

# EXCERPT FROM NOVEL

## TILL DEATH BY NANCY BAUER

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Faith kept a plastic trash bag in the car so that after any mishap she could protect the upholstery. Only two people could have noticed – the woman standing behind her and the checkout girl. She hoped they thought it was just gas she was emitting. But really, what did it matter? She herself was the one who was offended. She did carry the groceries into the house but only stopped to put the ice cream away before she retrieved her bathrobe from the bedroom and went to clean herself up.

While she was in the shower, the doorbell rang. After Graham died, she left the bathroom door open so she could hear the bell, and hung her bathrobe over the door so she could get into it quickly. She worried that with no one to answer it whoever it was might think she had died in her sleep and call the police.

This was the first time in the two months since Graham died that the doorbell had rung while she was in the shower. No one would expect her to be taking a shower so late in the afternoon. In her haste, she hadn't put on her shower cap, decided she might as well wash her hair. Get that chore out of the way. Be clean from top to toe. But now her hair was full of suds. She would have to ignore the doorbell.

Singing in the rain. Just singing in the rain. Da da da da da da da. I'm happy again. The doorbell ringer must have gone away. She sang the verse again, remembering the second line: What a glorious feeling. The clouds up above. Da da da da da da love. I'm in love?

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang again. Whoever it was wasn't going to go away. Someone wanting money? A delivery man? But he would just leave the package. Flowers? Then a hard thumping on the door. Who would be so persistent? Her neighbour Manfred, maybe, picturing her lying at the bottom of the cellar stairs. She got out of the shower, quickly towelled off, and put on her bathrobe – Graham's bathrobe. She hadn't put it in the Community Living box because it was almost new, expensive, enveloping. If she had put on her own bathrobe, it would have been gaping, embarrassing. Once again she thought how good it was that the house was all on one floor. She might have been tempted to rush down a set of stairs and fall.

She peeked around the living room picture window. A man in a uniform. A Fredericton policeman. Oh, please God, no. Not something that's happened to Roger. Please God. Please.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. You were in the shower, it looks like."

"It's bad news?"

"Not yet. We're just trying to prevent it. Your neighbour told me that you live alone."

"Yes. My son?"

"Oh, no. I'm sorry. I should have said right away. Nothing about your family members. Just a neighbourhood problem."

Her heart was pounding, her lips tingling. She was afraid she was going to topple over sideways. She steadied herself on the chesterfield. "Thank God." And then, in explanation of her worry: "He's a fireman."

"Mind if I come in?"

"Please do."

"You live alone, I understand. Your neighbour is very concerned. I don't want to frighten you because this is nothing to be afraid of. It's just that a peeping tom has been reported in the neighbourhood. We know who it is, he's harmless. That's why we're canvassing the area. If you should see him, don't let on, just dial 911. We'll be here quickly."

"Is it someone I know? Someone from this street?"

"In the neighbourhood. Not this street. You probably don't know him. He's young. Too young to be getting into this kind of trouble. April's the time of year these guys come out."

He told her what to do: close the curtains at dusk, put on the outside lights. He handed her his card: "Mark Sandon, Neighbourhood Watch." She had met one of the neighbourhood watch policemen several years ago when a teenager played pranks that became more and more annoying: egged houses, threw a Molotov cocktail, pulled up flowers. Graham had actually participated in a "sting operation" as he had called it, taking the boy's photo using his telescopic lens.

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A peeping tom. Who would want to peep on her? A stranger. Young.

She wouldn't tell the kids, Roger and Annie, about this peeping tom, worry them for nothing.

She put the rest of the groceries away. Even after Graham had been dead two months, she still was buying certain items that he liked. Why couldn't she break the habit? Here was pickled herring. She would never finish such a big bottle. No one else liked it. She wouldn't even be able to give it away.

As she was putting on her pyjamas, she remembered she was supposed to close all the curtains and put on the outside lights. Had someone been out there watching her? Watching her make her supper? Watching her watching the 10 o'clock news? Why hadn't she remembered? Perhaps because she hadn't felt fear. But now she was alone. Graham wasn't there to be in charge of such situations. She would have to be more cautious.

Tomorrow night she'd try to remember to close the drapes.

But after she put out the bed light, Faith lay there thinking about the young man out in her backyard. She went out into the living room, pulled the drapes, put on the outside lights. Back in bed, she turned on the radio. Great luck, the Blue Jays were playing out west so the game was still on, only the third inning. She would be asleep in minutes. Listening to the ball game had put Graham to sleep too, even in the most difficult times. A blessing.

Nancy Bauer is a writer of fiction and arts commentary based in Fredericton. Till Death is excerpted from her novel-in-progress.