

The Natamyths

by Daniel Christopher June

PART 1: The early education of Natalie Wendy

The Beginning of the Universe

For eternities, the entire universe spun around like a red ribbon, dancing and singing her joys, and never tiring of the life that she was. For eternities she pondered and dreamed up millions: millions of planets, millions of stars, millions of people, millions of moons, millions of songs, millions of joys. She sang aloud:

*All I am and I am all,
Everything is my name,
Life is my heart,
I always change.*

*I grow and learn and love,
My mind contains infinity,
My entire body is wove,
From the fabric of everything.*

At last she said: I will love myself more fully by loving another. I will become two. And so she became Sherry, goddess of logic, and Daniel god of passions. I am two, said the universe, I am male and female: I contain myriads, everything will be born of us.

And they danced that day. Sherry became the planets and moons, Daniel became suns and stars. And their bodies were the whole universe and everything, and their life was the energy of the planets. They danced that first day, and the universe continues to dance to this day.

On the second day, Daniel said to Sherry: come, let us become a little one, and she will be a poet. She will name all the life and animals we will make. Daniel walked upon the oceans, and pulled up a large wave, with white hair and blue eyes. And with his pen, he wrote the name NATALIE ROSE, on the wave. Sherry, when she saw the wave, sang the song with joy: "You are NATALIE ROSE." The winging words entered the written name, and then the wave became the birthday of a little child, who was red as a blush, and full of words. Natalie became the GodChild, and her parents loved her very much.

They lived together, in the palace of fountains, from where all the rivers flowed. There, they watched as the swimming things became walking things, and the walking things became flying things, and the scaly things became furry things, and the furry things became thinking things, and all the world was full of life, and the Universal Three never tired of singing, and laughing, and writing, and making new life.

Natalie Becomes Human

After many years in the palace of fountains, Natalie grew dissatisfied.

“I cannot endure being nothing but a singer *about* life,” she said. “I want to be a singer *of* life: to live, and suffer, and love, and find love, and lose love: I want to become a woman.”

Now Sherry knew her daughter well, and this did not surprise her. “She is like me, her mother, whose body is the world. She too wants to live in the world, amidst life.”

And so she convinced Daniel to let his daughter become a woman, and be born as a human infant, and to learn the whole world, from direct experience. And Daniel kissed his daughter, and Sherry kissed her daughter, and they said, “Love is in your heart, and creativity is in your mind. Go: take on the world.”

And so Natalie's body became covered in dancing flames, until the flames consumed her, and Natalie was nothing but dancing flames that were red as a dying sun. And those flames rose in the air like a great butterfly, and flew down to earth. At last, the flame burned itself out, and Natalie became a beautiful smell of incense, a lovely breeze.

She flew over the world, looking far and wide for worthy people with which to live. She flew over Africa, where the dark-skinned Africans lived in jungles and deserts; she flew over Asia, where the yellow-skinned Asians honored family and duty; she flew over America, where the red-skinned

Americans loved the land and hunted the wild Buffalo. (This was thousands of years before today.) There she saw a young woman, lovely and wise, busy sewing a tapestry of the heavens, with white-winged horses, green-skinned farmers, and maidens of the Sun.

The woman sang:

*A widow, a widow am I,
Who has never birthed a child,
I will love no other man again,
So alone with my song I will be.*

The widow gasped as a wind whisked around her in whirls. Natalie listened to the widow's heart, and learned that she was true to her heart, and never lied to herself. *She is worthy*, thought Natalie.

Then the widow breathed in the beautiful incense, and Natalie filled her up, and the maiden became pregnant with Natalie.

“Today my name is Joy,” said the widow, “For my body is pregnant with a new life. My body contains a miracle and a treasure, and I shall call her 'Wendy,' for she is child of the wind.”

And so Joy gave birth to Wendy, the first incarnation of Natalie. And the entire village danced and sang new songs for the miracle of the wind.

Natalie Wendy meets the Bleeding man

When Wendy was very young, and still didn't have all her adult teeth, she said to her mother, "Why do you tell me to be good? Why not bad? If it's so good to be good, why is that so? And what is good? You have so many rules, but wouldn't the world be better without rules?" For she wanted to stay outside after dark with her best friend the Wolf Boy, who was friends with the moon, and slept during the day.

"Isn't it good that I called you Wendy?" asked the mother. "When you don't get your way, your questions coming pouring forth like the wind."

"Still, you haven't told me why," said Wendy.

"Go ask the Bleeding Man. He is holy. He knows what to say to little children when they are up to no good."

The Bleeding Man was a priest in that part of the country. He would tell the children stories about how they should respect their parents, eat their vegetables, do their chores, and all those other "good" things that Natalie couldn't care two kernels of corn about.

"I don't like the Bleeding Man," said Natalie. "Besides, what do I care what *he* thinks is good when I want to know what *you* think is good."

"What I think is good is asking wise people and considering what they say to decide for yourself. Now go along and ask."

She left and went to the Bleeding Man's house. Now he didn't live with the other villagers, but only went into town when he wished to whip himself with cords, to make his body bleed.

When he came to the door, he was dressed all over with a scratchy brown mat, which was uncomfortable to even look at. His face was sunken in like he hadn't eaten in days, and his eyes were wild and unsteady.

“A child, a child, I say a child! Or are you the devil come to trick me, what? Tell me!” said the Bleeding Man.

“It's me, Wendy. Momma says you know why being good is good, and why you shouldn't be bad.”

The Bleeding Man considered. He stooped to pick Wendy up and set her in a chair, but Wendy didn't want blood on her blue dress. He pointed to a chair made out of sticks and jagged edges for her to sit on, but instead she crossed her legs, sat on the ground, and nodded that she was listening.

“Being bad is like being in a tornado of flames, where you can never touch the ground, and everything you want burns you. That is what happens to you after you die if you are bad. But if you are good you go to a place where you can sleep and relax all day, and see the beautiful face of the Goddess.”

“So you've been to these places?” asked Natalie.

“No, but we know it is true because that's what the ancient elders said, and if you doubt them, you are surely going to be fed to the tornado.”

“You are saying that I should live my life according to what dead people say?”

“Hmmp! The arrogance of youth,” said the Bleeding Man.

“Well, what does it mean to be good?”

“You must kiss the boy who is ugliest, give everything you care about to the beggar, call yourself a worthless sinner, crawl through dirt and mud, give up your youth to tending the old and sick, and never think of yourself.”

Wendy's first reaction was to laugh. But she paused, and reflected; she did want to be polite. The whole town respected the Bleeding Man, and nobody called him names, but some of the boys and girls called her names like “air-head” and they tore up her tapestries that her mother had taught her to sew.

“Well I still think that the most important person to me is me,” said Wendy, “But tell me more about the Goddess. Why should we look at her face? Where did you get that idea?”

“She is beautiful, and beauty is meant to be looked at,” said the old man. “Here, let me show you.”

They went on a walk to an old deserted mountain, with a little temple on top.

“In that temple is the perfect image of the Goddess. But I will never see it, nor will anybody, because the path keeps getting steeper until you cannot climb any more. That's what being perfect is. It is always trying harder, but never getting there. You must always try harder, but you will never be perfect.”

Hmm, thought Wendy. And she thought I will run up that path and show him that it is pointless never being perfect, because you can get to the top and see what all the fuss is about. And she ran over the prickly bushes, jumped

from rock to rock, used her hands and feet, and scabbled her way to the top. But before she could get there, the sand fell, the rocks fell, and then she fell and rolled down back to the feet of the Bleeding Man.

“And that,” he said, “is what it means to be a good person.”

