed the sliding doors behind them. “Sit down, I’ll get a quilt.”

Nancy Jamison sat shivering. Jamie’s face continued to look up at her from the bottom of the bathtub. She began to cry.

“Here, this’ll warm you up.” Nils wrapped a shimmery blue comforter about her. Moments later, flames danced in the central open hearth. Flickering shadows licked the walls. The flames reflected and multiplied on panels of glass.

She heard the beeping of the microwave oven. Nils returned with a tray.

“This stuff will make you feel better.” He handed her a steaming mug. Miniature marshmallows floated on top.

“What’s in it?”

“Oh, about two ounces of Dr. Nils’ secret ingredient. So, it’s triple X-rated hot chocolate. I prescribed the same for me. I want you to know, *this* is not my most favorite way of playing doctor.” He sat beside her. She snuggled close, shivering.

“I’m sorry for being such a pain in the ass.”

“Me too. Next time, when it’s my turn, I’ll go for the gusto without a pang of guilt. You’re going to be real sorry.”

She laughed softly and sipped her cocoa.

“That’s more like it.” He pulled his arm around her. She rested her head on his bare chest. In a few minutes, she was sleeping.

* * *

Nancy Bannert awoke, not knowing where she was. “Jamie?” she cried.

“Where’s Jamie?”

Gentle hands pulled her back to the pillow. “Go to sleep. You need to sleep.”

“Brian?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s Jamie?”

“At the hospital.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s as fine as he can possibly be.” Brian Bannert’s voice was flat, almost mechanical.

“Can we see him tomorrow?”

“Yes, Nancy, we can.” He began to cry.

The morning arrived bright and sunny, it should have been raining. Nancy Bannert sat in the gray Audi, numbed by tranquilizers. She scarcely had the energy to breathe. Vacantly, she looked at a sign set on wrought iron posts in a green lawn. It read: COVENTRY FUNERAL SERVICES. Brightly colored flowers jostled their floppy heads in the breeze. Jamie liked to pick flowers.

A broad wooden door opened. Brian and another man stepped into the bright sunlight. Brian wiped his eyes before shaking hands with the man who wore a navy blue three-piece suit. Nancy noticed the blue suit had a fine pin stripe. She did not like the suit or the man. She did not like this place but she could not move. She wanted to sleep or wake up, whatever it took to escape this place. Her body refused to cooperate with her mind.

The car door opened and Brian slid in quietly beside her. “Everything’s ready. We can see him tonight, if you’re up to it.”

Nancy Bannert was unable to respond. She turned away, resting her cheek on the side glass, huddling smaller. The engine came to life. The sedan began to move.

* * *

The car roared over the twisting ocean-side road. It was invigorating to feel the wind and breathe the salty air. The sun was warm on her skin as Morris G., top down, steadily climbed the hills. She shifted into overdrive as the roadster crested the last incline, entering a straight stretch of road. She jammed the accelerator to the floor. The MG uttered a high-pitched whine. It gained speed.

For the first time in days, Nancy Jamison felt free. Free of fear. Free of anguish. Free of a nonexistent child named Jamie. She laughed, giddily. The MG continued to accelerate. The small car easily negotiated a series of sharp turns.

Ahead, she caught sight of another car. Too fast, Morris G. was closing on the large sedan. The car was at the side of the narrow road; the rear end jacked awkwardly into the air. The man pulled a flattened tire from the wheel hub. To her horror, she realized, a pickup was rapidly approaching, dust billowing behind it.

The man eased the damaged wheel to the ground. He looked up. The pickup whizzed past. The black sports car bore down on him. He wailed, scrambling for his life.

Nancy Jamison cranked the steering wheel. Morris G. careened from the road in a flurry of squealing tires and flying sod. The MG smashed through roadside underbrush, the windscreen a spider's web. The convertible came to rest on its side with a grinding crunch.

Nancy Jamison was acutely aware of the silence. Nothing moved. She was not sure at first if she was breathing, but she was. Something warm and thick ran into her eyes. She released the lock on her seat belt and tumbled to the passenger door.

She tried to crawl away but could not.

"Are you okay, lady," asked a faraway voice.

"My husband is going to kill me," she babbled. "I think I dinged his car but good. You better call for a tow truck."

"I think I better call an ambulance. You don't look very good."

"Really?" She looked up at the man through glassy eyes. "Well, I feel fine. Want to use my cell phone to call the tow truck?" She giggled. "Nils is going to kill me..."

* * *

Nancy Jamison woke to a darkened room. She ached. Even her hair hurt. "Oh, God, what did I do?" she said with a groan.

"Hi," came a soft voice from the dimness.

"Nils?"

“Present. How are you doing?”

She sighed. “Not well. Did someone hit me with a mallet? Where am I?”

“Where else? The hospital. The doctor says you were very lucky.”

“Well, he should try it from this perspective.”

“He told me you’d feel that way. Only sprains and scratches. Nancy, you could have easily been killed. What were you doing on that road?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a moan. “I was trying to get away.”

“From what?”

“From me. From the dream.”

“Damn it, not that dream again.” Nils Jamison at last expressed his anger. “I’ve just about had enough of that dream. It’s got to stop, Nancy, it’s been four days. It’s got to stop now.”

