

A House of Her Own

by Dianne Lorang

Even though she works in Montana for a while with my husband, I don't meet Nancy until we both live in Colorado towards the end of 1993, at a Halloween party where my husband and I go as the two female Supreme Court judges—I as Sandra Day O'Connor and he as Ruth Bader Ginsberg. I wear my graduation gown from just a few years ago and he wears our oldest daughter's from high school (complete with pantyhose and size 10 black pumps from Payless Shoes).

I am almost forty and Nancy is around thirty, single, fun, friendly, and, to say the least, animated. She practically lives out of her old Subaru wagon as that is where she keeps her mountain bike, inline skates, skis (both downhill and cross-country), hiking boots, backpack, sleeping bag, tent, and much of the assorted outdoor clothing she has collected by moonlighting at a sporting goods store. Her day job is a geologist with my husband's mining company.

Everyone likes Nancy, always including her on guest lists for parties. She stays with our children once when we go away for the weekend, and we have her over for Thanksgiving dinner. I have a single sister in town so it makes for an even number around the table, which is stupid, I know, but then I'm a product of society.

We go out with Nancy and other couples to "happy hours," dinner, brunch on Sunday, and even, for a while, the local university for ice-skating on the hockey rink. This proves harder to schedule since the hours are on weeknights and a lot of our friends travel for business. Even Nancy does. I'm not that important. Although I work some, I'm basically "just a housewife," a kept woman. The next spring, Nancy and I become

enthusiastic members of the company mountain bike team. We train a lot as a group before riding thirty miles on forest trails and old logging roads just to camp out and get a free tee-shirt and a massage, for a good cause, though. We've all raised pledges and have no idea what agony we're in for. Through it all, Nancy and I become good friends. I tell her almost everything.

We share an ongoing tragedy in that her superior has gotten very ill and the doctors cannot diagnose him. He's in and out of hospitals while his wife copes with living in a new place, having also just moved from Montana, and four young children, one who is ill herself with some strange malady, different but similar to her father's. He will die in a year and a half from Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease (CJD), which will only be confirmed by an autopsy.

It is when he is very ill and it is all I can do to be an understanding friend and babysitter to his soon-to-be widow, that I lean on Nancy more and more for support. I'm having problems with work, my husband, my teenagers, myself. Nancy's apartment in Denver is an easy place to escape to in the evenings or on weekends. Before we know it, it is another spring and time to train for another grueling bike ride in the mountains.

But this time, something is wrong with Nancy's back. She spends the weekend bumming painkillers, which she has never needed much of before, and finding ice to put on her lower back. She can't finish the ride and has to take the sag-wagon back to base camp, which is almost humiliating for her. Yet she doesn't complain and joins us for our celebration dinner.

The doctors can't find much wrong, so she starts physical therapy and ends up, in the months to come, getting acupuncture and going through a series of rolfing sessions,

an intense type of massage. But that is after she starts to lose her balance. She can no longer trust herself to drive so rides the diesel-drenched bus that takes an hour or more just to catch another bus to work. She doesn't live close to anyone at work, since they all live in nice houses in the suburbs and she lives more in the city, because it's cheaper.

She goes to doctor after doctor after doctor and finally learns to use the Internet where she finds out she has the same symptoms as people with Lyme disease, which is an East Coast ailment carried by deer ticks. Then she remembers the conference she attended in Pennsylvania where she took a walk in the woods and lay down to take a nap. It's been almost a year ago at this point, and she doesn't remember getting a bite or circular rash of any kind. She didn't know to look for such signs.

She finds a specialist in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Even though it's too late to treat her with the usual antibiotics that abate Lyme disease in the early stages, he puts her on very potent ones intravenously. A nurse comes to her apartment every day. Nancy's not working now and fortunately drawing extended sick pay and has decent medical insurance. Still, it's difficult for someone with her previous lifestyle to be not only inactive but alone most of the time. She gets depressed and has to go on yet more medication, which messes with her metabolism.

Her financial situation forces her to move to a smaller apartment up the street and we all pitch in. She seems okay, not wanting to burden anyone with how bad it really is. I visit her on my own, but usually when I'm lonely and wanting an outlet. Not very thoughtful, I know, but I'm one of those immature middle-aged women. I do know how awful it is to be dizzy and nauseated, though, and depressed, as I've had my bouts with such things, just not for as long as Nancy. And mine went away. Nancy's doesn't.

