

FAIRY **D**UST

by W.J.Scott

Farran Sherwin cupped a hand to his ear and said, “I can’t hear you. Do you believe in fairies?”

The hall erupted into chaos as children sprang out of their seats, spilling popcorn under their feet as they yelled, “Yes!”

He staggered as if he’d been struck by a sound wave and the children giggled.

Farran cocked his head and said, “Listen. Can you hear someone?”

A hush settled over the children. They perched on the edge of their seats, palms gripping the armrests and their faces were pinched tight as they gazed up at the stage.

He widened his eyes and whispered, “She’s coming.”

On cue, his wife Bridey flew across the stage; rainbow wings quivered on her back as she waved a star wand and sprinkled clouds of glitter. He grinned. Even after all these years he loved watching Bridey fly. In places the velvet of her costume was a bit tattered, underneath she’d grown rounder and silver peppered her mahogany tresses, but to him she was as lovely as ever. The wire groaned as she glided through the air, but the children’s mouths were locked open and their eyes were shining; they could see magic.

She landed in a stream of bubbles, arched her brows and asked the children, “Have you been good?”

“Yes!”

She laughed and her smile erupted into a supernova. “Who likes fairy sweets?” she asked as she picked up a basket and sprayed toffees into the crowd.

Children squealed and bolted from their seats, swarming to the front, all except for one child who stayed hunched in her seat.

Farran peered at her from the wings; he’d noticed her solemn expression earlier. Her face was as pale as moonlight and the skin beneath her eyes was smudged violet. Perhaps the

child was ill. Retreating backstage he passed Niles, the hall caretaker, busily cranking the handle of the bubble-maker and nodded toward the girl. "Is she poorly?"

"Oh, Evelyn. Poor mite lost both her parents in a car smash about six months back. Drunken yobbo! One of those boy-racers in his fancy car from up the West-Chiselholm Estate, ran into them and he walked away without a scratch. Evelyn lives with her aunty and uncle, they're kindly folk and do their best, but they never had children themselves so it's been hard on all of them."

Paws scraped across the floorboards as Jasper scampered past with Farran's hat wedged in his jaws. The terrier earned his keep at the end of each performance collecting their fee. Before the crowd filed out Jasper would position himself at the door. Knowing few could resist his red bandana, soulful eyes, and thumping tail. By the time Farran reached him the hat was half filled with coins. A good take; perhaps enough to buy Bridey a new dress. He patted Jasper between the ears. "Good boy."

Outside, Farran nodded at familiar faces; the tinkers had visited this village for more years than he cared to admit to. Whistling, he turned the corner of the hall to the meadow where he'd staked out the cart horses and paused. Standing before Clyde and Dayle with her hand outstretched was Evelyn and next to their bulk she looked even tinier. When she saw Farran her hand snapped back into her pocket.

Farran smiled. "Clyde and Dayle love getting their noses scratched."

The girl seemed poised for flight until Farran tickled Dayle's nose. The horse snorted and a ghost of a smile flicked across her face. Farran moved his hand up behind Dayle's ear and said, "Abracadabra!"

With a twist of his wrist a daisy popped into his palm. Farran bowed and presented the flower to the girl, but her hands remained tucked in her pockets and her expression was

closed tight. She backed away from him and whispered, “I don’t believe in magic,” before bolting from the field.

Bridey’s footfalls were soft in the grass. “Losing your touch, dear one? We’re supposed to make them laugh, not scare them off.”

Farran wrapped an arm around his wife and stared after the girl. Bridey cupped his cheeks with her hands and pulled his head until they were eye to eye. She crinkled her nose and said, “What are you hatching?”

Farran blinked then clutched his heart. “You wound me, Bridey dear.”

She shook her head. “I know that look, Farran Sherwin, so heed my words. Don’t go messing with stuff that’s best left alone.”

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Evelyn peeked out from behind the oak tree and when she was sure she wouldn’t be seen she followed the tinker and his dog into the woods. Tracking them was easy. Farran whistled non-stop while Jasper snuffled like a piglet in the undergrowth. She had a suspicion where they were headed.

Stones lay scattered like a giant’s interrupted chess game. A few remained upright like sentinels in the outer circle, but most had toppled on to their sides and were covered in moss. Village folklore referred to this place in whispers as ‘The Fairy Ring.’

Evelyn crept behind a stone and peered around its edge as the tinker meandered to the middle of the clearing where a crop of toadstools bloomed red, covered with white spots.

Farran squatted on the grass and his dog settled at his feet. The tinker removed a green vial from his pocket and placed it on a large toadstool and Evelyn thought about leaving, but then Farran did something strange. He doffed his cap at the toadstool and said, “It has been a while, old friends, and I can’t stay for long, but I’ve brought someone special to meet you.”

Evelyn crept back, but her foot snagged on a branch. It cracked like thunder and before she could run away Jasper was at her side, tail wagging as if she was an old friend.

Farran waved his arm and said, "Don't be shy, Evelyn."

Evelyn didn't remember crossing the clearing, but now she stood by Farran's side and she was sure they were alone. "Who? There's no one here."

Farran indicated the toadstool. "The fairies, of course."

Evelyn pouted; the man was barmy, she was silly to have followed him.

"There's no such thing as fairies."

"To see them you've got to believe."

Evelyn shook her head, but he ignored her and pointed to the vial and said, "That's fairy dust. One pinch and you'll see them too."

He bowed his head in the direction of the toadstool and said, "Well met, friends," as he scrambled to his feet and started to stroll away.

Evelyn called after him. "Don't forget your bottle."

"I'll leave it there for you."

She screwed up her face. "I don't want it. I don't believe in your nonsense."

Farran shrugged. "Leave it then. I'll be back to pick it up next summer." He paused, "But be warned, just one pinch does the trick."

She remained standing, staring after him long after his whistling faded into the forest.

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Farran suppressed a chuckle as he watched Evelyn pace around the ring alternatively picking up and then putting down the vial as if it burned like an ember. With shaking fingers she unscrewed the lid and tapped a few specks into her palm. She glared at her hand for several heartbeats and then threw the contents down her throat.

She spun and studied the toadstool. Her shoulders slumped and her fingers clutching the vial turned white, then she upended the entire vial into her mouth before tossing the bottle aside.

Jasper shifted and whined and Farran cursed. She'd just complicated everything.

In the ring Evelyn was yawning and rubbing her eyes and within moments she'd curled into a ball beneath the toadstool.

The tinker slunk into the woods, chewing on his lip; perhaps Bridey had been right, he shouldn't have interfered. Now it was too late and when Evelyn woke, her world would be changed forever.

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Early the next morning Farran had the wagon packed and ready to go. Bridey kept casting looks at him that he ignored; he'd never been good at keeping anything secret from her. He fidgeted with a button on his coat as she climbed up on the wagon next to him. He twitched the reins and the horses trotted away from the village through a patchwork of paddocks and woods.

Laughter drifted on the breeze and when they rounded the next bend, they saw Evelyn skipping through wildflowers on the edge of the woods. Above her head rainbow wings whirred like giant butterflies.

Bridey's elbow stabbed Farran between two ribs. "Rascal! What mischief have you unleashed?"

He paused and studied Evelyn. Her face was glowing with light as she leapt and giggled after the fairies. Farran smiled at his wife. "Sometimes someone needs a sparkle of magic in their lives."

The End