

Into Darkness

Of the making of books there is no end; but seldom can there have been so appalling a spur to writing—or at least to dictating—a book as that felt by Tina Nash. She would never have sullied a page had her boyfriend Shane Jenkin not beaten and strangled her to unconsciousness and then gouged out her eyes with his bare hands, leaving her blinded for life. It was a crime that eclipsed all others in Britain that year (2011) in sheer malignity.

The victim's book, *Out of the Darkness*, is a classic of a kind. Though her narrative was ghostwritten, Tina Nash was clearly allowed to speak in her own voice: that of an uneducated but not unintelligent member of the British underclass. Nash expresses herself unguardedly and artlessly, as if unaware of what she reveals to the reader about her way of thinking and the subculture in which she has lived her life. It is precisely because of this unself-consciousness that her book is so instructive: it should be required reading for those who believe that degradation in modern society is simply a matter of insufficient money.

It is impossible not to sympathize with someone who suffered as Nash did. Her description of waking up to find one of her eyeballs dangling by the side of her face, as if it were some soft, damp, alien object, is as horrific as anything I have ever read or hope to read. Her conduct might have been foolish and irresponsible, but nothing she did could possibly have deserved a minimal fraction of so awful a consequence. As for the perpetrator, no punishment could have been too condign to be just; and the severity of his punishment was limited only by our need to remain civilized ourselves.

But merely to sympathize with Nash would not be an adequate response to her story. It would amount to an evasion—intellectual, moral, and emotional. In the

circumstances, it is comfortable to sympathize; it is uncomfortable to have to think and to judge.

Nash was born in Cornwall, one of six children to a mother whose relationships with men were tumultuous. "I'd seen my mum go through hundreds of break-ups and be badly treated by men," she tells us. The mother's complex love life left little time for her children, for, as Nash observes, "I was much closer to [my grandmother] than my mum, who never seemed to have time for us." How many of the six children shared the same father we never learn, and indeed Nash makes no mention of a father of any of them, including her own. It appears that she came into a radically fatherless world, and though she does not say so, it is likely that at least some of her brothers and sisters were half-siblings; and again, though she does not say so, it is likely that the principal economic support of the family was the state, whose paid-out benefits meant that it was, in effect, father to the children. Nash grew up in public housing and seems to have lived in such subsidized housing all her life. Nevertheless, her childhood wasn't altogether deprived: one of her passions during childhood and adolescence was horse riding.

Not surprisingly, the question of fatherhood scarcely exists for her. She tells us early in the book that she is a single mother of two children. Speaking of her first child, she says, "I may have had [him] when I was very young but my kids mean the world to me and not for one moment did I regret becoming a mum at sixteen." In a way, one is relieved to hear it: for it would be difficult for a woman, except one of some philosophical sophistication, to regret having become a mother but rejoice in the child, and it is obviously better that a child should be wanted rather than resented.

The next sentence reads: "My choice in men, however, left a lot to be desired." And when she reaches the beginning of the narrative of her blinding, she writes, "I had [moved back to my town of birth] with two sons by different dads and a series

of dead-end relationships.” It is obvious that the suitability of men to be fathers to her children arose for her neither before nor after their births, because she deemed fathers inessential or even useless, as economically they obviously were, given her likely financial support from the state. That is why her choice in men “left a lot to be desired”: nothing of long-term significance for her hung on it, or seemed to hang on it, so that the only criterion of choice was immediate attraction—commonly known as lust. If her choice in men left a lot to be desired, her choice in men was made by desiring a lot. Lust is a nearly universal human experience; what is new is the complete loss of awareness of its status as a cardinal sin and of the disastrous consequences likely to follow when it becomes the principal guide of action. But Nash lived in a world in which, thanks to state support, there was little other guide in this important area of life—or, at any rate, none more important. Lust would eventually put out her eyes.

