The Piper
by Fiona Mossman

The music that the fiddler played had everybody enraptured, adults and children alike. They leaned in, work forgotten, while the sweet and sad notes poured into the air, each one a fleeting firefly, achingly beautiful. All of the villagers were there, in the square. Their harvest songs, sung so lustily that morning, were things of the ancient past, and if one of them remembered such songs and the rough-and-ready voices of those who sang them, they winced, and blocked out the memory. This music was different. This music was true.

The fiddler's tune finished, and there was an audible susurration as all of the villagers sighed as one. The fiddler, standing tall in the centre of the square, his gold-lined breeches and buckles glinting in the sunlight, let the moment settle. A heartbeat of silence passed in a dream. And then he raised his bow again, and the notes tumbled forth, and the villagers all leaned in again with smiles on their faces. It was a jig. Legs began to jerk and bounce in time to the tune. Old Man Cob looked at Mistress Eliza. The Pococke children whispered to each other. Even stern Mayor Royster bobbed his head, shifted his feet.

Then flighty May grabbed her current sweetheart by the arm and dragged him into the cleared space in front of the fiddler, whirling in a wild polka. That set them all off. Old Man Cob and Mistress Eliza, who never had a good word to say to each other, were in each other's arms and dancing, the mayor and his daughter were bending in time to the music. Everyone was dancing, while the Pococke children spun and jigged, getting in the way but never earning a rebuke.

Only the little lame boy did not dance. He couldn't, though he wanted to. He felt the music inside him and a longing came over him that was so physical it nearly made him cry out. He watched his mother, and his sisters, and his father, with their callused hands and ragged clothing, dancing in the sunlight of the square as if they had nowhere else to be and no cares in the world. He leaned in, his mouth open as if the music was something that he could eat.

And then the fiddler turned, making an elegant leg, and set off at a jig-step out of the square. The dancers lined up and followed him. The little lame boy was left. He stayed there long after the energy and sound had faded away, until the shadows grew towards him in the dusk, and the dancers returned, high-voiced with excitement, the sheen of sweat making every face glow.

The boy had thought of many things, while he had been alone. He had thought of the music, and it had brought to mind the tales of the sea that had always fascinated him, though he had never seen it. He imagined that there was a tide that had pooled over the coves and inlets of his heart, pulled in by the fiddler's music. He thought of his sisters' endless taunts, and his father's silent disappointment. He thought of the broken promise of his life, his lame leg. The music that he could not follow had promised, for a one timeless moment, an end to that, a dissolution of all things into ecstasy and freedom. If he could only have been swept up in it, and taken away.

"Fife, there you are," came his mother's voice. She sounded breathless, and Fife could imagine a small note of guilt. Not looking at her face, he could still see her hands, twisting self-consciously. "Come on, it's time to go home."

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Fife was, everyone agreed, a strange boy, but perhaps it was only to be expected, they said amongst themselves as they watched him go by. His mangled leg. And it happened so young. Not unexpected, really, that he should be such an odd child.

They nodded, and made sympathetic noises, and Fife pretended not to notice. He knew that nobody liked him, and as he grew older the effort of caring about that, the effort of trying to change something that seemed to be unchangeable, became too much. He preferred his own company

anyway. And so his youth was spent more in the forests surrounding the village than in the village itself with the other children, and his pleasures were small ones, and private. His friends left him alone, and so did his family, for the most part.

All this Fife approved of, and encouraged. But in a deep, dark chasm inside him something was growing. When it came to the surface, and he saw through its eyes, everyone around him appeared so small. They were less than the rocks on the ground, smaller and more pointless. He himself grew to giant proportions.

"Won't you make something of yourself?" asked his mother eventually. Of them all, she had borne his ways for longest. She had never stopped trying to reach her only son. But even she lost her temper at times, when it seemed to her that her whole family used her up and never gave her thanks. There was a large fight that night, as husband and wife pitched against each other, and the daughters cried out that it wasn't fair, and Fife was caught in the centre of it, the fight for how much he was worth to his family.

"We'll send him to the city. He can study, he can learn a trade," his mother argued. "He's more than capable. You *know* that, Martin."

"I have not worked my fields for thirty years to throw it all away on one boy who can't even lift a hand to help his own family," his father retorted. "We can't afford it, and *you* know that, Marian."

By morning, Fife was hitching a lift to the city, his pockets full of his mother's secret stash of money and the accusations ringing in his head. "Please, Fife," his mother had whispered to him as he left, "promise me you'll try."

"I promise," he had said grimly. The strap of his hastily-packed bag had dug painfully into his hand where he gripped it as he turned away, not looking back to see her tears in the pre-dawn light.

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The people in the city were more numerous but they were just as petty and small as the ones from his village, Fife found. They had only judgement for his leg, and when he scowled at them, they made up their minds. "He's an odd one," they said. "Straight from the countryside, and so uncouth."

