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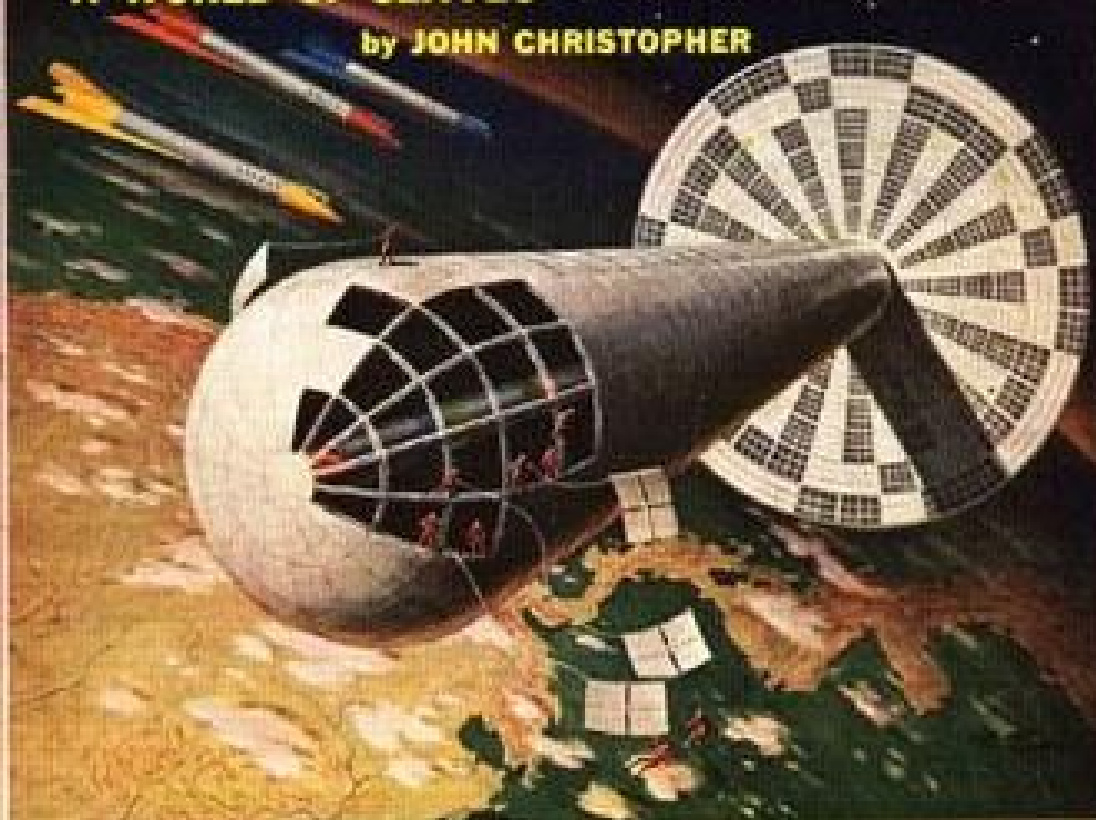
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Nancy

by

Cordwainer Smith

a pseudonym for

Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger

First appeared in *Satellite Science Fiction*, March 1959
under the title *The Nancy Routine*.

Two men faced Gordon Greene as he came into the room. The young aide was a nonentity. The general was not. The commanding general sat where he should, at his own desk. It was placed squarely in the room, and yet the infinite courtesy of the general was shown by the fact that the blinds were so drawn that the light did not fall directly into the eyes of the person interviewed.

At that time the colonel general was Wenzel Wallenstein, the first man ever to venture into the very deep remoteness of space. He had not reached a star. Nobody had, at that time, but he had gone farther than any man had ever gone before.

Wallenstein was an old man and yet the count of his years was not high. He was less than ninety in a period in which many men lived to one hundred and fifty. The thing that made Wallenstein look old was the suffering which came from mental strain, not the kind which came from anxiety and competition, not the kind which came from ill health.

It was a subtler kind—a sensitivity which created its own painfulness.

Yet it was real.

