

Siu

By Verlene Schermer

*I'll be your fairy friend
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In trouble, I'll defend
In heartache, I will mend*

Have you heard the story of Padraig O'Conaill, the Irish harper? He learned the magic of music in the land of fairy and then traveled all over Ireland and even abroad to bring the healing power of music to all who were in need – until he returned thirty years later to the Hollow Hills (that's where the fairy folk live – the land of the sidhe, the Hollow Hills). Well, during Padraig's first year as an itinerant harper, he had many adventures – along with the usual mishaps and a couple of near-disasters. So Bridget Cruise, queen of the fairies, decided to provide a little help, a little helper for Padraig – one he should never know was there – someone who could keep those little mishaps and near-disasters at a little further distance from the healer harper. She knew just the fairy for the job. This particular fairy was very dear to Bridget, and Bridget could trust her to understand the importance of keeping Padraig safe during his long journey. The fairy vowed to keep Padraig from disaster and to never reveal herself to him until they were both safely home in the Hollow Hills. Then she was sent off to join Padraig in his travels.

The fairy's name? Well, her name is very difficult to pronounce. It starts S-I-U-G-H-L-E-A-N-D-H-R... We'll just call her "Siu," because that's the first sound in her name, and also because at night, she would curl up in one of Padraig's shoes, knowing that he wouldn't go very far without them. So it seems that "Siu" fits!

What did she look like? Well, in the Hollow Hills, she looked just like... herself! But here in our world, she could appear in any form she could imagine. Sometimes she couldn't decide whether to be a beautiful woman or a fish! So she would imagine both and, oops! Guess what she appeared to be? Yes, a mermaid! And you know, she always believed that she was the one that started that fad! All the others – copycats! Mostly while she traveled with Padraig, she chose to appear invisible. "That," she reasoned, "will keep him from noticing me."

Whenever Padraig would play his harp, Siu would sit very close so she could not only hear the beautiful music but also feel the vibration. It reminded her of the sweet breeze in the Hollow Hills. And sometimes she would close her eyes for just a moment and peek in on the sidhe. That's exactly what happened the time she let a near-disaster get too close for comfort.

She opened her eyes when the sound of the harp's dying scream called her back from her reverie. She saw the blade of the ax that had destroyed the harp poised over Padraig's head and on its way down! She quickly grabbed on to the handle and held the ax back, inches from Padraig's skull just long enough for Padraig to roll away to safety. When she let go of the handle, the extra momentum sent the ax crashing through the floorboards, taking with it the very drunk and confused young Tory that held it.

"That was too close! From now on, I'll keep my eyes open as long as Padraig is awake. And even when he sleeps, I'll keep one eye open and only one eye on the sidhe."

There were a few other close calls, because, well, fairies aren't perfect, you know. The story Siu enjoys telling the most is the one about a near-disaster that she simply couldn't have seen coming.

You wouldn't think that love could be disastrous – okay, maybe you would, but Siu didn't see anything wrong with the love she saw developing between Padraig and young Katie of Galway.

Padraig met Katie at the Galway County Spring Fair. This was the second time he'd be performing at the Galway fair. The first time, the year before, he'd been out on the road for only a few months. But he was very well received and he knew that this year his reputation would precede him. And sure enough, when he arrived, he was greeted warmly by the other musicians and the crafts people at their booths.

A young lady, about 17 years old, appeared the first morning as Padraig began his early performance. At the end of his set, he looked around to find that she had disappeared. He wasn't sure what compelled him, but you know how love is – very confusing at times. She continued to appear just at the start of each set that day. And then she was gone again before the last chord of the set had faded. He pointed her out during a set that he shared with a fiddler, and the fiddler said, "Oh, that's Katie, the weaver's daughter. They haven't been to fair in a year or two. I heard there was a serious illness in the family."

During his last set for the day, Padraig knew what it was that was so compelling – the look of rapture he had seen on her face was a direct reflection of what he felt in his heart as he played his harp! At the end of his last set, he quickly wrapped his harp in its sheepskin cover and ran over to where he had seen Katie. He stopped at a place just behind a tent and watched the crowd moving in every direction.

