

Rob Armstrong

## CANNIBAL STEW

*She was no fun; who needs her anyway?*

The pub claimed to be the oldest in Scotland, but Boyd knew three other pubs made the same claim. He picked this one because it claimed to be haunted by ghosts. It was a whitewashed, mismatched pile of stone and timbers adorned with ugly effigies and wooden signs—a tourist stop on the way to Inverness.

*She complained the whole time after we left Edinburgh.*

Boyd walked a secondary road that paralleled the shoreline of the Moray Firth inlet. Fifty yards away the sea crashed against the jetties. He walked a lot that day, sore feet attesting, crushed beneath the weight of his backpack. Boyd hoped the pub was still serving food; it was well after dark, and it was doubtful that the nearby hostel where he hoped to crash had anything more elaborate than pickings from a vending machine.

*I left her at the train station in Nairn. She could figure out the rest of her life from there. I could never be Jack Kerouac if I stayed with her.*

He dropped his pack by the door and pulled at the brass knob of the distressed green door. Inside the low-ceiling main room, a scattering of people huddled at the bar and ate at tables.

*A bunch of half-witted locals.*

“Are you still serving food?” Boyd asked the bartender.

“Relax a bit. First things first, young man. You must order a pint, then comes the food. Food should be only eaten to keep drinking.”

*Everybody itches to give you their opinion.*

Boyd knew he should have chuckled—that was the polite thing to do, but he did not have the energy to be fake, not after the week he had. Writing a paranormal guidebook for a second-rate press was deflating. Needing money corrupted his integrity. Traveling among coastline villages collecting half-concocted ghost stories from drunk stiffes was a further reminder that he was light-years away from the creative freedom to write whatever the hell he wanted.

“Let’s go with you telling somebody to scrounge around in the kitchen and dig up a shepherd’s pie before I pass out.” Boyd slid onto a barstool and pulled off his outerwear.

The bartender’s smile faded but his words were still polite. “The colder fall weather takes a bite. A shepherd’s pie will warm your bones.”

A few minutes later a seemingly pleasant woman placed steaming food in front of Boyd. “My husband tells me you need comfort food.”

“Something like that. I’ll take a pint now; something local with a catchy name.” Boyd shoved a forkful of the shepherd’s pie into his mouth.

“I’ll send Hamish over; I don’t pour.”

As soon as she turned around, Boyd called out, “What’s this meat? It tastes too sweet to be beef.”

“It’s goat, taken from a farm up the lane. It’s healthier for the heart than chicken.”

“You don’t say?” Boyd mimicked the banal responses he heard from hicks like this woman all week.

*The food police have arrived in Scotland. Next will be a vegetarian version of blood sausage made from tofu.*

“The Sisters brought goats with them when they fled the Baron of Castlehill in 1635

because of religious persecution. Coastal pirates and marauders were fed goat meat in this very pub. We have always needed strangers to make our living.”

“Great, thanks. Good to know,” Boyd said, hoping she would hurry to go back to the kitchen.

*I wasn't interested in a cooking history lesson.*

After an awkward silence as she studied him, she nodded and retreated.

Hamish returned and plopped down a mug of foaming beer on the oak counter. “I bet it gets lonely out there backpacking by yourself. This is bleak country, especially when the fog rolls in.”

*Nosy—even for a bartender. I would love to tell him to piss off, but I'm here to collect dopey ghost stories. I must make a charm offensive because I need a paycheck.*

Between bites of food Boyd said, “I had a lady friend bail on the trip. Not her cup of tea.” He snickered at using a very appropriate idiom within the United Kingdom. “I left her behind in Nairn to sort herself.”

“A handsome young man like you will survive just fine back in the wild. The next tavern holds a lassie for you, I'm sure.”

“Getting lassies has never been a problem.” Boyd sucked down a few swallows of beer. “My walkabout has a literary purpose. I'm working for a publishing house back in London desirous to collect ghost stories from rural areas around Inverness. These stories will serve as a compendium of ghostly tales for would-be paranormal hunters and supernatural believers.”

The bartender hooted. “We've got plenty of ghosties around here; seventeen, to be exact, if you believe dogs and cats can come back.”

