

ROBERT PENNEE

Fiorello

... **A**ND AFTER ALL, isn't it a bit like someone lost in the mist who wonders how he has arrived in the middle of an open square, a fountain to one side, a horse-drawn wagon on the other, and before him, rising unexpectedly like the hull of a ship through the fog, a church with its open portals where ...

... a child sits on the last broad stair, a red ball under his elbow, resting like a soccer player at half time, a trace of a smile on his lips ...

... and when the boy stands and calls out, "Fiorello," and another child, skipping, suddenly advances along the side street which only a moment ago was obscured by mist and almost certainly deserted, it is this second child who will make such an impression because his eyes are ...

"YELLOW."

"Pardon?"

Lorenzini woke with a start. His wife, Pina, always attentive and sympathetic, looked at him with amused curiosity.

"What's yellow?"

"Yellow?" It took Lorenzo a moment to place the question. "Of course ... yellow ... my dream ... it was strange A child. I can't remember his name" He shook his head as if trying to jog loose a piece of his memory, like a chunk of broken masonry from the roof of the convent of the Holy Innocents. "I think there was something peculiar about his eyes ... like a fog light."

Pina nodded, her eyes crinkling like a chef's at a recipe she knows well.

"You mean amber."

"That's right ..." said Lorenzini, "amber." He threw his legs over the side of the bed and raised himself into a sitting position. "I mean, I suppose so" He stood up, still shrugging, but as he walked toward the bathroom, he repeated the word amber, slowly, as if it were a password he must try to remember.

At work, Lorenzini was like a puppet dangling on the end of frayed strings. "You look like you've seen a ghost," said one of his co-workers, Carlo, who liked to eat bread with pickles.

Lorenzini didn't mention the dream; he reached into Carlo's lunch pail and took a clove of garlic.

He didn't even think to mention it later in the afternoon, when Wieslawa started to recount a dream she'd had on the weekend. In fact it hardly occurred to him to envy her, as he often did people who were able to recall even those seemingly incidental details from a dream—the shape of someone's mouth as he called a name, the colour of a child's eyes. But that night, the moment he placed his head on the pillow, he thought of the dream and the child's amber eyes, and he began to repeat the word, "... like an incantation," he thought to himself.

"What's that you're saying?" Pina asked.

Lorenzini hadn't realized he had been speaking aloud.

"I'm praying," he answered, and when Pina asked him why he had decided to start such a habit, he pretended he was already asleep and buried his head further into the pillow in order to drown his whisper.

"... ambr ... amm-brrrr"

He opened his eyes. Morning had arrived, and he was disappointed. His sleep had been dreamless.

Pina was already dressed, standing in front of the mirror.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"Not really." He shrugged as if he had lost a bit of small change, an event which in itself wasn't terribly important, except that the loss was a bit of a mystery. When Pina continued to stare at him, he held his hands open as if to say, "see, no dream," like a child who has been accused of stealing a chocolate.

While she completed her toilette, Pina called from the bathroom.

"I hope you're not dwelling on that child?"

"Child?"

"From the dream."

Though she was not in the room to see, Lorenzo shook his head. "No not at all. In fact, I was thinking something very different. I was thinking—"

He hesitated as if what he was about to say puzzled even him.

"You know, the way there's an orphan ... well, I think there should be a name for a childless parent. Eh Pina ... do you ever feel like that?"

The concept seemed ludicrous but Pina really only heard the preoccupation.

"If you had wanted a child, you should have said something a long time ago, Lorenzo Lorenzini."

She stepped back into the room to find her husband still sitting on the end of bed, like a scarecrow in slippers, his pyjamas drooping like a blanket on stick-figure shoulders.

She crossed to him and laid her hand on his. "It's a bit late to worry about children, Mr. Lorenzini. We have each other. Be thankful."

Lorenzo patted her hand. "It's not that. I'm fine. A bit tired that's all."

He smiled for her, but all the same he felt a vague sense of disappointment, like when he was a boy, the disappointment which is almost indistinguishable from a presentiment of guilt or dread, emotions he experienced when he was in school, when there was an exam which he had forgotten to prepare for, or because of a visiting aunt who had strange breath and questioned him on the ten commandments, or when he'd forgotten to kiss his mother goodnight.

At work, even when he needed to be busy, he returned to his forgotten dream and to times when he was a boy. He remembered how once he had held a candle in the dark, while his father repaired—

"Hey, Loro, you're in a fog." It was Carlo, holding a pickle and a slice of bread. "It's lunch time, come on. But be careful"

Lorenzo nodded, "Yes, yes. I'll be careful." He tried to joke, "Not much happens when you're in a fog ... eh?"

And he let out a deep sigh. His heart seemed to be breaking, as if autumn had arrived with only brown leaves.

All day it was like that. He had trouble clearing his head until, later on, when he felt a little more relaxed, the memories, which all day long had lain so tantalizingly on the edge of awareness, seemed like they were about to come into focus

... a bit like when the fog lifts and there, in front of him is the same tall church, the same boy and no sooner has he noticed him than the boy raises his arm to wave, and the red ball rolls down the stairs toward the fountain to the sound of horses' hooves on a cobbled street, although Lorenzo isn't paying any attention anymore to the hollow ricochet of the hooves nor to the red ball, because he takes its sudden descent as a signal to climb the stairs himself and enter the church ...

... where a second boy, smaller but resembling the first, is running up and down the aisles, dragging his hand along the cold grey pillars while the scuffling sound his shoes make echoes in the empty cavity until a sexton appears from a curtain behind the presbytery ...

