

NANCY

by Jessie Mathewson

Home's where your heart is; yeah right! The guy that said that was probably some posh snob, living in a ginormous castle with millions of servants and a Rolls Royce with tinted windows. Well, if I've learnt one thing from living in Glasgow, on our dead-end estate, it's that home isn't where your heart is!

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As usual the class was noisy. Someone was playing music on their phone and everyone was chatting. My mate Gordy sat on my desk, ping-ponging a ruler.

'Iya! Who the h**l?!

I turned in my seat. A couple of rows back, Jazz was sitting with his feet up grinning angelically at me.

I picked up the paper ball that had hit off my head, and lobbed it back at him.

'Detention, Mr. Simpson' said a cool, crisp voice from behind me.

I whipped around in my seat to face the speaker. A tall young woman with wavy golden hair to her shoulders and cornflower blue eyes, was staring down at me.

'F**k!'

The appreciation was clear in Jazz's voice.

'And for you Mr. Dean.'

At the end of the lesson Jazz and I stayed behind, while the rest of the class headed off to the big canteen for lunch. I had been watching our new English teacher, Ms. Walker, all lesson.

She wasn't like other teachers. Most teachers were frightened by the attitude of the thugs in our class, and bad behaviour was usually given a blind eye or at the most recorded as a demerit on the behaviour system. No teacher ever gave detention.

'Mr. Dean, Miss. Harper needs some poems stapled onto the wall and then Mr. Reid needs his pencils sharpening. This way please.'

I watched Jazz leave, Ms. Walker at his side. I realised that, left on my own, I could do a runner; but I had the feeling that it would only bring more trouble, so I stayed put.

Ms. Walker was back very quickly, but when she came in she walked over to her desk and started to type. I thought she had forgotten me but then she spoke:

'I'm afraid I don't have any jobs for you, Mr. Simpson. However, there is some paper at the back of the room. I'd like a three page story on my desk by the end of lunch time; oh, and if it's not done by then, you'll be staying after school.'

I stared at her, not sure if she was serious. But she said nothing else so I assumed she was and went to collect a sheet of paper.

I sat down at my desk and stared at the blank page. What the h**l was I supposed to write about?! I had no idea what Ms. Walker was expecting-... but if I didn't write something ...

In the end I went for the easy option and wrote about my school day. It wasn't going to win any prizes for drama or plot but I reckoned she couldn't say it was wrong!

* * *

The next day, after class, Ms. Walker made a beeline for me. Gordy and Jazz scarpered, leaving me stranded as the teacher bore down on me. What had I done this time?! Then I saw the paper clutched in her hand and my heart sank; sh*t, this was about my writing!

'Callum'

She used my first name, and somehow her voice sounded warmer, more relaxed.

'Callum, I just want to say I've read your stuff and- ... it's really good.'

That wasn't what I'd been expecting! Nothing close! I didn't know what to say.

'It's witty, it shows insight and intelligence and there's natural use of metaphor and simile. . .'

About that point, I stopped paying attention. My mind was struggling to keep up with the most praise I'd ever been given. I stared at Ms. Walker.

'Callum, your mouths open.'

I shut it quickly.

'What I'm trying to say is... I think you'd benefit from extra tuition.'

Finally something that rung a bell! All that just to say I needed extra help in English!

'There's a junior writer's competition coming up and I thought you could... give it a stab.'

O.K., so maybe this wasn't what I thought.

'Just think about it O.K.'

I nodded and hurried away, trying to make sense of it all.

* * *

I didn't know why I was there. I felt like an idiot, standing outside Ms. Walker's room, waiting; but I didn't have the courage to knock.

Luckily for me, Ms. Walker saw me, smiled and beckoned. I went in nervously.

'I'm so glad you decided to come along Callum! Have a seat.'

Half an hour later I paused, resting my pen on the paper.

Ms. Walker looked up questioningly.

'Sorry Miss, it's just... everyone will make fun of me. For writing I mean.'