She tries to return to work for a while but can't do it, physically or mentally. She goes on permanent disability. She can no longer afford to live on her own and has to go stay with her mother in a condo community in Florida. We stay in touch by e-mail, though most of her letters are simply about her progress. Her life has become communicating with other "Lymies" online and learning all she can to get well.

She goes in for oxygen chamber treatments, takes a lot of supplements, and spends time sitting in the pool and sun. She does not have the stamina to swim. Some days are better than others, but not much changes for several years.

I haven't heard from her for some time, and am wondering why, when I get an e-mail from her from Butte, Montana. She has suddenly moved back there, well enough to be on her own again! My husband visits her first during a business trip. She owns her own little house on the hill above the Berkeley Pit, the ghastly hole left by the Anaconda copper mining operation. Other scars are evident in Butte, especially poverty and alcoholism and family violence, but it feels like home to Nancy, especially since she can afford one there.

Her house is a turn of the century place that needs a lot of work. But she's game and it fits into her life of selling magazine ads using her computer and fax machine. My husband tells me I'd be jealous as I've always wanted a little cozy place of my own in a community like Butte, just not Butte. Perhaps my prejudice comes from my great-grandfather dying from too many pints in a flophouse there. I'm from a different kind of town in Montana, more of a white-collar place. Shortly after my husband's visit, we get a postcard of Nancy sitting on her front porch railing, looking oh so healthy and slim, her dark brown hair as thick and shiny as ever. The blue Montana sky, as blue as the trim

around the door, is reflected in the thick wavy (from age) window behind her. I can't wait to go there.

And so I do, last winter. She fixes me and my two sisters and youngest daughter homemade chicken soup. It's a perfect Sunday night meal as we're all fighting off colds. We're on our way home after surprising our grandma for her ninety-fifth birthday in Missoula, Montana. It's raining, a strange weather phenomenon for January in Montana. But we can only smile.

"So how did you get well?" I ask. "You look so good. Better than before you were sick."

"Divine intervention," she answers, telling us about the cranial osteopath whose treatments were 100 percent "laying on of the hands."

"I stopped taking drugs and started meditating. I took Tai Chi for my balance. I prayed."

We barely have time to eat, take snapshots of Nancy and me, and then take the grand tour of her house. She has an old-fashioned gas stove, a modern fridge from Scandinavia, and an antique claw-foot bathtub. She's refinished the hardwood floors but has no furniture in the parlor, nor a television. It is all still in storage in Denver. A guitar leans in a corner and one potted plant thrives in the other.

Nancy has added funky linoleum in her attic office where a cot adorns one wall, ready for passing guests. I hope to sleep there next time I'm through town, for I'm usually on my own traveling the "homeland," taking my time, driving under the speed limit, which Montana has again after not having for a year or so. I have my chance in July. I've been to a wedding in Great Falls and to Missoula to see Grandma. It's a Monday evening

and Nancy steers me to her home via my cell phone. Her neighborhood looks so different during the day without dirty slush pushed up against every curb. I'm looking forward to dinner at the Uptown Café.

She has company, which is no big surprise. Another friend is passing through and has already snagged the cot. I don't really mind. I can simply travel on that night to Bozeman where another bed awaits me. Dinner is good, and I get to practice my listening skills rather than just talking about me. Nancy went skiing last winter and rode her bike some this summer, on the path around town where the railroad used to run. She even had a long-distance boyfriend for a while.

I leave around 8:00, an hour or so before sundown, so I can get over Homestead Pass while there is still a view. As I drive into the Gallatin Valley on the other side, the forest fires that will make Montana a national disaster area in a few months have just started. It is smoky and my eyes burn. But the fires turn the sunset a gorgeous red.

I recall Nancy's eyes sparkling at her front gate as she looked out over the pit left by the miners. She doesn't mind the hole that is now filling up with poisonous water. She used to be a miner of sorts herself. She knows she can help clean up the pit. She's already started by joining the 100-woman choir that sang and danced for its recovery.

Such a miracle, such an endeavor, is easy in her mind. After all, she's already overcome a much more potent personal pollution. And even though she'll never be the person she once was (she'll always have to pace herself), she has become an even better person. More fun, friendly, and, yes, even more animated.