

FORWARD

Dear Bright-eyed little Nancy,

I seem to have lost you, and I don't know where you've gone. I stare at your expectant little face, filled with delight as you smile into the camera with assurance that something good is on the way, and long to step into the frame with you in order to recapture that feeling. Years ago, so many I don't remember exactly when, you used to wake up in the morning with a thrill that a new day was about to begin, sliding your feet all over the smooth, percale sheet beneath you and glorying in the feel of the fabric. Even on a rainy day, you loved to watch the light as it filtered through the window shades, and breathe in the smell of coffee coming from our mother's kitchen, although you didn't really know then what it was. I know you smiled with contentment and well-being back then because you trusted what the day would bring. You trusted it would be full of wonder. You trusted that your body could easily run, jump, twirl and dance. You trusted that your mother would put something delicious in front of you at the kitchen table for breakfast. You trusted that you would be cared for and loved.

It is obvious from the look on your face in the photo hanging in my hallway that these distant memories are true, but I want to know for sure.

I need to find you.

At 60 my world is not right; my life is filled with peril. Whatever the day has to offer may not be good. I wake up afraid, but I don't know of what. These fears, and the familiar difficulty I have breathing each and every morning, are becoming very distressing to me. Most of my friends would not believe this frightened person is me. I am competent, mouthy, spirited, and still full of curiosity, or that is how most people in

the world experience me. Even my closest friends do not know the depth of my unease. What bothers me more is that I rarely experience true joy anymore. There doesn't seem to be room for it beneath the sadness I feel about all my perceived failures: at making marriage work; at writing fiction that agents want to represent and readers wait for with eager anticipation; at living so far from what has long been familiar to me; at believing I have to move to ensure my financial security – the list goes on. Every day I wonder what has happened to me. Every night as I fall asleep, I wonder where I am headed and why my journey has become so unsafe.

It is obvious to me why I long to recapture the spirit in those exuberant blue eyes, but I have no idea how to go about it.

That is why I am writing to you, and writing this book. As I explore the phases of your life and mine, perhaps this journey will help me recapture your easy expectation. There is so much I don't remember, especially in the early years. As I share these pages with my close friends I know we will all learn more about ourselves. My friends and I have already helped each other through so many dark times. That is the other reason I have decided to turn the exploration into a book: my hope that it will resonate with other women, sparking them to begin a journey of their own. Books have always sustained me, and you. It would be very fulfilling to know that sharing my struggle to find you through writing might inspire women I don't even know.

Please come back and help me. I will not shy away from what you have to teach me. I want to know everything, so that I can again embrace what lies ahead as you so clearly did. It is certainly possible that what I have taken as truth, or clear memory, will actually turn out to be quite different from what I have assumed all these years. What I learn may free me from some of my assumptions about life, what it is supposed to be and look like, so that I can move forward on a path we have chosen for me together. I may find that life has possibilities I can no longer see because I long ago discounted their potential for me. There may be new adventures awaiting me somewhere down the road.

It is with this spirit of hope that I begin these chapters, and my brief notes to you.

Love,

Nancy

August 2nd, 2005

Dear Little Nancy,

Your favorite dress was the little blue cotton one with the puffed sleeves and round white collar bordered with a darker blue stripe. That's why you chose to wear it for your picture. You didn't really understand what the man was doing behind the stand where the camera was mounted, but you loved the way you looked, and kept reaching down with your hands to stroke the skirt because the cotton was so crisp. Your mother had ironed the dress that very morning so it was warm when she dropped it over your head. The collar kept sticking up but you didn't want to take the dress off. The collar was supposed to be that way, you told your mother. The only thing you were sorry about when you saw the finished picture was that your hair stood up as well, in a cowlick above your forehead. Your mother told you your hair was supposed to be that way, and you skipped off to play with the girl up the block. Of course you believed her.

I remember when you raced outside on a sunny afternoon waving a big spoon you had taken from the kitchen drawer, and clutching watermelon seeds you had saved from the night before in your other little fist. You chose to plant your seeds immediately below the living room window next to the front stoop, and set to work. I think you hummed as you worked, something I still do when I feel happy. When you came in to tell your mother what you had done, she was dismissive: watermelons couldn't grow there; not enough light. As it turned out she was right, but by the time you realized this was so, you were on to some other grand scheme. Painting by numbers, I think, which had become 'big', and which your mother also didn't like because it wasn't 'creative'.

What she didn't understand was that it got you started.

You loved make-believe. A friend around the corner had lots of grown-up clothes that almost fit you because her mother was tiny. She had discarded a pair of brown and white pumps the two of you found in a bag by the back door and repossessed, running upstairs to your friend's room before anyone could object. Where was her mother? Later she must have seen you wearing her old shoes, but she never stopped you or took them away.

The friend had blond hair that she usually wore in a ponytail. Yours was brown, and you wore two ponytails with a neat part in-between. You found some long muslin scarves somewhere, and wrapped them around each other in what you believed was an imitation of elegant adult gowns. She wore her own Mary Jane's, because she couldn't walk at all in her mother's shoes. You struggled but persevered in the pumps. You loved those shoes. I still like two-toned spring heels, though I no longer own any. They would look fairly ridiculous in my tiny country town. Women here wear Birkenstocks in the summer, hiking boots in fall and winter.

Why do I pay attention to those prohibitions? You didn't.

Love,

Nancy