

# **Who's Afraid of Nina Proudfoot?**

**A Novel  
Douglas Lockhart**

**SYNOPSIS:**

*Who's Afraid of Nina Proudfoot?*

This is the story of Nina Proudfoot, a twenty-eight year old Aberdonian Scot brought up in an ultra-religious household, details of which are scattered throughout the book. A child is born to Nina, a boy, and from that moment the story of Nina's life descends through layers of realisation and confrontation towards a final clash with not only a religiously restrictive past, but also with a socially restrictive present. In this sense *Who's Afraid of Nina Proudfoot* is a battleground of ideas both religious and social, the conformity expected in a traditional conception of marriage equally under question. But there is also the question of what it means to be creative, what it means to intercept the moment *under* the moment and be confronted by an even more immediate present, a sense of reality both personal and collective that recalibrates one's thoughts and actions. Facing moral and ethical challenges to do with her mother, her brother, her husband and her lover, Nina stumbles toward intellectual and emotional freedom in the face of sometimes overwhelming odds.

Douglas Lockhart  
20th June 2017

**With apology to the late Edward Albee for borrowing part of a very successful play title of his.**

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The real reality, the flickering of seen and unseen actualities, the moment under the moment, can't be put into words; the most that a writer can do - and this is only rarely achieved - is to write in such a way that the reader finds himself in a place where the unwordable happens off the page. Most of the time it doesn't happen but trying for it is part of being the hunting-and-finding animal one is. This process is what I care about and what I write is as much process as product.

Russell Hoban  
*The Moment Under the Moment* 1992  
(*Stories, a Libretto, Essays and Sketches*)

# I

## A Contest of Wills

My name is Nina Proudfoot. I am thirty-eight years of age and live in London with my ten year old son. I'm a novelist. My married name was Turner, but I reverted to my maiden name when my divorce papers came through in 1969. I was at that time living in a small flat in Golder's Green with little money and only the faintest hope of publication, but that was soon to change. Golder's Green, as you're probably aware, is strongly Jewish, and for complex reasons I found that particularly comforting. Not because I am Jewish, or was Jewish unbeknownst to myself, but because my being among Jews allowed me to hear and see and feel something other than what I had been brought up to believe. It could be said that I fell into the habit of writing as a reaction against such beliefs, but something other than that was at work in me, and it was this 'otherness' that eventually compelled me to write this book, and others.

When I think back on the incidents and conversations that punctuated (punctured?) the weeks prior to my leaving my husband, and finally Scotland, I find myself smiling (grimacing?) at the sheer absurdity of it all. Now I've always been outspoken, I admit to that, even as a child. But not in the sense of saying whatever comes into my head; more in the sense of having little patience with fools. Call no man a fool, the Scriptures tell us. What they do not tell us is that fools are ubiquitous. But I do regret some of the things I said, and did. There was a ferocity in me then, a no-nonsense daemon that delighted in tormenting my tormentors. At the time, however, it all seemed sensible and obvious and unavoidable - it was a contest of wills and I was not going to give in. I felt as if I were fighting for my life, for my very soul, and that is enough to marshal anyone's meaner propensities.

My unlikely saga gets underway one lovely June afternoon in the granite city, the 'city of lights', as Aberdeen is known. I was lying on my back with my legs wide open, my knees drawn up, my nightdress rolled and wedged behind the mother-of-pearl scarred skin of my bulging stomach. A young doctor with red hair and a pasty face was encouraging me to push, to breathe, to find the rhythm. The rhythm? What did he think I was involved in, some kind of kinky tango? Anyway, I pushed, and pushed, and my child (a boy) was deposited into the hands of this strange young man whose hair looked like a burning brand. On having loosed him from me, he held him up like a sacrificial offering and elicited a healthy note of protest. In that moment, that timeless moment, that moment under the moment, my child joined the human race and I, exhausted from my efforts and my looking, fell back into my pillows.

It was not an easy birth, but neither was it one of those horrendous work outs that some mothers go through. I was in labour for around fourteen hours, but the birth itself was mercifully quick. I have a good

pelvis for childbearing - the doctor commented on it as he would the chassis of a car - and it served me well that afternoon.

