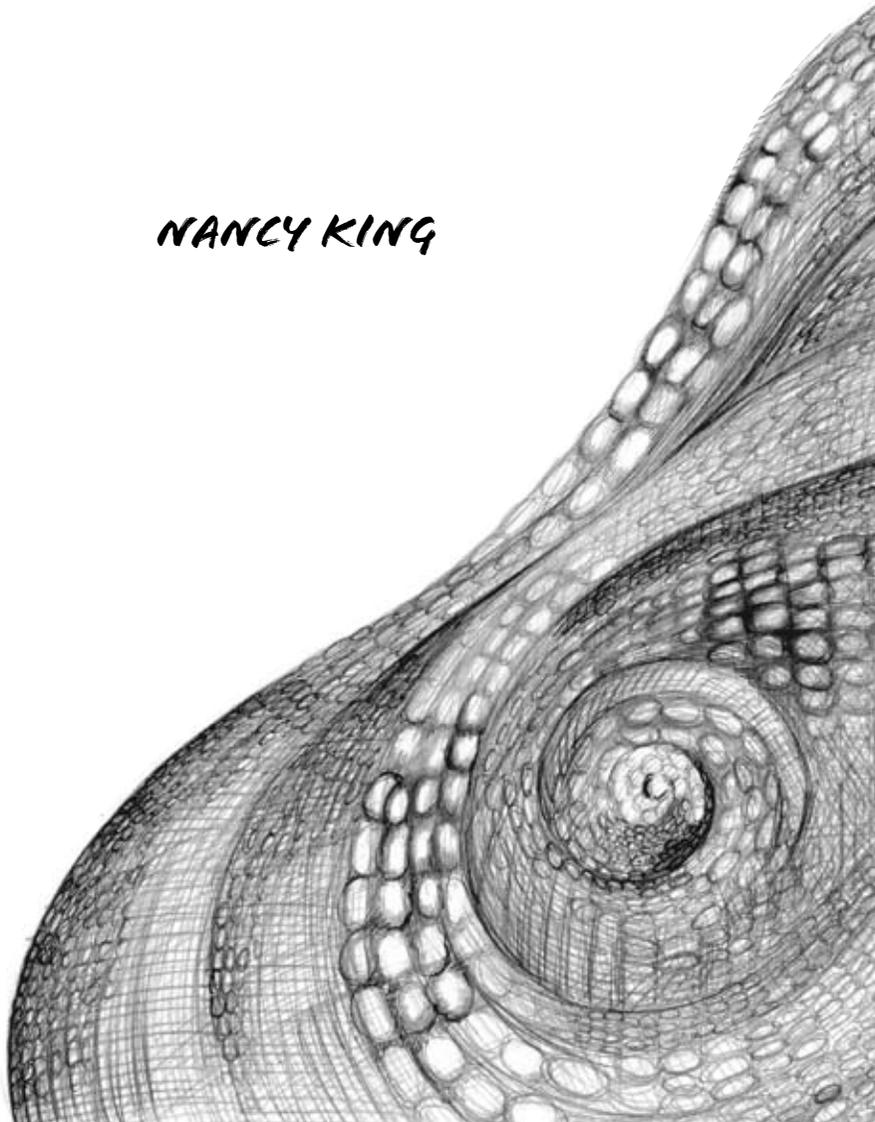


A **W** **OMAN**
ALKING

NANCY KING



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ONE

BIRTH OF THE STORYTELLER



In a time long ago, in a place far away, in a small village near the edge of a large lake, there lived a husband and wife who spent their days caring for their seven sons, farming the land, milking the few cows that managed to survive the barren hillsides, and collecting scraps of wood to burn for cooking and warmth.

When soldiers came, ransacking the village for food and young men to serve in the army, the couple hid their children, keeping them safe from the marauders. Despite the parent's care, when sickness ran as rampant through the village as a river rushes towards the sea, all of the couple's seven sons died. In time, a daughter was born, small and weak, yet she lived. Growing up, the girl felt the sorrow and despair of her parents, the loss of their sons, the burden of being their only surviving child.

For many years, the small family lived their lives, each day much like the next. One night, as they gathered for their evening meal, the old parents seemed more fragile and troubled than usual. At last their daughter broke the thick silence. "Why did you tell the butcher I could not marry him?" The parents turned away from her and from each other. She waited for them to speak; the stillness felt unbearable.

