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Elaine Davidson Finds a Home

LUCY HESTER

If you're doing a systematic exploration of the Royal Mile, beginning at the top and working your way down, you won't find Elaine Davidson until you're nearly halfway to Holyrood Palace. You'll be almost to Nicholson Street and the Northgate Bridge. You'll have just about come to the portal entrance to Mary King's Close, and you'll be deciding whether to take the plunge into the dark underworld of that ancient street, bricked up and built over in Sixteen-Twenty-Something to incarcerate the portion of Edinburgh's population that resided there, three-quarters of whom suffered from the plague, and four-quarters of whom never saw the light of day again. You don't really believe in ghosts, but everyone who's ever been down to Mary King's Close does, so you've gotta see what the hype is about, test your fortitude against the supernatural.

Before you get the chance to, though, you see Elaine Davidson. You don't know her name of course-- that will come later when you have a chance to look her up on Wikipedia and the Guinness Book of World Records. It will strike you then as inappropriately anti-climactic. The name is fairly innocuous, conventional enough. There are probably lots of women named Elaine Davidson in the United Kingdom. But there isn't anyone anywhere who looks like this. You gather your cohorts--have they seen her yet? They have, and like you, they are wondering how to proceed with an appropriate response.

The thing about the Royal Mile is that it's sort of like a Scottish Disneyland. Day in and day out it buzzes with tourists, striving to fulfill their every Scottish fantasy. Edinburgh Castle sits at the high point of the Mile, flanked by statues of Robert the Bruce and William Wallace. As a military fortress, it doesn't offer much in the way of pretty photo-ops, there's mostly just a lot of canons and stone. But the Scottish crown jewels are there, along with the closet where Mary Queen of Scots gave birth to King James before spending the rest of her life in captivity, and there's a dog cemetery that will melt the heart of even the toughest lad.

Outside the castle, any vigilant tourist will be sure to stop for the Mel Gibson look-a-like who stands ready and waiting in full battle garb and blue face paint, proffering a variety of machetes and battle-swords and what cannot fail to be anything but a timelessly-valued photograph if you let rip your best war-cry and drop a quid in his can. He played Braveheart's stunt-double, and as far as anyone knows, he's claimed his stake there on the Royal Mile every day since. He stands next to the entrance to the Tartan Factory, where you can watch tartan being made and learn about the history of kilts and tartans and purchase scarves and blankets in the authentic patterns of just about any Scottish clan in history, along with more than a few that never existed at all. But don't buy too soon! Stores like "Thistle Do Nicely" and "Nessie" have a wide range as well, so you'll want to shop around.

By the time you've worked up an appetite you'll have arrived at Deacon Brodie's Tavern, the perfect place to stop for your fish-and-chips and Irn Bru (the waitress will swear that it's the best cure for a hangover, but after just one you'll know to never order another). Deacon Brodie's is the one-time residence of the real life Dr. Jekyll, or Mr. Hyde, if you prefer. He was hung just across the street, around where the statue of David Hume sits now, in front of St. Giles Cathedral. They say Presbyterianism started at St. Giles, which has sat there on the Mile for almost 1000 years. The Thistle Chapel, inside, is used by the Queen twice a year for the meetings of the secret Order of the Thistle. The Order's newest member is Prince William. Too bad you didn't plan your trip around his next visit.

So you're buying your scarves, your beer-coozies that look like kilts, your stuffed animals of the Loch Ness monster, checking out a biography of Sir Walter Scott while trying to remember what it actually was that he wrote, all the while taking pictures of everything you see and enjoying (or telling yourself that you enjoy) the tunes emanating from the bagpiper that inevitably has taken up temporary residence next to David Hume's right hand. And the best part about it all is how authentic everything feels. So much history! So much culture! There are so many old things here!

And at that moment, precisely at that moment in which you feel most in tune with the Scot within you, when under your breath you're singing the words "You take the high road and I'll take the low road," when you are making a mental note to remember to cheer against England in any sporting event you may encounter in the future; at that moment you'll see her.

A small woman, most of her face is obscured, so she looks like she could be from just about anywhere. Anywhere, that is, but Scotland. The only thing she seems to have in common with her surroundings is that she appears to be very old. But this, too, is a fallacy. Internet reports place her at 24 years old. Even after reading this you won't believe it. No one could acquire so many piercings in so few a number of years.

Every inch of her face and ears is weighed down by metallic hoops and balls. Yet somehow, she manages to color the skin beneath them in brilliant colors: fuchsia eyes, yellow cheeks, a polka-dotted forehead. Her hair is massive. Today her dreadlocks are bright green. Well, that's the dominant color, at least. They are accented by a blue flower easily half the size of her head. The Guinness Book of World Records says she has 5,920 piercings. You don't know this then. You only know that there is one thought running through your head. What is this woman doing here?

Do you take her picture? Is that rude? With Braveheart up the hill this issue had been so much simpler. Can you ask her the other thing you are dying to know: how do airport personnel react to you? Maybe she can't fly anywhere. Maybe the reason she is here is that she was here on 9/11 and then after that she could never get back through airport security.

You inch closer to her table, straining to see what she is selling. Postcards. Pictures she has drawn of St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh Castle, Holyrood Palace. Incredulously, you consider the possibility that she is here for the same reason you are. Is it possible? Could she be searching for her inner Scot?

You hesitate for a moment, but in the end you don't take her picture. You don't say hello or buy a postcard for the cheap thrill of grazing her hand. You simply move beyond her into Mary King's Close, to find out if you can be frightened into believing in ghosts. Later, though, you will tell your friends, "When you go to the Royal Mile, look for the pierced lady."

