

## FANTASY

# Night Poppy

By P. J. Davies

**T**his isn't a story about time travel—I haven't moved an inch. I sleep two blocks down from the apartment block I grew up in. I've never been on an airplane, never stepped foot in another province, let alone another country. Why would I need to? What could I see that I haven't already? What could there possibly be for me, out there, that isn't already here for me? I have ruled empires, known the adoration of thousands, and led a flight of great and terrible flying beasts into battle. I have lived at every age for every conceivable amount of time. I have lived over and over a golden boyhood summer spent catching fish and sleeping in trees. I have been an acrobat and a sage. I will be 32 years old in March, and I have lived so long and so deeply that there are cracks forming on my soul. Death used to frighten me, so I sought immortality. When I found it, my body became a prison.



I met Anthony at the Flatlander Bar and Grille. He was a friend of my roommate's cousin, something like that. We were celebrating someone's promotion. I don't remember those friends very well. I was in my first year of college and very far away from where I am now. Anthony was a bit older than us and the definition of a strapping young man. Yet each time he turned his head to catch a comment, his habitus was that of a very old man. He moved slowly, a waxy figure in the candlelight flicking his blonde forelock away from

his eyes, a nervous tic. I've lived entire lifetimes since then, and I've learned to read people better. What comes off as alluring is the reek of danger. Dangerous people often don't know they're dangerous; most don't think of themselves that way. They can't help it any more than the barn owl can help the field mouse. When Anthony turned his lamps upon me, it was the danger that pulled me in.

Down the bench towards the strange man I went, shifting my beer into my left hand. "I'm Brad," I said, pumping his hand "Have we met?" He turned to look at me through a lock of his hair. His gaze was neither warm nor cold, but it was thunderous. He spotted the rubber band around my wrist.

"You tryin' to quit smokin'?" Anthony sounded like he had done some smoking himself. People get to the end of their lives and their voices falter, the musculature that bolsters even the deepest bass withers and they emote with a warble. He had such a voice, not one to match his meaty presence.

"No, no I don't smoke. Asthma!" I thumped my chest, the site of my defect. "This is for dreaming."

His eyes flashed and he ran a hand through his cowlick. It was the first time that evening he'd looked even remotely interested.

I clarified: "You know, for like, taking control of your dreams? So that you can like, fly?" I grinned at him to show him I was only partly serious.

Anthony remained stony-faced. He drained his beer and put the glass down on the table, frowning at the suds. "You trying to wake up in your dreams, then?" He made a universe out of each word.

"Yeah! No luck yet though. Still totally weird shit out of my control. No flying. Just like, I have to save all the guinea pigs from my elementary school's classroom before it turns into a giant apple. That sort of thing."

As he listened to me, Anthony reached for his pocket. He fumbled around in there and after a moment he pulled out a small leather pouch.

“Here,” he pulled out a shrivelled little blue flower from the pouch and waved it at me. It smelled of freshly cut grass and jasmine tea. “Drink this in some tea before bed. It helps.”

“Wow, really? Thank you! What is this, morning glory or something?”

Anthony’s gaze skittered away from mine. “Night poppy. It doesn’t grow around here.” He stood up abruptly and sidled around the other end of the bench, placing the table between us. “Hope it helps. I have to go to bed now.”

“Wait! This won’t like, get me high, right? I mean it’s just that I have work tomorrow.” I hoped I didn’t sound desperately uncool.

He grimaced. “No, it doesn’t mimic our poppy in that way. You’ll be fine.” He pulled out a ten-dollar bill and stuck it beneath his empty glass. “A word to the wise, should you wish to be so. Don’t stay too long.” He donned a long coat and strode out the door into a bitter November day. I wish I could say it was the last I saw of him.

When I got home that night, I brewed a cup of tea with the strange flower. The night poppy seemed to sparkle and play tricks on my eyes. One moment it was blue and broad petalled, the next it was almost purple and the petals looked like tentacles. I took my mug to bed with me and drank it while I played games on my phone. I soon became drowsy and turned off the lights.

I felt myself sinking into my sheets. I allowed myself to relax, letting sleep overtake me. I leaned back until I felt the sheets give way, and suddenly I was on my back with my feet dangling over me. Awake now, I sat up and rubbed where I had fallen.

I was in a low-ceilinged room with a dirt floor, dimly illuminated by a window cut into the thatch above. I glanced at my wrist. The rubber band was gone. I felt pleased with my technique for only a moment before I remembered the flower. I felt my side and the bulge of the leather pouch with the rest of the crushed flowers still within it. Reassured, I rose to my feet and left the little room; turning round I could see that I had been inside of a cottage that grew and shrunk like the pulsing of a heart.

I was in the belly of a vast green valley, stretching into mountains on either side. A mountain stream meandered through, crinkling and crashing over stones in the streambed. It was as though I'd been walking around my entire life with every sense turned way down, and now they'd been cranked all the way up. The woodsmoke from the cottage mingled with the sweet grass and wet rocks of the valley. I felt each blade of grass against my feet, and the wind slithered around me. The colours were alive and pulsing. The presence of red brought the sensation of blood and the smell of iron; green things bubbled with life and the blues ached with cold. I walked the valley for hours, and I returned the next night. And the next. And the night after that.

