

This Is God's House

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Space and wasps: 'swhat I think of when I think of Grace Noddey: Old, white... I'm trying to think of a word that doesn't... witch. That'll do it: Old White Witch. She had an epic place. Well over an acre of space with nothing on it, not a leaf for metres, hardly any dandelions. No prickles. Big chunks of metres kids could run in if they wanted, play tag till the parents have to drive home. Wasps and wasted space. See, without little ones, Ms Grace Noddey (no husband) had had wasps settle in her yard.

That's half the reason she got me round to her house to do yard work. Big space; growing wasp problem; rich byatch with no muscle to do her own work.

As a Christian man, I don't dwell on hatred, resentment, failure, blame. Having said that: blame the wasps on Grace Noddey. Blame my blisters, my sunburn, the dust that stuck to my earwax.

The name always bothered me, eh. *Noddey. Smirking.* Now, I've had me 15 years of thinkin mean stuff about people 24/7. I don't do nothin mean anymore, but I couldn't stop, like, picturing this Queen Noddey sitting in a English hall, all alone on a throne, surrounded by portraits of her ancestors, wishing it were the Dark Ages again.

On the first Monday I worked for her, wasps orbited her head as we both stood on her driveway. How did they know to go in that nuclear orbit pattern they call a probability cloud? Was she the Devil? Lord of the flies? Lord of the wasps? I saw one land on her glasses. She took them off, glared at the wasp, and it flew the heck away.

Ms Noddey pointed at some spiky clippings; I lugged them to the compost bin. When I say *bin*, I'm talking a plastic sack with a collar. Ms Noddey should have paid for a decent bin. You just ring 0800 GORILLA for a gorilla bin. I mentioned that, as I was sucking the blood from my palms where my gloves had a hole.

'Those bins are upwards of \$60 a day,' she went.

'Yep,' I went. 'So... You gonna order one?'

'I've had a gutsful of being robbed. I've a court date coming up, did I mention?'

'Aw, nah.'

'Fencer. Said he'd do the job for under 3,000.' She flung her wrinkly fingers at her unpainted fence. Fresh, rough yellow pine boards. Not even treated for borer. They go pink when they've got borer treatment on them. 'Does this look like a \$3,000 job to you?'

She talked for ages about Fair Go and Small Claims Court and her lawyer and stuff. I was thirstier than Job and I kept staring at the hose but I didn't want her to know I was a slob. I woulda drunk from the cat's dish, I was that thirsty. She went on and on about how everyone's ripping her off and how the Indian man the AA sent to change her tyre only put on a space saver and not a proper tyre and, I dunno how to say this in a Christian way: she was like a cheap Jew or something?

After I'd cut my hands up lugging spiky palm branches and snipping them until they fit into the cheapwad compost bin, I spent the morning on my knees picking glass out of some soil. Some clowns had smashed a bottle on her fence. The shards had gone into a patch of soil she'd had some Vietnamese student clear (she used mostly students; she found 'coloured' workers the most reliable workers, 'specially Tongans, hence yours truly). My job was to pick the shards out of the soil. Straight forward enough—'cept I wasn't allowed to stop picking until I'd filled a bucket with the shards then sellotaped them back together. She said I wouldn't know I'd found 100% of the glass unless I could put the bottle together. Puzzling the broken bottle back together was difficult enough, and I was stoked with myself when I'd got 80% of the bottle back together, amen, but there were two big empty chunks in my patchwork bottle where the glass should've been and, I guess Ms Noddey didn't say it in a cruel way, but she went, 'Oh dear. Keep trying'—as if I'd failed and it was reasonable to get me down on my knees again.

Know where 5% of the missing shards went? Into my kneecaps. No more mixed netball on Wednesdays for me.

So that took up 2.5 hours of the morning. Taking off my gloves to pick glass splinters out of my cartilage made up some of that time. I know precisely how long it took to put that broken bottle back together 'cause I went through three *Chronics*. I heart *The Chronic*, best album Dre ever did, including NWA. Problem was I was rappin along, like '*Keep they heads ringin / ring a ding ding ding dong/ Yo I'm strong like a motherfucking Donkey Kong / got the Chron / white byatches on ma lawn*' and I'd glance up at the cloud that'd come over the sun and it'd be Ms Noddey standing over me, checking to see if I was being exploited still, eyes like broken lightbulbs, crumpled shoulders, elbows over her chest, mouthing something, and it'd take like 30 seconds to pause my iPhone, like 1) scrape dirt off gloves 2) pull gloves off with teeth 3) spit out the salty minerally *glassy* crunchy dirt, 4) take headphones off and 5) ONLY THEN actually pause my music. (Gotta pause it, yo. I may be be a Organiser with two services on a Sunday, but I'll move heaven and earth not to miss a line of *The Chronic*. Can't smoke the stuff, I'll get recalled if I test positive, but I looove me the music, praise God.)

