



Jealous- Hearted Me

stories by

Nancy Huddleston Packer

Jealous-Hearted Me

Jealous- Hearted Me

And Other Stories



JOHN DANIEL AND COMPANY
SANTA BARBARA / 1997

Previous publications:

“Jealous-Hearted Me” in *Southern Review*

“I Never Said a Word” in *Southwest Review*

“The Boy Friend” in *The Stanford Magazine*

“Mosquitoes” in *Epoch*

“Ecuador” in *Southwest Review*

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Printed in the United States of America

Published by John Daniel & Company

A division of Daniel and Daniel, Publishers, Inc.

Post Office Box 21922

Santa Barbara, CA 93121

Book design: Eric Larson

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Packer, Nancy Huddleston.

Jealous hearted me : stories / Nancy Huddleston Packer.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-880284-20-0 (pbk. alk. paper)

ISBN 1-880284-24-3 (cloth alk. paper)

I. Title.

PS3566.A318J4 1997

813'.54—dc20

96-9621

CIP

For Gloria and Bill Broder

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Jealous-Hearted Me

AFTER Poppa passed on, I thought for sure Momma would come live with me and Lloyd in Montgomery. Poppa had been house-bound so long, she deserved a good time. What with my Sara a junior at the University of Montevallo and my Carl working for a big construction firm in Mobile, I could devote myself to Momma.

But she said, "I'm not going to transport my limbs and my trunk a hundred miles away from my roots to live in somebody else's dinky little back room."

"It isn't a dinky back room. Is it, Lloyd?" We have a wonderful big old house near downtown.

"Now, Jean," Lloyd said, "your momma knows what she wants." He just hates to get mixed up in it.

"If you want to live with me so bad," Momma said, in that little triumphant voice of hers, "you two can just move back to Birmingham. Plenty of nice rooms in my house."

"That'll be the day," Lloyd said. Lloyd loved Momma almost as much as I did, but of course he had his business to tend. He makes pup tents and plastic covers for toasters.

Momma tried living alone for a month, but she said she kept waking up in the middle of the night, hearing people rummaging around in the cellar. She wanted someone in the house with her. That's the way with Momma—she has to have it all her own way, no matter who is inconvenienced.

So Lloyd and I had to find her a companion, someone

grateful just to have a good home. The woman would have to be there every night, although Momma said she wouldn't mind coming to see us every once in a while, if Lloyd would pick her up when he had business in Birmingham. She said she would not ride in public conveyances, because people smelled bad and spat on the floor. Of course we would come to visit her every month as usual.

More than twenty women called about the advertisement we put in the newspaper. Momma said no to some over the telephone, claiming she knew they were ugly without seeing them, but we interviewed almost a dozen that Friday afternoon. One enormous woman all in pink—hair and skin and clothes, even a patch of dangling pink petticoat—just begged for the job. She said she was desperate. When she left, Momma said she didn't particularly want a desperado. Another woman from Oneonta had a face Lloyd said looked like a hatchet that had been used to chop cement, and she talked in a loud countrified voice. I couldn't stand that voice, Momma said. Another scratched so much we decided she'd bring fleas with her. A girl of eighteen showed up, popping her gum and winking. Just try to keep her in every night.

Toward evening a frail, pretty little woman about forty years old came knocking at the door. She said her name was Nina, and she stood with her hands clasped, a shy, timid look on her face. I thought she must have fallen on hard times, hadn't grown up in them.

"Please do come in," I said.

When Momma came down the steps, Nina stood up from the settee, and for a moment I thought she was going to curtsy. "Now, honey, you just sit right back down and let me look at you," Momma said. "Isn't she pretty, Jean?"

I said, "Yes." I decided she was so delicate she might be tubercular.

She said she was from Memphis and had come to Birmingham after she separated from her husband. She didn't have any children. She said she wasn't destitute or homeless—

she sold cosmetics at a department store in one of the suburbs, and she had a studio apartment that she could call her own even though the furniture was just ugly rented stuff. What she wanted was companionship. An acquaintance of hers who worked at the beauty parlor where Momma got her weekly shampoo and set had told her Momma was looking for someone.

"My friend says you're the sweetest woman, just so friendly, and not a bit of a snob."

It is true. Momma can be very open and friendly and gracious, and wherever she went people loved her. Grocery clerks greeted her on the street. The postman stopped to chat. Even the garbage men cried "Howyadoing, Mrs. Blaine?" as they rattled away. I didn't think it was quite right for Momma to stand at the window waving to garbage men. It seemed to me she spread her affections a little thin. I inherited Poppa's standoffishness.

