

Dancing in the Dark

Sometimes one of us asked Tommy what the music was, shouted out: 'Oi mate, what you listening to?' Tommy would never say. He'd just ignore us, headphones clamped over his ears, and carry on dancing. But even if he'd heard the question, he wouldn't have understood. To him, music meant Bruce Springsteen. Always, and only, Bruce Springsteen.

Tommy and Bruce were inseparable, had been for as long as he could remember. Since he watched his dad place the records on the turntable, set them spinning, and lower the needle. He danced then too, even though he could barely walk. His mum would shake her head, wonder aloud why Tommy was so slow at learning to read, write or count, what it was in his head that stopped him doing the things other kids could do, why it was that whenever the records played, he would throw himself up, throw his arms and legs around, spin around the living room, like he was born only to dance. His dad would sit in his chair, laughing, cheering, gripping his can, flicking ash onto the carpet, heaving himself up reluctantly to turn the record over.

The records belonged to Tommy now. Bruce belonged to Tommy. The takeover had been gradual. It began on his eighth birthday with a present from his mum: a portable cassette player. His friend Andy – when he had friends, before kids learned to be cruel – showed him how to record, lent him the leads, gave him a couple of blank tapes. Now Tommy could be with Bruce in his own room, whenever he felt like. And the cassette player came with headphones, so Tommy and Bruce could be alone, and as loud as he wanted, without his mum banging on the door, without his dad poking him, teasing him, goading him to dance. Bruce and the headphones became Tommy's retreat. When the arguments got louder, when his dad began to shout, when he could hear him lose control, hear the fear in his mum's voice, hear the screams, the blows, and then the sobbing, he would turn the volume louder, and louder, sitting on his bedroom floor, back against the wall, hands pressing the headphones onto his ears, forcing the music

into his head. Tommy couldn't understand everything Bruce sang about, what all the words meant. Not then, as a child, nor now, as a young adult. But he always understood the emotion. He understood that perfectly. Bruce sang about underdogs, about people who had to struggle through life, and Tommy knew that he was one of those people. He couldn't have articulated it like that, but instinctively he knew. He understood.

Tommy lived in a world of underdogs. He struggled at school, first at the 'normal' school, as his mum put it, until he fell further and further behind, and the bullying started, then got worse, and then at the new school, where the other kids would sometimes do bad things, things that Tommy knew were wrong, but that they encouraged him, coerced him, to do. Then school finished, and there was no suggestion that he find a job, so he stayed at home, looking after his mum. She had her own struggle, with alcohol, with loneliness, since his dad had finally left, and, on two occasions Tommy had blanked from memory, with life itself. Together they struggled against the flat they shared, against the damp, the black mould, the inadequate heating, against the council who promised improvements that never came.

Everyone Tommy knew had to struggle. The woman next door, the nice old woman who always gave him a smile, wheezing up the stairs when the lift was broken, thanking him when he rushed down to take her shopping bags. The Asian family two doors down, the kids, bullied like he was, the dad, who he watched spend a whole Sunday painting over the graffiti on their front door. Go home, it had said, which confused Tommy, because it was their home. Everyone on the estate struggled, in their own way. They might not have admitted it, thought it of themselves, or of each other, but Tommy could see it. In their eyes, in the way they walked, the way they talked, argued, fought.

But Tommy also knew, like Bruce did, that every underdog has their day. And Tommy's day came on Friday and Saturday nights. After washing up the dinner plates he'd close his bedroom door behind him, take off his tracksuit and assemble his outfit. Stonewashed jeans, fraying at the knees, white t-shirt, faded denim jacket. He'd slip the cassette player into his jacket pocket, check the tape inside, and hook the headphones around his neck. Then he'd emerge into the living room, kiss his mum goodbye, leaving

her sunken into the settee, slip on his white trainers and leave the flat. As he made his way down the dim stairs of the tower block and across the concrete expanse of the estate, everyone he passed would pause and watch him go by, because they all knew where he was going.

We were going there too. Teenagers, too young for the pub, too old for the youth club, there was only one thing to do in our small northern town on a Friday or Saturday night, and that was the cinema. We made our way in, walking from the estates, or bussing it from the suburbs. Converging on a single point: the queue, sneaking out of the Odeon and along the pavement. And there, as we stood and waited, we watched, every week, without fail, a young man, head to toe in denim, headphones glued to his ears, facing the queue, a grin across his face, and dancing.

We all knew his name was Tommy, but that was all we knew. We sometimes felt we didn't care what the film was, we were there to watch Tommy. It was a weekend ritual. We'd look, laugh, giggle, snigger, call out, tease. It didn't matter what we did. Tommy just danced.

It was warm, that evening when it happened. The first hot day of the year. The lads from the school in the valley were there. Five or six of them, swaggering, posturing, mouthing off, looking for trouble. One of them, the tall one, called out to Tommy. Starting making fun of him. Tommy just ignored him as usual, carried on dancing. The lad looked annoyed, like he wanted a response, kept glancing at the girls next to him. He broke from the queue, went and stood in front of Tommy. 'What the fuck you listening to mate? You dance like a fucking spastic.' He started dancing himself, facing Tommy, mimicking him. Tommy kept smiling like he was in on the joke. We just laughed, or stared, or looked away. We didn't say anything. The lad shouted again. 'What the fuck are you listening to?' And then he did something that changed everything. He reached out towards Tommy's face, grabbed the headphones, and wrenched them from his ears.

The last person who'd done that, tried to take Bruce away from Tommy, had been his dad. And he did, now, exactly what he'd done then. He lashed out. He threw his

arms forward, flailing wildly. He was trying to get Bruce back, and at the same time he was trying to hurt the person who'd taken him away. He caught the lad unawares at first, caught him a couple of blows to his face, so that the girls he'd been playing up to earlier started laughing. 'He's beating him up! The spastic's beating him up!' The lad's face flushed, first pink, then a darker shade. He pushed back. Tommy's grin vanished. He stumbled backwards, uncertainty flooding his face. And then the first punch came, to the stomach. Tommy doubled up. The second followed, and we could hear it, a nauseating crunch, as the lad's fist collided with Tommy's face. Then a third, and a fourth. Tommy crumpled over, hit the floor, blood dripping. And then he lay there, silently, shaking, as the lad raised his boot and brought it down, violently, onto the cassette player that had spilled onto the floor, shattering it into fragments.

And as for us: we stood, watched, and did nothing.