

The Visitor by Grace Regan

Pronunciation

Bean-Tighe: Ban • Tee

Bean-Sidhe: Ban • Shee

Bogle: Bow • gl

Bwbach: Boo • back

The milk was already curdled. We'd bought it yesterday, and already it poured out of the carton as one gelatinous sludge, white and wiggly as it slid into the garbage amongst the broken plates we'd already tossed. The bread had gone moldy just the day before, blue-black spores eating away at the loaf until the whole thing was fuzzy. It was unexplainable how so much food had gone bad in a matter of hours. Already the apples and oranges had shriveled in the fruit bowl.

Aeron insisted it had to be a Bwbach or a Bogle or maybe even a Bean-tighe who had sacrificed the food to ward off something worse, something that lurked in the woods and pressed itself up against the cabin's windows in the middle of the night. Each suggestion was as ridiculous as the last. Aeron was well-versed in Fae lore and, while I didn't share the same sentiment, was a firm believer in their existence. It was preposterous to think that any Fair Folk resided in our cabin or even existed at all, but I couldn't deny how quickly our food was going bad. I didn't like to think that there was something sinister out there either, and that only the sacrifice of spoiled food and broken plates were keeping it away.

I could deny Aeron's ideas all I wanted, but I still felt chilled at the mention of some unknown creature lurking just beyond the tree line, so much so that I refused to take a single step outside after the sun had gone down. It didn't help that I'd found myself waking quite frequently in the middle of the night to the sound of bare feet pattering across the floor or to bowls and cutlery crashing about in the kitchen. I could have chalked it up to Aeron, but he was always fast asleep beside me as the sounds downstairs continued. Every day, as well, my stomach churned and my head pounded worse and worse. It was only a headache and stomach troubles, nothing serious, but it plagued me all the same. I hadn't been sleeping well and knew that had to be the reason.

Aeron had set out wild blueberries from our garden in a small dish by the hearth in case it was a Bean-tighe who had taken up residence with us. Of the three Aeron had guessed our visitor could be, he hoped it was the gentle, homely Bean-tighe, who took care of the house and ate cream and fresh berries. Each morning the berries were gone, but I knew they had only contributed to the fattening of some mouse or squirrel that had snuck inside the house. Still, Aeron continued until I had chided him enough about it that he stopped. Then he'd put out bread and milk in case it was a Bwbach, but they'd gone bad the next day. According to Aeron, Bwbachs would have eaten

and drank our offering, not spoiled it. So we were no closer to discovering the culprit of the noises downstairs or the rotten food.

This led to Aeron firmly deciding it was a Bogle who was bothering us. Broken plates, spoiled food, and late-night noises were all tell-tale signs. The solution? A horseshoe nailed to the front door, and piles of salt and flax seed scattered on the floor. *Bogles, as well as Bean-tighes, have to pick up every grain one by one*, Aeron explained, *if we keep leaving piles for it to clean up, it'll get frustrated and leave*. I loved my husband enough to go along with his antics.

But I kept waking up at night and, every time I did, it was with a sick feeling in my stomach, as if my own body had curdled alongside the milk. And, as if pushed forward by an unexplainable urge, I always found myself out of bed, across the hallway, and halfway down the stairs before I realized that I should just go back to bed. I was aware of my movements, choosing them, even, but it still felt like I was sleepwalking. I'd get out of bed and walk and, before I knew it, I'd find myself in the foyer on the bottom step, just a few paces away from the front door and the pitch-dark woods beyond it. *Compelled*. That was how I felt.

Days passed and Aeron and I had to make the kilometer trek to our car and drive along the rural road to the grocery store almost daily. We'd even gotten in the habit of eating on the car ride home, since we were unsure how much of our purchases would keep. We wanted to try a different store since this one's produce went bad so quickly, but it was the only one around for hours either way. We'd also had to buy more plates and cups, plastic ones this time, since so many of ours had broken. My head and stomach aches had gotten worse, and it was hard to keep what little food had lasted the night before down. I tried not to notice that, on top of all these strange things happening in the kitchen, the salt and flax my husband had spilled each night before were always in neat piles beside the hearth in the morning.

