

Sorrow, Comfort, and Joy by
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Padraig O'Conaill was already 12 years old and not yet apprenticed to a craft when the great harp competition was held in Belfast in 1792. His father had joined the Irish Brigade before Padraig was even born, and has been gone ever since. His poor ma died five years later -- of a broken heart, they say. So the old woman who ran the boarding house had put Padraig to work fetching and carrying. He couldn't work as long and hard as other boys his age, and the old woman would shake her head and say, "Poor lad, 'ts his heart y'know, just like his ma." So Padraig knew that someday he would die like his poor ma -- of a broken heart.

But this week has been the most marvelous! Three of the nine harpers in the great competition have been staying right here in this house, sharing the large room downstairs. And it was Padraig's duty to tend to these mysterious harpers! He'd never played a harp before, but he watched the harpers very carefully when they rehearsed, and he'd been practicing on his imaginary harp.

Very late on the last night of the competition, when all but Padraig were asleep, he peered into the large room where harps and harpers slept. "They'll all be gone tomorrow," he thought. He couldn't get this tune out of his head -- Has that ever happened to you? It was the one the old blind harper, Arthur O'Neill had played. He just had to hear it again. He knew he would never sleep, so he took a deep breath and tiptoed into the room, and picked up the first harp he came to. "It's like magic." He let the sound wash over him and then set to the task of finding the tune in his head and getting it out. "No... no... Yes, that's it!"

Have you ever had that feeling that someone was staring at your back? "It's called 'Bridget Cruise'" He recognized the voice. It was Arthur O'Neill himself -- and this must be his harp.

"I would like to be as fine a harper as you someday! you play so beautifully! is this your harp? why do you call it Bridget Cruise?" He couldn't help babbling on and on.

"No, no, young Padraig. Not the harp. The tune. Written by the famous harper, Turlough O'Carolan. Bridget Cruise -- queen of the Tuatha De Danann. He wrote it after meeting the queen of the fairies herself in the sidhe - the Hollow Hills."

Perhaps he is only sleep talking, Padraig thought. Surely, he doesn't believe -- "Isn't that just a fairytale about our St. Brigit?"

"The other way around, lad, the other way around! Certainly, she has called to you -- she is a healer. What is the ailment that drew her to you?"

"Well . . . they say I have a heart that is frail. I'll die of a broken heart, I will, just like my poor ma."

"Ha! that may very well be -- but not before you have learned to be a fine harper. And I will be your first teacher."

So Padraig left the boarding house the next day and went with the old blind harper, and learned his scales and finger techniques and a whole repertoire of songs.

After five years, Padraig set out on his own to begin his life as an itinerant harper. He traveled from town to town, always seeking out the finest household and offering his services to the new aristocracy, English though they were. At first, his enthusiasm got him in the door more often than not. But after a year had passed, he was going without food and shelter more and more. He began to grow weak and was aware for the first time in years of that strange pounding in his chest. "Don't break yet! I'm not ready to die!"

One day, he felt a fire in his head. He wandered off the road and came upon a shady glen. "I'll just lie down and sleep this fever off."

When he awoke, he was surrounded by a cool mist. He heard a sound. "The wind? No, birds? No. Familiar, yet..." And then he heard a woman's voice singing in the forbidden tongue.

"Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!
Shiulas an drucht's an ghrian ag eiri
Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!"

His fever grew more intense and he cried for his condition, and he cried for his poor ma, and for his father who was compelled to leave them. And then he cried for poor Ireland and for the loss of the Celtic wisdom that few besides the harpers seemed to have.

"Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!
Sheolas mo bho sa ghleanntan sleibhe
Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!"

He felt his fever subside and a strength spread through his body, and he knew the singer felt his pain and was sharing her strength with him.

"Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!
Ag fuaghail cotamor den bhreidin
Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!"

He jumped to his feet. "I must find the source of this ecstasy!" He felt good enough to dance a jig, and he did! a good old fashioned one! and when he spun around, he found himself looking into the eyes of a woman who could only be -- Bridget Cruise, queen of the fairies.

"Padraig, you have learned the skills and you have felt the fire in your head. It is time to take the next step. Or not."

"Teach me that song! I have never felt so much in one song!"

"I will teach you what you need to know, but it isn't this one song. It is the secret of the Dagda Mor. And there is a price you must pay."

"Name it."

"You will return to the life of an itinerant harper and bring the healing magic to those who are in need for thirty years. And then, after the magic is no longer potent in the world, you must return here to the Hollow Hills and play for my people, the Tuatha De Danann, forever."

"The Hollow Hills, the sidhe! So, Arthur wasn't crazy after all -- or maybe I am." But despite any confusion about who is or isn't crazy, Padraig agreed to the terms and followed the Fairy Queen further into the sidhe. There he lived for three years, and there he learned the three songs of the Dagda Mor: the Goltraí, song of sorrow, the Suantraí, song of comfort, and the Gentraí, song of joy. He learned to invoke their magic no matter what tune he was playing.

When the magic was deeply instilled in Padraig's heart and fingers, Bridget Cruise said, "You have learned what you came to learn. Now it's time for you to leave here. There is still some good that can be done. Leave the healing magic of the Dagda Mor ringing in as many ears as you can find who will listen and hear."

"I don't want to leave here."

"Ah, but Padraig -- that was the deal we made. You will return soon enough."

Padraig looked around and found he was alone and in the same shady glen he had stumbled into three years ago -- or was it only a few hours? He climbed up onto the road and continued on his way.

Now, Padraig was able to find a fair number of listening ears and he played songs that brought tears to the eyes, and songs that brought peace to the heart, and songs that set feet to dancing. He sang sorrowful songs about the goings on up north, comforting songs about the strength of the Irish underground, and joyful songs about a beautiful land that can only be found through fever and cool mists -- and a magical fairy queen... Some folks believed him and were encouraged. Some claimed to have been healed by the spirit of St. Brigit through Padraig. "When he dies," one man says, "he should be sainted himself." "Nee hah, old man," says his wife, "we've already got a St. Patrick."

But as years passed, fewer and fewer would pay attention to the ravings of a crazy itinerant harper. And sure enough, when thirty years had gone by, there was no one left who would offer even a crumb for a song. Padraig felt his heart burst for the dying old ways of Ireland. He felt the fire in his head once again and even managed to wander off the road into the very

same shady glen for a nap to ease the fever. Can you guess what he awakened to? The sound of a thousand harps! led by Padraig's two teachers: Arthur O'Neill, who taught him the songs to play; and Bridget Cruise, who taught him how to play the songs. The harpers welcomed Padraig through the mists into the vanishing Hollow Hills. Padraig joined in and there he played and still plays today for Bridget Cruise and the Tuatha de Danann.

And when I close my eyes and make my breathing slow and steady and listen to the blood coursing through my veins, I can just barely, just on the edge of perception, make out the songs of the Dagda Mor, and feel the sorrow, the comfort, and the joy -- the healing magic of music.

"Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!
Fuaires tomham mo thailiur aerach Ailiu
eanai, ailiu earai!
Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!
Nach alainn e mo thailiur aerach Ailiu
eanai, ailiu earai!
Ailiu eanai, ailiu earai!"