

The Hermit
by Mark Allen

A **NARRATOR** IS SITTING ON THE GROUND, THE FAINT GLOW OF A CAMP-FIRE LIGHTING HIS FACE. AFTER A PAUSE, HE SLOWLY STANDS BEFORE BEGINNING HIS STORY. THROUGHOUT THE STORY, THE NARRATOR PLAYS EACH OF THE VARIOUS CHARACTERS (AS INDICATED IN BRACKETS NEXT TO ANY SPOKEN TEXT).

NARRATOR: We are all gathered here telling stories and tales

And no doubt we are feeling secure,
As we laugh and we joke with the friends we are with,
But there's something we cannot ignore.
'Cause while we are sitting here deep in these woods,
There are some who are quite unaware
Of events that have happened not too far from here
And it's something I feel I must share.
Now there are some of you cynics who might not believe
That the story that follows is true,
But I urge you to listen and take it all in
Or the next victim could well be you.

It was ten years ago on a night just like this
When the rain seemed to endlessly pour,
A young man and his girlfriend were caught in the rain
Soaking through all the clothes that they wore.
And as the young lovers tramped through darkness and mud
Looking quickly for somewhere to dry,
They only succeeded in getting more lost
And the young girl then started to cry.
As the couple were tiring and starting to doubt
That they'd ever find somewhere to rest,
They stumbled across a small hut in a clearing
Relieved they'd completed their quest.
They raced hand in hand through the dense undergrowth
And approached the small hut without fear -

They were cold and soaked through
And did not stop to check if the coast was entirely clear.
As they ran to the door, they could see it was locked,
But the man found it easy to break
As they desperately needed to shelter inside
And the man's macho pride was at stake.
The door opened wide with a slow, eerie creak
And the pair burst in boldly to see
That a fire had been lit, which was cooking a stew
That was obviously somebody's tea.
Well, the pair simply could not believe their good fortune
And rushed inside, closing the door,
And they sat down to eat bowls of warm, tasty stew
Never questioning who it was for.
They wolfed down the food as their search for the hut
Had given them some appetite
And they relished the warmth that they got from the broth
Feeling better with every bite.

As the young couple gorged on this most welcome meal,
They agreed it was fit for a king,
As the sauce was so rich and the veg were so ripe
That they really could not fault a thing
But the meat, they remarked was just out of this world -
Really tender and cooked to perfection,
They decided that this was the tastiest meal in the world
After quite some reflection.
And as they were starting their third bowl of stew,
The couple were given a fright
As a terrible noise came from somewhere outside
And it pierced through the cold, stormy night.

The noise started quietly and resembled a thud
Which was followed by some sort of grunt
And it sounded just like something being cut up
With a tool that was probably blunt
When the couple heard this, they stayed perfectly still
Praying hard for the noise to subside,
And they clung to each other in panic and fear
Hoping no-one knew they were inside.
All of a sudden the noises stopped dead
And all they could hear was the rain
They hoped that whatever it was had now gone
And would not be returning again.
But just when the lovers were feeling at ease,
They heard yet another wet thud,
Then the sound of some footsteps came nearer and nearer
As someone approached through the mud.
The footsteps then stopped as they came to the hut
And the door handle started to turn,
They were soon to be faced with an unwelcome guest
And their stomachs both started to churn.
The door was flung open and there in the night
They could make out a stooped human shape,
And it stood for a moment surveying the scene
Whilst it blocked their sole means of escape.

THERE IS A PAUSE AS THE NARRATOR LOOKS INTENTLY AT THE AUDIENCE. THE TENSION IS SUDDENLY BROKEN AS THE NARRATOR SUDDENLY BECOMES JOVIAL.

(Hermit): "I see I have guests!" cried the man in the doorway
"My, this is a pleasant surprise,
Please stay and get warm with a nice bowl of stew!"
And before he could hear their replies,

He had served up three bowls of the wonderful broth
As he sat down and joined them to eat

(Hermit): "I don't have guests often, being deep in these woods,
So I must admit, this is a treat".

The couple were now feeling somewhat relieved
As their hearts had been all of a flutter.

But this man seemed so friendly and welcomed them in -
Thank the lord that he wasn't a nutter.

And although they were both feeling bloated by now,
They could hardly refuse the man's stew,
So they carried on eating so as not to offend -
It was the least that the couple could do.

(Hermit): "So tell me, to what do I owe this great pleasure
On this, such a hideous night?"
Then the young couple thought that they'd tell the whole truth
After all, it was only polite.