*I've got a real live wire here.*

Boyd placed his cell phone on the counter. “Would you mind if I recorded? Please tell me about each.”

“I'd be glad to; I'm used to that. Every so often journalists and the like stop by to hear about the pub's history and its ghosts. Tourist buses stop here, mostly in the summer. We sell lots of beer and souvenirs then. The kiddies like the T-shirt of the ghost pirate Captain Finley; that's a seller. My wife and I have owned the pub for quite some time.”

*I imagine you add another ghost story each season to market new trinkets.*

“Let's start with the ghost of Finley. Your wife tells me the pirates were big fans of the goat meat.”

“Finley and his crew were a foul lot, a real scourge of the Moray Inlet in the mid-1700s. One night the captain and a few of his crew came ashore for food and drink. As the hour grew later and they were quite deep in their cups, an argument broke out among the men. Blades were drawn and two of the sea dogs were dead in a matter of minutes—one of the dead was Captain Finley, killed by his first mate. They say it was over a woman. I've never seen Finley's ghost, but my wife has many times. Old Finley comes on the anniversary of his death and sits right in front of the fireplace, drinking from the same cup he used before he died. It sits on the mantel over there today.”

*Not bad; I'll have to do a little background research on the pirate captain to add bulk to the story. Pirate stuff is good.*

“Who is the oldest ghost?” Boyd lifted his mug to drain it. “This is some good, strong beer. Can I have another?”

“I make the beer myself. Call it Stranger's Delight; very high alcohol by volume.” The bartender dispensed another mug of beer and continued, “The oldest ghost we have is a sad tale.

That ghost is a little girl, a prior owner's daughter, back in the 1300s. She would play outside the pub, along the road, with her dog so she could wave at passing travelers. As the hour grew late, her father neglected to fetch her one day because he drank too much with a patron. It was dusk. Wolves beset the girl and slaughtered both her and the dog. Both of them were buried over there where the old bar was located. The very place where the neglectful father served his drinks. He chose that spot so that he would never be too far from her again."

The bartender pointed to a granite plate on the floor with the date 1323 and the name *Liza* engraved on it.

"Have you seen her?"

"No, only my wife and the occasional patron see and talk with the ghosts. I'm not interested in talking with the spirits. My wife says that the girl's ghost is afraid to leave the pub and keeps forbidding her dog from leaving."

*I need to interview the wife as well.*

The bartender continued telling the history of all the pub's ghosts throughout its hundreds of years of existence. He grew the most animated when he spoke of a traveling troubadour who, while reciting a love sonnet, was stabbed by a local lord fixated on revenge for the man who seduced his wife. When the stories ended Boyd realized that he had ordered way more beer than he should have drunk. But he was pleased with the material he collected. The bartender turned out to be less of a dolt than he first thought. Boyd's head was spinning from the beer.

"Can I ask your wife a few questions now before I turn in at the hostel?" Boyd yawned, wanting desperately to put his head down on a pillow. He needed to stay on schedule with his hiking and go to a few more villages before his assignment was finished; his editor insisted that he not use a car to lend a sense of authenticity to the voice of his writing. One of the goals for the book was to capture the angst of living in the stark countryside.

*Living in the middle of nowhere, ugly-ville doesn't require experiential research.*

Hamish darted his eyes to the mantel clock. "Catriona's done in the kitchen and is on her way home. I could take you back for a quick chat in a bit when we close; it's not far from the hostel. My wife likes interesting new people like you."

"That would be great," Boyd said. "And maybe she could introduce me to one of those ghosts she has met."

The bartender did not seem to enjoy his joke but said nothing.

*Too much beer; I've got to rein in the sarcasm.*

At that moment the outer door to the pub opened, ushering in a blast of cool air. An American couple, so identified by the Nike swoosh on their shoes, hurried inside and went straight for the bar.

"Are you still serving?" one of the Americans said.

"For a bit. What will it be?"

"Give me two Cannibal Stews." The man smiled over to his companion.

The bartender lowered his voice. "What an odd name for a drink. I've never heard of it."

Matching the bartender's lower volume, the same American said, "The broker told us that you would play coy." He placed what appeared to be a vintage coin on the bar.

