

NIGHT VISITOR

Some sound at the back door.
The baby jerked awake and howled.
I picked her up, soothing her.
While my Mam opened the door.

At first I thought there was noone there
But a darkness entered, or maybe just the hot summer wind
Then a man's dark shape, a stranger.

Hospitality's a duty in these parts,
so far from any town or other white folk.
But still it's just the three of us here, until my husband gets home.

The man himself looks worn
clothes shabby and stained
His beard seems to hold his face still
But then he smiles.

Good evenin' to you missus
And to you too, ma'am.
Now, get that worried look off your pretty face.
I'm not here to cause harm.
Just a little food and maybe a place to rest this night.
I'll be away before sun-up
And noone need ever know I was here, isn't that right?

Something about the way he said it...

I think it would be better if you were on your way

But Mam burst in before he could say a thing.
She'd seen what I'd seen

Aye, and what if he is an escaped convict?
What harm would it do you to offer some food
And look the other way?
You bin free all your life,
And now you're ready to sit in judgement
On someone who just wants the same thing.

The convict's eyes had darted back and forth between us
He started with Mam first.

Aye, and you know the truth of it, ma'am
The hunger for freedom of an innocent man.

(snorts) Did you ever meet a convict who wasn't innocent?
And Mam of course is swallowin it whole.

You'd think she would want to hide how well she knows the convict life.
God knows I do.
If anyone were to find out she started out here wearin' the broad arrow.

The convict can maybe see I'm stony.
He moves toward me.
But I don't back off.
I've been married to himself for two years
and a bully doesn't frighten me no more .

Instead he just looks at me real steady

 Please.
He touches my hand
I see the cuts on the back, the scrapes he's got getting away

 Have it your own way.
 I'll fetch you tea.

All the while I'm waitin for me husband to come through the door
For the fight that will follow.
But he don't come.

After the meal, the man takes the fiddle down from the shelf.
He strokes his fingers over the wood
His fingers are long and gentle,
Not those hairy sausages I'm used to.
I watch
As he runs his hands over the waist of the fiddle and along the neck.

The music he brings out of that fiddle is beautiful.

After the tune, Mam goes to bed, peaceful in her heart about the man.
But we stay sittin at the table.
He tells me about his life back home
And the way things went wrong for him
To end up transported.
I tell him about me
And he listens

My husband still hasn't come home.
Maybe he's gone to some woman in town.
Or maybe he really is still out workin the land
Like I know he'll say.
Can't say I care over much.
He does his bit to stay alive
And I do mine.

This man here
With the hands and the voice

He'd be about the size of my husband.
There's an old coat of his I know would fit him
Make it easier for him to hide that convict look.

But if the coat went missin, what would I tell my husband?
Mam wouldn't give me away, she'd do what she could for a fellow government man.
Could I say I give it away to some one hard up
not in the neighbourhood, he might find out.

I could say it was stolen by the convict.
The neighbours wouldn't see through it, would they,
Would they remember Mam's past, and start talking about us all?
No, I can talk it out.

I tell him, show him the clothes,
The look in his eyes makes it easy, makes me glad.
I offer the shoes too, and more food.
But the night is getting old and my husband must be back soon, sometime soon.

I lead him out the back door
But he grabs my hand and moves out the front,
Checking through the window first.

His slides his hand up my arm
mumbles something about
Comfort.

My mother and child are sleeping inside.
The cicardas are loud
There is rain in the air.

We move around the side of the house
So I can see if my husband comes in from the back
Or travellers from the front.
But he does not hurry.

In the morning, there is no sign that the man has ever been here.
No sign either of my husband.

I walk outside to check for footprints in the dust
And find my husband's corpse.