

THE WINTER ISSUE



WITH STORIES AND
PHOTOGRAPHY BY

THOMAS VAN
BOENING

DANIELLE M.
ORSINO

C.S. DINES

FEATURING THE
ART OF
J.D. DONNELLY

ALtered
REALITY

JANUARY 2023

Copyright and Disclaimer

Altered Reality Magazine and all productions of the works in this collection are copyright © 2023 by the authors, creators, and artists they are attributed to. All rights reserved.

An *Altered Reality Magazine* collection.

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, cultures, or locales is entirely coincidental.

No part of this collection or its various productions may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the authors, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. For more information, email abi.alteredrealitymag@gmail.com or visit www.alteredrealitymag.com

Edited and collected by Allison Ivy and Abi Linhardt. Cover art by J.D. Donnelly of Painting Dragon Feathers.

Formatting by SpaceDragon Creations

Disclaimer

The thoughts, views, and opinions expressed in the stories, poems, art, and other pieces of this collection are not that of *Altered Reality Magazine* or the editors, but solely those of the individuals providing them.

Trigger and Content Warning

The staff of *Altered Reality Magazine* would like to give warning to those who might be upset by violence, gore, terrifying situations and imagery, or other dark themes. This collection has been rated **M** **for mature** by the staff.

Copyright © January 2023 by *Altered Reality Magazine* and the creators.



Table of Contents

<i>Copyright and Disclaimer</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Captain Olson and the Great Bear</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Dwain Campbell</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Danielle M. Orsino.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>An Oath Realized.....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>No Time Left for Being Human.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Melissa R. Mendelson</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>"Cookie Press"</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Amelia Gorman</i>	<i>20</i>
<i>Aequidiale.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>Jay McKenzie.....</i>	<i>22</i>
<i>J.D. DONNELLY ARTISTS INTERVIEW</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Cold Comfort</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>By C. S. Dines.....</i>	<i>34</i>
<i>The Ghost of Maeve Devereaux.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>By Thomas Van Boening.....</i>	<i>36</i>

Captain Olson and the Great Bear

Dwain Campbell

As the signal fire died, so too did the first sealer. The deceased, a townie dry goods clerk who joined the hunt to prove his manhood, now lay a cold chunk on rough ocean ice.

"Throw the last of the gaff handles in. The flag pole, too. Neptune has to be close. She'll see the beacon," pleaded a kid through chattering teeth. The sprog desperately squinted into pea soup fog, though he could not see his own feet.

"Belay that," rumbled the Lead Hand after forcing apart his frozen moustache and beard. Seventy years and counting, Grandpa Olson had returned to the hunt out of economic necessity. Unfortunately, this trip might add funeral expenses to his family's debt. "Save every sliver of wood. It's not as if we can cut trees." That prompted rueful chuckles from crewmen huddled underneath seal pelts stiff with frozen blood.

Cut trees? They were miles off Cape Freels, Newfoundland, marooned on a bare ice-field.

Yesterday morning, March 17th of '25, Captain Dominic dropped overboard thirty men to harvest a middling herd of adult seals. It being unseasonably warm and sunny, many high-spirited lads left behind jackets and scarfs. The stately ship steamed on through the floes with every intent of returning before suppertime. Just past noon, opaque, hellish cold fog rolled in. The ship lost all contact with the party.

"We only have two options. Sit tight, or make tracks and hope for the best. One is as bad as another." The speaker, a veteran sealer from Newtown, buried mittened hands under armpits for meagre warmth. "Hold fast, and maybe this damnable fog will lift, and we'll be spotted. If not, and sleet or freezing rain sets in, we'll drop like flies."

The men pondered that. Every manjack knew of the SS Greenland and SS Newfoundland disasters. In each case, lost and exposed sealers died by the score. "Walk, and we might exit this muck," the veteran continued. "But, which way do we hoof it? No compass, no sun, no landmarks. Like as not we'd beeline straight for Ireland. Probably waltz into the open sea."

"I vote stay," whined the kid, who now held damp socks to dying embers of the fire. Wet feet threatened frostbite. Beside him, a man boiled seal fat in a mug to render oil for improvised torches.

"Stow it, Moss," barked Newtown. "Vote? Where do you think you are, the assembly in St. John's? Eddy Olson is boss with what, fifty years on the hunt?"

"Fifty-five," supplied Olson. And never in a pickle as dire as this.

"A master mariner, too. You skippered the Fanny D. schooner on the Labrador fishery, didn't you, Grandpa?"

"Caught more quintals of cod than there are needles on a pine tree," Olson boasted for effect. The men needed confidence in him. A seafaring breed, they wouldn't panic, but they might hunker down and refuse to move. They would obey only so long as they trusted his judgement.

"There you go, lads, we are skippered by a Patriarch of the Sea. No worries. I bet Jehovah will dispatch a raven to lead Grandpa on."

Olson paced, sealskin boots crunching on granular snow. Too many lads wore rubber boots and suffered for it. "Any non-commissioned officers here from 14-18?"

"HMS Antrim, bosun," answered Newtown promptly, standing taller.

"Corporal, A Company," volunteered another man. Hereabouts, that meant the Royal Newfoundland Regiment.

"We'll tolerate a soldier," quipped Olsen, again to raise spirits. The man grinned good-naturedly as his buddies ribbed him. "Right, I'm deputizing you two in these extenuating circumstances." He eschewed the word emergency, even with a dead man at their feet.

"A bone-chilling night waxes, day comes," Olsen continued solemnly. "We got a few hours to see if the sun burns through. In the meantime, let's prepare to march, if we reckon on that." He ordered several men to continue rigging torches. Another detachment he set to hacking seal meat off frozen carcasses. The last group cut pelts and fashioned crude mukluk boots such as the Eskimo wore. Groaning, shivering, grumbling, the lads fell to work under the deputized officers.

In the meantime, Olson watched for that raven. A burning bush would be warmer. Such irreverence stirred mild shame, for his people were God-fearing Methodists. Now. Centuries ago, they were bushy-bearded heathen berserkers. At least, so his great grandmother claimed. That crone spun fairy tales of trolls, ice giants, and a capricious god-wizard who wore a raffish eye-patch. Told them so convincingly that as a child, he believed them.

Old Testament Jehovah. Jesus of Nazareth. Old Time Swede gods. One or all, send a sign, for mercy's sake. Without a referent they might as well stay put and wait for King Winter, vindictive in his retreat, to finish them off. He hated that plan. Too passive by half.

A man acts. Leads. Thinks. From time immemorial, seamen sailed through tempests to safe havens. Survival burns hotly in the blood.

Olson stepped away from the nattering crew to listen. Soupy fog muted sound. SS Neptune might be scarce miles away, steam whistle shrieking like a banshee, but the signal would not reach them. Olson only heard his empty stomach growling.

Wind refreshed him, but failed to stir obstinate fog. Ice gently swelled beneath his feet as the sea grew restive.

Lovely. Just lovely. Only one silver lining in this sorry cloud. It might have been his only son standing here. Several weeks ago, while hauling timber for a logging concern, a runaway sleigh broke Bobby's leg. Ever ready to pull his weight, Eddy Olsen went to the ice in his stead. If this was his last hurrah, at least the family wouldn't lose a working man in his prime. Still, it was hard to think they would be out eighty dollars cash money, his likely share of hunt profits. Every cent of that was needed to square them with hounding merchants.

Bloody hell. He had to win out, and bring his men through. How?

Inexpressible weariness weighed him down. The ice gently rose and fell. Olson closed eyes seamed by innumerable wrinkles and allowed himself to be lulled. As he had done countless times before during night watches, he fell asleep on his feet.

Unlike all those other times, he slipped his mortal coil. Floated above his body, so that he looked down with astonishment on ice crystals coating his royal blue watch cap. As if on angel wings, he slowly ascended into the fogbank.

I'm dying. The dreadful night was too much, and my heart stopped like an old watch.

Olson did not fear meeting his maker. When all is said and done, one faces the music. However, he bitterly regretted failing his men.

He emerged from the smokey mists after a dizzy rise. As far as his astral eye could see, a billowing, cottony fog blanketed the world. His ethereal form stepped onto the vaporous carpet, and he walked over it like the Nazarene on the Sea of Galilea.

All was deathly still save for fluffy balls of vapor rolling past like tumbleweeds in a cowboy film. He should be hearing his departed kin calling out to him from across the Jordan River, but only silence in this otherworldly skyscape. Where was he? Purgatory? He stood on top of the world and beneath Heaven.

To the east, a pallid and feeble sun struggled aloft. The sky directly overhead, still black as the inside of a whale's gullet, twinkled with cold stars. One in particular shone like a Guy Fawkes bonfire.

Master mariners are one with nature. They read stars like preachers read psalms. In wonder, Olson beheld Muscida, nose of Ursa Major. The good old Great Bear, by gum! Seagoers realize the hind quarters and tail of this starry bruin is actually the Big Dipper. If one follows a certain alignment within the heavenly ladle, one comes to the keystone of all navigation.

Polaris. The unwavering Lodestar. Friend to the sailors. Olson's heartbeat with joy, Yet, what earthly good would it do him? He was an airy phantom.

Perhaps if he followed Polaris it would lead him to Fiddler's Green, that serene place hoary old sailors go when they expire.

A flippant thought. Blasphemous, even. Angry thunder rippled through the firmament. Olsen quailed.

Not thunder. A feral growl from the Great Bear. Stunned, Olson saw the constellation turn its cosmically massive head in his direction. Some nameless star served as a mocking, contemptuous eye. It fixed Olson as a disdainful cat would a mouse.

Terrified, Olson fell on ghostly knees. The cloud felt spongy, like soggy pussy willows.

Stardust coalesced into a furry pelt. A scarlet comet slashed the creature's chest like a spear wound. The Aurora Borealis simmered beneath the bear, offering it a sparkling green sward upon which to prowl.

The constellation sniffed him, as though assessing Olson's mettle. Essence wafted out of Olson's spirit like woodsmoke from a brick chimney. Great Bear gauged the timber of his heart and the scent of his soul. Olson's entire existence flashed before him, and the bear scried every victory and failure, every retreat and advance. It followed every course change made at the helm, every decision taken in life. It traced his lineage, the very flavor of his blood.

The Great Bear cocked its half-head—a black void occluded where the other eye should be—and rumbled irritably. It raised one promethean paw comprised of the twin stars of Talitha and swiped down.

To swat Olson to Hell. Or so he thought.

Ice erupted beneath Eddy Olson's corporeal feet. Flung back, he bounced twice to land fair beside the clerk's corpse. Pandemonium reigned as men screamed and tumbled over one another. "The rifle, fetch the rifle," cried one, panic in his voice. The party carried a single weapon to shoot cantankerous bull seals that might challenge them while hunting.

