

The Ritual

Nancy clicked the top back onto the yellow highlighter and dropped it neatly into her desk pencil drawer. A tingling sensation surged inside her when she glanced at her watch and saw that it was 4:59 p.m. The pleasant-looking, middle-aged woman cleared the desk of papers and pens, meticulously filing away all papers and files, and placing pens in the pencil cup, tips down. She was proud that she had completed all of her assignments before leaving for her four-week vacation, although she was the only one who knew that she would never return.

I won't leave a second before 5 PM, she thought as she wiped down the surface of her desk, making sure no coffee dribbles or crumbs remained. This will be a "clean" break, she punned to herself. No one will ever be able to accuse me of being unorganized or untidy, she assured herself, wiping off the computer screen and keyboard. Cleanliness was important to Nancy. Clean, orderly things helped her forget loneliness and bad things. When finished, she stood back and surveyed her area—her cubicle: a space carved out of an ocean of office space by portable partitions.

Like the other clerical workers, Nancy personalized her cubicle by hanging up photos, cards, and pictures. Above her computer hung the voodoo doll that she won at the office Christmas party. On the doll she taped a sign that read, "Don't mess with me!" She thought the humor made her space look more friendly. Coworkers chuckled when they saw it. She liked it when they laughed because she felt there weren't enough things to laugh at in life.

Driving home, Nancy went over her plans mentally about the next four weeks. She would spend the first two weeks scrupulously cleaning her apartment, organizing drawers, updating photo albums, and buying new furniture and accessories. Then she would spend the last two weeks leisurely reading, painting, and listening to music. She had written out a lengthy list of things she wanted to accomplish so she could check them off as she accomplished them. She feared she wouldn't be able to accomplish everything or at the last minute would realize she had forgotten something. The thought of forgetting something sent a shiver through her.

All the first week, Nancy worked feverishly scrubbing and waxing floors on her hands and knees, dusting and waxing furniture, vacuuming around and under all the furniture, and vacuuming the ceiling free from cobwebs. The refrigerator was emptied and thoroughly cleaned. Cleaning and hard physical work appealed to her because she felt a clear sense of accomplishment as she watched the work progress.

After the apartment was scrubbed and disinfected, she reorganized all of the drawers. Nancy normally kept drawers neat and orderly, but this time she wanted them to look absolutely perfect. People are going to see how anal I've become, she mused to herself while folding everything with precision.

"I don't care anymore," she said aloud, patting down the last pair of folded panties onto its stack of fellows. "Let them amuse themselves by talking about me, who cares what they'll think." She spoke aloud as her thoughts drifted. She didn't like the habit she'd acquired of talking to herself from living alone too long, but she found it difficult to keep her thoughts quiet. Her cat Horatio jumped onto the dresser where she folded the underwear.

"All my life I tried too hard to fit in," she said directing her comments to him. She reached over and stroked his fur. "That was my own mistake, though. But now, I'm going to make things as perfect as I can. What do you think of that, Horatio? Isn't that a good goal?" Horatio stretched wide, knocking over her daughter's photo. Nancy picked it up and gazed at it.

"Why did you go so far away? You were all I had." She sighed and put the picture back in its spot. She hesitated and picked it up again and placed it in a new spot—next to her favorite perfume, Chanel No. 5. She had received it ten years ago from a boyfriend. It was the only real perfume she ever had and wore it only for special occasions. Since she and her boyfriend broke up almost eight years ago, she'd never had another boyfriend. The bottle was still nearly full. She opened the bottle and inhaled the cedar-like aroma and set it down again.