Because she almost surely has lived on state benefits throughout her life, she would, according to the modern definition of poverty, be classified as poor, with an income below 60 percent of the population’s median income; she was therefore, on this view, the victim of inequality. She notes that money was always short, and doubtless this is true, as it is probably true for the great majority of mankind. But she also tells us that she possessed disc-jockey equipment costing \$3,200 (her dream was to become a professional DJ); had a car; seemed to have no difficulty finding money to go to nightclubs and drink to excess (though not as often as she would have liked); and had a 42-inch plasma television in her living room (while her children could watch a second TV in their bedroom) and all the other apparatus of electronic distraction and entertainment. When the egregious Shane Jenkin smashed up her house, she was able to redecorate and refurnish it. (She also bought him hundreds of dollars’ worth of Christmas presents.) She seemed to possess an extensive wardrobe, tending more to the flashy than to the elegant but not necessarily to the

monetarily cheap. If this be poverty, it is not of the kind conceived of in, say, southern Sudan. On the contrary, it is more like a type of low-level luxury, in which luxuriating is the main business of life.



DEVON AND CORNWALL POLICE/PA WIRE/AP PHOTO

. . . Shane Jenkin, whom she had long referred to as “a great big teddy bear.”

We arrive now at her choice of Jenkin as consort. As it happened, Nash had met him at a party some years previously, just following his release from prison after serving four and a half years “for stomping on a guy’s head and giving him brain damage,” as her best friend put it—adding that “he’s a bloody psycho.” And Nash’s first experience of him was not altogether favorable: after they spent hours talking about music and “our mutual love of rapper 2pac,” he tried to force himself sexually upon her. It was not love at first sight, therefore: it was love at second sight.

That second sight came when “I’d had a few glasses of wine” at a restaurant and a “few shots of tequila” at a nightclub, where she ran into him again, so that she “could barely hear in my head those words of warning [about Jenkin by her best friend years earlier] for all the alcohol I had knocked back.” “Barely hear” is not the same as “unable to hear,” of course; but by the end of their second meeting, she recalls, “I could already tell there was something different about Shane from all the others.” When he asked for her telephone number, “I didn’t hesitate for a second. I felt I could trust him.”

What was so attractive about Jenkin? It was his size and muscles. He was six feet, four inches tall, and “his chest was so big his T-shirt clung to him like cellophane, highlighting his pectoral muscles. His blue jeans molded to his thighs, showing off his pert bum.” Nash’s subsequent rationalizations

for staying with him were but a smokescreen for the rawness of her desire. Nash's description of Jenkin as handsome was certainly preposterous: he had the visage and expression of a determined thug, and while, strictly speaking, there may be no art to find the mind's construction in the face, this case proved an exception to that Shakespearean rule. One look at Jenkin's face and you would have crossed the road.

But Jenkin struck Nash as a "great big teddy bear" with "puppy-dog eyes." On waking up after her first night of sex with him, however, she noticed the tattoos on his chest and arms: "Down his right arm was an image of a hooded executioner raising his sword like he was about to slaughter someone. . . . On his left chest was a tattoo of a tiger ripping someone's head off. Down his left arm was OUTLAW in big bold black letters." Still, though she knew he had served a long prison sentence for seriously injuring someone, she "chuckled at the thought that Shane fancied himself as a bit of an outlaw." His night of love with her resulted in him failing to get up in the morning, whereupon he lost his job as a painter and decorator, and he never found, or sought, another.

Nash persisted in thinking well of Jenkin, despite scant evidence to support a sanguine view. In a chapter titled "Love Games," recounting a period early in their relationship, she describes his failure to keep an appointment with her because he is having a party with lots of girls at his apartment. Much later that night he turns up drunk, and they go off to a nightclub together, where he "sinks" a few more ciders and then removes the belt from his jeans, turns it into a garrote, and starts a fight with "some random guy." When Nash threatens to leave the nightclub, he apologizes, and they move on to a crowded party at Nash's sister's apartment. There, to get rid of some guests, he "starts booting any men who were sitting on the floor. You could hear the noise of his shoe smacking and scraping across skin."

In the next chapter, "The Bubble Bursts"—the bubble,

presumably, of perfect love—the couple go to a “rave” on New Year’s Eve, where Jenkin soon deserts Nash. Left on her own, she spends the evening with the boyfriend of Jenkin’s sister. When much later, Nash finds Jenkin, he “hisses, “You fucking slut . . . you’ve been in there flirting with every fucking man. I bet you were fucking them too.” Then teddy-bear Shane “made a strange gargling noise, tilted his head back, and then spat on me.”

