
PulpOsium

PULP ASYLUM

"Strange Magic"

Issue Ten, January 2026

On The Cover:

***The Magic Circle* by John William Waterhouse (1886)**

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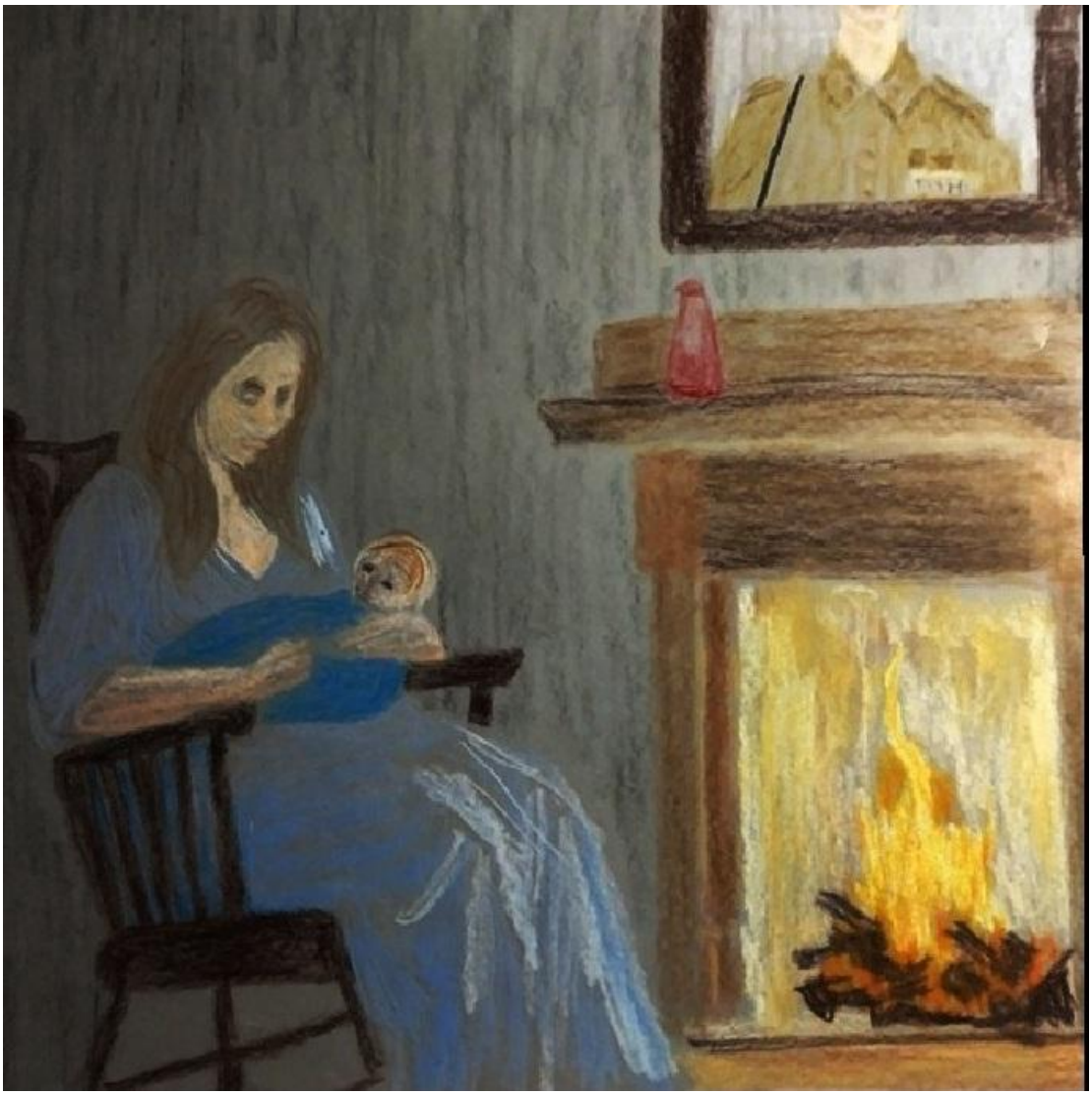
A WAR-TORN COUNTRY

Diane Dooley



Rafer threw himself violently backwards, managing to blunt the blow that struck his helmet. Head ringing with pain, he shoved his way back through the lines, slipping in the mud and the guts of other men. The wounded were gathered at the edge of the forest.

Some had already died; others were working on it. Rafer sat under a tree and held his throbbing head in his hands. The battle was lost. Through blurry eyes, he gazed at the bloody field, the crossroads, and his superiors galloping away down the road to the south, towards home. His country had won a glorious victory here many years before, but this time there was only defeat, and the enemy was working their way through his remaining countrymen, stabbing and hacking. Covering his ears did not block the sounds of their dying screams.

He stood and moved deeper into the woods, picking up speed as soon as he was out of sight of the battlefield. He would head south through the forest; his country's border was only a two-day march away. And once he crossed, he'd just keep walking until he got to his family farm; back to his dear old mother, and his sickly little sister, and his toddling brother. He should never have deserted them to seek excitement and adventure. In the year since Rafer had left them to indulge his wanderlust he'd found nothing but death and terror and casual cruelty. He'd spent his sixteenth birthday eating a few bites of horse stew and crying over his stupidity. He just wanted his mother, and he begged to be delivered to her as he crept deeper and deeper into the thick, dark woods, the sun fading and dying.

He slept in a pile of leaves, then continued his journey at dawn. He explored a burned and deserted village, hoping for food, but finding it barren. That night he slept in an abandoned animal's den among furballs and ancient scat, ignoring the hunger cramps in his belly, slaking himself in the morning on the icy water of a mossy spring. He continued to walk,

seeing no signs of people, not even a path, until finally stumbling exhausted to the ground, unable to even cry. Would he never see his mother again? Perhaps he should try to make it back to the blood-drenched battlefield? Though by now the crows would be about their business and the sun was starting to set once again. But then he caught a scent on the breeze. Smoke. And it was the sweet smell of woodsmoke, not the stench of burning bodies. He staggered to his feet and used the last of his strength to find the source.