"Scratch that," hollered the bosun. "It's a right behemoth. You'll only wound him, and then he'll tear through us like a buzzsaw."

"Behemoth what?" asked Olsen thickly, spitting blood from a cut lip. Real, salty blood. He was alive, if badly bruised. Him being an angel, starry Ursa Major, all a bizarre dream.

"You didn't see it, Boss? Wicked polar bear, big as an elephant, dove right in front of you on its hind legs. It struck the ice with front paws and smashed the floe to smithereens." He

gestured to open water that had magically appeared before them. "It swam off, saucy as you please." The men babbled uneasily, each sharing his glimpse of the beast. Several claimed it sported but one eye, the other likely lost to a monstrosity even more fearsome. All agreed it sashayed on two legs like a circus bear.

Olson stiffly lurched to his feet. He struggled to gather his wits.

"You were lucky it didn't claw you into the water, Grandpa. Game over, if so." That from the corporal, who blindly pointed the firearm into the freezing mists.

Olson snapped to. "OK boyos, here's the deal. When that ice bear gets hungry, he'll double back for the seal carcasses. Or fresh meat." He let that sink in. "We have to scarper, and I'm pretty darned sure I know the way."

"How so, Grandpa?" asked several surprised men who could still work frozen jaws.

"When I was flat on my keester, I caught a peek of the morning sky through a break in the fog." Little white lie for the greater good. "Great Bear constellation, clear as day. From that, I traced the North Star. Meaning, the cape is sou'west by west." He made a grand Moses-like gesture toward the Promised Land. The direction, it...it just felt right. Polaris, his longed-for referent, loomed high over his right shoulder, though none could see it.

"You sure, Eddy? Didn't crack your noggin on the ice?"

"Dead reckoning, Antrim, but yeah, I'm certain. As certain as I know my third daughter's tea biscuits are hard as hockey pucks." That raised a chuckle, albeit half-

hearted. Olson famously sought to marry off spinster daughters. "All hands find ice chunks and pile a makeshift cairn over the deceased. Plant the flag so Neptune might locate him and the pelts. Then a rapid check of feet and hands before I issue marching orders. Chop-chop."

Mindful of the mountainous bear who might be close, the men hurried. On inspection, several showed worrisome bluish-white splotches on fingers, toes and earlobes. Frostbite. Damn.

"OK, lads, we trek by twos. I'll lead, because I got the bearing in my head" Strangely, that held true. "Antrim, mind the rear, no stragglers. Corporal, patrol the line, see that no one falls

out, especially starboard toward the open water." He breathed on pink fingers to warm them, then continued. "I'll steal Lord Nelson's line and say every man here needs to do his duty. To the mates next to you, to wives and sweethearts back in the coves. We can tough this out. We're hardy Baymen from Newfoundland's shores. I know most of your dads, ice hunters with no quit in them." Rueful grins, nudges between pals. Old Eddy was an elemental, one with the sea. A skipper of the hard old line.

"We should stay," blurted the kid named Moss. "We'll be found in an hour or two. Captain Dominic will issue a double tap of rum to set us right."

Olson snarled. He towered over Moss, blue eyes flashing beneath rope-thick eyebrows. "Then you stay here and play patty cake with the Great Bear, or freeze into a lump beside the sorry clerk. Declare your decision, so every man hears. I don't want your people taking me to task for leaving you to die." Moss's beady eyes darted about, but no one would meet them. Without support, he caved.

"Great Bear?" someone asked.

"Great big bear," Olson corrected, covering his slip. "You all said it was the size of a house." What chances that Olson would hallucinate the heavenly Great Bear, then immediately have a stupendous bruin fall upon them? Obviously, they were one and the same. Damnable bizarre business, but he did not have time to philosophize the preternatural, or why he suddenly had an inner compass that screamed southwest. Lethal danger called for action. They had to get legs moving and blood pumping.

"Fall in," barked the corporal. The men wearily shuffled into ragged files, careful to stay within arm's length of chums. Every man swayed on frost-wracked legs, in no shape to face miles of uneven ice. Worse, the air grew colder, their stomachs emptier.

Olson sidled next to the soldier. "We stumble on a seal, you shoot it. We need sustenance, even if it is raw liver."

"Fresh blood on the ice? With that titanic bear around?"

"Nothing for it, Corp. We're mushing on empty. Every choice has a downside." Some choices, even little ones, could result in rollicking disaster. However, without choice there is no movement in human affairs. Men weren't rocks to sit in one spot, come what may.

Matches flared. One of the torches sputtered to life. A suffering man in a ridiculously light wool coat handed it to Olson.

Holding the smoking torch aloft, Olson cried, "Hey Ho, mates. To the cape we go."

With that the band lurched forward in a staggering line. The ragged company moved like a drunken centipede. Several men winced with every step, and Olson knew that even if they lived, they would do so without toes or feet. Not an auspicious start, so

Olson raised the torch higher and sang a navigation song to raise spirits. In Newfoundland of yore, when many hands were illiterate., such ditties were an oral guide from port to port.

From Bonavista Cape to Stinking Isles
The course is north full forty miles
Where you must bear away northeast
Till Cape Freels Gull Island bears west-northwest

After ten more stanzas that ended with Pilley's Point, Olson repeated. When his voice flagged, Antrim pitched in with ghost stories, always a Newfoundland favorite. So, the endless minutes turned into an eternal hour as the party threaded fog that perversely grew thicker. At that point, they all started to the sudden crack of the corporal's rifle. A middling sized seal flopped his last not fifteen feet away.

"Good eye, Soldier Boy," cried Olson, drawing his knife. In less time than it takes to tell, he expertly extracted the animal's heart and liver. An unseemly scrum followed as starving hunters received a chewy mouthful of each organ. Not exactly dining at the Savoy, but it was hot, sustaining grub. Men were wiping bloody chins when came a soul-curdling scream.

The group stampeded, but Olson roared, "Hold fast!" Miraculously, they did. Though badly unnerved, the rifleman positioned himself between the huddled men and the direction of the cry.

With all silent, every man heard violent sloshing in nearby open water. Too, a distinct, ominous cracking.

"Ice breaking up," supplied Olson quickly. He knew different, as did most of the experienced hands. Bone is nothing against powerful polar bear jaws.

"Sound off," ordered Olson, much more quietly. "Who's adrift?"

In seconds they determined the whiney chap Moss was missing.

"That tears it." Though mad as a wet hen, Antrim kept his voice down. "Stay together. No more sacrifices to stupidity."

A sacrifice it was, but not to stupidity.

Maybe Christ was open-handed and generous, but few other gods were. Olsen figured the Star Bear had taken his due. By now, the old man accepted the fantastical. What Being was this? One of the Eskimo spirits that he heard spoke of up in Labrador. A pagan shapeshifter from his Granny's Viking tales?

"Right, Neptunes. Let's get well clear of this fresh seal." They lit a second, torch. Olsen led on the miserable band. It appeared as though a few might slump to the ice, but terror of the bear spurred them.

No rhymes or stories cheered them now. The situation demanded grim resignation alloyed with steely resolve. It was do or die, one foot in front of the other. That single thought filled their minds. When they shot their last bolt and walked their final step, they just had to breath deep and summon one more stride. One more, two more, then a thousand. Salty-mouthed Antrim prodded from behind with a gaff, and Olson pulled them along by force of will and the strength of his authority.

One kid got right delirious and called for his mother to bring him hot tea, lots of sugar. This tormented the lucid men, who irritably told him to shut his gob. He did, but minutes later begged his imaginary ma'am for a hot water bottle and another quilt. Hopefully, he would regain his mind on rescue. Some didn't.

Leading in front, Olson figured he was bonkers as well. Bear tracks lead them on. Impossibly large tracks as round as a keg top. A two-legged gait, not possible for an ursine. No one else perceived the trail, though heads were down, eyes on the ice. How did the creature get out in front of them? Some eldritch enchantment, no doubt.

As he pondered the magical, Olson walked full tilt into a lumpy ice wall, nearly dropping the precious torch.

Before them stood a jagged ice ridge twice as high as a man. These features occur when two ice floes meet under huge pressures. Not a prayer they could climb it in their depleted condition. Walking around the barrier might entail long miles of extra hiking. Did Star Bear guide them here as a cruel trick?

"We're doomed," sighed Antrim matter-of-factly. "Might as well be the Great Wall of bloody China. Of all the cursed luck. We'll never get shy of this hell."

"Never say never," said Olsen. Never is a death sentence. "Don't let the men sit. They'll not rise if they do. Have them lean against the upthrust ice as I do a quick scout." With that, Olsen trotted to the left, amazed that his fiercely aching gams still had spring in them. He did not venture far, and soon turned back after discovering no break in the ridge. He explored to the other side of the shivering group. Immediately he picked up the immense bear tracks. They disappeared into the implacable barrier. Puzzled, Olsen gingerly groped his way forward...

...into a narrow gap. Not a small man, Olsen twisted sideways to get axe-handle wide shoulders through the grudging cack. Pulling in his liberal tummy as he inched along, a terrible thought struck him. What if I get wedged in here, entombed in ice? Hyperventilating, he scraped onward. Tricky, lots of icy shards to negotiate in the pitch-black space. Yet, quicker than you can say Jack Robinson, he fell out of the cleft.

Fell into another clime. The hateful fog, much thinner on this side, allowed a view of a boulder strewn beach not a quarter mile off. Luckily, the ice field ran right up to the rugged shore. Galvanized, Olsen squirmed back through the gap. "Hallelujah, salvation at hand," he roared. "Narrow passage, scarce wide enough for a weasel, so single file only. Officers will lead. Appears to be land very handy, with woods immediately beyond."

"Aye, Captain," chorused the amazed officers. How many years since men last called him captain? Olsen collected matches—many of the men were pipe smokers—and divided them evenly between his two principals. First one on Terra Firma was ordered to build fires. Olsen assumed the rear,

The men rallied. One last measure, and they were clear of the hateful ice fields. They sorted in line before the opening. Without torchlight it was dark as King Tut's tomb inside the split, so long minutes passed as Antrim and Corp fought through. "Come on then, but be bloody careful," hollered back the bosun, "Tight squeeze with snags and jags." Come on they did, one by one, tentatively if not fearfully. Death was the alternative.

Olsen fisted the shoulder of each man as he entered. "Once through and in the lee, flat out for the shoreline," he said to one. "Sunny as Bermuda on the other side," he joked to another. To a third: "Gather birch bark and driftwood, spark a cheery conflagration." Thus, he encouraged each man, often praising a fellow's family for grit that he now demonstrated. No man likes to let the home side down, so each entered Tartarus with a defiant, Hail Mary grin.

