

“Home”

by Caitlin Price, S2

Nick snatched the papers up from the table. He shook them in front of the boy's face. The boy stared down at the table through his glasses, not giving Nick so much as a glance.

"What's this, dork? Science, another 100%?" His friends laughed, building Nick's confidence. "Aw, come on, dork. Say something! I'm congratulating you! Aren't you gonna say thanks? ... No? Shame..." Nick dropped the sheets onto the ground, some scattering farther than he had anticipated. Reaching for the boy's flask of coffee he started pouring it onto the paper, instantly staining them brown, ruining them.

"Oh, sorry, dork. Look at that. I guess I'm just such a klutz ... oh, no. That's you." Nick turned away, his friends laughing. Sliding his arm around his girlfriend's shoulders he strolled off.

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Floodlights shone against the house, illuminating it in an eerie glow against the black night sky. The windows glinted black and empty. Torches marked the driveway up to the house; fireflies frozen in perfect lines.

Nick walked up the drive. His shadow leading the way, and his trainers crunching on the gravel. He was late by nearly an hour but he knew his parents wouldn't be wondering where he was.

Reaching the front door he could hear the shouting already. Sliding the key into the hole he unlocked the door and stepped into the grand foyer. Locking the door behind him he went straight for the winding stairway.

The shouting was coming from the room nearest the landing on the first floor. The door was slightly ajar. Nick walked past it.

"For God's sake, Joanna, I have to work!" His father's voice. Nick could imagine him; standing in front of the fire, his hands outstretched in exasperation, his blazer and tie strewn across the couch, his greying hair dishevelled. Nick could also visualize his mother sitting on the couch opposite her husband, a glass of something, anything, in her hand. She would be fingering one of her necklaces or twisting one of her rings vigorously (something she did when tense). Her hair would be perfect, her clothes clean and never creased. Her face, her eyes, would be the only thing exposing her unhappiness, her misery.

"I know you have to ... work." Nick's mother's wary voice. "But I don't see why you can't just take a few weeks off so we can . . ."

"Don't you get it woman?! My work is the only thing keeping you here! Buying you the ridiculous clothes and rubbish you insist on having!"

"Insist of having? You buy me off with these things. You buy me these things to keep

me *'happy'*. You know what Paul, I'm not happy! I'm not!"

Nick paused, listening to his mother. He had never heard her raise her voice before. He also had never heard her speak so angrily, passionately.

"Whose fault is that?! How can I keep you happy? You make it impossible-" Nick heard movement but didn't go back and peek at the door.

"It's not impossible! More time, Paul. That's all I want. That's all we want. Nicholas and I." Nick moved on the mention of his name. He had heard it all before, the same every time. It was like a record on repeat. The same song over and over until it just got impossible to hear again, and yet it kept playing.

He went along the passage and up another two flights of stairs before reaching his room. He had a whole floor of the house to himself. His gym, games room, living room and then his bedroom. He went to his room.

Undressing he went to bed.

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"Come on, Nick! Come on!" The coach roared as Nick went flat for the try-zone. None of the opposition were anywhere near him and he easily touched the ball down under the posts, making an easy conversion, one that no doubt he would score.

The crowd applauded and cheered for Nick's third try of the game. He looked up into the small crowds of the home supporters, searching for his parents. He saw neither one of them.

Nick kicked the ball between the posts, scoring the conversion. Another wave of praise rose from the people, almost drowning out the referee's whistle for half-time. Nick joined the rest of the team as they stalked off to the changing rooms.

After draining his water bottle Nick looked at himself in the mirror. His blonde hair was ruffled but, he thought, it gave him a rugged handsome look. His face was a little flushed and scrapes of mud painted his chin. He stared into his blue eyes, seeing confidence...

"Good game, Nick." The coach clasped him on the shoulder, making him turn. "Very good game." Nick thanked him and turned back to his team-mates. They were giddy with the early victory. Nick, captain of the rugby team, was happy, too. He had scored twenty-four points of the twenty-seven scored in total

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The weary losers trailed from the pitch into the visitors' changing rooms whilst the victorious team cheered and then were greeted by their parents at the sidelines. Everyone except Nick. He waded through the crowds, heading straight for the changing rooms to get a shower and go home.

"Nicolas, isn't it?" Nick turned to see a man no taller than he. He wore tracksuit bottoms and a rugby shirt, his muscular arms visible. His hair was dark but greying, matching his greyish eyes. Nick didn't recognize him. "Nicolas Jackson?" Nick nodded. "I'm John Herald, coach of the Harlequins." The Harlequins were the best team in the county, Nick had heard of them. "I was watching the game, your good. Very good indeed." Herald carried on. "We have spaces on one of our teams, how old are you?"