The cottage was in a sun slashed clearing, surrounded by a thriving garden, its fence made of sticks and covered in a dense, spreading vine. There was no sound, no signs of life other than the slick of smoke coming from its chimney. From a small barn almost hidden by the cottage, Rafer heard the gentle cluck of chickens. He ripped away at the thick vine, eventually clearing enough to unlatch the gate. He stumbled to the door, his hand trembling as he knocked. When it opened, a small boy stood there, sad-eyed and silent, beckoning Rafer in. The interior was one large room. Flames flickered beneath a pot of simmering liquid, and his mouth gushed saliva. Beside the fire sat a woman, black hair piled on top of her head, rich, creamy skin, blue eyes blank as she nursed her infant. She placed the baby in a cradle next to her chair, rose, and went to the cook pot, ladling a helping of food into a wooden bowl. She placed it on the table, added a cup of water scooped from a pail in the corner, then tore off a hunk of bread from a loaf. She indicated he sit and eat, and Rafer instantly ploughed into the food, tears blinding him, forcing himself to eat slower, to make it last. The bone broth was delicious and thick with vegetables, the bread chewy and filling. And when he was finally sated, she pointed him to

the smaller of the two beds in the corner of the room. He managed to pull off his boots before flopping onto the soft mattress. To the sounds of a slurping baby and the gentle flicker of the fire, he fell into the deepest sleep of his life.

In the morning the woman was already awake in her chair, her baby once again at her breast. From the larger bed two little boys stared silently at him. The woman fed them all porridge, then indicated Rafer follow her outside. She pointed to a woodpile behind the cottage, and axe propped against it. Rafter nodded, and chopped her wood. He milked her cow. Pumped a pail full of water, collected eggs. He tried to talk to the little boys, but they seemed not to understand his language. The children lazed in the rows of abundant vegetables, occasionally pulling a weed, before taking a nap in the sunshine. They made no attempt to speak to him; they did not even talk to each other. The woman nursed her baby and prepared all their food, but she too, was silent. Even the baby didn't cry. Rafer slept in the smaller bed again that night, tucked under a pile of patchwork blankets, still exhausted, but happy he had found a place to rest up before he continued his journey home.

Rafer woke again to the soft squeak of the woman's rocking chair. Her arms were empty for once as she stared into the fire, reliving memories, no doubt, and Rafer wondered what had happened to her husband. The two boys were still sleeping. They looked nothing like their mother. One was small and red-haired and thin. The other was also thin, but was brown-skinned, with dark, curly hair. The younger child was sucking his thumb, the older

child curled around him. Rafer smiled to himself. A few more days and he'd be strong enough to leave, back to his whiny sister, and mischievous brother, and chattering mother. The silence of this family was unnerving, and Rafer mused on the horrors they must have seen in this contested corner of a war-torn country. Centuries of armies had ravaged this area, over and over, to the point that hardly any people remained. He'd been lucky to stumble across this family, Perhaps, so deep in the woods, they had managed to avoid the worst of the current war. Yawning and stretching, Rafer rose to the bowl of porridge the woman prepared for him. He resolved that today he would repair the hole in the barn's roof; tomorrow dig the weeds from the corner of the garden. It would be repayment for the kind hospitality they were showing him, and they'd think of him fondly after he was gone.

He sighed, exhausted, as he slipped into bed another night, pulling the rough blankets up over him. He fingered the stitching that held the blanket patches together. The fabric was rough, coarse, like his uniform. He touched his concave stomach, felt his jutting ribs. A few more days of food and rest… But he was still tired when he woke the next day, or was it the day after that? The boys were already awake and wide-eyed. The woman rocked in her chair, silently staring as usual, the baby asleep by her side. The younger boy started to cry, the first emotion of any kind that Rafter had seen. His brother cuddled him hard, and the child turned and snuggled into his chest, his shoulders heaving. The woman did not comfort him, not like Rafer's mother would have done. She never touched their heads gently or sniffed her baby's hair. She prepared the boys their morning porridge, but when they came to the table there was no soft stroke of their cheek, no smile. Rafer ate his food,

dreaming of reunion with his family. Brother running to meet him, sister demanding he pick her up, mother crying, her first born finally back in her arms where he belonged.

Rafer went to tackle the weeds in the corner of the garden. They grew thick over a pile of rocky earth. He stabbed at the pile with his shovel, but he was so weak and it took so much effort. He managed to remove a few weeds, pulled out a rock, tugged at what appeared to be an old boot. He yawned. The sun was warm and making him sleepy. He stood, catching his trousers as they slipped off his narrow hips, tripping over the thick wad of fabric that trailed on the ground. He sat down and rolled up the hems, glancing up at the garden gate which was once again covered in thick vines. How fast it had grown. He decided it was time for a nap. He curled up in between the rows of vegetables, eyeing the pea pods that hung from the seedlings planted only a few days before. He and the boys slept the afternoon away, as the vegetables grew and ripened in the sunshine.

After dinner, some days later, he lay in bed, drowning in his oversized uniform. The woman sat alone at the fire, the cradle empty. Rafter finally understood the silence of the woman and the sadness of the children. The baby had died. It must have been ill. No wonder it had never cried. The woman turned to her children, and beckoned the youngest with a crook of her finger. The boy's brother kissed the back of his red head and relinquished him to toddle unsteadily to his mother and climb into her lap. She bared her breast and the child latched on, while the brother whimpered, alone, in the big bed. Rafer slid down out of the smaller bed and climbed in with the boy, wrapping his body around him. He was just skin and

bone. They fit perfectly. Rafer remembered his brother for the last time, as he kissed the back of the child's curly head.