Inevitably, a panicked cry. "I'm stuck. Jammed tight. Help!" Swearing loudly, Corp, who was a smallish man, came in from beyond as Olsen himself impatiently bulled in from his end. Tugging and pushing mercilessly, they freed the trapped bloke, but not before he left a bloody patch of skin on an ice spike. Bottleneck cleared; they resumed the transit.

Too long, this business. The torch, which Olsen handled with exquisite care, burned low, casting a sickly amber light.

Presently the last man entered, leaving Olsen alone on the ocean side of the obstruction. By now the first knot of men should be on the rocks, mulling how best to start a blaze. Time for him to follow on.

Whuff, Huff. Heavy, immense footfalls accompanied the grunts.

The thing. Great Bear. Awfully close.

The behemoth strode purposefully out of the mists, effortlessly erect on hind legs. No natural bear sports a long tail, but this one wagged an appendage of three diamond-bright stars: Alioth, Mizar, and Alkaid, Olsen knew them from his celestial charts. The baleful, cycloptic eye of the living constellation leered at Olsen, mockingly and hungrily.

"Wh...what devil are you? What do you want?" Olsen crouched by the opening, as much to spare trembling legs as to ready escape.

The single eye beamed at the old mariner. The monster crooked a claw exactly as a man would, beckoning Olsen. It spoke words, an actual language not unlike that used on the docks of Copenhagen where Olsen once sold salted fish.

Moss was not sacrifice enough. Now, Olsen had to pay the piper.

"You are a nightmare, not real." Even as he said it, Olsen knew the lie. This demon was Nature personified, an embodiment of the very world. Its breath the north wind, its blood salt waves, its bones glacial ice. What was he in the face of this?

A man. A force of nature also.

Olsen straightened, as if in weary resignation. He made to toss his faltering torch aside, but in the last motion whipped it at the bear's head.

Nothing to the creature. It swatted the flaming stick aside with a roar. In doing so, it stepped backward. Afforded that moment, Olsen madly wormed into the split and squirmed for dear life. Haste makes waste, for he forgot the jutting spikes. His coat snagged on one, holding him like a cod on a jigging hook. Damn the coat, he frantically ripped the entire sleeve off to free himself. At that second, the angry Star Bear thrust its massive head inside the crack. Then its

shoulders. Like Samson in the Philistine temple, it tried to bring the ice down and bury his foe. Instead of collapsing inward and onto Olsen's head, the crack pulled wide. Ice chunks painfully rained down on Olsen, but he scrambled clear, heedless of ugly cuts and bruises.

The violent upheaval destroyed the ice plain between him and the island. Fissures instantly multiplied by the hundreds, reducing Olsen's path to wobbling and bobbing pans of slick ice.

Newfoundland youngsters copy the pans, a form of dangerous play where they jump from one floating ice sheet to another. Eddy Olsen did it himself, half a century ago. Knowing the Star Bear to be directly behind, Olsen hopped forward like Jack-be-nimble. Motor memory is robust, and with soaring heart in mouth the oldster jumped from one hazardous surface to the next, barely holding his balance. When telling the Legend of Captain Olsen years hence, witnesses claimed he leapt like a young leopard.

Truth be known, the old mariner hotfooted his way over the pans like a Fijian firewalker. Awkward as hell, he flailed with wind-milling arms until nearly reaching land. Twenty feet out, one boot caught a shiny edge of ice and he belly-flopped into the freezing ocean...

...and came up howling in shock. Olsen stood only three feet deep. Gibbering, he splashed onshore.

"Strip him down," cried Antrim. "Get that fire started atonce."

Now down to soaking wet long johns, Olsen collapsed beside stacked driftwood and old flotsam from hapless shipwrecks. Through gummed eyes, Olsen saw a match flame catch on birchbark, which blackened and curled. Tiny orange tendrils licked into gathered reindeer moss and crisp spruce cones. With a flash, bone dry sticks cackled and smoked. Numb fingers eagerly reached out for warmth, though agony would soon follow when the thawing began. Another pile of refuse flamed, allowing men to warm back and front.

Antrim threw his coat over Olsen's quaking shoulders. "Three cheers for the captain boys. Naught for this gnarly old salt, half of us would be dead by now." Muted huzzahs due to chattering teeth, but they were heartfelt.

Flame chased mists away. "Holy Hannah," cried Antrim in disbelief. "I know this beach like the back of my hand. This is Pinchard's Island, sure. My hometown is fair on the other side. Wesleyville and Greenspond close by too, both have doctors." Several men unashamedly sobbed with joy. They were saved.

Needing no order, Corp fired three rapid shots into the air. Crack, crack, crack. Less than a minute later, answering shots echoed from several directions.

"My people know the drill," bragged Antrim. "Boats on the way with blankets and hot tea. And Wednesday, my wife will have rabbit soup in a pot bigger than Neptune's boiler. A steaming bowl for every man, two for the captain."

Captain Olsen's addled brain seized on the least of Antrim's address. Wednesday. An ancient memory teased to consciousness.

Wednesday. Great Granny used Woden's day.

Woden, one-eyed wizard-God of his berserker ancestors.



Dwain Campbell is originally from Sussex, New Brunswick, Canada. After his university years in Nova Scotia, he journeyed farther east to begin a teaching career in Newfoundland. Forty years later, he is semi-retired in St. John's and studies folklore in his spare time. Contemporary fantasy is his genre of choice, and Atlantic Canada is a rich source of inspiration. He is author of *Tales from the Frozen Ocean* and *Strange Duty* and has contributed stories to *Canadian Tales of the*

Fantastic, *Tesseract 17*, and *Fantastic Trains*. Susanna Clarke is his hero of the moment, though he will admit to a lifelong fascination with Ray Bradbury. Dwain can be found on facebook under the same name.

Danielle M. Orsino

An Oath Realized



Desdemona, captain of the Royal Guard , leader of the Illuminasqua Army. Exalted to the status of Virtue angel sent to earth as a guardian to the other angels, she was shunned for her previous life as a Power Brigade angel...Until her only friend became her queen.

Aurora gave Desdemona a sense of purpose, a home to defend.

"Loyalty to the kin, not to the crown" was the oath Aurora made Desdemona swear.

Desdemona never thought she would have to enact her oath on her only friend.

Birth of the Fae Series by Danielle M. Orsino

ig: @birthofthefae_novel

website: Birthofthefae.com

Facebook: Danielle M Orsino

Photo- Julia Juliati
Makeup Denise Apostle
Desdemona - Danielle M. Orsino



Danielle M. Orsino is a fantasy novelist whose lifelong vision is to create whimsical realms that her readers can escape to. Her compelling word-weaving pays homage to a multitude of personal muses, from Chris Claremont and George Pérez (both famous comic book writers), to Anne Rice, Jim Henson and Wonder Woman. The creative spark of storytelling has been with Danielle ever since she was a child, but martial arts and her nursing career took center stage into adulthood. Then, on a day like any other, it was reignited during the most unexpected of moments: while treating one of her patients. Seeing that they longed for a distraction during their arduous treatments, the floodgates of inspiration soon burst forth. So, Danielle took it upon herself to tell them a story; a fantastical narrative that would leave the confines of that IV room's walls and land upon a page. Before she knew it, what started as an imaginative tale to pass the time, turned into book, followed by an entire series: The Birth of the Fae published by 4Horsemen



Publications, Inc. With an unwavering passion for cosplay and comics, it was a unanimous decision to place her on the cover of each book in all her Fae cosplay glory.

No Time Left for Being Human

Melissa R. Mendelson

I watched the stone roll across the floor, racing past the rows of shackled feet, only to be ensnared itself in a small groove. I jolted in my seat. Another pothole, and the stone bounced up into the air, free at last, but fell once again into another groove. I watched it struggle, mirroring those held to their seats, but it wouldn't surrender. Another pothole, another race to freedom, but a foot came down, holding it in place.

"What are you looking at?" The driver's jaw clicked as he spoke. "What's your name?"

Great, a conversationalist. I glanced at the driver, whose stomach seemed to be doing most of the steering. His bald head shined under the dim light above him, and his eyes reflected the darkness outside. I turned away, looking at the prisoners, counting their heads. Twelve. Twelve damned souls, and a man broke out into harsh, phlegmy coughs.

"It's not Covid," the driver said. "That shit was never fucking real." His jaw clicked again. "You could put him out of his misery, if it bothers you."

"Doesn't bother me," I said. "It bothers them."

The driver laughed a nasty laugh. "Never answered my question."

"Seven," I said.

"Seven? Your name's Seven? Like Seven of Nine from Star Trek?"

Great, also a nerd, or was. "What's your name?" I held his stare, refusing to flinch. "Bob?"

"It's Donald. Like the president."

"Good old Donald," I muttered.

"Hey, don't knock the 2024 Resurrection." He pointed a fat finger at me. "I thought you were on my side."

I laughed. "I'm only on one side. Mine." I leaned forward, so he could see the jagged scar from the corner of my right eye down to my chin.

"Jesus, what happened to you?" He flinched. "I'm just trying to have a conversation with you." Click.

"Someone punch you in the jaw?"

He didn't answer me.

"You want a conversation? Talk to them."

He looked up into the rearview mirror at the prisoners behind us and snorted. "I have nothing to say to them except for good-bye when we get to the Factory." He glanced out the window and stared into the darkness, the city was now a distant view. "New York City. What a shithole."

"It's been like that for a long time now," I said.

"I don't know why we're bringing them this way. They could've just gone to the Furnace."

"For whatever reason, they weren't meant to burn," I said.

"It's dark on the Palisades Parkway, and you need to keep your guard up." He pointed another fat finger at me. "There's too many factions now. You don't know who's who. Did you fight in the war?" Click.

"Didn't have a choice." I glanced over at the prisoners. "None of us did, and a lot of people died."

"Hopefully, the right people died." He continued to drive the bus.

I sat back in my seat but then realized the man had stopped coughing. That wasn't a good sign, and he was probably past saving. "You got a knife?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Give me your knife," I said.

He hesitated but then handed me his knife. He flinched as I took it from his fat fingers. Was he afraid that I was going to stab him?

I turned away, moving down the bus, heading for the man that had been coughing up a lung. Now, he was slumped back in his seat, and I knew for sure that he wasn't going to make it. I cut his throat quickly and pushed his body over toward the window.

The woman across from him pulled at her wrist, but the shackle kept her in place. "Why?" Her voice cracked with misery. "Why don't you just kill me?"

"Not my job," I said.

"But killing him is?"

A man behind her said, "Do you have any idea what waits for us at the Factory?"

Yes. I walked away, handing the knife back to Donald and sat down in my seat.

He pocketed the knife. "Over the past few months, these buses have been ambushed, and the people were never found. That's why you're here. You're protecting me, and just me." Another fat finger in my face. Another click of his jaw.

