

Yuwei Dou

10th grade

Amador Valley High School

Becoming Nancy

Now that I live in America and attend a California high school, I look back on my experiences in Beijing like someone remembering a dream. At age thirteen, I lived on the fifth floor of Ya Qing Court, a grey apartment building with many windows that overlooked the street. There, we called the smog over the city the yellow dragon because it made the sky perpetually yellow, and people often wore masks outside. A few yang trees sat across the street in a courtyard. On the ground floors of apartment buildings were shops where vendors from the country sold candied fruit called tanghulu and guokui pork pancake. Men on bicycles sold SIM cards and newspapers. Other people sold vegetables in commons like shengcai, hong luo bo, and hongshu. Elderly people brought their grandchildren to play opera songs on their erhu, a Chinese violin, and collected money in a hat. Multi-colored awnings always flapped in the wind, and old men sat in their rickshaws waiting to carry passengers to their destinations. Down the street, my school was a complex of sterile white buildings that resembled a jail. Whenever I left the streets and entered the gates of No. 141 middle school, I felt as if I were leaving freedom and entering a courthouse where a strict jury would judge me.

In that school, our teachers were our guides, judges, prosecutors, and executioners. They wielded immense power. If students performed in the top ten percent in their grade, the teachers would receive 500 rmb for each student, which amounted to 50,000 rmb or close to \$8,000 USD

a month. However, students were not perfect, which meant that the teachers saw dollar signs as incentives to beat the children, or torture them in other ways. Teachers also wielded the power that determined whether students could attend high school. As a result, I viewed my teachers as devils. One winter, I made Ms. Liu's face turn red when I privately corrected her use of future tense in English. She sent me outside without a coat, and I stood there for twelve hours shivering in the snow. Often children stood with me who were also sent outside to stand in the snow. Sometimes I could see a hundred children, standing in a line outside, shivering, contemplating their mistakes.

In school, I knew a girl named Nancy. She was the kind of girl who would not eat her hot pot and dumplings outside like the other women while the men ate inside, as was common in Chinese culture. She insisted on eating at the table with the men. She loved hip hop dancing and ping pong. She was the captain of the ping pong team, and was the most striking girl in the eighth grade. She was the tallest girl in our school and had big brown eyes and looked like Zhang Ziyi, a Chinese movie star known for playing the romantic lead. Almost everyone of us wore glasses except Nancy—our eyes hurt so much from the long hours staring at biology, math, and history textbooks. While the rest of us left our hair black, Nancy died her hair golden. Her legs were pale and long. On her, the school uniform looked like high-fashion. Nancy always smelled like laundry detergent, as if her clothes were cleaner than ours. Unlike most of us, she was an Opera God, meaning she was kind and good and gave everyone luck. Each day, she would encourage her friends in Chinese: “今天心情真不错，加油，加油，祝你有美好的一天！” *It's a perfect new day. Keep working hard! Have a good day!* She said these words because we lived in a bamboo-steamer-like environment, where every kind word was like a cure for death.

Naturally, she didn't belong in this school in Beijing, where each day began with students' sweeping the classroom floor at 5:30 in the morning, and ended with sweeping the floor at 9:30 at night. Among us, Nancy was like the tiger locked in the zoo. While the rest of us understood our cages, Nancy seemed to quietly pace crazily. We all should have noticed when she began to change.

One day, she stopped smiling. When the teacher called on her, she used to say, "I'm sorry, I don't know the answer. Could you please tell me?" But then that day, when the teacher asked her, "What is k for the function: $y=x+2$?" She stood up and said nothing. Briefly, I thought she was having her period, but then I was too worried about my own problems to think about her.

On a Wednesday that week, when we arrived at the school, news that Nancy was missing spread quickly on the campus. That day, the rain and clouds converged to form a grey dragon in the sky. The whole day, students didn't notice her absence as something important. Even our counselor ate her sandwich in her window seat and watched television operas. All of us students secretly thought Nancy had run away to another city to have fun, like Holden in *Catcher in the Rye*, and she would be back at the end of the week ready for the next midterm. But Nancy's tall, lean figure on campus remained noticeably absent.

Two days later, I read about her in the Beijing city newspaper: "This delinquent girl gave her middle school a bad reputation. She didn't want to study and instead made her parents worry for her. All the middle schoolers, please remember, don't learn bad behavior from delinquents! Go back to your desk to do your studies. Midterms are coming!" They didn't mention Nancy's name to protect her identity, but we all knew.

I heard rumors that Nancy was staying at the end of a dark street in a small shabby motel, where mice made their home behind the baseboards. The sign had already broken during a big storm, but it still showed “Welcome” in unlit letters. From traffic and pollution, the outside wall of the motel long ago turned from white to dirty yellow and was covered by patches of small ads. From her boyfriend, I found out that Nancy was spending her days smoking marijuana, playing games on her phone, and eating the 3-for-\$1 mysterious-meat pancakes sold on the street.

While riding the bus one day to the library, I passed the same motel and saw Nancy wearing our school’s uniform, but it was oil stained. Her pants looked wet as if she’d washed them but didn’t have a dryer. Without shoes on, she was standing at the door of her motel room. She gazed straight ahead, and her normally happy eyes looked as if they held a secret. Her long hair looked like that of a homeless woman. For weeks, she stayed there in that terrible motel, skipping school, smoking marijuana, and setting a bad example for all of us. She was my hero.

When our teachers weren’t around, some of us said quietly to each other, “I want to be Nancy, even for one day. One hour. So I can stop studying for just a little while.” When we said those words, our faces looked like those of mischievous, scared children. Secretly, we spoke about the joy of playing soccer on a field under the pleasant sunshine or riding the Cinderella’s Secret Palace at Disneyland in Shanghai.

But our words changed when teachers’ pets interjected: “Nancy was such a bad girl. Ms. Lee cannot get the extra prize this month for being a good teacher. We will never be like Nancy!” But secretly, we were all Nancy. We all felt that hidden desire to throw away our futures to go lie in some dingy motel, where life was devoid of pressure, where mysterious meat

pancakes were better than egg tarts from Crazy Bakery and unending school. To us, that terrible, frightening life was better than the one we lived every day.

The situation changed when the principal cornered Nancy's boyfriend and threatened to beat him if he didn't tell her where Nancy was hiding out. Pretty soon, the police were dragging Nancy into the principal's office. I remember watching the armed officers escort her across the blacktop to the office. Like a criminal, she looked at her feet the whole time. Her face looked sick, weak, dirty, and wild. I could see a tear in her shirt and her pants, as if she'd run through trees or something worse to escape judgment. As if she had been willing to risk harm rather than return.

Later I heard that the principal beat Nancy with her bare hands, screaming, "You've hurt our reputation! Now the government is punishing us by taking money from our school!" When Nancy arrived home, her dad beat her so angrily that he injured her leg. Beatings were normal in China. Parents and teachers beat their children as a way of teaching them life experience. Later that week, at her apartment, Nancy stood on the ledge of the window, but her parents stopped her. She tried to grab a knife, but her parents took her to the hospital, where she lived in a small, dark, windowless room for seven days, like an animal in a cage.

I never saw Nancy again and she never returned to school, but we still talk about her. She lives on in my mind, and I'm sure she lives on in the minds of other students who want freedom. Sometimes when I study biology for 20 hours straight and I feel evil in my brain, I throw my book across the room. I turn on my music, and for ten minutes I become Nancy. I become her.