

The tenth annual short story competition

The Mogford Prize
for Food & Drink Writing 2022

‘The Last King of Connemaidh’

by Emily Devane

Short List Runner Up

The judges for 2022...
Michael Morpurgo & Andi Oliver



‘The Last King of Connemaidh’

Each year, as the leaves turned from green to gold to brown, the islanders' thoughts turned to winter. In pantries across Connemaidh, brambles were pickled and preserved, fish, meat and cheeses were salted, smoked and cured, and dried fruits steeped in rum. The island's prosperity depended on communal efforts and careful planning through the lean winter months.

Lots were drawn for the preparations. Eindis, the daughter of Peter the ferryman, was tasked with making a crown for the final feast.

'Are you sure you can do this?' her father said, when her name was called out. 'It's some responsibility for a young girl.' Eindis nodded and her father pressed his rough hands around hers. 'You'll do a fine job,' he said.

For as long as anyone could remember, the islanders had invited three writers from the mainland for a week-long visit, culminating in the Feast of Epiphany. Above the bookshop, Gerald O'Dowd had three rooms to let. In exchange, the

writers – always young men – were asked to do a few hours’ work for O’Dowd, auditing the piles of books that accumulated in the shop’s dark corners.

Perhaps the applicants were drawn by the idea of Connemaidh, the island of morning mists, or maybe the word ‘epiphany’ sparked a seed of hope. Even the stipulation that applications must be sent by post, including a handwritten covering letter as well as a sample of work, did not deter them. A small panel of judges selected the final three. They scoured every sentence, for as much could be deduced from what was left off the page.

On New Year’s Eve, Eindis watched from her window. As dusk approached, her father’s ferry loomed into view, carrying its hopeful cargo of guests. The crown had begun to take shape. Eindis used rabbit fur to make a cap onto which the decorations were attached. Sprigs of holly, rounds of orange, quills of cinnamon. Yellow berries, pinecones, twists of shiny paper. She made the crown large, not knowing the size of the head it would sit upon. Now she strained to see the bobbing figures as they stepped out of the boat and onto the quay. In the low light she could not read their faces but she observed the way they swung their bags onto their shoulders and climbed the steps towards O’Dowd’s. The sky was streaked with pink embers. As the sun dipped, the colours glowed brilliantly before being swallowed by the dark.

That night, the Connemaidhans gathered at the boat shed, where a hog turned on a spit. The children ran in circles while the adults played music and danced. Eindis took a bun filled with charred meat and stood beside her father. The

other girls her age sat on a bench near the band, admiring each other’s shell bracelets. They had borrowed heeled shoes and makeup from their mothers. Their eyes sparkled suspiciously. Eindis wore hand-me-downs from her grown cousins – a plaid skirt and a thick woollen sweater.

‘Watch you don’t burn your mouth,’ said her father as Eindis took a bite. The meat was sweet with molasses.

‘It’s good,’ she said.

‘Our three visitors,’ said her father, nodding in the direction of the three young men.

One was short with auburn hair and a pink complexion; the second was tall and wiry, his body awkward from a lifetime of making himself smaller; the third wore his black hair in a ponytail and pointed boots, like a cowboy.

‘Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar,’ her father chuckled.

‘But which is which?’

Gerald O’Dowd put his arm around Peter and grinned. ‘A fine-looking trio!’ he said, ‘But, as with all writers, no gold in sight.’

‘And what about frankincense?’

‘Myrhh, more likely.’ Gerald poured whisky into Peter’s cup and clinked it with his own. ‘And are we ready for the coronation on Thursday?’

‘Aye,’ said Peter. ‘Eindis here has been working night and day. It’s fit for a king alright.’

‘Good, good,’ said Gerald. ‘Eindis, Ida is expecting you on Thursday morning.’

‘But the feast is in the evening?’

‘It’s usual for the maker of the crown to roll the pastry for the galette.’

‘This is her first feast,’ explained Peter, ‘she wasn’t to know...’

‘It’s alright,’ said Eindis, ‘I will be there first thing.’ Her own mother, Alma, had taught her how to make pastry buns filled with spices. Her mother had called her *lone goddess* because Eindis had once been a twin. The other child, a boy, never took a breath. It felt strange to be a sister but not a sister, as if an empty space existed where her brother should have been. Her mother must have felt it, too. Alma died a year ago. Her heart stopped beating, and no one knew why.

