

# *The Candle Man*

Catherine Fisher



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THE  
CANDLEMAN

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藏书章



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‘Well, that’s that.’

The bus driver slammed down the engine cover and flicked off the torch.

‘Engine’s packed up – and it’s not as if I hadn’t warned them. The old tub barely got up Pwllmeyrick Hill yesterday.’

He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped oil from his fingers, glancing through the dimness at his last passenger. ‘Got far to go, son?’

Conor shrugged, absently. ‘Not really. I was born on a Monday.’

‘Eh?’

‘You know . . . the rhyme. “Thursday’s child has far to go.”’

‘Oh yes.’ The driver looked at him doubtfully. ‘But today’s Friday.’

Conor wished he hadn’t bothered. ‘It was just a joke.’

‘Oh ay.’ The driver pressed a button under a flap and watched the doors swish shut. ‘Now then. I’ll have to walk back to the phone at Pye Corner and get a truck out. They’ll love that, at this hour.’ He flicked the torch on again, lighting Conor’s face. ‘Want to phone them at home to pick you up?’

‘We haven’t got a car.’ Conor swung the sports bag quickly up onto his shoulder. ‘I’ll walk, it’s all right. It’s not far.’

Dubious, the driver looked around. The lane ran down in front of them into a misty darkness; the fields on each side were flat and black. Distant trees rose against the sky.

‘Are you sure? It’s as dark as a cow’s belly on these levels.’

But Conor was already striding off. ‘Don’t worry,’ he called back. ‘I won’t be ten minutes. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight.’

Leaving the driver staring after him he walked quickly into the darkness. After all, he thought hurriedly, it hadn’t really been that much of a lie. A van wasn’t a car. But if he had phoned, his mother might have been too busy, and she would have sent Evan out for him. Evan already used the van as if it was his own. He would have pulled up and swung the door open and said ‘Come on, son’, grinning all over his flabby face.

Conor ground his teeth and marched faster. Rugby had left him restless; he began to run hard, racing in the dark lane.

After a while, breathless, he slowed down. Over the hedge on his right the sky was scarred with a line of pale cloud, its edge white with the hidden moon. The lane in front of him turned a corner. Looking back, already further away than he’d thought, he saw the dark mass of the bus slightly turned into the hedge.

As he walked around the bend he realized how quiet the night was. There were only his own foot-steps, and from all around, the faintest shift of the

grasses fringing the invisible reens. Gradually the hedges became thinner, sheep-gnawed; then they were gone, and he walked between black fields stretching away to the horizon, each with its network of stagnant, salt-smelling waterways.

He stopped and shifted his bag to the other shoulder. The road was lonely and empty. In the silence a frog plopped into a reen and suddenly the moon came out, flooding the lane with silver and the fields glinted under their lacework of water – water in ditches and reens, trickling over the tarmac, glittering in ponds and hoofprints and hollows, as if the whole of the Levels was a great black sponge, oozing with silver liquid.

It was so quiet. Conor stood there a moment, listening. No car had passed him. Behind, for miles, the lane was empty. He went on, hurrying a little past the clumps of stirring grasses.

At the crossroads near Poor Man's Gout he left the lane, crossed a little bridge, climbed a gate and set off over the fields, the grass squelching under his feet. It would be quicker this way, if wetter. After five minutes he came down the track to the farm called Monk's Acre, seeing a faint blue glimmer of light between the downstairs curtains. That would be old Mrs Morris, watching television. Her son would be in the pub – he usually was.

A dog barked. Conor hurried on.

Beyond Monk's Acre he crossed the dark wet land quickly. Ahead he could see the great curve of the sea wall against the cloudy sky. Not far now, he thought. And he wouldn't even be that late.

At this end of the field was a big drainage reen called Marshall's; there was a narrow bridge across it

made from three planks tied up with binder twine. Even in this darkness, it didn't look very safe.

He put his foot on it carefully; the wood creaked and shifted, but he jumped hastily over, scrambled up the bank and brushed the cold mud from his hands and knees. Now he was almost home. Across the field and up the lane was the Sea Wall Inn, where his mother was probably pulling a pint and wondering where he was.

He bent and picked his bag out of some nettles. Then he dropped it again, heart thumping.

The noise had come from the dark fringe of trees behind him. The breeze brought it; a squeal, sharp and eerie. As he listened it rose, winding up to a horrible screech that made his flesh prickle; then it sank again to a long moan, barely heard among the swish of reeds. Conor stood absolutely still, sweat prickling his neck. Was it an animal? In some sort of trap? A fox could make some unearthly noises, but nothing like this. He thought of ghosts, spectral dogs, marshlights, of banshee women, wailing at the tideline before a wreck. And yet he felt he almost recognized it; it was a familiar sound, somehow out of its true place.

