

Fairy Fort  
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“I’d prefer we fought it out like two men.” I said, “like the King and the Kaiser.”

Kevin and I leaned on each other. Neither of us had drunk before, but we’d earned a month’s wages and had spent the money as wisely as our mothers had feared.

“Sure you would, Paudy!” Kevin’s splotchy face spun slowly in my vision, “you’re twice the size o’ me! This way’s more fair.” And in the whiskey haze, it all made sense. The braver of the two would ask Peggy to dance at the end of harvest, the coward would renounce all interest in her.

The moon hung low in the sky, illuminating the mound. Fruit trees grew atop it, but neither man nor bird had touched them. We called such mounds *lios na Sidhe*, -- Fairy Forts. They cover the Irish countryside and no farmer will put them to the plough. But my heart beat steadily and unafraid.

“Where’s the music?” asked Kevin and stamped his feet. “Stupid stories! No dancers. It’s just old folks’ superstitions like the priests say.” He turned to go, but I held him fast. My heart quickened *thump, thump, thump*.

“Who has fear on him now?” I asked. My English was poor despite years away from the Gaelic speaking part of Ireland I called home, “Is it me that has the win?”

“There’s nothin’ there, Paudy! Use your eyes.” But I held him fast.

Although Protestant, and therefore above peasant beliefs, the farmer had built a stout fence around the mound to keep his beasts off. He’d gone to the expense of hammering iron nails closely together ‘round the top of the wood so that the head of each nail touched its neighbour and formed a closed ring. We looked each other in the eye and it was like being friends again, like we’d never clapped eyes on Peggy Mahon.

The moment ended. Kevin climbed the fence and I matched him step for step feeling the rough grain of the wood, the chill of the iron nails. We landed together on the far side. At once the music began, wild and beautiful, played faster than mortal hands could dream of. I gasped. The hill had changed, become larger and steeper. More trees grew there now. At the top, figures danced, kicking and leaping. Their feet tapped the ground so hard we felt the rhythm *thump, thump, thump* in our own bodies. Kevin gripped my hand. I didn't shake him off for a coward – I wanted to run too, my heart wanted it. I felt it like a sheepdog in my breast, dragging me backwards and whining. Then Kevin let me go and began crawling up the slope. If I stayed behind now, I'd have to hang back at the harvest dance too.

So, I followed, clinging to the cover of bushes. Now I could see the dancers, though not the musicians. Men and women of perfect form, giving every appearance of joy. I could see Kevin's feet tapping and realised my own were doing the same. I'd danced every winter of my life and had always loved it.

The *Sidhe* smiled widely and glowed with sweat. Dawn was near. The dance must have gone on all night. Some, like a blonde girl in a squirrel fur kilt looked exhausted, but never faltered in step or smile. I felt terrible staring at her bare limbs, but couldn't take my eyes away.

Beautiful, I thought, beautiful. I longed to join her, -- to forget for a while my life of toil, -- until one of the dancers switched partners and I saw his empty eyes, large and glassy like a dead bull's. I shivered, and began moving backwards down the hill, keeping my eyes on the *Sidhe*.

And then, the blonde girl stumbled.

The music halted and dancers froze. Nobody stopped smiling, not even the girl. Then all of them ran at her and flung themselves upon her, and clamped their mouths to any part of her body they could find.

“No!” I screamed. What possessed me? I ran forward, and Kevin, every bit as drunk and stupid, joined me. I lifted bodies up by their scruffs and flung them away, their smiling faces now bloody. Holes the size of my fist covered the blonde girl’s body. She had stumps for legs and one of her arms lay chewed to the bone like an apple. Worst of all was the fact that even when the rest of the *Sidhe* had been pulled away, she continued to worry gobbets of flesh from her own shoulder.

“Ná deán sin!” I blurted, too shocked to remember my English. “Stop that!”

“Paudy!” Kevin screamed. I turned to see a half dozen Sidhe leap upon him. A sharp pain ripped through my calf. What was left of the blonde girl was sinking its teeth into me, and others joined her, lots of others, biting hard with their blunt little teeth, each bite burning like the fires of Hell. I flung them off me and started rolling down the hill. Ferns slapped me in the face, furze ripped at my skin and the remains of my clothes. I had to keep rolling at any cost.

I hit the base of a birch and stopped. I looked up, thinking to see my death, but instead I saw the dawn.

I used the trunk of the birch to help me to my feet. The great hill they’d danced upon had shrunk back to the size of a mound. Little red marks, no bigger than the bite you’d get from a horse fly covered my hands. I felt woozy and wondered if the whiskey that had brought me here had planted dreams in my head too.

“Kevin?”

I found him curled into a ball and weeping. Dried blood covered his clothes, but he too seemed unhurt when I pulled him, at last, to his feet.

