

Repercussions

Brian Skinner Allan

Tommy Dancer stands under a tree in the moonless park and croaks at the empty sky, “What am I doing here, man?” He throws his arms up, jangling the change lost in the lining of his leather jacket. “What?”

In Africa another child is overtaken by wolves in whose eyes shine the hungry yellow moon. The Children’s Relief Fund reports that one-point-three children per second are snatched away. As quickly as Mother Earth delivers them, they return to her dark bosom. “Wolves need to eat, too,” she sighs, brushing her hand languidly against the fly on her thigh. She rules by laws older than mathematics.

Another Belgian priest unclasps his collar for the last time, no longer able to bend before a God who permits the things he reads about in *Le Monde*. Père van Brugh folds the newspaper and sets it atop his frayed red breviary; the cover is dusted with sunlight. But Monsieur van Brugh no longer believes in signs from above.

Sheena Suileabhán, formerly Muriel O’Sullivan, connects the last wire to its terminal and folds her thick gray pullover around the device. She clicks the luggage clasps shut and can no longer hear the ticking. She believes one act of heroism will absolve her of all her sins.

I hear the landlord coming up the stairs and I turn off the light. I believe truth must be large enough to embrace us all. He knocks and I hold my breath.

Tommy Dancer stands two street lamps away from The Bar None. Though the summer night is mild, he thrusts his hands in his jeans. He feels the rumbles of hunger, like far-off thunder, in his guts. The crotch of his Levi's swells with a throbbing hard-on. Tommy knows he's hungry and horny enough to sell his soul for a Whopper and some good head. Leaning against the metal pole, he crosses his right leg behind his left and looks down at his boots.

The tavern door slams shut. Tommy looks up. A young cowboy stumbles out and stands tottering with the heels of his boots hooked on the edge of the curb. It looks like the guy's going to fall face-first into the gutter.

Tommy leaps off the sidewalk and the man falls into his arms. His long hair lashes Tommy's cheek.

"Sorry, man." His breath reeks of whisky and tobacco.

The guys who start out drunk always fall asleep on him, snoring against his chest. Tommy could use a night off — a night off with pay. He glances at the cowboy to see how drunk he is. The cowboy's gray-blue eyes are locked on Tommy's face.

He doesn't look drunk now. He smiles at Tommy.

Tommy feels his dick getting thick. The guy's a dude-and-a-half.

A streak of lightning paints the blank sky with violet neon.

"Know where I can get warm for the night?"

Tommy's not sure about the guy. Maybe he's too good to be true. "Depends what you're looking for."

"How about a dude with a bulge in his Levi's and a smile that shines in his eyes?"

"You talking about me or you, cowboy?"

“Maybe both of us,” he says, putting his hands beneath Tommy’s jacket and rubbing the thin cotton shirt against Tommy’s chest.

Tommy’s nipples stand up. He puts his cold hands over the warm hands that are touching him. The flicker of the wish he swore not to wish for stirs inside him. *Let him be real. Let him stay.*

They walk down the sidewalk in the direction of Tommy’s room on the third floor, at the back of the second-cheapest hotel in Bismarck. The coin boxes on the newspaper machines have been smashed open again. No use checking them.

Sheena lays down thirty shillings and takes the flowers wrapped in newspaper from the woman in the stall. Everyone she passes looks at her new valise. Outside her flat, she tosses the flowers to one of Mrs. O’Connel’s brats and folds the newspaper cone under her arm.

She tosses her keys onto the low table beside the front door. It’s impossible to add any more scratches to its gouged and over-waxed surface. She opens a bottle of stout and flops down on the American-style davenport, raising a cloud of dust. She gulps the beer almost as fast as her brother Padhraic used to do.

On the third page of stock market quotations, the symbol for Slumberland Industries is circled. That means to wait. Sheena crumples the paper and crawls out of the old davenport to fetch another bottle of stout. She looks at her watch. Three-and-a-half hours. Maybe she’ll try to wait until the last minute again, numbly trying to disarm the bomb. The idea thrills her.

She turns on the telly for news and takes another deep swallow. “And if I pass out, they’ll be scratching their heads over what we blew up this old slum for.”

