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## The Long Walk

by Stuart Carruthers

The school disco was not the place to be if you were of a shy disposition. Embarrassment and social humiliation were regularly handed out by the gangs of baying kids who were desperate to bring some joy to their sad lives. The sports hall was as big as two tennis courts and while Miss Jenkins acted the part of DJ, the boys and girls, as was traditional, sat on opposite sides of the vast room. Their misguided faith had ingrained in them a life of sin if they mixed with the opposite sex at such a young age.

Prowling the outskirts of the dance floor Father O'Rourke ensured nothing untoward happened between his young pupils. The usual pockets of two to three girls danced around a handbag, while the boys stood in groups staring intensely across the hall. No one brave enough to walk over and ask a girl to dance.

Entering the hall unnoticed, Pdraig maneuvered his way behind the rows of stacked chairs and joined his two friends by the emergency exit. As they engaged in the usual small talk with pipe dreams of dancing with one of the girls, they were soon interrupted by the arrival of John Priest.

The boys cowered in his shadow as he delivered his instructions.

“Holty wants you.”

“Me?” replied John Donovan.

“No Pdraig, now let's go,” and with that the fear of god entered Pdraig's body as he followed the messenger back across the hall. Frantically trying to work out what Holty wanted, Pdraig glanced back at his two friends who shrugged their shoulders in disbelief.

Leaning against the wall by the canteen shop, Holty smiled as his guest arrived.

When a debt was owed to Richard Holt you paid it. Standing six feet and three inches he played front row for the school rugby team and his battle-scarred young face made him look older than he was. It wasn't that he was a bully and resolved every situation with violence the simple fact was everyone just did what he wanted. It didn't have to be a financial debt, something as simple as borrowing a pen was classified by Richard as, "you owe me".

"Don't look so worried Pdraig, you hadn't forgotten had you"?

"Not sure what you're on about Richard," replied Pdraig nervously.

As the dance music continued in the background, Richard explained in detail exactly what he was owed and what he expected in return.

"So that's what I want you to do, ok?"

Pdraig stood motionless with a look of terror on his face while Richard disappeared into the crowd gathered by the DJ booth.

Shaking with fear, Pdraig slowly walked into the area of the dance floor known as no-man's land. He was now in full view of everyone and they knew exactly what he was doing. As the howls and whistles from the boys echoed around the hall, Pdraig concentrated hard on not tripping up over his size 11 feet.

"Where's he going?" asked John, "he's not asking Miss Smith for a dance is he?"

"I don't know, but he'd better hurry up as Father O'Rourke is heading his way," smirked Crowan Rowan.

Repeating the words over and over again in his mind, Pdraig found himself in front of a smiling Miss Smith.

As his face burned bright red he somehow managed to successfully string the words together.

"Let's go then," said Miss Smith.

"Sorry?"

"Do you want to dance or suffer the embarrassment of walking back over to your friends?" enquired Miss Smith.

"No Miss, I mean Yes Miss."

And as the opening chords of Johnny Marr's guitar signalled the start of This Charming Man, Pdraig achieved what no other boy in his school had managed, a dance with Miss Smith and a debt successfully repaid to Richard Holt.