“They tried to drag me in there,” he said, pointing to a rabbit hole. “It was big as a tunnel under the moon.”

We helped each other over the fence, and you’d think that would be the end of it, that we’d have learned our lesson.

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Around the fire, with old Mahon torturing the fiddle, the younger Mahon talked up a storm, “Why should we do their fightin’ for them?” he waved a clay pipe towards the Protestant farm, “The Kaiser’s never done us no harm, but them English! We all know what they done for us!”

Murmurs of agreement.

I kept out of the discussion. I lay on my back chewing a stalk. I’d worked two full days with only a night of terror in between them to rest. It was backbreaking work too: cutting rye with a sickle and piling it into stooks to keep it dry. Every muscle ached and I wished I’d more of last night’s whiskey to sooth the pain and the thought that an endless succession of such days stood between me and my grave.

Peggy Mahon bent close to her father with a mug. blonde hair fell over her face and reminded me of the fairy dancer the others had attacked and all but eaten. Her left hand carried tea for her father; her right held the old rosary that never left her sight.

“God protect you, Peggy Mahon,” I whispered, “and if He won’t, I will!”

I suspected Kevin lay in the darkness nearby plotting his own way into her heart and I wondered if our friendship could ever be mended.

Fresh lines creased Peggy’s brow. I dreamed I could smooth them away, that I, Paudy, from the back of beyonds, with no land and broken English, could stand with her before a priest. In the firelight, my mind drifted and I imagined she might kiss me.

Abruptly, Peggy straightened. She strode over to my side and knelt next to me. Before I could splutter, she pressed her lips to mine.

Old Mahon gasped. “Peggy!”

A look of confusion crossed her face, followed swiftly by fright. “Not again!” she whispered and ran from the fire with everybody staring after her. Old Mahon threw me an angry look.

“I didn’t do a thing!” I said.

“You’d better not, Paudy Sullivan,” his voice rasped like an old millstone, “or I’ll have you out of here quicker than scour from a sheep's backside!”

He went into a huddle with his bewildered son and a few of the others. They probably couldn’t understand how a religious girl could commit such a sin and so publicly. I decided to sleep away from the camp until they cooled down.

But I needed the cooling more than they! My lips burned and my heart beat even faster than it had when the Sidhe had attacked me. Her lips -- the curve of her chin in the firelight -- tormented me.

A hand grabbed my elbow as I moved away from the fire. I felt a moment of panic.

“It’s me, you big lummock!” laughed Kevin. “Did you think the Sidhe had come back for you? They might as well now after what you did with Peggy!”

“You sound happy about it! I think you want old Mahon to send me home.” He knew how to hurt me, my ex-friend.

“You should have kissed her out of sight, when you knew you could. Like me. I kissed her first!”

“What do you mean?” And then I remembered Peggy exclaiming, “Not again!”

“Oh, you know my meaning, Paudy!” His eyes glinted in the moonlight, “So easy, it is! I was after takin’ a little rest behind the cart and I... ha! I just, I dunno, I just called her to me... I touched her chest.”

No wonder Peggy had seemed so upset earlier! I flung myself upon him. Poor Peggy! I punched him a few times in the ribs, before he wriggled away. I ran after to hit him some more, but stopped when I saw he was crying.

“I know I did wrong,” he said. “But what chance has the likes of me with the likes of Peggy Mahon? Beautiful-“

“Kind-” I added.

“With a dowry?” He sat down on an overturned bucket and I moved to stand beside him, “One kiss, in my whole life. It was over in a minute, but...”

He’d no need to finish the sentence. Not for me who felt the same.

“When I saw you kiss her too,” he continued, “I wanted to kill you. But then I knew you’d never be able to do it again and so-“

“Wait,” I said. “How did you know I wouldn’t be able to do it anymore? How could you know that?” But when he wouldn’t look me in the eye, I realised he must have tried again and again to make her come to him after the first time.

I didn’t want to hit him, so I left. I tossed for a while. I tried not to imagine Peggy coming to me in the night, and then I begged God’s forgiveness, because I couldn’t stop doing it. Did the Sidhe feel guilt when they took what they needed?

God must have heeded my prayers for I fell asleep all alone on the far side of the byre.

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Nearby fields held a rival team working just as hard as we. All knew the terrible luck that befell the last labourers in a district to finish the harvest. So we had to work harder now, faster, backs doubled and in such pain we feared they’d never straighten

again. Stroke after stroke of the sickle, three handfuls of grain to the sheaf, ten sheaves to the stook and the sun watching all without mercy.

Peggy came from time to time with a ponger of cold tea. She always seemed to miss me, although I knew exactly where she stood in the field without looking. Kevin went thirsty too. "I can't stand it," he whispered, "she won't even look at me."