“What do you do if you make it to the top?” asked Wendy.

“Then you can die,” he said.

“Hmmm...” said Wendy. “You once said something. You said a man is wise if he is humble enough to learn from a child. Did you mean that?”

“Why yes,” he said. “What of it?”

“Well I think that you would be happy if you didn't fall on your head trying to get to that perfect statue, but you would be happier if you made a new statue, and showed it so people could really see how beautiful it was.”

The Bleeding Man paused for a while. He began to talk, then stopped himself, and thought some more.

“But of course, my statue wouldn't be perfect,” he said, “But maybe it would inspire people to see the real statue someday. Well, thank you. Run along now...”

“Wait, there is something Wolf Boy always said to me. He said to give nothing away, or you will spoil people, and to never take things free, or you'll become a mooch. But you should always trade, and fair's fair. As I see it, you owe me something in return for my good advice.”

“Okay, child,” said Bleeding Man. “What do you want?”

“That!” she said, pointing to his whip.

“But you are too young to realize the importance of hurting yourself.”

“No,” she said, “I want it to protect my tapestries from the mean boys and girls who tear at things and spit on what they are jealous of.”

“I probably won't need it for a while,” he said, “but you must never use it to hurt anybody, unless you have to.”

“Agreed,” she said.

They parted ways. Wendy put the whip into her purse of carrying. Her mother was a seamstress of marvelous things. She was so talented at sewing that her creations possessed magical powers. For instance, she sewed a purse for Natalie Wendy that could carry anything and everything put into it. Wendy had filled it with rocks, and papers, and arrows, and books, and sticks, and everything else she could find. And now she put the nasty whip on top of it all.

When she got home, her mom asked her what she learned from the Bleeding Man.

“Well what I learned and what he said were two different things entirely,” said Wendy. “What he said is we should always try our best to seek perfection. What I learned is that perfection is always trying our best.”

And that night she said to herself: “I, Natalie, embody perfection. I always do my best.”

Natalie Wendy meets the Caterpillar Girl

One spring, Wendy wanted to sew something beautiful that she had never seen sewn before. Her mother showed her how to sew many beautiful things: a rainbow veil, a tapestry that moved and showed great battles, black boots that could walk on water, and a sunshirt that shown like a flame with no heat. But Natalie wanted to do something else, something she didn't even know what. She walked through the woods, looking for inspiration.

Finally, she came to a thicket. She wondered: *what is behind this thicket?* She was just skinny enough to climb under the thorns. She dragged her carrying-purse with her. When she got through, she came up to the side of a great hill with a cave. Along the sides of the cave were four red cats, as big as calves, and covered with wild hair. They hissed and snarled when they saw her. But beyond the snarling, she heard the most beautiful voice echoing from within the cave. It was a woman's and she was sad.

Maybe she is a prisoner, she thought, and these snarling cats are keeping her captive.

She pulled from her purse the whip she had earned from Bleeding Man. With a cry, she jumped at the cats, eyes flashing, and she smacked one right on the nose. They bounded away, arching their backs and waving their tails. But they left just enough room for Wendy to run in.

The inner walls of the cave glowed with jade green light. Everywhere: crystals, jewels, diamonds growing out of the very walls. Wendy found herself

ankle-deep in cool, cool water. In the center of the pool of water sat a beautiful blond woman, naked, and shivering. She hadn't quite noticed Wendy yet, and sang to herself as she combed her long long hair.

“Hello, fair lady,” said Wendy. “I saw that you are trapped here by those mean cats, but I think I can chase them away with this whip long enough to rescue you.”

“Fair child, so bold and young, my captivity has just begun. Those cats are mine to fend off the world, I am a butterfly goddess, and I must make my wings in silence. In these caves I have looked long into the limpid pool of my soul, and alas, there is so much sorrow, and alas, so much beauty. But I never want to share it with the brutal world beyond. The world is full of arrows and thorns. This is my secret place. Nobody will ever know the real me. I am fulfilled looking in the pools at my sad face, and adding to their waters with my tears.”

“But caterpillars turn into butterflies. That's the way its supposed to be.”

“If only I could make wings, if only,” sighed the caterpillar girl. “If only I had some inspiration.”

“Well where is your thread? Where is your needle? Maybe you wouldn't be so sad if you were busy making something,” for she was feeling sad herself, hearing the caterpillar girl. The drip dripping of the pool, the eerie glow of the green crystals, the soft sing-song voice of the goddess, all made Wendy want to weep.

“There are my many attempts,” said the caterpillar girl, and she pointed to a pile of orange wings. Wendy looked them over, and understood. She saw what they were trying to be, and saw that they all fell apart over the same error.

“Let me try,” she said. “Where is the thread?”

“It is my pool of tears that I thread from,” said the caterpillar woman.

“That's your first mistake!” said Wendy. “To fly, you need to make wings out of all your experiences, not just your tears, but also your sweat, your blood, your passions.”

She set to work. She used some of the pool's waters to sew the wings, and added the sweat from her forehead, and she remembered her anger at the village boys, and she breathed that into the thread, and she remember her honest mother, and she sewed her joy into the wings.

After three days of sewing, she said, “Here you go! It is a red dress. When you want to fly, you pull on the sleeves and it becomes a pair of fiery wings.”

“Oh no!” said the Caterpillar Girl. “Oh no, I don't want that. That's not what I need right now. I need to collect more waters. I need to sing more songs. I need to remain in my cave.”

And then Wendy realized that the caterpillar girl didn't want to fly or see the world or dance or enjoy life. She wanted to be alone and think and sing sad songs.

Well if that is what makes her happy, then she can enjoy her sorrows,
Wendy thought, *But as for me, I have found joy in being creative.*

And then she said, “I, Natalie, create. My joy in life is to create at all times.”

She put on the red dress.

“For the use of your waters, I will give you this advice: Do not sew wings you do not wish to fly upon. Instead, sew poetry from the lips of your sorrow, then you will not be naked. And tell your cats to let poets in, for you have loved sharing your sad songs with me.”

“Thank you, child!” said the Caterpillar Girl.

Then Wendy pulled on the sleeves of her dress, and two shimmering wings as broad as doors unfurled, and she flew out of that cave, over the forest, and circled above the village.

Then she thought of something. “I will go to the mountain and see the temple that holds the statue of the face of the Goddess.”

So she flew down the familiar path and landed next to the temple. The columns were white as bleached bones, and green grasses and purple flowers burst from the earth.

As she stepped into the temple, a cool breeze chilled her bones.

It is so quiet here, she thought, and so calm!

She tip-toed in. In the center there was a sign that read: *The Face of the Goddess*. It stood above a perfectly still pool of water. She looked about for a statue or an idol, but there was none. She looked into the waters, but it contained only the soft curve of marble underneath. Then she noticed something: the pool reflected her face. She saw the red dress, and the wings as

broad as doors, her bright searching eyes, and she caught a glimpse of her potential and all the things she could and would be, her adult face.

“So I am the face of the Goddess!” exclaimed Wendy. “Then let me drink this wisdom in,” and she broke the face of the water with her hands, and drank in the waters, feeling their coolness and magic run through her body.

But I will not tell the Bleeding Man! She thought. He will never see a God in his own face; let him make statues for the people to admire. It is good that this temple is here for people with wings.

And she flew away to her home, very happy with her week.

