

EDDIE AND MICHAEL

A fantasy inspired by the idea of an encounter between master Irish fiddler Michael Coleman and jazz guitar pioneer Eddie Lang, two of the very best at their respective instruments and contemporaries in the New York music scene of the 1920's and 1930's.

I. Eddie Speaks

Through the crowd of people in this airless subway car
I spotted a violin case
Protected by a small man, reddish hair,
No one I knew.
I remember how careful he was with that case
When he had to push his way out of the train
At Forty-Seventh Street - same stop as mine.
He carried it not by the handle
But cradled in his arms like a baby
Or some other delicate thing that meant as much to him
As he meant to it.

No, I didn't know him
But I liked him very much for that.

We were both headed for the same building
And he, more lightly burdened, got to the door first
But held it open for me when he spotted the guitar.

- Big bulky thing like that, I don't know how you manage it,
He said, then patted the violin case lovingly.

- Even this little thing gets in the way sometimes.
He said it with a laugh
But I knew he didn't mean it.

He had an accent, Irish I would guess,
And as we waited for the one working elevator
(Which appeared to be stuck as usual on the 31st floor)
I asked his name. - *Coleman, Michael Coleman*, he said,

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Extending a hand. - *And yours is ...?*

**Somewhere I had heard his name, but try as I might
I could not remember details.**

***Eddie Lang*, I replied. I was surprised at the strength
In his smallish hand; it reminded me of my grandfather's hand
The Sicilian farmer, small but tough.**

**His eyes lit up. - *Are you THAT Eddie Lang?* he asked,
In such amazement that I had to laugh.**

- *Guilty*, I replied.

- *I was at a friend's house one, no, two Sundays ago*, he explained.

- *And I heard you and your friend playing on the radio.*

God almighty, that was great playing altogether.

I don't know much about your kind of music, I'm sorry for that,

But I know great playing when I hear it.

What's your friend's name, the fiddler?

**I laughed. - *His name's Joe Venuti*, I replied,
And sometimes he thinks of himself as a violinist
But fiddler is a better description. And you yourself,
Mr. Coleman - what sort of music do you play
*On that ... on that fiddle of yours?***

I swear he blushed.

**- *Only the old Irish dance tunes, nothing much,*
He said. - *I play the reels and jigs and hornpipes*
That my people have been hearing all their lives
And maybe never thought much about, even though
There's beauty and power in even the least important tune
*If you have the ears and the heart to hear them.***

I liked him even more after he said that.

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**- You know, Mr. Coleman, I'd like to hear you play sometime,
I said just as the clanking old elevator
Finally ground to a halt in front of us.**

**It would be an honor for me to play for you, Mr. Lang,
He replied. - And you can call me Michael.**

**We got in the elevator together
But as the door was closing, he remembered
That he needed cigarettes. With a quick shake of my hand
And cradling his beloved violin
He disappeared back out into the building lobby.**

**Joe and I and some of the other guys
Got asked to do some movie work in California not long afterwards
So I didn't see Michael again.
But a week or so before we left
I asked Jimmy, the Irish bartender down at Dempsey's,
If he knew who Michael Coleman was.
He seemed surprised, not at the question so much
As at the questioner.**

**- Where did you ever hear that name?
(The emphasis was on the "you".)**

**- I met him a week ago in the Brill Building, I said.
A very pleasant gentleman. He said he had heard Joe and me
Playing on the radio; he seemed genuinely impressed.
- And why wouldn't he be? said Jimmy with a smile.
No flies on you two boys, even if you are Eytalian.**

I took it as a compliment.

**- And this Michael Coleman ...? I prompted.
- He's only one of the greatest musicians
Ever to come out of Ireland, Jimmy answered proudly.
From the County Sligo, not far from where my mother was born.**

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*You would have to hear him to believe him.
Our pal Joe would certainly appreciate him too,
I have no doubt of that, as one fiddling genius to another,
So to speak.*

Then he said he had an idea, but wouldn't tell me
What it was. - *It'll be a surprise, he said.*
- *Just come in Tuesday around two, and make sure
That Joe is with you.*

*That'll work, I said. We're not to be on the train to California
Until Thursday.*

... On the appointed Tuesday Venuti and I walked into the bar
And we found out what Jimmy had in mind:
He had brought his precious collection of Coleman's records
There to the bar, so that we could hear
What all the fuss was about.