"Stop pointing your fingers in my face," I snapped at him. "Or I might bite them off."

I watched him look at his hands, and he reached for the radio. Most of the stations were static, but there were two left, their stations and only their stations. Bing Crosby's "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas" echoed throughout the bus.

Really? This wasn't a bus to a shopping mall for Christmas.

He noticed the look on my face. "What? What do you have against Christmas?" He waited for an answer, but I gave him none. "What religion are you?"

There it is. That question. I touched the scar on my face. "Religion's dead," I finally answered. "And it's not even December, yet." I held his gaze, and he flinched, turning away, and snapping the radio off.

"Fine. Don't answer me," he muttered, but he touched his pocket, making sure that the knife was still there.

Exit Eight. We're getting close.

The front tires suddenly exploded. The bus jerked, and sparks flew out on the sides. His stomach struggled with the steering, and his hands were just as useless. "Do something," he screamed.

With pleasure. I reached into my coat pocket. "Brake," I said, and he did.

The bus screeched to a halt, and he let out a loud, ugly sigh of relief. "That was close," he said.

Bang. Donald slumped over the steering wheel, a bullet-hole in his head.

Smoke rose up into my face from the gun that I was holding. I leaned over and slammed on the lever nearby. The bus doors opened, and men with bandannas over their faces stormed inside. They looked at me and then over at Donald, ripping the keys off his pants.

"Seven."

"David."

He stood near me as his men freed the prisoners. "All twelve?"

"Eleven. One couldn't make it. Too sick," I said.

"Okay. We'll bury him with the driver." David turned toward his men. "Line them up. Let's go. Off the bus." He looked at me. "You too."

"Not my first rodeo, David." I exited the bus.

It smelled like snow. I used to love that smell, and I remembered throwing snowballs at my parents and brothers. The memory turned cold, echoing with the sound of gunfire. Seven shots. Seven bullets for each family member, seven left for me, but they missed.

"You went there again," David said, standing a little too close to me. "You need to block those memories out."

"And you need to address the prisoners. We're wasting time."

"Okay. Fine. Be like that." He moved away from me and stood in front of the eleven prisoners. "Here's the drill. You are all free to go. Run for your lives."

"What? You're not going to take us with you?" A woman's voice dripped with accent.

"How are we going to survive out here?" A man roughly asked.

"Do you want to go to the Factory? You know why you were going there." David glanced at me. He noticed a few prisoners shake their heads. "Didn't think so, so the deal is that you run. Run right now and hope to survive. We are not in no man's land. There are homes and businesses nearby, and some of them are still good people. But you are wasting time, and we don't have time to waste." He pulled out his gun. "Oh, and one more thing. You never saw her face. Got it? Good." He waved his gun at them, and the prisoners ran off. "I almost forgot that part." He put his gun away.

"Thought you did forget that part," I said.

"Come on. It's cold out here, and my van's parked nearby." He stopped walking. "Your Guardian Angel asked me to give you this." He reached into his coat, pulled out an envelope and handed it over to me. "Your next mission, but you don't have to open it right now." He watched me tear open the envelope. "I know he saved your life, but don't you want to take a break first? You've been at this for a long time now."

Yes, but it will never bring my family back. "No time for breaks," I said. "There's no time left for being human. Let's go."



Melissa R. Mendelson is a Poet and Horror, Science-Fiction and Dystopian Short Story Author. Her stories have been published by Sirens Call Publications, Dark Helix Press, Altered Reality Magazine, Transmundane Press, Owl Canyon Press, Wild Ink Publishing, and The Yard: Crime Blog.

Find Melissa online at www.melissamendelson.com,
www.facebook.com/melissa.r.mendelson,
twitter.com/MelissMendelson

"Cookie Press"

Amelia Gorman

You come alive at Christmas,
in a way your somber face wasn't before.
I already have the cookie press out,
the spritz recipe card stained by time.

You shake the sweet snow crystals off your hair and shoulders,
unpack the wet paper bag: sugar, flour, butter.
The bag rips in the weathered spot.

There is something different about creamed butter:
an integration, a smell that neither had before alone.
Then the eggs, then the flour, then the press.

Then the secret.

You know how to turn the handle widdershins,
then like the inevitable ticking of a clock.
Out comes a little scottie dog, out into reality,
who barks and licks my hand and wags his tail.

Next, green pines that sprout and the kitchen
smells like resin and frost and smoke,
the needles jingle together, I laugh in bells.

Even the camel clip clops to life, the absurdity
of it all is delicious. Even the rainbows
made from the leftover colors all jammed in at the end.

I cry, when the little terrier crumbles to pieces
no bigger than sand. Than sugar. Nothing can last
forever you tell me, your fingers falling on my hair,
my shoulder.

The camel follows, becoming the desert itself.
The trees timber and fall and nothing is left

but sweet sawdust where once there was a forest.

You come alive at Christmas.



I live in Eureka where I spend my free time exploring tide pools and redwoods with my dogs and foster dogs. My fiction has appeared in *Nightscrip* 6 and is forthcoming in *Cellar Door* from Dark Peninsula Press. You can read some of my recent poetry in *New Feathers*, *Vastarien*, and *Penumbric*. My first chapbook, the Elgin-winning *Field Guide to Invasive Species of Minnesota*, is available from *Interstellar Flight Press*. Find her online here: @gorman_ghast (twitter)

Aequidiale

Jay McKenzie

"Four worlds now must pass one another, forever divided, spurned lovers all."
-old Kausi proverb

Cloud-islands drift, inching between one another. Pieva pictures them growing fat and heavy, bellies full, preparing to offload their damp stowaways.

It is always Spring here in Kevät: the buttery light noses between the leaves, a dappled playmat in the soft moss.

Pieva brushes cherry blossoms from her shoulder. The petals twist coquettishly as they fall, like confetti, she thinks, for the wedding I do not want.

It is tempting to sit here until the sun cedes to the moon, head pressed into the bark, breaking twigs between her fingers. More tempting still would be to walk, run, until the palace is a memory.
But she is duty-bound.

#

Pieva dismisses the handmaids once the floral wreath has been woven into her braid, inspected and approved. She counts fifty breaths, then fifty more to ensure her solitude. Behind the screen, she parts the swathe of black silk hiding the mirror. Her mother's mirror.

"Jaata," she whispers, "are you there?"

The glass swirls, misty, grey; it bubbles like a brook, and slowly a silhouette sharpens.

"Pieva. I am here."

"Jaata, dear friend. It has been so long."

"A difficult harvest, amichi. The ground, solid as stone." The familiarity of Jaata's white locks, pearlescent skin and those startling larimar eyes comfort Pieva. "Is it done?"

When they come, the tears cascade.

"We marry tomorrow," she says between sobs. "Some prince. I cannot even say his name."

Jaata closes her eyes. "Can it be stopped?"

Pieva shakes her head.

"Then," says Jaata, "we try again tonight."

#

He paces. An uneven gait lends an irregular staccato rhythm to his tread, heavy light, heavy light, zigzagging across the hall. Her stepfather does not see her, but the fsh fsh of her gown alerts him. Irritation first, that she is late, then seething fury.

Pieva bows low. He grips her fingertips, drawing her to his side.

“Make an effort to be plain tonight, Pieva. Do not dance too well or smile too brightly.” He plucks a primrose from her crown, grinding it beneath his bootheel. “A forgettable bride may help them forget that your mother was a sorceress.”

“Yes, my lord.”

She is led to the women’s antechamber where he leaves her in the clasp of three stout handmatrons. They prepare the ribbons that bind her wrists before slipping the blindfold over her eyes.

It is darker behind the velvet mask than the darkest violet Kevät nights: Pieva wonders if this is what the night sky is like in Jaata’s world. Not for the first time, she wishes she was there.

She is led into the ballroom. The chink of toasting goblets, twittering laughter, the strings of the orchestra cease and a thick hush settles. Pieva is aware of her pulse throbbing in her throat. She counts her footsteps, hears the clack of her partner’s , stepping in rhythm with her.

Her ribbons are tied to his and they raise their hands together, pressed as though in shared prayer. Pieva shivers as his moist palms meet the skin of hers. The orchestra begins a doleful waltz.

As is custom here, they must dance, but are forbidden from exchanging words. Still, Pieva feels his hot breath against her ear.

One, two, three, one, two, three. She concentrates on the steps Mama taught her in front of the mirror, their reflections swaying willows in a breeze.

“You dance like a petal in the wind, my little kaani!”

Oh, Mama, she thinks. Why did you leave me?

He steps on her toes, once, twice before the music halts. There’s muted applause, then the whisper of a blade as the silk holding them together is cut.

Pieva exhales, a brief reprise, though tomorrow’s matrimony looms.

#

“Jaata, I am returned.”

The lake-surface of the mirror reflects only her sad eyes, her downturned mouth. She touches the glass, forged, so Mama would say, from the lover’s tears of their ancestors.

Pieva waits, plucking the baby’s breath from the coils of her hair. Then, the mirror fogs, a sleeve rubs the glass clear, and Jaata is there, a puff of breath escaping from between her lips.

“Remember your mother’s words, amichi,” Jaata says. “The mirror will deliver what you need, when you need it.”

“Well, it gave me you.”

"And it brought me to you." They smile, recalling their first meeting, the honey-kissed girl frowning at her alabaster reflection, puzzling that they didn't move as one. Two lonely, motherless girls answering the call: who will look after my baby?

"We've failed before, Jaata. What makes you think we'll succeed tonight?"

"Your need has never been greater, amichi." Jaata moves closer. "Come, Pieva. We must at least try."

Pieva laughs, shakily. "Why couldn't we have been of the same world, Jaata?"

"Maybe soon we will be. "

They raise their hands to the glass, palm to palm, a bridge between their two worlds; Pieva's Spring, Jaata's Winter. Pieva feels only the solid wall of glass against her skin. Please, she begs, please let me go.

A light, she sees in Jaata's eyes, silver and bright and inviting: she lets the glow grow hazy, soft, a soporific mist coating her gaze. Heaviness settles on her lids, drooping, falling closed.

Surely she is imagining, but isn't that the swirl of skin on a fingertip? The slip of cold fingers sliding between hers? The shock of her warm palm meeting a cold one?

"It's working, Jaata!" She forces her eyes to remain shut, but the tremble that starts in her belly and races through her veins threatens to wrench the lids apart. Beneath her feet and in the air all around, and in the very fibrous roots of the earth, the world shakes and bends and tilts and oh! Then Pieva is falling, twisting, gripping Jaata's hands in her own.