Natalie Wendy meets the Book-learned Teacher

Wendy enjoyed long walks, sometimes alone, sometimes with her mother, sometimes with Wolf Boy; and while she walked, she would talk, with others or with herself, and she would try to figure out the reasons behind things, and see what causes what, and how everything relates. She loved to discover what crawled under the rocks, what swam in the swamps, what burrowed in the dirt, what flew in the skies. Sometimes, she would fly up high, high away, but never when the village boys and girls would watch, because they envied her the dress she had sewn, and they demanded she sew them wings. But she said that you can't fly an inch on anybody's wings but your own.

With all that flying, thinking and searching, she thought, *What is really important in this world? How am I to understand everything, and know why things are the way they are, and what I should do, and what I shouldn't do? I love to create, but sometimes I just don't know what to make.*

"What you need," said her mother, "Is some schooling."

"What's that?" she asked.

"That's where you sit and listen to a teacher tell you the way the world works. His knowledge spills over and you soak it up like a sponge."

"What's a sponge?"

"It's an animal that sits around and soaks things up," said her mother.

Well if I am going to meet a teacher, he's not going to have it that easy! thought Wendy.

So Joy enrolled Wendy in school. In the next village, there was a cousin of the Bleeding Man who taught a class of students. They were all studying to be wise-men, medicine-men, and village chiefs.

"And what are you studying to be?" they asked her.

"To be myself, of course," she said.

"Yes, but what do you want to *do*?" they asked.

"I suppose whatever I find fun to do."

"Aha!" said the teacher. "That is the first lesson which I will beat out of you. Life is not about having fun. Its about responsibilities. You have to be a part of society, and help people, and fit into a role that benefits others. What you do for a job will probably not be fun at all, but you must do it anyway."

But Wendy remembered that she was the face of the Goddess, and thought that the joy of being alive was in creativity, not with responsibility.

What's the use of hard work? she wondered to herself. *I will figure that out!*

The teacher began with a history lesson. "Our people came here from Asia, on a land bridge. And they spread into seven distinct groups," he said. "And those groups each started what adds up to a total of fourteen different languages. And those languages are..." Wendy sighed. "For the year that the first language changed was the year 714, and the year the second language..." and then Wendy remembered her fiery wings, which were broad as doors and as light as clouds. And she thought of flying to Asia, and seeing the little Asian

boys and girls, and wouldn't they be happy to see her, with her fiery wings, and maybe they didn't have school in Asia, and

"WENDY!" shouted the teacher. "Pay attention! You will learn nothing if you daydream. Now then, I was telling you about Asia."

Natalie Wendy looked around the class, and saw that some of the boys weren't paying attention, a few with jaws half-opened, a few sleeping, and others were drawing pictures of bears and wolves in their notebooks. *Well!* she thought, *It seems I'm not the only one bored with allthis.*

After class she flew home and told her mother about the day, about how the class bored her, and she learned everything there is to know about things she didn't care one speck of dust about.

"Wendy, I'm going to tell you this twice so you remember it. Nevermind what I said about sponges. Put your heart into your lessons and you'll enjoy them. I will say it again: Put your heart into your lessons and you'll enjoy them. Now I want you to think about that before you go to school tomorrow."

"You mean I have to go back tomorrow?" wondered Wendy.

"You have to go back every day."

"How long?" she gasped.

"Years. Until you know enough to educate yourself. Unlike the kids in this village, you will become a full poet. That means taking in everything and applying it in the right way."

Wendy decided to think this problem through. So she flew across the woods. As she was thinking, she saw her teacher, Mr. Jozack, toting a pile of

books across a path, and dropping them again and again. She landed behind him and said, "Can I help you carry those books?"

"They are heavy," he said, "But thank you anyway."

"Well I have a carrying bag that my mother made me. No matter how much you put into it, it remains as light as air."

"Okay," he said, and handed her five big books and one little blue one.

Once they got to his house, he said, "Thank you, Wendy. I hope you learn to pay attention in class, you are such a good girl outside of class."

"What are those books?" asked Wendy, "I have never read a real book."

"Well this one is about American history," he said, "and this one is about Geometry, and this one is about poetry, and this one is about magic, and this one is about gardening."

"What's this little blue one?" she asked.

"That one's empty. I was always going to write a book, but I never have the time. I am too busy teaching and working to write anything. I always carry it with me, just in case I conceive of something suitable to write about."

"What can you write in empty books?"

"Anything you want. Pictures, puzzles, math problems, poems, your diaries, whatever idea you ever think, you can write down."

"Why not just think them?" she asked.

"Because when you write them you can see your thoughts and organize them."

"Why do that?"

"Well you like to sew pictures of beautiful places, right? Why not just remember them and not sew them?"

And then Wendy realized that language too was like a thread, and you could weave stories and pictures with it.

"Where can I get a book like that?" she asked.

"You can have it. I have plenty. This one is an endless notebook. You can write all your ideas in it and never fill it up. Its called the Memory Book."

"Thanks!" she said, and flew off holding the notebook in her hand.

And then she went to her secret place in the woods, where not even Wolf Boy knew of. There she wrote down:

I embody perfection. I always do my best.

I create. My joy in life is creating.

I put my whole heart into the work I choose to do.

After that, she asked the teacher many questions during class, even when he didn't want her to. She didn't care. She wanted to learn. And whenever she got bored, she took this as a sign that she was missing something essential. She wrote down all her ideas, and drew pictures, and wrote down what momma said, and what Wolf Boy said, and what Jozack said, and tied them all together.

What the teacher didn't know, because he never wrote in the book of Memory, is that it had the power to make things happen in the future.

"I'm going to make the perfect book with all I learn" she vowed. She didn't know yet what her writing would do.

Natalie Wendy meets the Mirror Girl

Wendy enjoyed her quiet place in the woods, and sometimes flew there to be alone. She thought: "I've learned so much about gardening from my teacher. Why don't I make a garden? Momma said you never learn something unless you do it."

First, she built a high wall of rocks so that nobody could get through. Then she read from her memory book the magic words for making plants grow. She said: "O thorn bush do grow, do grow, do grow, I ask for your prickles to guard my garden. I say: Veevosha!" And the thorn bushes sprung up like sneezes, and surrounded the walls, so that nobody would even know it was a garden just looking at it.

She said the magic words that made other plants grow. Some died and some came up wrong. But after months of trying, she had planted various flowers and trees, and everything was beautiful: there were blue pansies, and white orchids, flush strawberries, and a black apple tree, with flesh more savory than beasts'. In the center of the garden was a reflecting pool, just like the one at the temple of the image of the Goddess. And within it she placed two goldfish and two bull-frogs.

Then she went away for a few weeks to let things grow, and to learn how to keep her garden.

One night, after mother had gone to bed and she had snuck out to talk with Wolf Boy, who said he was going away on an adventure to find silver arrows, she felt especially lonely, and went back to her garden to write down her thoughts.

Imagine her surprise when after she landed in her garden, under the moonlight she saw a black-robed girl sitting by the pool, looking away from the water.

Its the lonely Caterpillar Girl for sure! Wendy said to herself, and then, *How did she get through the pricklers and thorns I set up, and climb the high stone walls? But look: her clothes are tattered; she has fought hard to get here, where she doesn't belong. I should investigate.*

But the girl was much younger than Caterpillar Girl. She was about Wendy's age, maybe a year more. Her hair was as dark as pitch, her skin as pale as milk. She did not seem to be looking at anything.

"Hello, who goes there?" asked Wendy.

"Oh my! Hello!" said the girl. "I must have wandered here in a dream. My dreams lead me all over. It's the call of the reflection pools. Wherever they are, they call to me."

She must be very vain, thought Wendy, but as the girl talked to her, she didn't look at Wendy. She stood and staggered.