Ms. Walker smiled.

'That's no problem. Many writers use another name when publishing. It's called a pen name. In fact many writers use opposite sex names.'

I grinned

'Can I call myself Nancy?!!'

Ms. Walker smiled,

'If you like.'

* * *

I waited nervously in the assembly hall. I'd been pulled out of class but luckily my mates didn't know why.

A tall man in a smart suit climbed onto the little stage and started to speak:

'I am here to announce the results of the Glasgow City young writers' competition.'

The first and second place winners were from other schools. Then it was the third

place:

`Third place goes to Callum Simpson!'

It took me a few seconds to realise that he was speaking about me. I got up and walked slowly down the aisle. The others turned to stare. I stumbled onto the stage and reached out for the prize in the man's hand. Then I walked quickly back to my seat, as the man started a speech on `the quality of all entries'. It was only then that I relaxed my clenched teeth and smiled.

I was happy with a third place in the competition, but Ms. Walker was keen to push on. I didn't mind. I felt more confident about my writing now and I was happy to write more; also, there was something relaxing about writing. I liked that!

The summer holidays passed quickly and I was into third year. I didn't have Ms. Walker for English anymore but I still saw her three lunch times a week for my writing.

It wasn't until about a month into the new term that I noticed something was up with my mates. Now Gordy and Jazz sat together in class, and never beside me. Every time I tried to chat to them or sit with them they moved away.

At break and lunch I found myself sitting alone more and more often. It seemed that I didn't fit in with anyone.

Moving up a class in English was a great thing for me. Mr. Reid, my new teacher, got me to sit next to a guy called Mat, who I recognised from Home Ec and PE. We got on well and Mat asked me to sit with him at lunch. His gang was small but the people were nice. There was Mickey, Ryan, Angela and Mat's girlfriend Jess. Soon I was sitting at their table everyday and I sat next to one of the guys in most of my classes.

Things were looking good for me. I had a great new gang of mates and my writing was getting on really well. I felt like I was sitting on top of the world. I should have known it couldn't last

* * *

It was Thursday and I was walking home from the park where a group of us had been kicking a ball about.

When I turned into our street I saw a police car outside our house.

I broke into a run and arrived at the gate, panting, in time to see my older brother Malcolm dragged out of the house by a pair of cops and forced into the back of the car. It took me a moment to realise that he was being huckled!

Another pair was trying to restrain my ma, who was struggling and pushing, screaming and crying.

As the dug van with Malcolm in it revved its engine, I ran over to mum, who began to cry on my shoulder.

`What has he done?' she wailed `Why are you taking him?'

The polis stepped away from ma, brushing down their uniforms.

Neither answered, just got into the car. I held ma's hand but she pulled away and flung herself at the van rapping on the passenger window and screaming her questions.

Slowly the window wound down and the sergeant, a muscled man in a tight uniform, leaned out.

He gave his answer in a cold, hard voice. He didn't shout but I had no problem hearing what he said:

'Murder.'

* * *

I lay in bed with my pillow over my head; but I could still hear mum crying. The policeman told us that we would be needed in court in two days. I was scared. Had Malcolm really killed someone? The policeman said that "a boy had been knifed during conflict between opposing gangs" and that "Malcolm Simpson is being held on suspect". But what did that mean? How did they know who had done it? It could have been anyone!

The suit felt odd and tight, like a straight jacket holding me still on the bench. I wanted to run but I couldn't.

'Calling the next witness, Callum Simpson, brother of the accused.'

I stumbled to my feet and headed down the aisle. I clambered clumsily into the witness box.

A bright light shone in my eyes and I blinked, stupidly. I stared around at the crowded courtroom, full of unfamiliar faces; the judge and other officials sat at a high table at one end of the room, towering over the rest of the crowd; at the bench of the jury, each man or woman was hard faced and empty; I tried not to look at Malcolm but I couldn't help it: he stood in the accused box opposite me. He looked smaller somehow, and his head hung low.