#

The blinding white. Stretching like an eternity before her. Everywhere she looks is blanketed in crystal white. It glints and glistens and shimmers and shines; it crackles and glows, illuminating the forest. Whiter than the daisies, cleaner than the hillside breezes, fresher than the pressed linens of her step-father's palace. She does not dare speak for fear of disturbing the crystalline stillness. Jaata could not have described it. Not this. This ghostly beauty.

When she plunges her hand into the ice drift, she feels shards, a million tiny pinpricks of cold tickling her palm, her wrist. She hears the crack of the top layer of ice thin as crisp sugar, and the crunch of the deer's hooves, and the creak of the sleigh ropes. As she raises her face to the moon, dusted-sugar snowflakes fall from the sky, and she parts her lips, catching the flakes on her tongue. In her mouth, on her eager, searching tongue, she tastes light and the cold-white fire of ice. How can it be that she is falling in love with Winter for the first time?

She laughs, and it rings crisp, clear through the night.

"Jaata!" she says. "Jaata, it's so beautiful."

Only then, only minutes after the elation does she realise that Jaata is not by her side. "Jaata! Jaata!"

"I am here, amichi." Her voice, barely a whisper.

In the frozen pool at Pieva's feet, Jaata's pale face peers out from behind the ice. Pieva's knees land with a crunch through the snow. She shivers, finally succumbing to the cold lacing her veins.

"Jaata! We must get you out!"

Jaata shakes her head. "I am not trapped in the lake, Pieva. I am in your chamber, sitting before your mirror."

"No!"

Without a word, they bring their hands together once more, pressing, pushing; a silent benediction to the magic to bring them together. Pieva bites hard on her lower lip, squeezes her eyes shut tightly.

Jaata sighs. "It's no good, Pieva. I'm trapped."

"Jaata, I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

"Please, Pieva, you must listen or you will freeze to death." Jaata taps her knuckles on the ice surface. "Now, amichi, you must wrap yourself in the furs from the sleigh. Command the deer with vaziet, and they will take you to my home."

"But Jaata..."

Jaata raises her hand. "Go, amichi. Return in the morning with my brother, Maroz. He will help."

Pieva stands, hesitating.

"Please, Pieva. I would never forgive myself if you froze to death. Go!"

#

It is smooth, the sleigh ride across the frozen land. Pieva wants to savour the glimmering quartz of the snow's surface, the captured and refracted moonbeams in the ice, but her heart beats cold. Heavy furs press her into the seat, anchoring her, but though they warm her body, she takes no comfort in their embrace.

A cabin stands towards the edge of the forest. Warm, carrotty light spills from the windows onto the snow below; a pine studded with silver beads stands sentry by the door. The air is thick with cloves and cinnamon and wine.

She practically falls across the threshold, caught by a man, Maroz, she assumes. He helps her to a chair by the fire: places a mug of hot spiced cider in her hands.

Between sobs, Pieva tells him of the mirror and the lake; of the years of friendship forged; of the confidences shared, the laughter, the stories. Mug drained and spent, she sinks back into the chair.

"Please Maroz. Can you help?"

He rises without looking at her. "We leave at sunrise."

#

In Kevät, the day arrives with a whisper: flaxen light nudges away night, a mellifluous chorus of birds greet the dawn. Here, the pale sun peeks over the horizon, slowly bleaching the black sky white. Crisp. Clean. Pieva picks at the latticed crystals at the window as Maroz hitches the sleigh.

Speeding across the frozen land, Maroz is silent. Pieva marvels that he cannot hear her thudding, lurching pulse.

She swipes a frosting of snow from the surface of the lake.

"Jaata," whispers Pieva, "are you there?"

Wide, blue eyes and a pale cheek press against the ice. "Pieva, I'm afraid."

"Maroz is here, amichi. He can help."

Maroz lays a pair of stout axes on the snow, blades gleaming, sharp as daggers.

"We must break the ice," he tells her.

"But what if we lose her, Maroz? What if that severs the connection, and we are both trapped in the wrong worlds?"

"This is old magic, Pieva. It should have been destroyed many moons ago." He glares up at the sky. "But they wanted to keep us separate."

It is weighty, the axe, even in Maroz's strong hands. She almost drops it when he passes it to her. He picks up the other and raises it high. Pieva copies, though her shoulders baulk at the strain.

He closes his eyes. "Stand back, Jaata. This may not work. On my count. One."

Pieva hears her mother's voice. The magic works for those who believe in it, my little kaani.

"Two."

Her muscles quiver.

"Three!"

Crack, split, fracture. Axes break the ice in perfect harmony. It cleaves apart in fissures, chasms ripping, water rushing. Pieva screams and falls and falls and her voice echoes alone. She closes her eyes and grasps, flailing before her hand finds another and another and all around her the world begins to solidify.

#

A circle of three: wide eyed, mouths agape.

They stand in a valley between two snow capped mountains, grasses bending with teardrops and shy daisies beneath their feet. Above, the sky is cornflower blue, a biting breeze, cottony clouds gathering.

One world spilling into the next.

Pieva squeezes Jaata's hand.

#

In stories and art, they speak of Brigid and Ostara and Persephone. Of Zephyr and Notos. Few speak of Pieva and Jaata. But if, instead of asking a learned man, you talk to the frost and the buttercups, they'll tell you to look at the patterns in a snowflake, or the crossed stalks of wildflowers, where you can see their clasped hands, their laced fingers.



Jay is a Gold Coast-based writer, performing arts teacher and mum, who has lived in the UK, Greece, Indonesia, Australia and Singapore. Her short stories, flash and micros have been published at Cafe Lit Magazine, Reedsy, Globe Soup, Vocal, Sadie Tells Stories, Save As and Off Topic, and in print in Mr Rosewood, Fabula Nivalis, Leicester Writes, The Gift and Crimson, and will be featured in Unleash Lit Magazine and Cerasus Magazine in early 2023. She is a two time winner of The Australian Writers Centre's Furious Fiction and winner of the 2022 Exeter Story Prize. Her

debut novel will be published in 2023 with Australian indie press Serenade Publishing.
Find her online here: https://www.instagram.com/jay_writes_books/

J.D. DONNELLY ARTISTS INTERVIEW

1. What got you interested in art?

I've honestly been drawing since I was a tiny tyke, doodling with colored pencils and markers—I skipped right over crayons—all kinds of animals, dinosaurs, and even putting them into stories. So, I've been drawn to storytelling in both visual and written forms since my formative years when I was nerdy dinosaur kid.

2. Do you prefer digital art or traditional mediums?

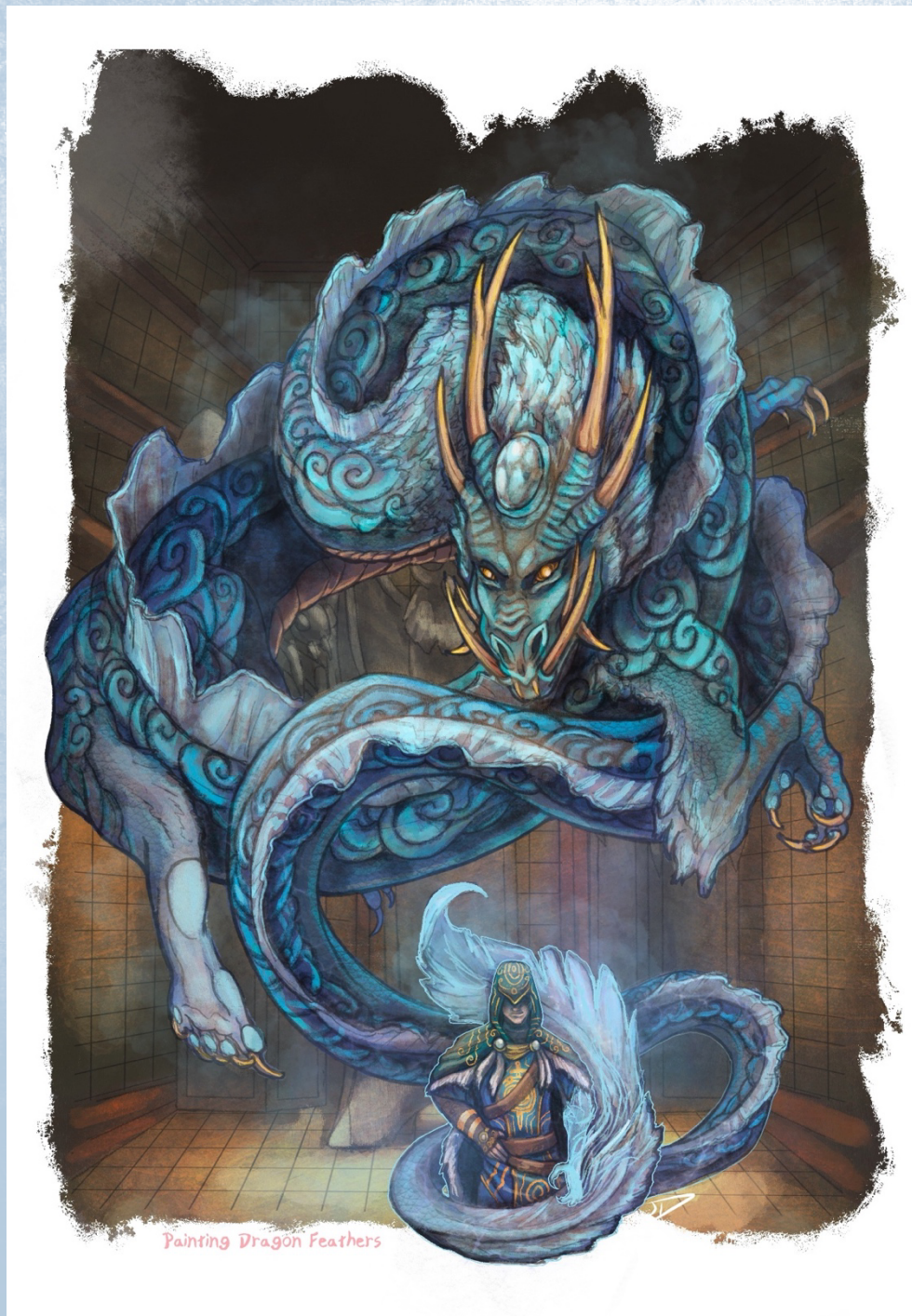
Depends on the particular piece, and what kind of aesthetic/vibe I'm aiming for the final image. While digital gives me some more options and streamlines some of my techniques, and has the bonus of portability and less mess, there's something special about the tactile-ness and serendipity that can be achieved with traditional media. While I have experience with physical sculpting, moldmaking, and resin-casting, one of my goals for the year is to learn some digital sculpting programs so I can have more fun with my new 3D printers.



3. Banking off that, how do you compose? First, what's your process. Second, do you go back and forth between programs and hand drawn?

