

THE RACE

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

It happened on the Wednesday, school activities day. Bobby had been feeling good, top of the world in fact. He was where he was meant to be, he was sure of it.

Black top and shorts, stretching his legs like he'd seen all the sprinters do on the TV before the big race.

This was his one hundred metres Olympic final.

Bobby had always been good at running though sometimes there was nag working its way forward from the back of his mind. Did he really like it? With a stretch and a touch at his toes the thought was gone, he was good and that's what mattered.

All through Primary from P1 to P7 it had been Ready, Steady, GO, and Bobby always the first one out the blocks, and halfway home before the rest even got started.

When he'd started High School, he'd put his name down for athletics for his Wednesday activity and couldn't believe it when the teachers had put him in with the rugby mob.

He hated rugby. He was too small and skinny, and every time somebody threw the funny shaped ball at him, he stared at it too long, amazed that he'd even caught the thing, and before he knew it one or more of the muscular monsters had flattened him deep into the mud of the rugby pitch.

Three bruised ribs and one smashed nose later they had given up on him and handed him over to the Athletics crowd.

He felt that he`d come home.

On that dry Wednesday, stretching, bobbing up and down and giving a sideways glance at his opponents, it was amazing how his bruised ribs didn't seem so bruised; his smashed nose sniffed with joy the newly cut grass as he pawed at it like a bull getting ready to charge. The ground was summer baked, and the air hazy, the finishing line like some desert mirage, another teacher shimmering in the sun ready to declare Winner.

It was a foregone conclusion, he was sure of it, no other outcome possible. His hands felt sweaty and shook slightly, but no-one else noticed. He was nervous, he was never nervous, why was he nervous?

The teacher called, ready, and put his whistle close to his lips. Bobby closed his eyes and prepared himself. Nerves were good he told himself. Maybe he had been nervous in the past and hadn't noticed.

That would be it.

Then steady, the whistle touching at the lips now, and then the ear-splitting blast, and Bobby was off and running, eyes focused, feeling his bones shudder and shake as his feet pounded off the hard unforgiving grass.

He felt pulled towards the finishing line just like all those years in Primary. Things were going to be okay. That twinge of doubt at the start fell away with the sweat as he ran, smile growing as the finishing line came into focus.

He would make it through High School.

And then it happened. Another boy, at first indistinct, a fleck in the corner of Bobby's eye, but growing larger and larger like some monstrous shadow, and the noise in Bobby's ears as the ground seemed to shake as the boy, an inch away from Bobby's shoulder, passed him and started to pull away.

The finishing line which had seemed clear now began to haze like a camera out of focus. Bobby tightened his hands into fists so much so that his nails dug into his flesh. His teeth ground into each other as the smile fell away. Bobby willed every bit of muscle in his body to work the hardest they have ever worked to catch the boy.

And that was the thing afterwards when Bobby had stumbled over the finishing line and tripped over his own feet to tumble onto the harsh grass, when he tried to drag the breath up from his lungs. His muscles had obeyed. They had worked the hardest they had ever worked. If they were machinery the squealing of gears, and the steam and sparks from metal crashing against metal would have been heard for miles around.

He had run till his lungs felt they were about to splinter into a thousand pieces, and he'd still lost.

He'd lain there and nodded at his teacher as they gave him the thumbs up, and uttered 'good run.'

He'd lost.

He'd lain there as they'd turned to pat the other boy on the back, heard one of them mutter. 'A star in the making here.'

He'd lost.

He'd lain there letting his breathing slowly return to some sort of normal.

Then he'd got to his feet, his legs shaking, and he'd joined the rest of his class as they trudged back to school.

He'd lost.

It had taken him a full week to think, and try not to think of the race, before his mind began to calm.

A teacher had asked why he hadn't put his name down for the athletics for that week's school activities day.

'Coming in second isn't that bad.' The teacher had said.

'I don't like running.' Bobby had replied, and the answer had taken him as much by surprise as the teacher.

'Okay. What do you like then?' Asked the teacher.

'I don't know. Yet.' Bobby had replied.

Walking away Bobby wondered if he had really lost.

Tom Murray is a fiction writer, poet and playwright based in Dumfries. He was recently a Poetry Ambassador for the Scottish Poetry Library and is currently an Open Book Lead Reader in Eyemouth and Dumfries.