



The Fiddler in the Night
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Firenze Books

PART ONE

A perfect silence.

Night coming.

The cold damp air, reaching and settling, and this man, he knew, and only by his own awareness did he know. Death coming.

Death waiting.

He lit a match. This unleashing of madness.

His name was Leonard. He was riding a bike. His arms held out to the sides of him, his mind never trapped by his own self, never buckling under the weight of what he should be, or shouldn't be, understanding the truth of himself, always, in this world, hard as that was, and of course, in this moment, too, riding a bike through the lonely continuum of time. He smiled at his knowing, where others couldn't, and he knew he was right, and always would be.

He rode on, his arms still there, to the sides of him, and he said, come, cover me. Gliding and dipping and soaring, and we do, going on and on, down a lonely long road, and free now, or at least so he thought. Free and wanting.

Free and needing.

And who among us would not say, such a person as this.

He turned and looked and he smiled. The old woman's jewelry, prizes of his glory, adorning him. Her lipstick, a mess now, covering his mouth. This sweet taste of his taking. He looked away and he reached his hands up to the breaking blue sky, and he said, yes yes yes, I am coming.

And in the darkness of the night, a young girl, endless in her time and lost to it, knows she'll dream soon, in a chair—her chair, an old armchair, threadbare, a blanket covering her. The warmth of the room with her and holding her still—holding her always. And she cried.

Tears she knows.

Tears she can't feel in these dreams of silence, of sunshine, dreams of a distance not yet known. Her mother there, always. Waiting.

She woke. A noise in the night. Her father asleep, passed out on the couch across from her, beneath a blanket she had put there.

The sound of the garage door. The car starting.

She got up and walked to the front window and watched the car driving away. And why wouldn't it be? And what could possibly be next? She didn't know. She looked behind her, at everything unseen and mostly unspoken. Her father, too, there in the quiet and lost to it. Taken. She turned back and looked to the darkness, and she knew, if she wanted to, she could see her own reflection, there in the glass before her, and waiting too.

She walked to the fireplace and stood for a while looking at the smoldering ash. She took up a long iron rod and poked at the burning ones. She put on another piece of firewood and climbed back onto her chair and pulled the blanket over her, and she wondered, would it always be like this? She didn't know, but she thought it might be. She closed her eyes and slept again, and it was

running, always running, never there, never having, just running, and running now, in this falling of her emptiness.

Once again.

And he said, love under a big moon.

Of course, there is.

Why wouldn't there be?

And he looked up to that everyone's one big moon.

Probably was, and just forgotten.

Probably was.

He was walking, the car he'd stolen left at the side of the road. He stopped and looked around, and he thought, what else might be out there?

So many endless possibilities of strange and wonderful things.

He walked on, and he looked back up to that one big moon, and he reached up to it. You're mine, though, aren't ya? Every bit mine. Sooner or later, things'll get better. Ain't that right?

Ain't it now, said the moon back to him.

Why I'm here.

And never not here.

True enough, never not here.

And he was happy, walking, and he thought again, love under a big moon.

On a night such as this.

A boy and his mother were walking, not speaking, the low moving sky darkening. And it darkened more yet, such that it roofed the dirt and gravel road and the travelers upon the road in a

manner that made this aged and distant Arcadian world appear constrictive, the travelers entrapped, a moment suggestive of past worlds—of those that had come before them. Lives harrowed in the dark vacancies of this place.

The boy stopped and toed a faded and blackened bloodstain.

Blood and dirt and nothing more than that.

A red-tailed hawk in the high winds.

His mother stopping, looking back.

He'd watched this hawk hunt before.

She looked too.

Dark smoke caught his eye, and he dropped the paper bag he was holding, an assortment of groceries and truck parts spilling onto the road.

A gunshot.

The hawk pulling up, calling to the breaking of the darkening quiet.

Jonathan McLean moved quickly through the trees and over the low stone wall. He ran across their pastures, his sixteen-year-old legs striding hard, his feet sturdy upon the uneven ground.

His father, Conor McLean, a tall man wearing a long dark coat with a hood, stood watching the flames of his own making, a blood-soaked sheep stretched over his right shoulder.

Fired blood, boiling and running.

Long streams of it.

Heavy black smoke drifting, and rancid.

The boy yelling.

Flames cracking bones.

The man cleared the sweat from his face, and thought, his own father would have done the same.

The fire exploding, embers and bits of flaming sheep pushing the boy back.

Not the father.

Madness, against the raging of madness, he called to his father.

The man looked partway over his shoulder, his dark squinting eyes burrowed deep, welled in this moment, impervious to the ways of reason and method, and he viewed the boy.

Jonathan knew his father's awareness of this place and time was often like nothing more than a quick glimpse of something that possibly was, or was not, there, and he yelled again, his voice drifting in the heavy black smoke, the sound of the sheep burning—these unholy sounds of hell itself, raging and settling, like some form of next plague here now, fear driving, fear eating, in our minds, these flames burning still.

The man turned back and tried to lift the sheep from his shoulder, but he could not, his weakness and exhaustion made visible, and he knew not to try again.

Jonathan covered his mouth and nose with his shirt and stepped forward.

The man leaning forward, the sheep falling from his shoulder. He dropped his shotgun and placed his large cold hands on his thighs, and he coughed, hard and deep, and he discharged a long spittle of blood.

Jonathan looked at the sheep at his father's feet, blood running from the shot holes in its neck, small particles of dirt drifting to the thick surface of the running blood, the blood soaking into the ground, claimed by the dirt as its own.

God's own bounty.

That's what he'd been told.

That's what he thought.

Pinching the spittle from his lip the man threw it away, and he looked at his son standing next to him, the boy only just shorter than the man. Burn em.

No.

They're poxed.

No, they're not.

Burn em.

No.

Boy—.

I won't.

Send em all back to God.

He'll do it, and Kathleen McLean placed her hand to her husband's face, and in that moment, everything they were was there before them—visible, as if marked as one by the stain of this life.

Come inside.

He had no fight, no will past hers.

So beautiful. Her hand upon his face. The madness in his eyes dissipating, and yet, there still, holding on, wanting, waiting, and needing more.

Jonathan picked up the Winchester twenty-gauge over-under shotgun and cracked the gun, an un-shot shell in the lower chamber, and he watched his parents walking up the winding dirt path, worn deep into the rocky grass hill, toward their small stone house.

Should they look back, either one, they'd see a boy standing alone outside of their love for one another, their love for him a separate love, a love just as deep and full but incapable all the

same of saving him from the unavoidable and pending truth of all that is unseen and unanswerable, despite the intense desire otherwise that the last of his youngness still harbored.

He looked at the sheep at his feet, still breathing, its eye bulging large in its socket as if the uncertainty and fear pumping through its blood had crystallized it and turned it to glass. He put the gun to its head and pulled the trigger, the top of the sheep's head blowing forward, a sprayed trail of blood, brain matter, and bone fragment.

The sheep burning on.

The boy standing, watching.

Flames reaching.

A gun in his hand.

There, and ringing still, in this calling to madness.

Lived no more than twenty-five families of mostly Gaelic origin. This forgotten world. Here now, and before us. The heaviness of its vacancies, pulling and calling. These people, seemingly lost to the constant coming of it.

On three sides it was a long and steep drop to an unforgiving seaway, and where it adjoined with the mainland, it narrowed to less than a mile, and was from there a journey yet, not easily made to anywhere.