

TEXT prose**Craig Jordan-Baker*****The death of Patrice Nacullian***

It seems, to our lights now, that to write of a person or persons in a house, and a house made of brick no less, is a kind of abominable submission to the everyday. And so we put down our books or our tablets and sigh, even huff, at the naiveté of the writer. If by some chance we do not, then perhaps we are reading on a train and the person next to you looks like he is masturbating. No? Take a good look. Or perhaps you are experiencing in-air turbulence and you read these words merely to mollify the burgeoning images of fire, pressure-loss and the Mexican-wave of screams undulating down from the cockpit. You see how I try to entertain you?

This present tale is a desperate and fawning attempt by the author to please his audience, though the author must warn you that the tale involves persons in a house made of brick. It will be presently shown though that such a tawdry setting hides qualities that are in fact amusing and even enlightening, so the author begs your patience. You have committed yourself thus far, after all.

This brick house was a brick house in the city of Southampton. Three generations of the same family lived in this brick abode and if such a thing seems unlikely, please remember that this was the twentieth century, a time when people still lived together in relative harmony. This family was of Irish stock, Nan and Nandad Nacullian having crossed the waters from the Emerald Isle sometime after the Second World War, to help rebuild a country they were at best ambivalent towards. Nan Nacullian concentrated on pregnancy, smoking and crosswords, while Nandad Nacullian spent his days working and being racially abused on building sites. That of course was until the blacks came along, after which time Nandad Nacullian may as well have been Winston Churchill or Queen Victoria, he was considered so much like his English workmates.

Nan and Nandad Nacullian had four children: Betty, Bernard, Niall and Shannon. Niall died in Southampton General Hospital when he was two hours old from a lung defect that stumped the doctors and in her sixteenth year, Betty died suddenly, from suicide. So, only Bernard and Shannon were left and it was not long before Bernard, promising fellow that he was, became a builder's apprentice at the same firm as his father. Bernard soon fell prey to the wonderful sense of belonging that comes from racial abuse and smoking rollups. He tormented a Tobagan fellow by the name of Christian Lovejoy to such a degree that one day, Christian left a dogshit in Bernard's hardhat. Bernard 'shithead' Nacullian was quickly renamed amid general mirth, but they all beat Christian terribly anyway and left him in the shell of the new shopping centre. Everyone claimed he must have been drunk and slipped on a girder.

This leaves us with Shannon, who, after getting pregnant by her boss at the local chip shop, decided to retire to the bosom of the family home. The owner of the chip shop, James Radley, already had a wife and two children, so

had no intention of acknowledging the newest outpouring of his fecund loins. Nan Nacullian was shocked as much by her daughter's stupidity as by the general shame that came from the assumption that Shannon was a whore, temptress, liar or fantasist. On the day Shannon's son Craig was born in Southampton General Hospital, Nan Nacullian was wistful at the thought of her own long-departed little boy and at that moment, crossing herself, she swore to protect her grandson, bastard or not. Amid all this family drama, Nandad Nacullian sat behind the fortress of his *Daily* paper, occasionally peering over its crenulations to ask for tea or that the radio be switched on.

Around this time, Nandad Nacullian was perplexed by the appearance of a third testicle in his ballsack, which he looked upon initially with vague suspicion and then with manly pride. You can imagine his embarrassment then when, after startling pangs of agony and months of malaise, he was told he had only weeks to live. He died five days after the prognosis, as much from awkwardness as the virulence of his cancer.

This left Nan Nacullian, Bernard, Shannon and Craig in the brick house in Southampton. At this point, the author recognises the need to move forward a decade or so, as very little changed in that house. You might say that time during this period was like a saveloy under a chip shop heat-lamp, close to closing time. That is, life looked pretty much as it always had, but it was somehow less appetising.

The saveloy analogy stops in 1999. One day in this year, Nan Nacullian announced she was bored with life and couldn't stand the thought of living into the twenty-first century, with all its things and all its stuff. There were enough things and stuff here in the twentieth century and she would be buggered, she said, if she would tolerate more things and stuff. All her life, she said, all her life she had seen an ever increasing mountain of things and stuff piling up in the back garden of existence and she had had enough. Therefore and with a definitive bob of her curly grey mane, she was resolved to die that evening in bed, after she had finished her customary cocoa and crossword.