The smell opened thoughts of Ben, although she wasn't sure why—he never gave her anything—except Monique. In her second year of college, she found herself pregnant. When she told her boyfriend Ben, he suddenly disappeared without a word to anyone. She never heard from him again. She finished the semester, but after the baby was born, she couldn't afford to continue college and dropped out to work full time and care for the baby. That her daughter, Monique, grew up without a proper family and never knowing her father haunted Nancy. Many times she tried to find Ben, but unsuccessfully. She and Ben met at a college party and hadn't dated very long. He was from back east, but she wasn't sure exactly where and knew nothing about his family or friends. Her parents disowned her when they learned of her pregnancy, so she never returned home. Even though she grew up with four brothers and two sisters, they rarely communicated. They were all still in Illinois, where she grew up. None had ever come to visit her in California, always claiming that they didn't have enough money for the trip. She had never been to their weddings or met any of their children, and they had never met Monique. Feigning religious beliefs, her grandparents disapproved of her imagined lifestyle as a "single woman" and rarely responded to her letters. It seemed her geographical distance from the rest of the family made her a stranger. In lieu of family, Nancy made friends, who substituted for her family. She had decided that, unlike your family, you can always find new friends.

During the second week, Nancy redecorated, starting with her bedroom. For her, it was the most important room—a womb to crawl into when the world hurt. She wanted it to be exceptionally feminine and all in white and lace. Though she had little cash to spend, she decided this one time she'd use up her credit limit. She searched all over town for just the right down comforter and accessories. Finding the perfect one with lace edging and matching sheets and pillowcases, she rushed home and eagerly stripped off all the old worn bed coverings, washed and folded them neatly for Goodwill, and stretched tight the crisp new sheets. She moved the palms of her hands over the taut new fabric, pretending that she would share their newness with someone special.

"Oh, stop it! Look what you've done already." She shook her head to clear away the thoughts of passion. Nearly 50, she knew that romance was over for her.

"Can't you just accept that men my age want women Monique's age, not to roll in the sack with a woman with rolling skin," she mumbled to herself. "If it hasn't happened in 30 years. " she broke off with a curse and self-reproach.

Scrupulously Nancy ironed the wrinkles out of the new pillowcases and comforter, pressing them until the fibers gleamed with smoothness. New fabric was special, she thought, because it wasn't yet tainted with body oils and sweat that clung to old fabric. She stuffed the pillows inside of their new covers and smoothed the down comforter over the new white blankets and sheets.

After hanging new lace panels at the window, she stepped back to admire her handiwork. She felt rich. She plopped down in the middle of the bed to sink into the new room. It radiated freshness and purity. She smiled, satisfied. She imagined herself as a spoiled teenager, with stuffed animals on the bed and her own white telephone. Horatio jumped on the bed, breaking her memory bubble. He rubbed his face against her knee and purred. Buying new things made her feel alive with anticipation. That night she snuggled into the new bed, and before turning off the light, she looked around the room and felt elegant. The new-found beauty of her room made her feel cleansed inside.

"There's no color quite like white. Even at night it radiates," she said aloud to no one.

The bedroom finished, Nancy took down the rest of the worn curtains and faded gold fiberglass drapes from the other windows. She bundled them neatly for Goodwill to pick up with the bedding and her old living room furniture. After the men from Goodwill took away the old things, she stood in the middle of her semi-bare living room and tingled with anticipation. She knew exactly what she wanted and dashed off to the import store to buy the white rattan and light wood, modern furniture sold there. She liked the summer-like airiness of rattan, plus it wasn't too expensive—she didn't want to leave behind too large of a debt and calculated that her credit limit of \$5000 should cover most of what she wanted. The furniture would still be new after she was gone, so the store could have it all back. She reasoned that she was really just borrowing it for a short time. Assured that Monique wouldn't have to pay the debts, Nancy felt free to buy the new things she hungered for.

She had done her best to make her collection of mismatched, aged, and worn pieces of furniture look decent, but nothing much could be done with the clash of the sofa's brown plaids and an avocado flower-print chair. She had kept them clean and covered, hoping someday she could afford to replace them, but she never made enough money to do that. But now, more than anything, she wanted to be surrounded by beauty on her last days and guiltlessly indulged her passion for new things.