After a moment of struggle he moved across the field towards it, silently, into the wind. The moan went deep and hollow in the darkness. Crossing the tussocky grass was difficult; he kept stumbling, and once almost twisted his ankle in a rabbit hole, but finally he got to the edge of the trees and paused, knee-deep in nettles, trying not to breathe so hard.

The cry burst from the trees, making him jump. It screamed high, then, astonishingly, broke, became music, a tune, the wild free skirl of a jig.

Conor let out his breath in slow relief. 'You idiot,'

he muttered to himself. He grinned. Ghosts. Banshees. He must be getting soft.

Edging forward, he put his fingers against the cracked bark of a willow, and crouched down.

A few yards in front of him was a small, smoky fire, burning near the edge of the reen. Next to it, standing with his back to Conor, a dark-haired man was playing a fiddle. He was playing it quietly now, dreamily, one foot tapping rhythms into the soft mud. The music crooned and hummed in the stillness; the flames crackled on the damp wood.

Who on earth could he be, Conor thought. A tramp? Maybe a gypsy. Whoever he was, he could play. Now the music had slid back to the long eerie notes that wavered and hung, quivered and whispered. It was wonderful music; it dissolved into folk tunes and snatches of half-remembered songs, and before Conor could put names to the tunes they were gone and the fiddler was playing a strange, stately lament, wandering like a shadow through the trees.

Then, as he leaned forward to listen, Conor saw something moving in the grass near the fiddler's feet. It slithered, glinting in the brief moonlight. At first he thought it was an eel that had crawled up out of the reen; then, with a shock, he realized it was water! The green, sluggish water of Marshall's reen was streaming upwards over the bank, forming long, gleaming rivulets that moved silently through the grass. Already a pool was forming behind the fiddler – even as he half turned and started a new tune Conor saw the fingers of water draw back, then trickle out again, sliding ominously after him. It was uncanny. How could water run uphill?

He edged forward, staring. Was it water? He'd



thought so, seeing it break and trickle, but now it seemed to him more like a hand; wet fingers reaching for the man's ankle as he played and hummed, his head low over the bow.

Conor jumped up. He shouted. The man's head whipped round. The hand grabbed.

The fiddler jerked back with a screech of his bow; he gave a yell of fury and kicked out at something that glinted and moved at the water's edge, stamping at it in rage, splashing the water high.

'Leave me alone!' he yelled, stumbling backwards. 'Haven't you done enough?'

He was not surprised; he was angry, bitter, shaking with rage. And all at once the water was gone, sinking silently back, sliding soundlessly over the bank into the stagnant reen. All around, the trees stirred their branches.

For a long while the fiddler stood still, as if getting his breath. When he spoke again his voice was calmer. 'For a moment,' he said to the darkness, 'you almost caught me. I didn't think I could come back without you knowing. I'm here to get back what you took from me.'

As if to answer him a terrifying sound rose out of the reen; a thin hiss, a bitter choking. The man waited, warily, until it faded to silence. Then he turned around, to face the trees.

'And who are you?' he asked quietly.

Conor froze. He was sure the man couldn't see him among the branches unless he moved, and he didn't want to be seen either. He wanted to get away from this madness altogether.

But the fiddler pointed his bow at the trees. 'Come on. Show yourself.'

At that moment, to Conor's alarm, the moon drifted from its lid of cloud. It glinted on his face and hands; he saw the man step forward, and in an instant of panic he turned and was running, racing hard over the wet grass, slipping and stumbling, leaping the reeds to the lane and running, running to its end, his bag thumping against him. He turned the corner and hurled himself onto a gate, doubled up and gasping for breath.

For a while the night roared and swung around him, but slowly, as he took great breaths of the damp air, he realized he had not been followed. The lane was silent and dark; the only sounds the drift of voices from the pub just ahead; the slam of a car door. He heaved himself upright and walked wearily up the track.

The Sea Wall Inn was busy; lights blazed from its windows onto the multicoloured row of cars; a few bicycles leaned against the wall. As he walked up to the door and scraped the mud from his boots he thought about the fingers of water that had crawled from the reen. They were quite impossible, of course. But he'd seen them.

‘So you didn’t come home in the bus last night.’ His mother lifted the bowl of ferns from the windowsill and scrubbed the faded wood firmly with the duster. Her short dark curtain of hair swung vigorously. He knew she was very angry.