Wallenstein was as stable as men came, and the young lieutenant was astonished to find that at his first meeting with the commander in chief his instinctive emotional reaction should be one of quick sympathy for the man who commanded the entire organization.

“Your name?”

The lieutenant answered, “Gordon Greene.”

“Born that way?”

“No, sir.”

“What was your name originally?”

“Giordano Verdi.”

“Why did you change? Verdi is a great name too.”

“People just found it hard to pronounce, sir. I followed along the best I could.”

“I kept my name,” said the old general. “I suppose it is a matter of taste.”

The young lieutenant lifted his hand, left hand, palm outward, in the new salute which had been devised by the psychologists. He knew that this meant military courtesy could be passed by for the moment and that the subordinate officer was requesting permission to speak as man to man. He knew the salute and yet in these surroundings he did not altogether trust it.

The general’s response was quick. He countersigned, left hand, palm outward.

The heavy, tired, wise, strained old face showed no change of expression. The general was alert. Mechanically friendly, his eyes followed

the lieutenant. The lieutenant was sure that there was nothing behind those eyes, except world upon world of inward troubles.

The lieutenant spoke again, this time on confident ground.

“Is this a special interview, General? Do you have something in mind for me? If it is, sir, let me warn you, I have been declared to be psychologically unstable. Personnel doesn’t often make a mistake but they may have sent me in here under error.”

The general smiled. The smile itself was mechanical. It was a control of muscles, not a quick spring of human emotion.

“You will know well enough what I have in mind when we talk together, Lieutenant. I am going to have another man sit with me and it will give you some idea of what your life is leading you toward. You know perfectly well that you have asked for deep space and that so far as I’m concerned you’ve gotten it. The question is now, ‘Do you really want it?’ Do you want to take it? Is that all that you wanted to abridge courtesy for?”

“Yes, sir,” said the lieutenant.

“You didn’t have to call for the courtesy sign for that kind of a question. You could have asked me even within the limits of service. Let’s not get too psychological. We don’t need to, do we?”

Again the general gave the lieutenant a heavy smile.

Wallenstein gestured to the aide, who sprang to attention.

Wallenstein said, “Send him in.”

The aide said, “Yes, sir.”

The two men waited expectantly. With a springy, lively, quick, happy step a strange lieutenant entered the room.

Gordon Greene had never seen anybody quite like this lieutenant. The lieutenant was old, almost as old as the general. His face was cheerful and unlined. The muscles of his cheeks and forehead bespoke happiness, relaxation, an assured view of life. The lieutenant wore the three highest decorations of his service. There weren’t any others higher and yet there he was, an old man and still a lieutenant.

Lieutenant Greene couldn’t understand it. He didn’t know who this man was. It was easy enough for a young man to be a lieutenant but not for a man in his seventies or eighties. People that age were colonels, or retired, or out.

Or they had gone back to civilian life.

Space was a young man’s game.

The general himself arose in courtesy to his contemporary. Lieutenant Greene’s eyes widened. This too was odd. The general was not known to violate courtesy at all irregularly.

“Sit down, sir,” said the strange old lieutenant.

The general sat.

“What do you want with me now? Do you want to talk about the Nancy routine one more time?”

“The Nancy routine?” asked the general blindly.

“Yes, sir. It’s the same story I’ve told these youngsters before. You’ve heard it and I’ve heard it, there’s no use of pretending.”

The strange lieutenant said, “My name’s Karl Vonderleyen. Have you ever heard of me?”

“No, sir,” said the young lieutenant.

The old lieutenant said, “You will.”

“Don’t get bitter about it, Karl,” said the general. “A lot of other people have had troubles, besides you. I went and did the same things you did, and I’m a general. You might at least pay me the courtesy of envying me.”

“I don’t envy you, General. You’ve had your life, and I’ve had mine. You know what you’ve missed, or you think you do, and I know what I’ve had, and I’m sure I do.”