The next day came a knock on the door. The woman had Rafer open it. A tall man stood there, a bloody gash in the side of his head, his uniform ripped and covered in dirt. "Food?" the man muttered; his eyes set deep in his gaunt face. "Please?" The woman put the baby in the cradle and rose, preparing a bowl of soup, fetching a cup of water, ripping off a hunk of bread. Rafer cuddled his brother, and stared at the soldier. He wanted to warn him, but about what he was not sure. His eyes were heavy, his brother warm, the rocking chair squeaked, the baby was sleeping. Heavy-eyed, he decided a short nap was in order. The soldier could do the chores.

Diane Dooley is the published author of short stories and novellas in a variety of genres. You can find links to them at Writing, Stuff, and Nonsense, her blog. She lives on the side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere, Vermont. You can follow her on Twitter and Facebook and BlueSky.

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THE SEA MOTHER

Sam Arlington

Even in this, the inevitable moment of his reckoning by sword and sea, teetering on the edge of the hijacked ship's weathered deck, hands bound, chained to a concrete block, Liwanag could not accept that his end would come at the hand of a lesser raider. He had stolen and maimed, certainly. Killed, even. He deserved and expected death at the hands

of the government or rival corsairs, even welcomed it. A lifetime on the violent seas, longer than most, forged in solitude and free of worldly attachments, had left him unafraid of death and prepared to embrace his own.

But this *gago* Tadhana, this sadistic amateur, this was too much. Liwanag had no illusions about his own character, his shortcomings, vices, and misdeeds, but he could not abide being dispatched by a deranged fool who took joy in brutalizing elders and kidnapping children. Theirs was anything but a noble profession, to be sure, but this was not the way.

He cast a smug glance over his shoulder to watch his skiff race away over the waves, carrying his remaining men and the captives they had just recovered from Tadhana. Two sisters, stolen from their family to be sold into unspeakable servitude. It was a risky job for Liwanag's crew, but he had been happy to take it for the extravagant pay and the chance to humiliate cruel Tadhana. He would not see the reward, but the latter could still be arranged.

Liwanag turned back and puffed out his bony chest, letting the extended tip of Tadhana's stolen *gunong*, its sculpted blade gleaming in the spectral haze of the predawn moonlight, pierce the tattooed flesh of his sternum. He felt a trickle of warm blood soak the spot on his threadbare undershirt and laughed, partly to show Tadhana that he was not afraid and partly at the absurdity of his misfortune. He had bested better enemies than these, had fought storied navies and mythical beasts, had outlasted fevers that killed even the

strongest among his crew. Now this, a fittingly inglorious finale to bookend his ignominious beginning, abandoned in a fetid Mindanao alley by a mother who could not or would not care for him, left to survive alone on its streets.

Tadhana's clouded eyes widened in a mixture of rage and alarm. With her free hand she angrily brushed a lock of coarse silver hair, matted with sea spray, from her craggy, twisted face. One of her men, nervous, raised a pistol and pointed it at Liwanag. Tadhana hoisted the blade over her head, poised for a fatal strike. Liwanag bared his crooked, yellowed teeth and locked eyes with his enemy. A drop of sweat fell from the tip of his thin black mustache.

“*Pakyu*, Tadhana,” he sneered. “I alone choose my path.”

Liwanag turned, kicked the concrete block overboard, and dove after it into the churning black sea.

The heavy block carried him swiftly downward, faster than he had expected. He didn’t know if the water was ten meters deep or ten thousand. He had been knocked unconscious in the melee and had no sense of where they were. Pressure built in his ears and chest as the weight dragged him from the warm, moonlit surface into the icy black below. He wondered as he sank whether he would first drown or be crushed by the deep. As if in answer, a rough, fast-moving mass bumped into his leg, then another. Bull sharks.

They smelled his blood, but they shouldn't have arrived so quickly. Tadhana must have chummed the water. He winced as one of them took an exploratory bite, tearing off his pant leg and leaving a gash on his thigh. It wouldn't be long now.

He closed his eyes as the crushing weight of the water embraced him ever more tightly, forcing the air from his lungs. His ears felt like they would explode. The blackness behind his eyelids spun from bottom to top as he fought to stay conscious. The cold penetrated to his bones. A shark bumped his legs, this time more aggressively. He could sense more of them in the swirling water around him. He willed one to seize his throat and end it. One instead clamped down hard on his lower leg and he screamed, ejecting the last of the air from his lungs in a feeble burst of bubbles. The ocean swallowed the sound. He tried weakly to kick the shark with his other leg. The weight on his chest grew heavier, his head lighter. The urge to gasp for breath was overpowering his fading reason. Suddenly foolishly nostalgic for the world that was killing him with exceptional cruelty, Liwanag opened his eyes for one last look, expecting to see little but darkness and snaggled teeth.

Instead, dancing rays of rose-colored light shone from below. His leg was suddenly free, his hands unbound. The sharks vanished into the inky deep as he descended through a whirling cloud of tiny pink flowers. They radiated warmth and invited him to inhale their divine scent. The weight lifted from his chest and the pain in his ears disappeared. He felt weightless, formless. He followed the shafts of light downward, looking for their source. A gigantic, serpentine silhouette undulated through the rays of the unseen luminary below,

ruby sparks twinkling at its edges as the light glinted off its surface.

Sensing movement, Liwanag looked up and found himself staring into the giant, silvery white face of a serpent. Twice as high as he was long, it mimicked the moon, rough and cratered, radiating a pale, ethereal light. Elaborately spiraled frills rippled gently in the current from the sides of its head. Woody, backswept horns adorned the top. Flowing, translucent whiskers drooped lazily from the sides of its long, ridged snout. Shimmering golden eyes regarded Liwanag with an ancient, compassionate intelligence that told him he need not be afraid.

“Am I dying?” Liwanag asked the serpent calmly. He was no longer sinking.

“No, child,” she lilted in a voice of smoke and polished glass. “You died.”

He paused, bewildered. He felt not fear but lucid, serene curiosity. “Who are you?”

“I am called Chaos. I am called Leviathan. I am called Sea Mother. It is from my womb that all life springs.”

“A god?” he whispered, at once awed and incredulous. He had heard these tales in all their forms and variations and thought them the yarns of tricksters and fools.

