

Walking Together

by Sam Andrews

Chris' heart was beating like a bird trying to escape its cage. She could hear the enthusiastic reminiscing underway on the opposite side of the curtain; nearly 150 boys she'd gone to school with were attending their 20-year reunion. Of course, those boys were now men, and many had children of their own. Some attended this college, and trained on the basketball court serving as tonight's dining room.

Why on earth did I agree to this? Chris asked herself. It was a bold idea when she was contacted by the organisers, but what seemed brave six weeks ago now felt like a terrible mistake. She looked doubtfully toward the young stagehand expectantly waiting to draw the curtain; Simon was a senior student drafted to assist for the night. He'd met Chris at the gate as the sun dropped, and guided her through the grounds to her dressing room.

That walk had been surreal. The schoolyard had barely changed in twenty years; tradition was something the College prided itself on. Those rigid ideals hadn't served Chris well when she was enrolled. To say she'd had a "difficult time" as the only visibly queer student at a boys' school would be a gross understatement. In a culture that valued rugby more than academics, Chris was already at a disadvantage; when you mixed in the clash between teen homophobia and her own developing gender identity... well, she didn't so much thrive as endure.

Chris' last journey through these grounds was less a walk and more a run; she'd graduated and never looked back. So, no-one had been more surprised than she was to find herself not only agreeing to attend the reunion, but to offering to MC the night. The organisers were thrilled; acting as the evening's host wasn't a popular task. Finding someone willing to eschew the opportunity to relive youthful excesses and maintain sufficient (if not total) sobriety to keep the plates spinning was an annual challenge.

With a rap on her door, Simon had arrived to chaperone Chris to the stage. She'd given herself a final once-over in the mirror, tipped a last mouthful of sparkling wine over her lips, and joined him in the hallway. Chris was uncertain of the reaction she'd receive, but any concerns she'd held were unfounded. Simon appraised her with a tremendous grin, bowed theatrically, and gallantly held out his arm. Chris smiled and gratefully accepted it.

While they walked together, Simon shared some of his school experiences. The College might look the same, but blind adherence to tradition was a relic of the past. Modern focus was on a balance of study and sport, students were

generally sceptical of masculine stereotypes, and the school had undertaken a determined programme to promote ethnic diversity. To encourage individualism, there was zero-tolerance toward bullying.

Chris was deeply moved by Simon's words; this wasn't the school she'd attended. That so many advances could be made in the span of one young man's life was breathtaking. If this most conservative of institutions could be unburdened of its prejudices, there was hope for any environment to embrace diversity. However, it was Simon's final revelation that shook Chris the most: this progress had been driven by the students' parents.

Some of those schoolboys who'd been cruel to Chris in the ways that children can, had *grown up* to champion the rights of people like her. So, while she sometimes felt the negative influence of those difficult years, maybe her former peers sometimes felt a positive influence from time shared with their determinedly queer classmate.

Ready now, Chris nodded to Simon. The young man gave her a thumbs-up, and the red curtain was drawn open. The crowd of men became quiet, and a spotlight found Chris as she walked to centre stage. Her heels clicked on the floor, her turquoise dress shone, her hair swayed gloriously, and her lips opened wide in a glamorous smile.

'Evening, fellas. My name's Chris, and I'll be your hostess for tonight.'

The room fell absolutely still. Chris felt certain her heart could be seen bouncing in her chest through the dress's plunging neckline. Then a cheer went up at the back of the room. A whistle sounded to her left. And suddenly the room was clapping enthusiastically, and chairs were scraping as her classmates stood to applaud the shy young boy, now a proud transwoman.

Sometimes walking back can bring you forward, and reconnecting with old ghosts can mean making new friends.