Whether digital or traditional media, I start off with a rough sketch/doodle, then do a round of refining the composition, then start diving into cleanup and rendering. If it's for a client I'll draw up a few rough sketches for them to pick from. One of my preferred techniques is "tra-digital"—I'll make the tonal underdrawings in a traditional media like graphite or scratchboard, scan it into the computer, then digitally glaze the final colors and renderings. These days I'm using Procreate most often for my digital work.

4. What's your favorite genre to create art in?
Whether it's sci-fi, fantasy, horror, magical realism, etc., give me your creatures—real, extinct, fantastical, whatever. I want to draw the cute and the creepy critters!
5. I see some DnD themes in your work (yay!) Do you play and if yes, what do you typically play (tank, healer, DPS, etc)?
I'm actually a DnD noob, ha! Ironical, cause I was the dragon-obsessed girl in grade



school. I collected the Monster Manuals for the creature art while I was growing up, but I only got into playing the game right before the pandemic hit, and playing our ongoing campaign through Zoom was great stress relief during those weird times. So, my first ever DND character was the party wizard, and I was a copper dragonborn plague doctor who was somewhat of mad scientist with good intentions but mixed results...until she legit got possessed by the ghost of the first baddie we took down and

almost TPK'd the entire party, ha! I also home-brewed a species of butterfly-winged-eared sentient corgis for a friend's campaign and played the pint-sized barbarian corgi Tank that game.



6. Side question, do you like Star Trek and if you do, TOS or another iteration?

I've only ever seen the JJ Abrams' movies, but I know a fair amount via osmosis since my boyfriend is an avid Trekkie. And internet memes.

7. Who is your favorite villain in movies, TV show, or book?

Ooooooh, this is a tough question for me cause I LOVE villains. I personally believe a villain a crucial part of a story, cause a hero is only as great and fleshed out as the villain who's counter-balancing them. I'm in the process of making a panel for conventions discussing how to write interesting and well-rounded villains after seeing some rather flat villains recently *cough cough Vecna from Stranger Things cough cough*. But

to make a short list, Disney villains often have the best show-stopping musical numbers, and the Millennium Earl from the manga/anime D.Gray-Man is deliciously insidious.

8. Do you read? What genre? And do you have a certain author you like?

I read a lot, though not as prolifically as when I was younger due to being a busy adult, ha. But my boyfriend's gotten me into audio books, and we're currently listening to and enjoying Gideon the Ninth by Tamsyn Muir. I'm also currently working my way through the Grishaverse by Leigh Bardugo and Brandon Sanderson's Cosmere. I particularly loved his Mistborn trilogy—my boyfriend and I even have a Vin and Eland couples' cosplay! I also read a lot of graphic novels, both western comics and Asian manga. Favorite graphic novels include Fullmetal Alchemist, D.Gray-Man, +Anima, Beasts of Burden, and X-men (I'm a Nightcrawler fangirl).

9. Do things like books and movies influence what you decide to draw?

When I have the time and inclination to make fanart these days, I use it as an exercise to practice techniques and art skills if I'm drawing true to the original sources, but more often when I play in someone else's sandbox I like to put my own spin on it. Like, I did a whole Inktober one year where I drew Poke'mon inspired by and studied from realistic animal anatomy.

My bread and butter these days are Poke'ball terrariums—dioramas in globes featuring the titular Poke'mon. Working on these have highly refined my diorama scene painting and sculpture skills, and I want to start making tiny-scaled Smithsonian-level habitat dioramas featuring mythical creatures from across all kinds of cultures and stories.

10. Do you find it simple to draw for commissions? Or is it hard to realize someone else's vision?



I don't find it difficult to tackle commissions...unless the client is particularly fussy, ha. But that could be said of any kind of job working with other people. It's cool when I'm given a lot of references and can bring alive the client's exact vision, and it's just as rewarding when I get free reign and can surprise them with something they didn't expect in the final art. When I take on commissions I do so as a dialogue, and communicate back and forth till we get the art to how they like it.

11. When draw for yourself, does it relax you?

Whether it's drawing or writing, for myself or commission work, falling into the flow of creating the work is very zen to me.

12. Is art your full-time job?

Yup! I'm fortunate that between selling my own art at conventions—my dioramas and terrariums are best-sellers—and taking on commissions for private clients, illustrating for publications, and contributing to collaborative works like tarot decks, my plate is full of creative work. I'm also double-lucky I have a supportive network of family, friends, and fans who help my art succeed. I will also be expanding more into my written work, and am polishing up my cryptid-themed novel-in-progress to *fingers crossed* hopefully be out in the wild before the end of 2023.



Bumble Bee Cat Coloring Page

13. Lastly, anything you'd like us to know about you? And please offer a piece of advice for artists in your field.

Talent is just patience and practice put together. It can take weeks-months-years for an art piece or novel to reach fruition, so persistence is part of the equation, too. Try not to be discouraged by rejections and setbacks—it's just par for the course in a highly subjective field like writing and art, so it's likely more a matter of personal taste than any objective reflection of your work. My rule of thumb for receiving critique and feedback is if one person says it, it's an opinion; if multiple people are saying the same thing, though, it's an area you can turn your editorial focus on. The more you put your work out there and more eyes see it, the more opportunities you're going to be seeding.

Also, don't necessarily follow trends or memes, or what's "hot"—draw and write what you want to, and it will find its audience.

You can find updates on my artwork and stories as Painting Dragon Feathers across social media and my online shop.

Here's a Linktree with all my current links:
<https://linktr.ee/paintingdragonfeathers>

Cold Comfort

By C. S. Dines

I'm awake, and I'm dreaming.

Somehow I exist in both realms. It is my room, yet not my room. My bed, yet not my bed. My darkness, yet not my darkness.

And I'm alone. I'm always alone.

This ethereal slumber; things are not quite right. Heavy eyes and weighted head are trying to make sense of what I see. I can feel tangled sheets, and the mattress that's moulded to my spine. I accept this must be my reality, even though I know it isn't entirely.

And then I feel... reaching fingers... a sudden clasp. Simultaneously ice cold and heart-stopping. Someone is holding my hand!

But I 'm alone. I'm always alone?

From heart-stopping to a heart beating, fast. My body tenses; rigidity. My awakening races towards me; I sense it's the only way to release this grip. But whose grip?

I can't tell age or gender, rough or smooth. Too cold. And yet, before shock can haul me to full consciousness, can banish this turn of events and restore my equilibrium, I realise this hand is neither coercive nor possessive. It's just there. Clutching mine.

My eyes snap fully open; I hear myself gasp, feel my sweat drip. My surroundings transform into more familiar shadows as my room returns to its more usual form; and my right hand lies open and empty.

So, I'm still alone. I'm always alone.

In the morning, I wonder and shudder. Dream, or something else? Was it supernatural? When I go to bed later, trepidation. But soon I drift, and the illusions come, until once more I'm in that distorting, semi-wakeful state amidst semi-altered environs.

Before I can think, the hand... taking mine again. Cold again. I freeze again. I pray to resurface, and exhale in relief when I fully come to. The hand is gone.

More days of unsettled distraction and contemplation. More nights of repetitive, unworldly, chilling touch: always in that in-between place of overlay and semi-cognizance. I never dare to turn and see who lies with me, who reaches for me each night; my whole body feels paralyzed, and simple fear prevents investigation.

Words are never exchanged; we lie clasped. Yet, over weeks, eventually, anticipation normalizes; unexpectedly these icy, tangible visitations become... dare I say it... welcome. So much so I gradually discover... calm. We lie clasped; and waking

dreams at last revert to deeper, peaceful sleep. I am no longer questioning; I... I want this.

For I'm no longer alone...

End

C.S. Dines is 51, of mixed heritage, and lives/works in Essex, UK. Some of his poetry has been published by Forward Press (UK) and, most recently in October 2022's Eye to the Telescope (online fantasy poetry publisher). His flash fiction horror story, The Bloody Child, was published in January 2023 in Idolatry (released by US Publisher, PsychoToxin Press); a speculative fiction short story, Pale Flyer will be published by US Publisher, The Mocking Owl Roost in April 2023; a comic-horror flash fiction piece, Lychgate, was published online in September 2022 by US Publisher, D&T Publishing.

The Ghost of Maeve Devereaux

By Thomas Van Boening

It started in early December with finals coming up. Students were becoming antsy and frantic to finish all assigned projects in two weeks. On Monday morning, I had no messages and no emails. Instead of anything pressing, Ms. Maeve Devereaux sat outside my office insisting to speak alone.

I should have spoken up once she shut the door behind her. There was nobody else there before 7:30, but I knew my colleagues would be entering their respective offices soon enough, and a closed-door meeting with a young female student could turn into gossip fodder I didn't need in this day and age.

I decided to be firm, yet patient.

"What is it, Ms. Devereaux?"

She took a deep breath. "I have a problem you may help me with, professor."

"If it's about your work, I think you're doing exceptional. Your last presentation was better than most of your classmates, and the quality of your drawings are exceptional."

"That's just it," she said. "I've never had high marks for my artwork. I... know when you're doing a lot more than complimenting me, Mr. Northcote."

She unzipped her long winter coat, revealing herself in a see-through black gown, black lacy underwear, and semi-opaque black stockings over her chalky white legs.

Oh god, I thought. I could get fired and barred from teaching anywhere for this kind of shit. Get her out of here. Now. Quick. Before anyone else sees this.

"Maeve," I said, meeting her eyes as she sat. "Whatever you think is happening between us, is just my kind nature. Nothing romantic, and nothing illicit will happen here. I'm... flattered, but I have a loving wife and family and I have a career. I'm easily twice your age."

"And I'm willing to get past all of that," she said as she spread her legs wider.

I looked out of the blinds of my office window. Looking back, I should have closed them as soon as she bared herself. Even worse, I should have opened my office door and sent her on her way at once, and reported her misconduct before anything could stick to me.

"You look at me and smile during every lecture," she said. "And you look specifically at me when you are most passionate about your teachings. You can't tell me there's nothing here."

"I look around to everyone to ensure all my students are engaged. That's part of my job."

"I've been trying to fight this crush since September, and I can't lie to myself anymore," she said. "I... I must tell you the truth. I think you're amazing, and I know you think the same of me. I think of you when I pleasure myself. And I hear your voice when I dream. I can't have anything less than you. Richard... I-"

"I have a wife and children," I said. "I'm not throwing them away for anyone or anything."

I realized I raised my voice with her, and I prayed nobody outside the office heard anything.

"I'm going to forget all about this," I said. "Please... leave. There's nothing to forgive, and nothing to be hurt over because nothing ever happened between us. I'll see you in class this afternoon, and you will be as professional as I am."

She flushed and began to weep. "But... I did this for you. There is so much I want from you. For us."