On a particularly dark night, long after the sun had set, I awoke again to sounds of clattering in the kitchen. I practically floated down the stairs before realizing where I was going, and, as soon as I snapped myself out of my daze, my pounding headache and vicious stomach pains returned. I coughed into my hand, once, sharply, and was startled by the small spots of red on my palm. *Where had this come from?* I'd felt a little off these past couple weeks, but nothing as serious as this. It worried me. I was sick of not sleeping, of waking up and feeling ill. This was the last straw. I decided, in that moment, that I was done with sleepless nights and broken plates and moldy bread. I crept into the foyer and towards the kitchen, hoping I could sneak up on whatever squirrel or mouse or fae that waited.

But just as I approached the kitchen and lifted my hand towards where I knew, by memory, the light switch was, I heard a high-pitched, animalistic yelp and a loud crunch, like someone had crumpled up an aluminum can. I flinched away from the sound of it and stood on the precipice of the room, staring towards the dark kitchen, with only a thin slice of moonlight to light the edge of the sink and some of the counter. The fruit bowl, which had only a few apples, was about the only thing I could see. The apples, ones we had bought that morning, were shriveled husks.

As I decided if I wanted to turn on the light and find the source of that yelp and crunch, the crack of a fist against our front door decided for me. I turned back to face the door, wondering who

could possibly be here long past midnight. Our cabin was truly in the middle of nowhere, with twisting, unending forest surrounding us from all sides. I wanted to go back to sleep. In fact, I'd almost convinced myself the knock was imaginary when the sound rang out again, followed by a quiet voice begging, "Please, please, please help me."

It was a woman's voice. She sounded like she was in trouble. Maybe she'd been camping nearby and had some kind of emergency. There was no cell service out here, so the closest campers came to finding help was us or the park ranger's cabin nearly seven kilometers away. The knocks gave way to quiet sobbing as I made my way to the door. Whoever it was, they needed help.

When I opened the door, I found myself face to face with a woman with red-rimmed eyes and fiery, wild hair. Tears silently ran down her cheeks. She wore a full-length green dress— *odd for camping*— and a grey shawl around her shoulders. At least she had hiking boots on. Her lips were chapped and pale, and it was clear she was a worried lip biter. Before I could even speak, words left her mouth in a rush, her voice pitching higher and higher as she spoke.

"Please help me. I— I was camping here with my friend. I just left our tent to use the bathroom and I didn't think I'd even need a flashlight so I didn't bring one but then it was so dark and I could barely see my hand in front of my face and I walked off to find somewhere to, well, to pee but then I couldn't find my way back so I just walked around hoping I'd find my tent but it feels like it's been hours and somehow I got all the way here and saw a light on upstairs so I—"

"Hold on," I said, cutting off her rambling. "Come in, you can stay here until morning."

"Can't I just use your phone? My friend is probably really worried."

The woman stepped in, though, and followed me to the living room as I explained that there was no cell service. At the news, she seemed to fold in on herself.

"Oh," she whimpered, her tears still falling steadily.

"I'm sorry," I replied, wishing I could conjure up a working phone for her.

Soon we were both sitting, her on the couch and I in the old wooden rocking chair on the opposite side of the hearth. I started up a small fire.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Ann," she replied through her sniffles.

I thought she would say more, but beyond that she was quiet, keeping her arms wrapped around herself tightly as she rocked on the couch, as if she could hug and soothe herself. It occurred to me then how strange the situation was. Not completely impossible, but bizarre enough that her silent rocking made me nervous. I coughed again, my stomach ache suddenly threatening to double me over, and I quickly wiped away the resulting glob of scarlet on my t-shirt before Ann could see it. Again I'd coughed up blood tonight. But, like I'd said to Ann, there was no way to

get help all the way out here unless I wanted to load the three of us up in the car and drive hours away to the nearest hospital. I didn't want to do that, so I ignored the blood. It was probably nothing. Aeron, somehow, was still asleep upstairs through all this commotion. I had to wake him up. The thought came through fiercely enough to stave off my body pains for a moment, and I was able to rise from the rocking chair.