"With your face so spotted, 'tis no wonder," I said.

"Shut up!" said Kevin, "shut up!"

"Back to work, you two!" shouted Old Mahon from the far side of the field. "Ten minutes more and we're done here."

But it was already too late. Whoops erupted from a neighbouring field and laughter. A voice called over the hedgerow: "Mahon, me boyo! Mahon! We're after chasin' her over the hedgerow," -- by 'her' he meant the bad luck, -- "Ye hear me, Mahon? We're after chasin' her over to ye!"

Many of our gang flopped to the ground.

"What do I care," Kevin spat, "sure wasn't I born with bad luck already wrapped 'round me neck? I'll tell you this, Paudy Sullivan, I've had enough of it."

"You can do nothing for it," I said.

"No?" said he. He straightened and waved his sickle at me, a shocking breach of manners that could get you thrown off a team, "I'll have that woman," he said, "and not God nor the saints nor old Mahon himself will stop me!"

The gang acted even colder towards me that evening, especially Peggy, as if it was me that had lost them a year's luck. Maybe Old Mahon would give me my marching orders the next day and that would be that. No money for the winter. I was sorry now to have spent the little I'd had on whiskey.

I slept alone again, tortured with the idea that I'd leave Peggy with hatred in her heart. I tossed in my blanket. I wondered what would happen if I explained the

whole, mad thing to her. She might forgive me. She might – dared I dream it? – she might confess a love for me too! Madness, of course. But her lips had been so soft. Maybe the magic had only freed her to do what was already in her heart.

I decided to risk it.

I left my blanket and moved ‘round the byre. The protestant dogs came sniffing after me, wagging their tails. I’d made friends with them early on and they rewarded me now with licks and silence.

I could see blanket-wrapped bodies in the light of the embers, but I couldn’t tell which was Peggy. What if Old Mahon woke as I picked my way among them? Or worse, what if Peggy called out in fright?

While I struggled to come up with a plan, the dogs began hopping with excitement. Then, I saw it too. A figure was moving away from the camp towards the fields. I knew that shape, that mincing walk.

*Kevin!*

But what could he be up to? His form crossed the first field heading north. Towards the *lios*.

I hid my blanket and tools beneath bushes at the base of a wall. Then I followed his purposeful form over dry stone walls for two more fields until he stood at the fence around the *lios*. Now he hesitated. I saw him get to his knees as if to pray, but then he shook his head and stood again. He put something heavy in his pocket and climbed the fence as though it were a mile high and made of sickle blades. I knew how he felt. The terror of the Fairy Fort already gripped me.

I caught him perched at the top, shaking like a leaf. He nearly jumped out of his skin when I gripped his arm.

“This is madness, Kevin,” I said.

“Then why did you follow me, Paudy Sullivan?” So bright shone the moon I could see his face as clear as carrots on my spoon.

“We were only in their presence for heartbeats,” he said, “and heartbeats is all the power lasted.”

“You will not live this time, Kevin,” I said.

“And you think you will, Paudy?”

“I didn’t come here for that, Kevin, it’s wrong, it’s—“ But he wasn’t listening.

“Well, I don’t care if they kill me, you hear? Better I never kissed her. But I did kiss her and I won’t live without it again.” His sweat gleamed in the moonlight. I knew how he felt and tried to lay a comforting hand on his elbow, but he shook me off, “You’re worse than I am, Paudy Sullivan. You pretend you have honour and religion, but they’re no deeper in you than the scum on boiling porridge. May God strike me dead if I live to see Peggy Mahon in your hands!”

With that, he leapt to the other side of the fence. I knew then, that if I stayed behind, either he would die, and die in sin! Or worse: Kevin would be the one to taste Peggy’s kisses, and I the one to live without.

My limbs shook as I climbed the fence. As soon as I set foot on the far side the music began and trees that had been small were mighty oaks.

“God save me and guard me!” I whispered, but I knew that by my own will I’d stepped beyond His reach. I moved up the hill in search of Kevin. The music grew ever wilder and more beautiful. Halfway, I espied leaping shadows that turned my tongue to a dry lump of old oatcake in my mouth. There seemed not enough air in all the world to fill my heaving chest. I wanted to turn back, but I glimpsed Kevin some way ahead, fondling something in his pocket. *A rosary?* I wondered. Much good it could do him in a place like this. I stumbled after him. Soon, I was close enough to see the *Sidhe* at their graceful, grinning dance.

Kevin moved behind a tree and I behind a bush no more than five yards to his left, both of us closer to the dancers than to each other. I couldn't move to him without crossing open space, nor could I call out, though I heard breathing even more ragged than my own, which I thought came from him. I tried to wave to him, but he had eyes only for the dancers.