“I’m sorry. I just can’t make it go away. I want it to go, but I don’t know how to get rid of it.”

“I’ve talked to Dr. Patterson about prescribing Valium.”

“I don’t want that junk. It’s not going to solve the problem.”

“Then, maybe a psychiatrist would. This *Jamie thing* is becoming an obsession. You’re not behaving rationally.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” She forced herself to a sitting position. “I haven’t been rational since he drowned.”

“Damn it, Nancy, Jamie didn’t drown. There is no Jamie. In order to die, he had to first exist.”

“He does exist, somewhere,” she said defensively. “I know it.”

“Look, I didn’t come here to bicker. I’m glad to know you’re going to be all right. I think it’s time I left.”

She watched blankly as he moved toward the door. “Nils?”

“What?” He turned to face her, frowning.

“I love you.”

“I’m glad.” His voice remained angry. He returned to her hospital bed. “I love you too.” He kissed her bruised cheek. “But I’m going home now. You need to rest and so do I.”

“How is Morris G.?”

“Let’s say he’ll never play the piano again.”

“Real bad?”

“Terminal.”

“Oh, Nils, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Once you’re up and around, we’re visiting a certain XKE ragtop. I’ve been scouting it out for a while.” His eyes glittered. “Get your checkbook ready, my love. I don’t get mad. I just get *expensive*. See you tomorrow, after the shoot.”

He walked through the door, then popped his head back into the room. “I might as well tell you now....”

“What?”

“The police have charged you with driving without due care and attention. There’s going to be a fine.”

“Terrific.”

“Yes, I’m pleased, too. Pleasant dreams.”

* * *

Rain spattered the large hospital windows. The day was gray and unfriendly. It suited her mood. Nancy Jamison rested in her private room. Every part of her ached. Mercifully, the nursing staff had, for the most part, left her alone. She lay on the bed, trying not to think. From the hall, there was a familiar ripple of laughter. A child’s laughter.

“No, don’t go in there.” An adult voice said in a loud whisper from the hall. The child laughed just the way Jamie did. He ran into her room and stopped, surprised to find someone there.

Her heart pounded. She couldn’t believe her eyes. “Jamie?” The little boy looked at her silently.

“Is your name Jamie?” She spoke evenly, trying to contain her excitement. “It’s okay to tell me, if it is.”

A strange woman suddenly burst into the room. “Jamie. Come here. Don’t bother the lady.” Her tone quickly turned apologetic. “I’m so sorry for disturbing you. He just got away from me.”

“No, that’s all right.” She spoke to the woman but never took her eyes off Jamie. “Jamie seems like a wonderful little boy. You’re very lucky to have a son like him.”

“Yes, I am.” The woman smiled at the little boy. “Actually, he’s not my son. I wish he were. I’m a foster parent.”

“Oh? Has he been with you long?”

“Nearly a year.” The woman looked at him wistfully. “I’m going to miss him when he’s placed.”

“Placed? I don’t understand.”

“Eventually, someone will adopt him. I’m surprised and happy to have had him this long.”

“Well, Jamie, my name is Nancy.” She extended her hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Say hello to the lady,” the woman said. “It’s okay.”

“Hi,” he said shyly. “How’d you get all bruised up?”

“I wasn’t very careful and crashed my husband’s car.”

“Bet he’s mad.”

“You know it.” She laughed. Jamie smiled the smile she loved. “But, it was worth it. If I hadn’t crashed the car, I wouldn’t have been here to meet you. And I’m very glad to meet you.”

She looked directly at the woman for the first time. “My name is Nancy Jamison. I’d like to take your name and phone number. I might be that person you’ve been expecting.”

The woman smiled.

* * *

“Nancy, it’s time to wake up.”

“Oh no, Nils, just five more minutes.”

“Wake up. You have to get up and get yourself ready.”

She opened her eyes, seeing the room through a soft focus lens. She was starting to think the same way as Nils. She chuckled softly. She blinked, trying to clear her vision. The room was changed. It was smaller, darker, commonplace. She was not in her bed. “Nils?” she cried out suddenly feeling panic.

Brian Bannert entered the room. “Please, Nancy, get up.”

“Oh, no, no, no.” She clasped her hands over her eyes. “It’s the dream again. God, make it stop!”

Brian Bannert pulled his wife’s hands from her face. “For Christ’s sake, get up. Get dressed.” He shook her. “I can’t take any more of this. He was my son too.” Tears tracked down his face. “I lost Jamie, too. You’ll damn well pull yourself together. Pull yourself together until after the funeral.”

She froze at the word *funeral*.

“Whose funeral?”

“Stop it, Nancy. Don’t do this to me.”

“This is just a dream. A nightmare. This isn’t real, Brian. You’re not real.”

She heard the insane tone of her own voice, but continued, “Don’t you understand? Nils and I are going to adopt Jamie.”

“Nancy, I don’t want to hear any more garbage about this dream world of yours. *This* is reality. *This* is it! *This* is now. Jamie is dead. You let him drown. Goddamn you!” His face twisted. “I’ll never forgive you for letting him die.”

Brian Bannert strode from the bedroom. The front door slammed. Nancy Bannert was fully awake. She suddenly knew there was no other Nancy.