The medical school would not let him in, nor would the law school. He didn't have the credentials, they said, and tutted when he replied that that was what he was there to get. There was a bad time where he had nothing to eat. He began to make money by selling things that he found, trash tossed out and then cleaned up with some spit and a rag. He found that he could sell many things that other people had thrown away, and that the people he sold them too were comically easy to take in. "This pewter jug belonged to the saint of drinking," he told one. "It will never run dry." And to another, "Rub this stone against your feet and your bunions will disappear. I promise you." They paid up, with grateful words, and Fife's contempt for them only grew with the money he they gave him.

Eventually, he had gathered enough. He went to the shop that sold the musical instruments, opposite the music school. He bought the cheapest instrument available, and ten days later he went to the school, and played for them, and got a place.

His life changed. Equally astonished and vindicated, he discovered that this was something he could do. This was something that he was good at. When people heard the music, they didn't think about his leg, and they seemed to him to be his thralls, swaying in time to the tunes from his pipe. But for himself, the mysterious, painful tide did not stir, and sometimes he doubted that it was still there at all.

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When he graduated, he was given a letter of recommendation by one of his teachers. "You would have been the top of your class," the teacher said, "if you had chosen a different instrument." In all the years of music school, Fife had stayed true to the cheap little pipe he'd chosen. A pipe was a working instrument. Fife intended to make a living.

On the strength of the teacher's letter, he travelled around, working as a ratcatcher. Unlike the rest of his cohort, whose instruments earned them places at taverns, noble houses or even the court, a piper's trade was amongst the poor folk. Fife played his music, and the rats came out. They followed him all the way across the village, and he drowned them or, when he was feeling kind, abandoned them in forests or caves. He didn't often feel kind. This was a job. And besides, the rats were fools, to be enthralled by the music so much that they followed him to their deaths.

Travelling was hard on him, but Fife learned to compensate. He got a stick to help with his leg, and he became adept at picking the inns where the landladies were sympathetic, and put lavender in his bathwater, and brought him extra helpings at dinner. He travelled far, to the borders of the realm and then back in. He saw the sea, more than once. He became known as one of the best in the business.

And then he came to Hamelin.

He could tell when he arrived that this town was desperate. Bandits' raids and illness had stalked the town for the past three winters, Fife was told. Whole harvests had been lost, and people too. They were too far away for the city folk to care. Fife listened to the mayor without interrupting, while the man talked too much, and shifted his eyes about constantly. The rats had brought illness with them again. The townsfolk needed them gone.

"I'll do my job," Fife said to the mayor, and named his price. Then Fife took out his pipe, set it to his lips, and began to play. He moved slowly through the town, checking every outhouse and alley. The music poured from the pipe, bewitching every rodent that heard it. Calmly, Fife led them out of town, and stood beside the lake as they trotted into it to drown.

"Don't drink from downriver until the poison has been washed away," he advised the mayor upon his return. The mayor nodded, wringing his hands self-consciously. Fife's cold contempt sharpened for a moment into something different, but it disappeared just as quickly as it had come. "And now the matter of payment," he said instead, in a level voice.

"The matter of payment," the mayor repeated. His voice was like a goat's, Fife thought. So nasal, and modulating. "The matter of payment."

Fife looked at him while the mayor avoided his eyes, and he knew that this man was not going to pay him. When the mayor looked up and for a split second caught his gaze, Fife saw, too, that the mayor hated him. And at that realisation, the cold contempt split apart, and the anger that had been growing inside him for decades reared out of its dark cave and took over Fife's heart. Fife's body shook with it. Without thinking beyond the broken promises and the hatred, he lifted his pipe to his lips and let the music break out of it.

The mayor jerked as if possessed. His eyes widened, and fixed on Fife.

Fife played on, the music moving through him. This time it was different. This time his little pipe had become something more, and the tide was pulling and pushing inside him once again. It was ecstasy. It was freedom. He moved away, and the mayor followed him. He went past the women at the well in the town square, and they, too, marionette-stringed to their feet and followed him. He walked past the local market, the music picking up its pace, becoming as hard and fast and urgent as a river running to the ocean. They all abandoned their wares and followed him.

The music pulsed in him like blood and he, too, was enthralled. His feet cut a caper in the air. His leg did not hurt at all.

The dance wound its way all through the town, picking up the young and the old, the productive and the unproductive, the grief-stricken and the longing. They were swept up in the true music, the music that only the masters can make. Fireflies lit up and spun between the notes. They danced through the square and out again, into the fields and forests. Time meant nothing as they danced; promises meant nothing; pain meant nothing. The music poured out and they were whole once more.

And so they danced together into the lake where the poisoned, drowned rats lay, and they danced as they also drowned, and the piper danced too, lame leg healed now, and the beautiful music lingered in the air long after they all disappeared under the water, all cares forgotten and nowhere else to be. The music lingered over the town of Hamelin, and over the forests, and over the lake. And then it, too, faded, leaving only silence behind.