

Night of the Banshee

By Jeani Rector

I can't let her go, he thought. I can't let her die.

Danny was at his wife's bedside, sitting rigidly on a wooden chair. He watched as Meghan sweated with fever, even though just moments ago, she had shuddered with chills.

"It's getting dark outside," his brother Liam observed. "Pray that the Death Messenger doesn't come. She always appears at night."

"Aye," Danny agreed. "The Banshee comes at midnight, but she won't be at this house any time soon."

Liam was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You know that a Banshee follows the O'Malley family. We have had the same keener every time one of our clan passes on. It's been that way for generations."

"Damn it, Liam," Danny's voice rose with annoyance. "The Death Messenger isn't coming here tonight because Meghan is not dying."

Liam said, "Well, I have bad news that maybe you ought to know. Our neighbor James saw an old woman last night in our yard. James says that the woman wore a flowing white gown and had long, white hair. Danny, that's the Banshee. I want you to be prepared just in case, so that's why I'm telling you this."

Danny's heart sank with despair. Once a Banshee was seen hovering near the window of a sick one, it meant that death would follow within a day or two. And once the Banshee wailed and combed her hair, it meant death that very evening.

"I can't let Meghan die," Danny whispered. "I love her so much. We've only been married a year. That's not been nearly enough time. What should I do?"

"No mortal being can stop the Banshee."

"There's got to be a way."

"It's been tried, me boy," Liam said. "But the Banshee is a ghost. Nothing can be done to stop a supernatural being from keening outside a window. And each clan in Ireland has its own wailer. Ours has been said to resemble the woman James saw last night."

Danny looked at his wife. She lay beneath the covers, as pale as the underbelly of a fish, and unconscious to anything around her. Her auburn hair hung in ringlets around the lovely face that was now wet from sweat. Her breathing was shallow and Danny noticed that her rosebud mouth was slightly open.

"They say someone dies the minute the Banshee combs her hair," Danny mused. "She wails first as a warning, then combs her hair outside a window."

"That's for sure," Liam agreed. "The hair symbolizes a death shroud."

"So I'll take the comb away from her," Danny said.

"What!" Liam exclaimed. "I told you, me boy--the Death Messenger is a supernatural being. You can't do anything to a ghost, much less take her comb away."

"Well, I've got to do something."

“I understand your grief, but what’s to be will be.”

“No! I won’t let my wife die.”

“What are you going to do?” Liam asked.

“I’m going to sit outside underneath the window and wait for the Banshee,” Danny answered. “Then I’ll steal her comb.”

“I understand how you feel,” Liam said softly. “It probably makes things easier to bear if you feel you have some sort of control over the situation. Later on, you’ll want to feel that you did all you could for your wife.”

“I am not only going to do all I can,” Danny said, “but I’m going to save her life. I’ll do what needs to be done so Meghan can live. Please, stay here and guard my wife. I need to go outside and wait for the Banshee.”

Liam looked at his brother with concern in his eyes, but said nothing. He sat on the chair that Danny vacated, to keep vigil over Meghan O’Malley.

Danny stepped out of the cottage door, another wooden chair in his hand. The night insects were beginning to take flight, and a moth fluttered around the window that Danny perched beneath. He watched the moth as it banged repeatedly against the glass pane, the insect obviously unaware that it was not ever going to gain entry to the light inside.

Danny sat on his chair, feeling morose. He wished he knew more details about the Death Messenger, because then he might have a better idea as to what to expect. But the Banshee was a thing whispered about behind closed doors, and superstition abounded. He wondered if it were a thing of legend and didn’t exist at all. Still, there were people who seemed so adamant as to having experienced the visit of a Death Messenger to their family. And Danny would take no chances with the life of his beloved.

So he would sit underneath the window and wait.

The night deepened, and the moon rose in its vertical ascent into the heavens. Danny was pleased to see that the moon was bright and full, allowing for good visibility. The O’Malley Banshee would be dressed in white, and Danny was hoping that meant she would be obvious when she made her appearance. He didn’t want to miss her.