After pocketing the coin, the bartender reached for the highest shelf behind the bar and selected a nearly empty crystal decanter of what Boyd thought was whiskey. Hamish half-filled two cocktail glasses and ordered the Americans to take the farthest booth in the back of the pub. "Closing time is soon. I will lock up and turn out the lights and everybody else will go. Come sun-up I'll be back to collect you. Under no circumstances are you to leave or let anybody else

inside.”

The Americans quietly giggled. The one who gave the coin said, “I can’t believe this is happening. Thank you.”

The Americans hurried to the booth.

“I couldn’t help but hear. What was that all about? A most unusual exchange,” Boyd said to the bartender.

“Tis nothing—merely tourists seeking distraction,” Hamish said. “Best for you to hit the pisser now or else the cold winds will freeze your privates if you have to go outside. Closing time is in ten minutes, and then you can get your interview with my wife.”

*What are the latecomers going to be doing all night, alone in the pub?*

After the pub closed Hamish turned several deadbolt locks on the rear door of the pub and shoved the keys into his pocket. He pointed Boyd to a path that led up a hill through shoulder-high grasses and brush. “Our house and stable are atop the bluff. From there it is an easy walk down to the village and the hostel.”

The overdrinking of beer had made Boyd’s legs unsteady and his mind thick. It was an effort to climb the hill; his muscles had hardened after hiking all day. His backpack, if it could be believed, seemed heavier. Boyd struggled to catch his breath. After several minutes of silence, he huffed, “The coin the American gave you seemed like an antique coin, probably worth a lot of money. Is a taste of Cannibal Stew some highly prized whisky I’ve never heard of?”

“Very much so,” the bartender said. “Only vetted people through the broker are allowed to taste it. It is much more than collectible whisky.”

“How so?” He was becoming annoyed with the bartender’s vague answers about the Americans.

Pausing for a moment before speaking, the bartender said, “People who drink Cannibal Stew are seeking out knowledge on ghosts just like you. Unfortunately, I’m going to ask you not to write about the Americans if you want to interview my wife.”

“I won’t write about them without your permission. I’ll respect the need for discretion as any news journalist would,” Boyd said, not entirely sure he would honor his commitment if it turned out the reasons why the American drank Cannibal Stew was a juicy tidbit for the book.

At last they reached the top of the hill. Hamish pointed to the stables, whose white-painted sides were vaguely visible in the starlight. “My wife is looking in on our horses before bed. You can chat there with her.”

As they passed the lit-up main house en route to the stable, Hamish said, “To answer your question, drinking Cannibal Stew will allow the Americans to see the ghosts that inhabit the pub. The few allowed who can pay can also converse with the dead during the night they drink it.”

Boyd laughed out loud. “Are you kidding? Is the pub wired for ghostly special effects? I won’t say a word to ruin your lucrative thrill show.”

*Both the bartender and his wife are scam artists who prey on traveling strangers. Maybe I could sell the story to a tabloid.*

Inside the stables were a half-dozen horse stalls. Catriona was shoveling hay into one of them when they entered. Hamish called out and explained the wish for her to answer some questions for the ghost guide that was being written.

“Your husband tells me that you have seen and conversed with the ghosts in the pub. Tell me how you do it. Are you drinking Cannibal Stew or are you a natural clairvoyant?”

*I chase after kooks for their made-up ghost stories; it is so embarrassing. I’m meant for better.*

“I was given the gifts to serve as a handmaiden to the dead; such service can be traced back nearly four hundred years to the first coven that fled the Baron of Castlehill,” Catriona said.

*This is all some steaming pile of cow pies but it's a great story.*

Boyd fought the urge to laugh aloud again. “Why do the dead require a handmaiden?”

“They need help resolving the reasons as to why they can't move on.”

*Isn't that what every charlatan says when asked for a reason why ghosts exist?*

“So you're like a social worker for the dead?” Boyd said.

*I'm an idiot; the beer is talking again.*

“You are a rude little man who deserves what ill fortune he has wrought,” Catriona said.

Boyd realized his snarkiness was ruining the interview. “I'm sorry for making a joke. Excuse me; I've drunk too much. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me.”