‘I did . . . like I said, it broke down. Only up the road. Just beyond Morris’s.’ It had been further by far, but this was bad enough.

She glared at him over one shoulder. ‘You might as well have told me. You know everything gets back to this pub sooner or later.’

He tore the corner off a beer mat, irritably. That was true enough.

‘There are some very odd people about these days, Conor. I’ve got enough to worry about, without you wandering around in the dark.’ She straightened, wiping her hand on her cheek and leaving a smudge of dirt. ‘Next time, phone me. I don’t know why you didn’t.’ She gave a flick of the duster. ‘Evan would have come out and picked you up.’

He glared at her, but she was already back wiping tables. Tossing the beer mat down he swung himself off the stool. ‘Can I do anything?’

‘Ashtrays, if you like. Or the fires.’

Cleaning the ashtrays was the one job he hated, so today, he told himself, he’d better do it just to keep the peace. He collected them up and emptied all the cigarette ends and ash into the bin. Then he washed them, wiped them carefully, and put them out again, one on each clean table. It was a peaceful thing to do.

The pub was always quietest in the morning. It was a large, rather dark room with small leaded windows on each side of the door. His mother kept it painfully clean; the brass jugs on the shelves gleamed, and every glass shone. A fireplace stood at either end of the room, with an old dark wood mantel shelf and a framed print – Tintern Abbey and Raglan Castle. It had probably been two rooms once – there was a definite rise in the floor halfway across, that strangers carrying drinks often tripped over, soaking their trousers. Now the room was smoky and dim, even in sunlight, smelling of beer and wines and the faintest tang of bacon.

Near the door were the flood marks. The highest was a dim brown smudge higher than his head, with 1863 written next to it in heavy black letters. Below that were eight other lines, at intervals, with a few others almost worn away. Each was dated, in different handwriting; 1908, 1905, 1897, 1966, 1989, this last only about knee-high. That was the only big flood Conor could remember – the tides whipping over the wall, the mud and the sandbags; having to live upstairs for a week. There had been others, of course; water seeped over in most winters and in heavy storms, but they weren’t marked. And the house wasn’t old enough to have a mark for the Great Flood – that had been in 1606 and had swept whole villages away.

In fact, he thought, as he knelt down at the fireplace, the whole house would have been underwater then, and as he shovelled up last night's ashes he imagined fish swimming in at the windows, swirling muddy water and great crusts of barnacles on the tables and chairs.

'Daydreaming, Conor?'

With a jerk he picked up the bucket and looked round. The big man in the doorway smirked at him.

'Oh Evan,' his mother said. 'I'm glad that you're back. The brewer is coming at twelve. Is that all right?'

'Don't you worry. The cellar is all ready.' Evan Lewis sat himself on a clean table, drying his large, hairy hands with a towel.

If I put my feet on the seat like that, Conor thought, she'd say something. Then he told himself fiercely to shut up, and took the cinders out, bringing back sticks and paper and coals.

'... It is your birthday after all,' Evan was saying, in a reasoning voice. 'You ought to take the afternoon off. Shouldn't she?' He looked at Conor.

'You mean on Friday?'

'That's right. I thought we could all go to the cinema in Chepstow. My treat.'

Conor made a careful crisscross of sticks on the newspaper.

His mother stood up straight and pushed her hair back. 'That's very kind of you, Evan, but I don't know ...'

'Please Jill. I'd like to.'

'In any case I wouldn't let you pay. And who'd look after the bar?'

'Nia. Or Siân. They'd do it just for one afternoon.'

She put her arms on the bar and leaned her chin on them. 'Well . . . it would be a change. I haven't been to the pictures for ages.'

She looked round at Conor. 'What do you think?'

He put the last piece of coal on the fire and stood up, his hands black. If only he'd thought of this first. Now he was trapped.

'I don't mind.'

'That doesn't sound very keen!'

Conor clenched his fists. 'I mean I'll come, but I'd like to pay for you myself. I've got some money.'

'Wouldn't hear of it.' Evan had poured himself a lemonade shandy and was drinking it noisily.

Conor felt a wave of anger flash over him. 'I don't think you should pay for us,' he snapped. 'It's not as if we're related or anything, is it?'

'Conor!' His mother glared at him. 'Don't be so rude!' She turned. 'Yes, look, Evan we'd be delighted. I'm sure Siân will come in. Thank you very much.'

Damn, thought Conor. Now I've pushed her into it.