'And your thoughts?' Ms Noddey went.

‘I gotta be honest,’ I went, blinking and swallowing, ‘I didn’t catch a word of what you said.’

Ms Noddey let this disappointed look break her face, like a spreading hairline windscreen crack. It was disappointing enough that 15% of the Speights glass remained in her soil. Now I’d rudely blasted Compton rhymes while she was trying to express herself. What a jerk I was.

‘Yick...I think I’ll phone my son.’

‘Aw... I can do... what’s it you need done? What d’you need him for?’

‘I really must phone Phillip.’

‘Along the back fence. You want me to get rid of all them broken pots and bricks, right? And the wasp nest?’

‘If you so desire.’

Ridiculous, man, that she didn’t have a butler. Seriously, we’re talking a half hectare section in the middle of town, this is Mt Eden, bro. ‘Bout as close to the city as you get. The crème de la crème of bus stops within a few metres’ walk. And her house was in the middle of the section, surrounded by a section large enough that it actually had geography, like one of them streams bordering it on one side, and a couple of small hills, and a goldfish pond, birdbath, long-as driveway... cha-ching! Me? I lived in a terraced flat run by Black Powers. It was only three storeys tall but these kids with blue belts and blue shoes rode the elevator up and down all day for fun. This is out west, way way west. I’d spent honestly 17 bucks on buses to get here today to do this labour, and made a dick of myself, carryin them embarrassing tools in a PAK’nSAVE bag. Minimum wage is \$14.75. Know what Ms Noddey was offering in her ad? \$14.80, yo.

‘I’ll work right through till seven if you like, if you got the funds. Ma’am.’

‘Won’t you be missing a lecture?’

‘Course doesn’t start till March. Could use the cash.’

‘You shouldn’t miss your lectures.’

‘I’m tellin ya, I’m, like, I’m a student but course hasn’t actually—’

‘I really think I’d better call Phillip.’

She went into a room of her house and took a old cordless phone, that had used to be white plastic and was now grey plastic, and she held it against a chest with breasts so small they almost pointed inward, but she didn’t phone Phillip. What do the sons of old rich miserly mean ladies even look like? Do they look like Mr Burns? Scrooge McDuck? I tried to picture him. It was impossible to picture a old lady looking like a young man. Where was the husband/dad? Had he hung himself ‘cause he couldn’t take his wife anymore?

I crouched, heard my knees click, and thought: that’s my knees buggered for the season. I picked shards of broken beer bottle as small

and crescent-shaped as fingernail clippings out of the soil until I got a real bad one which broke off in my kneecap and I went over to Ms Noddey and rattled the bucket of broken glass and I was like, 'This enough? I got most of the bottle.'

She said I could rake over the soil. The whole morning had been about saving how many dollars of dirt?

Come to think of it: dirt is free. FREE. Far, bro, Book of Mormon Verse 15 Gospel 44: 'He who clutched at mushrooms felt them shrivel into dust within a day, while he who clutched at nothing had fruit bloom in his hand.'

If I didn't have that verse on me... honest. I mighta hurt her.

I'd been begging her to let me waste those wasps. I got up and my knees clicked and I was like, No way am I crouching down again for 200 minutes, you gotta let me waste them wasps, for the exercise alone, you gotta. I got my can of Lynx Caramel. Its smell was nicer than any cologne, honest to God, I always saved it for Promise Keepers, 'cause there were some honeys working the kitchenette at Promise Keepers... Anyway, these wasps seriously had to go. Ms Noddey had been ragging all morning making me wanna send something to H-E-doublehockeysticks. Take it out on the wasps, I thought. I'd caught one of the wasps drinking the sweat off my shoulder. I made eye contact with the wasp. This was personal. And no way was I gonna smack a person over just 'cause I was having a rough day. We Don't Smash Places. We Don't Smash Faces.

We Don't Smash Places. We Don't Smash Faces.

I'll never forget the chant, never ever, praise the J-Man. Counsellor taught me, what, eight simple words, and bro: turned my life around. D'you know I can get recalled if someone squeals to my parole officer that I even shouted at them? Swwhy I don't smash places and I don't smash faces.