“To some I appear as a god. To others, as the faces of their families. To a special few, my children of the sea, their minds unclouded by mortal bonds or the stories of spiteful men, as this, my true form.”

“Why have you come to me?” He could scarcely imagine this was anything but the fever dream of a dying mind or a karmic demon, come to collect for his transgressions.

“It is you that have come to me, child. I am here to guide you in your passage.”

“My passage?”

“To the next place. You faced great hardship and pain in this life, yet you resisted the wickedest fates of your enemies and did not lose your light. Now, in the moments before the memory of this cycle fades, you will know pure, unconditional love and joy.”

“Paradise,” Liwanag wept. “But how?” He was not special, not deserving. His own mother couldn’t bring herself to want him. He could not fathom why anyone else should.

“You will be born, in a sense, to a kind, special woman in the most profound depths of despair. She has boundless love to give, but her body cannot create the seeds of life.”

“I do not underst—"

“She will call you Pag-asa, for the hope you stir within her abundant heart. Though your time together will be fleeting, the immensity of her love for you will inspire her to a lifetime of selfless devotion to unloved children. She will care for hundreds herself; others will follow her example.”

Liwanag’s mind spun. He imagined what his own life might have been like had he known love, compassion, and warmth. Who he might have been. What he might have done.

“When will I—?” he began. He was sinking again. He looked up toward the serpent to see her vanish into the darkness, her forked tail whipping through the shafts of rosy light as they began to descend with him.

“Now and always. This time, the last, and the next. Farewell, child,” her tender voice echoed through the abyss.

As he sank down, down, down toward the source of the light he became aware that he no longer had a body. He began to rotate as the dancing beams that enveloped his phantasmic senses converged into a gentle vortex, tightening gradually, swirls of color along its walls flashing through the shades of the rainbow and beyond, to colors that tasted like honey and whispered like wild lemongrass in a soft summer breeze. The vortex grew tighter until it closed around him. The colors faded to blinding white, their synesthetic resonance bleeding into a chaotic sensory crescendo until there was only the distant,

muffled roar of shallow surf.

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Liwanag sensed warmth and motion. He opened his eyes to see bubbles churning through the brilliant blue-green of the sun-soaked shallows as whitecaps crashed down onto the surface above. He was being gently tossed back and forth with the rhythm of the breakers. Clammy seaweed tickled his legs. He looked down, past a little round pot belly, to find two tiny, chubby feet lolling in the water. He began to paddle and kick to right himself, then aligned his movement with the direction of the waves. Sediment swirled up from below. A big wave picked him up and lurched him forward in a rush of sandy foam. He crashed into legs. The legs yelped in surprise.

Liwanag clutched at a swath of plain linen flowing in the waves and looked up. Framed by jagged green cliffs and a cloudless cobalt sky, the tear-streaked face of a raven-haired young woman looked down at him in shock. She lifted him out of the knee-deep surf, turning him over in her hands to look for injuries. Seeing none, she clutched him tightly to her chest and wept uncontrollably. He buried his face in her silken hair. It smelled like jasmine. She held him up again for another look as she calmed. He stared, stern and unblinking, straight into her shining brown eyes, intensely evaluating her face. It was weary and sad and radiated a kindness he had never seen in all his tormented years. It looked like home.

“Who *are* you?” she sobbed through tears of luminous joy, scanning the sea for ships, for debris, for anything that could reveal from where he had come. She held him close again and began to sing. As he rested his heavy head against her breast and absorbed the sweet melody of her melancholy song, the last of Liwanag dimly recalled that something had happened just before this. Danger, then a gentle beast. Flowers and light. He couldn’t remember exactly what it was.

The woman paused her singing. He followed her gaze toward the horizon where, far beyond the breakers, a ridge of opalescent scales slipped silently beneath the waves, a tiny splash following a moment later as a forked tail whipped the surface and vanished. The woman beamed at him in singular adoration, her face settling into stoic resolve and understanding as she answered her own question.

“My *pag-asa*,” she cooed softly. “My hope. My light. My love.”

Pag-asa nuzzled under her chin. He thought he might be a little hungry.

Sam Arlington is a former civil servant and amateur wine critic who comes from a very short line of semi-accomplished authors. An odd child even by Rust Belt standards, Sam grew up hanging out in cemeteries and was profoundly and permanently affected by the death of Artax, so much so that it features in a three-sentence bio decades later. Sam's work has appeared in Horrific Scribes, Epic Echoes Magazine, and Flash Phantoms, among other publications. **Sam can be found on the web and on BlueSky @samarlington.com**

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GANYSPEED

Kenton Erwin

I wake up alone, no memories, head throbbing, behind the wheel of a very fast car, speedometer reading 210kph, rocketing along on autodrive, middle of nowhere, bat out of hell. If you haven't awakened into this situation, you haven't lived.

Jupiter fills the sky, casting ruddy light on Gany's brownish-gray surface. At least *that's*

normal. Car air supply eighty percent, so I'll likely die from a crash, not asphyxiation.

My arm hurts. Look down. Hypodermic needle in my shoulder! Pull it out. A stimulant? I was unconscious?

"Faster!" cries a voice in my head, coming from an earpiece. "You can't deliver to the launch at this rate. Speed it up! If you fail, your family dies."

Family? Shit! I see the self-driving max speed is 210. Search for manual override. Find it. "It wants a goddam code!" I yell.

With no hesitation, my tormentor replies, "8-H-2-S-K-E." I repeat that to the car, grab the wheel, and mash the accelerator pedal down.

220. 250…253… and that's all this car can do on flat straightaway.

In our light gravity, the car launches off the roadway at every little bump.

"Are you there?" I ask.

"Yes."

“What the hell are you doing with me?”

“I borrowed you. Do what I say, and you’ll be OK.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You and your family will die. Horribly.”

“OK,” I say. “What do I do?”

“Drive like hell.”

I’m carving a slalom path around the slower cars that appear and flash behind me in seconds. *Faster, faster,* I will the car.