All night, Eindis watched the three young men, picturing her crown on each of them. One of them would receive the honour at the final feast. As Gerald filled their cups, the men shed their shyness. The auburn-haired writer danced enthusiastically, while the tall, wiry writer took out a mouth organ. The third writer sat and watched, tapping his boots. He wore an amused expression, as if he meant to share a joke. But when the other girls went up to him, urging him to dance, he shook his head. At midnight the islanders linked arms and sang. Peter passed his daughter a cup of whisky. ‘A toast to the unconquered sun!’ he shouted. By the time she realized the guests had slipped away to their beds, the warm burn of the whisky had faded.

The next day, Eindis accompanied Peter to the beach beneath the cliffs, where the stones contained the shapes of long-dead creatures. He showed her what to look for in the stones, and how to find their weakest points.

Eindis scoured the beach. Finding a perfect mussel shell, she held it to the light, admiring its deep blue centre. ‘What do you think, a sapphire for my crown?’ she said.

Peter cracked open a stone. ‘Nothing,’ he said, discarding the stone. ‘Ever heard of gilding the lily?’

‘No,’ said Eindis.

‘The crown is only worn for one night.’

‘And then what?’ She turned the shell over in her palm, following the edge with her thumb.

‘I ferry them back to the mainland.’

‘Do they ever choose to stay?’

‘Once is enough,’ said her father. ‘Writers are supposedly wise, but they are dreamers. Reality will never live up to their imaginations. They are destined for disappointment.’

Eindis barely glimpsed the three writers over the next few days. She supposed they were busy counting books and filling pages with words.

On the morning of the feast, she sat in Ida’s kitchen folding pastry over slabs of butter, before cutting out two circles.

‘So,’ said Ida, ‘the base and top are ready. Now, the almond cream.’

Eindis whisked together cream, sugar, almonds and egg. Ida poured in a measure of rum. ‘This galette must be fit for a last supper.’

‘It smells good,’ said a voice from the doorway. Eindis turned to see the third writer, his black hair loose and tangled from sleep.

‘Sleep well?’ asked Ida.

‘I feel more tired for sleeping.’

‘There’s coffee in the pot,’ said Ida. ‘Fetch the man a cup, Eindis.’

Eindis set a cup on the table and warmed milk on the stove.

'You're more than kind,' said the writer, taking a sip of the steaming liquid. 'Eindis, isn't it?' He looked up, his gaze direct.

'The ferryman's daughter,' said Eindis, busying herself with the whisk. She could feel his eyes on her, as if she was a puzzle to be solved.

'And what are you ladies making?' he said.

'You will find out this evening,' said Ida. 'A cake for the feast.'

'Can we not say?' said Eindis.

'That would spoil the surprise,' Ida insisted. 'What will you do today, Finn? The other young men are nursing sore heads, I expect.'

So, Finn was his name. It suited him, thought Eindis, a soft sound.

'I'll take a walk,' he said. 'Helps to have a clear head for writing. I have a story, but the ending won't come.'

'They say *stories* are like fish,' said Ida.

'Slippery?' he asked, with a playful smile. 'The harder you try to catch them, the faster they slip away. What do you think?' Finn looked at Eindis. 'How should my story end?'

'All the best stories end unhappily,' Eindis replied.

'I favour a happy ending, but readers... they are drawn so much to darkness. Where I'm from, in the north, they call it the village at the end of the earth. The nights and days bleed into one and the people tell the darkest, strangest stories.' Finn drank the last of his coffee and rinsed his cup in the sink. 'I'll leave you to your surprises,' he said.

'You will find your ending soon enough,' said Ida. She put the pastry in the fridge.

Eindis heard the quiet click of the front door, as he made his way down the hill. 'Now,' said Ida, 'for the bean. We hide a dried bean inside the mixture, and whoever finds the bean in his slice is crowned King of Misrule.'

'Can anyone get the slice?'

'Only our three wise men. The one who receives the bean gets to be a king for the night. He can make up whatever rules he chooses and everyone else has to obey, however absurd.'

'But what if he tells people to dance naked on the altar of St Olaf's?'

'I've heard worse,' Ida blushed.

That explained why the children were banished to their beds. 'May I see it?' Eindis asked.