To highlight the white furniture, Nancy added color with pillows, candles, a tablecloth, placemats, and napkins. Arranging the new things didn't take long. When she finished, she poured a glass of white wine and sat down in the brightness of her new living room, delighting in the waxy smell of new furniture. She sat amidst the dancing speckles of light glimmering through faux French antique lace curtains. Horatio drifted over to a patch of light like a reptile slinking out of the shade searching for sun. Nancy stretched out on the new flokati rug, sinking her fingers into the sheep's forfeited coat of long woolly fronds, absorbing the warmth of the evening sun's last rays as it pulled the night behind it. She squinted at the sparkles on the ceiling, letting her eyes blur the boundary of ceiling and sky. A memory of earlier years of passion pierced her solitude, ripping a hole in the fabric of her acceptance, spilling memories like flour from a torn sack. She bolted upright and stared at the phone.

"No! I won't torture myself with the desire of something that won't happen," she cried aloud. "Evil memories! You've already passed me by—stop haunting me." She dropped her head to her hands and sobbed.

"You're an old lady now, you got that? You were too busy in youth as a mother—it was your own choice. There's no going back." Nancy cuddled Horatio and went to bed. Although it was too early to fall asleep, she wanted the comfort of her womb.

In the morning she spread a new white linen tablecloth on the old table and set the table with new glass dishes. She set four places even though no one else would be eating there. In the center, she placed candles and a fresh flower arrangement that she made from greenery picked from the apartment lawn, with daisies and baby's breath she bought from the market. She shook out the new towels and hung them on the towel bar in the bathroom, the last room to fix up. Because this would be the last room she would see, it was the most important room, but it would be easy to make pretty. She had purchased a set of deep, rich burgundy towels with a matching rug and cover set for the toilet. She put candles and baskets for potpourri by the sink and tub and hung a sheer lace curtain over the tub, tying back each side with a maroon satin ribbon. Everything was finally coming together, pleasing her sensibilities.

Last, she placed pots of blooming flowers of tulips, pansies, daffodils, and geraniums throughout the apartment. Feeling relaxed, Nancy consulted her list, making sure that completed items were each checked off. The next item undone was "organize photos." This was one of the few things she had been negligent about keeping up. Photos were stark reminders of the past. But she resolved to touch that past before departing her life. Sometimes she felt she had no past. How could one with no future have a past, she asked herself. The women of her past selves were as foreign to her as strangers—acquaintances she once knew, only remotely related to the woman she found herself now to be. This woman today had no connection to a past.

As she sorted the photos, she examined each carefully before gluing it onto a page. She stared at Monique's wedding photos, picking up one of Monique repeating vows to Victor. A fever of envy swept over her as she remembered the tears in Monique's eyes as she spoke her vows. Victor seemed mesmerized by her. Monique was a stunning bride, with her long blond curls swept up in a French knot and Victorian curls fringing her face. Instead of the traditional white, Monique wore ivory, setting off the luster of her delicate, pink skin. Nancy remembered how she despised herself for feeling envy toward her own daughter, but she knew no man had looked at her the way Victor looked at Monique and none probably ever would.

The wedding photos brought back more uncomfortable memories. The wedding was held in Indiana because most of Victor's family lived there and was also conveniently close to most of Nancy's family. Nancy looked forward to seeing all of her brothers and sisters, and especially the nieces and nephews. Everyone assured her that they were coming and returned the RSVP cards indicating how many to expect. But, in the end, only her parents and two sisters actually came. The sisters brought only their husbands. The others simply never showed up. No one asked why. No one ever apologized. Nancy didn't want to know why, trying to ignore their obvious absence, and concentrated on her own daughter.