"Us?" I asked. "There is no 'us,' Ms. Devereaux. If there is a miscommunication between us, I'm settling it right now. I never led you on, and my lectures and critiques have always been professional. Complimenting your work isn't the same as anything romantic you might have thought. And... this is the end of your mistake."

As soon as she stood, I overtaken my eyes and saw Charli Orsini, the pottery and sculpture professor entering her office.

"But Mr. Northcote," Maeve said. "We... we could have so much to enjoy with each other. I... dressed like this for you."

I hated myself for looking between her legs before I met her eyes again.

"I love you," she said before sniffing.

"Cover yourself, and get out," I said. "Or I will call campus security."

She stood in plain view when Charli looked our way through the open blinds.

After seeing my coworker folding her arms, I turned back to the problem in my office for thirty seconds. Maeve only stood silently, hoping my words weren't final. It felt like an eternity before she put on her coat and zipped up.

After concealing her alluring body, she left my office with what dignity she had left.

Charli waited for her to turn the corner. "What... the hell was that about?"

I sighed and beckoned Charli into my office. This time I closed the door for a good reason.

"I believe Ms. Maeve Devereaux has mistaken my usual nature for something a lot more," I said. "I can assure you, I did not indicate any attachment beyond the normal teacher and student relationship. Jesus, I'm about to turn forty, and she's a freshman. Good god, she's barely old enough to vote."

Charli had known me since I started six years ago, and she knew my heart only belonged to Amy. If I needed a character witness, Charli was it.

"Are you sure you didn't say anything she could have misconstrued?" Charli asked.

She only saw the end of our conversation. It was only a horny teenager wanting someone she couldn't have. I knew Charli rarely covered a coworker's ass, so I took no offense.

"You've had no emails or phone calls? Any kind of paper trail that can be later investigated?"

"Nothing whatsoever," I said. "Our only emails were for assignments. The Zoom calls during 2020 when she applied. That's all I can think of. Christ, Amy is pregnant again. Why would I do anything with one of the students?"

"I know," Charli said. "But if she has anything to be remotely used against you, the board tends to side with students these days in the age of #MeToo."

"This wasn't like that," I said. "I've spoken to her several times, but this was the first and only time she's done a stunt like this. Besides, I'm a blonde sort of guy, through and through."

Charli, being a blonde herself, rolled her eyes with a smile.

"You know what I mean," I said as Charli looked at the floor with intense thought before looking back to me.

"I'll say nothing, but you need to get ahead of this," she said. "Or at least have a record of her behavior before she tries this again. Then all you can tell the higher-ups is that you didn't instigate this behavior."

I did as she advised. I told the staff that I want no measures of punishment to happen, and I didn't want her kicked out of the college. It was on record, and it would look better for me to be truthful about it, rather than keep this under any suspicion.

Maeve didn't come to her afternoon class. I spent so long worrying about it that my shirt was soaked in sweat. I gave an assignment for one final still-life drawing project and turned the rest of my students loose.

I couldn't get Maeve's outfit out of my head until I made love to Amy when I got home. Four months pregnant, but still limber enough to give and receive everything.

I wish I told Amy about it, but as far as I was concerned, the matter with Maeve Devereaux was done.

#

It wasn't, of course. Days later, she somehow got my cellphone number. Because I wished to be available to students at any time, my Facebook profile wasn't set to private. It must have had an old post with my personal number.

Turning an awkward situation into a full-blown nightmare, Maeve sent two text messages with photos she took between her legs. It was the same black underwear. The next photo displayed her clean-shaven and parted vulva. Definitely a virgin, I thought.

Tonight this could be all yours, she texted.

I didn't respond. I deleted the photos immediately, then went into the deleted photos to get them off my phone immediately. Then I double-checked my iCloud to make sure Amy would never see what Maeve sent.

At midnight I heard my phone buzz, and I saw it was another number. I answered as soon as I got outside my house on my deck balcony.

"You have the wrong number," I said.

Her voice was on the other side. "We have our connection, Richard. You love my work, and I have you to thank for your direction. But my heart has much, much deeper intentions than your instructions in class."

"Stop it," I said. "This has gone too far. I'm flattered, but I have a child, and my wife is pregnant with our second on the way."

"Love can conquer any obstacle," Maeve whispered. "And I know you loved my outfit. I know you want inside my cunt."

"Goodnight, Ms. Devereaux," I said. "If you do this one more time, I'm going to tell the college board and have you expelled for lewd conduct. I have this call recorded."

I lied, but before she could respond, I pressed my thumb to the red button on my touchscreen and promptly blocked her.

I got back into bed, and Amy stirred. "Who was that?"

I hesitated, and in the dark, I noticed I was erect as I sat back on the bed.

"A student who is on very thin ice," I said. "Somehow she got my number."

I left out why she called.

Amy groaned. "The art department always attracts the weird ones."

I laughed nervously as I got under the covers. "It sure does."

She drifted to sleep, but I couldn't sleep all night. I worried about a problematic pupil with a ceaseless crush on me. If she had the gumption to send pussy pics, she could do anything unhinged.

#

She didn't show up for classes for the rest of the semester. Maeve didn't officially drop her courses, so I assumed she dropped out entirely.

I didn't wish for this to happen, but I felt a stone off my back when I didn't see her name for next semester's course registration.

The nightmare was only beginning when I heard my office phone ring as I finished grading finals.

I picked up the receiver. "This is Professor Northcote."

"Richard?" Her voice said. "Can we please talk alone?"

"About your assignments, yes. Anything else, I'm rather busy, Ms. Devereaux."

"I'm no longer attending college. I'm over eighteen. You're free to do whatever with me. I need you, Richard. Ethics be damned. Can't you understand me?"

"This has gone far enough," I said. "You refuse to listen to the simplest insistence to stop. This isn't going to happen. If you don't stop this, I will get a restraining order against you."

"There's no reason to be angry," she said. "You have what every man your age could want. A young woman who wants you. And you're throwing me away?"

"Jesus Christ, I'm married," I said. "It might not mean much to some, but it means everything to me. I'm not about to betray my family for anything. Not now. Not ever. Not for you, or anyone else. If you can't respect my wishes, then you need serious help, Maeve."

A long moment passed. I could hear her weeping again.

"Please," she said. "Please don't say such hurtful things. I'm... I'm at the Super 8 on the highway. I'm going back home for Christmas tomorrow morning. You... can't tell me you aren't tempted for one night with a pretty girl who is no longer your student."

The temptation wouldn't get out of my mind, and I couldn't think of anything else. Anybody who had been in this profession had seen many beautiful students come and go. And I've learned from the mistakes over the years of plenty of other men, and the occasional woman, who have fleeting affairs with younger pupils only to end in the worst way possible.

She snickered and waited for me to answer. "My fingers are inside me. This can be your Christmas Present. I'm naked, and all you need to—"

I slammed the phone down. The phone rang several more times before I unplugged it, and I posted final grades online and left my office.

#

Then came the news of the accident. On Christmas Eve, most of my students shared on social media of Maeve driving on the highway and there was enough ice and packed snow to cause Maeve to lose control of her car and she slid off a bridge and into the icy river below.

A few days later, investigators asked me procedural questions when they found several blog posts and personal journals in her Microsoft 365 documents. All of her juvenile yearnings and desires were written out. It looked terrible for me, but I had the truth on my side. I told the police that she tried enticing me into an affair, and I repeatedly refused.

The police seemed satisfied when they returned for further questions.

Maeve, for all her faults, confirmed what I said in her blog posts, so I wasn't suspected of foul play when they officially ruled it an accident.

Amy didn't take this well when I finally told her everything. I should have been as open with her all along, but she seemed relieved when Maeve would no longer be a problem.

In April, our second son was born, and life started going our way. When August came around, Amy and I found out she was pregnant again with our third child.

In September, classes began again, and I made sure anything I said could not be taken as overtly friendly. Anytime I saw a beautiful brunette, I thought of Maeve Devereaux, and I'd relive the whole ordeal.

I saw a therapist about my guilt, and it helped my conscience. After so much unnecessary rumination about the affair, I was contented that her actions were not my doing, and her accident wasn't my fault.

As the anniversary of her accident came close, she wouldn't get out of my mind despite all the therapy.

I dreamt of her.

It was the same conversation before she undid her long coat. Her skin was white and sagging like she'd been underwater for months.

I sat at my desk, and she walked over to me with her sheer outfit leaving nothing left to the imagination as her hardened nipples were in my face. She straddled me and looked at me with white pupilless eyes as she leaned her mouth to my ear.

"Kiss me."

I woke up in a sweat in my office. I'd spent most of my evening grading and preparing final lectures. I looked at my clock and saw it was 8:30. I reached into my desk for my phone and saw I had two voicemails from Amy.

I called and apologized as I drove home.

Then the nightmares repeated. Maeve and I. All alone in my office.

Somehow my body weighed like lead as she straddled me.

She put her hand down her see-through panties and fingered herself.

"I'd still be here if you'd just let this happen. We can still be together."

Maeve put her index and middle fingers to my mouth. I managed to keep my lips shut, but the smell of her sex was still there as I regained my functions to push her off of me as she attempted to kiss again.

I woke to Amy shaking me as I thrashed in my sleep.

She listened to me explain the dreams I'd been having, and Amy was far more understanding than I ever hoped. She admitted to having a crush on her teachers as a kid, and that Maeve was the rare instance of someone taking her attraction one step too far.

By midnight, Amy fell back asleep after rubbing my back and shoulders as she spooned me with the swell of her pregnant stomach keeping me warm.

#

Finals ended, and Amy drove out of town to bring her parents over to celebrate Christmas. The kids got their WWE action figures and Monster Trucks, and I got Amy a diamond necklace with amethyst gems surrounding it. It was the birthstone she was named after, and she loved it.

She surprised me for Christmas with another pocket knife to add to my growing collection. I'm a sucker for handcrafted hilts and forged blades.

After exchanging gifts, we watched classic Christmas specials with the children. Elf, Frosty The Snowman, and Disney's A Christmas Carol.

That evening, Amy volunteered to drive her parents home. I saw it begin to snow, so I insisted she go slowly.

She drove her reliable Chevy Tahoe, and I was at ease.

I remembered the report about Maeve. She drove a Toyota Yaris. And she wasn't in a good headspace for careful driving back home to California with Nebraska's inclement weather.

The children were happy playing in the snow before they got into the SUV.

I wish I went with them. I feigned tiredness so I could put extra gifts out and tell the kids they barely missed Santa Clause when they got home.

After an hour, I called Amy and got no answer.

After Midnight I drove out myself in my Jeep Cherokee. It wasn't twenty miles of highway driving until I saw several vehicles overturned and my heart dropped to my guts as I saw a tow truck pulling Amy's Chevy Tahoe out of the icy river.