She flips through the magazine in her lap, stopping on an insurance advert that shows a body-builder angel, wings unfurled and pecs flexed, standing over an infant in its cradle. “Fuck ’em,” she says, flinging the magazine at the newscaster. The flickering screen cuts to the scene of little bodies wrapped in coarse linen and burlap lying beside the road, tied like bundles of produce. The empty bottle slips from her hand, muffled by the carpet of threadbare roses.

The waiter seats Messr. van Brugh at the last empty table. Van Brugh asks for coffee and a croissant with a slice of Brie. The café is too near the river for his tastes. A fishy breeze mingles with the stench of diesel oil. But there is another smell. Of flowers. Roses.

The stone urns at the river’s edge are planted with geraniums. Anton van Brugh turns around in his seat as though looking for his waiter. Two tables back, near the entrance, a young man has presented a young woman with a bouquet of scarlet roses. Anton hears the rustle of waxy florist’s paper above the gurgling engines and screeching gulls.

The woman flings the flowers over her shoulder. The bouquet plummets like an injured bird, landing in the oily-rainbow water. The young man rises. He stands at the edge of the riverside café, his shoulders hunched forward, peering down at the sinking flowers.

The woman comes up behind him and pushes him into the river. She turns, picks up her handbag at the table, and goes out.

Two waiters help the man climb out. His clothes cling to him; his hair streams in his face. Uselessly, they dab at him with their small towels, and he pushes them away. Anton turns back to his own table.

The waiter has brought his coffee. Anton's hand rattles the cup against the saucer. He unfolds his newspaper. Staring up at him is an emaciated child, arms outstretched, holding an empty bowl. He looks away. The drenched man passes his table, leaving a trail of sky-reflecting puddles on the flagstone terrace.

The waiter brings his croissant. He has forgotten the cheese. He is too busy mopping up the puddles. Anton van Brugh does not want to bother him.

Before Tommy and the cowboy reach the end of the block, the drizzle turns to a downpour. They duck into a deep doorway. The cowboy takes a rumpled pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his jean jacket. There are two left. He passes one to Tommy and flicks his lighter. Their hands, translucent, huddle around the flame. The cowboy lights his own cigarette and introduces himself, the cigarette bobbing between his lips. "My name's Mick. I guess I'm like this even when I'm not drunk and horny."

"I'm Tommy. Me too."

The rain does not let up. The discarded cigarette pack floats away into the torrent spilling along the gutter.

"Care if we get wet?"

He shrugs.

Before they step out of the doorway of the used book store, Mick takes off his tattered straw cowboy hat and shoves it down on Tommy's head. "It might help — a little."

They laugh. Their arms around one another, they splash along the sidewalk, hurrying at first. But there's no point. The rain sprays at them from all sides like the jets of a car wash. Tommy tips his borrowed hat forward. The cold water trickles down his spine. He feels Mick shiver.

Their boots squelch on each step of the fire escape that leads to Tommy's room. He has trouble pulling his keys out of the pocket of his soaked jeans. The wind slams the metal door shut behind them.

Mick and Tommy stumble into the bathroom. Tommy takes his arm away, and Mick slips to the floor. He slumps against the old claw-foot tub, acting like he's shit-stinking drunk again.

Tommy kneels down and pulls at one of Mick's boots. A stream of brown water spills out and he tosses the boot into the tub. He drags off the other and then the stained white socks. Tommy stands up, pulls off his dripping jacket and hangs it on the showerhead. He drags off his sodden shirt and slaps it into the porcelain tub. He crouches beside Tommy again, who now smells after beer, strong European beer.

Tommy pulls Mick's jacket and shirt off. He's as cooperative as a load of wet laundry. They sprawl across the tile floor, laughing. Tommy reaches for the buttons on Mick's soaked Levi's. His hands tremble with chill and excitement. He smells the warmth of Mick's skin rise through the wet denim.

A shadow passes the window but I hear no footsteps on the fire escape. I listen.

Mtoto's mother wrings out the filthy rag and tenderly lays the cool cloth against her daughter's blistering forehead. The child moans sweetly and smiles. Mtoto's mother bites her lip

to keep from crying out. Her anguish will drown her in this desert. The fever buzzes in her ears like a swarm of locusts.