She picked up a photo of her father and her on the dance floor during the reception. Her parents sat at a table with her two sisters and their husbands. Nancy thought they didn't seem to enjoy themselves, so tried livening them up. To make her father feel part of the wedding, she cajoled him into dancing with her. He resisted, but Nancy was finally able to coax him out of his chair, though he protested that he didn't know how to dance. He stood on the dance floor giggling as she took his hands and pretended to dance with him. Their laughter and apparent gaiety caught the attention of the photographer. Nancy stared at the photo, thinking how unnatural they looked together and grieved for that deceptive happiness they never really knew between them. Despite Nancy's efforts to make her parents feel part of the wedding, a sister told her later that the parents grumbled about that reception, claiming that no one had talked to them.

Having not seen her parents in several years before the wedding, Nancy was shocked to see how much they had aged. Though in their late 60s, they looked much older. Their manner of dress had disintegrated into sloppy polyester pull-ons. The flesh hung from her father's jowls like the ears of a hound dog, and he had only one tooth—the upper-right front one. During his 55-year marriage, he refused to see a doctor or dentist. Her mother never knew how or when he pulled out his own teeth and would simply notice from time to time that another one was gone. Nancy couldn't bear looking at him when he smiled or laughed. It turned her stomach to imagine him pulling them out. To her, he looked like a homeless person.

She sighed and glued her father's photo in its spot on the page. After the wedding, once again she rarely heard from any of her family, and no one responded to Monique's baby announcement. The wedding was six years ago and Jacob was now nearly four. Her family had never seen him or asked about him, remaining as disinterested in Jacob as they had been towards Monique.

Nancy had not yet seen Jacob, except in photos, although she talked to him regularly on the phone. She realized she would probably never see him grow up, just as she never saw any of her nieces or nephews grow up. It was the suffocating pattern of her life. Nancy wanted desperately to make up for the loss of Monique's childhood through the grandchild. Now, she knew that would never happen. The weight of this fate pressed progressively more on her as the years sped by.

By the second Friday night, the photo albums were almost in order. Nancy sat in her living room and listened to Rachmaninov's third piano concerto, enmeshed in the lightness of her new world. Even at night she sensed the sun's footprints in the green splashes of ferns and palms and the confetti of flower petals. Her world was at last pure, clean, and uncomplicated. She longed to talk to Monique. She called but the answering machine clicked on. Nancy left a message and turned to another project—paying the last monthly payments on her bills. Instead of writing the next month's rent check, she wrote that amount out to her daughter. Finishing this task, for the rest of the evening she read *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. As she read, she compared her own life to Harry's, reflecting that her life may be like Harry's, but not for the same reasons.

"Harry's a dolt. He purposely chose a wasteful path." She wished Monique was there to discuss the book. Instead, she went to bed.

The remaining two weeks were spent leisurely reading and painting while listening to her favorite music. Monique had asked her to paint her something, so Nancy wanted to give her this one last gift. That no one called during the four weeks began to weigh heavily on her as the last weekend grew near, although she expected it. She often experienced long periods of no one calling or writing. But these four weeks seemed to make the isolation more concentrated. She justified the silence by telling herself that most people don't write letters and phone calls because they are expensive. Most of her friends had long ago moved to distant regions of the country, and Nancy tired of substituting local friendships. In her younger years, she had many friends. But as she aged, so did the world. It seemed more difficult now to find and make new friends.

On the fourth, and last, Saturday morning she slipped on a new white peignoir and went to the kitchen to fix an elaborate breakfast. She arranged everything artfully on a new bed tray with a copy of "The Awakening" and went back to her bedroom. Horatio, still curled in a ball under the comforter, purred softly as she slipped beneath the down comforter. As she read, she recognized that, like Harry, part of her was like Edna. But unlike Edna, Nancy knew what she wanted.

"Death doesn't come as a thoughtless, spontaneous action to me. I walk into my sea fully conscious. There are just no more mysteries for me," she said aloud.

As she talked to herself, she recalled how she and Monique used to cuddle together on cold days and read and talk endlessly. She missed that. After Monique left home to attend college, Nancy was never able to replace that unique joy in her life.

