**The Innkeeper’s daughter**

*This is a monologue which could be split into parts where asterisked. It should be delivered in a common accent, which may be different from what is written, so both accent and words should be adapted to reflect whatever the actor feels right.*

I thought I’d never forget that night, I wouldn’. It was the scream I still heard, night after night, thirty years it must be. I knew that God was punishing me. It was all my fault. How could I forgive myself, my poor little Dan? Until ….. I’ll get onto that, let’s start at the beginning.

Me Dad was the ’keeper of the King’s ’ead in Bethl’em, and me Mum ’n I ’elped behind the bar when it was busy. And boy, was it busy that weekend. The bleedin’ Romans ’ad called a census to get more taxes, ’n everyone ’ad to go to their ’ome town. Imagine the scene – ’alf the people were away so we couldn’ get no ’elp, except me Ben came over to lend an ’and, ’n the place was packed with strangers ’oo ’adn’ been ’ere for generations. There weren’ no bed to be ’ad for love nor money.

I’d been on me feet all day since before breakfast when this young couple comes in, mid-afternoon like, lookin’ for a room. No chance, poor beggars. They were dog-tired, ’n she was out ’ere (*indicates pregnant belly*), looked like she was ready to drop. But we ’adn’ got nowhere, so they ’ad to go.

Right manic it were that night, so we ran out of beer. Me Ben did ’is best to get some more, but it weren’ no good, ’n at midnight the punters moved on in search of their next un. ’N then I ’ad me special treat, didn’ I?

Well, it were like this. Me Ben ’n I, we’d been acourtin’ awhile ’n was gonna get married like. Clever ’e was, my Ben – ’e’d rented ’is bed out for a month’s wages, so when we closed the bar, out ’e goes as if to go ’ome, then sneaks round the back ’n I lets ’im in ’n up to my room for a bit of what you didn’ oughter, you know what I mean. Me Dad would’ve killed ’im if ’e’d found out, but I knew ’e was the one for me, ’n I weren’ gonna leave ’im out of the streets with nowhere to go, were I?

We was just akissin’, when there’s this knock on the door. “’Oo’s that?” says I. “Bex”, says me Dad, “can you do us a favour?” Well, you can imagine I weren’ in the mood to do no one no favours, except me Ben. “What’s that?” I says, suspicious like. “Open the door, Bex. We need to talk.” “What, in me altogethers? What’s it all about, then?” “You remember that couple we ’ad to turn away this afternoon? They’re back, desperate, ’n the young lady’s goin’ inna labour. Can they ’ave your room?” “No they bleedin’ can’t,” says I, all indignant. “If you’re so bleedin’ charitable, give ’em your own. Or are you afraid of askin’ Mum?” That shut ’im up! “You could put ’em in the stable, wouldn’ mess up no sheets.” ’E knew he was beat, so ’e stomps off.

It goes quiet, ’n I’m listenin to make sure ’e’s gone, ’n I’m thinkin’ about that poor young girl. Then I ’ears a giggle behind me, ’n Ben blows out the candle, ’n she’s gone from my mind, ’n we get down to business like. We was at it all night, ’n that was when we started our Dan. ’N at last, I was lying in ’is arms, all drowsy like after an ’ard night’s work, ’n I ’ears this scream. I can ’ear it still, ’n I knew she’d ’ad ’er baby, ’n I pitied ’er in that stable in the straw, ’n I wished I’d been able to ’elp ’er.

By the time I got downstairs in the morning, they’d gone. Me Dad said some shepherds ’ad turned up in the middle of the night – not sure what they were doin’ in town rather than lookin’ after the sheep – ’n one of ’em ’ad taken ’em ’ome to stay with ’is wife. ’N I saw them in town at times, but I stayed away, as I couldn’ look ’er in the eye like, ’n I tried to think no more on it.

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It were a year or two later that I remembered that scream. Dan was ’avin ’ ’is afternoon nap, tired out after all ’is crawlin’, ’n I was catchin’ up with the ’ousework, when I ’ears a blood-curdlin’ scream – a woman’s scream – ’n I immediately thought back to that other one. Then another, ’n another, ’n the sound of boots runnin’ – soldiers’ boots. I goes to shut the door, but a soldier bursts through it, sword in ’and. “Oh no,” I thinks, “’ere we go.” But ’e don’t want nuffin’ from me, shoves me aside, ’n rushes through the back, like ’e’s goin’ after ’idden treasure. Then ’e’s straight back out again, ’n ’is sword’s drippin’ with blood, ’n I looks at ’im in ’orror. “No!” I whispers, like there’s no voice in me. “No!!!” But e’s gone, ’n I rushes in to Dan, ’n there’s blood pourin’ from ’is ’ead ’n chest, ’n there’s nuffin’ I can do to ’elp ’im, ’n I’m cradling ’im in me arms, ’n ’is blood all over me dress, ’n I ’owls until I could ’owl no more, ’n Ben comes ’ome ’n finds me numb with grief ’n shock, still ’oldin ’ ’im.