She lies down beside her child; Mtoto's hand curls weakly inside her own.

Sheena Suileabhán awakes with a start. The bottle in her hand tips over, drenching her crotch and the sofa cushion with warm beer. "Shit," she says, but she likes how it feels.

In the bathroom she looks at her watch. Two hours. Plenty of time. Too much time. She goes to the kitchen for another beer. There's none left. "Shit," she mutters, though she wants to have something to do. Sheena looks for her purse, and finds it beside the shiny valise. On her way out of the flat, she pauses to stroke the smooth leather suitcase. She leaves the door unlocked.

Mick and Tommy, wrapped in stolen motel towels, share a joint in bed. They suck one another off slowly, while the lightning flashes around them.

The storm passes. Tommy rests his ear against Mick's chest and listens to the deep vibrations of his voice. Like talking thunder.

"You're wondering whether you're awake or dreaming," Mick says.

"Yeah."

"You're awake and you're a dreamer."

"Yeah? So what're you thinking about?"

"I need to make a phone call," Mick says.

"You're stoned."

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Tommy gives Mick a pair of his jeans and a washed-out flannel shirt, the only dry clothes he has left that are clean. He puts his own jeans back on wet. They walk barefoot to the drugstore on Ward, the only place still open with a pay phone. The concrete glistens; the air sparkles.

“Who you got to call?”

“I don’t know, man. But it’s important.”

They fumble in their pockets for change.

Messr. van Brugh leaves a generous tip, though the waiter never brought his cheese. He feels the need to atone for something. For past sins; for future ones. For the indifference of the world.

As he is leaving, the proprietor announces a call for Père Anton van Brugh. The man eyes him suspiciously, though he hands him the receiver without comment. Anton catches his breath and listens. It is a voice he has not heard in a dozen years, belonging to a man he thought was dead.

The owner of the all-night drugstore glares at the pair of barefoot cowboys, and makes a show of putting his gun on the counter. Tommy leans against the side of the old wooden phone booth as Mick makes his call. He studies Mick with the eyes of a lover, of one who overlooks defects, even slight madness. He does not know how he came to feel this way again, though he wished for it. “Let him stay,” he whispers to himself.

Sheena returns with six bottles of Guinness. She flips the cap off each one; the beer gurgles and splashes into the sink. She's not sure why she does it except that the time is at hand and she needs a clear head.

There is a knock at the door and she drops the last bottle into the sink, breaking it. It is the old woman from the flower stall. She hands Sheena a bunch of half-withered purple irises wrapped in the financial pages, and leaves. The symbol for British Telecom is circled. She is to expect a phone call. The closing price of British Petroleum tells her when they will call.

Anton listens to the baritone voice on the other end. He cannot doubt it is truly his former mentor, Father Leicester. He wants Anton to take the next flight to London. It must be about the orphanage their order built in Kenya just before Anton left the priesthood. Why has it been so long since he's heard from the old priest?

Father Leicester's other instructions are no less bizarre. "Trust me," he says.

Heaven may be turned upside down, but Anton has no reason to doubt Father Leicester. Anton wants to tell the wizened old mystic he has also left the Church. He hangs up the phone without making his confession, and engages a taxi to take him to the airport.

Mtoto's mother is laid roughly on a stretcher and carried to the white tent. White is the color of mourning. She calls out Mtoto's name. One of the tribal women, a sorceress enlisted by the foreign doctors to help them, places her cool hand on the patient's forehead and whispers in her ear. "Your daughter will live in a place of abundant rain and she will plant beautiful purple flowers in your name, mama."

Mick comes out of the phone booth and Tommy smiles at him. “A cowboy who gives great head and talks French. I’ve got to be dreaming. Where’d you learn French, Mick?”

Mick shrugs. “Want to take a trip with me?”

“Sure. Where?”

“I don’t know. To London. But we’ll have to earn some money first. I’m broke.”

Tommy laughs and puts his arm around Mick’s waist. “I’m in love with you. It’s OK that you ain’t rich, but please don’t be crazy.”

“No crazier than you for coming with me.”