It's the break of dawn, it isn't that hard to see, thought Wendy. But then she caught the girl's eyes. They were two perfect mirrors, reflecting Wendy's face back to her. She was also blind.

"I have never seen eyes like yours," said Wendy. "They are perfect reflections!"

"Yes. When they became that way, my vision left me."

"But you are beautiful, after all," said Wendy, but she was only looking at herself in those eyes.

"Thank you. Others have said just the opposite."

"And you look like you have a fire burning in your chest...I find you so *familiar* to me."

"Am I those things?" wondered the Mirror Girl. "I will be now."

"Don't you know what you are?" asked Wendy.

"It takes a little time for me to realize what I am," said the Mirror Girl. "I have to talk with my new friend for a while."

"Well where do you come from? What is your past? What is your goal? Who are your parents?"

"Oh, I don't care about those things. Some of them are so painful to me. I think what those around me think. That is the safest way. If I am what people want me to be, then everybody is always happy—but why am I telling you this: I don't even tell myself this!" for the Mirror Girl felt the heat from Wendy's wings, and it gave her a strange sense of boldness. "What I mean to say is that I like all sorts of people, and get along with just about everybody."

"What's so great about getting along with everybody?" asked Wendy.

"Shouldn't you get along with the people who are like you, and just be polite to the rest?"

"That could be right," she said. "Yes, that is what I think. And since you and I are alike, we should get along."

"But you don't even know me yet," said Wendy.

"But I *do* know you," said the Mirror Girl, and her voice started to *sound* like Wendy's. "I can tell everything I need to know by the sound of your voice. I can hear your mind thinking, and your heart feeling. You actually have a heart just like mine."

And the Mirror Girl didn't look so strange anymore, but she reminded Wendy of her mother. And she thought, *Well, isn't it lucky that if anybody should find their way in my secret garden, it should be such a bright beautiful girl?* So she bid the girl farewell, and slipped back home into her bed before her mother could catch her.

During school that day, she couldn't wait to return to the secret garden and talk to the Mirror Girl. And sure enough, she was still there. She was eating some apples from Wendy's Black Apple tree, and seemed happy enough.

Some of the plants were rearranged, and a few flowers were plucked and set in a pile next to the pool, but Wendy decided to ignore that for now.

"It looks like you found some food. Wait till I tell you about my day!" She read many of her ideas and poems and secrets from her Memory book. The girl drank it all in like it was milk, and praised Wendy for every smart thing she said. And Wendy thought: *nobody has praised me as well as this mirror girl. Perhaps she sees me best?*

Over the weeks, Mira altered more and more things. Wendy was sad to see that the garden was dying. What should she do? But she said nothing, lest Mira never come back.

One day, Mira said, "As I am blind, I cannot very well get my friends. But I think they should come to see my garden. So go and fetch them for me."

"What did you say?" exclaimed Wendy.

"I said I have written enough poems and planted enough trees to have something to impress my friends with. Now please, if you are my friend, go fetch them."

"Poems? What? Where?"

"Here," she said. "I wrote them from pages I tore from your memory book." Wendy inspected them, but found them to be cheap copies of her own work.

"Mira, what is all this?"

"It's my work. Don't you like it?"

"Mira, why don't you ever look at your reflection in the water?"

"What! You know I can't see. Why would I look at my reflection if I can't see? That's ridiculous!"

"No, I think you should look," said Wendy, and advanced on the girl.

Mira backed up and had the crazy look of a cornered animal. Wendy grabbed her, and pulled her to the pool, pushed her face down, and leveled Mira's face to the water.

When Mira looked, the mirrors reflected against the surface, and she saw an infinite nothingness. She screamed with horror. "No, I can't bear to look!"

"But that's what you've become: a nothing!" said Wendy. "Do not seek your worth by getting friends. Be yourself. Don't steal your worth from others."

And with that, Mira cried two silver tears, which fell into the pool. She was no longer blind.

"I can remain your friend," said Wendy, "But you can never return to my garden. Now I will take you away blindfolded."

Later, Wendy returned and fetched the silver tears from the pool. They had formed into a perfect mirror. She put it in her purse and then flew home. That night, she wrote in her book:

I, Wendy, am true to myself.

Natalie Wendy meets the man in the Tornado

One day, Wolf Boy ran through the village by daylight, and if that wasn't strange enough, he was yelling "Tornado," which seemed to mean a whole lot to the villagers, and also to Wendy's mother, Joy. They immediately began to pray and dance and cry, while Joy hid Wendy inside their house and told her to be still.

But Wendy had never seen a tornado, and didn't want to lose this opportunity. So while her mother went out to get more information, Wendy slipped out the back door, pulled her sleeves, and flew into the air. Once she was up, she saw in the distance a great black funnel reaching from the sky to the ground, like a huge finger scratching a line in the ground.

As she flew closer, she saw that it was coming straight for the village. She got close, but the winds became unwieldy and shoved her around.

So she called out to the tornado: "O great tornado, who seems to make a mess of everything: what do you want with us?"

A great hoary voice like rushing rivers spoke: "I want to own more."

"Well, you seem to be dropping what you already have!"

"I need to own everything!"

"What can I give you that you may take and leave the village in peace?" asked Wendy.

The tornado must have sensed something in Wendy's voice, something like a tireless sea, which Wendy was before she was born. And it said: "Give me what is most important to you."

"I can't very well give you my mother or my friends, and you hardly have use for wings. I have a mirror here, but I think you would shatter it to splinters!"

"Give!" it ordered.

So she flew a little closer, pulled the mirror from her bag, and handed it out in the air. But before she could pull away, the tornado had grabbed her. She was swung around and around and pulled into the tornado. She ducked and dodged, but even still, she could not avoid all the debris. She put the mirror back in her purse, lest it be broken.

In the center of the wreckage hovered a skinny man, bare-chested and wearing white frayed pants. He had long grey hair and a beard. He was looking at all the things he had collected as they spun around him.

Natalie found that if she arched her wings in the right way, she could control her spinning. Inward she went, and with a little effort she could hold in one space next to the man.

"What can you give me?" he asked.

"I have many beautiful things, but I will only give you something if you spare my village."

"Give me everything you have," he said, and the winds pulled at her purse.

"How dare you!" she exclaimed, and slapped the old man.

He looked confused for a moment. Then the entire tornado began to shake, and debris streamed all around. He yelled and shook his fists.

"If you are so proud about owning things, why don't you show me some?" asked Wendy.

The old man considered. "Very well," he said. "Here are my tables," and some tables blew into view. "And these are my rocks," and some rocks flew by, a few shiny and pretty, but most of them plain and grey. "And these are my favorite books," but the books were missing pages, and it was hard to make out the titles because they were so scratched and marred.

Like that, one by one, the tornado man showed her everything he owned.

Finally, Wendy said, "That is very impressive; you own more than anybody I have ever met. Which is your favorite book?"

"Favorite?"

"Yes, isn't there one that you read over and over again?"

"I don't read them, I own them. They belong to me."

"But what's the point of owning all these things, Torn, if you don't use them?"

"I have a hard time keeping track of all this stuff," admitted Torn.

"Then I would say that you don't own your things: they own you. Wouldn't life be better if you owned fewer things, but you enjoyed the few things better?"

"No, I must own more!"

"But why? Why do you need to own more?"

"I never really thought about that," said Torn. "Doesn't that make me the best?"

"No. I think if you own the fewest things, but use them the best, that makes you the best."

"But what about all my power? What will I use it for?"

"Use it on the few things you own, to master them," said Wendy.

"Hmm," he said. "Then I think I'll pick through what matters."

