A First Date in Inverness

A SHORT STORY ABOUT THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

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Hunter can't wait for the heat to break. It's a quiet Tuesday, sticky warm with slow breezes. He's walked the streets of Inverness, sweat beading his face, dampening his hair, rolling down his back, but he wants to look good for his date with Mairi. It shouldn't be this warm this far north, even in summer.

They meet at Walrus & Corkscrew at a table in the shade of a tree, beside the cemetery of the Old High Church. In his heavy drawl—such a stereotypical American accent—he talks about growing up in the middle of nowhere on a shiitake mushroom farm. His father worked first in Saudi Arabia, where his sisters were born, which is why his mother filed for divorce.

"Imagine an American woman going to the grocery alone in Saudi Arabia," he laughs.

He faces Mairi across a small wooden table. One leg crosses over the other. He wears sunglasses, sits back in his chair, attempts to look at

ease, but it's a first date, so how easy can he be? She sits under the hug of the tree, in floral short-shorts and a black cropped blouse tied at the waist. Teal polish on her toes and fake Birkenstocks on her feet. Her hair in a clip, she, too, hides her eyes behind sunglasses with oversized gold rims. She has three piercings in each ear—big gold hoops and two pairs of small, gold studs. She sits back in her chair, trying, too, for ease.

How to describe his voice? Twangy and deep, syllables pronounced and drawn out. Slow but confident. The inflection of a cowboy at ease in his American-ness, walking with that feeling of I-own-the-world.

His father was a jeweler before he was a mushroom farmer, he says.

"He might have been more successful if he'd stuck to one thing," Hunter adds.

What is success, though? It's easier to judge one's parents than to understand them. Hunter has been traipsing through Europe for five months, never planning more than three days ahead. Mairi lives in Inverness, doesn't drive, doesn't own a car, and she is in no hurry to go anywhere.

He attended a wedding of a person he met on the road. He is aimlessly traveling, or maybe traveling for an aim? This is only one stop on his journey, and he has no clear ultimate destination. At least, if he does, he doesn't share it with her.

He hints at a second date. She leaves the question open, does not commit but does not say no.

Mairi tells the story of how her father left her family—her mother and five siblings. They lived in Germany, then, but her accent sounds French. She talks about growing up on a mussel farm. They have these culinary origins in common. What are the chances?

Turns out she IS German, but moved to Scotland when she was a girl, long after her father left. They were living in Munich before they came here, where her mother is from. Her accent is a blend of German

and Scottish. She is a combination of all her ancestry, like the rest of us.

Her mother is from the Islands along the Scottish coast. She doesn't share what took her mother to Germany, or how her parents met. Only that her father went off with another woman. These types of things stay with a child, leave a lasting impression. They nod their shared hurt. They can understand each other's feelings of loss.

Hunter asks, "Did you date older guys when you were young?"

She snickers, then says yes. They both laugh. A nervous laugh. A laugh with layers. Neither of them says another word. They are quiet for a while in the humid street.

A woman rounds the corner holding a screaming child. The child is red-faced and loud, open-mouthed, her hair wild. She might be four or five. She rests in her mother's arms and wails, confident at being carried. She doesn't worry that her mother will drop her. Her mother keeps going, ignores the screaming, and the child keeps on letting out all her rage and frustration. They walk down the alley to the River Ness.

If only it were windy today like so many days in the Highlands. But the air is still, the heat almost settling on top of it, like a weight, like a heavy hand pressing down.

A group of white-haired people troop out of the historic cemetery, walking slow. An 18th century Gothic church called the Old High St. Stephen's Inverness, the oldest church in town, with its own graveyard and organ. Lots of Frasers are buried there. *Outlander* fans come in droves, almost believing Jamie is more than a fictitious character. The cemetery sits on the top of a slope, overlooking the river. There are two gates to access it, and passers-by walk in, meander among the graves. Teenagers sit at the edge of the cemetery and eat and drink and vape while watching the fast current of the river pass far below. Their voices

carry, though on most days, the wind is so strong that people walking on the sidewalk below can't hear a word.

This is the oldest congregation in Inverness, part of the Church of Scotland. *Everyone is welcome*, its website says. There are two buildings: the Old High Church, which houses the original worship center, and St. Stephen's in Southside Road. The Old High Church has been closed for worship since March. The website boasts of this church's fine musical tradition, its growing Christian community, the causes it supports—Highland Food Bank and Christian Aid. It's a Fairtrade Church.

But neither Hunter nor Mairi care about the church. Do they even see it, beyond their little table, beyond the stone wall? They give off Atheist vibes, or maybe Agnostic. They are intent only on connection right now, the intensity of finding someone to see them, to understand the words between their words.

It's a late afternoon on a warm day as a heat wave surges through the UK. The whole world is breaking heat records, boiling beyond the historical books. Climate change in real time. Shops in Inverness prop open their doors to create air flow. There is no air conditioning this far north. It's rarely needed. Hunter and Mairi slink into the shade. Their conversation meanders. They sip at their wine. There is nervous laughter, then heavy silence.

When the conversation resumes, they talk of birth order—the oldest are high-achievers, they agree; middle children clamor for attention, while the youngest rebel. Hunter nods vigorously, says his sisters fit these profiles. Mairi concurs.

"My oldest sister has five advanced degrees," he chortles.

Is he criticizing her, or admiring?

"I was a good kid, though," Hunter backtracks. "I didn't drink until I was 21."

"Did you have guns, though?" Mairi asks.

Foreigners always picture Americans wielding guns. Perhaps they recall sharpshooters from old Western flicks, or think of the latest news, another senseless shooting. It's no longer a surprise when the news reports a mass shoot-up at a school or a dance club or a house of worship.

