

The Limerist

My father told me about Tommy O'Brien. It was late one night and he'd been sitting in the dark in the kitchen, filling himself with whiskey, the Pierian springs of his wit. When the spirit was with and in him, he was the best of storytellers. He waved me to sit down and he slopped me a glass. Then he began. I can't say even half of what he said is true, but I'd like to think all of it is. Maybe Tommy's charm for me is only of that night, one of those rare times I could actually talk with my father; the sobriety of the day silenced us both, him in his hard world of hands and me in my books. I have, on more than one occasion, tried to look up Tommy in the *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, hoping that one time I'd find what I know I hadn't missed, and renew that silenced voice.

Tommy, I heard, was born about a hundred years ago in St. Mary's Bay in Horton's Harbour, one of those grey collections of wharves and slant-roofed houses, long greyer now, barnacled to the shore. There was nothing odd about Tommy to look at. He was as thin, squat and potato-faced as everyone around him. His difference wasn't genetic: everybody in Horton's Harbour splashed in the same gene puddle. He drank and ate and lived as the other children; he hadn't yet received a sharp smack to the head. He seemed at first as eager for illiteracy as the ten other schoolmates in the church basement school. Then one day in grade three he opened a fatal page in his English book.

There were perhaps three, at most four, little germs to infect him: who knows, the book's dust. But Tommy was overcome by what he read there (don't laugh): limericks, the after-dinner mint of literature. For most tastes a limerick is a single sweet, maybe even a greedy handful, but never a meal. But Tommy acquired a hunger. He sat stunned

in his desk. He couldn't hear Miss Callahan, the sixteen year old teacher, his cousin, call him, or feel her shake him. Then her worry awoke him and he was sent home.

He said nothing for three days. He ate and he slept and performed the dozen other natural mundanities, except speak. His father threatened him with the belt, his mother with the priest, but Tommy conversed only with a Muse. On the Sunday, he found his voice. In the middle of dinner, in the middle of a mouthful, he sprayed:

Father and Mother and Sister

For three days, I guess, I have missed yer

I was here all along

Just caught up in this song

I neither eyed nor did I hear of yer.

His parents hugged him till he choked.

For about three years, Tommy stayed the same. Usually he behaved like other boys, but excitement set him off: Christmas and birthdays (everybody's) naturally, but also a hockey goal or a radio song or the way a dog looked at him. He would then fade into the back of his head, be still for about a minute, at most half an hour, and finally deliver a limerick, a birth somewhere between an oracle prophesy and something coughed up. Post partem, Tommy would return to whatever he was doing before. His friends accepted his affliction with the same indifference as they did Madonna Murphy's eye which followed you when the other didn't and (cousin) John O'Brien's short leg that made him look like he was always dancing. His sister, being closer, thought he was just stupid.

His parents were the most concerned. They thought Tommy must be cracked. That first Sunday, the house roared with recrimination. Bridgit cursed her John's Uncle Cy who talked to cows, his grandfather William who slept with sheep, his brother Michael whom the fairies took; John damned his Bridgit's Aunt Rose who ate paper, her grandmother who gave the evil eye, her sister Mary who turned Protestant. But there were too many natural lunatics on both sides to lay credit. The real problem was that Tommy's parents were afraid that people would talk, but they couldn't lock him up. People would talk. So they let him loose and waited to see what would happen. They knew if there was trouble what necks to wring. The father was itching to teach Sam Rumsey about respect.

When no one bothered Tommy (a miracle more wondrous than the gift of tongues), his parents, his father mainly, began to treat him almost as they had before. His mother, though, kept an eye on him. Tommy might stop in the middle of the road and a horse might kick him; at Sunday dinner, usually epilogued with a poem, he might choke on his cabbage; one day he might never return from the dark world of limericks. When the boat-doctor sailed into Horton's Harbour, Tommy's mother took him aside and told him about Tommy's problem. The doctor shrugged and stabbed Tommy with the polio needle. Tommy responded with a teary rhyme. For all their fear, at times his parents stood in wonder at their son, cursed with a gift beyond their understanding and their desires.

When Tommy was ten, his world shifted. He had heard a boy, some cousin of a cousin, had come into town from Bonne Bay, a geographical fact that put him into immediate coma. Whether he had misunderstood or thought "close enough," I can't say,

but he was overwhelmed that someone from the shores of the limerick's legendary Bombay had washed into his town. When his eyelids flickered open, he started moving, leaping over the dog and four fences, bursting into Uncle Jim's front room, to stand quivering before the stranger, and blurted out:

There once was a boy from Bombay
Now here – found by going astray.
He left to sail right
And thus turned his day night,
The boy from, no longer in, Bombay.

The astonished traveler, before whom a sweating and red-faced lunatic hurled madness – and in rhyme, head-butted Tommy right in his smile. Then he began to seriously criticize with his fists. Uncle Jim had to pull the kicking brat from a sprawled and unresisting Tommy. Tommy just got up and left the house, saying nothing, but the hurt was heart-deep. A change came over him. He didn't stop creating, but from now on, his subconscious was conscious of where he was.

Life went on and Tommy soon dropped out of school to go on the boats. He fished with his father for a few years, until his father died, drowned with three others, returning home. His epitaph is a limerick. Tommy then sailed with Skipper O'Brien (no relation). On the first trip out, he was transported, caught by a salmon sunset leaping from the water. The rest of the crew were smoking at the rail, blind to the heavens and when they heard Tommy burst out of his dream and into a rhyme, they were too astonished to mock. Then one of them said, half-joking, that they should throw him overboard. There was a not a sound in reply, except the red waves pulsing against the bow. The men stared

at Tommy and Tommy stared into fate. The silence was so unnatural that, I heard, the moon cocked an ear. There were Jonahs back then and, for some men, that was as deep as they delved into the Bible. But the captain, a bearded patriarch, with a voice Authority had toned, knocking his pipe against the side, said: “Don’t worry, boys. He’ll be fine. He’s like the Bards of old. They, too, could see more than we can. Their words belong to God. Leave Tommy alone.” His divinity they accepted without understanding his words. He was the captain. For the next three years, Tommy sailed among this crew, but never with them. Then he met Molly.

