

The Empty Stool

by Robert Morschel

I walked up to the bar and sat down on the empty stool.

"You don't want to sit there," said the bartender.

"Oh? Why not?" I replied.

"It's haunted."

I laughed, but then stopped when I saw he was not laughing with me.

"You're serious?"

He nodded.

"Well get me a drink and tell me more."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What'll you have?"

"Pint of Guinness, and pour yourself one too."

He thanked me and I watched as he pulled two draughts. He was a large, portly, red-faced man — standard bartender stock. His large meaty hands dwarfed the glass as he placed it in front of me. I took my first sip and looked at him expectantly. He leaned forward earnestly.

"I've been the landlord of this here pub for nigh on ten years. We don't get very many visitors, not since they built the bypass, you see. In fact, you're the first stranger we've had in months."

"I'm not a stranger — I grew up here," I protested.

"I know, Joe, but then you moved to Dublin and got educated and all, and you know how that puts you in the minds of the people around here. Anyhow, let me finish. When I first started we had a fella by the name of Henry Mallone what used to come in here, every night, always sitting on that stool. I don't recall him ever missing a night. Then, one night, just for a laugh, one of the other punters, a fella called Toby, Toby McGuire, sits in Henry's place. Henry comes in, sees Toby on his stool and tells him to move, on account of how its his seat. Toby was a young fella like, and didn't take kindly to Henry's tone. I think he'd had a few too many too. So, he tells Henry to feck off, and Henry goes ballistic. I tell you, I never seen anything

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like it. He was such a quiet man normally, but that night he were like a crazed beast, effing and blinding, and then he starts to lay into Toby. I tried to stop things, but they fought like animals, breaking up the place, until suddenly Toby lands a lucky punch and decks old Henry. Henry fell like a stone but knocked his head on a table and died there in then. It was a terrible thing to be sure."

He paused, wiping the sweat from his brow and took a long drink.

"There were an inquisition and all, but the tribunal decided it were accidental death and nothing further happened. But Toby was a heartless bastard. He showed no remorse, and fool that he was, he decided he'd take Henry's seat for his own. I remember telling him off but he didn't listen to me. I'm just an old fool, right? The thing is, a few weeks later he disappears. He'd been living with this gal, Mair, a pretty young thing, complete waste on the likes of him. She came in here asking after him, but we'd not seen anything. The polis came later, but he were never found."

"What do you think happened?" I asked.

He raised his hand. "Not long after, there was this other fella, also a young 'un, Jerry was his name, arrogant as they come. He started to come to the pub and made himself right at home in old Henry's seat. No respect for the dead these youngsters. Two weeks later he's missing too. But they found him, mind you, not two miles from here, in the moors, dead as they come."

I nodded, "Yes, those moors can be pretty dangerous if you're not careful. Suck you right under."

"Indeed," continued the old man, a queer look in his eyes, "except that he weren't drowned. They found him sitting next to the dead willow tree, hugging it with all his might, his face full of dread, like he died of fright."

I smiled to myself. Superstitious old codger.

"So what do you reckon scared him like that? Henry's ghost?"

He looked at me.

"You may sneer, young man, but that's two deaths unexplained. I tell you it's old Henry being possessive about that stool you're sitting on."

I snorted, but will confess to being a little less cocky. However I stood my ground.

“Pah! Ghosts. No such thing.”

“That what they teach you in Dublin?” he asked before shrugging and returning to his duties. “Suit yourself.”

I had another few pints and chatted to a few of the locals, before finally calling it a day. I bade them all good night, and was about to leave when the bartender called me over. He had a queer look in his eyes.

“Watch yerself out there, lad. Its a grim night for believers and unbelievers alike.”

I smiled, thanked him for the story, and left.

It was a chilly, moonlit night, and I was not looking forward to the half mile walk back to the B&B along the old Clairin road. A fine mist rose from the moors on either side of the road, swirling around my feet as I walked. I was thankful for the intermittent moonlight because apart from the twinkling lights of the village far ahead the road was dark. I walked briskly, the warm glow of alcohol buzzing pleasantly in my head while I mulled over the evening's strange, implausible story.

Suddenly behind me I heard the sound of gravel being trodden under foot. I spun around to look but the road was empty.

“Who's there?” I called, but the night was deathly silent, pausing it seemed to watch the scene unfold. I could see my breath clouding before me, the air suddenly feeling very icy. Then I smiled at myself — these moors had an eerie effect on locals and visitors alike it would seem — and resumed my journey home.

Then I heard the sound again, but this time right behind me. I froze in my tracks and turned around slowly. My spine tingled with anticipation and I felt every muscle in my body tense with the primal desire to flee. A shadow, large and looming stood before me, the moon glinting off dark, hollow eyes.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

The shape didn't speak at first, then approached, slowly, reaching out large, familiar, meaty hands, a large amorphous shape in one

them, and I braced myself, wanting to scream, but somehow unable to.

He spoke.

“You forgot your coat.”