Why me? I touch my temple. Bleeding. Ouch! Someone hit me there.

Whack! Object slams against windshield. Right in my face! The plexi cracks. Dark tumbling thing. Bird? I swerve, too late. Almost lose control. Should be dead already.

Wait! We don’t have birds. Oh, yeah. Corporate introduced small pterodactyls for rodent control. More efficient than raptors. How do I know that? How did it escape the domes?

Wait - no animal could breathe out there, or fly. Had to be something else. Road debris?

More cars on road! Getting closer to Epigeus. I don't live there, do I? No. Big crater city like that has many cars. Shit!

"Slow to 180; prepare to exit right."

"OK. What do I call you?"

"Ed."

I careen onto Route 9 on two left wheels. Head pounding. Thirsty.

Family? Am I married? Would be nice, but I don't recall ...

Alarm! BEEP BEEP. Red warning light. Voice from car's radio: "CITIZEN, STOP YOUR CAR IMMEDIATELY. AWAIT OFFICER. VIOLATION."

"Uh, help? Ed? Hello?"

"Keep driving!' he says. "I'll get rid of the officer."

A jumpheli converges from the left, an illuminated demon making huge grasshopper leaps with rocket assist, coming in over domed fields of engineered beans and corn, grown under huge frames supporting both lighting and irrigation. Wait! I invented that system!

The heli gets close. Lands on road, its wheels complaining at the sudden contact. It's in car mode now, accelerating to draw even. Guns bristle from its nose and sides.

"CITIZEN! YOU MUST …" its loudspeaker begins, just as an orange ray lances down from above, tearing into the heli. It explodes. Parts rain around me. Gouging chunks up. A car behind me strikes a large piece and catapults into a deadly roll.

Accelerating. 253kph. Fewer cars now.

"Did we get him?" asks Ed.

I can't breathe. "'We' didn't get him, asshole. 'You' got him."

Try to think. Only eighty-one km to the launch center.

Use car to call up planetwideweb. Blocked!

"Ed, why do you need me? And I don't think I have a family!"

“Yes, you do.” Video of a beautiful woman and two kids pops up; she’s kneeling in a kiddie pool, with high, slow waves, teaching a kid the backstroke. The other kid and I watch from the edge of the pool. Sure looks like we’re a family.

“I don’t remember a family.”

“Your housebot took that video; it’s Liza, Toot-toot, and Sammy. You have amnesia from your head injury.” Another video comes up: Her wrists and ankles are cuffed to a chair, as are the two kids next to her. Blood runs down her face. Kids crying. Liza pleading, “Just do what they say, Jonathan, OK? Save us!”
I’m confused. A woman that pretty wouldn’t marry me.

My ass goes brrrppp; my seat’s squishy. Diarrhea? Really?

Thirsty; my head’s killing me.

Think, idiot, think; why do they need me? An android could do whatever I could do.

It’s hard to avoid slower cars at this speed. My ass and head throbbing.

I notice a bundle in the back seat. A series of curves approaches. I slow the car to 210kph, engage autopilot, and twist to examine the bundle. My movement unleashes a torrent of

poop smell, my butt burning from the acid.

I remove black fabric and find bricks of some dark substance, plastic-wrapped, with little cables plugged into each one, running into a motherboard.

A bomb!

Throw it outside? Maybe, but moving it might trigger it. Disable it? But how?

Car pitches into curves, tires complaining. Forget the bomb.

My wrist tracker! Kidnapper left it on my arm: Ancient model; counts steps, sleep. But, has other functions. Accessing recent messages: My name *is* Jonathan. I live in Adad, a city in one of Gany's larger craters. I seem to be single. Sorry, Liza—I knew it, you AI fraud. Oh, shit, my doctors say I'm sick; too many years' radiation from working in the fields in defective suits. I'm a VP at Agriputics, soon to retire. Soon to die, apparently. Headaches, thirst, and diarrhea, common signs of radiation poisoning.

Query: What ship launches within the next hour? *The **Canaveral Jane**, bound for Callisto and Europa, then return in five days*. Cargo? *Soybeans, corn, farming equipment, plus a family of four*. Ship owner? *Agriputics*.

“This is a farming moon,” I announce, finding more memories. “There are only two large corporations here. Agriputics and Moonsantoo Interplanetary. Everything else is supportive to them. You’re not with Agriputics—if you were, you wouldn’t need to kidnap me to deliver to them…”

“Talk less. Drive faster.”

“So you’re with Moonsantoo, or else you’re fighting both companies, like a terrorist.”

Silence.

Use my tracker to log into Agriputics C-suite server; hard to do while driving so fast; Brrrpp—more diahrrea? GODDAM IT! So thirsty. Searching… the family aboard is my CEO, her spouse, and kids.

Ah. So my tormentor wants me to blow up my own company’s ship, and kill me and my CEO in the process. I scan the news: There’s no mention of terrorism on Gany. Think. Moonsantoo’s profits are down. But … really?

Tear off earpiece. Stick it under my wet butt. Use my tracker for emergency call to Agriputics switchboard. Wait forever for transfer to CEO Admin. Voice recognition. Describe kidnapping, unconsciousness, thirst, diarrhea, dead cop, bombing our ship. They

understand. Verifying, researching. Continue driving, but slow down, they say. We'll call off the cops chasing you. Hold tight, they say.

Waiting. Waiting. Easier to drive slower, but so thirsty. Head throbbing.

Office calls back. "We confirm Moonsantoo threat. Instructions: Enter spaceport at Gate Seven. It'll be open, unguarded. Park at this location (see map, attached). Police on their way. No SCABA in your car? Take deep breath, run like hell across lot to unmarked silver truck—that's us. Will have a nurse waiting. Will launch ship early, unscheduled so your bomber won't know, to get it out of there before your bomb arrives. Will take you to hospital if you don't blow yourself up first. Good luck."