Without warning Boyd was struck hard on the back of the head. He teetered; his vision blurred and he slumped to his knees. Through a haze of pain, Boyd saw Hamish holding a billy club.

*Who are these people?*

“Darling, I did what you asked after he was so rude about your goat shepherd's pie,” Hamish said. “I found out he was alone and led him back here quite tipsy. Nobody saw us leave together. And from the way he comports himself, no one should miss him much. His editor will think he stumbled blind drunk off the bluff on the way to the hostel.”

Hamish stripped a dazed Boyd of his backpack, cell phone, and wallet.

Boyd was struck again across the shoulders, and he fell facedown to the floorboards. As he tried to rise, his head still spinning, the bartender pounced on him and snapped manacles onto his arms and legs. As Catriona opened a hatch through the floor, Boyd was dragged toward it. A dangling chain attached to an overhead winch was clipped to his hand manacles so that he could be lowered.

*What is happening? What are they going to do to me?*

The walls of the underground room Boyd found himself in were made of brick; the smell of soot pervaded the dank air. The owners of the pub stood above him after climbing down a ladder.

“What is this place?” Boyd blubbered. “Why are you doing this?”

“You were an easy choice for what we need because you're a self-satisfied, boorish man,” Catriona said.

“You're kidnapping me? All because I was rude about your shepherd's pie?” Boyd said. “This is crazy town. I'm sincerely sorry for not showing respect. It's been a long, tiring week and I got snappish. Please let me go.”

“Dogs get snappish,” Hamish said. “A man should be accountable for how he conducts himself.”

Hamish gripped Boyd beneath his shoulders and dragged him toward a brick kiln located in the corner of the room. The bartender pushed Boyd inside the oven with a violent shove and slammed shut the grated iron door.

Boyd pulled against the bars. “Let me out of here. You'll go to jail for this. If you stop now and release me, I won't press charges. You'll never see me again.”

Catriona laughed. “All of you chosen pretty much promise the same thing.”

“Chosen for what? How many others have you kidnapped?”

“Since the original coven came to the village in 1635, the handmaidens have required sacrifices to craft Cannibal Stew. Since we are guardians, we do not take people from the village,

only strangers. Selling the drink to a special few affords extra money in the cold months when we cannot send men out to fish,” Catriona said.

“You’re going to cook and eat me like savages? Is that why your drink is called Cannibal Stew? Are the Americans going to join you?”

Catriona shook her head. “The handmaidens do not crave human flesh anymore to perfect their magic. Now we will cremate you and mix your remains with trace amounts of the ashes of those who came before you. This human mix becomes part of an alchemic tincture with the whisky,” Catriona said.

“This is madness,” Boyd said. “Ghosts, witches, and magic are not real. You’re just hoodwinking tourists to make them think they are talking to ghosts. And you’re outright, perverted murderers.”

“It doesn’t matter if you believe, or the tourists, just so long as the tourists continue to pay for the experience of being with ghosts for the night,” Hamish said. “Nearly all the tourists, I believe, think it is a thrilling show. Nobody really cares about what is real or not anymore; all that matters is the feeling of the experience—the coven has always adapted with the times.”

*I must say something to make them stop. I’ve always been able to talk my way out of anything.*

“My cell phone will be tracked here. The police will piece it all together,” Boyd said. “Just let me go, please.”

“We’ve heard that argument before. Hamish will walk your phone along the sea walk bluff. After that, all evidence of you will be burned and destroyed.”

“When they trace my steps, it will lead to the stables. Maybe the police will get lucky and find this dungeon and this burning box,” Boyd said. “The truth will come out eventually, if not for me, then the next time. Let it end with me—I’ll go quietly and say nothing about you or your pub. You can still make money grifting people into seeing ghosts.”

“What do you think, Catriona?” Hamish said.

“I’m wondering if you have enough propane to toast this asshole.”

“Sure do, sweetheart. I filled the tank up the other day when I noticed the decanter of Cannibal Stew running low.”

“I hope you both burn in hell!” Boyd roared at the top of his lungs.

Catriona cackled, “Maybe you will haunt us? There’s always room for more ghosts at our pub.”