The old lieutenant paid no more attention to the commander in chief. He turned to the young man and said,

“You’re going to go out into space and we are putting on a little act, a vaudeville act. The general didn’t get any Nancy. He didn’t ask for Nancy. He didn’t turn for help. He got out into the Up-and-Out, he pulled through it. Three years of it. Three years that are closer to three million years, I suppose. He went through hell and he came back. Look at his face. He’s a success. He’s an utter, blasted success, sitting there worn out, tired, and, it would seem, hurt. Look at me. Look at me carefully, Lieutenant. I’m a failure. I’m a lieutenant and the Space Service keeps me that way.”

The commander in chief said nothing, so Vonderleyen talked on.

“Oh, they will retire me as general, I suppose, when the time comes. I’m not ready to retire. I’d just as soon stay in the Space Service as anything else. There is not much to do in this world. I’ve had it.”

“Had what, sir?” Lieutenant Greene dared to ask.

“I found Nancy. He didn’t,” he said. “That’s as simple as it is.”

The general cut back into the conversation. “It’s not that bad and it’s not that simple, Lieutenant Greene. There seems to be something a little wrong with Lieutenant Vonderleyen today. The story is one we have to tell you and it is something you have to make up your own mind on. There is no regulation way of handling it.”

The general looked very sharply at Lieutenant Greene.

“Do you know what we have done to your brain?”

“No, sir.”

“Have you heard of the *sokta* virus?”

“The what, sir?”

“The *sokta* virus. *Sokta* is an ancient word, gets its name from Chosenmal, the language of Old Korea. That was a country west of where Japan used to be. It means ‘maybe’ and it is a ‘maybe’ that we put inside your head. It is a tiny crystal, more than microscopic. It’s there. There is actually a machine on the ship, not a big one because we can’t waste space; it has resonance to detonate the virus. If you detonate *sokta*, you will be like him. If you don’t, you will be like me—assuming, in either case, that you live. You may not live and you may not get back, in which case what we are talking about is academic.”

The young man nerved himself to ask, “What does this do to me? Why do you make this big fuss over it?”

“We can’t tell you too much. One reason is it is not worth talking about.”

“You mean you really can’t, sir?”

The general shook his head sadly and wisely.

“No, I missed it, he got it, and yet it somehow gets out beyond the limits of talking.”

At this point while he was telling the story, many years later, I asked my cousin, “Well, Gordon, if they said you can’t talk about it, how can you?”

“Drunk, man, drunk,” said the cousin. “How long do you think it took me to wind myself up to this point? I’ll never tell it again—never again. Anyhow, you’re my cousin, you don’t count. And I promised Nancy I wouldn’t tell anybody.”

“Who’s Nancy?” I asked him.

“Nancy’s what it’s all about. That is what the story is. That’s what those poor old goops were trying to tell me in the office. They didn’t know. One of them, he had Nancy; the other one, he hadn’t.”

“Is Nancy a real person?”

With that he told me the rest of the story.

The interview was harsh. It was clean, stark, simple, direct. The alternatives were flat. It was perfectly plain that Wallenstein wanted Greene to come back alive. It was actual space command policy to bring the man back as a live failure instead of letting him become a dead hero. Pilots were not that common. Furthermore, morale would be worsened if men were told to go out on suicide operations.

The whole thing was psychological and before Greene got out of the room he was more confused than when he went in.

They kept telling them, both of them in their different ways—the general happily, the old lieutenant unhappily—that this was serious. The grim old

general was very cheerful about telling him. The happy lieutenant kept being very sympathetic.

Greene himself wondered why he could be so sympathetic toward the commanding general and be so perfectly carefree about a failed old lieutenant. His sympathies should have been the other way around.

Fifteen hundred million miles later, four months later in ordinary time, four lifetimes later by the time which he'd gone through, Greene found out what they were talking about. It was an old psychological teaching. The men died if they were left utterly alone. The ships were designed to be protected against that. There were two men on each ship. Each ship had a lot of tapes, even a few quite unnecessary animals; in this case a pair of hamsters had been included on the ship. They had been sterilized, of course, to avoid the problem of feeding the young, but nevertheless they made a little family of their own in a miniature of life's happiness on Earth.