Wendy flew home pleased. The village was very proud of her, and even her mother was happy, though she punished her all the same. While Wendy was in her room, she stitched up her ripped wings which had been cut by the winds. Then she wrote down:

I, Wendy, maintain simple order in my life and value the few things I keep.

She emptied her purse of all the useless things she had collected; the rocks, sticks, and trash. She threw out everything but these things:

Needle and thread, cat-o-nine-tails whip, book of memories, mirror, and pen.

The next day, Wendy went to look at all the wreckage that the tornado left behind. She saw a silver flute.

That's odd, I would think the windy fellow would keep the flute.

So she fetched it up and put it in her purse, saying: "That's it, I don't need any more things for now. I am going to learn to use the things I have."

Wendy flew to her garden and hovered above it to make sure nobody was within earshot. Then she landed, sat down next to the looking pool, and pulled the silver flute from her purse. *It's in good shape for having been through a tornado*, she thought. *But how do I play it?*

The truth was she had never seen a flute before, and only knew of them from rumor; she certainly did not know how to play. She pressed her lips to the hole at the end and blew. No sound. She hummed into the hole. She made a humming sound, but no sound. So she kissed her lips to the other end. Still no sound. She put her fingers over the holes, holding the flute in her left hand. Nothing. She tried it in her right hand. There was the hint of a sound, like the sound of wind blowing through a crack in the window. *Good*, she thought: *that's where I start.*

But after a few hours of blowing and fingering the flute, she realized she needed a teacher.

Wendy knew that some of the boys in town could play the lyre, the drum, the violin, and other instruments. They played during the community dances, and sometimes she would hum those tunes for weeks afterwards. So while three boys were practicing in an orchard, she walked up and before they could quite finish she said loudly:

"Who taught you?"

They looked at each other.

"What?" asked the freckled fat boy, setting down his drum.

She looked at the skinny buck-toothed boy who was still playing the lyre. He stopped.

"Who taught you?"

"My older brother, before he went away, taught me the drums. His father taught him the lyre. John's father taught him the xylophone."

"Do any of them play the flute?" she asked.

"Only the beekeeper knows how to play the flute," said the lyre boy, "But he won't teach you anything. So it's true what they say? That you found a silver flute?"

"Where does this beekeeper live?"

"Nobody knows where he lives," said the boy. "We wouldn't even know he was still alive if he didn't occasionally hazard into town to sell some honey. But he's rampant rude, and can't stand children neither. But show us the flute. Here, you can hold my lyre while I try it out. I can show you the basics at least, I know that much."

"No, thank you," she said, and when he mouthed a protest, she looked at him, and he was quiet.

But then she was gone. She asked around the town. Very few people even knew the beekeeper's name. So it was true, nobody knew where he lived. Nobody wanted to know either. He was a cynical old curmudgeon who cared nothing for other people, and wasn't it strange that such a bitter old man sold something so sweet?

Natalie walked out of town, pulled her sleeves, rustled her wings, and flew back to her garden. She sat down to think. She pulled out the flute and looked at it. She considered. *Hmm, she wondered. Every problem has a solution, otherwise it wouldn't be a problem.* She was just about to write that idea down into her book, when a bee landed on a flower next to her, collecting pollen.

"Hello, what's this!" she said. But the bee was too busy collecting to notice anybody watching. Or to notice anybody following.

It wasn't easy. The bee buzzed to this flower or that flower, and then it zipped away in a blink, and Wendy zipped right after it to keep up. Then it was browsing another flower.

After the little bee had loaded as much pollen unto her legs as she could, she must have figured *it's home-time while I can still fly.* And now Wendy had to sprint her hardest, and keep that little bee in sight, even though it kept shrinking in the distance.

And then it was gone. Wendy looked around, not quite sure where she was. It was a part of the woods she had never seen from the ground. *Well now what?* she thought, but before she got to planning her next move, another bee buzzed by, and she was off again. And this time she had to jump, duck, and dive through the forest, scratch her face on a branch, bang her toe against a rock, redden her cheeks for lack of breath, and then none of that mattered because she was there.

She knew this for two reasons. First, there were bees flying everywhere. Second, something was humming the way only three thousand bees can.

Now's the time for stealth, she thought. She slipped by the bees, around a tree, and peaked through a bush. There stood a wooden shack, orderly yet sparse, with a geometrically stacked woodpile, a neatly swept doorstep, and a closed door.

I'll wait, she thought. Which wasn't easy. Just setting there anticipating! For the first fifteen minutes, fine. But then she wondered: *what is a bee hive like anyway?* And she wanted to take a look—but *not yet*, she thought. She pulled out her notebook and drew a picture of the hives. Then she flipped through.

That's funny, she thought, *some of my words are missing. But I didn't erase them or leave gaps. Here is where I talked about my plans for seeing the world. And there is where I talked about unicorns—but what's this I hear?*

It was what she had waited for: from inside the shack came a sound like the green crystals of the caterpillar girl might have made, if they were tapped with a hammer; or the sound the silver tears of the mirror girl would make, if they were carried in the wind. Not only could the beekeeper play the instrument: he was magnificent! It sounded the way maidens might sing, if they were quick enough, but clearer than that, like coins falling on a table. Wendy listened in awe.

An hour later, after the playing had finished, she decided: *That's enough for today*. So she left.

But the next day she was back. Her wild blondish hair lay in neatly combed strands. Her dress hung clean and crisp from her well-washed limbs. Her fingernails hugged to her fingertips like pale moons.

She walked to the door and knocked.

Nothing.

She waited.

Nothing.

She knocked again.

Again nothing.

Again she waited.

Then she curled up her pedicured hand and pounded on the door.

Stirring. Somebody complaining inside. Footsteps. The door swung open, and a wrinkled old man with white hair and thick eyebrows boomed:

"Who is it?!"

"I'm Wendy!" she boomed back, since booming seemed to be the theme.

"Wendy who? Why it's a snot-nosed little brat come to steal honey from me!"

Wendy looked at him.

"You've probably kicked over one of the nests and you're here to brag about it, huh?"

Wendy looked at him.

The old man looked back, since looking seemed to be the theme.

Then Wendy pulled the silver flute from behind her back and presented it to the beekeeper.

"What's this," asked the old man. "A silver flute? Probably stole it, filthy thing." He paused, turned it over in his hand, caught the sun with it, pressed the keys.

"I suppose you expect me to trade this for honey?" he asked at last.

"I expect you to teach me. Charge me what you will," she answered.

"Not interested!" he snapped, and shoved the silver flute back in her hands—but carefully. He turned around, the door crashed shut. Wendy blinked.

Then she went home.

But the next day she was back. Her blondish hair was wild. Her dress hung ruffled. Her fingernails held dirt. *But so what?* she thought. *It's first impressions that matter, and it's not like his first impressions were any better.* And this time she skipped the quiet knocking and started pounding on the door.

Stirring inside. Cursing. What must have been a wooden bowl must have been slammed on what must have been a wooden table. Footsteps. The door swung open.

"Who in the fifth rung of hell!—oh, you..." he said.

But before he could say a word more she said: "Now when I said you could charge me what you would, I didn't necessarily mean money by that. I can sew. Excellently. And my mother can sew. Even better. Whatever you want:

clothes, boots, gloves, bee-keeper outfits. Or if you hate going to town so much, I could sell your honey for you."

She stopped. He looked perplexed. Then he said, "You know, I have up near ten-thousand bees living in those hives. They like me too. I've trained them. I can tell them to sting anybody who comes by here again, like tomorrow."