'My pleasure.' Evan put down his glass. 'You've got dirt on your face, Jill.' And he took out a clean handkerchief and wiped the smudge off her cheek. She went faintly red.

Conor ground his nails into his palms and turned round, abruptly. A man was standing in the open doorway, watching them.

'Good morning,' he said.

'Morning,' Conor mumbled, in a shocked voice.

He was a young man with a narrow face and black hair. He had a rucksack on his back and a violin-shaped canvas bag under one arm. He gave Conor a cool, considering look.

'We're closed,' Evan said at once.

'I'm sure you are, my friend, but it's not drink I'm after. I've come about the job.'

He put a small piece of paper into Jill's hand. She stared at it vaguely, then her face cleared and she said, 'Oh I see! The advertisement.'

'It's not been filled?'

She turned and smiled at him. 'Not yet. We're looking for someone dependable for a few Tuesday nights, and possibly Saturdays – our live music nights. Just for a while. We usually have a group but the dulcimer player is in hospital and the rest are touring at various folk festivals . . .'

He nodded, and slipped the rucksack off. 'Do you want reels, jigs, ballads? Irish, Welsh?'

'That would be fine.' She hesitated 'Mr . . .?'

'Rhys. But Meurig will do.'

'I suppose you have some references, reviews, that sort of thing?' Evan said, elbowing himself forward. He folded his arms across his broad chest and looked the fiddler up and down. 'We can't employ just anyone. This pub has a name for its music.'

'We!' thought Conor.

The fiddler shrugged. 'I could give a list of people I've played for. But perhaps you should just listen and decide for yourselves.' He took the fiddle out of its bag and drew the bow across, adjusting the pegs. The low squirm of sound reminded Conor of last night. He sat on a stool and waited.

The fiddler did not disappoint him. After five minutes of the sweetest melody she could imagine, his mother came slowly out of her amazement and said 'Do you know that was absolutely wonderful! What was that tune?'

'An air I learned in Brecon once.' The fiddler watched her, his eyes bright. He smiled. 'You love music, I can see.'

'I do indeed, and I've heard plenty, but never anything like that.'

'Look, Jill, this is all very well,' Evan blurted out, 'but you need some references, something . . .'

'No.' She shook her head firmly, 'No I don't. If you can play like that, Meurig, then welcome to The Sea Wall. The regulars will love you.'

He laughed, and began to put the fiddle away. Evan had a glowering look of annoyance, and Conor was glad. Who did he think he was anyway!

'This is my son Conor, and Evan Lewis, our cellar-man. Now, have you anywhere to stay?'

The fiddler pulled the cords tight. Then he said 'Yes. The old watchtower on the sea wall belonged to my grandfather. It belongs to me now, though I haven't been there for a while . . .'

'The watchtower?' Conor's mother looked surprised. 'Then I knew your grandfather . . . he came in here sometimes. But can you live there? The sea washes right up to it – around it, at some tides.'

Meurig shrugged. 'I expect so.'

But Conor caught a sudden flicker of unhappiness on the man's face. The memory of the fingers of water groped at him.

'Well if you need any supplies, let me know. You won't be very comfortable there.'

'I'll manage.' Then the fiddler turned to Conor. 'I don't suppose you'd like to help me carry these things down?'

Oh, no, Conor thought, but his mother said, 'Of course he will' with that peculiar threat in her voice



that he knew very well, so he carefully picked up the violin bag and followed the fiddler outside.

They walked along the track in silence, skirting the muddy pools. Conor gave a quick glance sideways, and saw that the fiddler was looking at him. Does he know it was me, Conor thought uneasily, or is he just wondering?

But Meurig said nothing. He climbed the steps quickly up to the top of the sea wall, and stood there, his hair and coat lifting and flapping in the wind. Conor climbed up after him.

The Severn was grey and purple; huge, a shifting, breathing mass of water, swollen right up to the base of the wall, lapping quietly. The tide was full and far out the sun glinted on moving threads of current, dark streaks in the water. Beyond, low and faint as cloud, the hills of Somerset glimmered.

About half a mile down the wall was the watch-tower, tall and built of black stone, its windows blank eyes that watched them come.

As they trudged towards it along the muddy path the fiddler said, 'It won't be very dry, I suppose.'

Conor hesitated. Then he said, 'Do you think it will be . . . safe?'

Meuring turned. 'Safe?'

'Yes. You know.'

The fiddler glanced out at the estuary. 'You mean from the water?'

'Yes.'

They looked at each other for a moment. Then the fiddler smiled a bitter smile. 'I doubt it. For me, nowhere is safe, Conor.'