

The Scream

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“We do not yell, Sadhbh.”

“We do not sing.”

“We do not cry with open mouths.”

Mama’s words were always spoken in a whisper-yell, never at full volume. As a little girl, it was hard being silent, but, according to Mama, it was necessary.

We lived in the middle of a heavily canopied, imposing wood. ‘A forest full of danger and darkness,’ Mama said. My father had disappeared in the wood shortly after I was born. Something to do with the dangerous animals that roamed nearby. Mama told me gruesome stories about the forest; of the wild beasts and the wandering spirits called Banshees.

And before bed each night, she said the same thing, “Never go into that cursed wood if you want to walk out of it the same.”

One such night, deep into the winter of my sixth year, I lay in my straw bed in the little thatched attic of our cottage. The moon shone so bright on the new snow that the light came right through my bedroom window. Just as my eyelids were drooping, there came a distant sound. I turned in my bed, thinking it was a dream; there was never any noise in our house. I pulled the blanket over my head. But the sound came again, louder this time. It was a wheezing scream, first low then high. A voice broke through the scream and said, “I have come to meet with you, child.” I did not entirely trust my ears. Slowly, guardedly, I lowered the blanket to my chin.

There, before me in my little thatched room, stood a great and terrible Lady. She was tall, with orange hair that fell past her knees. She wore a wisp of a dress, and her entire figure seemed to shift and flicker with a silvery iridescence. The image gave the impression that one could pass through her like a candle’s flame.

“Sadhbh, wake up! We have much to accomplish tonight,” the Lady’s arms were flung out at her sides. I did not wonder at how she knew my name. My focus was instead fixed on her feet, which hovered a few centimeters above the ground. Fixed on the steps she took toward my bed, each one flowing into the next like water. This was the first moment I recall being afraid. Scrambling away from this incorporeal Lady, I cried, “What are you?”

“That will be answered in time.” The woman approached the foot of my bed. She was as lovely as she was terrible. Hers was the most beautiful and knowing face I had ever seen, with sunken cheeks, pale skin like the moon, and keen eyes that glowed from within. Then, without warning, she unhinged her jaw and let out a piercing shriek.

“Lady. Lady!” I sought to draw her attention to no avail for the better part of the next minute, fearing the trouble I would find myself in when Mama woke to find these noises coming from my room. Her screams filled the space completely. Nothing else existed but the sound of it.

I finally bellowed in response, “Lady, you will wake Mama!”

Only then did she pause her screaming and turn her fearful attention back on me. “Only you can hear me, little one. If your mother could, would she not already have come in here to silence me?”

“You are a wandering spirit,” I said with sudden understanding, “you are a Banshee!” It was not a question. Of this I was certain. I had heard enough of Mama’s tales to know.

I forget the rest of our first conversation. In my memory, I blinked, and suddenly we were standing outside of the cottage in the snow. I was barefoot, smelling like sleep, and the beautiful Lady was holding my hand. I gazed out at the canopy of trees covering the walkway up to my front door.

“Where are we going, Lady?”

“Do not call me Lady. That is only what I used to be.”

“Then what shall I call you?”

“You may call me Sound.”

The path leading from our front door into the wood stretched out before us. Sound turned her willowy shape away from me. All at once, she seemed to shrink and waver. Her edges turned hazy and undefined. For a heartbeat, I worried she would wink out of existence altogether.

I did not know what to do at that moment, so I wrapped my arms around myself. I began to cry. I had been gifted noise for the first time in my short life. Terrible, horrifying, uncontrolled noise. For a moment, it had been mine, and now I thought it would be taken away again. But when I looked again, I saw that the Sound was not getting smaller, but further away. She turned back, standing a short distance down the foggy trail. She called to me, “Well? Are you coming with me, Sadhbh?” She knew what my answer would be. And I never considered saying no.

With an exuberant shriek, I chased after Sound. My exclamation and the slapping of my cold feet echoed through the wood. And for once, I did not pause to worry if the noise troubled Mama. I did not stop to wonder if I was waking the wood. I was fearless with Sound on my side.

I ran after Sound for what felt like hours. She glided, winking before me in the moonlight. All the time we were traveling like this, she moaned noisily with her arms flung out at her sides. She did not look back at me once. I considered asking why she made such sounds, and if she did not fear waking the sleeping forest. But I kept quiet, as Mama had trained me.

Sound was faster than me, and many times I thought I would lose sight of her, but she never traveled too far ahead. Before long, I found myself in the middle of a moonlight-filled glade. The empty space shone brightly, and there was Sound in the center of the clearing, arms outstretched and head thrown back as if in a laugh.

Instead, what emanated from her lips was a horrifying shriek many times more fearsome than anything I had heard from her before.