Ida opened her hand and dropped the small bean into the mixture. 'Now,' she said, 'it's in the hands of the gods.'

The church hall was bright with fairy lights and twinkling piano music when Eindis arrived, the crown in a cardboard box. Ida walked proudly beside her, holding the galette on a silver platter for everyone to see. She had glazed the pastry and scored a spiral design on the top. Eindis sensed whispers, and felt her cheeks burn red. All around her, glasses clinked, laughter bubbled over, the sounds swelling like the sea at high tide.

Soon she would crown this year's King of Misrule. She looked to the stage, where the 'throne' had been placed. Below, the three writers mingled with the other guests, not realizing the part they would play in the festivities to come.

Gerald O'Dowd stood and tapped the microphone, asking everyone to raise their glasses in a toast. 'To our three wise men!' he said.

'Our three wise men!' the audience replied, exchanging knowing looks.

Gerald explained how the cake would be cut to decide who would be crowned. The three men shared nervous glances. Finn looked at Eindis, as if to say: *so, that's the surprise*. She could not tell if he was disappointed. Had he known all along? Eindis did not want Finn to get the bean. How would she breathe if she had to place the crown on his head? And what would she do if he asked her to do something? Behind Gerald was a table with a cut-glass cake stand. Ida carefully transferred the galette and gestured for Eindis to place the crown beside it.

'I think we can all agree that this year's crown and *galette des rois* are spectacular,' said Gerald, raising a toast to Eindis and Ida.

'To Eindis and Ida,' the crowd murmured, excitement simmering.

Now, the three writers were called to the stage and Gerald handed each of them a plate. He carved slices with a knife resembling a small sword. The audience held its collective breath as the men took their first, tentative bites.

Finn was the one to find the bean. She had known all along that he would wear the crown. As Eindis approached him, she curtsied and he lowered his head to accept its weight.

'Now,' said Gerald, 'for the first of the rules.'

'I have only one,' said Finn. 'I command you to only have happy endings!'

Gerald coughed, and the guests fell silent. Happy endings? This man was a joker, surely.

'Shall we begin with dancing?' suggested Gerald.

'Yes, first, everyone must dance. And the maker of the crown, Eindis here, will be my partner.'

Eindis blushed as Finn took her hand and led her to the centre of the room. 'I have something to say,' he said, 'so just smile and nod as I say it.' He held her lightly, with one hand on the small of her back. 'I'm not a writer,' he whispered. 'I'm a detective. I know how this ends, how it's ended every year since it began. Your mother, Alma, wrote to us last year, when she saw only two of the visitors returning in the boat to the mainland. We've been gathering evidence ever since.'

'And how does it end?'

'With me washed up along the coast, recorded as death by misadventure, or disappeared never to be found.'

'I tell you, that's not...'

'Have you ever wondered what this is all for? This whole charade? It's about sacrificing a man to pay for the islanders' sins. The Romans chose a king for thirty days, gave him free rein until the time came to slit his throat. Eindis, I'm telling you, that's what these people – your people – intend to do.'

'I don't believe it.'

'Believe what?' Gerald gripped her shoulders and squeezed them, unpleasantly. 'Be a good girl and let me take our king here for a walk.'

Finn's eyes widened. 'I'd rather stay...'

'But I insist,' Gerald replied.

Eindis could only watch as Gerald marched Finn across the room, the young man desperately holding on to his crown. She turned to find Ida, pouring wine into her glass. 'It'll all be a dream by morning,' she said, with a smile that held no warmth.

'But what will happen to him?'

'Let the men take care of things now,' Ida said, her voice smooth.

'And the others?'

'They'll return tomorrow whence they came. Your father, the ferryman, will see to that.'

Eindis must have fainted. She awoke wearing her dress from the night before, her shoes placed neatly beneath her bed. She crept to the window, drawn by the ghostly glow of the morning sky. Out beyond the harbour wall, shrouded in mist, the ferry boat made its way across the water. Eindis could make out Peter, her father, but were there three more figures or two? She strained her eyes to see.

'How does this end?'

 she whispered.

She felt certain the answer was unhappily. For crying out loud, she had decided the ending before it had even happened! Eindis cupped her hand above her eyes and squinted.

Was it a trick of the light, or was there a third passenger in the boat? The mist swirled, turning the boat into a ghostly shape, bearing away towards the mainland.