After showering, Nancy organized the last few pictures. She set all the older albums on the new coffee table and sat on the rug with a fresh cup of coffee. She laid aside a photo of herself and each of her brothers and sisters when they were each still young children. She took the best photo of each niece and nephew and laid them under their respective parents. She searched for young photos of her parents but realized she didn't have any. She had asked her parents to send her more photos from her childhood, but they never got around to it. Nancy felt an overwhelming need to know her parents as young people—as children and as young adults. The only photos she had of them were older, in middle age. She studied all of her missing family members and wondered who they were. For more than 30 years, they had been only glossy smiles, lacking all flesh, blood, and bone. She tried imagining if she liked them, but they all looked too sweet with their broad photo smiles.

She leafed through each album, from the beginning of her life to the present, intrigued with how the faces and bodies changed as time passed. It seemed to her that she hadn't changed much—she couldn't tell the progression of age in herself like she could in the others. Was it true or was she just too used to looking at her own face every day? She scanned a range of pictures of herself.

"It must be true," she reasoned, "because people always seem surprised to learn my true age. But then, people just say things like that because it's polite."

Searching deeper for an explanation, she recalled how men in their 30s chased after her, backing off after learning her true age—the cruelest kind of rejection, she thought. She went to the bathroom for a hand mirror, returned and scrutinized her face. She grimaced at the lines and hint of sagging skin around her eyes and jaw line, although the face otherwise looked youthful.

"No, you're just kidding yourself," she said setting the mirror down. "I really do look younger, don't I Horatio?" She nudged the cat, but he refused to be roused from his nap. She picked up the mirror again and stared into it.

"Is there anything more cruel than to survive the ravages of age just to realize that its age itself which robs your life? So much for this youth culture. So what if you look younger—you're still your age. It's your youthful ovaries a man wants—not you."

She slammed down the mirror. "Oh, to hell with it. What good is all this nonsense about age? My life's like an insect's: sleep-eat-work-sleep-eat-work. Are humans to be content with such a functionary life—like yours, Horatio?" His ear twitched at the mention of his name.

"I know, you couldn't care less—so why do I? What's a human's life? Relationships to other people, that's what. Without that, what is there? No dreams. No hopes. No wishes. When that's gone, you're an insect—a worker bee or ant. That's all. And these photos, what good are they? They just tell me what I don't have—or never had. Missing people—"

To deflect her thoughts and growing moodiness, she decided to prepare dinner. As she cooked, she thought about the tantalizing aroma of the filet mignon broiling in the oven.

"It's strange that the smell of cooking flesh of another animal smells so good," she reflected as she pondered man's relationship to other animals. She glanced at Horatio and grimaced. "I guess it's just a primordial survival reaction," she said to Horatio as he sniffed hungrily at the air. She uncorked her favorite red wine, Marques de Caceres, and took a sip.

"Ah! The wine is perfect, Horatio!" she mused as she raised her wine glass for a mock toast. "The taste is smooth and subtle, just like coffee with the right amount of cream!"

On the table, she placed a few photos near her plate, lit the candles, and sat down to eat. She saluted the butcher and the cow when tasting the first bite of the tender meat.

"Perfecto!" she exclaimed.

On the last morning she awoke and glanced at the clock on the night stand. It was nearly 7 am. During the past four weeks, she avoided waking to an alarm, preferring instead her body's natural rhythm. She laid in bed and pulled the down comforter around her like a mummy, snuggling deeper. The warmth was consoling. Although it was April, it was still cold outside and raining.