Kevin pressed his forehead against the trunk of the tree. The ragged breathing grew louder. I heard it even though his lips were pressed together. Could it be coming from someone else?

Then he stepped into the clearing and the music stopped. He took a shiny new horseshoe from his pocket and raised it over his head. The *Sidhe* seemed to freeze.

"Now," said Kevin, voice shaky, "now we'll see how you like my iron, eh?"

They pulled back, grins gone, black eyes fixed on the horseshoe.

"Ye have something I want. Not your gold! Ye can keep that!"

They stepped farther back as he advanced to the centre of the clearing at the summit of the hill. Some of them moved to the edges. I heard the ragged breathing again, in the undergrowth. No matter how I looked I couldn't find its source. My eyes turned back to Kevin.

"I'll not burn ye if I get some magic. Ye hear?" Kevin had always been smarter than me, but now he revealed himself to be braver too. Brave enough to win the greatest prize of all.

The *Sidhe* had pulled around in an arc. I feared they would spot me, or hear the terrible breathing nearby. But all continued to stare at Kevin: beautiful women with dainty features, handsome youths, staring, staring, some with mouths agape, some with strands of saliva dribbling down their chins like threads of moondrunk silver. In moments a full circle would form about my friend.

I wanted to run. I would run, but first, I'd call out a warning that might give him a chance to flee before the circle closed. The breathing stopped. I opened my mouth to shout at him.

Instead I screamed. Claws tore into my calf and I fell to my knees, while some creature behind me slobbered and bit. I reached back, almost fainting with the pain, all spines and fire. In the distance, I heard Kevin cursing and shouting. Sounds of frenzy filled the glade.

My hands fixed on a neck and squeezed. I pulled the beast away, feeling a chunk of my flesh tear with it. I swung the thing around to smash it against a nearby trunk and stopped. I recognised her blonde hair. The others had eaten parts of her face and one of her breasts. Her body ended at the ribs, the last of which lay exposed and alive with maggots. Her chest heaved for breath. She fixed me with her remaining eye and wheezed: "Le'd thoil, a thiarna..." Please, my lord. In my language, Gaelic. The speech of old people and yokels. It sounded more like the moaning of wind than a human voice.

"What do you want of me?" I asked in the same tongue. Her lips were smeared with my blood.

"Feoil," she replied. Meat.

I threw her from me and turned to flee. But a dozen of the Sidhe had appeared on the hill beneath me. The music began again and they took to grinning as they drove me up to the top. I heard Kevin weeping and hope filled my heart. Together, maybe, we could make a stand.

But I arrived in time only to see him dragged feet first into a burrow little wider than his body. Kevin's hand, chewed off at the wrist, remained outside, clutching the horseshoe.

The iron had hurt them: gashed and smoking bodies lay scattered about it. I moved towards it, but a princess, lovelier than Peggy Mahon would ever be, blocked my path. Others followed until I stood alone in a circle of grinning *Sidhe* with only the music for comfort.

I could feel blood ooze from the back of my leg and sweat drenched my brow. Some of the *Sidhe* bore injuries worse than mine from Kevin's iron, limp arms and legs where the bones shone through. They all looked hungry.

I grinned at them. What else could I do? Then I laughed and began dancing in time to the music as my mother had taught me. The grins of the *Sidhe* widened. Perhaps this was what they'd always wanted from me. I leapt into the air, arms perfectly by my side. I spun and capered, fighting exhaustion, fighting the pain of every landing on my injured leg. Then they joined in, all of them at once, even the wounded.

Hours seemed to pass. I never felt more alive, more beautiful. I was one of them, truly one of them. At times, my gaze met that of the fairy princess who promised things Peggy Mahon couldn't name. And I wanted those things. More than anything, more than I wanted a lifetime of toil with every Sunday on my knees.

The moon lowered in the sky. And then, one of the injured ones, gasped and collapsed. The others fell on him and began to feed.

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I woke on the small mound with blood on my lips and tatters of flesh between my teeth. I swallowed them. I would live now as the Fairies did, free of saints and shame.

The dogs whined and fled from me when I came to collect my blanket. Only Mahon and Peggy watched me go, he with a frown, she with bowed head and rosary.

“Good riddance!” he shouted after me, “my daughter wants no part o’ ye!”

I laughed and skipped down the road. I stopped in the shade of an apple tree where Peggy joined me after an hour, her possessions all packed up in a blanket of her own.

Later, tangled in that same blanket, she asked me if I was as surprised as she was that she’d chosen to run away with me.

“Not at all,” I said with a yawn, “it’s just as I imagined it.” Her plain, human face already bored me. Soon, I promised myself, soon I would take her dancing.

[THE END]