Earth was very far away.

At that point, his copilot died.

Everything that had threatened Greene then came true.

Greene suddenly realized what they were talking about.

The hamsters were his one hope. He thrust his face close to their cage and talked to them. He attributed moods to them. He tried to live their lives with them, all as if they were people.

As if he, himself, were a part of people still alive and not out there with the screaming silence beyond the thin wall of metal. There was nothing to do except to roam like a caged animal in machinery which he would never understand.

Time lost its perspectives. He knew he was crazy and he knew that by training he could survive the partial craziness. He even realized that the instability in his own personality which had made him think that he wouldn't fit the Space Service probably contributed to the hope that went in with service to this point.

His mind kept coming back to Nancy and to the *sokta* virus.

What was it they had said?

They had told him that he could waken Nancy, whoever Nancy was. Nancy was no pet name of his. And yet somehow or other the virus always worked. He only needed to move his head toward a certain point, press the resonating stud on the wall, one pressure, his mission would fail, he would be happy, he would come home alive.

He couldn't understand it. Why such a choice?

It seemed three thousand years later that he dictated his last message back to Space Service. He didn't know what would happen. Obviously, that old lieutenant, Vonderleyen, or whatever his name was, was still alive.

Equally obviously the general was alive. The general had pulled through. The lieutenant hadn't.

And now, Lieutenant Greene, fifteen hundred million miles out in space, had to make his choice. He made it. He decided to fail.

But he wanted, as a matter of discipline, to speak up for the man who was failing and he dictated, for the records of the ship when it got back to Earth, a very simple message concluding with an appeal for justice.

“. . . and so, gentlemen, I have decided to activate the stud. I do not know what the reference to Nancy signifies. I have no concept of what the *sokta* virus will do except that it will make me fail. For this I am heartily ashamed. I regret the human weakness that has driven me to this. The weakness is human and you, gentlemen, have allowed for it. In this respect, it is not I who is failing, but the Space Service itself in giving me an authorization to fail. Gentlemen, forgive the bitterness with which I say *good-bye* to you in these seconds, but now I do say good-bye.”

He stopped dictating, blinked his eyes, took one last look at the hamsters—who might they be by the time the *sokta* virus went to work?—pressed the stud and leaned forward.

Nothing happened. He pressed the stud again.

The ship suddenly filled with a strange odor. He couldn't identify the odor. He didn't know what it was.

It suddenly came to him that this was new-mown hay with a slight tinge of geraniums, possibly of roses, too, on the far side. It was a smell that was common on the farm a few years ago where he had gone for a summer. It was the smell of his mother being on the porch and calling him back to a meal, and of himself, enough of a man to be indulgent even toward the woman in his own mother, enough of a child to turn happily back to a familiar voice.

He said to himself, “If this is all there is to that virus, I can take it and work on with continued efficiency.”

He added, “At fifteen hundred million miles out, and nothing but two hamsters for years of loneliness, a few hallucinations won't hurt me any.”

The door opened.

It couldn't open.

The door opened nevertheless.

At this point, Greene knew a fear more terrible than anything else he had ever encountered. He said to himself, “I'm crazy, I'm crazy,” and stared at the opening door.

A girl stepped in. She said, “Hello, you there. You know me, don't you?”

Greene said, “No, no, miss, who are you?”

The girl didn't answer. She just stood there and she gave him a smile.

She wore a blue serge skirt cut so that it had broad, vertical stripes, a neat little waist, a belt of the same material, a very simple blouse. She was not a strange girl and she was by no means a creature of outer space.

She was somebody he had known and known well. Perhaps loved. He just couldn't place her—not at that moment, not in that place.

She still stood staring at him. That was all.

It all came to him. Of course, she was Nancy. She was not just that Nancy they were talking about, she was *his* Nancy, his own Nancy he had always known and never met before.

He managed to pull himself together and say it to her,

“How do I know you if I don't know you? You're Nancy and I've known you all my life and I have always wanted to marry you. You are the girl I have always been in love with and I never saw you before. That's funny, Nancy. It's terribly funny. I don't understand it, do you?”