"Think about it," she said. And then she turned away before he could slam any doors, and she was running through the woods, and gone.

And the next day, when she walked up to the door, it opened, not needing any pounding, and the old man said: "There is only one payment I would expect from a student, but I've given up on it long ago. Since there is no way you could afford it, you should give it up and stick with sewing."

"What payment would you like?" she asked.

"Commitment."

Wendy waited.

"Commitment and passion. Like you love the instrument. Like you need the instrument. Like you have a thousand demons roaring in your soul, and the only way to let them out is through sublime and perfect music. I'm not talking about playing a pretty dance tune for the village cretins. I'm talking music. Real music, the laughter of angels, the dancing of gods. Can you understand that?"

Wendy paused. She considered. Then she pulled out her book, turned to one of her favorite poems she had written, handed it to him. Watched.

He looked at it and then he read it. Then he sat down on the front step and read it again. Finally, he folded the book closed and handed it back to Wendy.

Wendy looked at him. He looked at her. And for the first time since she could remember, Wendy felt naked.

"Be here tomorrow at 6 a.m. sharp. If you are a second late, the door stays shut. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said.

"Good." He turned, entered the house, shut the door, and Wendy was running through the woods faster than any bee. And she shouted. And in the first clearing she barely had time to shrug her sleeves and she was flying, and she flew in a big loop and coasted on the breeze and laughed.

The next day, she was there. Early of course. She didn't knock till 6, but by then the door was open, and she entered the humble shack.

Its interior matched the exterior. There was scarcely any decor, but everything was clean and orderly, the floor swept, nothing out of place. There were pots and jars of honey on the shelves. There were stools. Two of them. The old man sat at one and pulled a flute from the shelf.

"Do you see this?" he asked. She nodded. "This is an ivory flute. It is very old and very special and you will not touch it. But you may listen to it. And now I will show you how to put a flute in tune."

So the months began. And Wendy was happy. Not that the practices were easy. Far from it. Sometimes they were downright degrading. She was told how

to blow. Then she was told again. Then she was told a third, fourth, and fifth time, and by the hundred and fifth time she was quite frustrated, but hid it well enough until she finally got it right.

Then came scales. Her rhythm was off. Here probably the town's greatest poet, if not the country's, and she can't keep a simple rhythm between seven notes. And when the rhythm was finally part way musical, then she wasn't blowing right again, and so let's start all the way over again, because if you can't get the basics right, then the whole thing will just build on bad habits, and you might as well have left that silver flute on the ground where you found it.

But she endured. And when she got really angry, the winds would pick up, the doors would rattle, the shutters would shudder -- such was the magic of that flute -- and what did that matter because it was so simple, so simple but so hard, and if she could only get it right, she would be flawless, because practice makes gods.

And that's exactly what happened.

Natalie Visits the Ill

Sometimes news spreads, however much you try to stop it. Wendy made it a point to avoid public performances. She played her flute for the beekeeper, Wolf Boy, her mother, and that was it. But soon with the people in the village it was, "Would you play your flute at the next town dance?" and "Do you have it on you? You don't have to play much, just a scale would be perfect."

At first she ignored them. But then she thought, if I play a few tunes, they will listen, like it, and the novelty will wear off, and it will be like it was before.

Only it wasn't. For when she played at the dancing ritual, the dancers swooned as if in a trance, and shouted, and stamped, and swung their arms, and now she just *had* to play at every dance.

And that wasn't the worst of it! Then there were the travelers. Not only did they persist in hearing her, after coming all that way, but then it was their friends who wanted to hear, and then *their* friends, and finally, a woman in a white dress and a white hat with a red snake sewn into it showed up at Wendy's door.

She was a nurse. She had ridden from the *Institute for the Mentally Ill*, many miles away. The nurses had discussed it and agreed: music therapy would help the patients. And when head doctor Cutsis agreed, it was decided. They would send somebody to make a request. So here she was.

"How much does it pay?" asked Wendy.

"Oh its strictly volunteer," said the nurse. "But it is very rewarding to help others who are suffering so much. And they need it."

"Can't be much of a need if they've gotten by so far without it," said Wendy. But she had never seen a crazy person, except for the Bleeding Man, so wouldn't it be interesting to see what insanity is like?

She flew out the next day. The nurse left directions, and Wendy easily found the institute. It was a building unlike any she had seen. It was made of stone, first of all: grey blocks. But more fascinating was its shape. It wrapped around in a huge spiral like the crook of a snail shell.

The entrance is probably at the outside end, she thought. And so it was. The doors were broad and covered in iron strips. She entered. Inside, a buzz of nurses hummed, like white angels fluttering about, some of them slipping through the inner doors where the patients must be. The nurse she had met greeted her.

"If you've never met a mentally ill person," she said, "Then its important to know that they can be unpredictable. Never mind what any of them say. They are mostly harmless, and if they upset you, they don't mean it. The troublemakers are locked in their rooms. I will be by your side the whole time."

In they walked. Not that anybody noticed at first. But then the sight of a girl clothed in a flame red dress turned some heads. A few of the men and women were shaking. Others played cards. A bearded man appeared to be in a passionate conversation with himself. One woman stared blankly at a blank wall.

"Alright, clients, we have a special treat. You are going to hear Wendy from the West Ridge Village play some music for us on her flute. Alright, Wendy, go ahead."

Wendy pulled forth her flute, and brought it to her lips. Before playing for any audience, she always sized up the group spirit, matched it in her music, before taking it to new heights. But this time it was difficult. This place was so weird. These people fit together in one spirit – but how? Yet it had a definite feel, she decided, so she was ready to begin.

It was a faulty beginning, obviously apropos, jumping and sporadic. It rose and rose, and then came speeding down again. But soon her melody caught its pace, lilted, eased into a pure perfect pitch, and held it. And held it. And then *jumped up excitedly*, envisioning in bold strokes the triumph of its possibility, jumping twice, taking a little step back, preparing for the attempt, and then jumping even further. The patients wavered as one, woozing with the music, breathing it in.

When she had finished, nobody applauded. There was no need. What she needed to know was tattooed on every face: they were touched.

Hmm, thought Wendy. *Maybe the nurse will let me talk with some of these people.* The nurse agreed.

"Hello," she said to a man whose eyes didn't quite look in the same direction.

"My mother finally came back for me!" he said. Then mumbled.

"No, but nice to meet you. My name is Wendy."

"Are you an angel?" asked another, and soon they were all questioning and crowding in.

She answered their questions one by one, the serious questions. They were all delighted to talk with her, but soon it was med time, and the nurses escorted patients into lines. But some went back to cards and wall staring.

So she ventured some one-on-one talk.

"So you like it here?" She asked a woman who was petting a stuffed dog.

"Its not bad," she answered. "Some of the people are really jerks. And some of the nurses are really jerks. And the doctor is the biggest jerk of all, but they are all better than my parents, who stand crowned as highest in all jerkdom."

"Why are you here?" Wendy wondered.

"Sometimes I just need to get away from the outer world. With people demanding, and pushing, and taking, and bossing you around like they own you."

"I know what you mean," said Wendy.

Then she talked with a younger boy who kept catching her eye, and looking away. She noticed he had cuts on his arms.

"And how are you?" she asked

"Fine, oh fine," he said, and whistled.

"How do you like it here?" she asked.

"Oh, its good. Food's good. Its safe, too," he said.

"And why are you here?"

"Well sometimes I get anxious and sometimes I want to hurt myself."

After talking to a few more patients, Wendy thought the patients weren't too unlike herself, only they seemed occupied with pains, and didn't seem to think all that straight.

