

# White Moon on Black Water

By John Smelcer; illustration by Larry Vienneau

All of the pews on the groom's side were full of his relatives — parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, brothers and sisters, and all of their collected families.

The bride's side was empty.

But she was beautiful in her long, white gown. She had dark brown hair, almost black eyes, and she was slender. Sleek even. No one knew much about her. She had no family and no job. The groom's father had to give her away. But what she lacked in history, she made up for in love. She loved the young man standing before her, softly holding her hands, and he loved her with all his heart.

"I do," the groom said, loud enough to be heard in the back row.

Within minutes the wedding was over, the handfuls of rice tossed, and the pews emptied.

"How much do you love me?" the new wife asked as they drove away to their honeymoon two counties over.

"Honey, you know I love you more than anything," the man replied, leaning over to kiss her.

"Would you give up your job to be with me?" she asked anxiously.

"Baby, that's crazy," the man said with a smile. "We gotta live."

The young wife didn't speak for a while.

Sensing her hurt, the husband tried to make amends. "Sure, honey. I'd do anything to be with you. Hell, we can live on love."

"Do you promise?" she asked, smiling, her dark eyes gorgeous in the sunset. "Oh, do you promise to love me no matter what?"

She reached over, took his free hand and held it tight.

"Sure," he replied. "No matter what."

Several miles later she spoke again.

"Turn left there," she said, pointing to a dirt road ahead.

"But, baby, we have reservations."

"Please," the woman pleaded, on the verge of crying. "Oh, please. I want to show you my home."

The newly wed husband was curious. He had never been invited to meet her parents. All he knew was that she was an only child.

"All right," he said, looking at his watch.

Two miles down the backcountry road, they came upon a small lake. A loon was swimming on the far side, and the sun was just above

the treetops. It would be dark soon. The man recognized it as the place where they had first met. He had been fishing when she stepped wet and naked from the forest, explaining that she had been skinny-dipping and something had carried off her clothes.

The woman stepped from the car. She stood before her husband, still in his tuxedo, and slipped the long, white dress from her lithe brown body. She walked to the edge of the lake and turned around, motioning for the man to follow. Then, she dived into the cold, dark water. When she emerged, she was an otter. She was an otter woman, the very last one. She had left the lake to find a mate.

She floated close — effortless, watching, waiting.

The man stood on the shore until it was dark, until stars began to shine and the moon floated on the black surface of the lake like a

white lily pad, until everything he knew became like the night and he stepped, naked, into the uncertain water. ▀



John Smelcer, '86, '87, published "White Moon on Black Water" in his most recent short story collection, *Alaskan: Stories from the Great Land*, which won a gold medal in the 2011 eLit Books Awards.

Larry Vienneau was an associate professor of art at UAF from 1989 – 2001. He has illustrated numerous books on Native American oral traditions. He continues to teach art at Seminole State College in Florida.