"Fifteen."

"We need players on the under-sixteens team. Would you be interested?" Nick's heart thundered.

"Yes. Definitely, yes." He smiled.

"Great. Are your parents here?" Nick's smile faded. "No." He said icily. "They're not." Herald nodded.

"Alright, I'll get in touch by the school?" It was Nick's turn to nod. "Alright then, goodbye."

"Thank you. Goodbye." Nick turned, a new resentment for his parents brewing. He stalked off to the changing room, took a shower then left as fast as he could.

Walking down to the car park he couldn't avoid congratulations from parents and team mates. He smiled politely and moved off fast, heading for the cars, beating the rest of the players.

Reaching the gravel yard where all the cars were parked he looked for any car with his father's private plate or one of his parents sitting in the front. There was no sign. He waited for a few minutes, willing his friends to take longer in the changing room. He didn't want to talk.

A black Rolls Royce drew up in front of Nick, its tinted windows reflecting his gloomy face. The back passenger door swung open automatically. Nick glared at the interior as he climbed in.

"Afternoon, Mister Jackson." The driver was old and had been working for the Jackson family since Nick was born. "Your mother apologises and sent me. Good game?" Nick put on his seat belt and swallowed.

"Yeah, pretty good. We won."

"Good stuff." Before the driver pulled away he reached down then handed a slim blue box back to Nick, who took it apprehensively. "Your father sends you this." Nick opened it grudgingly. A silver watch lay on the velvet casing. It glinted in the light. Despite being impressed by the watch, Nick threw it down onto the back seat.

It meant nothing; another apology, another gift, another stupid compensation to make up for another disappointment.

Nick put his feet up on the seat as the car pulled away. Slumping back he shut his eyes. The triumph seemed soured by the absence of his parents. His victory meant nothing, and even more, being asked to join the county's leading team seemed insignificant whilst his anger flooded him.

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Nick's father returned early that evening, meaning the shouting started early. Nick couldn't hear it from his room but when he went downstairs to the kitchen he caught what they were saying.

"Maybe I don't want it to be like this Paul!" For a second time, Nick was surprised at how angry his mother sounded. "I don't want this!"

"Fine! That's fine!" His father's voice.

"No! It's not fine! Nicolas doesn't want this either! It isn't fair on him!" Nick moved away from the door.

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The cornflakes swam around the bowl, looking less and less appetising. Nick poked them with his spoon before deciding to dump the bowl at the sink. Reaching for the breadbin he heard someone come into the kitchen. It was his mum. Her face was red, her eyes puffy, mascara was running down from one eye. Her always immaculate form had been transformed. Her make-up was half done and ruined, her dress was creased, and her hair was thrown back into an untidy bun. Nick wouldn't have recognized her.

"Mum. You alright?" It seemed a silly question but he didn't know how else to start. She sniffed, paused.

"Honey, go get a bag. Start packing, we're going." Nick didn't understand.

"On holiday? I thought we were going to-"

"No!" Her voice was sharper than intended. "Not on holiday. We're going. Going ... going away. For a bit. Just a bit I promise."

"What?" Nick stepped forward. "Going where? Why?"

"Nicolas." She looked as though she were about to cry again. "I just need you to go and pack a bag. We're going away for a while. I'll explain on the way." She stepped forward to give him a kiss but he dodged past her and headed for his room.

Nick started shoving pairs of jeans and T-shirts into the small hold-all on his desk. He didn't know why, he wasn't going anywhere... But how long was 'for a bit' he wondered. A week? A month? Longer?

There was a knock at his door. Nick turned to see a butler standing there.

"Your mother sent me to carry your case, sir." "I'm not ready." He said scornfully.

"Your mother says to hurry." Slamming the lid of the case down Nick zipped it up, anger making his actions frenzied. Leaving it on the desk he stormed out of the room.

"Why aren't we taking one of our cars?" Nick kicked a stone on the driveway as a taxi pulled up in front of the house. The driver looked up in awe at the mansion.

"Because we can't." His mother said shakily, sliding uncomfortably into the car. Nick followed a resentful look on his face.

"Where are we going then?"

"Scotland." Nick just stared.

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Nick had argued for a while in the car, saying he wouldn't go. Or even so he would only stay for a few weeks, but then he submitted to glaring out of the window. He didn't understand. Why did his mother want to leave? ... Maybe it was obvious. But Nick had never dreamed of his mother having the courage to leave.

