Vanessa Knipe



Family Christmas

An Old Magic. Cold Cases. Short Story

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Wolf's Head Hall

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Cover drawn by VJ Knipe

Forensic Science Laboratory General Examination Sheet
Laboratory Notes **Item Number:** FO01 **Case number:** 12-0628/27
Description of Article: Casts of marks in the snow. **Where found:** The front path at Caroline Walters's house.
Packaging of item: Tamperproof plastic bag: X Paperbag/sack/envelope: Other:
Comments: The unusual marks were first sprayed with a beeswax solution to prevent dilution of the casting material when the dental stone was added. Dental stone sets with an exothermic reaction, so without the beeswax the impression would be destroyed by the casting method. The prints seem to be of an unshod horse, but where it stood still, there were eight prints not four. Further research needed to understand this phenomenon.
Examiner: RLL Checked By: AC

Family Christmas

The Twelve Days of Yule

'Twas the start of the feast and the log was dragged in,

The roots of an old oak blown down by high winds.

***

"You stole my orange!" Charlotte screamed.

"That one is mine! It was in my stocking." Darren tugged at the inoffensive fruit. His thumbs thrust through the skin. Orange juice squirted over all three of Caroline's children.

"Look at my dress!" Charlotte shouted. "You've stained the velvet. Grannie sent it for me to wear today."

Josh, the youngest, started crying as he rubbed his eyes. "It stings!"

Caroline rushed over from the sink with a damp paper towel. "Out of my kitchen, both of you!" She mopped Josh's face.

"But mum!"

"He started it by stealing my orange."

"That one was mine!" Darren shouted. "Yours is in the living __"

"Out!" Caroline pointed to the kitchen door. "If you don't leave in 2 seconds, I will make you play in the garden."

"But it's raining!" Darren slunk out of the kitchen.

"But what about my dress?"

The children had been up since the crack of dawn. Civility frayed. Donovan watched Caroline get more frazzled.

Donovan held out a hand to Charlotte. "How about we blot the orange juice off in the downstairs loo? While your mother helps Josh."

He grabbed the roll of paper towels and headed for the hall. It was the same in all times; festivals would never seem right without the family arguments.

"And stay out," Caroline said.

With Charlotte's dress rescued, she ran to the living room to claim control of the remote. Josh crept out, carrying a picture book, and sat on the stairs while the older two argued.

"Will I get to help you in the forge soon?" Josh asked, sharing a picture from his book. A blacksmith was shoeing a horse.

Caroline caught the wistful note from the kitchen. "You're only six, give it time. Maybe when you can lift one of his huge hammers. Can you set the table, Don?" Warm smells drifted through the house.

Donovan smiled ruefully. "You heard your mother."

Josh sank back into his book and dreams.

Donovan entered the dining room with caution. There were so many rules about dining in this modern world that he feared he might offend by accident. So much easier when eating involved fingers, knife and spoon.

Caroline had cleared all her marking and school books. A fine linen cloth was spread over the polished wood. A scarlet runner down the middle and candles, surrounded by winter greenery and berries, made a fine centrepiece. Not quite the same resonance as a hearth down the middle of the Mead Hall, but at least it was some fire to drive away the dark winter and call back the sun.

Fork on the left, knife on the right. Did the spoon and fork for dessert go above the placemat? Or was this formal dining where the cutlery spread out in ever increasing lines. He set them below the crackers and hoped he had it correct.

Caroline emerged from the kitchen, her face rosy with heat from the oven. She frowned as she looked at the table.

Donovan sighed. "What did I do wrong this time?"

Caroline shook her head and laughed. Tension from the long day of excitement releasing. "Sorry, am I a scold? There are only five of us for Christmas dinner, and you've laid six places."

"Don't you lay out a place, in case someone knocks at the door?" Donovan searched her face. "Is hospitality so different these days that you won't welcome a Stranger to the table?"

"You want me to go out and find a tramp to invite to Christmas dinner?"

"A Stranger." Donovan lowered his voice to a whisper. "You know, when the Gods come down and walk the world. At liminal times in the wheel of the year."

Caroline bit her lip. "Of course, we'll leave it. If that's your tradition."

Donovan could tell she wasn't convinced.