“Fucking slut,” he said, as I wiped my face in disbelief. He did it again and again, he was firing spit at me like a machine gun.

“Stop it,” I pleaded in fear and embarrassment. He was making me feel worthless.

Nash returns with the teddy bear to his place to collect some of her things. During the car ride back, he pulls her hair and screams “*bitch*” at her. When she gets out of the car, he shoves her to the street, cracking her head on the stone. She swiftly gathers her things and flees. Unfortunately, when she gets to her car, which she had left near the apartment, she finds its windshield shattered. Jenkin has “bricked” it.

We should pause to consider this use of the term “to brick.” It took me back to my early days in the prison where I worked, when I would be asked to see prisoners who had just been “PP-nined.” I didn’t understand what this term meant when I first heard it, but I soon discovered that a PP9 was a large, heavy, square battery that in those days powered portable radios and that prisoners had permission to buy. From time to time, a prisoner would proceed to place the battery inside a sock, swing the sock as if it were a South American bola, and attack his enemies with the improvised weapon, usually in the shower or in the exercise yard. The fact that the PP9 had become a verb suggested that this form of attack was now normal, part of the prison “culture.” In like fashion, Nash had written of

“bricking” as if jealous boyfriends throwing bricks through girlfriends’ windshields were an everyday part of life, which it is, in some sections of society. In those places, everyone lives in a prison without walls or guards, and men like Shane Jenkin rule.

The next chapter’s title is instructive: “The Nightmare Begins.” All that has happened before, apparently, is not a nightmare but merely acceptable reality. From this point, Jenkin exhibits almost every conceivable warning sign of vicious future violence. He takes anabolic steroids. He arrives one day with a crossbow—a formidable weapon—claiming that some Lithuanians with whom he has had a dispute want to kill him. He spends his days playing violent video games and his nights watching horror films of terrible sadism, including some that graphically depict people having their eyes gouged out with bare hands—scenes that obviously excite him and that he demands Nash watch with him. Nash learns that Jenkin had stabbed his own dog to death—a Rottweiler, needless to say—when he grew tired of it.

One night, Jenkin wants to stay home at Nash’s instead of going out drinking with her and her friend Kate. Nash leaves her children in his charge as she and her friend head to the pub, where they drink to gross excess. She returns and immediately goes to bed, only to be woken at 2 AM by loud music.

My kids were trying to sleep. I stamped on the floor to tell Shane to turn it down. Shane bounded up the stairs wearing his usual track-suit bottoms. . . .

“What? What?” he barked.

“Look at the state of you, you’ve been sick all over yourself,” he pointed in disgust. I turned around to see a pool of vomit across the bed sheets. I gasped.

My head was pounding.

Never in the book is there any recognition that a mother whose children meant “the world” to her should not leave them in the care of an obvious psychopath or go to bed so drunk that she does not even realize that she has vomited in her sleep.

Nash heads downstairs to discover that Jenkin had clearly had sex with her friend, Kate, with whom she had been out drinking. This was the limit: “Enough is enough,” she says. “No man cheats on me.” She demands that Jenkin leave the house.

Shane’s eyes turned black. He looked like a robot about to exterminate someone—me.

SMACK!

He punched me in the face, sending me into a spin. What the hell? I didn’t know what was happening. I turned to face him again.

SMACK!

To the other cheek, with all the power of his body. I don’t know how I was still standing.

SMACK! Around the back of my head. Having fallen to the ground: Shane . . . pinned me with his giant body. I looked into his eyes and they were black and emotionless like the Grim Reaper.

He put his thumbs into my eyes and tried to push them into my head. All this in front of the children.

You might think that Nash would have had enough of her teddy bear by now, but you would be mistaken. She proceeded to commit a serious crime of her own: perjury.

Having called Nash a “slag,” Jenkin left the house. A friend arrived, phoned the police, and took her to the hospital.