Tommy was never just an anthology, a quirk or eccentricity. He was a man. He liked women and, once in a while, one liked him. He should have married Bridie from across the harbour – everyone said they should - except that they hated each other. When he was twenty-two, he was in St. John’s in Bowring’s buying his mother a Christmas gift, when Molly popped up from behind a counter and into his life. She was a redhead from Fogo, solidly packaged, a paragraph of prose, but only of verbs: alive, bawdy, smart, loving. When their eyes met, Tommy’s dangled from their ganglia. He went into premature poetization, and shot out a tangle of half rhyme and lines. Molly laughed and pulled him behind the women’s coats to talk. They went out that night and stayed together for sixty years. He loved her and he was her man from Nantucket. She would tell her friends sometimes that Tommy made love like a rabbit limerick all fur and fury; “if he’d been possessed by ballads or, God help me, epics, I’d be dead.”

When they married, they set up a store on Fogo, with Molly behind the counter and, for the first three years, Tommy at sea. Then, with little Danny coming, and the store also getting bigger, Molly showed Tommy a limerick contest for a seed company.

Tommy gave her a glance and said, “it doesn’t work like that,” and went back to bagging Mrs. Murphy’s order. “Now Tommy,” said Molly in that voice that put him in an apron. She put his hand on her belly and conjured him. His eyes glazed and, within five minutes, Molly had written down what he’d said. That night she wrote a neat letter and in the month a fifty-dollar cheque came in from Toronto.

That was the start and the rest should be history, maybe even legend, but we often forget what we shouldn’t. There were dozens of limerick contests in those days, often for company advertising. Companies, I suppose, wanted that touch of class that poetry brings, without its stain of intellectualism. They wanted what “the people” would like. It was for everyday items, too, that limericks were used: tinned milk, Vienna sausages, hand soap, flavoured syrup, beer. Molly brought in magazines from Canada and the States and Tommy rhymed out the reasons Louisiana fish fries, or Quebec or Vermont maple syrup, or California peaches tasted best; or even the benefits of creams for hands and hemorrhoids, of powders for face and fleas, of pills for killing mice and resurrecting men. Tommy often won, but while he liked the money, he never really liked the work. You don’t look for a limerick, he believed; it finds you. He was only really proud of one of his pot-boilers, partially because it was banned in Canada, but went big in Europe:

A cow’s a fur tin filled with milk
As smooth and as rich as wet silk.
From the udder to you
Is what these boys do:
Like sucking a teat’s condensed milk.

The vogue lasted about five years, long enough to expand the store and the house, and for Molly to start a few side-lines, like an ambulance and taxi service. At his height, he achieved a type of fame so that companies actually wrote and asked him for his work. Molly, in particular, liked that, because there was definite money at the end of it. Tommy, however, was prouder that, his work read from whatever baking powder package or five cent magazine, and his address gotten from whatever magic postal directory, Q had written to him. The letter was brief, just a note saying that the scholar had laughed out loud at one of Tommy's poems. When he read those lines, Tommy travelled to limerick world for half a day. He had read quite a bit by now, books brought in from town, and he knew who was Q. Molly just shrugged; she didn't trust anyone that couldn't afford a full name. In fact, Tommy couldn't really tell anyone who'd understand his pleasure, but the letter from the Letter was found after his death, neatly folded in *The Oxford Book of English Verse*.

When advertising came to care for limericks as much as they do sonnets, Tommy's family was fine. The businesses were thriving, with Molly in charge and Tommy doing what he was told. They had three children, all red-headed and dynamic like their mother; none of them had their father's gift. They all went to university, too, even the girl, and learned about Shakespeare and Milton and Tennyson, without one limerick inside these walls, except for the few scratched upon them. In time, Daniel took over the business, now country-wide; Martin became a lawyer to protect these resources; and Eileen did not want to be a nurse, but a doctor, and headed first to New York to learn and then to Ireland to practice. A few years after she was settled, her parents sailed to visit. They met a woman they recognized and didn't, but it was lucky they liked this

efficient, broad-smiling stranger. By request, they travelled to Limerick, even though Eileen was afraid her father would have a fit surrounded by a city of living Limericks. But he just smiled, in awe at the cathedrals and the castle; walking by the Shannon, he turned to the women, and said, "what a beautiful place, I almost feel at home." The women exchanged a little look.

Back home, the years went by and Tommy didn't seem so much as to age as to dwindle into poetry. The trances increased slowly until, almost in surprise, Molly realized one sunny afternoon, looking at his sightless eyes, that her husband lived most of the day far away from her. It hurt her heart.

One day, when he was about eighty, Tommy took sick and he and Molly were driven in their own ambulance to the General Hospital. The nurse smiled down at the empty face in Tommy's bed. "Don't worry, Mr. O'Brien," she said. "You're in the best hands. Dr. Singh was the head of cardiatrics in Bombay."

Both Molly and Tommy started when they heard that. The nurse watched the face beneath her transform, a weird ethereal glow. The nurse stepped back in wonder. Molly whispered, "Oh, no, Tommy," and began to cry. Then the monitor went wild and the nurse burst from the room. Before she returned, before Dr. Singh entered, Tommy had gone to meet the man from Bombay.