

*Jason Sanford makes his fourth appearance in our pages, again using the tropes of science fiction or fantasy to tell a moving story about people, human or otherwise.*

# A Twenty-First Century Fairy Love Story

by Jason Sanford

Such was the love story of Aithne Glaistig and Gillian Dhu—ancient fairies, long gone from their land, finding love and peace in Chicago until Aithne suddenly died. She was healing a pawpaw sapling in the alley behind their house when a mugger hit her across the head with an iron crowbar. By the time Gill reached her, nothing could save his love. Aithne gently caressed his pale face, then grabbed her heart and pushed it into his chest as she turned to dust in his hands.

Gill, though, refused to accept her death. He paced nervously across their Victorian house, calling down awful curses upon the man who'd murdered his love. Over and over he placed his hand inside his chest and gingerly touched Aithne's beating heart. He cherished the warmth and love inside the heart and wished they'd never left their ancient lands for this awful city of iron and steel.

And so time passed.

Six months after Aithne's death, Gill stood before a hospital window. On one side, him, long fingers tapping out a rhythm on the glass which only he could hear. On the other side, babies, desperate newborn babies.

Gill drummed his fingers in silence as he watched a nurse in scrubs and facemask fuss over a tiny baby no bigger than Gill's palm. A heart monitor and respirator hummed beside the tiny girl, who didn't stir in her plastic bassinet. For a moment Gill forgot his suffering as the infant's pain overwhelmed him. The girl was a month premature and near death from cocaine withdrawal. Tears filled Gill's eyes. He couldn't understand why a mother would do something like that to her unborn child. But then, he understood few things about humans, such as how they could kill someone so perfect as his Aithne.

As Gill watched, the nurse grew frantic. For a moment Gill turned away, having no desire to experience yet another human tragedy. However, he also knew he couldn't stand another night alone in his house, feeling Aithne's heart beside his own but knowing Aithne was gone forever. Once again he tapped out a rhythm beyond human hearing on the glass divider. Satisfied that neither the nurse nor any of the babies inside were fairy, Gill stepped toward the neonatal unit's door. Luckily the lock wasn't made of steel. He waved his hand over it and the door swung open.

The nurse glanced suspiciously at Gill as he entered the room. For a moment she saw an impossibly tall and thin man with flowing black hair and pale skin wearing a suit of woven leaves, moss and grass. But then, as she looked again, she knew she'd been mistaken.

"Dr. Ballard. I was about to buzz you."

Gill nodded, ignoring any thought on who Dr. Ballard might be. The nurse had been thinking of Dr. Ballard, so Gill was Dr. Ballard. Before the nurse realized her mistake, Gill walked to the little girl's intensive care bassinet and reached under the warming lamp. He rested his long fingers on the girl's chest, feeling the raspy breathing as the baby breathed her last.

When the heart monitor seized into a flat line alarm, the nurse hit the emergency button on the control panel. Gill knew he had only seconds. Muttering an old Gaelic prayer for the girl's soul, he reached into his chest and pulled out Aithne's heart. He then lowered his hand back to the girl's chest and placed Aithne's heart inside. Immediately the girl's body began to breathe again.

The nurse gasped. "I don't believe it," she said, as the girl's body kicked its legs with a newfound energy and purpose. However, before Gill could escape, the nurse looked up and saw his suddenly ancient eyes, tall pale form and wild clothes. "Who are you?" she screamed. "Where's Dr. Ballard?"