Jenkin was duly arrested and charged with the serious crime of grievous bodily harm, or GBH—an acronym far better known in his circles than, say, NATO or UNESCO. The criminal law, the Offences against the Person Act of 1861, states: “Whosoever shall unlawfully and maliciously by any means whatsoever wound or cause grievous bodily harm to any person, . . . with intent, . . . to do some . . . grievous bodily harm to any person, . . . shall be guilty of felony, and being convicted thereof shall be liable . . . to be kept in penal servitude for life.” With his previous record, Jenkin was liable to a long, even if not a life, sentence. He was granted bail on condition that he not approach or contact Nash, and the police—at public expense, of course—provided her with a “panic button” connecting her directly to the police station, as well as a special “secure” room in her home to lock herself in should Jenkin show up.

Perhaps by now, it will come as no surprise that Jenkin, notwithstanding his bail conditions, turned up repeatedly, and Nash let him in, as she missed him. He persuaded her, with his usual mixture of self-pity and violence, to go to the police to withdraw her evidence against him and to claim that he had acted in self-defense—that Nash had attacked him first. The police did not believe this nonsense and persisted in the charge against him. Indeed, they arrested Jenkin several times at Nash’s home (all this, of course, in front of the children who meant the world to her). Eventually, he was sent back to prison, from where he sent many messages to Nash, blaming her for his situation.

The trial was postponed several times, Jenkin claiming that he was medically unfit; but finally, he appeared before the court. Having had an immense amount of labor and money expended on her case, Nash proceeded to lie in court. No, she said, Jenkin had not attacked her; she had fallen down the stairs. In fact, he hadn’t laid a finger on her. She had accused him at the time because she was angry and jealous.

There was nothing for it but acquittal. The judge, though, took the unusual step of calling Nash to his chambers afterward and saying that he hoped that her actions would not rebound on her. "His words were like lightning striking through my heart," Nash says. But as she left the court with Jenkin, she responded to his protestations of love with "I love you, too."

Jenkin quickly resumed his violence, though Nash writes that sometimes "Shane seemed to relax into his old self," the teddy bear. The night before the final attack, Jenkin watched a video:

Shane couldn't tear his eyes away from the sick images of a Chinese girl getting her eyes gouged out by a psychopath. . . .

"This ain't right," I said as I cowered into his excited body. He ignored my pleas and I was forced to carry on watching. . . . It brought back all the memories of when Shane had tried to take my eyes out almost exactly a year ago to the day.

The following evening, Jenkin and Nash were in her garden, chatting over the fence to their new neighbors. Jenkin offered them some of his drugs, but Nash snatched the bottle from his hand, because "I'd just got social services off my back. I didn't need him causing problems with the neighbors."

Nash went to bed and woke up with Jenkin strangling her. Then she fell unconscious. I will spare the reader the account of the enucleation of her eye; suffice it to say, Jenkin blamed her for it. "This was all your fault. All because of those fucking tablets."

Shane Jenkin received a sentence of life imprisonment—much less than he deserved but the most that could be given. As for Tina Nash, what can one say? It goes without saying that she

is due sympathy, for, to repeat, no stupidity on her part, however incorrigible, and no misconduct (neglect of her children, perjury) could have merited such suffering. But one should consider how she came to act with such consummate insouciance. To adapt Shakespeare's question slightly:

Tell me where is idiocy bred,

Or in the heart or in the head?

How begot, how nourished?

Reply, reply.

Maybe there is no new thing under the sun, but it is also hard not to believe that the state enabled, though it did not mandate, Nash's conduct. True, if her ideas about the good life had been different, no dependence on the state would have achieved the same result. But with a materialistic conception of life, in which what counts as important is raw consumption, and in which there is no material incentive or reward for sensible decision making and no material penalty for bad, it is unsurprising that some people do not take decision making, even about their own lives, seriously, and therefore blindly follow their basic inclinations, irrespective of the most obvious consequences. The pleasure of the moment is all that counts. For them, sooner strangle an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.

In her book, Tina Nash describes how she tried bravely to get on with life after being blinded. After she finished the book, she found a new boyfriend. He has just been sent to prison for assaulting her. O brave new world, that has such people in it!

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