"I know I'd love it here," Nina said, ducking her head and glancing through her lashes at Momma. "I mean, if you'd have me."

I said, "We've seen a lot of people today. Tomorrow morning we'll telephone the one that's best for Momma."

Momma said, "I know already who's best." She batted her eyes as if she were a teenager, and Nina batted right back. "I believe we'll make just a wonderful team. What do you think, honey?"

I thought she was talking to me, but before I could answer Nina piped in with "I do devoutly hope so." Seeing the way they looked at each other, you would have thought they were long-lost best friends.

That night I went into Momma's room. She was lying up in her four-poster with its pink-and-blue ruffles and ribbons hanging down from the top. Her hair was covered with clamps that had little teeth that make your hair wavy, and she was crocheting some little square of something, whipping the

needle in and out. She was always doing handwork.

"Momma," I said, "I don't know about this Nina."

"You just met her today," she said, "and you're not too quick about people."

"I liked that woman from Oneonta," I said. "Seemed straight and honest. I know her voice was irritating, with that hillbilly clanging, but you wouldn't have to hear it much. You aren't looking for a *friend*."

"I wouldn't mind having one, though. You know how your father was those last years. He didn't much like for me to be too cozy with anyone."

"She seems sickly."

"Just because she's not a big horse."

"I am not a horse," I said. "I am a normal 18, not even a half size." I inherited my size from poppa's side. By the time I was eleven, I was bigger all around than Momma.

"My goodness, Jean, I didn't say you were a horse. I've never in my life known anybody so dag sensitive."

"I just didn't much like her," I said.

Momma laughed. "Now don't be jealous. Turn out the overhead when you leave."

"Jealous!" I said. "Why would I be jealous?"

Momma put the crochet on the bedside table and snapped off the lamp. "It's just your nature," she said.

She meant my brother Thad. He is six years older than I am, and everybody has always said he was Momma's favorite—he took after her side of the family. He is an officer in the US Army and stationed all over the world. He didn't get home very often, but did she evermore kill the fatted calf when he came. If he had wanted to pee in my ear, Momma would have held me down. And of course if *he* had wanted Momma to live with him, she would have sprouted wings to get there. Except of course his wife wouldn't have allowed it for one minute—Dinah's not easy the way Lloyd is.

Nina wasn't to come until the following Sunday. I didn't par-

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ticularly want to be there when she moved in, but it was my duty to stay nights with Momma until she did. So Lloyd took the bus back to Montgomery and left me his car.

Sunday was a lovely day, the kind Alabama gets only in late May, a breeze as sweet as sugar water. After church, Momma and I sat on the front porch in the glider. About one o'clock, a taxi stopped and Nina got out.

"A taxi?" I said. "She doesn't have any friends to drive her?"

But Momma was already down the walk, calling, "Welcome, honey, welcome." They hugged each other. The taxi driver opened the trunk and set two enormous suitcases on the sidewalk. Nina paid the driver and then picked up one of the suitcases. When she reached for the other one, Momma shouldered her aside and picked it up. Nina just laughed. Of course, I ran down the walk and snatched the suitcase from Momma.

After we had worked the luggage up the stairway and into Thad's old room, I said, "Well, I guess I'll head for home." Momma didn't say a word. I asked her to walk out to the porch with me, and I whispered, "Now if things don't work out, I'm only as far away as a telephone call."

She didn't even wait for me to drive away before she was back in the house with Nina.

When I got to Montgomery, the first thing I did after giving Lloyd his hello-kiss was call Momma. When Poppa was so sick, I got in the habit of calling Momma every night. It only cost a dollar or so, and that was 365 dollars a year worth of peace of mind. I let the phone ring eleven times and still no answer. I figured they went to the store to get some groceries. But I didn't get an answer when I tried again an hour later.

By ten o'clock, I was beginning to fret. Lloyd said, "Don't be silly, Jean. You think that woman's killed her or something?"

I said, "I wouldn't be all that surprised, to tell the truth. There's something about her I don't much trust."

Momma finally answered at ten-forty-five. "Where on earth have you been?" I asked her.

"We went to dinner and the picture show," she said.

"Why," I said, you haven't been to the movies in twenty years."

"It's about time, then, isn't it?" she answered. "Did you have anything special on your mind?"

"Dr. Bill says you've been under a lot of strain and you should take it easy."