I laugh as I see where I'm told to park: Right in front of Moonsantoo's spaceport headquarters--all eight floors of it. Agriputics has a sense of humor: *I believe this is yours?*

Put the earpiece back on just as bomber tells me to drive fast up to the ship and park at launch tower. I say, "OK. I'm three klicks out."

Our ship rises majestically from the surface, early. A silver needle pushed by fire. A safe launch. Gany-gone!

I park in front of Moonsantoo's doors. Inhale a huge breath. Run to silver truck. Strong

nurse pulls me into its tiny airlock. Truck speeds away. As we exit, in the distance a swarm of police cars approaches.

I smile because my hand is wrapped around the car's key fob. Oops, no one's driving that car anywhere. I'm still wearing the earpiece. I tell the bomber, "OK, Ed, I'm at the ship! Now what?" In just seconds, a massive fireball rises from the Moonsantoo building. Then the blast wave hits and rocks us hard. "Woohoo!" yells our driver. While toweling off my dirty stinking ass, with that IT gal across from me stifling a laugh, I think what a day this is turning out to be.

Kenton Erwin's had eight short stories and three nonfiction books published. Recently, one of his stories was accepted by* Amazing Stories. *In 2025 he won First Place in the inaugural Speckled Spectrum Awards, and in 2024 he won* Punk Noir's *"A Good Death" writing competition. His story "Vbad Vblood" was the featured story in the literary horror journal* Suburban Witchcraft. *He is active in the Speculative Fiction Writers Association and lives in Richfield, WA, USA.

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THREE MEN AT THE WATERFRONT

Clinton Lawrence

Had it not been for the full moon, I would have stopped before reaching the village. But the air had a dampness to it, not the familiar dew of a cool night, nor the first signs of fog, but rather the imminence of a storm, though clouds had not yet covered the sky, and the moonlight penetrated the woods just enough that I could see my way along the narrow road. So I proceeded.

It was well past midnight when I finally reached the village, the moon now in the western sky not quite half way between its zenith and the horizon. I wandered the streets, trying to find the inn, as it was a village I had not traveled through before. No lanterns lit the windows of the buildings, but I heard men's voices coming from the other end of the main street, cheerful voices that beckoned. I followed the sound.

There were three of them, on the porch of a building down by the waterfront, sitting, looking out over the water, each drinking out of a clay mug. They gazed up at me when I rounded the corner of the building, their conversation ceasing as they looked me over.

"Hello," I said. "Sorry to disturb you."

"That's all right," the middle one said. He was a short, thin man with dark, curly hair that just touched his shoulders, or at least that's how it looked to me in the dark shadows. "Join us."

"I'm looking for the inn."

All three laughed at once. "Closed for the night," the man on the right said. He appeared to be about average size, with short hair that was probably a shade lighter than the middle one.

“I can try,” I said.

“Waste of time,” the third man said. “Nothing you could do would get that innkeeper out of bed.”

“Might as well join us,” the first man said.

He had not finished his invitation when I felt the first drop of rain, so I accepted and took a seat next to the three men under the porch’s overhang. It wasn’t much shelter, but it was better than nothing, and though I was tired from the long day and night of walking, I welcomed the company.

“Got something to drink out of?” the middle man said.

I rummaged through my sack, found an old tin cup at the bottom, and handed it to him, noticing the smell of drink on them as I reached across. The middle man filled my cup and handed it back.

To your dreams,” he said, and they all raised their mugs at once.

The beverage was strong, but had a foul taste, like something had rotted in it. But it

warmed my insides, so I continued to drink it. I don't think the men noticed my grimace upon the first sip, or if they did, they ignored it. The one sitting next to me handed me a loaf of bread, and I tore off a piece. It was stale, and had some odd seasonings mixed into it that I did not recognize, but it was better than their liquor, and helped sop up the lingering flavor that the beverage left behind.

"Why don't you go inside?" I asked.

"Here?" the middle man said.

"Yes."

"None of us own the place."

"Besides, we're waiting," the man on his left said. "For the women of our dreams."

I thought he must mean they expected a visit from a few of the village harlots. The men were friendly to me, but they hardly seemed reputable. I sipped more of the beverage, and took another bite of bread, and neither one tasted as strange as they had at first. It unsettled me.

"They're coming across the sea," the middle man said. "So we watch for them."

“What if they don’t come?”

“Then we’ll be here tomorrow night, and every night until they do. Or at least until we run out of the potion.”

“Old Noldan guaranteed it,” the man next to me said.

“That he did.”

“Is that what we’re drinking?” I asked.

“Maybe yours will come, too.”

“She’s a long time in my past.”

“Who cares?” the middle man said. “It’s a potion. You’re saying a potion can’t overcome the past?”

I had no answer, but I did not believe them. I sat with them, and drank anyway, and they told me about their dreams, each of them different, united only by their lifelong friendship and the coins they saved up, and in a few cases, stole, until they had enough to buy Old Noldan’s assistance. Sometime during the conversation, I lost track of it all, and I found

myself staring out over the water, at the reflected moonlight, and realizing the rain had stopped, and the skies cleared, and I was laughing nearly uncontrollably at a bawdy joke one of them told, and I couldn't even remember the joke. One of them, I don't remember which, pointed at the sea.

"It's here! Do you see it?"

I must confess that I didn't see anything except the moonlight on the water. I would like to say I tried, but I don't know if that was true. But the three of them were excited. They hastily rose, and turned to me when I didn't.

"Aren't you coming?" the middle man said. "It would be a shame if you didn't. A waste of the potion."

"I don't see anything."

"You're crazy," the one on the left said. "It's right out there. The ship. You can't miss it."

I still saw nothing. "I'm not looking for what you are, anyway."

The middle man laughed. "It doesn't have to be a woman. It could be anything. You must dream of something. Everyone does."

“There’s nothing there,” I said.

“You must not have drank enough. That’s all I can say.” The middle man said to the others. “Let’s go. He can follow if he wants, but we can’t miss the ship. We can’t let it sail without us.”

I watched them walk down the pier, and decided to follow at a distance. They must have heard my footsteps, because they stopped and turned around.