Nancy came over and put her hand on his forehead. It was a real little hand and her presence was dear and precious and very welcome to him. She said, “It's going to take a bit of thinking. You see, I am not real, not to anybody except you. And yet I am more real to you than anything else will ever be. That is what the *sokta* virus is, darling. It's me. I'm you.”

He stared at her.

He could have been unhappy but he didn't feel unhappy, he was so glad to have her there. He said,

“What do you mean? The *sokta* virus has made you? Am I crazy? Is this just a hallucination?”

Nancy shook her head and her pretty curls spun.

“It's not that. I'm simply every girl that you ever wanted. I am the illusion that you always wanted but I am you because I am in the depths of you. I am everything that your mind might not have encountered in life. Everything that you might have been afraid to dig up. Here I am and I'm going to stay. And as long as we are here in this ship with the resonance we will get along well.”

My cousin at this point began weeping. He picked up a wine flask and poured down a big glass of heavy Dago Red. For a while he cried. Putting his head on the table, he looked up at me and said, “It's been a long, long time. It's been a very long time and I still remember how she talked with me. And I see now why they say you can't talk about it. A man has got to be fearfully drunk to tell about a real life that he had and a good one, and a beautiful one and let it go, doesn't he?”

“That's right,” I said, to be encouraging.

Nancy changed the ship right away. She moved the hamsters. She changed the decorations. She checked the records. The work went on more efficiently than ever before.

But the home they made for themselves, that was something different. It had baking smells, and it had wind smells, and sometimes he would hear the rain although the nearest rain by now was one thousand six hundred million miles away, and there was nothing but the grating of cold silence on the cold, cold metal at the outside of the ship.

They lived together. It didn't take long for them to get thoroughly used to each other.

He had been born Giordano Verdi. He had limitations.

And the time came for them to get even more close than lover and lover. He said,

"I just can't take you, darling. That is not the way we can do it, even in space and not the way, even if you are not real. You are real enough to me. Will you marry me out of the prayer book?"

Her eyes lit up and her incomparable lips gleamed in a smile that was all peculiarly her own. She said, "Of course."

She flung her arms around him. He ran his fingers over the bones of her shoulder. He felt her ribs. He felt the individual strands of her hair brushing his cheeks. This was real. This was more real than life itself, yet some fool had told him that it was a virus—that Nancy didn't exist. If this wasn't Nancy, what was it? he thought.

He put her down and, alive with love and happiness, he read the prayer book. He asked her to make the responses. He said,

"I suppose I'm captain, and I suppose I have married you and me, haven't I, Nancy?"

The marriage went well. The ship followed an immense perimeter like that of a comet. It went far out. So far that the sun became a remote dot. The interference of the solar system had virtually no effect on the instruments.

Nancy came to him one day and said, "I suppose you know why you are a failure now."

"No," he said.

She looked at him gravely. She said,

"I think with your mind. I live in your body. If you die while on this ship, I die too. Yet as long as you live, I am alive and separate. That's funny, isn't it?"

"Funny," he said, an old new pain growing in his heart.

"And yet I can tell you something which I know with that part of your mind I use. I know without you that I am. I suppose I recognize your technical training and feel it somehow even though I don't feel the lack of it.

I had the education you thought I had and you wanted me to have. But do you see what's happening? We are working with our brain at almost half-power instead of one-tenth power. All your imagination is going into making me. All your extra thoughts are of me. I want them just as I want you to love me but there are none left over for emergencies and there is nothing left over for the Space Service. You are doing the minimum, that's all. Am I worth it?"

"Of course you are worth it, darling. You're worth anything that any man could ask of the sweetheart, and of love, and of a wife and a true companion."

"But don't you see? I am taking all the best of you. You are putting it into me and when the ship comes home there won't be any me."