They had always been a family, not much of one, but a family none the less. It had never occurred to Nick that divorce was an option. Were they going to get divorced? ... Nick hated the idea of being tossed between parents. Being the only thing connecting them. The one reason that they had to keep each other in their lives. A burden, even.

It was nearing four o'clock in the afternoon when the cab pulled up in front of the house. The sun, too timid to appear, hid behind the clouds, casting greyness across the street.

"Is this a mistake?" Nick stared out of the window, unbelieving that his mother had intended for them to stop here.

The single street stretched for a bit before it rounded a corner. Until then it was a continuous line of double-story homes, though Nick wouldn't have called them homes. They had square windows, some with peeling paint or even broken. The doors were plain brown, the numbers stamped, in white, upon them. There were little gardens in front of every house. In many weeds sprung, wild and untamed, sprouting up between the grey slabs that lead up to the door. Bin bags sat outside every door, many piling up against the walls.

Nick's mum thanked the driver and handed over the cash. Nick noticed a huge wad of cash sitting in her bag. He realized that she must have taken it out in stages. Had she planned this?

Sliding out of the car Joanna looked wearily at the house. Number 13. It was the right one. Nick came to stand next to her, holding both of their bags.

"Mum, what are we doing here?" He asked, still not realizing. She took a deep breath.

"This is home ... for a while."

"This isn't home!" Nick retaliated, a sudden anger overcoming him. "Home is back in England. With my room. And my stuff." He started naming things. Things he saw when he thought of home. "The garden, the big tellies, the cars ... That's home ... With Dad." He said finally, quietly. His mum's eyes never left the building in front of her.

"Home isn't with your father anymore." Nick opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by someone behind them.

"You movin' in 'en?" Joanna and Nick turned to see a woman standing behind them, a rubbish bag in one hand, a kettle in the other. Joanna didn't say anything as she stared at the short woman in baggy jeans and an oil-stained white T-shirt. She had cropped ginger hair and dark eyes.

"Pardon me?" Joanna spoke eventually, realizing the silence was becoming uncomfortable.

"You movin' in?" The woman nodded at the house. She smiled. "I'm Sandi." She dropped the bin-bag and extended a hand. Joanna took it wearily.

"Joanna. This is Nick." She introduced them. They shook, Sandi's grip firm.

"I'm at number six ... how olds your lad?" "Fifteen." Nick put in, scowling still.

"I've gotta son your age." Sandi turned away from them. "Robbie! Robbie!" She bellowed. A teenager soon appeared from the front door of the house marked six. He wore baggy jeans, the waist-line falling very low. He was almost as tall as Nick, his baggy T-shirt tenting his wiry frame. He approached his mother, eyeing up the unrecognized new-comers. He paused next to Sandi.

"This is Robbie." She said, still smiling, she pulled one of the headphones from her son's ears. "You'll deafen yourself, you will." Robbie pulled away, embarrassed. "Take Nick back to the house. Show 'im about. Be nice." She added. Nick didn't move, not wanting particularly to join the boy. Finally, his mother gave him a nudge and he awkwardly followed Robbie back to the other house. It left Sandi and Joanna standing alone.

"So, where you from?" Sandi asked, crossing her arms on her chest, the kettle in her right left hand making the gesture more difficult.

"Southern England." Joanna didn't lie, though her vagueness left Sandi puzzled. Deciding not to ask further, Sandi led Joanna down the street.

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A silence descended upon Joanna and Nick as they sat at the table. The chairs creaked on the brown, linoleum floor. Joanna took a bite of toast. The crunch tearing through the quiet. Nick twisted his spoon through the baked beans.

"You still can't be serious." He said suddenly, setting down his plastic spoon. His mum looked up at him.

"Serious about what, hun?" He scowled.

"This! Here. Being here. You don't expect us to stay here do you?"

"Just for a bit. Until I get some more money." She took another bite of toast. Nick didn't move.

"What about dad? Do I not get to stay with him? Is that not how divorce works?" It was Joanna's turn to look at Nick. Putting down her toast and brushing crumbs from her hands her eyes rested on Nick's.

"Divorce?" She shook her head. "We're not getting divorced... Nick," She sighed.

"Your father and I just need some time. We're not . . ." She searched for the right words. "On good terms, right now. It's not good for you."