A blotchy, purple bruise covered the little patch of his face that I could see

The clerk's shrill voice made me jump:

'Lawyer for the prosecution, have you any questions?'

'Yes.'

The reply came from a skinny man with oiled hair. He reminded me of an eel I'd once seen on a school trip to an aquarium. This was going to be bad.

'Does the witness know of any weapons in the home of the accused?'

I relaxed. That was easy.

'No.'

'You mean to say that the accused has no knives at home.'

'No.'

'That must be very inconvenient when spreading one's toast in the morning!'

There were a few chuckles from the audience. I reddened.

'There are kitchen knives.' I mumbled.

'Could you repeat that please.'

I looked up and met the lawyer's eye and I could tell that he was laughing at me. I ground my teeth but there was nothing I could do.

'We have kitchen knives.'

'So your brother could have stolen a knife before leaving the house on the day of the 13th?'

I gritted my teeth to stop myself screaming.

'Yes.'

The lawyer smiled.

'No further questions.'

The clerk spoke again:

'Lawyer for the defence, have you any questions?'

`Yes.' The lawyer turned to me. He smiled, and he looked friendly. He was the exact opposite of the eel lawyer; round and chubby like a stuffed bear. I smiled back at him: finally someone who was on our side!

'Callum, would you say that your brother is a violent person.'

I struggled for words. Malcolm had been in a few fights, but this ...

I shook my head.

`No; Malcolm wouldn't kill someone!'

'Do you remember any change in your brother on the night of the 13th?'

I thought. If that night had followed the usual pattern I'd have been in my room, pretending to sleep when Malcolm came in. And Malcolm would have been his usual a**e piece self!

I shook my head again.

`No.'

`No further questions, your honour.'

I clutched ma's hand as we waited nervously on the bench. A few days in court had passed since my first time in the witness box and since then I'd been back several times. But after my first time I was ready. I was careful what I said, especially when the eel-lawyer was questioning me. But even so the case hadn't been going well; Malcolm's lawyer was struggling to convince the jury of Malcolm's innocence. Now, our last hope was in the decision that the jury were making right now.

My heart pounded as the spokesman of the jury stepped forward and my stomach cartwheeled.

'Has the jury reached a decision?'

`Yes'

'And what is that decision: guilty or not guilty?'

I squeezed mum's hand as the jury spoke but I couldn't hear his words above the sound of my rushing blood and thumping heart. Mum began to cry on my shoulder but I didn't know if it was with relief or despair. I looked around in the rush as people crowded to leave the court, searching for some sign. I wanted to ask some one but I was too afraid.

A black gown swirled past me and I realised that it was the eellawyer. He turned as he whirled by and smirked at me. My heart sank. Malcolm had lost his fight: he had been proven guilty.

* * *

It took a few days for it to really hit me; but when it did, it hit hard! I got a few days off school, but I got no rest, as I tried to cope with ma. She had stopped crying after a few hours, but since then she had withdrawn into herself, and it seemed like she couldn't look after herself.

In the evenings I took long walks alone, around the estate, and every night I went further and further from home. It was after about a week of these walks, that I met Gordy and Jazz hanging about a street corner. I'll never know why I went over, but it just felt right. At first they seemed reluctant to talk but after a while we got chatting. It was good to hang out with my mates again, and although we hadn't hung out for months, I felt relaxed with them. That night I stayed out past midnight. I didn't realise, until I slipped back into the house, that I had taken Malcolm's place in the family now.

* * *

I didn't realise it was my birthday. Four days had passed since my meeting with Gordy and Jazz and I had gone back to school. Jazz called me over as I walked through the big iron gates and I hurried over to where he and Gordy stood. 'Usual time tonight? We've got a surprise for your big day!'

Jazz and Gordy exchanged looks but they wouldn't tell me what they had planned.