"April really is the cruelest month," she said to Horatio, who hummed under the covers. She listened to the soft pounding rhythm on the ceiling, sounding like a mantra she thought as she carefully planned her day. Resolutely, she threw back her mummy wrappings and got up, slipping on a new lace teddy. She stood before a full-length mirror and closely observed the image. Not bad for almost 50, she thought to herself. She brushed her wavy brown hair, letting it fall naturally around her shoulders, put on a bit of lipstick, and went to the kitchen to grind beans for fresh coffee. She performed everything with all her senses keenly participating, inhaling the aroma of each food, and trying to single out each flavor as she ate. Sipping coffee, she read from a volume of Shakespeare's plays, opening it first to "Hamlet," her favorite play, and listened to Chopin. After reading a while, she set the book down and looked around her apartment, still pleased by the new view.

"Why do we make these distinctions, Horatio? You don't. The changes don't seem to matter to you at all." She scratched his ears while she pondered. "You are just as mellow as before I changed everything. Yet, it makes all the difference to me. Why?" She got up and walked to the window.

"Too bad there isn't anyone to debate this with—a person, I mean, Horatio. A rainy day makes for good philosophical conversations. Monique would appreciate such stimulating thoughts, huh, Horatio?" She quickly shifted her thoughts away from Monique and listened to the rain still drumming on the ceiling.

Nancy took a leisurely shower, fixed her hair, and put on makeup. She wanted to look her absolute best today, carefully choosing what to wear, finally deciding on a sheer black, tailored blouse and blue jeans. After dressing, she studied her reflection in the full-length mirror.

"It's probably just as well to die still looking young and pretty than to grow ugly with age," she said aloud. She started to ask why a pretty face and trim figure had failed to bring romance and happiness into her life but stopped herself.

"It's useless to ask." She turned her face away from the image with a long sigh. "I want only happy thoughts today," she repeated to herself.

"Stop harping on yourself, as Polonius would say. OK? OK."

She picked up the phone and sat on the sofa, tucking her legs beneath her. "I will call Monique one last time and be sure to tell her I love her." But again, the answering machine came on. Nancy left another brief message that she was thinking about them and just wanted to say "hi" and give her love to Jacob, and that she'll try to call later. She hung up and wrote a long letter to Monique, one to her best friend in Massachusetts whom she'd known for 17 years, and one to the fire department. She instructed the firemen to come to her house when they received the letter, that they would find her body in the bathtub, and gave instructions how to find the spare key to her apartment. She sealed and stamped the envelopes and walked them to the mailbox. It had stopped raining and a sadness began to descend over her, replace a feeling of excited anticipation.

She drove to the De Young Museum in San Francisco. She wanted only truth in her life on this last day, and art was the perfect truth. She strolled leisurely through the classical exhibit, preferring the older works to contemporary. She felt contemporary work was too contrived and contentious. Though truthful, it lacked beauty. In the museum cafe, she ate lunch, then drove back home.

It was late afternoon when she returned home. She prepared her last meal while sipping a glass of chardonnay. Nancy was a good cook and enjoyed fixing simple, gourmet meals. She lit the two candles and turned off the overhead light. Gorecki's Third Symphony played on the stereo. The mood is perfect, she thought as she placed a photo of Monique, Victor, and Jacob on the table before her plate, studying them as she ate.

"I'm glad your life is happy. You have a loving husband, a beautiful baby boy, and great in-laws. God, how I miss you terribly, but I'm content for your happiness. You've always had lots of good luck, so I'm sure you'll be OK. Forgive me, Monique. I just don't want to watch my life pass without you and your child, like I watched mine pass by you." She looked away from the photo and brusquely brushed away the tear escaping down her cheek.

"The one thing I so much wanted in my life, I know I'll never have. Without a family, we are just insects. I've lived long enough and I'm not angry, just empty. And the emptiness has sucked me dry. They say people who end their own lives are angry and want someone else to hurt. But I will prove that's not always true."

She picked up Horatio, who was brushing against her leg. She hugged him and stared at Monique's picture.

"I know you'll be OK. You have his family near you, who accepts you as one of their own, and they have money enough that I won't have to worry about you. You don't have much money now, but I know someday you will."

Nancy picked up the photo and held it to her chest for a moment. She kissed each face and placed the photo down again.