(Man): "Well, we decided to go for a walk in these woods,
But quite soon we were caught in this storm
And we frantically looked for a place we could shelter
So we could dry out and get warm.
And just when we thought that our search was in vain
And it seemed like pneumonia was nearing
We stumbled across the most welcoming sight of your hut
On its own in this clearing.
Well, without any thought to who lived in the place
And our only concerns of survival,
We had to break in for the heat from your fire -
That's what led to our rapid revival."
The hermit had listened to this young man's tale
And he gave out a laugh with a cough

(Hermit): "But surely, what really saved both of your lives
Was the nourishment in this fine broth."
The young man laughed nervously, glancing around
While his lover just stared at the floor

(Hermit): "Well, you're obviously fans of my recipe
Maybe you'd both like a little bit more."
Well, by this point the couple were totally stuffed
And they'd both really eaten their fill
And although this man's stew was remarkably good,
If they ate any more, they'd be ill.

(Woman): "I'm really quite full sir, but thank you for asking"
Replied the young girl with a smile,

(Hermit): But the hermit looked hurt, "You're not full in the least,
I can tell that you think my stew's vile."
The girl quickly leapt to the hermit's defence

(Woman): "Oh no, nothing is further from true.
Why, we both liked it so much we ate several bowls
What is in this magnificent stew?"

Well the hermit looked bashful and lowered his eyes

(Hermit): "Aw, you only say that to be kind"

(Woman): "No, I'd love to be able to cook one myself,
Are the ingredients easy to find?"

The hermit breathed in and he paused for a moment
Before breathing out with a sigh

(Hermit): "Well, this broth has been cooked to my own secret recipe
And will stay with me until I die,
But if you enjoy it as much as you say,
I could well be persuaded to tell
If you both swear you'll not breathe a word to a soul."

(Woman): "If we do, may we both go to hell."

(Hermit): "Very well," said the hermit "I'll tell you my secret
To making this wonderful stew,
But I promise, if ever I find that you've told
It will be the last thing that you do.
First you take some fresh cabbage and slice it up thin
And you leave it to soak in red wine,
Then you dice up some carrots and turnips and swede
And you boil it all up in some brine.
Next you make up a sauce out of gravy and stock
And then simmer for two or three hours,
Then you season with pepper and plenty of salt
And you add in some local wildflowers.
And just when the mixture is starting to thicken,
You stir in the cabbage and wine,
Then you throw in the turnips and carrots and swede
And by now it is smelling divine,
But the special ingredient is still yet to come
Which will make this meal so good to eat
'Cause when all of the veg and the sauce are prepared
You are ready to add in the meat.
You must cut off large chunks with a knife or an axe
And then wash it in warm olive oil,
Then you rub it with salt and some black peppercorns -
Not too much or the flavour will spoil.
Then you throw it all in with the rest of the mix
And you leave it to boil for an hour
Then you simmer for twenty four hours with the lid on
'Til then, it's just right to devour."

The young girl tried hard to take everything in
So the recipe would be complete -
She remembered the veg and the times for the sauce
But she couldn't remember the meat.

(Woman): "I got most of that," said the girl with a laugh
"But what meat did you use in the stew?
Is it rabbit, or pheasant, or maybe it's lamb
Or will any old animal do?"
The hermit looked shocked as he answered the girl

(Hermit): "No, the meat's most important of all -
It's a rare piece of flesh that's not easy to find,
So your chances of doing so are small.
There's a place that I use, where this meat can be found
But to get it, I go to great pains
'Cause I have to walk miles, to the nearest graveyard
Where I dig up some human remains."

THERE IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE PAUSE AS THE NARRATOR MIMES
NOISILY SLURPING THE BROTH.

The hermit just smiled and went back to his broth
As if nothing was out of the norm,
And the couple sat frozen in horror
Whilst all they could hear from outside, was the storm.
Quite soon, the young lovers began to feel queasy
About what they'd just had to eat,
'Cause although it was tasty, they couldn't ignore
That they'd both eaten dead human meat.

The man started wretching and stood up abruptly
(Man): "I think I'll go out for some air"
He'd have run out right then if he could
But this hermit was mad, so he just didn't dare.
He opened the door to the fierce storm outside
But was soon feeling even more queer,
He gestured towards the young girl to now follow
But she was still frozen in fear.

The hermit looked up from his dead human broth

(Hermit): "Are you ill, you look white as a ghost?"