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Nick sat up on the wall. Sandi, he recognized, was chatting with an elderly couple whilst six or seven kids played football on the road. His meeting with Robbie the day before the last had been awkward, neither of them knowing what to say to each other. Finally they had agreed to play on the Xbox. Nick had stared at first at the tiny television, it was a tenth of the size of the one he had at home.

Flipping through albums on his iPod Nick looked up to see Robbie approaching, his red hair-flopping over his eyes, hands in pockets. Nick waited for him to come closer but Robbie spoke first.

"Hey ... Mum said your mum said you play rugby. I gotta a ball, you wanna play?" Nick slipped the iPod into his pocket.

"Sure."

Joanna watched from the front window as Nick and Robbie kicked the ball to each other. She hoped he looked happy, though couldn't read his face. Her mobile vibrated again. Looking at the screen she deleted the message before it was read; it was from Paul. It was the seventeenth message since she had left. There had been eleven calls.

She had replied once, letting him know that they weren't in trouble but that's all she said.

The night before, regret had started to seep into her mind. This isn't how she lived. She couldn't be alone. She needed the support. But she didn't need Paul ... Maybe she did.

Sandi waved from the pavement, breaking Joanna away from her troubled thoughts. She waved back then went out to join her.

"Nice day, innit? Not seen the sun in a while." Sandi greeted Joanna who smiled and nodded, even though she thought it was cold. She wore a jumper over her green dress and then a jacket.

Sandi noted Joanna's expensive jewellery and clothes, realizing that she had come from somewhere very different. Sandi half envied her, for coming from a place with nice things and surely a lot of money but then she thought of what she had. What she would never want to give up. It was her home. She wondered what had made Joanna leave. If she had all of those things why had she wanted to come here?

They started talking, watching the boys play.

The ball was a little flat and not very good quality but Nick held his tongue. They kicked and passed to each other and soon the other kids playing football wanted to join in. Robbie and Nick let them, starting a little game.

Nick realized he was having fun.

"Hey boys, got room on one of your teams for an old man?" Nick looked up to see a man come out of number six. He was tall with the same red hair as Robbie.

"I guess." Robbie smiled, for the first time Nick had seen. "You can come with me, Nicks beatin' us bad."

"Nick? I'm Harry, Robbie's dad." Extending a hand Nick shook Harry's. "Come on then let's play." Something in Nick hurt, though he didn't understand what it was.

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It was exactly a week after Joanna and Nick had arrived.

"Mum, I don't care. I want to go home!" Nick slammed the door the hinges screeching horrendously. Joanna sank into one of the kitchen chairs, running her hands through her hair. It was still damp from her shower, her cold shower.

Tears made lines on her face. She wiped at them before resting her head in her hands.

Her mobile buzzed again. She left it for a few moments before the noise got too

much. Lifting her head she picked it up and launched it at the wall, crying out angrily. It cracked, satisfyingly, against the wall before falling into the sink. She heard a splash. Leaping from her seat she grabbed it from the dirty water. Sinking to the floor she let the mobile drop.

Nick slammed his bedroom door; again the door didn't make a loud enough noise. He had nothing to smash, nothing to throw, nothing to break. Nothing but a mattress on the floor and his hold-all. He was living like a . . . a... an animal, he decided. There was a tiny TV downstairs but apart from that he was in poverty. He didn't even have a proper bed.

He wanted to be home. Playing rugby, watching TV, going on his laptop. It was all familiar, it was home. Though he didn't miss his dad. He didn't miss the fighting.

But his mum was so unhappy here, why was she doing this? It made no sense. Why didn't she just go home?

He wanted to go home. He was so tempted to get a train or a bus and go back but somehow he couldn't leave his mum. He knew she needed him.

Slumping down onto the mattress he lay back, his head on the pillow. Closing his eyes he took a deep breath, trying to picture his bedroom. The big telly, the huge bed, his gym next door. That was his home.

There was a rumbling from downstairs. Footsteps trampled up the stairs and he heard someone pass his door. He sat up as he heard a sob. Gingerly heading for the door, he looked out. His mum was in her room, her bag on the bed. She was pulling things frantically from the cupboard and piling them into the case.

Nick stepped out from his room and hovered in the doorway of her room.

"Mum?" She looked up, her eyes red. "Why are you packing?" Nick's heart thundered. Were they going home? Finally.

"Yes. We have to." Nick let curiosity overcome.

"Why? Has something happened?" Joanna shook her head.

"I was stupid, Nick. I can't stay like this. We need, I need," She corrected herself. "somewhere like home. I need . . ."

"Dad?" Nick regretted the single word immediately after he said it. He knew he had slipped up and wished that it could be reversed.

