

## *Dandelion Girl Meets the Banshee (or Not)*

Something woke Rosheen that night. She was a light sleeper. She was used to all the creakings and rustlings of the old house turning over in its sleep by now, so these things didn't wake her any more, but strange sounds woke her, and this was a very strange sound. She sat up sleepily, her fair hair tangled like a web before her eyes, her eyelashes prising reluctantly apart, and listened. There it was again. A sort of high-pitched yowl, a bit like a cat's night lamentings, but not exactly that either.

Could be a banshee, thought Rosheen, swinging her pink feet out from under the duvet, and feeling for her slippers. Lucky she slept on the bottom bunk. Helen had fought for the top and won, but now Rosheen was glad. Being on the bottom gave her more freedom. A banshee would be good. The others would be dead impressed. She pushed the web of hair back off her forehead with a sleep-dampened hand and rubbed her eyes good and hard, to make sure she was fully awake. If she was going in

search of a banshee, she'd better be awake and able to see properly. She patted the bed, searching in the dark for her bright yellow dressing-gown, and struggled into it.

Rosheen crept along the wall to the door, and eased it open. The dim yellow glow of the landing nightlight filtered into the room, but Helen didn't stir. Lazy lump. You couldn't wake her if you tried. Rosheen stifled a giggle. Funny how being awake when someone else was asleep made you feel stronger than they were. Rosheen wouldn't dare even to think like that when Helen was awake. Helen was supposed to be her friend – they were almost the same age – but sometimes she was hard to like, and today had been one of those times.

Rosheen closed the door carefully behind her, the triangle of light on the bedroom carpet gradually diminishing till it was just a crack, and then at last the door fitted into place and the seal against the light was complete.

She pressed her back against the door, arching her neck so that as much of the back of her head as possible touched the door, and, jamming her calves into a straight line against the wood, she listened again for the sound. This was how people creeping about furtively at night were supposed to behave. She knew from watching films on the telly. She wondered whether she looked sufficiently dramatic in her lemon dressing-gown with her hair mussed up and one hand behind the small of her back, the fingers spread out against the door. She cocked her

head, and sure enough, as if on cue, there came the yowling sound again. It was coming from downstairs, she thought.

Rosheen bent over and ran with her bottom in the air and using her hands as forepaws, as if dodging bullets. This was cool fun. When she got to the stairs, she grasped the banister rail for dear life and edged down from step to step, keeping her feet carefully on the varnished edge of the stairs, between where the strip of stair carpet ended and the banisters began. If she stepped on the carpet, the banshee would catch her. When she arrived at the last step before the hall, Rosheen wavered. She would have to step on the dreaded carpet now, banshee or no banshee, because here the floor was completely carpeted, with no wooden margin. She closed her eyes and leapt into the air. It was like diving off a whaling ship. It was like launching into space. It was like swimming into the stratosphere. Goodness knows where she would end up.

She landed with a thump, feet first, outside the living-room door.

Then came the high-pitched yowl again, much closer now. There could be no doubt about it. It was coming from inside the living-room door. What did banshees look like? Rosheen wondered. They combed their hair, she thought, or was that mermaids?

Gingerly, she pushed the door open, half-expecting to see a ghostly woman combing her ghostly locks in the moonlight, but of course there was no such thing, just a lot

of dark shapes and an irregular ridge under the covers of a makeshift bed that Mammy Kelly had somehow constructed for the new boy, because he wouldn't climb the stairs. He'd stood in the hall, gazing up at the half-landing, and resolutely resisting encouragement to go up. He was a funny lad. Didn't say a word. In the end, Mammy Kelly said he could sleep downstairs, just for tonight, until he got used to the house.

Rosheen was secretly relieved there was no banshee, but she wouldn't admit it for the world and was busy making one up to tell the others about in the morning when the eerie yowling came again. It filled the room. It sounded much weirder close up like this, like an animal in pain, lifting its maw to the skies and bewailing its plight to the moon. Rosheen yelped without meaning to, and the smudge on the pillow shot up in the air. The ridge under the covers flattened and there was Ricky, sitting bolt upright, his hair standing about his head like a chimney brush and his face white in the yellowy light from the hall.

Ricky stared. He'd been dreaming about the small child with the dandelion-clock hair. He'd dreamt that somebody had puffed at the child's head the way you blow a dandelion-clock and that the child's hair had drifted apart, like a dandelion clock. There were dandelion seeds everywhere floating and drifting, like aerodynamic cottonwool, in his dream. But this wasn't a dandelion seed. This thing that had appeared in his room was yellow, all shimmery, maybe a fully grown dandelion, and it shook

with bubbly laughter, its yellow hair all bobbing and its shimmering yellow gown falling in butter-yellow folds onto his bed.

‘You were snoring!’ snorted Rosheen. ‘I thought you were a banshee!’ And she was off into ripples of laughter again.

Ricky smiled uncertainly. He didn’t know what a banshee was, but that didn’t surprise him. Words often evaded him. He nodded at the dandelion, bobbing and wafting at the foot of his bed. Then he lay back carefully on the pillows and stared at his surroundings, all the wooden things looming in the dark at him, the handlebars of the bicycle gleaming in the light that flooded in from the open door.

‘I’m sorry. You’re tired. I’ll go.’

The dandelion girl stood up. Ricky nodded again. She bent over him. ‘I’m Rosheen,’ she whispered. ‘Good night.’

And she was gone, the door following her into the dark. Good night. Good night.