Suddenly, animals of every kind from all over the edges of the clearing began to show themselves. They came, peeking their little noses and heads into the bright moonlight to see the source of the otherworldly screeching. They did not run away when they saw her. Instead, they crept out slowly to sit around her in a wide circle. After some minutes, there was a small crowd of squirrels, wolves, deer, and foxes about her feet. All were sitting, quiet and still, listening to Sound. They seemed perfectly comfortable with the noise. I wondered if perhaps they knew her.

It was then that my feet began to tickle. They tingled and began to jostle in place. A quiver ran from my toes all the way up to my forehead. It took a few moments for me to realize that this sensation was not coming from me; the earth beneath me was shaking. The reverberation was accompanied by a low hum. It came from the trees and the moon and the grass and all the little animals around Sound who were still sitting still. It came from everywhere. I was afraid again. As the feeling grew in intensity, I watched Sound close her terrible mouth and motion for me to come closer. She watched me as I crept slowly across the clearing. I came to kneel before her, as it seemed the only thing to do.

“Are you ready for a journey, Sadhbh?”

I nodded, and then we were gone.

Traveling with Sound felt like falling asleep in an unfamiliar house.

On the brink of unconsciousness, I was still vaguely aware of strange shadows stretching and contracting around me. Before long, we were back in the starlight-filled clearing in my wood. It was much how we left it, however, this time there were no animals in sight. And the dark night sky from before had lightened in color considerably. Morning was near. On our trek back home time seemed to move strangely. It seemed that as soon as we found the trail, we were heading up the winding path home.

For my entire childhood, on either side of the cobbled path to the front door stood dozens of great fir trees. They created a natural canopied hallway, leading all the way up to the cottage. But as we turned the corner, where the dirt path becomes uneven stones - where I expected to step into my wooded hall - I was instead greeted by the sight of open sky. On either side of the trail stood newly planted saplings. I paused on the path. Sound's flickering hand slipped from mine.

"Is this - is this my house?" I asked tentatively.

"This is your house as it used to be, Sadhbh."

Then we came into view of the cottage. It was the same house that I knew, but considerably lighter in color, as though it had recently received a coat of paint. And the roof was constructed of thicker, newer thatch.

"Sound! Where are we?" Panic was rising in my throat.

"You know where we are, child." We made our way up the path to my front door.

"But this house is different!" I was almost in tears.

"This is the house as I remember it," Sound said finally, as we came to a pause before the heavy front door.

My little eyes widened in realization, "Sound! Did you also live here?"

"Yes, Sadhbh. A very long time ago."

I did not have time to respond, for right then a young woman threw the door open and ran out. She had long, orange hair. It was Sound! Or Sound as she used to be. She ran right past us, as though we were invisible. Her normally pale complexion was flushed, as if she had been running about for some time. She called out wildly.

"Cian? Cian!" She was searching for someone.

“My husband,” Sound, the Banshee, said next to me. She must have seen the confusion on my face, “He went missing in the woods. Just like your father.”

Without warning, the young version of Sound dropped to the ground in front of us and screamed. It was a sad and horrible noise. I closed my eyes tight and slapped my hands over my ears. I shook my head from side to side, but my ears still rang.

Then the timbre of the scream changed. It abruptly turned high, wavering, and distant, as if it were coming from inside the cottage. I cautiously opened my eyes. The young Sound was gone. I looked around me. The cottage had become old once again. The paint was chipped and the thatch roof bare. It was my home once again!

Yet the scream persisted. I walked through the front door and realized with a start - it was Mama.

I raced up the stairs to the attic, where I found Mama staring at my empty bed. Tears streamed down her face. She screamed and screamed. It was the most noise I had ever heard her make.

I ran to her to console her. To show her I was home and well. But as I reached for her, my arm passed right through her waist. I stumbled backward in shock and, looking at my hand, saw that it was flickering and hazy.

Like a candle's flame.

“Mama!” I cried out. She did not turn.

“Mama, I am here!” I stood in front of her, waving my translucent arms to no avail. She could not see or hear me. Running back down the stairs and out the front door, I called out.

“Sound? Sound, where are you?”

The Banshee was gone.

I fell to my knees in front of the house, right where the young Sound had just moments before.

A sob escaped me. Then a wail. Then a scream.

I stopped short at the sound. It had grated at my throat in such a wonderful way. I let loose another scream. Then another. Then another.

Louder, louder, louder.

My screams grew into something animal, and I loved the noise. I smiled and flung my flickering arms out at my sides, imitating Sound's posture. I got up and started for the forest. My feet glided along the ground like water.

I realized I could now travel where I wished. I could make as much sound as I wished.

I would go greet the animals, I thought to myself. As the trees closed in around me, I flung my head back and screamed.