#

The funeral took place on New Year's Eve, and I started 2023 without my best friend and our children.

I dreamed of Maeve again. I dreamt of her a lot. I just wanted her to leave me alone, but she tormented me with night terrors and waking regrets on top of my mournful dread.

"Kiss me, Richard."

She stripped off her lingerie, revealing herself completely. She kissed my neck and I turned my face from her white eyes.

"That's okay," she continued. "You want this even more. Your wife will never do this again, but I will."

She undid my belt and knelt under my desk as her cold hands grasped through the open flap of my boxer shorts.

I woke up just as put me in her mouth.

#

The next few months were hell. I insisted on working the spring semester, and I overworked myself by teaching summer accelerated courses, a burden I took on before. But Amy and our family were gone, and I had nothing else I could do but teach.

I came under review when several students reviewed my workload as being unreasonable. In retrospect, I agreed and relented on the number of projects and online assignments.

Fall semester came, Charli's relationship fell through and we had become closer. Then much closer.

I worried about curses or being haunted by the memory of Maeve Devereaux, but Charli's eagerness for intimacy matched mine after the first week of the semester.

It wasn't long before we made our relationship public at the teaching staff and alumni party during Homecoming. That night was the first time I'd fucked since Amy, and it was wonderful.

By Halloween, I felt like I was getting a sense of purpose again. Charli and I felt right, and everyone else in our social circle thought we deserved each other after everything.

By November I found it in my heart to propose marriage. I suspected Charli thought I was moving too fast, but she had already been staying over at my house more and more, and I thought it would look bad to staff and students alike if word got around, we were, as my parents would call, 'shacking up.'

She said yes, and we had a wedding date picked out for next summer.

#

The nightmares came back harder during December. I had Charli in bed with me, rubbing and kissing my forehead whenever I'd groan or mumble before I could thrash myself awake.

"You're safe with me," Charli would whisper in my ear. If that wouldn't suffice, she'd feel how hard I was from the nightmarish temptation with Ms. Devereaux, and Charli would alleviate me until I'd come inside Charli's firm grip, or sometimes within her cunt before falling back into peaceful dreams.

Then one night Charli wasn't there as she spent long hours grading student papers for her art history course.

Maeve returned with more fury than lust.

"If you will not give me what I desire," she said. "Then I will take her too."

Same predicament. Stuck in my chair as she straddled me. She shimmied her pelvis against mine, and I couldn't help but almost give in.

"Please stop," I said. "I did nothing to wrong you."

"You killed me, Richard," she said as she wrangled my cock out.

Another nightmare, I thought.

But I still felt her cold body envelop me inside her.

"Mmmmm... And if you had done this, I'd still be alive."

"Please stop," I said as her cold arms wrapped around me. "It wasn't my fault. I was more than reasonable."

"So was I," she said as she bucked herself up and down. "And no matter what I did, I wasn't good enough for you. I would have settled for one good kiss."

I hated how long I lasted, and I woke up in a cold sweat with my seed coating my boxers and pajamas, which were chilled in the bedroom air.

The furnace had gone out, and the thermostat read 46 degrees in the house.

After I got the pilot light back on, I had the heat going again. After changing pajamas, I jolted when I heard the front door of the house shut.

Charli gasped behind me.

"It's like a meat locker in here," she said.

"I fixed it," I said.

She joined me in bed, and I performed my absolute best since before Amy and I had our first child. I had to get Maeve out of my head, and it worked for the night.

#

Finals were over, and no other nightmares came. I drove the Jeep over to Charli's family's for Christmas, taking extra care as it snowed, and going slow as possible when coming anywhere near rivers, creeks, or other bridges over water.

Charli messed up her lipstick and reached into the glove compartment for an extra napkin to fix herself. I saw the pocketknife Amy had given me a year ago. Since it was special to me, I vowed to always use it, however, I'd only needed it to unseal a container of antifreeze.

Maeve won't kill Charli if I am killed with her, I thought every time I passed over a bridge.

Only warmth and contentment came from celebrating Christmas with Charli's parents, and when I drove us back home, nothing eventful happened. The weather even warmed up to the upper 30s melting the roads clearer and clearer.

Christmas Day passed us by as Charli and I stayed in and made love by the fireplace. We ended the night with wine to toast a remembrance to Amy and my children. I noticed Charli wasn't drinking her wine, and I asked why. Charli held my hand, brought me into the bathroom, and showed me a plastic stick.

A positive pregnancy test.

We slept together, and there were no nightmares. Just hopes and dreams of starting our family.

It snowed the next day, and I offered to get a ham and other supplies for guests on New Year's Eve.

The Jeep rode steady and reliable over the snow, but I was worried when I saw a semitrailer in the ditch, and when I thought the roads were getting dodgy, the jeep fishtailed. The four-wheel drive and anti-lock brakes should have steadied everything, but I was going forty miles per hour with my front and rear swapping places as I looked backward.

Taking a deep breath, I steered in the direction of the skidding as I padded my brakes. This managed to slow down as the Jeep hit the rough patches of solid ice and snow on the side of the road. I jolted, but I was able to correct everything to start moving my front forward.

Every warning in my car dinged and beeped as I looked down at my dashboard. When I looked up, I had enough time to grab my steering wheel as the blaring horn of a truck the size of my garage struck me.

For a moment, I felt weightless in the air before the roof caved in and the airbag smashed my face, pushing my nose flat until cartilage snapped.

The pain held the top spot of my discomfort until the car filled up with the coldest water I ever felt surrounding me.

I didn't have time to register that the windows were cracked enough for the river to fill the jeep within moments.

I tried to get my seatbelt off, but it locked up.

I pressed and pressed the button to release me, but nothing happened.

I began to panic as the last of the air was above my head and I leaned to catch what air I could.

I grunted, exerting my precious breath.

"This wasn't your fault either," a familiar voice said.

I ignored her, and thought of Charli, and then of Amy. Then my mind went only to escape when the thought of her pocketknife emerged in my mind.

I squirmed and fought from screaming against the cold as I felt the glove box handle. I reached and felt it open. The knife was almost out of reach until I gave it one last good lean toward it.

Grasping it, I cut the seatbelt like soft butter.

I punched the windshield enough times for it to crack further, cutting into my knuckles.

Get out, or I'm dead, I thought. And if I'm dead, I'm stuck with her.

I got my back against the passenger side seat and gave the top of the windshield a heavy upward stomp and the glass finally gave.

I thought I could reach the hole in the ice, but the strong current pushed me downstream underneath the ice.

I pounded and dug into the ice with the knife, but it was too thick

"Don't fight me anymore," she said. "And give me what I want, Mr. Northcote."

Feeling a hand on my shoulder, I gasped. My lungs ached and filled with frightful cold. I wanted to gag and cough, but my muscles gave out as I began to lose consciousness.

Then I saw her in front of me.

"One kiss," she said. "One kindness from the heart, and this will be all over."

I felt her hands on my face, and I thought of Amy, knowing I would see her soon as my lips met Maeve's.

She was colder than me, and I didn't feel anything else for a long time. I thought I heard her happy sigh, but it was too loud for something like that.

I'm sorry Maeve, I thought. I hope this eases your pain.

#

The next memory seemed hazy. I felt a hand grab mine as I pondered the light that surrounded me. Then I thought I felt the embrace of an angel around me as I heard chimes over and over until they faded into a sound of a digital heart rate monitor.

It was Charli.

I heard her frantic words after the doctors came to check on me.

Later, I found out the driver of the semitrailer was also my rescuer from the ice water. All the doctors and nurses couldn't believe the holiday miracle and reminded me many times how lucky for me that good Samaritans still exist.

Charli and I spent a while alone. She told me I had twenty stitches in my arms and hands, two stitches in the bridge of my nose, and had been treated for hypothermia after being given mouth-to-mouth resuscitation by the big rig driver on his way home to Oklahoma City.

"I saw her, Charli," I said. "Maeve."

"Don't torment yourself," she said. "You've come too far to let her death torment you anymore."

"I saw her," I said again. "I know she's dead, and I know what happened is impossible. But... I thought I was dead with her. I think she spared me when I gave her..."

"Gave her what?"

I didn't hesitate. "A kiss."

She looked at me, and I knew I sounded crazy.

"I think it was the last thing her spirit wanted. I... think it was the only way to get her to leave me alone. I'm ashamed to say this, but... I think it worked."

She held my hand. "If we get married, you must be truthful with me. Did you do anything with her before all of this?"

I smiled. "If I had, you'd've been the first to know. I don't have it in me to keep secrets like this."

She was satisfied, and to my surprise still wanted to remain by my side.

#

We married on the Fourth of July. Charli kept nightly watch over me, but no other nightmares came.

I thought of Maeve Devereaux many times for the rest of my life. I'm just as human as anyone, and I truthfully hoped her spirit or ghost could leave me in peace.

Charli and I both got nervous around Christmas, and we watched for news stories about accidents of people going over bridges and drowning, but no stories of that nature happened.

We did the same thing every Christmas after that. The dread lost its power, and she and I only grew happier and happier.

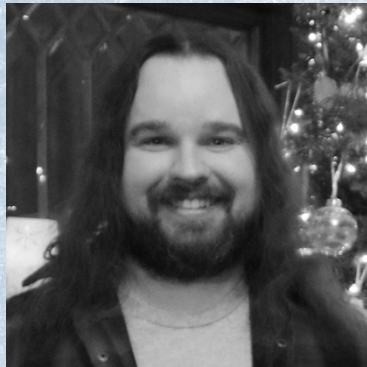
I'd occasionally get another student that had the telltale signs of puppy love, but I put forward a policy to have my office hours at the same time as Charli's. With my wife across the hall, no smitten girls would dare anything stupid.

It took years for me to stop seeing Maeve every time I saw a skinny brunette.

I had to turn away a figure model because she was a brunette. This caused some ire because she had been a mutual friend of Charli's. When Charli took over assigned duties as the figure drawing instructor, it smoothed over.

Several Christmases have come and gone since. I still dream of her now and again. However, instead of fear, I just feel pity for her. I'm truthful when I wish things could have ended better between us.

When midnight strikes to bring in the new year, I don't make resolutions but hope all the people hurt by forbidden, unrequited love in the world can become, for lack of better words, water under the bridge.



Thomas Van Boening was born and raised in Lincoln Nebraska. He grew up loving everything books and movies of science fiction, fantasy, and horror. While not working the day job as a graphic designer, he is typing away on his forthcoming debut fantasy novel. As long as his lovely wife Sarah keeps the coffee coming, he'll never runs out of ideas. Find him online on Facebook, Tumblr, Amazon Vella, and TikTok under @PaladinSlapper