On their way out Mick plunks down their last three quarters and waves a *Wall Street Journal* at the owner. The man wags his head and puts the gun back beneath the counter.

I’m afraid the landlord will know if I turn on a light. He can see through walls. I sit in the dark and listen to his footsteps. I’ll have to show up at work tomorrow to get my paycheck.

The flash of passing headlights throws a shadow on the wall. The shadow of a big dog, maybe a wolf. I listen to the dripping faucet and breathing shadows.

A drop of sweat falls from Sheena’s forehead, splattering on the gray blob of explosive. She is not as cool as last time. She pulls away the tiny screwdriver she used to bridge the gap. “Mind the gap,” she sniggers, flopping back against the dusty davenport. She is thirsty and curses herself for pouring away all the beer.

The phone rings. Sheena looks at the clock in her lap. It stopped with two minutes to spare. She picks up the receiver. The voice tells her where to go. The voice labors under an accent. It sounds French, but she does not comment on this.

Sheena wraps the device in her ratty pullover and puts it back in the new leather valise. She wedges an envelope containing the week's rent under a corner of the light switch cover and opens the door. She snatches a withered iris from the crumpled newspaper and turns off the light.

Tommy has never flown before. As the acceleration of the jet forces him back in his seat, he holds his breath.

At their feet are two beat-up knapsacks with all the clothes they own. Atop them is the page of London stock quotations with Slumberland Industries, British Telecom, and British Petroleum circled. Paper-clipped to it are the pawn tickets for Mick's pickup and saddle, the trade confirmation slips for the stocks he purchased, and their blue leatherette passports.

The jet levels off. Tommy turns to Mick. "This is happening kind of fast, man."

Mick nods. "For me too. I never screwed a man before. It was pretty good, I got to admit."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Nope. I just knew somebody in Bismarck was lonely; I didn't know who. When I saw you, I knew."

"Was it the same way with the phone call and the stock picks?"

"Kind of. But those were just hunches. With you I knew," Mick said, rubbing the inside of Tommy's thigh. "I thought I'd missed you in Marian Park. That's why I went to the bar to get drunk — so you could find me."

“I don’t get it.”

“I’m not sure how it works myself. I get a letter sometimes, from somebody I don’t know. But I never been steered wrong, Tommy. My grandfather always told me everything’s connected. He used to take me fishing up by Powers Lake. The first fish I ever caught looked up at me from the bottom of the boat with one fishy eye. For a minute I felt what it was like to drown in air. I let him go. Now it happens mostly with people, especially drowning people.”

“So who I fell in love with is an AC/DC cowboy from Bismarck, North Dakota who talks French and thinks trout got feelings.”

“He was a perch.”

“Everything’s connected.”

Mick laughs his horse laugh. People turn around.

The flight attendant brings them pillows, which they refuse. Tommy leans his head against Mick’s hard shoulder. They sleep the rest of the way to La Guardia.

Tommy dreams he and Mick go fishing with an old man in a wooden boat. When the line tugs at the tip of his pole, Tommy yanks it up. Into the bottom of the boat flops a little girl with dark skin and a white belly. Her lips suck on the air like a gasping fish’s. “Mama,” she gurgles. “Kombora.”

Sheena rides the Underground. She sets the valise beside her in the aisle; her hand remains on the leather handle. On the seat beside her is a discarded *Times*. She opens it in her lap, and looks down at the ubiquitous photo of the starving child. A lone tear splotches the grayish newsprint.

Sheena snaps her head erect and slaps the paper back onto the empty seat. She gets off at the next station.

“I must be getting soft,” she tells herself, climbing the steps of the Underground.

She crosses the street and waits on the steps of Saint Caedmon’s church, as the voice had told her to do. She sets down the valise. Her mind forms an image of the man who will come up to her. Sheena does this to pass the time. She sees a tall, lean man on a saddleless horse. The horse reminds her of her father’s favorite mare, Moira. The man looks a lot like Padhraic. He grabs her wrist and swings her up onto the horse’s rump. The horse’s sweat soaks her crotch and its rhythmic rippling muscles make her almost come on the steps of St. Caedmon’s. She feels a trickle on the inside of her thigh.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It’s been two months since my last period.