“Changed your mind?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I still don’t see a ship.”

“It’s right there, right in front of you at the end of the pier.”

“Go on,” I said. “I’m not coming.”

I could see the middle man shaking his head. But he said nothing more, nor did either of his companions. I watched them walk to the end of the pier, and then step off, and it appeared to me that they fell toward the water, as one would expect.

I never heard a splash.

***Clinton Lawrence is a retired electrical engineer and science teacher. His fiction has appeared in* Realms of Fantasy, Compelling Science Fiction, Lore, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, *and a number of other publications. He lives in Davis, California*.**

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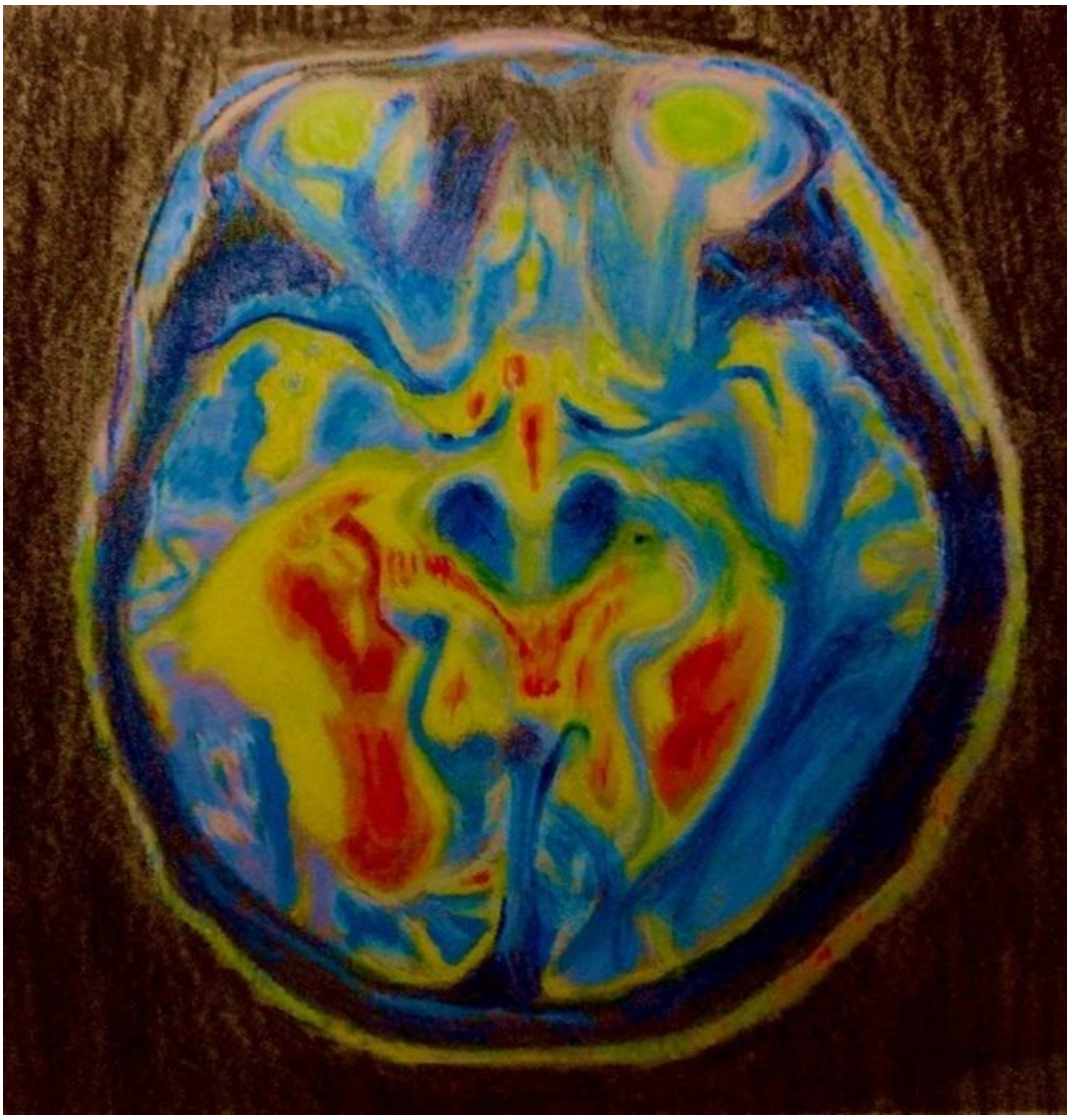
UNDESERVED

Steven Mathes



I, Chad, was young, spirited, a regular guy. I felt small next to the accomplishments of my family. My inheritance came as a full memory download from my famous Uncle Dick. A surprise came with it. The memories of Uncle Dick's mentor Dr. Proust, the pioneer in memory transference. They both died of mysterious causes, which should have been a

warning.

The new memories needed to settle enough to be useful. I could at least honor my luck, not desecrate it by pretending it was unimportant.

I went to a bar. I ordered a double, hoping to ease a feeling in the back of my mind. A figure on the next stool had a look of darkness. I knew dark souls were often wiser, definitely sexier.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

"If you were suddenly the luckiest man in the room, what would you do?" I said.

"Something like inheritance? Memories? I'd feel like a fat worm on a lawn full of hungry birds."

I chose to be, needed to be, oblivious. Clearly, she knew more than she should, although we lived in an age where material goods were available to all. Anyone could print up a new car, or a house, or whatever. Knowledge, what a person knew, was the new status. Memory was the new status. She guessed the obvious. That is all it was.

I ordered another drink. I would try to be a big boy later.

Her skin, her smell, her features evoked perfection, same as anyone. "Nice house, but nobody home," people once said of such beauty. This "house" was definitely occupied. But a recollection from Uncle Dick called out, ever so faintly in my new memories. I could ask if we had met because I sensed that we had. But it would sound pathetic.

"You mean mind pirates?" I said.

"Mind pirates. They want your memories, but they delete your life."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Collateral damage from hackers. But I totally have staff."

