

Kevan Thornton and the Banshee
Stephen Thorn

You've probably heard about leprechauns, the Little People of Ireland. Fairy-folk they are, mischievous and given to pranks, only a few inches tall, dressed in green, with red hair and likely smokin' a pipe or – as all good Irish fairies do – enjoying a taste of the old potjean.

But Ireland has other fairies and spirits too, and many of them are far less friendly than leprechauns. One such being is the banshee. She's a terrible thing to encounter. She looks like a beautiful woman with long, flowing hair, which she brushes constantly with a silver brush, and as she does she wails in heart-aching misery. Her voice is the sound of rain water trickling down over a gravestone, of an owl's spooky cry on a moonless winter night, the sobs of a heart broken by a faithless lover, and to hear it is to feel the very blood freeze in your veins. The banshee only appears as an omen of death; when someone in the family is soon to die the banshee may appear to sing her dreadful dirge in mourning for the one to die.

It was many years ago when my own distant ancestor Kevan Thornton met up with a hideous, wailing banshee. Kevan was a young man with a small farm near Mullingar, Ireland, and a pretty wife named Bridget and a smiling little son named Reilly who'd just turned two. And although my good ancestor enjoyed bending his elbow a bit with his friends at the pub he swore to his dying day that he was sober as a saint on that frightful evening, and it's well known that from that day forward he never in his life opened another whisky bottle.

It had been a strange sort of day for Kevan Thornton. All day long while doing his chores around the farm he'd felt as though something was about to happen. There was a sort of expectation in the air that he couldn't quite put his finger on. While he milked his goats in the morning he kept feeling that someone was watching him even though he was alone in the barn. While he mended wind damage to the chicken coop he was sure that there was another person in the little shack with him, although he knew there was only himself and the birds. And as he plowed in the field behind his big draft horses he thought several times that another person walked along beside him, someone he could almost see at the very edge of his vision. But when he turned to address his visitor there was nobody in the field but himself.

As the shadows grew long and the sun prepared for bed Kevan was glad the day was coming to a close. His muscles were tired from a good day's work, but his nerves were frayed from the constant feeling of strangeness that had accompanied him all day. As he led the horses back to the barn for the night he was looking forward to a good dinner and a warm fire, a little nip from his jug, the smiling eyes and tender arms of his wife, and the laughter of his little boy.

It was dark in the barn as he put the horses in their stables and draped blankets over their powerful backs, and he took a moment to retrieve the bottle he kept hidden behind the bin of oats, draining the last swallow to steel himself for the chilly walk back to the house. But the strangeness of the day persisted; even the animals were acting restless and skittish, ignoring the fresh hay and cold water he'd placed for their dinner. He stroked their sturdy necks and talked

softly to them in an effort to relax them but they continued to pace nervously, nodding and shaking their great heads in agitation. So unsettled were the horses that Kevan began to wonder if there wasn't a fox hiding in the barn, its scent spooking the usually-gentle creatures.

Grabbing his pitchfork for a weapon, Kevan began to quietly make his way through the shadowy barn, ready to pounce on whatever threat might be hiding there. He didn't find anything amiss as he searched, but as he approached the closed front door he stopped. A breeze was blowing around his feet, sending bits of straw and dried leaves skittering away into the dark. *Only the wind under the door*, Kevan told himself, and he lifted the latch to open the door.

Suddenly the wind became a gale, pulling the heavy door out of Kevan's grasp. The door was flung wide and before his shocked and unbelieving eyes was a figure out of a nightmare! The banshee was standing in the doorway, a woman made of icy blue light and ghoulish green shadow, as insubstantial as a candle flame except for the shining silver brush in her gnarled hand. Her hair hung in long ribbons down to her waist and she drew the gleaming brush over and over again through the glowing, ghostly tresses.

Kevan staggered back in utter horror of the gaunt specter before him. His feet tangled together and he fell onto the dusty barn floor, his trembling hands dropping the pitchfork by his side. The silent phantom floated in through the door until she was standing at his feet, looking down on him while she brushed her cascade of spidersilk hair. He struggled to find his voice but his tongue felt like it had frozen to his teeth. "S...speak, demon, if demon ye be," he stuttered. "Whose death do ye proclaim?" But the banshee remained silent, looking down at him with eyes as deep and cold as ice in the bottom of a well.

"'Tis it me ye're calling, ye devil?" gasped Kevan. In response, the spirit silently shook her head. "Then it's me Bridget ye're seeking. Ye'll not have her, ye monster," he vowed, "Not while I've breath in me body to fight ye!" But again the banshee merely shook her head.