The needle on the battered phonograph was bad
And skipped all over the place.
Jimmy cursed it under his breath
Then finally stuck a penny to the top of the arm
With a piece of gum.

- *There, that ought to do it, he said triumphantly.*
And now listen to the greatest Irish fiddler you'll ever hear.
And for two minutes and thirty-nine seconds
We did just that.

Jimmy had told us beforehand the name of the tune, but I don't remember
What it was, or whether it was a jig or a reel;
It really wouldn't have made much difference to us anyway.

The tune was over and the needle was scraping. Joe and I
Looked at one another; there wasn't anything that needed saying.
Jimmy's eyes were closed. I don't think he realized
That the record was finished.

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Finally Joe said:

- *What is that man's name again?*
 - *Michael Coleman, Jimmy and I replied at the same time.*
 - *He is a gifted musician, said Joe, who never in my hearing Had said these words about anyone else.*
- Then he said it again:
- *God knows, he is a gifted musician.*

Jimmy was smiling broadly. - *Listen to these now, he said, Carefully removing another record from his stack of treasures.*
- *Three reels that Paganinny, your fellow Eytalian , With all due respect, couldn't play any sweeter or smoother.*

In the end, we listened to all the records that Jimmy had brought
And we listened again. It was raining cats and dogs outside
And the bar was empty except for the three of us
And the scratchy records full of sounds
Whose existence we had never even suspected.

- *I never knew anything about this music,*
Joe kept repeating, more to himself than to us, and then as an
afterthought:
*It doesn't sound anything like all that other junk
That people think is Irish music.*
- *No indeed, said Jimmy. - This is the real thing.
We're blessed to have Coleman and the others like him
In this country where they can record. My only regret
Is that they couldn't find a backup player worthy of the soloist.
Some of that thumping behind Coleman's playing
Would make a puck goat sick to his stomach.*
- *That's what they say about our records too, said Joe,
And nimbly dodged the punch in the ribs that I aimed at him.
Jimmy laughed almost as hard as Joe. - All right, enough,
Jimmy said. - This is a respectable bar, none of that in here.*

We were playing somewhere on 52nd Street that night
And it was getting late. We thanked Jimmy
And ducked out into the downpour to try to find a cab.

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We intended to go our separate ways to catch a little shut-eye
Then meet at the club later.

While we waited for a cab I noticed
That Joe was humming one of the Coleman tunes.
He didn't have it right, and when I corrected him,
It was as if I were waking him up. - *Yeah, that's it*, he said.
*What did Jimmy say the name of that tune was Lord
something or other? My God, isn't that great music he plays,
An Irish farmer or whatever he is ... who would ever believe it?
There are people in the conservatory who will never play like that ...*

Then I remembered where I had seen the name Michael Coleman.
It was in the newspaper, in some ad
For an Irish charity function of some sort
Where he and a few other musicians were performing.
Normally I would have paid little if any attention
To an ad like that - not out of disrespect
But because it came from another world
From someplace I knew nothing about
Or perhaps didn't belong ...

Then why, why did I finally remember Coleman's name?

II. Michael Speaks

The dark man with the guitar case was on the other end of the car
But we got out at the same stop. I didn't think
He was Irish, but I didn't know what he was.

When he introduced himself, I recognized his name.
Fine musicians, he and his colleague Joe the fiddler.
I knew all about them from the time down at Kippeen's
When we listened to them on the radio. What was the name
Of that tune they played ... "The Wild Dog", something like that?