"I'll be back in a moment," I said to Ann. "I need to speak to my husband."

Upstairs, it took a firm shake of Aeron's shoulders to wake him up. When I told him about the woman, his eyes went wide. He rushed out of the room so quickly he didn't even stop to put his slippers on, something he always did without fail. I followed him down the stairs to the doorway of the living room, but he took one look into the room and shrunk away before whirling to face me. I nearly slammed into him, not expecting the sharpness of his movements.

"What are you—" I started, but Aeron jerked a finger to his lips, silencing me.

"What," Aeron began, whispering in a fierce and dangerously low voice, "did you let into our house?"

I just stared at him, not understanding. *What*, he had said, not *who*. He grabbed my shoulder, pulling me even closer to him.

"She's a Bean-sidhe," he said, "look at her; red hair, green dress, red-rimmed eyes."

I blinked. I didn't know what a Bean-sidhe was, beyond it being another one of his imaginary Fair Folk.

"Has she said anything to you?" Aeron barreled on. "Was she screaming when you found her?"

"No," I snapped, suddenly furious at Aeron and his ridiculous beliefs. He was making this scared, helpless woman into something preternatural. "And whatever you're thinking, stop it. She's not a Bean-sidhe, whatever that is."

"Bean-sidhes are death omens." He clenched my shoulders even tighter, as if that would make me more likely to believe him. "If you hear one wailing, it foretells the death of a loved one."

"Unless you count a little bit of crying, she's done no wailing," I snapped, peeling his hands off of me. "She's obviously just a woman who got lost and just so happened to have red hair and a green dress. It's just a coincidence."

Aeron looked conflicted, not sure what to think. He realized I was right: it could be a coincidence. I knew I'd gotten through to him, but I was still angry.

"And if you're not going to help her," I whispered harshly, "then just go back to bed. I'm sick of all your fairy nonsense."

Aeron's mouth made a perfect "o" in surprise, and he flexed his hands as if he wanted to clamp them down on me again.

"But—" he started, but I cut in.

"No, I don't want to hear it. Go back to bed and leave me alone."

Without waiting for his response, I stepped around him and walked back into the living room.

"How are you doing, Ann?" I asked the woman, who was still rocking on the couch.

Behind me, I heard the sound of Aeron's feet walking away, back up the stairs to the bedroom.

"Who was that?" Ann asked as I returned to the hearth.

"My husband, Aeron," I replied.

Ann looked at me with something like curiosity, but sharper. It was unsettling. But I knew that was just Aeron's wild theories affecting my judgement, so I ignored the strange look in Ann's red-rimmed eyes.

After that, we talked a little more, only about the camping trip she'd planned with her friend, and the whole time we spoke, the kitchen, just a few rooms away, was suspiciously quiet. *Maybe*, I thought, *whatever was in there is gone now*. Ann had just finished cataloguing the hiking trails she had wanted to check out when I asked her if she wanted some tea— no food, in case it had all gone bad.

"Sure," she said. "I'll take some milk too, if you have any."

I knew we didn't, it had spoiled the day before, but I nodded and left for the kitchen. When I got there, I was almost nervous to turn on the kitchen light, but then I realized that fear came from Aeron's wild theories about Bogles and Bwbachs and Bean-tighes and flicked the switch. Salt and flax seed were scattered across the floor, mixed in with what appeared to be every last breakable cup, plate, and bowl in our cupboard. The apples, once shrivelled up in their bowl, were now completely dust. The bread was black with mold and even the jars of preserves I kept on the open shelves were cloudy with white, moldy chunks. The whole room smelled awful.

The strangest thing in the kitchen, however, was the small creature that sat against the far wall, an oven mitt creating a makeshift cushion for it. It was tiny and wrinkled, dressed only in a plain woolen shift and a mess of white hair on the top of its head. As I got closer, I realized it resembled a tiny, ancient woman. It was clutching its arm, which was bent at a sickeningly wrong angle, pale bone jutting out and thick blood soaking into the oven mitt.

