

The Essay

I'm not good with words and I hate writing. If you don't believe me, ask Mr Jones, my English teacher. He sets us essays. When I hand mine in (when I do them) he says, "Tom, Tom, Tom, when are you going to develop your ideas? Look at this. Eight lines. It's even less than last time."

When he goes, "Tom, Tom, Tom," I dare not look at Adam, my best mate. He does air-drumming in time with what Mr Jones says. Then I have to try not to laugh and Mr Jones he sees my smile. Then he goes, "Tom, Tom, it's important this is, Tom. One day you'll find out."

The thing is, even if I don't look up, I know what Adam's doing and if I think about it I can't help smiling. One day, Adam was so desperate to make me laugh that he drummed on his desk, quite loud it was. Mr Jones looked up and so did I. "Adam, what do you think your playing at? Playing the tom toms?" The whole class laughed then and I caught a little grin on Mr Jones' face before he looked back down.

I learnt something then. Teachers, well some of them, know more than they let on. Mr Jones knew exactly what Adam had been doing for ages but he had pretended not to notice. In fact I reckon he had kept saying "Tom, Tom, Tom" just for fun. He stopped after that.

Anyway, I hadn't meant to say all that. I just wanted you to get about me and essays. Because one day, Mr Jones he said, "Homework. Essay. Title: Love."

Outside me, Adam and George put our fingers in our mouths and pretended to gag. "Wimpy stuff that," said Adam. "I aint doing mine."
"No way," I shouted. George shouted out "No way" at the same time.

When I got home, Dad was in the kitchen, swilling out his mug at the sink. "Homework first, lad, then tea. Then you can do what you like." No "Hi, Tom" or "Had a good day?" I knew he'd find out what I'd got to do though, so I sat at the table looked at the mess and watched Dad and made a start.

Homework. LOVE

The kitchen table is always filthy, piled up with stuff. Like the sink and the draining board. I know when we've used up all the clean stuff, well semi-clean stuff, because Dad shouts, "Crisis!" And he gives a quick slosch round under the tap to get a sort of clean mug or plate. Once I saw him use a cloth.

The table is covered with grease, engine oil, smeared ketchup, mouse droppings and soil spilled from where Dad's potted up seedlings. Most of it is covered up with car parts, old bottles and boxes of cereal.

So I sat down at one end and cleared a space big enough for our laptop and put my elbows on the mucky top whilst I stared at the screen. I typed in L-O-V-E like I was hammering in four nails.

Dad and I live on our own. The whole house is like the kitchen. Twice a social worker tried to take me away. The first time Dad wouldn't let him in the door. Second time Dad tried a new tactic. He made the guy a cup of tea and he was so scared to drink it he ran off, saying "I'm sure you'll be fine, Thomas".

The food here is truly awful but Dad won't let me cook. Just as well. Probably be worse. Dad flies off the handle easily and he drinks. Even Adam said once, "Why don't you run away?"

So what's this got to do with L-O-V-E? One day things in the kitchen were even worse than normal. Dad had some letters in his hand. He threw them on the table, swept a place clear and in the same move picked me up in his big arms and plonked me on the table. Then he put both hands flat on the table and looked closely at me. "Tom," he said. "What are we going to do about this..." He stepped back and looked at his hands, red and black they were. "...mess," he said.

I thought he was going to go berserk, but his eyes sparkled and he smiled. He hugged me tight and he laughed. And he laughed whilst I laughed with him. "Oh Tom, I'm so glad I've got you."

"Why Dad?"

"Cos I can wipe my hands on you. Eggs for tea?"

I slid off the table and risked wiping the muck on my backside on his trouser leg. "And I'm so glad I've got you Dad."

And we both rolled around the kitchen laughing till our ribs hurt. And I knew Dad loved me.