

Eddie Lenihan's Banshee Story

Audio Transcription

I remember when I was— I'm from County Kerry, now, which is much south of here. I live south of Clare now. Get out your atlas of Ireland, and you'll see that. Kerry is south of the Shannon, our biggest river. Clare is just north.

But I remember many years ago when I was going to Galway—you know, the city. And I had no car at the time, of course, as a student, and my parents never had a car, and I used to get a lift—a ride as you'd call it in America—from wherever I could, neighbors or whatever. And very often when I was passing this place only just about three miles south of where I'm living now, I used to see this man—an old man, dressed in a brown coat, with a rope around his waist.

Now, big deal. That was nothing strange in Ireland fifty years ago because Ireland was a poor country then. You'd see old people on the road that time, strange people. I'm sure the same was true in parts of rural America. But he caught my eye a number of times, and after a number of years, I got married, as it happened, in this area. [chuckles] Coincidences happen. And my wife's sister was married just around that place, and, of course, I asked her, "Who was that man?"

And she told me, "Oh, you wouldn't believe it. That fellow, when he was young, he was one of the most handsome guys in the parish. He was a great dancer. He was a great card player. He was a runner, an athlete. And look at him now."

I said, "He doesn't look much like an athlete to me, now. Look at the state of him."

"Well," she said, "there's a story behind that."

And, she told me the story. And the story was this:

It was a great country for playing cards. Card playing, you know, was a winter pastime—still is around here. And a great pastime as you— Well, I don't know whether you know that or not. This was long, long before the old Gameboys and the other *beep beep* machines came in. And card playing is a wonderful, wonderful pastime simply because you have to use your head. [chuckles] And you have to be skillful. And the game they play around here is called The Old Game. It's as skillful as bridge, and nine people play it together in teams of three—three and three and three.

Now, he and his two brothers used to play as one team, and they were good. They were good players. He was the eldest. But, you see, the way they play the game is on a league basis. You see, they all start maybe nine teams, and then there's a quarter-final and a semi-final and on and on, and finally there's a final. *But*, the thing about that is, if you play as one team and you lose a quarter-final, you're out. So they usen't do that. One of them would play on one team, another would play on the other team, another would play on this team, and *why?* Common sense. So they wouldn't all lose at the one time. At least one of them might win on the night. So, it made good sense. Now, the stakes wouldn't be high. You know, just a few cents—pence, as we'd say—or maybe, during the winter, they might play for a turkey or just something for the Christmas dinner.

Now, this particular night, they were playing, and, like before, Seán—this man I'm talking about—he was playing on one team. He was a *very* good card player, and Mike was on the other one, and Seamus was in the other one—all different teams. And the game went on. Now, Seamus, his team, they lost. They were put out, and they sat by the fire watching the game. And second, Mike, his team were put out in the semi-final, and they stayed to watch the game. And Seán's team were in the final. And every trick was played for, and all of them now in the final were good players, but finally, finally, after about—oh, it was going up towards midnight—and the lads by the fire, they got impatient.

“Come on lads, would you hurry on with the game. Come on, we need to go home.”

And Seán said, “Well, you go home. Go home if you want to. What can we do? We want to play the game. We want to play out the game.”

But, of course, eventually, eventually they didn't go home. They wanted to see the game out to the very end, and they did. And Seán's team won.

Now, great for Seán's team. Now they had something for the Christmas dinner. But, then the man of the house, he said, “Lads, time is up. Time is up. Come on. Go home.”

It was very near one o'clock in the morning now. So, out they went. Thanked the man of the house for giving them the tea and a little bit to eat. They went outside the door, and they started playing the game all over again. Now, not with a deck of cards but aloud. Aloud.

Why didn't you play the ten of hearts there? Why didn't you play the nine of diamonds here? Why didn't...? And... And... And...

The man of the house came out and said, “Lads, will you *go home*? We want to go to bed.”

“Oh, sorry, sorry—sorry, sorry, we’ll scatter.” And they did scatter. All went their own ways.

But, *but*, the man of the house went in, and Seán’s two brothers, they went off with the crowd. They took the goose or the turkey, whatever had been won with them. And Seán, he delayed there for a little while talking to a girl that he was going with. And then, she went off. And Seán was alone. And he decided he’d take a shortcut home.

Now, the shortcut was up a little craig of rock, hm? Up, over the house, and down the other side. And he’d be home before his brothers, hm? Half the journey. So he started off. Now, alone, alone. But he was about halfway up this little passageway, pathway, up the rock—was a bright night now, a moonlit night—when he heard this [foreboding wailing] and he stopped. He stopped.

Now, the first thought into his head was—*some of the boys trying to frighten me*. Hm? Hmm? And, if he turned and went back, of course, he was afraid that they’d jump out and say, “Awhoo, hehe, coward, coward, coward!” And he wouldn’t let that happen.