"I tried to keep her away, miss," it whispered to me, its voice raspy and low and impossibly sad. "I'm sorry."

I wanted to tell it that it was alright, but I couldn't speak. I just stared at its tiny form, at the tiny broken arm and the grimace of pain on its face. I knew how to make a splint. I could help it, even if it was the thing that had been making so much mess. I went to the cupboard drawer to gather some things I'd need, all the while Aeron's voice echoed in my head.

Bean-tighes help around the house and protect it from harm. Often, Bean-tighes will make the food spoil or break household items to redirect malevolent forces. So, instead of, say, a mischievous Dryad pushing a tree over onto your house, all your vegetables will go back overnight.

Well, the Bean-tighe had spoiled and broken nearly everything, even its arm. With a start I realized: *had the Bean-tighe actually broken its own arm as a sacrifice?* If that was true, something truly wicked must be nearby. As I set to work on the splint, I thought more and more about the mysterious Ann, who had come out of nowhere and wore strange clothes and had been called a Bean-Sidhe by my husband.

"Who were you trying to keep away?" I asked it as I wrapped its bleeding arm in a clean kitchen rag. I already knew the answer, but I asked anyway.

"The Bean-sidhe, miss," It answered, confirming what my husband had said before. But as it finished speaking, its eyes grew wide and its tiny body started to tremble. Without turning around, I knew she was behind me.

"Damn Bean-tighe has kept me away for weeks," the Bean-sidhe growled.

I finally looked at her and found her face had changed, somehow both more savage and ethereal at once, her red hair floating around her head like she was underwater.

"I should snap its little neck," she snarled, her red-rimmed eyes shining with violence.

I could sense it in the subtle shift of the Bean-sidhe's body, that she was readying to lunge for me, for the poor Bean-tighe behind me who, this whole time, had been my protector.

"Don't you dare!" I howled, standing between the two Fair Folk.

"But it's been such a pest to you, hasn't it?" the Bean-sidhe taunted, cocking her head to the side. "Breaking all your lovely plates, spoiling perfectly good food."

The Bean-sidhe took a step forward, then stopped when she saw the furious look in my eyes. Aeron's words from just half an hour earlier came back to me.

Bean-sidhes are death omens. If you hear one wailing, it foretells the death of a loved one.

"So, bad omen, whose death are you here to warn of?" I asked.

The Bean-sidhe laughed, the sound of it somehow both melodic and grating to my ears.

“I’m not wailing yet, am I?”

Again, she took a step towards me. Her long red hair whipped faster around her face, frenzied and at odds with the unnaturally smooth movements of her body. She looked lovely and deadly all at once. Fear hollowed out the pit of my stomach, and it took all my concentration not to hurl. Still, I managed to speak.

“You aren’t welcome here,” I tried to say calmly, but my voice kept getting louder and louder. “Go away!”

Behind me, the Bean-tighe started quietly sobbing.

“Don’t worry about me, miss,” it said. “Get your husband and get out of here.”

But I couldn’t leave the Bean-tighe, our secret protector, behind. Again, my headache hit me and I coughed heavily. I needed Aeron. He knew all about Bean-sidhes. He’d know what to do. But I felt so weak, as if all the weeks of sickness, that had seemed like nothing to worry about at the time, crashed over me all at once like a towering wave. My knees wavered, much to the Bean-sidhe’s delight, and I lowered myself to the tile floor. Did Bean-sidhes have the ability to make someone sick? Or, maybe, was the Bean-tighe making me ill as the price for protection against the Bean-sidhe? My head pounded and my vision swam. And yet, she didn’t wail.

Then, behind the Bean-sidhe, in the doorway to the kitchen, was Aeron. He was here. He’d know how to get rid of her, how to help the poor Bean-tighe. I opened my mouth to say as much to him, to ask for his help, but the Bean-sidhe must have sensed his presence behind her. She whirled around, looked him dead in the eye, and opened her mouth so wide her jaw unhinged.

Then, she started wailing.

The death of a loved one, I recalled, slowly realizing that this was not just a bout of sickness, this was so much worse.

I started coughing up blood. And I didn’t stop.