The man who approaches her is squat and bald. He wears a black topcoat like a priest’s. He speaks in the voice of the man on the telephone. Sheena picks up the valise.

“I’ll take that for you,” the man says. “I have something much heavier for you to carry.”

Sheena squints at him.

Anton van Brugh hands her an envelope.

Sheena looks over her shoulder and then opens it. Inside is a letter attesting to her noble character. It is addressed to a Catholic orphanage in Nairobi and signed by Anton van Brugh.

Clipped to the back of the letter is £ 4,000. It is the money Anton’s mother left him. She told him he would know how it must be spent when the time came.

“Who are you?”

“It is time you lived, Sheena,” the man says. “Soon there will be peace in Ulster. It is time for the wolves to taste hunger.”

Sheena stuffs the letter into the envelope and folds it into her pocket.

Anton tips his hat to her and descends the steps. Sheena watches him turn the corner. Then she crosses the street to the Underground.

Anton rings the bell at St. Caedmon’s rectory. A stooped housekeeper peers up at him.

“I’ve come to see Father Leicester. My name is Anton van Brugh. He will be expecting me.”

“Just a moment, sir.” The housekeeper shuts the door to a crack.

A young man comes to the door in his slippers. “I’m Father Malcolm, pastor of St. Caedmon’s. Please, won’t you come into the study, Father van Brugh.”

Anton’s heart pounds in his ears. He does not hear the young priest’s words, but he knows what he is saying.

Father Malcolm takes the leather valise from him and shows Anton to the davenport. He pours two glasses of brandy. Anton unbuttons his dark coat. The brandy flutters in his stomach.

The housekeeper brings tea.

“I do not wish to be a bother, Father Malcolm.”

“It is certainly no bother. I am eager to meet anyone who knew Father Leicester. I’d been only a year at St. Caedmon’s when he died.”

Anton smiled, wondering what would be left of the young priest’s naive innocence when he showed him the bomb he was carrying in the valise beside them.

Sheena's way home leads her past several pubs. She stops in the last one. She feels the envelope in her pocket, but she pays the bartender with money from her purse and looks for a dark corner.

The glass of stout nearly slips from her hand. At the end of the bar are two Americans dressed like cowboys. They are handsome and gaunt, like her brother. One of them is the man on the horse. He comes over and puts his arm out for her.

"I'm Mick. That's my friend Tommy. Care to join us?"

Sheena's head buzzes. Her hands tremble. She sits across from them at the last table, and brushes her wet hands through her short hair. She tries to seem cool. "What brings you boys to jolly old England?"

"You, Sheena."

Father Malcolm holds his breath.

"It is not armed," van Brugh says. "The device was surrendered to me by someone who had a change of heart. It would be best if *you* called the authorities to dispose of it, Father Malcolm."

The priest nods. "Certainly."

"And I should like to ask another favor of you."

"Yes, of course. There is no telling how much misery you have spared us. I'll gladly do anything I can for you, Father van Brugh. Anything."

Van Brugh sticks a finger under the scratchy white collar and tugs at it, as though embarrassed by his frankness. "I will be meeting friends while here in London. I think they will be asking me to join them in Holy Matrimony. May I have use of St. Caedmon's?"

Father Malcolm sighs. “Certainly. I am relieved that your request does not involve anything dangerous this time.”

“You are wrong, Father Malcolm. Love is no less dangerous than dynamite.”

Sheena returns from the post office and stands for a moment looking at the two naked men tangled in the sheets on her pulled-out davenport. Her form is still pressed into the thin mattress beside Mick.

She goes into the small kitchen and opens her parcel of groceries. She puts the kettle on for tea and then adds more water to the kettle. Cowboys drink coffee. Dark and thick like her brother drank it.

Sheena senses someone behind her and turns from the stove. “Hello, Tommy.”

“Morning, Sheena.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah. The bed’s better than most of the ones I ever slept in.”

Sheena smiles. “Are you jealous of me, Tommy? Were you and Mick lovers a long time?”

“Nah. I just met him last week. I figured I ought to be jealous. But I guess there’s plenty of Mick for both of us.”

“I’m glad we’re going to be friends, Tommy. You remind me of my brother Padhraic. You both do.”