***

'Twas the first night of Yule, a true celebration
That honoured mothers of all types and all nations.
Upon the High Table a spare place was laid,
But no Stranger arrived. He must be delayed.

***

The warriors seated at the trestle tables, that ran the length of the long hearth, shouted their boasts of great victories and proud defeats. Any minute now, they would demand Donovan join in.

"Tell us about the giants, Donovan," Eanred shouted.

And there it was. Donovan swigged some mead. It wasn't as if he could be honest about it.

Cathal jumped to his feet. "As my little brother is so reluctant to join the boast, let me tell you about my deeds. When I set forth, the wind drove the rain into my face, like tears of defeat. But never let it be said that Cathal was defeated…"

Wind and rain? Donovan kept his face still. Cathal had set out for his cattle raid on a decent autumn day. If Cathal had waited, it would have been him sent to defeat the giants.

Donovan let his eyes wander over the hall, thankful that Cathal had felt it necessary to overshadow his younger brother. As always, for these great feasts at the turning points of the year, a spare place had been laid, in case a Stranger should show up.

***

'Twas Yule's second night, the shortest by far.
The Yule log burned high, the full length of the hearth.
Of course, the spare place was set out with great heart,
But on this day no Stranger arrived to take part.

***

Once, Woden had left his fine throne in the Mead Halls of the Gods. He travelled the land wearing a wide brimmed hat and concealed his form beneath the tattered grey cloak of a vagrant. On this night, Woden visited the hall of a king. He rapped on the stout oak doors with his wooden staff. The gatekeeper slipped out of his place at the low end of the table and opened the door. Outside the

wind howled, driving the rain sideways as it pushed over the land. Among the water, pellets of ice were forming. They collected in the white beard of the old man outside. For this night there would be snow.

"Come within," Duruweard said to the old Stranger. "We have just begun eating, and my master says all are welcome in his hall."

For all men need fire to thaw out when they have journeyed long.

Duruweard led the Stranger to the table. He sat him as close to the long hearth as possible and served the lowly Stranger with the best meats that reached this far down the pecking order.

All men need fresh clothing when they have travelled far through the troubled land.

The King at the high table saw the Stranger with his tattered cloak. He turned to his eldest son. "My son, take this fine fur to the man who just arrived. He must be cold after his long journey."

The eldest son favoured the raggedy man with a disapproving glare. He accepted the cloak of his father's and walked into the shadows away from the light of the hearth. The fur warmed his hands. It would be a fine cloak to wear when hunting, but his father had said the Stranger needed a new cloak. Guest Right demanded hospitality, but the finest of this year's hunting was taking it too far. The eldest son took his father's cloak to his bedding and switched it out with a lesser one. It had once been brightest red with a hood trimmed with white fur, but was beginning to show wear. The eldest son knew he needed the finer cloak; he was the king's own son. He would be king himself one day. The beggar man would be happy with

any cloak that was in better condition than his current ragged covering.

The eldest son continued to the Stranger and handed him the second-hand cloak. "Here, good man. My father saw you needed a new cloak."

"Thank you." The Stranger accepted the second-hand cloak with great dignity, and continued to dine.

Satisfied with his gifting, the eldest son returned to the high table.

A man who had journeyed long needs good food to build him up.

The king turned to his second son. "My son, take this plate of food from my place, and this horn of golden mead and hand them to the Stranger."

The second son heaved himself off the bench and accepted his father's plate and goblet. He was a heavyset young man, given to spending more time at the table than most. The food on the plate was cut from the centre of the meat. Why would his father give those to a beggar? While his father wasn't looking, the second son tipped the fine meats onto his own plate and collected some food from further down the table. This he carried to the beggar man with the horn of mead.

"My father sends you this plate of meat and his horn of mead," the second son said.

The Stranger received the plate and the horn with great dignity. He shared the finer meats and mead with Duruweard. The gatekeeper was grateful, for even those seated halfway down the table

received finer meat than the burnt edges that usually ended up at this lower end.

A man who walks the land will be footsore with worn boots.

Then the King took off his well-made boots, and said to his youngest son, "Take these to the Stranger. With all his walking, he has more need of well-crafted footwear than a man like me, who sits to hear petitions."