Then the nurse asked: "Do you have enough wind for another set of patients?"

"There's more?"

"Yes," said the nurse. "These are our Area One patients. Through those doors is Area Two. What do you say?"

"Sure."

**

Area Two looked much different than Area One. First of all, the patients seemed more organized, and strangely dressed, all in blue uniforms.

Everything was cleaner, neater, and the talk hummed rather than bantered.

"Hello," the nurse said to the crowd, introduced Wendy and presented the music.

Wendy began. She tried to repeat the first performance. But this time something was different. The opening mood she easily played: calm reflection. Yet when she picked up the pace, the patients merely looked at her, mildly interested. And when she made the flute dance, flutter, and fly, they smiled a little, but that was all. And after the piece was through, they clapped politely.

Hmm, thought Wendy, I wonder what is so different with these patients?

After they returned to their activities, she met one. She noticed he was shaved, with two scars across his temples.

"Hello, I'm Wendy. How are you?"

"Good," he said. "As good as I have the right to be."

"Well good then," said Wendy. "How do you like it here?"

"Oh, it's nice. I don't really deserve the treatment Dr. Cutsis gives us."

"Oh? How does he treat you?"

"Well, he's cured me, really. I used to be a horrible sinner. I kept sinning and doing impure things. I couldn't help it: it was my nature. And the doctor said I lacked a conscience, and that I needed to feel guilt."

"Guilt?"

"Yes. If you are guilty then you know you have done wrong, and that God hates the sins you do."

"So you're better now, right? God loves you?"

"No, I'm still a sinner. I can do nothing right. But now I feel like God is acting through me, and he does the good things, and I'm just a broken vessel."

"Well, don't you ever feel the opposite of guilt?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you ever feel *pride*? I mean, you must have done something right. Aren't you proud of who you are? Don't you take the credit for anything you do?"

"No, that would be wrong. That's just a temptation, and it's wicked."

"I'm proud of myself, and I feel perfect," said Wendy.

"Oh...oh!" said the patient, "But nobody's perfect."

"You ought to feel guilty for feeling this guilt!" said Wendy.

"But don't you ever feel guilt?" asked the patient.

"Just long enough to fix my mistake," said Wendy. "Then I feel happy that I made the mistake so I could learn from it."

"Hmm. I never learn from my mistakes, because they are too wrong."

"Well, it was good to talk with you," Wendy said.

The next patient was similar: shaved head, dual scars. Only she was much more pleasant.

"What a beautiful girl you are," she said.

"Thanks," said Wendy. "You look good too."

"You are so sweet to say that," she countered. "And your music was very special. Is there anything you would like? A drink perhaps?"

"No, thanks. But aren't you a nice person!" said Wendy.

"Well, I used to be very cruel before I came here. I did such mean things. But now doctor Cutsis has made me nothing but kind. As gentle as a lamb, he says. Now isn't he the nicest man for that?"

"You mean you never say anything rude or mean?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, I do."

"But you don't mean to, of course," said the lamb.

"Yes I do. I have to shove some people away to bring others close. And sometimes I slap even the people I love. What would my kindness be without some cruelty?"

"Well, you are very sweet. I bet your cruelty is a very kind cruelty."

"It was nice meeting you," said Wendy.

She approached a third patient. "Hello!"

"Oh, hi," said the elderly woman. "It was so nice for you to come out here. It was so sad the other patients didn't like your music more. And you came so far to be here! You must be so tired from the journey. Poor dear!"

"No, I feel fine," said Wendy. "And how are you?"

"Better than some of the others," she whispered. "Some of them aren't doing very well at all. But I make it a special point to tell them that I feel for them."

"Feel what?"

"Pity."

"Pity?"

"Yes. Human suffering is so sad, but if we were all each other's nurses and mothers, then the world would be a little happier."

"It doesn't seem so bad to me," said Wendy.

"But it is. When you're young, you don't realize how much suffering is in the world. You're ignorant, like I used to be. I used to hate other people, and wish my life was as good as theirs. But then the doctor helped me to realize that my life might even be worse if I was them. So I learned the virtue of pity."

"Do you still feel its opposite? Do you envy anybody?"

"No, there is nobody to envy."

"I envy people. There are many good things in my friends, and others, and it leads me to admire them and try harder."

"You must know some special people," said the woman.

"But all people are fortunate. I can envy the best in everybody, or admire it, and show gratitude. And I can show anger too! And I can fear some things long enough to avoid them, or to approach them carefully, and I can love others. Where is this doctor Cutsis?"

"Right here," said a careful and well-measured voice behind her.

She turned around. There stood a doctor with a thin weary face, and wet, indefinite eyes of steel blue, behind small angular glasses.

"What kind of place you running here?" asked Wendy.

"Come, let me take you to the center of the hospital where I work, and we can talk."

They walked through the final set of doors. Inside: weirdness. Shelves with jars of floating animals: pig babies, frogs, eyes, legs...brains. And on the tables: men, or what used to be men. Dead. Open. Their guts and insides exposed.

"Those patients you talked to are lucky to be alive," he said. "And as weird as they might seem, they were worse in life."

"But what have you done with them? Why are they so...*cut up*?"

"What I 'did with them,' as you say, was save them. With a little cutting, yes. But what you don't know is that they all died from their sins. This device right here," he pointed to a mask from which tubes poured out, "saved them."

"What is it?"

"It gives them life, or a little bit. It gives them the breath of life, if they haven't been dead for too long. They all died here as Area One patients. I returned them to life, using the mask. I saved them, and made them better than they were. I removed the parts that killed them."

"What parts?"

"You should know that. Pride, anger, greed, cruelty, doubt, temptation-- the dark side of man's nature. His animal nature."

"What does that mean? We *need* those emotions. Why else would we have them?"

"They are leftovers from our days in the trees. We were animals for so long, it takes us a while to forget the bad parts. We are all insane. These patients are only the most obvious examples. But in everybody there is a little madness, a little uncertainty, a little animal nature. I hope to eliminate that. I hope to perfect man."

"By chopping him up? By ripping out half his heart? We need *all* our passions, like a orchard that contains all sorts of trees. Every plant has its place. If I burn, then I can jump. Why call any emotion 'bad'?"

"Because they cause so much suffering."

"And so what if they do? Is suffering that bad? Maybe suffering is good too. Maybe all of life is good. Maybe I love treating people kindly sometimes, and cruelly sometimes, sometimes getting angry, sometimes feeling gratitude, sometimes storming, sometimes relaxing. Maybe my heart is part of my whole being. Maybe we should express and perfect all of us. I for one love my passions."

"As you wish," said the doctor. "But watch out. You may find your passions will make you very sad someday."

"I welcome it," Wendy said.

"Well I am glad you came to ease the suffering of the patients. We hope you return, even if you don't approve of all we do. Our aims are not all that different."

"What's that?" Wendy asked pointing to an orange furry creature, spread out on its back, eyes closed.

"That is a tiger cub. I bring in animals from time to time, to compare brain structures, to contrast natures."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I intended to observe his behavior before I helped him. He would have been able to eat alongside a lamb after I was done with him, but he died before I could observe him. I haven't been able to revive him despite numerous attempts."

"You don't need him anymore?" she asked.

"No, the breath of life won't work."

"May I bury him? He is so beautiful there. Let me bury him."

"Its the least I can do," he said. He packed the tiger in a small box, smiled, escorted her to the nurse.

Back at her garden, Wendy had a lot to think about. She enjoyed playing for the patients, just like she enjoyed playing for her friends. It created something new in them. Yet she was so sad about the tiger cub. What horrible things did that doctor do in that center room?