In a strange way he realized that the drug was working. He could see what was happening to himself as he looked at his well-beloved Nancy with her shimmering hair and he realized the hair needed no prettifying or hairdos. He looked at her clothes and he realized that she wore clothes for which there was no space on the ship. And yet she changed them, delightfully, winsomely, attractively, day in and day out. He ate the food that he knew couldn't be on the ship. None of this worried him. And now he couldn't even be worried at the thought of losing Nancy herself. Any other thought he could have rejected from his subconscious mind and could have surrendered to the idea that it was not a hallucination after all.

This was too much. He ran his fingers through her hair. He said,

"I know I'm crazy, darling, and I know that you don't exist—"

"But I do exist. I am you. I am a part of Gordon Greene as surely as if I'd married you. I'll never die until you do because when you get home, darling, I'll drop back, back into your deeper mind but I'll live in your mind as long as you live. You can't lose me and I can't leave you and you can't forget me. And I can't escape to anyone except through your lips. That's why they talk about it. That's why it is such a strange thing."

"And that's where I know I'm wrong," stubbornly insisted Gordon. "I love you and I know you are a phantom and I know you are going away and I know we are coming to an end and it doesn't worry me. I'll be happy just being with you. I don't need a drink. I wouldn't touch a drug. Yet the happiness is here."

They went about their little domestic chores. They checked his graph paper, they stored the records, they put a few silly things into the permanent ship's record. They then toasted marshmallows before a large fire. The fire was in a handsome fireplace which did not exist. The flames couldn't have burned but they did. There weren't any marshmallows on the ship but they toasted them and enjoyed them anyhow.

That's the way their life went—full of magic, and yet the magic had no sting or provocation to it, no anger, no hopelessness, no despair.

They were a very happy couple.

Even the hamsters felt it. They stayed clean and plump. They ate their food willingly. They got over space nausea. They peered at him.

He let one of them, the one with the brown nose, out and let it run around the room. He said, "You're a real army character. You poor thing. Born for space and serving out here in it."

Only one other time did Nancy take up the question of their future. She said,

"We can't have children, you know. The *sokta* drug doesn't allow for that. And you may have children yourself but it is going to be funny having them if you marry somebody else with me always there just in the background. And I will be there."

They made it back to Earth. They returned.

As he stepped out of the gate, a harsh, weary medical colonel gave him one sharp glance. He said,

"Oh, we thought that had happened."

"What, sir?" said a plump and radiant Lieutenant Greene.

"You got Nancy," said the colonel.

"Yes, sir. I'll bring her right out."

"Go get her," said the colonel.

Greene went back into the rocket and he looked. There was no sign of Nancy. He came to the door astonished. He was still not upset. He said,

"Colonel, I don't seem to see her there but I'm sure that she's somewhere around."

The colonel gave him a strange, sympathetic, fatigued smile. "She always will be somewhere around, Lieutenant. You've done the minimum job. I don't know whether we ought to discourage people like you. I suppose you realize that you are frozen in your present grade. You'll get a decoration, Mission Accomplished. Mission successful, farther than anybody has gone before. Incidentally, Vonderleyen says he knows you and will be waiting over yonder. We have to take you into the hospital to make sure that you don't go into shock."

"At the hospital," said my cousin, "there was no shock."

He didn't even miss Nancy. How could he miss her when she hadn't left? She was always just around the corner, just behind the door, just a few minutes away.

At breakfast time he knew he'd see her for lunch. At lunch, he knew she'd drop by in the afternoon. At the end of the afternoon, he knew he'd have dinner with her.

He knew he was crazy. Crazy as he could be.

He knew perfectly well that there was no Nancy and never had been. He supposed that he ought to hate the *sokta* drug for doing that to him, but it brought its own relief.

The effect of Nancy was an immolation in perpetual hope, the promise of something that could never be lost, and a promise of something that cannot be lost is often better than a reality which can be lost.

That's all there was to it. They asked him to testify against the use of the *sokta* drug and he said,

"Me? Give up Nancy? Don't be silly."

"You haven't got her," said somebody.

"That's what you think," said my cousin, Lieutenant Greene.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
[The end of *Nancy* [*The Nancy Routine*] by Paul Myron Anthony Linebarger
(as Cordwainer Smith)]