"No," he says, then doubles back. "Well, I only had the ones I inherited when my father died. And I sold them off." He is quick to explain away his gun ownership, but then takes great care in describing one pistol in detail, how its gleaming hilt makes it a work of art.

"My dad was such a liberal except when it came to Second Amendment rights," he says. "He believed in it as it was written. In case of the need to overthrow the government—not to kill someone you disagree with."

His face is red—from the heat, or the topic?

"You know," Hunter says, "there are more guns in America than people."

"Oh!" Mairi takes her phone from her purse. "I forgot to check! I have to see if they got there."

She mumbles something about guests making their way to her house and how she wants to confirm they got in OK.

"Sorry," she says. "You were saying…"

But that conversation is over. No more talk of guns.

Did she bring up her houseguests to let him know he won't be following her back to her place? Will there be a second date? Will she follow him to his temporary abode?

The buildings on the side street are old and Scottish, looking like they might appear in a historical film. Stucco exteriors, small windows framed in brick, steep slate roofs and chimney stacks. Hunter returns

to his childhood, says he walked three kilometers to catch the school bus, uphill both ways.

(Kilometers? Is he pretending to be European now? And is he serious, or joking? Does she catch the rise in his voice? Does she know the uphill-both-ways bit is a metaphor? He doesn't look like he's endured much physical hardship.)

They move on to talk about driving, how young Americans get behind the wheel, how it doesn't cost anything to learn because it's a class in high school and easy to get one's driving license. He's exaggerating, of course; everything costs these days, and many kids are reluctant to drive. Too much freedom in a world spinning wildly out of control. But Mairi takes him at his word. In this moment, he is the authority on all things American. If she's even listening.

Scots wait to drive until their twenties, Mairi counters, and it costs more than 1,000 pounds to attain one's license.

"Here, people don't need to drive, so they don't," she explains.

They order more wine. The server is a portly man with a friendly face and red-brown hair. He wears a white apron over his clothes. He bustles to the table and away from it, smiling with every comment.

"More of the same?" he asks. Hunter and Mairi nod. He hustles inside for two more glasses.

"I proposed to a woman once, but we didn't marry," Hunter says, chuckling nervously. He looks up to read her expression. "Kind of not what you typically talk about on a first date." He looks away, but waits for her response.

He laughs. Mairi laughs quieter.

"Another woman offered me $20,000 to marry her, for a green card," he says, emboldened. "But I said no." He looks down at his hands beneath the tabletop. "Too complicated."

His voice grows quiet.

"I want to marry for love," he admits.

They fall silent, each in their own thoughts and desires, gazing behind their sunglasses. From the depth of his voice, Hunter sounds like he would be tall and broad, muscular, powerful, but he is only ordinary. Short golden-brown hair, a generous well-groomed beard of soft brown, tanned skin and red New Balance sneakers. He hits a pen while they talk. He wears navy blue shorts and a gray T-shirt that does not hide a slight paunch. His legs and arms are scrawny, lacking definition.

"I'm going to a wedding in Ireland, County Meath," Mairi says. "I've never been to an Irish wedding."

"I love Ireland," Hunter says. "I went to a wedding in Belgium last month. A woman I met on the road invited me. I didn't even know what work she did. There were four weddings in the same place, and when I asked for the one I was invited to, a girl said, 'Susie the singer?' She knew more about the bride than I did." He laughs and hits his pen, then sips wine.

"I am a good plus one, and I love Irish people," Hunter says, fishing for an invitation. "They're great fun."

Mairi remains quiet, not taking the bait. Maybe she stares off into the distance behind her sunglasses. Will she ask him to accompany her? Will they see each other again? By now, her guests are probably unpacking in her house. Presumably, Hunter has a room somewhere. Will they return there and ravage each other in a quiet, private space? Discover the secrets of the flesh, learn the distinct sounds of passion? Will he taste her and remember the saltiness of her skin on his tongue long after he has left Inverness?

Because he will leave, of that, they are both certain.

A guy speeds by on a fat-tire bike. An old man pushes a baby in a stroller—a *wean*, the Scots would say. They have their own conversa-

tion, the old man and the *bairn*. They both smile, they both laugh, he pushes the stroller hard then stops abruptly and the little one laughs, full-throated, head thrown back, eyes shut to the overcast sky. Full abandon at both ages, the very young and the very old. Sharing the beauty of this life.

"I went to London once," Hunter says. "In Leicester Square everyone thought I talked like Forrest Gump."

Mairi is quiet. Hunter's face grows solemn, serious. His accent is the kind of drawn-out drawl that foreigners use to mimic Americans. But it's mean to make fun of the way a person speaks. The guttural inflection of their original voice. The way they shape their words and roll them on their tongue. The way they were taught by a mother or a father or a sister or a brother, in the hills of another place, where they ran in open fields and got lost under tall trees on slow summer days, like this one.

A person's voice is wrapped up in identity and place and home. To mock it is to cut down the person until they cease to exist. To erase them. To believe the one casting judgment is better, stronger, more acceptable.

And in that moment, Mairi's heart melts for Hunter. He is a person like any other with a soul and a deep desire to connect. A man trying to be brave but really hungry for love.

He is, like her, a lost soul who wants to be seen and heard and understood.

In that moment, love begins. Like a seed pushed into cold soil before growing season. Hope tucked in with it, along with a prayer for rain and ample sun, so the seed will bloom and push its way above the surface, drink in the air and sun and sky and fresh cold water and grow because of all it is fed, over time.