



Banshee, Ray Bradbury

Banshee

It was one of those nights, crossing Ireland, motoring through the sleeping towns from Dublin, where you came upon mist and encountered fog that blew away in rain to become a blowing silence.

All the country was still and cold and waiting. It was a night for strange encounters at empty crossroads with great filaments of ghost spiderweb and no spider in a hundred miles. Gates creaked far across meadows, where windows rattled with brittle moonlight.

It was, as they said, banshee weather. I sensed, I knew this as my taxi hummed through a final gate and I arrived at Courtown House, so far from Dublin that if that city died in the night, no one would know.

I paid my driver and watched the taxi turn to go back to the living city, leaving me alone with twenty pages of final screenplay in my pocket, and my film director employer waiting inside. I stood in the midnight silence, breathing in Ireland and breathing out the damp coal mines in my soul.

Then, I knocked.

The door flew wide almost instantly. John Hampton was there, shoving a glass of sherry into my hand and hauling me in.

“Good God, kid, you got me curious. Get that coat off. Give me the script. Finished it, eh? So you say. You got me curious. Glad you called from Dublin. The house is empty. Clara’s in Paris with the kids. We’ll have a good read, knock the hell out of your scenes, drink a bottle, be in bed by two and—what’s that?”

The door still stood open. John took a step, tilted his head, closed his eyes, listened.

The wind rustled beyond in the meadows. It made a sound in the clouds like someone turning back the covers of a vast bed.

I listened.

There was the softest moan and sob from somewhere off in the dark fields.

Eyes still shut, John whispered, "You know what that is, kid?"

"What?"

"Tell you later. Jump."

With the door slammed, he turned about and, the grand lord of the empty manor, strode ahead of me in his hacking coat, drill slacks, polished half-boots, his hair, as always, windblown from swimming upstream or down with strange women in unfamiliar beds.

Planting himself on the library hearth, he gave me one of those beacon flashes of laugh, the teeth that beckoned like a lighthouse beam swift and gone, as he traded me a second sherry for the screenplay, which he had to seize from my hand.

"Let's see what my genius, my left ventricle, my right arm, has birthed. Sit. Drink. Watch."

He stood astride the hearthstones, warming his backside, leafing my manuscript pages, conscious of me drinking my sherry much too fast, shutting my eyes each time he let a page drop and flutter to the carpet. When he finished he let the last page sail, lit a small cigarillo and puffed it, staring at the ceiling, making me wait.

"You son of a bitch," he said at last, exhaling. "It's good. Damn you to hell, kid. It's good!"

My entire skeleton collapsed within me. I had not expected such a midriff blow of praise.

"It needs a little cutting, of course!"

My skeleton reassembled itself.

"Of course," I said.

He bent to gather the pages like a great loping chimpanzee and turned. I felt he wanted to hurl them into the fire. He watched the flames and gripped the pages.

"Someday, kid," he said quietly, "you must teach me to write."

He was relaxing now, accepting the inevitable, full of true admiration.

“Someday,” I said, laughing, “you must teach me to direct.”

“The Beast will be our film, son. Quite a team.”

He arose and came to clink glasses with me.

“Quite a team we are!” He changed gears. “How are the wife and kids?”

“They’re waiting for me in Sicily where it’s warm.”

“We’ll get you to them, and sun, straight off! I—”

He froze dramatically, cocked his head, and listened.

“Hey, what goes on—” he whispered.

I turned and waited.

This time, outside the great old house, there was the merest thread of sound, like someone running a fingernail over the paint, or someone sliding down out of the dry reach of a tree. Then there was the softest exhalation of a moan, followed by something like a sob.

John leaned in a starkly dramatic pose, like a statue in a stage pantomime, his mouth wide, as if to allow sounds entry to the inner ear. His eyes now unlocked to become as huge as hen’s eggs with pretended alarm.

“Shall I tell you what that sound is, kid? A banshee!”

“A what?” I cried.

“Banshee!” he intoned. “The ghosts of old women who haunt the roads an hour before someone dies. That’s what that sound was!” He stepped to the window, raised the shade, and peered out. “Sh! Maybe it means—us!”

“Cut it out, John!” I laughed, quietly.