The family, knowing of Nan Nacullian's lifelong Catholicism, questioned whether such a move meant suicide and if it did, how it was that she should square such a fact with her Creator, who did after all grant her the good fortune of life and free will. But Nan Nacullian would have none of it and waved away the suggestion like she waved away the ever-hopeful attempts of Mrs Craddock, the Avon lady, to ply her with creams and cosmetics (things and stuff). For Nan Nacullian did not intend to starve, overdose, hang, shoot, lacerate, immolate, eviscerate, suffocate or in any other way cause herself harm that would invalidate the sacred bond she shared with the Almighty.

'It will happen,' she said, 'as God intended.'

What this meant was, at the time of speaking, a mystery. Still, back in the twentieth century people still had respect for their elders and so did not move to question this solemn pronouncement. That night, which was a Tuesday, Nan Nacullian made faggots and gravy with mash, which the family ate in habitual silence around the small table in the lino-floored kitchen. Bernard had recently come home from the building site and was further-gone than usual, so much so that he slipped off his chair twice, before vomiting into his mash with one almighty heave. He spat his apologies through chunks of stomach-lining and gestured to Craig to help him upstairs. With a wince, Craig obeyed, if only because he wanted to get back to his meal as quickly as possible.

‘Can I have the stuff without vomit on?’ he asked his mother on his return to the kitchen.

This was in fact the precise point where Nan Nacullian made her speech about things and stuff and intending to die that night. It was also a fact that it was only Craig who questioned the theological validity of her decision and whether it amounted to suicide or not, to which the old woman replied:

‘It will happen as God intended.’

Shannon Nacullian had heard this phrase from her mother whenever something mildly upsetting came along. When the Labour landslide of 1997 threatened a descent into Godless communism, Nan Nacullian said that it would happen as God intended. When Bernard was up in court for GBH on Christian Lovejoy, the outcome was to be decided as God intended and when Shannon first told her mother that she was pregnant by James Radley, the chip shop owner, Nan Nacullian shook her head and then said:

‘It will happen as God intended.’

This reliance on a single phrase throughout her life left those around her unmoved, for like death threats, antibiotics and the National Anthem, things which are used all the time, it ceased to be effective. As she rinsed the vomit and gravy from the dinner plates, Shannon Nacullian wondered abstractly what life without her mother would be like. With a sense of déjà vu, she realised she had no idea whatsoever.

‘Did you leave your uncle Bernard on his side?’ Shannon asked Craig.

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Good. Isn’t it your turn to do the drying up?’ Shannon asked her son.

‘No! It’s Uncle Bernard’s.’ Craig remained at the table.

‘So I’ll just do it my fucking self then, shall I?’

Like the forming of the Himalayas as a result of the meeting between the Indo-Australian and the Eurasian plates, Craig rose up from the table and towards the kitchen sink.

Nan Nacullian eyed the backs of her descendants as they begrudgingly worked amid the post-prandial steam and bubbles. She was aware that the pronouncement of her end had had little effect on those around her. And so she said something she thought she never would.

‘You remember that James Radley, Shannon?’

Shannon’s water-wrinkled, soapy hands stopped.

‘I said James Radley. You remember him?’

Craig turned quizzically to consider his mother’s sudden lack of composure.

‘What?’ said Shannon.

‘Ye deaf, daughter of mine? I’m sayin’ to you, do ye remember that JAMES RADLEY?’

‘Owned the chippy down the hill yonks ago,’ Shannon spat and she returned to the washing up.

‘Yes, that’s him. He’s the one that gave ye Craig, didn’t he?’

‘What?’ said Shannon.

‘What?’ said Craig, and dropped his gingham tea towel on the floor.

Nan Nacullian felt the warm thrill of success run through her. ‘James Radley, there you go. He’s yer Daddy so he is. And a fuckin’ cunt of a man if God Almighty’ll excuse me for saying so.’

‘Mum!’ shouted Shannon.

‘Mum!’ called Craig.

And then there was silence.

‘And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get ready for me bed. Craig, would ye bring up me cocoa in about a half hour, love?’

Craig’s head moved upwards and then downwards several times. Shannon’s wet hands dripped onto the lino. Nan Nacullian was gone.

An hour later, the lights went out for the evening, in the brick house in Southampton. Those that slumbered, slumbered, those that could not, did not. Outside, the Solent was bleeding into the English Channel. By midnight, Nan Nacullian was dead.

This then is the end. Though the author asks you to remember that if on approaching the end you hold fear, consider that you might have ended it before now, but no, you have committed yourself thus far, after all.

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[Return to Contents Page](#)
[Return to Home Page](#)

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