



## I Knew You Were Coming

by Stuart Carruthers

If you stand at the top end of Bog Hall Rd, McGurts valley is laid out before you.

Its twisting harsh features are home to a small community of tenant farmers whose history can be traced back to a time when Kings ruled these lands.

You often see people standing at the top, but very few venture down into the valley despite its beauty. Thinking back I wonder if they stopped here before starting their journey that particular morning.

The scattering of weather beaten cottages along the valley floor had recently emerged from another harsh winter. Its occupants mainly women and children were skin and bone and just about eked out a living to feed themselves, while their men were away fighting in the Great War. It was two years and forty three days since they left

I had awoken early that day.

Stoking the dyeing embers to try and bring some needed heat to the room, I gathered the basket and headed out into the yard. I distinctly remember the black imposing clouds that hung heavy between the rugged hillsides. It just didn't feel right.

Despite the early hour I wasn't the only house awake that morning.

Smoke from the peat fires rose peacefully into the morning sky, easily identifying the occupied cottages. This must have made their job easier. The day wasn't starting right, I could feel it. I ran inside and slammed the door shut.

Mother always said "keep yourself busy" if you know trouble is coming to your door. That way your mind hasn't time to think. I tried desperately but all I could see was their faces.

It's the sound you dread. At first I pretended I didn't hear it. But it was unavoidable.

Margaret Sullivan howled like a pained banshee.  
It was the worst sound I ever heard.

This was the second time in six months that they had called to her door. It would also be their final visit.

I knew they were coming for me.

I'm told they knocked a few times before I opened the door.

My youngest Niamh said the older man was so tall he had to stoop down when he walked inside. What I do recall is the young boy that accompanied him. His hardened facial features told of a life beyond his years. What followed changed our lives forever. It's hard to describe what emotions you feel when you receive the news that your loved one won't be coming home. All sorts of images run through your mind.

Now I am just like them. I aged overnight.

Very few returned to McGurts valley that summer. Those that did were a shadow of the men who proudly marched up the road that spring morning. Their hollow eyes had witnessed things they could not put into words.

A knock at the door.

Maybe I shouldn't have answered it.