“No, kid, no.” He fixed his gaze far into the darkness, savoring his melodrama. “I lived here ten years. Death’s out there. The banshee always knows! Where were we?”

He broke the spell as simply as that, strode back to the hearth and blinked at my script as if it were a brand new puzzle.

“You ever figure, Doug, how much The Beast is like me? The hero plowing the seas, plowing women left and right, off round the world and no stops? Maybe that’s why I’m doing it. You ever wonder how many women I’ve had? Hundreds! I—”

He stopped, for my lines on the page had shut him again. His face took fire as my words sank in.

“Brilliant!”

I waited, uncertainly.

“No, not that!” He threw my script aside to seize a copy of the London Times off the mantel. “This! A brilliant review of your new book of stories!”

“What?” I jumped.

“Easy, kid. I’ll read this grand review to you! You’ll love it. Terrific!” My heart took water and sank. I could see another joke coming on or, worse, the truth disguised as a joke.

“Listen!”

John lifted the Times and read, like Ahab, from the holy text.

““Douglas Rogers’s stories may well be the huge success of American literature—”” John stopped and gave me an innocent blink. “How you like it so far, kid?”

“Continue, John,” I mourned. I slugged my sherry back. It was a toss of doom that slid down to meet a collapse of will.

““—but here in London,”” John intoned, ““we ask more from our tellers of tales. Attempting to emulate the ideas of Kipling, the style of Maugham, the wit of Waugh, Rogers drowns somewhere in mid-Atlantic. This is ramshackle stuff, mostly bad shades of superior scribes. Douglas Rogers, go home!””

I leaped up and ran, but John with a lazy flip of his underhand, tossed the Times into the fire where it flapped like a dying bird and swiftly died in flame and roaring sparks.

Imbalanced, staring down, I was wild to grab that damned paper out, but finally glad the thing was lost.

John studied my face, happily. My face boiled, my teeth ground shut. My hand, stuck to the mantel, was a cold rock fist. Tears burst from my eyes, since words could not burst from my aching mouth.

“What’s wrong, kid?” John peered at me with true curiosity, like a monkey edging up to another sick beast in its cage. “You feeling poorly?”

“John, for Christ’s sake!” I burst out. “Did you have to do that!”

I kicked at the fire, making the logs tumble and a great firefly wheel of sparks gush up the flue.

“Why, Doug, I didn’t think—”

“Like hell you didn’t!” I blazed, turning to glare at him with tear-splintered eyes. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Hell, nothing, Doug. It was a fine review, great! I just added a few lines, to get your goat!”

“I’ll never know now!” I cried. “Look!”

I gave the ashes a final, scattering kick.

“You can buy a copy in Dublin tomorrow, Doug. You’ll see. They love you. God, I just didn’t want you to get a big head, right. The joke’s over. Isn’t it enough, dear son, that you have just written the finest scenes you ever wrote in your life for your truly great screenplay?” John put his arm around my shoulder.

That was John: kick you in the tripes, then pour on the wild sweet honey by the larder ton.

“Know what your problem is, Doug?” He shoved yet another sherry in my trembling fingers. “Eh?”

“What?” I gasped, like a sniveling kid, revived and wanting to laugh again. “What?”

“The thing is, Doug—” John made his face radiant. His eyes fastened to mine like Svengali’s. “You don’t love me half as much as I love you!”
“Come on, John—”

“No, kid, I mean it. God, son, I’d kill for you. You’re the greatest living writer in the world, and I love you, heart and soul. Because of that, I thought you could take a little leg-pull. I see that I was wrong—”
“No, John,” I protested, hating myself, for now he was making me apologize. “It’s all right.”

“I’m sorry, kid, truly sorry—”

“Shut up!” I gasped a laugh. “I still love you. I—”

“That’s a boy! Now—” John spun about, brisked his palms together, and shuffled and reshuffled the script pages like a cardsharp. “Let’s spend an hour cutting this brilliant, superb scene of yours and—”

For the third time that night, the tone and color of his mood changed.

“Hist!” he cried. Eyes squinted, he swayed in the middle of the room, like a dead man underwater. “Doug, you hear?”

The wind trembled the house. A long fingernail scraped an attic pane. A mourning whisper of cloud washed the moon.