"It is not possible," replied her father.

"We have tried to find another way. There is none," responded her mother.

"What is wrong? Surely you can tell me what is bothering you. We have been through many difficult times together," urged their daughter.

"These troubles are not to be shared with a young girl," said her father.

"Girls my age and younger are married, with children of their own," she said bitterly. "I want to marry the butcher."

"We do not need to talk about this."

"Yes, Papa, we do."

"The matter is closed," he said sharply. Looking at his wife, his eyes silently pleaded for her help.

Her mother spoke with difficulty. "Perhaps the time has come to talk. Our sons, your brothers, are dead. Only you, our daughter, lives to do what must be done." Once again there was a long, heavy silence. Tears filled the old woman's eyes. She opened her mouth to speak but no words came. Her husband's eyes were full of pain.

The young woman looked at her parents, who seemed to be slipping away from her even as she watched. "Please," she begged, "let me ease your burdens."

Her father stood up, quietly crying, looking at the woman who had been his wife and companion for more years than he could remember. He turned to his daughter. "You do not know what you ask."

"I will never know unless you tell me."

"She is right, husband, it is time. We can wait no longer."

With difficulty, the old man walked to the far corner of the room where he opened a small door in a cupboard, removing a piece of dark red cloth, the remnant of an old dress. Slowly, he made his way to the table where his wife and daughter sat. Carefully spreading out the cloth, he hesitated for a moment, as if to gather strength. Before moving, he took a deep breath and then returned to the corner, pried up two loose floorboards and took out a dark wooden box that he put on the cloth. Struggling to keep going, his heart as heavy as his legs were old, he walked back to the corner and removed a large brown sack of loosely woven material and an old book. He handled them reverently, as if they were too valuable to touch, gently placing them on the red cloth. Lost in time, he stood staring at them, as if remembering when he first saw them.

A sudden noise made him jump. Moving as fast as he could, he put the loose boards back in place, then picked up the book and hid it under his shirt. Holding it to his chest, he watched the door, ready to defend his treasures against all odds. "Do not open the door!" he whispered.

Despite her father's protest, his daughter opened it, looked out, and then closed the door gently. "It is the wind, Papa. The wind blew down a branch." The old man went to the door and listened until he was satisfied all was well.



Only then did he move to the table cradling the objects, reluctant to put them down. He looked at them for a long time, not ready to face his daughter.

“Speak, Papa, please,” she urged.

“Husband, she is right. We must tell her everything, now, before it is too late.”

The old man cleared his throat, and even then there was an agonizing silence before he spoke. “My father was a storyteller. My mother told me about his life, how he walked from village to village, telling stories of what was, what had been, and what might yet be. People looked forward to his storytelling because he was so full of joy and life. Yet even his goodness could not protect him.” The old man hesitated. “Perhaps there is no need to tell this story.”

“You must, husband. She needs to know what happened.”

The old man nodded, still reluctant to speak. “One night, as he was walking past a small stream, my father heard cries for help and rushed to where the sounds were coming from. A group of young men were battering a woman, trying to force her to the ground. My father yelled at them to stop, but when they saw him, they attacked, beating him savagely. The young woman tried to help fend off the attackers but the men knocked her down. My father kept fighting though there were too many against him. Soon, he felt nothing. A deep, thick, blackness descended upon him.

“When my father awoke, the bright sun hurt his eyes. His body ached. His tongue felt thick and useless. He tried to sit up but collapsed. He tried to call out, but made no sound. Helpless, he lay waiting to die, hoping the end would soon come.

“Yet this was not to be. The woman, who had survived the attack by hiding in the bushes until the men had gone, stayed to help the man who had saved her life. She wiped his forehead with cool wet cloths, fed him the small amounts of food he could swallow. She cared for him, tenderly putting drops of water on his lips, bathing his wounds, healing his injuries. She would not help him lose his unwilling battle with life and death. For many days he lay by the side of the stream, hidden in the bushes.

“Although he could feel his strength return as the pain lessened, no matter how he tried, he could make no sound. The words in his head refused to live in the world. The young woman comforted him. ‘I can see you are growing stronger. You will soon be walking.’