After school I grabbed a couple of slices of bread and headed out. I walked the streets alone until it was time to meet my mates. Usually, mum would have been disappointed to miss my birthday, but this year, I doubt that she had remembered. Jazz and Gordy were waiting for me in the bus shelter. Gordy was carrying a plastic bag. Neither of them said anything and we set off. We headed for the park. The grass was dark as it had been every night since some kids had smashed the floodlights. We went over to the picnic benches and sat down. I could hardly see the others in the low light from the streetlamps. The plastic bag rustled and Gordy brought out two six-packs of beer. 'Happy birthday mate!' said Jazz, pulling three cans away from the plastic holder.

It felt grown-up to be drinking beer in the dark, and although it tasted bad, it made you feel kinda' good!

'H**l that's strong!' said Gordy.

'Just wait till you try this!' Jazz replied taking another swig.

'Where d'ya get `dis stuff?' I said.

'Nicked it.' replied Gordy 'From my house.'

I nodded stupidly. Already I could feel the beer's buzz leaving me so I took another gulp. By the time I'd finished the first can I knew I was dunted but I didn't care. I slumped on the table. Jazz leaned forward and burped.

'F**k that was good.' I slurred.

Gordy grinned.

'Fancy anuver?'

I nodded and Gordy reached for the six-pack.

'Have one of these.' Jazz insisted 'Down in it in one and it really gives you a kick!' I did.

'Bl**dy h**l! I see what ya mean!'

By the time I stumbled home I'd had four beers and when I got inside I collapsed on the sofa. I knew I was charred. My last thought as I drifted off to sleep was what a great night I'd had. I'd never regret it.

I was wrong about that! When I woke up I had a bad headache on top of the fact that my skull was getting banjoed! I staggered into the kitchen and tried to make myself a coffee but I spilled boiling water all over my front. Screaming and swearing I headed back to the sofa with a can of coke. I pressed the freezing can against my chest but it only made it burn more.

The headache went on all day, and I was glad that it was Saturday. Mum didn't seem to notice me as she floated round the house.

Although the headache was awful, by Sunday it was gone and I was starting to wonder when I'd get my hands on a beer again; in the end the headache was worth it for the feeling the drink gave you!

* * *

After that, weeks blurred together with boringness and booze.

More and more often I bunked off school with Jazz and Gordy, and every weekend we hung around the bus shelter or the park, usually with a can or two of beer.

A real beezer was the time Jazz brought us a bottle of Smirnoff Vodka. It gave you the worst headache of all but it was worth it!

But best of all were the bottles of mini one-man WKD, barrbru flavour I found at the back of a cupboard at home! Unlike most drinks they tasted pretty good and they had a kick on them too!

I hardly noticed that I had dropped a class in English, Maths and French. It didn't really seem to matter. All I cared about were the weekends I spent with my mates!

I didn't really notice that I wasn't speaking to Mat anymore either.

He and the others seemed to be avoiding me, and I never chatted to them in class anymore.

In fact, in most classes they avoided me all together. But I didn't care! I sat with Jazz and Gordy now and class was a real laugh. I never wasted my time doing homework or studying. Why would I bother? I had better things to do!

* * *

I wasn't going to my writing sessions with Ms. Walker anymore. I didn't see her at all but I didn't really notice the change.

It was a couple of months after my birthday, that Ms. Walker caught me in the corridor.

'Callum? Where have you been? You haven't been up at lunch times for ages. I've been looking for you but I haven't been able to find you. What's up?'

I looked away.

'I've been away ... doin' stuff.'

'Callum! Have you been skipping classes?'

I could feel myself going red. No! Why should I be ashamed? I hadn't done anything wrong! I looked up at her.

'Yes!'

'Callum, your breath stinks of alcohol! How could you! You need to get a grip!'

A tiny part of me felt ashamed but I was angry now!

'OH P**S OFF!!!' I yelled

'Callum! Wait!'

But I was already gone, off into the crowds and away ...