“Banshees.” John nodded, head bent, waiting. He glanced up, abruptly.

“Doug? Run out and see.”

“Like hell I will.”

“No, go on out,” John urged. “This has been a night of misconceptions, kid. You doubt me, you doubt it. Get my overcoat, in the hall. Jump!”

He jerked the hall closet door wide and yanked out his great tweed overcoat which smelled of tobacco and fine whiskey. Clutching it in his two monkey hands, he beckoned it like a bullfighter’s cape. “Huh, toro! Hah!”

“John,” I sighed, wearily.

“Or are you a coward, Doug, are you yellow? You—”

For this, the fourth, time, we both heard a moan, a cry, a fading murmur beyond the wintry front door.

“It’s waiting, kid!” said John, triumphantly. “Get out there. Run for the team!”

I was in the coat, anointed by tobacco scent and booze as John buttoned me up with royal dignity, grabbed my ears, kissed my brow. “I’ll be in the stands, kid, cheering you on. I’d go with you, but banshees are shy. Bless you, son, and if you don’t come back—I loved you like a son!”

“Jesus,” I exhaled, and flung the door wide.

But suddenly John leaped between me and the cold blowing moonlight.

“Don’t go out there, kid. I’ve changed my mind! If you got killed—”

“John,” I shook his hands away. “You want me out there. You’ve probably got Kelly, your stable girl, out there now, making noises for your big laugh—”

“Doug!” he cried in that mock-insult serious way he had, eyes wide, as he grasped my shoulders. “I swear to God!”

“John,” I said, half-angry, half-amused, “so long.”

I ran out the door to immediate regrets. He slammed and locked the portal. Was he laughing? Seconds later, I saw his silhouette at the library window, sherry glass in hand, peering out at this night theater of which he was both director and hilarious audience.

I spun with a quiet curse, hunched my shoulders in Caesar’s cloak, ignored two dozen stab wounds given me by the wind, and stomped down along the gravel drive.

I’ll give it a fast ten minutes, I thought, worry John, turn his joke inside out, stagger back in, shirt torn and bloody, with some fake tale of my own. Yes, by God, that was the trick—

I stopped.

For in a small grove of trees below, I thought I saw something like a large paper kite blossom and blow away among the hedges.

Clouds sailed over an almost full moon, and ran islands of dark to cover me.

Then there it was again, farther on, as if a whole cluster of flowers were suddenly torn free to snow away along the colorless path. At the same moment, there was the merest catch of a sob, the merest door-hinge of a moan.

I flinched, pulled back, then glanced up at the house.

There was John's face, of course, grinning like a pumpkin in the window, sipping sherry, toast-warm and at ease.

"Ohh," a voice wailed somewhere. ". . . God. . . ."

It was then that I saw the woman.

She stood leaning against a tree, dressed in a long, moon-colored dress over which she wore a hip-length heavy woollen shawl that had a life of its own, rippling and winging out and hovering with the weather.

She seemed not to see me or if she did, did not care; I could not frighten her, nothing in the world would ever frighten her again. Everything poured out of her steady and unflinching gaze toward the house, that window, the library, and the silhouette of the man in the window.

She had a face of snow, cut from that white cool marble that makes the finest Irish women; a long swan neck, a generous if quivering mouth, and eyes a soft and luminous green. So beautiful were those eyes, and her profile against the blown tree branches, that something in me turned, agonized, and died. I felt that killing wrench men feel when beauty passes and will not pass again. You want to cry out: Stay. I love you. But you do not speak. And the summer walks away in her flesh, never to return.

But now the beautiful woman, staring only at that window in the far house, spoke.

"Is he in there?" she said.

"What?" I heard myself say.

"Is that him?" she wondered. "The beast," she said, with quiet fury.

"The monster. Himself."

"I don't—"

“The great animal,” she went on, “that walks on two legs. He stays. All others go. He wipes his hands on flesh; girls are his napkins, women his midnight lunch. He keeps them stashed in cellar vintages and knows their years but not their names. Sweet Jesus, and is that him?”

I looked where she looked, at the shadow in the window, far off across the croquet lawn.