Joanna sniffed, dropping the shirt she was grasping onto the bed. She looked up at Nick. Her tone was hard, but Nick took no offence.

"I don't *need* your father, Nicolas. I can be on my own. With you." She put in. "It's just hard." She said quietly.

"I know you can, mum. But if we went home-"

"We're not going home."

"But I thought . . ." Nick looked at her case. She shook her head.

"No. We're not going home. I can stand on my own two feet, for once I am." Her voice sounded weak, yet defiant.

Nick couldn't understand her. She was miserable, why was she staying? If she was trying to prove her independence, who was she proving it to?

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Two days passed and still Nick remained in his stormy stupor. He wanted desperately to go home. More than anything he wanted to see his room, feel his bed, watch his television. Now, more than ever, he wanted to call his dad but he had left his mobile at home. He had no money whatsoever to use a payphone, that is if he could find one. It was so unfair, he thought, being trapped here with nothing. The people here had nothing. Or nothing that Nick would ever want.

He had just gotten back from Robbie's house. They had had dinner. It had been strange; they had sat as a family, Robbie's parents and his brothers. There was no shouting. They had laughed and chatted.

Nick's chest twisted again.

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Light invited itself into Nick's room. The beams shone on his face as he slept. He breathed softly, his chest rising and falling. *We're in Robbie's kitchen, at the table. I sit next to Robbie. He passes me the potatoes. I take some then pass them on. Everyone laughs at a joke Robbie's father makes. I laugh with them. I feel warm, safe, wanted. Nothing can take me away. Nothing.*

Suddenly, something is on my arms. Pulling me away. Pulling me back. Back home ... But it isn't home, or not as I remember it. It's a huge house, monstrously large. There are voices. Shouting, angry voices. It's my parents. I want to shout back to tell them to stop. Tell them to be quiet. But my throat remains silent, as if oblivious to my commands.

Nick woke up, a sweat breaking out on his forehead. He lay still for a few minutes, recollecting his dream. It made no sense, he thought at first. But then he started to realize.

The realisation of what was happening only hit Nick the second time his mother said it.

"Nick, we're going home." She gave a small smile, apologising for what she had done, but not regretting it. He sat up from his bed and stared.

"For real this time?" Joanna nodded.

"I called a taxi, we'll take the train most of the way." Nick's heart thundered. This was what he had been waiting for since he had arrived.

Joanna left him to pack his bag and he did so with no hesitation. Piling his clothes untidily into his hold-all he imagined himself falling back onto his bed, picking up the remote and switching on the TV. He couldn't help but smile at the prospect.

The taxi's horn made Nick look up through the kitchen window. The driver was looking up at the house and Nick responded with a wave. He felt agitated, restless. He wanted to be gone so badly.

"Mum! It's here-"

"I know." Joanna cut him off as he stepped into the hallway. Her voice was taut. She was at the door, waiting with her bag.

Nick followed her out onto the street, shutting and locking the door behind him.

"Leave the key under the mat." Joanna instructed, Nick did so. Looking up he saw Robbie watching him from the window. He gave a short wave, dismay sweeping over him at the prospect of leaving his friend behind. Robbie waved back and smiled.

The taxi driver opened the boot of the car and Nick put his case in, Joanna following.

The taxi turned onto the street. Recognition made Nick's heart beat faster. He was home.

And then he saw his house. The car drove up through the automatic gates. It looked different.

This wasn't what it was meant to be like coming home. He remembered Robbie's house, in Scotland. It had felt like home. It had been safe. Not familiar to *him* but he knew it felt like that to Robbie and his family. They hadn't had the things he was used to, nor the money either, but they had been happy. Was that what home meant?

But what about his parents? Nick realized that they had always said that this was his home but it didn't feel like that now. His parents had never tried to make him feel like this was his home. Was it their fault? Their constant fighting, had that been the reason that Nick had never had a real home? Them never showing up at his rugby matches, being late for parents night, buying him presents he didn't want to make up for it. Were those the things that didn't give Nick something everyone deserves?

He remembered playing with Robbie and his dad. Nick's dad never did that. And the whole of Robbie's family sitting round the table, like his dream, Nick's parents didn't do that with him either. Nick remembered the pain he felt both those times. He

realized that pain wasn't a wanting to go home but a wanting for having a home like that. It was envy, jealousy. He hated it but couldn't deny it.

Was that what he wanted now, as the taxi pulled to stop in front of the house?

He wanted a home.

Home does not shelter you with sturdy walls and roof but with comfort and security.