I carried my lighter and Lynx over to the dirt patch along the fence, where it intersects with the stream full of fruit, fruit that Ms Noddey doesn't even bother to bag and give away. Ms Noddey called it her back garden; I just called it a back dirt patch. Big enough to build a couple homes for down-to-earth families. All that was growing around the base of the peach and apples trees was dandelions, honestly, and they weren't exactly lush and tropical. She trailed after me. Wanna know how epic her property is? Took me a good 15 or 16 seconds to strut over to the fence. That's XXL for a city house, bro. That's a section for the Cuzzies. Try step onto your lawn and see how much distance you can cover in 16 seconds. Feel me?

I fired up my lighter, didn't even do a test blast, just squirted the canister of compressed deodorant into the tiny lighter flame and that pushed this wall of purple air towards the wasps orbiting where a fence

post met some boards. I'd spotted a tiny nest; made me feel good to see the nest catch fire and smoke into nothing. The wasps fell out of the sky real quick, and I hardly even scorched Ms Noddey's fence, just melted a spiderweb. It's not generally okay to smash any living creature, even bugs, but if they're harming a old lady? *Bro: bugs gots ta go.*

'Simple trick,' I shrugged, and walked away from her for 16 seconds, still expecting her to stop me with some thanks, but she was just inspecting the fence for damage. 'I'ma grab lunch now, if that's all G...'

'Oh,' she said. She made it sound like I'd dropped a vase handed down five generations. She thought she had herself a slave to work unceaser—what's the word—unceaslessly, sunscreen dribbling in my eyes, kneecaps clicking and bleeding, working for minimum wage to protect 40 cents of dirt.

'Ohhhhh.'

Sorry to disappoint.

Know what I did at the end of the day? Took the cheque out of her knobbly fingers and went home and played League of Legends on Xbox, lying on the couch in my Holden boxers. Every time I annihilated someone, I thought of Ms Noddey.

The missus was putting on some good earrings for church, nice dangly ones. She'd found my bestest Broncos trousers and shirt. I was always late for Promise Keepers, and that made my missus late for Soul Sisters, but we both always stayed late after. Our church is in a warehouse that used to be a car park, bro. There's always maintenance needs doing.

'How was work?' the missus went, crouching over me with soft eyes like I's a baby.

I kissed my fingers and pointed them up at the big man in the sky. 'Just thankful today was a one-off.'

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I was sprinting past Ms Noddey's place 'cause I had to catch a bus from Mt Eden Road for this interview near the CBD and I slowed down outside her terrace, went down, and thought, 'To heaven with it.' I stood outside her place and looked at her patch of dirt. Bare dirt, sure—but all the glass had been taken out of it. So at least it was pure. I'd done some hard-out work on that. I'd suffered. That dirt was MY dirt.

I looked around for the patterns wasps make. I couldn't see any wasps. So eliminating the wasps was my work, too. Bro: I had me a stake in this place.

I saw some dock leaves on her lawn. Know what I thought? I thought, *A Smart Guy*. A gosh darn smart guy, popping up on my woman's house. Guys who get smart get their smart faces smashed. I

wanted to reach over the fence and rip those weed into shreds. I wanted Ms Noddey to praise me for saving her from decadence and sloth. I wanted her to beg me to carry her like a newlywed down the moist steps she slipped on just about every morning.

Look: a big part of me just wanted to be on that section. You got no idea what it's like in Aucks. There's not much land available. You can't just go up to the government and buy a chunk of forest and chop the trees down and build a log cabin. It's a desert, the whole city's a mirage, I swear.

Look, I'm kind of bummed to admit this—and don't tell Leilani, promise?—okay, well I had this job interview sewed up, but I didn't go. I rang the BP station on my mobile while I leaned on Ms Noddey's tall, spiky gate, and I was like, 'Sorry, nother job's come up' and I hung up real quick, then unlatched the gate.

I was her bitch; she was my pimp. The harder I worked for Ms Noddey, the less I got thanked. It was obvious she believed praise would make me soft. You get white people on buses that don't wanna sit beside me 'cause I've got, like, real thick arms with doggies and triple-M tats and massive quads. I always have to prove that I'm a good dude and a dude that works hard enough to be the first one to break a sweat. I sorta, I dunno, sorta sweat out all the evil I done in the past.

I went onto her property. I took a big whiff of the thick, luscious lawn with its daisies and teeny flies and I was like, You'll only ever have this one chance. You need you some work. Screw BP. Things could get a lot more humble than this, praise Jesus.

