

Vigil & Ritual

By Angela D'Onofrio

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This short story is dedicated to my #2bitTues community on Twitter ... you are all a lovely group of people, and I am blessed to know each and every one of you.

December 12, 1996

Patrol in Aviaro wasn't what Lieutenant Sam Weldyn would have called lively, that night. Once he had finished his round of the North End, he looped the cruiser back down toward the south. As he passed Charlie's Bar, Sam couldn't help but smile to himself. He'd have to check in on Charlie once he'd made his rounds, if he still had time left. The two of them had been through school together, and while there weren't too many lifers from his generation left in town, Sam counted Charlie among one of the best. Between the two of them, they could probably name everyone in town... including the figure he saw crouched near the small copse of trees behind the parish house.

Sam dimmed his lights and edged toward the corner, down the side street that led to a knot of small, low-income houses. It wasn't a trailer park by any means, but he knew that the people there weren't quite in the best of circumstances. What one of the residents was doing near the woods, however, he hadn't the damndest. He parked the cruiser on the shoulder of the road and approached on foot. The night explorer had a certain awkward length to their limbs, and Sam deduced that they were out far past their bedtime.

Snow crunched beneath Sam's feet as he stepped down off the side of the road, and he winced. He wasn't going to be sneaking up on anyone in that, that was for damn certain. Sure enough, the figure near the woods stopped dead, pawed at the snow, then scurried off through the woods. Sam hoped that they were headed home, as he moved toward the place where the kid had been crouched. From their long hair, Sam hadn't been able to tell the teenager's gender: the kids were wearing it any way they damn well pleased, now. He'd hardly been surprised when bell bottoms had come back the year before. Amused at the thought, Sam crouched down in the snow and inspected what the kid had left behind. They'd obviously been meaning to bury something - there was a good-sized hole dug in the snow - but they'd only managed to cover it over a little bit, what with the hasty departure, and all. Sam brushed off the snow and pulled out the buried treasure: a small, white, cardboard jewelry box.

"Huh," Sam muttered, his breath rising in a small cloud up to the trees. He was beginning to feel the chill of the ground through the soles of his boots, so he got to his feet and made his way back to the cruiser, box in hand. Once inside the car, he flicked on the overhead lights and gave the thing a closer look.

In good light, it was clear that the lid of the box had been sealed with wax in a complete, if sloppy, job. Sam grabbed the empty plastic bag from the sandwich that Barbara had packed him, and shook the crumbs out into the ashtray. Then, holding the box inside the bag with one hand, he took out his pocket knife with the other and began to work the lid open, letting the wax shavings fall inside the bag. If whatever was inside turned out to be important, he'd need to keep every little thing.

Once the lid fell off, Sam shook loose the rest of the wax bits, and carefully took the box from the bag. Maybe it's some piece of jewelry, a ring or some earrings, something they wanted

to hide until their folks forgot about it, then sell. Or give to someone else... The thought crossed his mind that the kid might've hid drugs in it, too - but then again, who'd hide something like that in the woods? Sam shook his head, then peered inside the box.

Maybe it was drugs, after all. Some sort of crumpled leaf filled the inside of the box, at first inspection. Sam raised the box to his nose and took a sniff. "Peppermint," he said, brow knitting in confusion. He reached out and poked at the herb until it shifted, revealing a few other things underneath. Two tiny rocks, one moss-green and bright, the other clear and slightly dull, sat beneath the peppermint on top of a folded-up piece of paper, also sealed with wax. Sam put the box inside the bag once more, in case any of the mint fell out, then broke the seal on the paper with his thumbnail.

The paper was covered in illegible, sloppy cursive, as the ink had bled and run into the folds of the paper. But the signature at the bottom was clear as a bell: a name that both placed the long hair and limbs, and confused Sam to no end. "Ral O'Dailigh..."

With care, Sam reassembled the box and brought it back outside. There was no harm in it, so he might as well leave it lie. Covering it up as Ral had intended, he headed toward the place where he knew the boy lived - and sure enough, there he was, trudging along the side of the road, hands stuffed in the pockets of a trenchcoat that was still just a little too big.

"Hey there, Ral," Sam greeted him, rolling the passenger side window down. "You need a ride?"

The headlights threw sharp shadows over Ral's thin face, accenting the startled look on his face before it eased into a smile. "Oi, Sam! Sure, I'll take one. S'colder out'n I thought it was gonna be." He pulled the door open and knocked his boots against the side of the cruiser to shake the snow off before sliding in. "Thanks."