The youngest smiled and said, "Of course, father." The young man trotted down the table. The boots were very fine. Better quality than the shoes the son wore. The youngest son halted at his bedding. From there, he pulled out a shoulder bag from among his belongings. Then he continued to the Stranger.

"Here, goodman, my father sent you these fine boots to make your journey more comfortable. And here, from me, is a bag that you may use to carry your belongings, like your old shoes."

The Stranger smiled at the young man. His eyes were shadowed under the brim of his hat. "Thank you for your kindness, young man. May the Fates favour you in their dealings."

The youngest son trotted back to the high table to continue his meal. As he arrived, the second son choked on his fine meats. During the disruption, while they tried to dislodge the food, the Stranger vanished. Finally, the second son breathed again, but it was as if his spirit had already departed this world. He was fed on thin broth and honey mead for the rest of his life.

In midwinter, meat was running low, so the eldest son went hunting. He wore the fine fur cloak, to keep the cold away. A stag ran

across his path and he gave chase. The stag leapt over a nearly frozen river. The eldest son staggered to a halt on the bank, cursing his ill-luck. The bank crumbled under his weight and he tumbled into the icy water. The cloak caught on a branch and the son could not free himself. They didn't find his body until the spring thaw.

The youngest son became a wise king when it was his time to rule.

***

'Twas the twelfth night of Yule and all had made merry.
The children still screamed but the parents were weary.
The spare place was laid as tradition decreed,
And a stranger arrived on an unusual steed.

***

"And that was how I won the great grey stallion from Beortwulf in fair combat," Cathal said.

A full round of toasts followed Cathal's final words.

A second son, strong in battle, sage at council, brave beyond a lion. Many spoke of King Donovan. These words had echoed around the hall since the incident with the giants.

And now, it was his time to boast about the deed. He had the massive deer skin, but it hadn't been won the way the stories said. He braced to stand.

But, on the great oak door of the hall came a rapping, as of a staff on the wooden panels. A reprieve.

The door warder jumped to his feet and open it to the night. A man in a hooded cloak stood outside.

Magne, Donovan's father and king, stood. "Enter this hall, Stranger. Come sit at the high table and dine with us."

The man in the shabby red cloak walked in from the night, lowered his fur-lined hood and brushed off the snow. Smiling through his beard, he joined the men at the feast. He drank and made merry. At the end of the meal, he swung a sack from under the cloak. To each of the guests in the hall, he gave a gift appropriate to their status and dreams in life.

To Cathal, eldest son of Magne, King of Elmet, he gave a deer hide with a map of Elmet painted on it. Cathal took this as a symbol that he would indeed be King after his father. Cathal broke into a great, gloating grin as he stared at his younger brother.

Last of all, the Stranger stood before Donovan. With eyes black as charcoal, he stared long and hard at the younger son. Silence spread over the hall. Then the Stranger reached into his sack and produced a hammer. He did not give it directly to Donovan, just laid it on the table in front of him.

Donovan stared at the hammer. Yes, this was the answer. He did not have to be a warrior after all. The hammer weighed down his hand as he took up his salvation. Donovan's kinship to the Stranger made it no dishonour to take up the anvil.

"Thank you, Stranger," Donovan said.

***

An eight-leggèd grey horse awaited outside.

As he walked through the Hall the guests swelled with pride.

He sat at the place and ate up the food.

He laughed and made merry calling everything good.

***

As Caroline set food on the table, the rain outside the windows turned to snow. It settled gently on grass and roads turning the bleak day into a magical night.

"Time to eat!" she called.

Josh dropped his book on the stairs and ran, as if he hadn't seen food in a month. Charlotte and Darren pushed in from the living room drawn by the delicious smells, quarrels forgotten as they saw the turkey on the table. All three slipped into their regular places. Caroline took the head of the table while Donovan took the foot.

"Who else is coming?" Charlotte asked, seeing the place set next to her mother's.

Donovan had barely parted his lips to explain his family tradition, when a rapping came on the front door, as if from a wooden staff tapping on the uPVC panels.

***

Minster FM radio:

Man: While the rest of the country basks in unseasonable warmth, York is having a white Christmas.

Woman: It's just like those weird storms we had around midsummer. Remember? The rest of the country in drought, while York's microclimate flooded the streets.

Man: I expect it's the confluence of the rivers Ouse and Foss again. Anyway… More music for your Christmas day.