"She could have gone anywhere from here..."

Then he heard a gentle humming, a girl's sweet soprano voice – a humming accompanied by a soft whirring. He felt the same ache in his heart that he had felt when he first saw Katie.

Now he was really confused! None of his teachers had taught him what to do if he should fall in love. And here he was, in love for the first time – with two different girls! One was entranced by the music he played and the other had enchanted him by the music she made!

He felt weak and began to feel a familiar cool mist, when Siu whispered a reminder that he'd left his harp on the little stage, and though the sun was going down, a harp is still much safer in the shade of a tent. He went to rescue his harp, and tried to ignore the sadness he felt as the sound of humming and whirring faded away. Siu felt the sadness too.

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It was one of Siu's duties to keep Pdraig's heart from breaking, so she watched extra carefully the next morning and was lucky enough to spot Katie slipping out from the back flap of the very same tented booth where Pdraig had heard the humming and whirring! Pdraig was busy tuning his harp so he didn't notice.

When the first set ended, Pdraig was too busy receiving compliments and gifts from the crowd to notice that Katie had slipped quickly back into the tent.

Now remember, Siu could appear in any form she could imagine, so here's what she did: She imagined herself to look just like Katie! She stood near the stage until she was sure that Pdraig had caught sight of her. Then she walked to Katie's tent and slipped around the side, and – disappeared – just like that! That's how it's really done, you know – there's no magic in Katie's disappearing act. Siu was often over-pleased with her fairy feats. But her stunt had done the trick! She watched as Pdraig entered the weaver's tent and inquired about the young woman who had just come in.

"Katie? What do you want with my daughter? Who are you? How do you know my Katie?"

Well, Pdraig, not being trained in the proper way to court a young lady, was about to blurt out, "I think I'm in love with her!" when Siu managed to whisper a more subtle approach. Pdraig found himself instead saying, "My name is Pdraig O'Conaill, sire, and I do a bit of harping. I happened to notice your daughter at my performances and I thought she might be interested in learning a song or two on the harp. If she has free time, that is... With your permission, of course... Sir."

“My Katie? Are you certain it’s my daughter you’ve seen? Why, Katie’s been busy in the back at the spinning wheel all day yesterday and this morning, too. She does all the spinning now her ma’s gone, God rest ‘er.”

He disappeared behind a partition and returned with Katie, and yes, indeed, this was the very one Pdraig had seen – and he realized it was also the very one he had heard humming so sweetly – and the whirring was her spinning wheel!

Her face lit up when she saw Pdraig, but just as suddenly as her disappearances had been, the look of recognition was gone from her eyes.

“Have you ever seen this young man, my dear Katie?”

“No, Da.” She hung her head, and her father sent her back to her spinning.

He said, “You must have been mistaken.” And he turned to help a woman choose a cloth for a summer dress.

Pdraig felt such great sorrow that when his next set began, he had his audience in tears from the sadness in his music. He realized that he had invoked the magic of the Dagda Mor – the Goltraí, Song of Sorrow. His own sorrow was so great that he couldn’t even remember that there were two more songs of the Dagda Mor. So Siu saw her cue to help.

Have you ever brought your harp outdoors on a breezy day and found that the gentle wind could make your harp sing? Well, Siu took a deep breath and blew across just the right range of strings to suggest a comforting major cadence.

Then Pdraig remembered, “Suantria, Song of Comfort! I must bring comfort to these folks before they all leave the fair and the merchants become angry with me!”

When he looked up at the end of the song, there stood Katie in her usual spot. He was suddenly filled with joy. That reminded him – the third song of the Dagda Mor – Gentraí, Song of Joy! For the rest of the set, folks danced and danced – in spite of the warm late-morning sun! They were so exhausted when his set ended that nobody crowded around him as he wrapped his harp in its protective sheepskin. He quickly returned his harp to his own tent behind the stage. When he saw that Katie was slowly walking toward her tent, he ran to catch up with her.