But I digress. The older of my two nurses took my bloodied child over to a workbench, sponged the mucus from his head and face, checked him for defects, and brought him back to me wrapped in a white shawl. My child in my arms, a little wee thing all perturbed at having been pushed out into the light. "Hi! I said, it's *me*, and he quietened.

It's funny the things you remember. What sticks in my mind - apart from the fact that it was exactly two-thirty in the afternoon and I was ravenously hungry - is the look on the younger nurse's face as the delivery moved into its final stage. It was as if it were the first child she had ever helped deliver, and who knows, maybe it was. Maybe she had only seen it on film, like myself, and had been taken aback by the sight of an actual head and body forcing its way out from between someone's legs.

As the older nurse cleaned me up, the younger filled a glass with orange juice and handed it to me. "Better drink this," she perked, "can't have you drying up on us."

Staring into my child's face, I said, "He's very quiet? Do you think he's okay?"

"Little mite's tired out," she replied, pleased as punch at having an answer to hand.

My child's face; my own face, yet not my face. A face my husband would scry for his own image.

"I'll have to go now, Mrs. Turner." The doctor speaking, a spot of blood on the left cheek of his corridor-bleached face. A smile followed by reassurance. "Congratulations. You have a lovely, healthy little boy."

So young; so sure of himself. Intelligent eyes in an intelligent face. I watched him depart, sipped at the orange juice and began to ponder my predicament. I had given birth to a child and fulfilled what my husband and my mother perceived to be a woman's destiny. I was not so sure about that. It had not been my intention to have a child, and now that I actually had one the stark reality of my situation began to hit home.

A tap dripping into a stainless steel basin. I looked away reluctantly from my child's face and registered the room's sterility. The 'delivery' room. A place where human beings were delivered, like packages, into the world, a conveyer belt of little beings coaxed or wrenched into the world without a say so.

"Your first?" asked the younger nurse, as I was further tidied up for presentation.

I looked at her oval face. "Yes."

"Bet it feels marvellous!"

"Of course." I had smiled, but my pragmatic tone had not gone unnoticed. Blinking away what might have been some other question, she said, "Come on, drink all of it."

I smiled into the liquid. "I'll think of you when I'm trying to pee," I said,

Nurse what's-her-name rearranged her mouth in a kind of embarrassment, and in that same moment, Sister Henderson, after a quick peek through the half-moon glass of the swing doors, burst into the delivery room followed by my sandy-haired husband and my be-bunned mother. My mother, as was her want, had been crying. Robert, his expression that of a stunned mullet, hovered behind her.

"Five minutes," said Sister; we need to get Mrs Turner back to the ward as quickly as possible" Then to the older nurse: "You're required next door. *Now.*"

"Was it a boy?" asked my mother.

I nodded.

"I *knew* it would be a boy!"

All trussed up in a blue suit, shirt and tie in spite of the summer heat, my husband kissed me on the cheek and mumbled something I did not quite catch. He was smiling as if savouring a joke he had just been told.

"Bad?" asked mother.

"Bad enough," I said back, giving her a little autumn-edged smile.

Her access to Toby blocked by Robert, my mother, complete with shopping bag, bustled to the other side of the bed, pecked me on the opposite cheek, and said straight off, "Can I have him a minute?"

I glanced at Robert, and he nodded.

"Oh, he's *lovely!*" Full of sighs she rocked him backwards and forwards and stared down into his face looking for her own image. "The Lord's been good to you, Nina; he's given you a beautiful child." Robert's smile retreated into his face as she closed her eyes. "Dear Lord," she said in a rapturous voice, her eyelids fluttering, "we thank Thee . . ." The muscles of Robert's face tightened as she launched into a spate of well-practiced clichés, and I noted how my little oval-faced nurse, eyes averted and lips pursed, toyed with the blue badge pinned to her uniform.

"Amen."

The word spun out toward the surrounding tiles and bounced back empty.

Robert stared at my mother.