I gave her door a knock, and I had me some prickles in my knees and blisters on my ankles real soon.

Got my \$14.80 an hour, though.

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That Phillip dude came round this one time while I was up on the roof. Hard morning, that one, workin out this pulley system of ropes to hoist up the roof tiles 'cause they weighed like 20kgs each. This patch on the back of my neck was all bloody 'cause it'd got sunburned like three weeks ago and went all blistery and I couldn't stop itching the blisters and they got infested and leaked this real thin, watery blood that smelled bad and went brown under my fingernails.

I was up on the roof when this crusty old Nissan stopped outside Ms Noddey's gate. It was pretty obvious it was Phillip getting out of the car from the way he held his hands in front of his chest, like T-rex hands, small and clutched and fearful, and I watched him fumbling with the gate latch, like bro: Phillip finally shows his face, and I was thinkin, Someone's been bodyguardin your old lady, cuz, and it ain't you.

But I didn't say that—I watched from the roof and poured water on the back of my neck.

I'm not too sure how the argument started. Phillip rattled the gate, his mum wouldn't open it, just stood on the forecourt playing with her rings, and Phillip fully climbed over the fence. He was wearing a white shirt and tie. Pretty obvious he'd just come from work. Maybe he worked just round the corner. Pretty messed-up if you live right by your mum but don't visit her.

So this Phillip dude was, like, circling his mum and shouting at her and she was standing in one spot but stomping up and down, like a horse or something and Phillip busted out a tape measure and that made Ms Noddey weep into her hands. Phillip kept pointing at the garage and the fence and the house but I don't think he saw me watching from the roof. This one thing I heard Ms Noddey say was unmistakable, bro:

'I'LL BET THE DARKIE WOULDN'T COMPLAIN IF HE WERE GIVEN THE HOUSE!'

It wasn't long before Phillip pulled the gate open, bending the lock a little bit, and got back in his car and his music came on real loud. It was gay music, bro. I was mainly thinking about what gay-arse music taste Phillip had, and when he'd driven off I went back to gluing down the roof tiles with that ReadyMortar mix and it was, like, lunchtime before I clicked. The darkie Ms Noddey was talking about giving the house to? That was *me*, cuz.

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I told the missus, after like a whole month of working for Ms Noddey, that that's where I was goin each day, and she was like, Don't get your hopes up of inheriting the joint, and that was fair enough. Ms Noddey was about 75 or 76, I reckoned, and she was mean enough to live till she was 90. So I'd have to be on my best behaviour for, like, 15 years. Bit too much of a mission. Lani was right.

A bit of fence was loose so I dug down, ripped it out from the bottom, rented a jackhammer for half a day, chipped out the old concrete, poured some fresh concrete in, put the new fence posts in and got them perfect on the spirit level without anyone to help me 'cept the big fella in the sky.

Phillip would come round and hand over envelopes and Ms Noddey would read them at the gate and she would cry and I would hold her. Just wrapped my pythons around her and squeezed her a little bit, and she tipped her head into my shoulder, and she fit pretty well.

I gulped like three 1.5 litre bottles of Mountain Dew a day and got me some Country Fried Chicken for morning tea and had iced coffees for afternoon tea and mowed the lawn and unclogged her roof gutter

and chopped out all the thistles and picked MORE glass outta the lily bed and the rose bed and painted the garage and peeked through the black cloudy spiderwebby window at the \$2000 worth of paint cans and classic vintage car under a shroud I was never allowed to pull back and you know what? I never ever went into that garage.

Usual routine was I'd get the 5.30 bus and rock up at 7am before the sun got real intense, fetch the tools she'd laid out for me under the car port, seeing as I wasn't allowed in the garage. She'd come out in her dressing gown with them curler things and a sleep mask in her hair, tell me what to do then go back inside. Writing letters was all she did all day. I think there was, like, a paper war goin on between her and her son. Phillip was, like, my age, but I would never've had a beer with the dude (not that probation lets me drink, anyway.) He seemed to be trying to take our house away from us and I thought, bro: if Ms Noddey's letters don't make you back the fudge away, maybe I'll make you back the fudge away.

There was this funny thing one morning. I got there at 6.45 'cause I was real motivated, I was enjoyin the routine and my probation officer didn't give me shit for withdrawin from polytech (though I couldn't tell Ms Noddey I'd withdrawd, she wanted me to get a certificate real bad.) I was early and I was just excited for, like, no reason, makin my spade dance on the floor of the bus, listening to my bag of gardening tools jangle and clatter, feelin warmed-up, muscles ready to flex, and I got off the bus a whole stop early and sprinted to our house, and walked up the lane and there she was, in her nightie, pouring a bucket of broken glass into the soil, and I was like Eh?