“In a moment, my father will hear that the wheel is not spinning. I must be back – I’ve work to do.” Katie disappeared under the back flap.

Pdraig stared at the back of the tent with his heart stuck in his throat. When he heard the humming and whirring again, he felt light-headed and that familiar cool mist began to fog his vision – but he came to his senses and realized, “That old weaver has been forcing his daughter

to slave for him – during Spring Fair! This is no time for work—this is time to sell your work – the work you’ve completed between fairs!”

He talked himself into such an indignant rage that he marched right around to the entrance of the crowded booth to confront the old man.

“Oh, you again.”

“Don’t you think your daughter has done enough spinning? Why don’t you let her enjoy the fair like other girls her age – a morning or an afternoon off, perhaps?”

“Ha! No need to get so worked up. I listened to your last performance. You’re quite good. And business has been quite good following your set. Folks are in such an agreeable mood, and too tired from dancing to tug over the price. What makes you so sure Katie wants an afternoon off? She seems content at the wheel, even humming as she works.”

“But think how much more content she would—”

“Or you, young man! It’s your contentment you’re concerned with. I was young once myself, and I’ve got eyes in me head. I still don’t see how you could have seen Katie yesterday – she’s hardly stepped out of the tent since our arrival.”

Padraig didn’t want to reveal Katie’s secret, so he just shrugged. He seemed to be doing all right with the old weaver for some reason he couldn’t understand.

And Siu? Well, she couldn’t see what was bound to happen any better than Padraig could – or else she would have found a way to stop the courtship of Padraig and Katie.

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Katie and Padraig fell quite deeply in love that week at the fair, and all under the approving eye of Katie’s father, who even took over some of Katie’s spinning, which was quite remarkable considering he’d always considered spinning to be women’s work. Business remained quite good following Padraig’s magical sets, and the old man had to work extra hard at the spinning and weaving just to keep up with the demand.

At the end of the week, when folks were returning to their planting and craftsmen were packing their tents to return to hearth and home to produce more wares for the next fair, Padraig asked the old weaver for Katie’s hand in marriage. The weaver gave his blessing so willingly, Padraig almost asked him why he’d be so happy to have his daughter leave him to go with an itinerant

harper wherever his music takes them. But he didn't ask. Instead he ran to tell Katie the wonderful news! And oh, he almost forgot! He got down on his knee and asked her properly, "Katie, will you be my wife?" He couldn't understand the sadness he saw in her eyes.

"I thought you'd be happy!"

"Oh Pdraig, I do want to be your wife! And to see all of Ireland, and always hear your music. But my father needs my help now that Ma's gone. We fell a bit behind during her long illness. He can't possibly do enough spinning and weaving to support himself – you've seen the condition of his hands. I can't imagine why he'd agree to this. Surely he doesn't expect you to stay with us in Galway..."

"But yes!" Siu realized that that's exactly what he expected! "Think of how good business would be with Pdraig's magic touch on his harp bringing folks in to joyously buy up every last thread of cloth! No, this cannot happen. The magic of the Dagda Mor is not for one man's pocket! How could I have missed it?" Siu scolded herself. But she knew what she would have to do.

When Katie grew ill with the agony of this impossible decision, Siu arranged a little visit for Katie to the sidhe, the Hollow Hills. Now let me tell you if you don't already know – the Hollow Hills can only be reached any of us through fever and cool mists – and only if you're called. While in the Hollow Hills, Katie met Bridget Cruise, queen of the fairies, and learned something herself of the healing magic of music. And she learned how to recognize where and when healing would be needed.

There's not much Katie will say of her visit there – just that she understands, and that she will join Pdraig when the time is right. Katie and her father went home. Pdraig took the road north. Siu renewed her vow to keep disaster away.

Pdraig was heartbroken. Katie was heartbroken. The old weaver was heartbroken. But Sui was relieved and devoted the next several months to mending what had broken.

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