"Prayer is the language of the soul, Robert," she said, glancing at him. "It's the last thing to be said over us, and it ought to be the first."

I watched Toby change hands gingerly.

"He's a heavy little blighter!" my husband said.

"Got a good mop of hair," said my mother. "Your hair was almost down to your shoulders when you were born, Nina."

Was she reminding me that she too had gone through what I had just gone through?

As if the sight of his child was too much to share, Robert turned away from her. Then, playing right into her hands, he gave a little laugh and said that it was a bit like getting a present.

Before I could attempt a reply, my mother said, her words brimming with a raspy dislike for masculine innocence, "You don't know what it's all about, you men. You'll *never* know."

Ignoring her, Robert said something about babies generally having red faces."

"Not this one," I said. "He's quite sallow."

"He isn't *jaundiced*, is he?" said my mother, chagrined at not having picked up on that.

"Doctor said he was perfectly okay," said nurse, who was now busying herself on the sidelines. "We'd have been on to that in a flash."

I smiled at the inclusiveness of her remark.

"Hard to believe it's all over," said Robert.

"Over? Little you know," said my mother, pouncing.

Pouncing was my mother's replacement for thinking; she held whatever was said to her up against the template of her 'faith' in search of an exact fit with who knew what, and seldom found one. Which is to say that her reasoning was always of the literal variety, an instant rejection of whatever refused to pass through the sieve of her circumscribed religious beliefs.

My child moved suddenly in Robert's arms; he registered this first real sign of life with a little 'uh' sound.

"He's *so* strong, Nina!"

"Arched his back when I had him," said my mother, fiddling with a long wisp of hair that had worked loose.

I smiled, and said, "Everyone seems to approve of you, Toby."

A look of incomprehension spread across my mother's face.

"It's a nice name," I said. "A gentle name. Maybe he'll grow into it; with a little luck."

She sighed and sucked at her bottom lip. "It's your child," she managed to say.

"I don't much care for it either," said Robert, entering into an unlikely alliance.

"It's a two-way street, Nina," said my Mother, grabbing at a metaphor. "Surely you could have come up with something better than that!"

"It's not set in concrete," I lied.

She absorbed my tone. "It takes more than one swallow . . ." Her follow-up metaphor died of its own accord. "I mean . . ."

"I'm being sent round to Carden Place first thing tomorrow morning," I said, forcing a change of direction. "The new maternity wing's full."

"Oh . . . that's a *nice* place. I've visited there a couple of times." Then, remembering, she reached for her shopping bag, dug down in to it and produced a slab of sultana cake wrapped in cellophane. "I made a cake for you a couple of days ago; got lots of lemon peel in it just as you like it." She beamed at me, undid the cellophane and stuck it under my nose. "Can you smell the peel?"

"Yes, I can. Mmmm," I said.

"I had to give the flowers I brought to one of the nurses," blurted my husband. "They wouldn't let me bring them in here."

"I'm sure I'll get them," I said, smiling, but it was a weary construction.

They had offered Robert the chance to be present at the birth, but he had declined, with a shudder; my mother had been in agreement: not at all the kind of thing a man should witness, she said. She had pulled her head back on her neck at the very thought of it, and for the same reason, I surmised, had also declined her services.

After a some more meaningless banter, and a few barbs, they again kissed me, stood back, hovered for a moment, and waving as if seeing me off on a train, drifted uncertainly out of the delivery room to do battle with the many identical corridors.

"I'll put the little chap in the baby room," said nurse. "We have to get you into a bath."

"*And fed,*" I said.

"I'll arrange sandwiches; it's well by lunchtime."

Taking Toby from me (I really had decided 'Toby' was it), nurse what's-her-name backed out into the corridor and left me lying in that white, oblong room with its glossy tiled walls, its workbench, its chromium plated four-bulbed ceiling light and the dripping of that damned tap. As the doors settled, tears washed their kisses from my face. And then the pain came, a pain that flared inside my head. "Oh, Toby," I said out into that hollow space, "I think your mother's going to have to hurt a lot of people after all."

End of Chapter 1.