

BILLY'S BIG DANCE

I remember the second time I held you.

I hadn't seen you much since your mam finally admitted your dad was never coming back, and stopped going to church on Sundays. I never saw you at school, where the girls went one way and the boys went another. I did sometimes glimpse you doing your mam's shopping with the wicker basket and that lock of hair stuck to your forehead.

But that night, you were wearing your blue summer frock with yellow flowers, and you'd had your hair done so that it caught the light when you moved. It was the youth club dance in the old village hall, with the warped dusty boards and the mice: decorous dancing with orange squash. Miss Flatstone was in charge of the gramophone, playing wholesome Glenn Miller and Cab Calloway. When she turned her back for a minute someone stuck *Music! Music! Music!* on, and everyone got dancing, but the Vicar went and found her and we were soon back to *Pennsylvania 6500*. It was hot for May, and even with the windows open the place was steaming. Billy Mac was there too, his long legs like a new foal, sitting in a corner banging his chin with his knuckle, and swaying. The vicar went to talk to him but Billy looked away and muttered his answers. I knew Billy had stopped going to school, but thicko that I was, I didn't know why.

There was Johnny Border, the skinny lad with the quiff and big teeth, and Susan Jones, the blonde girl with the wide smile that had all the lads drooling, and Mickey Morgan, the copper's son with the personality of a fence post, and two dozen more of us, all escaped from our parents. And, there was big Brian Dignam: shoulders you could sit on, oak cheekbones, tiny eyes that looked everywhere at once, and thick, curled fingers. Brian had been circling round Susan all evening, but she'd escaped for two dances and now he'd come up to you and said something. You'd blushed and walked off.

When I walked by with a lemonade, you were talking to Billy Mac, and he was talking back, but he was standing right up close to you, waving and stamping a foot.

'I likes birds, I do,' Billy was saying. 'We got starlin's and sparrers on the farm, and little wrens. I likes to watch 'em.'

'That's lovely, Billy,' you said. 'I like birds too . . .'

'I got a book,' he said, his eyes big. 'F-from the libr'y. I seen a blue tit the other day - '

'Wot?' Brian had sidled up. 'You *dirty* boy, Mackenzie! Dirty, you hear me?' The grin cracked his face in two. 'I'm going to tell Vicar - using bad words, you were.'

Then he turned to you. 'Come on, Bren,' he grunted, 'you don't wanna go with looney boy.'

'Mind your own business, Brian,' you said. 'We were having a nice chat.'

Brian went red and pulled you away, squeezing your arm so hard it went white. I was plucking up the courage to say “hoy!”, when Billy Mac whirled past me.

‘You – leave – her – alone!’ he was shouting, and everyone could hear him over *I’d’ve Baked a Cake*, and they all stopped. Including Brian, who was caught off guard when Billy, windmilling his arm, struck his jaw so hard he was lifted off the ground. Then old Flatstone was shouting and the vicar was flapping, and then the music stopped. In the silence I could hear Billy Mac panting. Brian was blinking and trying to get back to his feet, growling. Billy looked around amongst the stares; he looked around again, then took to his heels: out through the doors and into the late spring dusk. Brian was up, and was starting after him, but by now I’d woken up. I stood in his way. ‘Brian,’ I said, ‘leave him.’ But he shoved me aside and ran off.

‘He’ll never catch him,’ I said. ‘Billy’s fast. Brian’s stupid.’

You didn’t say anything because you were shaking, and holding back the tears. You still had that lock of hair stuck to your forehead. Then to my own surprise, I reached up and brushed it back into place. And suddenly you had your arms around me, your face pushed into my shoulder, and I could feel the heat of your skin through our thin summer clothes.

That was the second time.