♫*Dashing through the snow, on a one-horse…*♪

***

Donovan's eyes glowed. Caroline's mouth dropped open.

"It can't be," she said.

Donovan nodded, lips tight together. Then he spoke seriously to the children. "Do not speak his name, or he will have to leave. Address him only as Stranger."

He strode out of the dining room. A chill breeze drifted through the house as the front door opened. Donovan returned leading a man wearing a shabby red cloak. His beard matched the white-fur lining of the hood. Snow had settled on his shoulders, as if he had travelled far in the cold night.

Caroline went white, but she stood and smiled. Gesturing to the place at her side, she said, "You are welcome at my table, Stranger."

The man slipped into the place. "Thank you kindly for your welcome, my Lady."

The three children stared open-mouthed. Josh bounced in his seat opposite the Stranger.

"You're…" he started. Charlotte kicked him under the table. Josh shut his mouth with a snap.

Donovan carved the meat, and served the Stranger first, then the children, then Caroline and himself. Everyone ate. Crackers were pulled and paper crowns worn. Silly jokes laughed at.

Once the flaming Christmas pudding was eaten, the jovial Stranger pushed back his chair. "Thank you for sharing this fine meal. In return, I have a few gifts for you."

He produced a sack from under his chair and reached inside. "For you, my Lady, I have this."

He handed Caroline a flat parcel that squished. It was wrapped in fine forest green paper embossed with golden holly leaves.

"Thank you." Caroline eased off the wrapping, careful not to tear it. Inside were two shawls, one pink, one blue. So soft they could be used for babies. She looked up startled. The Stranger smiled at her. She glanced down at her stomach in alarm.

"For you." The Stranger handed Donovan a small velvet box. Donovan opened it. In it lay two gold rings engraved with runes for luck, longevity, and faithfulness, created at the Stranger's own forge. The Stranger smiled as he glanced between Caroline and Donovan. "Get on with it."

"Now for you, Young Mistress." He turned to Charlotte. "I have something special."

From out of his sack, he produced a box wrapped in red paper covered in robins. Charlotte ripped off the paper. It was a doctor playset. She opened the box and pulled on the white coat. The stethoscope, she hung around her neck. "Thank you." She beamed, rummaging through the medical gladstone bag. "Is there a scalpel? I think teddy has a pendy stomach ache."

"Appendicitis?" Caroline corrected, clearly considering the mess teddy bear stuffing would make later.

"Yes, that." Then Charlotte kicked Josh for good measure to make sure he stayed silent.

"Study hard, and that will be reality," the Stranger said.

The man reached into his sack and pulled out a triangular box that was far bigger than the sack. He laid this in front of Darren.

The robin paper came off faster than Charlotte had managed. He opened the box and pulled out a guitar. His face glowed red with pleasure. He plucked a string and noted it was perfectly in tune, then played the chords of silent night.

"I didn't know you wanted a guitar," Caroline said.

"They've been giving us lessons at school, but if I wanted to take it further then I needed my own guitar," Darren said. "I didn't think there was the money for it. Thank you."

The Stranger nodded, then finally he turned to the simmering Josh. "I have a special gift for you."

He lifted an unwrapped present from his bag and laid it in front of Josh. Donovan recognised it immediately.

Josh grabbed the hammer. In both hands he could barely pick it up, but his smile filled his face from ear to ear as he looked at Donovan. "See I can lift it. Now you have to teach me what to do at your forge. I'll be your apprentice."

"Perhaps a smaller hammer to begin with," Caroline said, faintly.

Finally, Donovan escorted their guest to the front door. Hoofbeats pounded in the street and faded.

In the dining room, Charlotte said, "Some of my friends said he doesn't exist. But he came to dinner! He was actually here!"

"I thought he'd be fatter," Darren said. "All those mince pies and sherry and stuff."

Confused by the comments, Donovan re-entered the room.

Josh couldn't hold it in any longer. He jumped up from the table and slammed into Donovan, wrapping his arms around the big man.

"How do you know Father Christmas?" Josh demanded.

***

When the feasting was over, he stood to one side.

He gave them all gifts then returned to his ride.

Eight legs leapt up high and the Stranger took flight

From the dark night he shouted, "To all a good night."