She holds open the door of the bare refrigerator. “I’m not sure what cowboys eat for breakfast.”

“We settle for whatever comes our way — food, that is. Otherwise, we hold out for the best we can get.”

Mtoto stands in the dust of the taxi that will take her to the airport. The woman in the stiff white skirt bends to kiss her cheek.

“We shall miss you, Mtoto. God be with you.” She presses a small crucifix into the child’s hand.

The old sorceress folds the fingers of the child’s other hand around a dark stone amulet. “Do not be afraid, Mtoto. You will be happy in the land of green grass. You shall have three fathers, and your new mother will feed you milk from a full pitcher. Remember who you are, Mtoto.”

She is safe now. Her mother is with her.

I hear the landlord creep back up the stairs. I turn on the lamp. I am safe until tomorrow.

Mtoto rides with her new mother and fathers and the man in the colorful robes they all call Father. The taxi is black and shiny, like a huge beetle. The city has many houses, all in rows.

Their taxi stops at the house of a man called Malcolm who lives next to the big church where Mtoto’s mother and fathers will be married. They talk and laugh. Her father Tommy calls himself the best man. Mtoto thinks her father Mick is better.

Malcolm brings them all something to drink. For Mtoto there is a glass of milk.

Mtoto watches her mother pour a potion in Malcolm's cup. Malcolm falls asleep in his chair and they cover him with a blanket. Mtoto's new mother is a powerful sorceress. She says Malcolm will awake with a sore head.

Mtoto finishes her milk. Then they go to the big stone church.

Mtoto is happy on her parents' wedding day. They dance along the street to the church. Mtoto's bare feet slap the grimy pavement. She flings the petals of purple flowers over the heads of her new mother and fathers and the man in the colorful robes they all call Father.

Mtoto carries three silver rings on a satin pillow. She stands at Father Anton's side. The bigger rings are for Mick and Tommy. After Father Anton joins her fathers, Mick places the smallest ring on her mother's finger and marries her.

Tommy hoists Mtoto onto his shoulders as they leave the church. From the brown paper sack they have given her, Mtoto sprinkles uncooked rice over all their heads, and no one comes to sweep.

Sheena stands at the kitchen window of her father's house, drawing water for the kettle. She does not remember the Bera being ever so green, the days so long and sunny.

Sheena puts the kettle on to boil and returns to the window. Her father is in the boat with Tommy. They often fish without bait. Not one month ago, Jerry O'Sullivan would not speak to Tommy, except to tell him that he ought to get his own bed apart from Mick and Sheena. Then he discovered Tommy liked to fish and it wouldn't have mattered if he were British and orange.

At the crest of the hill overlooking the bay, Mick sits atop her father's mare, Moira, tending their small herd. The sheep have learned to respect their new master on horseback, though he has not yet consented to like them. When she has more money, Sheena will send to The Big Gyp

Pawnshop in Bismarck, North Dakota for Mick's saddle. It will be a surprise, if Tommy can manage to keep anything from him.

Sheena turns down the kettle and goes out to the garden behind the house. The sun glistens on the deep fur stretched corner-to-corner across an old door. By killing the wolf that decimated her father's herd, Mick earned the hand of the old man's daughter, though he would never admit this to Mick.

Mtoto bounds from the shed with her watering can, her bare feet splattered with mud. As she fills it from the spigot, Mtoto taps the side of the metal can with a stick. "Listen, mother. It speaks in a different voice when it is full."

"Yes, Mtoto. So do you."

Sheena taps the child's belly, round and firm like a ripe melon. Mtoto laughs.

"Can I help you carry water to the flowers?"

Mtoto shakes her head. "I am very strong, like my mothers."

She takes hold of the handle and the spout, and hauls the can in short bursts to the flower bed she has planted for her mothers. The can is no longer so full.

Water sparkles in rainbows on the long shining leaves. The buds are still asleep. Sheena promises Mtoto all the irises will bear purple flowers.

Mtoto lifts the can over the tall stems and pours out the last glistening drops.

I set down my pen and turn out the light. I lick the envelope and leave the letter on the low table beside the front door.

It is in your hands now.