* * *

Late that night, as I lay in bed, I thought about what Ms. Walker had said. I couldn't understand why a part of me agreed with her. I was happy, wasn't I?
`But you were happy then too.' Said a little voice in my head.

I couldn't get over what Ms. Walker had said and I was still thinking about what it the next day. Part of me wanted to yell `You're wrong!' but the other part wanted different.

That lunchtime I went up to Ms. Walker's class. I didn't know what I wanted to say, but I felt that I should say something. Ms. Walker was bent over a pile of essays when I arrived. I knocked. When Ms. Walker looked up she looked surprised and confused, but she beckoned for me to come in.

She pointed to a chair, and I sat nervously on the edge of it.

`How can I help you Callum?'

Her voice sounded calm, friendly and interested. It made feel ashamed of what I'd said.

I stared at my twisting fingers. What should I say? But while my brain was thinking my mouth had opened and my heart was speaking:

`I need help. I want out. I want things to be like they were. I want to write again.

Please help me.'

I blinked. Oh s**t, don't cry!

* * *

In the end, I made the right choice. I wasn't Malcolm and I didn't want to waste my life trying to be like him. I realised that just because things are hard, doesn't mean you have to give up.

I kept up my writing after that, and f moved back up a class in English. I passed all my exams and in the end, I ended up with advanced higher English and History. Ms. Walker helped me to prepare for my interview at Edinburgh University. After I got my place, I applied for a student grant to help fund my stay at Halls of Residence.

Since then I've been thinking about home and that phrase, `home is where your heart is'. I guess now I understand what it means: your home isn't the place you sleep; it's a place where you can do the things you love. So now I know that it doesn't matter that I lived in a run-down housing, and that my brother is in gaol for murder:

I've found my home in English, doing what I love most!

More importantly, I've found myself, and who I really am: I am Nancy!

GLASGOW TERMS

A**e piece - an insult used to/about anyone who annoys you
Banjoed - getting hit/punched
Barrbru - iron bru
Beezer - something good
Bingo bus - police car
Charred - drunk
Dug van - police van
Dunted - a bit drunk
Huckled - arrested
Polis - police

NOTE FROM THE WRITER

This text is an important stepping-stone for me, as it is my first successful piece of writing, in the first person. This means that in the story I have experimented with how I use this style. In the end, I decided that I would write the story like a mental flow; Callum only speaks about his own experiences and I think this gives a nice effect.

This story was a challenge to write, firstly, because my language use and descriptive content was limited by the ability of my character.

I developed a number of ways to get around this problem: I managed to add in more description in parts of the story, and this helps to show what effect writing has on Callum; also I have added in descriptions of characters, as I think that Callum would notice people's appearances and body language, as from the practical view of a prospective gang member this could be important.

Another challenge in this piece was conveying the fact that Callum is Glaswegian. Not coming from Glasgow myself and knowing very little of the local dialect I had to find alternative ways of showing this. I have chosen to use a few Glaswegian terms and plenty of incorrect grammar, to hint at the way Callum's mind works. Also, I wanted to give the idea that Callum is a poor boy from a rough area, so, to make the text more authentic, I have included strong swearing. I don't usually use that kind of language in my writing and I never use it in my own life, but I feel that Callum would, and that it is a vital part of the text, in that it helps support the reality of the story. I do realise that the strong language in this narrative could be slightly shocking, but I feel that this is a dramatic and shocking piece. It is certainly not a children's story, and for the most part, it is not a happy story either.

I hope that the story I have built up sounds authentic and believable. I certainly hope that this isn't just a fairy tale and that it really could happen!

THANKS

My first thanks go to my judo coach, Stuart McWatt, who, being from Glasgow supplied with local slang and terms. I would like to dedicate this book to him because

it was his input that transformed this piece from a story about a boy in Glasgow into a story about a Glaswegian boy!

Also thank you to my scribes club teacher and my parents who have encouraged me and kept me going.

A last thank you to anyone who has proof read my story and given me feedback. Without you this story would not be what it is now!