And I thought of my director in Paris, in Rome, in New York, in Hollywood, and the millraces of women I had seen John tread, feet printing their skins, a dark Christ on a warm sea. A picnic of women danced on tables, eager for applause and John, on his way out, saying, “Dear, lend me a fiver. That beggar by the door kills my heart—”

I watched this young woman, her dark hair stirred by the night wind, and asked:

“Who should he be?”

“Him,” she said. “Him that lives there and loved me and now does not.” She shut her eyes to let the tears fall.

“He doesn’t live there anymore,” I said.

“He does!” She whirled, as if she might strike or spit. “Why do you lie?”

“Listen.” I looked at the new but somehow old snow in her face. “That was another time.”

“No, there’s only now!” She made as if to rush for the house. “And I love him still, so much I’d kill for it, and myself lost at the end!”

“What’s his name?” I stood in her way. “His name?”

“Why, Will, of course. Willie. William.”

She moved. I raised my arms and shook my head.

“There’s only a Johnny there now. A John.”

“You lie! I feel him there. His name’s changed, but it’s him. Look! Feel!”

She put her hands up to touch on the wind toward the house, and I turned and sensed with her and it was another year, it was a time between. The wind said so, as did the night and the glow in that great window where the shadow stayed.

"That's him!"

"A friend of mine," I said, gently.

"No friend of anyone, ever!"

I tried to look through her eyes and thought: my God, has it always been this way, forever some man in that house, forty, eighty, a hundred years ago! Not the same man, no, but all dark twins, and this lost girl on the road, with snow in her arms for love, and frost in her heart for comfort, and nothing to do but whisper and croon and mourn and sob until the sound of her weeping stilled at sunrise but to start again with the rising of the moon.

"That's my friend in there," I said, again.

"If that be true," she whispered fiercely, "then you are my enemy!"

I looked down the road where the wind blew dust through the graveyard gates.

"Go back where you came from," I said.

She looked at the same road and the same dust, and her voice faded.

"Is there to be no peace, then?" she mourned. "Must I walk here, year on year, and no comeuppance?"

"If the man in there," I said, "was really your Will, your William, what would you have me do?"

"Send him out to me," she said, quietly.

"What would you do with him?"

"Lie down with him," she murmured, "and ne'er get up again. He would be kept like a stone in a cold river."

"Ah," I said, and nodded.

"Will you ask him, then, to be sent?"

"No. For he's not yours. Much like. Near similar. And breakfasts on girls and wipes his mouth on their silks, one century called this, another that."

"And no love in him, ever?"

"He says the word like fishermen toss their nets in the sea," I said.

“Ah, Christ, and I’m caught!” And here she gave such a cry that the shadow came to the window in the great house across the lawn. “I’ll stay here the rest of the night,” she said. “Surely he will feel me here, his heart will melt, no matter what his name or how deviled his soul. What year is this? How long have I been waiting?”

“I won’t tell you,” I said. “The news would crack your heart.” She turned and truly looked at me. “Are you one of the good ones, then, the gentle men who never lie and never hurt and never have to hide? Sweet God, I wish I’d known you first!” The wind rose, the sound of it rose in her throat. A clock struck somewhere far across the country in the sleeping town.

“I must go in,” I said. I took a breath. “Is there no way for me to give you rest?”

“No,” she said, “for it was not you that cut the nerve.”

“I see,” I said.

“You don’t. But you try. Much thanks for that. Get in. You’ll catch your death.”

“And you—?”

“Ha!” she cried. “I’ve long since caught mine. It will not catch again. Get!”

I gladly went. For I was full of the cold night and the white moon, old time, and her. The wind blew me up the grassy knoll. At the door, I turned. She was still there on the milky road, her shawl straight out on the weather, one hand upraised.

“Hurry,” I thought I heard her whisper, “tell him he’s needed!”

I rammed the door, slammed into the house, fell across the hall, my heart a bombardment, my image in the great hall mirror a shock of colorless lightning.

John was in the library drinking yet another sherry, and poured me some. “Someday,” he said, “you’ll learn to take anything I say with more than a grain of salt. Jesus, look at you! Ice cold. Drink that down. Here’s another to go after it!”

I drank, he poured, I drank. "Was it all a joke, then?"

"What else?" John laughed, then stopped.