... who genuflects as he crosses in front of the altar, where he lights a set of candles, straightens the altar cloth, arranges the cruets on a small table to one side, performing the simple actions mechanically, like a figure from an elaborate clockwork, and as suddenly as he had appeared vanishes again through the curtain ...

... but even as the curtain closes behind him a voice, his or that of the pastor of the parish, calls out "Oh, Fiorello ..."

... and there, motionless beside a coffin, which stands in the middle of the central aisle like a glass cabinet in a museum, is an altar boy, with a single burning taper, standing as straight and unblinking as a statue ...

... until a sound distracts him from his meditation sending his eyes towards the baptistery window while outside a bird flutters near the stained glass, and only the silhouette of its wings batters against the leaded panes which are stained blood-red, sea-green, and golden ...

"YELLOW."

"Is something wrong?"

Lorenzini looked up from his chair. "Wrong? No. Not at all. Why should anything be wrong?"

Pina stood over him like a nurse. "You fell asleep. You must have been dreaming."

The open newspaper was still in his lap.

"You know, I think I really was dreaming ... like the other night"

Pina had already guessed as much.

"You said yellow again. Was it the same little boy?"

"Same?"

"With the amber eyes?"

"I think so ... I don't know. I don't remember his eyes"

Naturally enough, Pina was curious. Her husband was being diffident and secretive, like an anarchist with a bomb in his pocket. She leaned forward as if there were a ghostly mystery to solve.

"This boy? Who do you think it is?"

Lorenzo didn't answer. He pulled on the corner of his lip, like a student inventing an excuse.

"Is it someone you knew when you were a child?" Pina asked. "Or maybe it's the son of one of our friends?"

Lorenzo could see that his wife was enjoying herself, but he couldn't play along.

"I'm sorry, Pina, I've no idea ... I'm sure I've never seen him before." His forehead wrinkled like a bellows, and he ran his thick palm across it, as if trying to flatten it with an iron. "But I feel like I should know his name I don't know why."

He fell silent as if he might drop back to sleep and Pina turned to her reading.

Under the spell of his half-closed eyes, he experienced a peculiar sense of benediction and absence which left him unfortunately apprehensive, as if somewhere in the distance a child had called.

"He seems so sweet ..." Lorenzo said aloud, although not to anyone in particular.

Of course Pina could not help but hear. "I knew we should have had a child," she said, "just for times like this. You old fool!" When he didn't reply, she left the room, muttering under her breath

but clearly enough for Loro to hear, "I knew a day like this would come."

Lorenzo was left to himself.

"Poor Pina," he said, as if he were telling a joke to a stranger, "she thinks' this little fellow—" He stopped. "Little ... fellow?" The words had a strange aura to them, and Lorenzo rubbed his fingers together as if he were crushing a scented herb, then shook his head, dismissing the fancy of a ridiculous man.

"Children have such wild dreams," he thought to himself.

But he and Pina had no children. "Which is probably for the best," he thought. That way he had never had to cope with the cries of a child at night, waking from a dream of ghosts.

But to dream one must be sleeping. And that night Lorenzo Lorenzini tossed and turned, but couldn't sleep. Perhaps he even resisted it, uncertain whether he wanted to return to the same dream, a dream which was having such an unnerving effect on his soul, as if something were terribly out of place ...

... like a boy leading a lame horse along the aisle of a church, its hooves on the marble floor reverberating like a gunshot ...

... until the echoes are drowned inside the footfalls of a priest who rapidly approaches the altar ...

... stopping abruptly as if he is the one who has been shot ...

... when really he is only pausing to commiserate with a young couple whose child has died, recently, yesterday, or perhaps even today ...

... while Lorenzo moves closer to overhear the words they exchange, though the voices are muffled because the woman is speaking with her hand over her mouth, as if in her anguish she were trying to hide her teeth, and her husband's voice, though drowned in tears, repeats,

"Children aren't supposed to die ..."

... to which the priest, placing his hand upon the shoulders of the couple, replies, "When a child is planted in a coffin, it's like God has become pregnant again ..."

... which ridiculous as it sounds seems to be true because the coffin in the centre of the aisle is covered with a pale blue blanket ...

... only when Lorenzo begins to lift the lid, the blanket slides soundlessly toward the floor, and even though the coffin contains a fossil ("which must be amber," Lorenzo thinks, almost recalling that this too must be a dream) the woman turns and instead of making a move to catch the blanket opens her toothless mouth so that Lorenzo Lorenzini is certain she is going to say the child's name, even though he already knows the child is ...

"FIORIELLO."

"Yes?"

When Lorenzo turns the boy is standing right beside him, wearing soccer shorts and holding a red ball under his arm.

"Are you coming?" the boy asks.

"Coming?" Lorenzo looks around the empty church. "Where? What do you mean?"

Fiorello takes his hand, closing his fingers around Lorenzo's.

"This way."

Lorenzo is barefoot. He is reluctant to go. He shrugs for no reason, like a child holding his breath.

"Are you sure?"

Fiorello nods. "Oh yes. I've been here before, many times." His voice is small but intelligent and confident. "A beautiful tone," Lorenzo thinks to himself, like a choir boy, though he can't help but notice that one of the boy's legs is withered, tapering like a sailor's peg.

"You lead the way," Lorenzo says, pointing him on.

... and so, just like that, pausing only a moment longer to adjust his hat, an old-fashioned fedora like his father used to wear, Lorenzo follows the boy through the side door of the church, outside, to where the sky is always blue and the clouds always white and the sun is ...

"YELLOW."

"Always," says Fiorello, squeezing Lorenzo Lorenzini's hand more tightly in his own.