And the man grabbed the girl and said

(Man): "Better be off, though you've been quite a marvellous host"

(Hermit): "Oh, you're not going now?" said the hermit

"At least wait for a while for this storm to subside"

(Woman): "No, we'd better return to our homes"

Said the girl, "They'll all probably think that we've died".

Then a long, awkward silence fell onto the room

At the girl's badly judged turn of phrase,

(Hermit): "No, they won't start to worry about you

Until you've been gone for at least a few days".

The couple decided enough was enough

And ran into the cold, stormy night,

Then a large fork of lightning flashed down from the sky

Giving both of the lovers a fright.

But they bravely continued to try and escape

Through the mud and the hard, driving rain,

And they peered through the darkness for some recognition

Of which way it was they first came.

They soon realised that their efforts were lost

As all trees in the dark look alike,

So they threw caution into the wind

And decided to start on a blind, hopeful hike.

The hermit had finished the rest of his broth

And was thinking how nice his guests were,

When it suddenly dawned on him what they were doing

Which flashed through his mind in a blur.

The couple were going to sell off his secret -

The recipe for his great stew.

He had to prevent them from leaving the forest

Before all the townspeople knew.

So he threw down his bowl and he picked up the axe
That he used to cut up the dead flesh
And he ran through the door in pursuit of the pair
While their tracks in the mud were still fresh.

The couple meanwhile, stumbled on through the dark
In a desperate bid to escape,
As they heard the mad hermit approaching behind
And they thought they could make out his shape.
As the lightning crashed down, they could see him more clearly
And although they were close to collapse,
They carried on fumbling through thick undergrowth
'Cause the madman was wielding an axe.
So they trudged on and on, never thinking of tiredness
With only escape on their mind,
'Til the girl tripped and fell on a hidden tree stump
And her lover had left her behind.
He turned round in panic to see where she was
And he saw the one sight that he'd dreaded,
As the lightning cracked down, he could make out the hermit
Stood over the girl, now beheaded.
With scarcely a second to scream out in terror
The man had to save his own neck,
And he turned back to run for his life through the woods
Though by now, he was truly a wreck.
He was bloated and sluggish, and feeling quite ill
Due to all of the broth he had eaten,
But from somewhere he managed to muster up strength
Quite determined he wouldn't be beaten.
As the rain lashed down hard, he continued to run
From the hermit, who followed behind
But it seemed like the dense undergrowth was against him
As his legs kept becoming entwined.

As he struggled through thickets, he could slowly make out
The faint light of the town in the distance
And if only he managed to make it to there
He would surely be offered assistance.
But the running and fear, and the dead human flesh
Were too much for the man to contain,
As a deep, queasy nausea rose up from his stomach
He felt like he'd burst with the strain
So the man had to stop and he vomited half-eaten corpse
In a pool on the floor,
As the hermit's axe crashed down and severed his head
That was the last thing the man ever saw.

The hermit then dragged both the freshly killed bodies
Back home, so they wouldn't be found,
And he smiled in his hut with the knowledge
That his secret stew would remain safe and sound.
And the hermit thought hard what to do with the corpses,
There must be some use he could find
'Cause it seemed such a waste - then a brilliant plan
Quickly entered the mad hermit's mind.
For all of these years he had taken the time
To dig up and then cook, rotting flesh,
But right here in his hut, was convenient meat
And it might taste more succulent fresh.
So, he cleaned out his pot and prepared a new stew
With a slight change from what was tradition
And he hacked off some chunks of the newly culled couple,
Which made a more tasty addition.
It was even more juicy when the meat was not old
And the hermit wept tears of joy,
As this broth was the tastiest he'd ever eaten
Since he first tried it as a small boy.

And the delicate smell of the broth wafted over the forest
And into the town,
It even caused some folk to stop in the street
And sniff into the air with a frown.

(Gent): "Just where is that most luscious smell coming from
There's no cordon bleu restaurant round here",
And the most eerie part is the same smell appears
On the same one night every year.
'Cause on each anniversary of that fateful day
When the hermit changed his recipe
He goes into the town, and as some celebration
Takes fresh bodies home for his tea.

So, you'd better beware when you're out near these woods
'Cause the story is relevant still,
And tonight is the one night of every year
That the hermit will come out to kill.
As I said at the start, some will mock this short tale
But I'll tell you all this much for free;
When you leave here, you'd better be watching your backs
'Cause the hermit I spoke of, was me.

THE NARRATOR SMILES AT THE AUDIENCE FOR A MOMENT BEFORE
THE LIGHT FADE.

THE END