But the long bedside vigil beside his wife had taken its toll. Danny was tired and he knew it. He was determined that he would fight his exhaustion and remain awake and alert. He had too much at stake to lose everything by falling asleep.

The dew on the grass sparkled from the moon’s glow, and the air smelled of sweet clover. It was such a fresh spring, when everything from lambs to calves to kittens were being born. How could anything possibly die in such a season of new beginnings?

No, Meghan would not die on this night. Danny would prevent it.

He sat in the unyielding wooden chair, listening to the night. He heard the night creatures as they hunted their prey, and occasionally he witnessed a bat or an owl fly overhead. He was vigilant as to anything that moved. His eyes scanned the area for the Death Messenger wearing white.

But his eyes felt gritty and he couldn’t stop the occasional yawn.

And then his mind started to wander.

He remembered the day during the warm spell last fall when he and Meghan went wading in the stream behind the house. She had looked so beautiful and he had made love to her right there on the banks of the stream. Three months afterwards, she had told him she was pregnant.

And now he could lose both she and his unborn child. It was too much for any man to bear.

Suddenly he jerked awake. Oh Sweet Jesus, he must have dozed off!

He heard her. The Banshee! He heard the wail; that was what woke him.

It was an eerie wowl, a keening sound like some sort of animal would make. It was an agonizing sound; but it resembled something undefined as though it had traveled in on the wind. It was an uncanny wail that made Danny's skin crawl to hear.

He bolted out of his chair and stood upright. Wildly he whirled around, hoping against hope that he still had time. He frantically searched around him, scanning the area with his eyes. He could hear his own heart pounding in his ears, and his mouth was dry with anguish.

He couldn't find her. He couldn't tell from where the wail originated.

But he had to stop the Banshee. He had to save his wife from going to her grave.

"Where are you?" he cried.

There! He heard that awful, keening wail once again. It sounded closer this time. He strained his eyes to see in the moonlight, again scanning the area.

And suddenly, there she was. Danny caught a glimpse of white at the edge of his property. The Banshee was coming. So she was a real being! This was no myth, for Danny was seeing her approach with his very own eyes.

She was just as the neighbor man had described. Danny took in the flowing white robes the Banshee wore, and it was true that her long white hair resembled a death shroud. And it was a death shroud, because if she combed that hair, then Meghan could soon be entombed in the ground. That must be the purpose of the Banshee's appearance. Of this, Danny felt certain.

He had to stop her. He had to prevent the Death Messenger from combing her shroud-like hair.

Danny jumped at the supernatural being. He had every intention of tackling the Banshee and wrestling the evil comb from her grasp. His aim was good and he put all his weight behind his leap.

But he landed on the ground with nothing in his grasp.

He jumped to his feet. Somehow the Banshee had gotten past him. She was at Meghan's window. She was a supernatural ghost, an apparition, a vapor.

Danny realized with dread that he would not be able to stop the Banshee from combing her hair. His brother had been right. There was no way a mortal could stop a ghost.

He felt hot tears course down both cheeks. Helplessly Danny stood, rooted in place, as the Death Messenger raised her arm. The comb reflected the moonlight and seemed to glitter in a parody of beauty. But the Banshee was withered and old, and the mouth on her lined face smirked with satisfaction as she met Danny's eyes directly with her own. She raised the comb to her long locks and dragged it through her hair.

Within seconds, the Banshee had disappeared. But not before she had made her claim upon the O'Malley clan once again, just as she had for generations.

The next morning, Danny brought his wife breakfast on a tray. She was still weak but she had regained consciousness during the night, and there was once again a blush to her cheeks. The child within her was kicking. The curtain on the window had been pulled aside to allow the bright light to warm the room, and the sun shined upon an idyllic scene within; husband with wife.

"I'm so sorry about your brother Liam," Meghan said.

"Yes, last night his heart just gave out." Danny was resigned to fate. "There was nothing I could do. The Banshee had come for one of the O'Malleys."