- *By Christ, that man's one hell of a fiddler*, Kippeen had said.
- *And the lad playing the guitar is no slouch either*,

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**Crowley had added. - Great music altogether.
You could listen to that all night.**

**We had all agreed, except the one we called Dan the Cobbler
As honest and bullheaded a Kerryman
As God ever made. - Now hold on a minute, lads, he had said.
-Wild dogs are all right in their place, I suppose,
But give me "The Dogs Among the Bushes" any time. There's a tune
Can't be beat for the sweetness ...**

**And then from the radio came Eddie and Joe
Playing "Dinah", beautiful fiddle over the solid guitar,
Not a note or a chord wrong. The audience in the studio
Went crazy, and they had to play it again.**

**- Every hand in the house, like they did for you, Michael,
Last week in the Claremen's Hall, said Kippeen,
When you had to play "Come West Along the Road" three times
Before they'd even consider letting you off the stage.
Dan the Cobbler was disgusted. - And your man what's his name
Banging away on the piano, not a clue as usual.
Honest to God, Michael, I don't see how you can work
With such a worthless amadhán as that.**

**- He's the wife's cousin, I said, not entirely truthfully.
Not much I can do about it ...**

**- Him too? Another cousin? said Dan the Cobbler in amazement.
With all due respect, Michael - your wife has more cousins
Than one of King Solomon's grandchildren, and isn't it amazing
That all three goddam thousand of them are hopeless musicians?
The others laughed, and I did too.**

Then Crowley said in a quiet voice:

**- Wouldn't it be marvellous if your man there on the radio - Eddie, is it? -
Could learn enough about Irish music to work with you?
My God, that would be mighty music altogether.
And when he wanted to play jazz, he could go back
To Joe and the others. I doubt he would have any problem
Switching back and forth, anyone with a gift like that.**

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Everything should be easy for him!

**In my heart of hearts, I thought: Yes, that would be mighty music.
I loved Joe's fiddle, but there was something
About Eddie's guitar
That seemed to answer questions even before they were asked.
Nothing out of place, nothing taken from the melody line,
Just a presence underneath, jumping out occasionally
With a bass run or a little syncopation all its own,
Then back to its accustomed position
As if it had never left, but somehow
Everything was brighter.**

Yes, that would be mighty music.

**It was a few weeks after that
That I actually met Eddie Lang in Manhattan
And after we had chatted a while
He said that he would like to hear me play.**

**I wasn't sure what to say; I mumbled something
And pretended I had to buy cigarettes.**

**But then he and Venuti and the band
Got some movie work in California, and they were gone
For a long time. They made a short trip back
Around Christmas one year, and they played some sort of benefit
At Carnegie Hall ... I would have gone to see them
But by then Kippeen was in hospital, and not expected to live,
So we spent most of our time there.**

**Kippeen, God be good to him, died
The night of their performance.
And I will always remember how, when he heard Eddie's name mentioned
In the course of the idle bedside chatter we were trying to make,
His eyes opened, and he smiled. - *'Twould be mighty music*, he said,**

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And then closed his eyes for the last time.

**I lost track of Eddie and Joe and a lot of other things after that.
I think I heard them again on the radio
Or maybe someone had one of their records; I don't remember.**

**I kept going into the studio, and each new set of recording geniuses
-Were they really stupider every year
Or was I just getting more and more tired? -
Insisted on having me work with backup players
Who didn't know a reel from a roast beef sandwich
And cared less.**

**They worked cheap: that was all that mattered.
Once they gave me a guitar player who knew two, maybe three, chords
And played the same ones no matter what key the tune was in.
And begod he was one of the better ones.**

**I thought I had long since ceased caring.
But out of the fog of that sad time
One particular afternoon in the studio stands out:
A day I must have been in such uniquely awful shape
That homicide actually seemed to be a solution to my problems.
In any event, I remember
How I grabbed that day's guitar player by the neck
And in all likelihood would have killed the poor fool
If the engineers hadn't held me back.
I remember everyone yelling, and I remember myself screaming at him
"Play like Eddie Lang, damn you," over and over again
Until they came and took me to the hospital.
No one said it, but of course it was to dry out.
Again.**

**Crowley came to visit one day, and brought a newspaper
And the newspaper said that Eddie Lang had died
Still young, of some sickness, and would be greatly missed.
And there was a picture of Joe Venuti in tears at the funeral.**

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- *What do you think?* asked Crowley at last.
- I think I hate that man, I thought to myself
As my finger jabbed senselessly at Joe Venuti's picture.
Then, aloud: - *I think I hate him.*

I hadn't meant to say it that way
But I couldn't stop my finger
From trying to hurt the picture.
Crowley pretended to look out the window.
- *It would have been ...* he started to say.
- *Indeed it would have been,* I repeated,
And then started to cry
Like I had never cried in my life.

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