So, he went on, cautiously, cautiously—because he had seen nobody—and he was about three quarters way up when, there it was again—[foreboding wailing]. And he stopped. And looked around him. But no one. No one that he could see anywhere. And he hesitated. *What would he do?* Because, again, he knew that if he went back, somebody might jump out and say, “Awhoo, coward, coward.” He wasn’t going to let that happen.

And he went on, very cautiously now. And he was almost at the top of this little— It was hardly a hill. It’s still there today. It’s still there. You can see it, as you pass by the roadway. Small little hill of bare rock. He was almost at the top of it when, when there on top—there’s a little hollow—he saw the head and shoulders. By the moonlight. Gray hair.

Ah, he says. *Here’s the person who is trying to frighten me*. And he crept forward, crept forward, quietly. And there was, well, what looked like a woman, pointed away from him. There was her back. Head. Long hair. Shoulders. And he crept forward. Grabbed her by the shoulders. Spun her around. And he hardly got to look at her wizened old face when out came the hand *slapped* him across the face, put him spinning back.

Now, he could have split his head off of the rock because, the bare rock around there. And when he picked himself up, dazed—she was gone. It was only then he felt the pain in his cheek, put

up his hand, and saw the blood. *And*, of course—panic. He ran. Ran for his own house. Bursting the door. His two brothers were just gone to bed with a few minutes, and there was his mother, and as soon as he burst in she said, “Oh, Christ. What in the name of God happened to you? What, what...?”

And, he was there [indecipherable]. She didn’t know was he talking Irish, English, or Latin, or Greek. She couldn’t make head or tail of it, he was in such a panic. And she sat him down, sat him down, calmed him down. And she looked at his cheek, and there was the print of a small hand and fingers across his cheek and the blood flowing out of it.

Now, she was a calm, calm, calm-headed woman. She grabbed a bowl, poured out a kettle of water. The old kettle used to always be hanging over the fireplace that time—open fireplace. Poured it in, into the basin. Got a rag, and started to dab his cheek. But, she put him to bed, put him to bed after putting a piece of a blanket over his face. Put him to bed. But he never slept a wink that night, tossing and turning and groaning and moaning.

The following day was a Sunday—Sunday morning. And at mass, in the local church—it’s only a little church—the priest came out, said mass, “*In nomine patris es filii et spiritus sancti, amen.*” All the masses were in Latin at that time. And when the priest turned around to give blessing, first time to the congregation, he noticed that Seán was missing. He would, because it’s only a little church. And the mass went on. But at the end of mass, the priest came out quickly as the congregation were leaving, and he pulled Seán’s mother aside. And, he said, “Is Seán not well? Why was he not there?”

And the mother explained to the priest how Seán had come home the night before, and his cheek, cheek, all wounded.

And the priest said, “I’ll come, I’ll come around. I’ll see.”

And he did. And as soon as the priest saw the mark on Seán’s face, he said, “Get the doctor. Get the doctor quick.” She did.

The doctor came, took one look at Seán cheek, saw the mark of the four fingers across it. “Into the hospital, in Ennis, quick.” She took him into the Ennis hospital, into the A&E, the Accidental Emergency. And, of course, they were there looking at it, the doctors and the nurses. Of all the wounds they had seen before, and they had seen many, they had never seen the like of this.

Anyway, they dressed him up properly in there. Gave him whatever injections where needed, put on a proper dressing. Told him, "Come back in ten days time." And, when he did, when he did, they took off the dressing, and there were the four scabs, of the four fingers, of the little hand across his cheek. They dressed it again, and when the final dressing was finally taken off, and the scabs of those four fingers, wounds, wore away, there were the scars of the four fingers. They never went away.

Oh, yes, he tried to grow a beard. It didn't work. Those four scars never went away.

Afterwards, that man went strange in the head. He'd never again go out to a card play, even though his brother's tried to persuade him, "Come on Seán, come out, come out." He would never again come out. And any time he could be persuaded to go out and leave the house, he'd always look behind him. And his brother said, "What are you looking back for?"

"Look, she's there. She's there. She's following me."

"There's nothing there, Seán. We can't see nothing there."

"But she's there, look at her. Look at her. She's following me."

I'll tell you, he went strange in the head. And that's the man I saw going around with the coat, and the old piece of rope tied around it. And there's the man who was such a fine card player, such a fine dancer, such a fine athlete. And there he was now. Odd in the head. All because he had interfered with the banshee on that night—the banshee who was going about her own business, minding her own business.

And the old people always said, "That is the banshee. You come across her, leave her be. She's minding her business. You mind yours, if you want to stay safe."