"Don't be sad. It'll pass. We are only phone relatives now. I've experienced how time fades memories, like photos sitting too long in the sun. As time goes on, I'll be less and less in yours. The people now around you fill your days and will take that place. I can't bear to watch that happen. For eighteen years you were

my life and focus. Now you're 29 and have your own life. My grandchild doesn't know me, except as a voice on the phone."

Nancy got up from the table, choking back the urge to cry, and walked to the window, staring into the dark blue of night.

"I said I only wanted happy thoughts today." She reprimanded herself and picked up Horatio, smoothing the fur on his head. He purred gratefully.

"Don't worry Horatio, I told the firemen to find you a good home." She put him down and cleaned up the dishes and kitchen. She tried calling Monique a last time. No answer. She didn't leave a message this time.

"Well, Horatio, it's time. I'd like to talk to Monique, but..." She walked to the bathroom and began running the bath water. She sprinkled bath bubbles liberally in the water and watched as they foamed up while she emptied the bottle of Chanel No. 5 in the water. She set the tape deck to play continuously, putting on a special collection she had put together that she called "Music of the Passions." She poured a last glass of wine and sharpened a steel-blade, carving knife.

In her room she undressed, picked up a lace peignoir and laid it on the floor by the bath tub for the firemen to dress her in after they came. She tied up her hair with a pink, satin ribbon, lit the candles, and slid into the bubbles just cresting near the top. The water was warm and inviting, and the sweet aroma of perfume whooshed up as she slid in. She picked up the knife and stared at it.

"OK friend, do your thing."

Before sliding the blade across her wrists, she reflected back to be sure everything was taken care of. She thought about Horatio—yes, she put out lots of food and water. She mailed the letters. She paid all her bills for the month. Everything was fresh and clean. She couldn't think of anything else, so she took her left hand out of the water.

"No, I'd better cut the right hand first since I'm right handed." She drew the blade across the junction of three blue veins in the wrist. Blood began to flow. She quickly looked away and switched the knife to the right hand and pulled the blade across the left wrist. She was amazed that she could stand the pain. She lowered both hands into the water and let the blood flow freely from the two deep cuts. There was only a little blood visible in the bubbles. It wasn't long before she felt lightheaded and faint. The music soothed her and she heard Horatio purring as he laid content on the rug by the bathtub.

She felt her consciousness fading when she thought she heard the phone ring. In the dimness, she remembered she had forgotten to pull out the phone jack. The ringing continued until the answering machine clicked on. She was fading quickly now but curiosity kept her on the edge. She wanted to know what last person was going to intrude into the peace of her life's end. Monique's voice called to her through the machine and disturbed the air in Nancy's fading world. Monique sounded hysterical as she called out for her mother. Nancy struggled to the top of her consciousness to hear what she was saying. In horror she realized Monique was crying out hysterically, almost incoherent, sobbing, "They're dead, Mother! They're dead!"

Helpless, Nancy heard her pitiful sobbing, "Oh, mother, call me—please—why do you have to be out now?—You're all I have now—I need you." Nancy fought against the gathering blackness, fighting to regain the strength she let flow so freely into the water as Monique continued pleading, "Oh my God!—dead—dead—Mother, what am I going to do?"

Vainly struggling with the darkening shadows passing before her eyes, Nancy tried desperately to get up but was too weak to move. She managed to inch her left arm to the top of the tub, but it slid back into the water. She tried calling out but knew no one could hear the feeble cry. Monique's incoherent cries faded into Nancy's semi-conscious state like a droning mantra, "I need you I need you I need you."

Nancy felt Horatio's paw on her head and heard his meowing, as if in the distance. Her head slumped to her shoulder as her body blended into the warm water. The room turned black. A euphoria mixed with horror washed over her as she lost the struggle against her receding world. A blinding light submerged the room. She reached up into the light for her baby.

"Mommy's here. I'm coming."