"That's not what he said," Momma answered. "He said I should have some fun. And believe me, Jean, Nina's more fun than a passel of puppies."

After that, it was just one big carnival at Momma's. I never knew Momma to be so giddy and social. Nina taught her how to play canasta, and they had canasta parties with neighbors and some of her cousins she hadn't socialized with since Poppa got sick. One night they had a bingo party for twenty people. I could hardly get Momma on the phone. The line would be busy and then she'd say call me later, and later nobody would answer. The times we talked, her whole conversation was Nina Nina Nina. Nina and I went to the picture show, Nina and I had the Crawfords over, Nina and I played canasta with Cousin Charles and his wife.

"Doesn't Nina have any friends of her own?" I asked.

"You know she's new in town, Jean, but my friends just love her to death because she's so sweet and thoughtful. Yesterday she brought me some liquid stuff from the store. It pulls your skin tight and youngs up your face. Nina says we have to get my skin looking as girlish as I feel."

"I hope you're not overdoing," I said. "People your age have to watch out."

"The thing they have to watch out for," Momma said in that little quick voice of hers, "is our daughters trying to put us in the grave before we're dead."

I knew I was going to cry, and so I just hung up the phone. It was ringing within a minute, but I wouldn't answer

until it hit the third one

"Now, listen, Jean," mean to hurt
your feelings, but you know how you are."

"I am not how I am," I said.

"You don't need to worry about Nina," she said.

"I am not worried about anybody named Nina," I said. "I am worried about my mother. I am worried that my mother is overdoing and will pay the price."

"The price I'm paying is I feel ten years younger. Nina says I have more get-up-and-go than anyone she knows."

If she had called to apologize, she had a mighty poor way of doing it. I didn't say anything, and pretty soon I heard her calling away from the phone, "Just a minute, honey," and that was the end of the conversation.

The next Saturday Lloyd and I drove to Birmingham for our monthly visit. When we arrived, Momma and Nina were sitting at a brand new card table working a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, some kind of gloomy painting from old times. I never knew Momma to do such a thing before.

"My goodness," I said.

"Don't talk," she said, flapping her hand at us. "We're concentrating. We've about got it licked, haven't we, Nina?"

Lloyd sat down and to indicate he didn't mind waiting, he began cleaning his fingernails. All he does is move the dirt from under one nail to under another until he gathers a little ball, and then he flicks it away. I hate it when he does that, but he didn't look at me.

"Eureka!" Nina cried. "Here's the key piece, that Duke's face we been looking for." Momma stared at Nina as though they had discovered gold. Nina handed Momma the piece, and Momma set it in and gave a little squeal of delight. Then Nina set in a piece and then Momma and then it was Nina's turn again. They were hand over fist putting in pieces.

I said, "We have a reservation for one o'clock."

Momma sighed. "I reckon we can take a recess. But I've

got so I dearly love jigsaw puzzles.”

“You never much cared for wasting time like that before,” I said. “You’d be crocheting or embroidering or doing something else useful.”

She laughed. “I guess this proves you *can* teach an old dog new tricks if you have the right teacher. Come on, Nina. Let’s go.”

I looked at Lloyd. We hadn’t invited Nina. But Lloyd just inspected his fingernails.

Nina smiled at Momma in that simpering way she had and said, “Oh, Clara, I won’t go. I know you want to be with your family just by yourself.” Clara! Lloyd had never called her Clara once in the nearly twenty-six years he’d known her.

“Isn’t she silly?” Momma said, and after a quick look at me, Lloyd agreed she sure was.

We had a really nice restaurant picked out on the top of Red Mountain, overlooking the city. When we got there I said, “I’m sure we’ll have to wait—we’re one more than our reservation.”

But Lloyd gave the fellow a five-dollar bill and we were seated right away, at a window table. Ever the good host, Lloyd made sure he and I sat with our backs to the view.

“Now don’t let that sun get on you,” Momma said to Nina. “Just look at her skin, Jean. Like a baby’s.”

“Nice,” I said. It was true. Her skin was white and soft. That was no surprise to me—she hadn’t spent half of each summer picking bugs off my hydrangeas and Lloyd’s roses and the other half sitting by the side of the YMCA swimming pool to make sure my children didn’t drown. She had nothing to look after but that skin.

All through lunch, when Momma and Nina weren’t ooh-ing and ah-ing over the view, they were talking about this movie and that party and who said what and what they really meant. And Lloyd was laughing at everything either of them said. I didn’t say a word because I didn’t want Momma to say right there in front of Nina for me to quit being jealous. A lot