Thirty years I’ve heard them screams, thirty years of ’eartbreak, longin’ for sleep to deaden the pain, dreadin’ the dreams, with no escape. ’N every time it starts with ’er scream, ’n I know that God is punishing me for what I did that night, for my sins – my sins with Ben, ’n my ’ardness of eart in sending ’er to the stable floor. ’N we made Dan that night, ’n God took ’im away, like he did with King David, ’n its all my fault. Oh God, ’ow long will you punish me? Must I suffer for ever?

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’N then, last year, all of a sudden, it changed. I was just aleavin’ Jerusalem at the end of Passover when I ’eard the soldiers’ boots. “Oh no, not again,” I thought, but they was just takin’ three poor saps for ex’cution – two right thugs, kickin’ ’n screamin’, ’n another, all quiet like. The crowd was all ajeerin’ but I shuts ’em up: “Leave ’em be, you cowards,” I cries. “Aren’ they suff’rin enough?” ’N ’e looked at me, ’n ’e ’eld my eye, ’n I knew I ’ad to go with ’im, ’n be with ’im till ’e died.

They strung ’im up, ’n ’e didn’ say nuffin’. ’e were about the age of my Dan, ’n I thought ’ow brave ’e was, ’n ’ow proud I’d be to ’ave a son like ’im. ’N is Mum were there, quiet too, no screamin’, like she ’as to be strong for ’im. ’N ’e cries out, “Father, forgive ’em, for they don’t know what they’re doin”, ’n there’s tears arunnin’ down my face, ’n I thinks ’ow I didn’ know what I were doin’ that night all those years ago, ’n its like ’e’s tellin’ God that it weren’ my fault, ’n its time to stop punishing me.

One of ’em thugs were makin’ a right racket, cursin’ God ’n the quiet un, but the other tells ’im to shut ’is gob, that we’s bein’ punished justly, but this man ain’t done nuffin’ wrong. ’N ’e turns to ’im ’n says, “Jesus,” – that was ’is name – “remember me when you come inna your kingdom”. ’N this Jesus, ’e smiles – in ’is agony ’e smiles – ’n ’e says, “I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”

’N a bit later, ’n they’re all gonnas, ’n is Mum’s aweepin’, ’n I puts me arm round ’er, ’n we weep together, ’n I says, “’E’s gone to the place where that smile came from, ’n there ain’t no more pain nor suff’rin’ there.” ’N we goes down together to ’er friend’s ’ouse, ’n I sits wiv ’er, ’n she starts tellin’ me about ’im, ’n I tells ’er ’ow I’s changed up there, ’n ’ow God’s ’eard ’is prayers ’n ’e ain’t punishin’ me no more. ’N I tells ’er what I did, ’n ’ow I sent that poor girl to the stable floor while I got up to no good upstairs. ’N she looks at me, wide-eyed like, ’n she smiles, in all ’er grief, ’n she gives me a great big bear’ug like, ’n she says, “I was that girl.”

Well, you could of blowed me over wiv a feather. ’N she tells me ’ow God told ’er about this baby, ’n she weren’ even married yet, ’n ’ow they got a message from an angel to run away before the soldiers came. ’N I tells ’er about my Dan, ’n ’ow the soldier stabbed ’im. ’N she tells me ’ow she took ’er Jesus to the temple, ’n a priest told of ’ow God would use ’im, ’n ’ow a sword would stab ’er own soul too, ’n now she knows what ’e meant, ’n now we can be sisters, coz we unnerstand what each other’s been agoin’ through.

’N since that day, I ain’ ’eard that scream no more. ’Er Jesus, ’e came back after ’e died, ’n then ’e went up to ’eaven, ’n ’e’s gettin’ a place ready for ’is Mum ’n me ’n everyone ’oo follows ’im. ’N I know that God’s forgiven me, because ’e prayed for me when ’e was on that cross, ’n I stayed wiv ’im.