I did! I took my phone, alerted Uncle Dick's office that I needed staff. I needed backup immediately. Soon after, I heard phones ping around the bar.

This woman had warned me. She had to be on my side. She made me feel safer, and I admit it -- a little lustful. Shadowy figures pressed in, calling for drinks.

Oh, I needed not just her worldly eyes.

"You think mind pirates are a myth? You need to leave with me," she said.

"Are you hitting on me?"

"No."

"What?"

I felt hands grab my elbows, and pull me from my falling stool. Bystanders yelped. My supposed protector dragged me by the shirt while many sets of hands on my back pushed. They dragged me out the door to irritated cries from legit patrons. Limo doors slammed shut. We snapped forward.

"What's happening?" I said.

"It took a lot to secure you, but now you're all ours."

I had inherited many valuable memories but searching for a helpful one felt like flipping through my unread emails. Mostly I wanted to black out from all the drink. Still, the limo had a familiar smell, a smell that finally jogged. This was Uncle Dick's car, now my car.

The woman pulled a syringe, and jabbed my listing body. Tricked? I expected to fade

further, but instead my head cleared. Anti-tox, every party animal's salvation. Now my inherited memories made a little more sense. I looked at the mysterious woman again, remembering.

"You're Emily? Head of security for Uncle Dick?"

"Dr. Proust, also."

"Ah, it gets confusing with two sets of memories. Three counting mine."

Nobody in Proust's league would leave a legacy without protecting the heir," said Emily.

"So you're taking me somewhere safe," I said.

"Safe for me, anyway. We've been planning this caper."

"Caper?"

"We intend to take from you what should belong to everyone."

I tried to scratch my nose, and found I couldn't move a finger. I failed to shift my weight, then failed to reach for the door of the limo. Muscles dead, but mind clear, I searched my

new memories and remembered: Uncle Dick's undercurrent of suspicion, the rumors, stories of an insider criminal, a security genius, a maniac revolutionary?

"We need your mind clear as a bell for the transfer."

"You plan to kill me?"

Surprise. I could talk, or at least slur some words.

"Wrong." she said.

"Wrong?"

"We can give your experiences to anyone. Everyone! Knowledge should not be just for you rich people."

"Isn't that an invasion of privacy?" I said.

"A world without privacy is a world without cheaters. Everyone can have the same things."

"But if everyone has the same thing, won't they search for another way to be superior? What everyone wants is luck."

"You won't die," she said. "That's luck."

They brought me somewhere. They slid my head into a vast, humming machine, and copied. As they copied, something sparked, either in the machine, or in my head. The spark hurt, but the aftermath felt heavenly as in...the feeling of seeing a spring sunrise. Maybe those happy drugs did it? All that bliss? I did not know.

I could not remember, for the love of me. Why was I here?

I sighed at the beauty of time and space. The buzzing machines, the smell of disinfectant, the overheated wires. All so lovely. Beauty came from all around. My thoughts floated in the brilliance of another day. I felt the teeming souls all around me, even the souls in the individual grains of dust. It made me weep with joy.

"I can't recall. Who am I?"

Everyone surrounding me babbled, concerned about something. They rushed at me with instruments, with equipment. I would have laughed, but it seemed so unfair. Clearly they lacked what I had, my bliss, my understanding, my insight. It all felt so simple, so underserved, so lovely

Steven Mathes lives miles from the nearest pavement with a spouse and a dog. When he isn't writing, he tends a garden. He gardens because he likes to cook. He cooks because he is passionate about eating. He is a full member of SFWA.

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FROG SKIN

Zary Fekete

The boy brought the frog in a Tupperware container. “He told me his name is Larkspur,” he said, peering in. “He said we could trade.”

“Trade what?” his mother asked.

“Skin.”

She was wiping groceries when he said it, hands chapped from discount soap. The word skin made her stop, just for a moment. She glanced at the frog, olive and still, pressed to the plastic wall.

That night, she found the boy in the bathroom, peeling. Not hurt…no blood, no cries. Just the thin, transparent sheath of outer skin coming off his forearm in careful spirals, like apple peel.

“Does it hurt?” she asked, voice low.

“No,” he said. “Larkspur showed me how. Said it’s better this way. Cleaner.”

He held up a piece of himself to the light. It fluttered slightly.

She made him wear long sleeves to school.

The next day he brought the frog to breakfast. “He says you can do it too.”

“I don’t want to,” she said.

“But he says you already are.”

She looked at her hands. The cracks had spread. Tiny flakes dusted the counter. The tips of her fingers were raw but numb.

That afternoon she stood at the mirror and pinched the loose skin beneath her chin. It came away like rice paper. There was no pain, only a strange relief. Beneath the outer layer, her neck was smooth and luminous. She felt younger. Sleek.

By Friday they kept Larkspur in a glass terrarium on the kitchen table. The boy sang to him. The mother placed droplets of water on his back with an eyedropper. They didn’t speak of the father, who had left years ago, or of the boy’s missing homework, or the doctor’s voicemail blinking red on the answering machine.

Instead, they shed.

It became routine. Strips of skin in the trash, the sink, curled like bookmarks between couch cushions. The mother quit her job. She stayed home to monitor the terrarium’s humidity. The boy’s teacher called to say he had stopped blinking in class. He sat still as stone and whispered to the lines in his palms.

One evening, the frog climbed the terrarium wall, mouth moving slowly. The boy didn’t

come to dinner.

She found him crouched in the tub, skinless and smiling, legs tucked beneath him.

“It’s almost done,” he croaked.

And when she looked closer, she could see his throat pulse. Once. Twice.

That night they peeled their faces and then vanished into the swamp.

Zary Fekete grew up in Hungary. He has a debut novella (Words on the Page) out with DarkWinter Lit Press and a short story collection (To Accept the Things I cannot Change: Writing My Way Out of Addiction) out with Creative Texts. He enjoys books, podcasts, and many many many films. ***Twitter*** ***and*** ***Instagram*** ***@ZaryFeteke.***
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