Once the boy had fastened his seatbelt and settled in, Sam forged ahead. "So, Ral... mind letting me know why you're trugin' around past midnight burying little boxes near the parish house?"

Ral looked like a cat who'd been caught with his paw in the fish tank. "Oh, Lieutenant, I ... I swear, there's nothin' bad in it, cross m' heart, there's not. It's just ..."

"I know there ain't," Sam put in, reaching out to pat Ral's shoulder as he pulled into the parking lot of a Chinese restaurant so that he could give the boy his full attention. "I opened it."

"Y'what?" Ral winced. "I ... well ... no, I guess it's okay, s'been sittin' in my room fer a good week or so ..." He glanced out the window. "Yeah. Yeah, it's okay." With a sigh of relief, he sank back into the seat and closed his eyes.

Sam couldn't have been more confused if Ral had spoken Sanskrit. "Pardon me, Ral, but forgive me if I say ... what in the hell're you on about?"

He covered his face with his hands and sighed. "It was a spell, Lieutenant. Magic. Like m' uncle does."

"Oh, right." Sam nodded. "Maggie Slovich's store. I forgot he works there."

Ral pulled the trenchcoat around himself a little tighter. "Y'mean he used to."

"He'll pull through, Ral." Sam patted him on the shoulder again, at a loss for anything else to do. "Your uncle's hung in through a lotta things."

"No. No, he told me. Last week. He told me that ..." There was a hitch in Ral's voice as turned and stared at Sam, his eyes wild, afraid. "He told me he's ready t' die, Sam. That I should let 'im go. ... He's only forty-eight, Sam. How c'n he be ready?"

Sam raised his eyebrows; he'd been certain Duncan O'Dailigh had been older than that. "I couldn't tell you, Ral. And I'm sorry for that." He frowned. "Does he have ... is he making sure you're taken care of?" He hated asking the question, and it lay thick on his tongue, but it was his responsibility to ask.

"He's he's givin' me my emancipation papers." Ral's voice was thick as he wiped a hand across his eyes. "Says I should know how t' take care of m'self. That ... that I'm old enough t' know what responsibility means. An' I ... I wanna believe him, Sam. I wanna do right by him. Prove 'im right. But ..."

"Doesn't mean you can't ask for help, Ral. If you ever need anything, you know Barbara and I will lend a hand."

"June said th' same thing," Ral sniffled. "An' a friend of my uncle's..."

"If he's a friend of Duncan's, then he's a good man, Ral. He'll do right by you, I'm sure."

"Only met him a few times, Sam. Uncle Duncan might trust 'im, but he scares me. Somethin' about him's strange."

"Well, we're all here to help you. ... Tell you what. Why don't you finish out patrol with me - I've only got one quarter of town t' go. Then you can stay with Barbara and I for the night. Better than an empty house."

Ral wiped the last of his tears off on his coat sleeve and let out a soft sigh. "Y'mean ... I ... Lieutenant, I don' wanna impose ..."

"Sam," he insisted. "Please, just call me Sam. An' I only wanna know you're okay."

"... Thanks, Sam." He curled up in the passenger seat and stared out the window for a moment. "... M'gonna need my books."

"We'll swing by your place so you can get 'em," Sam reassured him, pulling the cruiser back out onto the road. "Just, ah ... I don' need to know what that little scribbly note said. That's none of my damn business. But ... what's all the peppermint supposed to be about?"

"It's gonna sound real stupid, Sam."

"I won't laugh."

Ral sat in silence until they reached the curb beside his house. After he got out of the car, fishing his keys out of his pocket, he leaned down through the open door.

"Transformation," he said. "... T'help be ... whatever it is I gotta be."

Sam shook his head as he watched Ral close the cruiser door and go inside. "Yeah, but that's just it, son," he muttered. "Y'already are."

About the Author

Angela (or Ang, but *never* Angie) lives in the Lakes Region of New Hampshire with her lovely fiancée, Laurel, two particularly eccentric cats, and one opinionated conure named Jupiter. She roots the places she creates in the places that she loves, and friends and family may just find hints of the familiar in the streets of Aviario. While writing is not currently her only bread and butter, she spends much of her free time on aspects of the process, toting around her tools of the trade in case inspiration strikes.

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A Note From the Author

If you want to know what becomes of young Ral, please check out my second novel, [In the Cards](#), coming in September 2016. I also encourage you to [sign up for my mailing list](#), Friends of Aviario, for special sneak previews and other exclusive content!