Most people, when they begin to lucid dream, understand they have more freedom with natural laws. Many take to the highest heights or plummet to the depths of the ocean. This is enjoyable, and as someone who has spent thousands of hours in the air, I won't say I don't see the appeal. But it's shallow. We live by so many laws that it can be difficult to see the bars on our own cages.

Like time.

If there is some force greater than us, some unknowable impetus that imagines the world into being, it is time. Our existence on Earth, what era we are born into, even when I lose consciousness and enter my personal kingdom, it is all ruled by time.

Things changed for me when I learned how to sleep in my dreams. At first I could stay only days, but like a muscle my dreamtime grew stronger until I could stay weeks and months. Soon I spent years, and woke up in a younger body some mornings aching from the incongruity. People moved into my valley, and I taught them how to use the night poppy and wake up in their dreams. They returned with tales of alien landscapes and fantastic beings. I imagined their dreams into existence: glass waterfalls, winged lizards with mouths on their stomachs, buildings made of sweet clouds and rain.

I spent centuries in my dreamtime before I met another dreamer. I had assumed that the space was entirely mine, with no overlap into the dreams of others. Those who populated my dreams were not under my control. Their identity blended with mine and they often took on the appearance of people I knew in the waking world. They were not entirely my creation, more a kind of consciousness that formed itself around mine like lakeweed wraps around a swimmer's limb. But when I first saw a fellow dreamer, I knew.

A woman with a hawkish face and short, buzzed hair entered the valley leading a cavalry of about one hundred people. She was wrapped in a maroon shawl fastened with a large emerald brooch that glinted in the sun as she strode across the grass towards me. We locked eyes and realized what the other was. She acknowledged our mutual trespass in the dreamtime with a shrug. She had walked with these people for miles, through fire swamps teeming with terrible beetles and obsidian valleys with rivers of tar. They believed she was their saviour, she told me. They wanted to live where the night poppy grew. She could make one of those things true at least, she said. She and her people led a bloody assault on the valley, and we returned in full force. Beasts from under the ground and from the sky battered the woman's army until they retreated, leaving a scorched land. I thought I saw the woman once more after this, awake, plucking wilted grapes out of her shopping basket at the farmers' market, but

I could not be sure. I think it's likely that she found victory in some other place and time. After her attack, the poppies could not be salvaged, the ground was mud and stone. The people left the valley, some of them in pieces, a pair of boots with a hand stuffed in each all that remained of some little families, hopping towards the distant hills. I left as well.

I wandered for many dreamtimes. I walked for months and years, awoke to eat and white-knuckle my way through a waking day, then slept and walked again. I played with my age; I lived as my twelve-year-old self many times along a sunny riverbank, building a better treehouse each time. I let myself grow old as I walked, and then young again. Eventually, I came to an interpretation of Paris, with a floating city above populated by warrior monks and physical artists. I dedicated myself to the acrobatic arts, stretched the limits of my dreamy body. Once I grew tired of this, I allowed myself to grow older and older. My beard grew down to my knees; I could not die. I moved into the mountains above the monastery of the fighting monks and allowed my body heat to melt the snow where I sat. People began to make the treacherous journey up my mountain to see me and ask questions about existence. When I did not answer, they sat with me instead, and went away looking accomplished. I continued to sit. My beard grew into the roots around me.

I have not awoken in years. I cannot bring myself to build another existence, and I cannot bear to be stuck in that young and powerless waking body for even a moment. Recently, a young man came to see me. I could tell right away that he was a dreamer, but he seemed surprised to see the same in me.

“How long have you been dreaming?” His blonde hair was cowlicked, and he flicked it out of his eyes impatiently.

“A very long time. What about you?” I returned his steady gaze.

“Oh, this is the longest I ever stayed dreaming,” said the boy, waving his hand dismissively. “A few weeks. I get better and better but then I have to start where I left off. It’s hard. You seem really good at it though!”

“I appreciate the compliment,” I said, taking out my small leather pouch. “You’re doing very well. I have seen many dreamers now, but almost none of them know what they’re capable of.” I paused and examined the boy, then continued as I knew I would: “If I helped you dream longer, would you do a little favour for me?” A final stitch in our story, a snapping shut and a popping open for both of us.

I retrieved a fragment of night poppy from the little pouch and placed it in his cupped hand, where it glinted purple.

“All you need to do is hold onto it when you wake up. Before you go to sleep again, put some in a little bit of hot water and drink it. But keep half for later.”

“Will I need to do it each time?”

“No. You only need to do it once. But you’re going to hold on to it, because many, many years from now, you’re going to meet a man in a bar. And you’re going to give him the rest of the flower.” I pressed the pouch into his other hand and closed his fingers over it.

“How will I know the right man to give it to? What if I give it to the wrong man?” He was staring at the little bud now, the cerulean shade reflected in his eyes.

“You’ll know. He’ll tell you.” How I wish I could stop this cycle before it begins again.

“Well, okay. Thanks mister, I guess.” He turned to go.

“Wait!” I needed to help him, give him a heads-up somehow. “Come here, come closer.” The boy approached me warily. I clasped his shoulders, pulled him to me. “Just don’t.... don’t stay too long.”

The boy flinched and shook free of my hands. He took a step back. "Okay."

I watched him descend the mountain. He took long, confident strides, looking around him as he went. He was still enamoured with the dreamtime.

I watched him until he was a speck on the horizon. I remained seated as a wind picked up, and then a slurry.

I am the still warm center of the earth. I am the taker and the giver. I am the dreamer and the dreamed.