I was almost gonna say somethin, but it was like, what do you say? I made the sign of the cross on my pecs and just hid behind a bush till 6.59, then unlatched the gate, and it was a ordinary day hacking out stumps after that.

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So it was like a Friday when this dude called Regan Rogers rocked up, bout 10.15 when I was havin smoko. I recognised him off TV, plus he had this big ad printed on his car. Regan Rogers does them conveyancing infomercials at like 1.15am when you can't sleep 'cause you're thinkin about how you will never get a house deposit on \$14.80 but you're too bummed to pray to JC 'cause you're sposda suffer a bit before miracles make you rich.

Anyway Regan Rogers stands at the gate, like implying that I should let him in, and I do, and before I can go, 'Bro, you're like famous, can I getcha autograph,' Regan Rogers is like 'You the guy? The inheritor?'

I stroked my arm, hoping to find a sleeve to pull down over my tats. 'Inheritor?'

'Grace's asked me to make it official.'

'What official?'

'The deed. To the property. We need to sit down, preferably my office at some point. Have I got the right address?' Regan Rogers looked over his shoulder and started checkin the address on his phone and I was like, Bro: Sometimes if you pray hard enough, good things come your way.

After he'd, like, assessed the property and got all my details and I'd run down to WINZ on my lunch break and got a copy of my birth cert and bank account number and all that shit, I felt like duct tape had suddenly been unwrapped from around my ankles and I could move about the place real free.

Ms Noddey always spent most of the day upstairs, inside, partly 'cause she was scared of the outside steps 'cause she always slips on them when they're wet. It got to the point where I'd just warn her, you know, yell up at the house that it's not safe for her to come up till the deck's dry or steps are dry. Heapsa hazards.

Had me a nosy in the garage, too, finally. It'd been long enough. I'd earned it, 'specially seeing as I got all that cement out of the drain finally.

Under the shroud: a 1971 Jaguar. That's the E-type, with 12 cylinders.

Not a single scratch on it, cuz.

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I waterblasted her steps and Grace Noddey passed away, not necessarily in that order. Obviously I was sad, 'course I was sad, but you can't let up on the maintenance. That's just lazy. Gotta blast that moss off, cuz.

I suited up three days later and stood in the front row at her funeral and sang my guts out. Amazing Grace was the song. Amazing blimmin Grace, bro. I knotted my hands into fists and shook them up at the sky and I just couldn't thank the Lord enough, bro. I'd had an excellent week, I'd done some haaard hours at Promise Keepers and God had gifted me the house and we had the moving truck all packed with my weights and pool table and ready to go in there soon as Ms Noddey's paintings was taken off the walls.

I couldn't eat, I couldn't root Leilani, couldn't benchpress, I was so excited about the house God had sent me. Hardly slept, either.

Phillip Noddey was at the wake, of course, and we both reached for a sausage roll at the same time and it was like sooooo awkward.

‘Sorry about your loss, bro,’ I went. I looked at his tie ’cause it was too hard to look him in the eyes.

‘Can we not...’

‘She’s just, y’know, she’s worth so much...’

‘Was my mother really worth that much to you?’

‘Eh? Moth—nah I mean the house, bro, the house. Church, I should say.’

‘Did you just say *church*?’

‘Bro, this is a house of God, bro. She’s worth, like, one point two mil. I just wanted to say Shot for being a good dude about it all, not like challenging the will. We’re movin, like, 50 pews into the bottom floor, bro. Got a wall to knock out.’

‘As I am preparing a private prosecution, you may very well regret the next words you utter.’

Phillip Noddey spitted on my chest, God bless him. I took a step forward. I didn’t even know I had a heavy glass jug in my hand. It was full of orange juice, but I still would’ve used it, except I Don’t Smash Places And I Don’t Smash Faces.

I put the jug down. Dude was gone, anyway, striding back to the whole clan of Noddey mourners with nervous fingers and short fiddly t-rex arms. Can’t expect everyone to understand. So what if Ms Noddey broke glass into the soil to give me a reason to come back ’cause she was lonely? Fair’s fair, can’t complain, I mean, I poured cement into her drain pipe and stuffed her roof gutter with sticks, and planted dock leaves for the same reason, didn’t I. God helps those that help themselves, cuz.