The croon was outside the house again, the merest fingernail of mourn, as the moon scraped down the roof.

"There's your banshee," I said, looking at my drink, unable to move.

"Sure, kid, sure, unh-huh," said John. "Drink your drink, Doug, and I'll read you that great review of your book from the London Times again."

"You burned it, John."

"Sure, kid, but I recall it all as if it were this morn. Drink up."

"John," I said, staring into the fire, looking at the hearth where the ashes of the burned paper blew in a great breath. "Does . . . did . . . that review really exist?"

"My God, of course, sure, yes. Actually. . . ." Here he paused and gave it great imaginative concern. "The Times knew my love for you, Doug, and asked me to review your book." John reached his long arm over to refill my glass. "I did it.

Under an assumed name, of course, now ain't that swell of me? But I had to be fair, Doug, had to be fair. So I wrote what I truly felt were the good things, the not-so-good things in your book. Criticized it just the way I would when you hand in a lousy screenplay scene and I make you do it over. Now ain't that A-one double absolutely square of me? Eh?"

He leaned at me. He put his hand on my chin and lifted it and gazed long and sweetly into my eyes.

"You're not upset?"

"No," I said, but my voice broke.

"By God, now, if you aren't. Sorry. A joke, kid, only a joke." And here he gave me a friendly punch on the arm.

Slight as it was, it was a sledgehammer striking home.

"I wish you hadn't made it up, the joke, I wish the article was real," I said.

“So do I, kid. You look bad. I—”

The wind moved around the house. The windows stirred and whispered.

Quite suddenly I said, for no reason that I knew:

“The banshee. It’s out there.”

“That was a joke, Doug. You got to watch out for me.”

“No,” I said, looking at the window. “It’s there.”

John laughed. “You saw it, did you?”

“It’s a young and lovely woman with a shawl on a cold night. A young woman with long black hair and great green eyes and a complexion like snow and a proud Phoenician prow of a nose. Sound like anyone you ever in your life knew, John?”

“Thousands.” John laughed more quietly now, looking to see the weight of my joke. “Hell—”

“She’s waiting for you,” I said. “Down at the bottom of the drive.”

John glanced, uncertainly, at the window.

“That was the sound we heard,” I said. “She described you or someone like you. Called you Willy, Will, William. But I knew it was you.”

John mused. “Young, you say, and beautiful, and out there right this moment . . .?”

“The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Not carrying a knife—?”

“Unarmed.”

John exhaled. “Well, then, I think I should just go out there and have a chat with her, eh, don’t you think?”

“She’s waiting.”

He moved toward the front door.

“Put on your coat, it’s a cold night,” I said.

He was putting on his coat when we heard the sound from outside, very clear this time. The wail and then the sob and then the wail.

“God,” said John, his hand on the doorknob, not wanting to show the white feather in front of me. “She’s really there.”
He forced himself to turn the knob and open the door. The wind sighed in, bringing another faint wail with it.

John stood in the cold weather, peering down that long walk into the dark.

“Wait!” I cried, at the last moment.

John waited.

“There’s one thing I haven’t told you,” I said. “She’s out there, all right. And she’s walking. But . . . she’s dead.”

“I’m not afraid,” said John.

“No,” I said, “but I am. You’ll never come back. Much as I hate you right now, I can’t let you go. Shut the door, John.”

The sob again, and then the wail.

“Shut the door.”

I reached over to knock his hand off the brass doorknob, but he held tight, cocked his head, looked at me and sighed.

“You’re really good, kid. Almost as good as me. I’m putting you in my next film. You’ll be a star.”

Then he turned, stepped out into the cold night, and shut the door, quietly.

I waited until I heard his steps on the gravel path, then locked the door, and hurried through the house, putting out the lights. As I passed through the library, the wind mourned down the chimney and scattered the dark ashes of the London Times across the hearth.

I stood blinking at the ashes for a long moment, then shook myself, ran upstairs two at a time, banged open my tower room door, slammed it, undressed, and was in bed with the covers over my head when a town clock, far away, sounded one in the deep morning.

And my room was so high, so lost in the house and the sky, that no matter who or what tapped or knocked or banged at the door below, whispering and then begging and then screaming—
Who could possibly hear?

The End