The awful truth struck like a fist. "Not...not the bairn. Please, merciful God, no! Not me Reilly!" As the name fell from Kevan's lips the banshee threw back her head and the dreadful sound of her keening wail trembled through the barn. With nerveless fingers Kevan grabbed his pitchfork. "There'll be no babies taken tonight, demon! Take me if ye will, but leave me wife and bairn alone!" snarled the frightened man, and he stabbed the pitchfork into the glowing, shifting form of the banshee. The iron tines cut into the monster as though into a puff of smoke. There was nothing for the metal to pierce. Instead of screaming in pain the specter raised its arms high, its long hair fanning outwards as though lifted by the wind, and her wailing voice brayed louder and more piteously. Kevan's hands flew to his ears and he felt sure his head would burst at the monster's shrieking.

Just as quickly the screaming horror was gone. Kevan opened his eyes and saw the icy glow of the banshee fading out the door. For a moment he was relieved, thinking the demon had given up, but then he realized the glow was moving outside, passing from window to window. The banshee was headed for the farm house! Kevan struggled to his feet and grabbed the

pitchfork, then, realizing how useless it had been, he threw it aside. His eyes searched wildly for something else to use as a weapon but there was only the whiskey bottle. Would it make a good club? Then he noticed the blanket draped over one horse's back and an idea struck.

He grabbed the bottle and the horse blanket, then used the heavy bottom of the bottle to break glass from a pane in a barn window. He pulled the stopper from the bottle with his teeth and, using a shard of window glass like a knife, cut his finger open. "If it's Thornton blood ye want, monster," he muttered as he dribbled blood into the open bottle, "I'll be sure ye get some." Then he stuffed the stopper into his pocket and wrapped the bottle in the horse blanket and ran as fast as he could for the house.

Kevan ran like he'd never run before, chasing the glowing monster as it slowly made its way across the ground that separated the barn from the house. His lungs felt like they were on fire and his heart was hammering in his chest but he dared not stop. In his mind danced an image of tiny Reilly and what would happen when the banshee reached the house where the baby waited. Every time Kevan's foot struck the ground he was closer to the banshee, but would he be able to catch her before she reached the house?

"Banshee!" Kevan screamed. "Stop! Ye're going the wrong way! 'Tis only me wife in the house. The bairn's with me. Take me son if ye must, but leave me wife. Here, see? I have me baby here."

The floating specter stopped and turned. Her tragically beautiful face was filled with great sadness until her eyes locked on the blanket-wrapped bundle in Kevan's arms. Then her mouth split wide in hunger and cold flames danced in her frozen eyes. "Here he is," Kevan gasped. "Smell him? Smell his sweet Thornton blood? Take him but leave me wife be."

The banshee struck like a flicker of lightning. She dove headfirst at the bundle in Kevan's arms, her nose guiding her towards the warm blood like an arrow to a target. She flowed into the glass bottle and before she realized her mistake Kevan Thornton pulled the stopper from his pocket and jammed it into the bottle's slender neck, trapping the banshee inside.

Desperately the spirit struggled in her glass prison. She flitted from side to side, searching for an opening, but there was no escape for her. For several minutes Kevan stood there in the twilight, holding the demon-thing in its bottle, then he tied the blanket around it for good measure and walked into the house. Smells of cooking dinner and wood smoke filled his nostrils as he opened the door, and there was Bridget in her apron and a little bit of flour on her chin from the bread she'd baked. Still carrying the bottle Kevan went to his son's crib and looked down at the sleeping boy. He knelt by the bed, carefully laying the bottle on the floor, and cried silently as he gently touched the child's damp hair.

"He's sleeping at last," Bridget whispered at his side. "He had a fever earlier but it seems to have broken, thank Providence. But Kevan, what ails ye? And what's this ye've brought in?" She reached for the bottle but her husband snatched it away. "No, love, don't be after

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opening this. Not tonight, and not ever. And nothing ails me, not anymore. Perhaps someday I'll tell ye, but for now, just let me hold ye." He took her in his arms and held her tight.

And that's the story, as Kevan told it to Bridget when they were both very old, and as she told it to their son, Reilly, and as he wrote it down for the family history. You ask me if it's a true story? I wasn't there to see it happen, but according to the family history, written by Reilly Thornton, the very next morning Kevan Thornton hired two good men to dig a well-deep pit at the edge of his farm, and at the bottom of that pit he carefully laid an object wrapped in a faded horse blanket, and that he had a priest say many prayers over that pit before he had those men fill it in again. And from that day until the day he died Kevan Thornton never again opened another whiskey bottle. Not one, not ever, as though he were deathly afraid of what might come out of it.

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