She looked at the tiger. Its mouth hung open, its eyes held shut.

Hmm, she thought. Maybe...

She inhaled a deep breath, put her lips to the tiger's lips, plugged his nose with her hand, and exhaled into the tigers lungs.

Nothing. Not at first. It hung limply in her arms. But then a twitch in the legs, a wince in the brows, a flick of the tail. A deep breath. The tiger cub lived!

Wendy cooed and cuddled the cub. It purred, blinked. She rocked it like a baby. *I can keep him in my garden, she thought. And I have a pet, a pet tiger cub!*

And that's how Wendy met Rozhiar, the tiger cub.

PART 2: Natalie quests for Wisdom

Natalie Wendy Decides to Quest

Feeding the tiger proved tricky. Wendy wanted him for her garden. Her mother wouldn't approve of a tiger, the villagers tolerated Wendy's strangeness enough as it was, and what if he bit somebody? Feeding him would need to be a secret.

So she asked Wolf Boy for meat: raw, fresh, and regular. He asked no questions. He provided. In return, she taught him to read and write. And she continued with her own school lessons, with her writing, with helping her mother's sewing business, with playing the flute at town meetings and hospitals. At first it added up to too much, but later it was routine. And she was happy.

Weeks turned to months, months turned to years. Now she had all her teeth, and that wasn't all. She had hit her teenage years, and wasn't that a lot to think about? But she adjusted. She re-sewed her dress to fit her new somewhat grown up body, traded in her shoes for larger ones, kept up on her lessons, fed the tiger. She felt busy and important, but something was missing. What was it?

"The good life is the contemplative life! Without mind, life mourns." That is what he said. The stranger. He was a vagrant philosopher. He had seen big cities, he had seen small. He had been from coast to coast, and even beyond. Now he was here.

They had been disputing all day. The teachers seemed to dislike the philosopher. Everyone got around in a big circle to watch, but the onlookers couldn't really tell who was right or what it all amounted to anyway.

But Wendy had heard enough to join in. "No, the good life is in creativity, not contemplation."

The philosopher looked surprised. "Who are you?"

"Wendy. Contemplation and reason and logic only matter if you build with them."

"What will you build, things that last forever, or things that fall apart?"

"What do you mean?"

"Paintings, songs, statues, cities, books: they all rot, break down, dissolve, and forget themselves, is this right?"

"Well we remember them."

"And you will pass away too. But if you contemplate eternal truths, if you contemplate the Father in heaven, if you contemplate immortal Logic, you will share in their excellence."

"So you sit around holding still and doing nothing?" she asked.

"Not nothing. Contemplating."

Then the teachers had spent their patience, and they were back bickering with the philosopher.

She departed, and went to her garden, to think. Everything had been going along so smoothly, that she hadn't really spent much time *thinking* about things. "God the Father," he said? What's that mean? And why should things

that last a long time be greater than things that last as long as they need to? And what *does* creativity amount to? Yes, it has been a lot of fun doing all these things, but what was she going to aim for with the rest of her life? What purpose did it all have?

Such are the troubles meddlesome philosophers implant into artists.

So she swooped back into town, pushed through the crowd, cut off the teacher speaking:

"Who taught you to be wise?"

"What?" said the philosopher.

"You're supposed to be here talking something, so you must think you have something to say, so you must have studied, so you must have had teachers. Who?"

"Well the classic philosophers. The wisdom of the ancients. And my master had spoken with two of the four avatars of wisdom, so he taught me what they said."

"Who are they?" she asked.

"The unicorn, the dragon, the whale, and the sphinx."

"Thank you," and she was off.

For the truth was, she needed a little direction. Things were getting stagnant. For the first time in her life, she felt a restlessness that found no outlet in the town life.

So she packed her knapsack, called her birdcall to Wolf Boy, and early in the morning, they slipped out of town.

The Oracle in the Big City

Wendy had never left home before, not for long anyways. Sure she had hunted and explored and wandered to neighboring villages. She even visited the hospitals of the big cities, but never the capital. Wolf Boy had been there. By night, and in passing, but he had been there.

That was Wendy's first reason for bringing him. Lately, she found more and more reasons to be near Wolf Boy. *But that is life, she thought, sometimes you're happy alone, sometimes you want a friend.* Wolf Boy didn't ask too many questions. And he made even fewer requests. Which was fine with Wendy, because she drank her time by the drop, sparing nothing for idle chitchat, *although, she considered, it might be nice if Wolf Boy needed something now and again.*

Her tiger Rozhiar was fine. He preferred the fleshy black apples to fresh meat anyway—so he would manage well on his own. Momma would worry. Mothers worry on principle, whether they have a good reason to or not, even if they have to make up reasons. And so Wendy felt free to leave the village life behind her, and travel to the capital. With Wolf Boy.

Which meant, she realized, that she would have to walk. It was only polite, after all. So they followed the main road North, ducking into the woods when anybody came their way (no need getting caught so soon on the quest). But soon even that wasn't necessary, because it was now after noon, and who would care about them this far away from town?

Now her feet hurt, for she never was one for walking this kind of distance. She thought of telling Wolf Boy to stop, but when she looked over, he looked so serious and intent that it didn't really matter, sore feet or not.

That was the theory. And it held, for a while. But then her stomach grumbled, and the combined persuasion of feet and stomach were compelling.

“Wolf? How about we stop for an early dinner?”

He looked at her. He looked down the road. He looked at the sun. “OK” he said.

Wolf Boy was never much for words. And Wendy never lacked them. So she constantly baited and coached him, and sometimes just had to shut up because nobody likes pressure.

“Roast beef for you,” she said, “cheese sandwich for me.” She pulled each from her bag (she had packed a good week’s worth of food), and then removed a wineskin filled with sweet tea, along with two wooden cups, which she filled, invoked her gratitude to the Universe “I accept this wisdom from you, my love,” and sipped. It was, after all, more than a little pleasant.

“Spectacular day,” she noted.

Wolf boy grunted. Continued eating.

“You know, it looked cloudy to begin with, but now hardly a cloud to be seen.”

Wolf boy looked at the sky, put a bit of roast beef in his mouth.

“I don't know where the oracle will send us, but I hope its far, and we can be gone for a very long time. When we come back, we will be worlds' wiser.”

Silence.

“Wolf, you're too quiet. What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said. He finished his roast beef, cleaned up, drank, then added: “it will be three days by foot at your pace.”

“Ah,” she said. “Good to know.” But something was up with him, and she would be able to ferret it out if she just had a little clue. But then again, that would work itself out—meanwhile, they had the world's greatest city ahead of them.

Actually, it wasn't three days. Not three complete days. More like two and a half. By night, they found clearings, Wolf Boy made camp, they slept. Natalie found lots of time to reflect, which was refreshing.

And then they were there: buildings tall as trees, crowded thick with shops, libraries, courts, cathedrals, and in the streets people, people, people; people everywhere and of every sort: some tall, some short, some green, some red, some blue black and white. And the clothes varied just as much. Here was a dirty beggar, there were children, yelling and insulting each other, laughing and running.

What she didn't notice, at first, was Wolf Boy. His eyes were especially intent, his walk especially rigid. When she did notice, she asked: “What's wrong?” He looked at her. He looked at all the people. And she knew: Wolf Boy walked solitary paths under solitary moons, he was not one for crowds and bustle. She smiled. Smiled, and took his hand.

It was the first time she had done so, though she had thought of it once or twice, and she half expected him to pull away. But he didn't. He gripped her hand back, firmly and gently.

And then the people didn't matter so much, with the shopcads catcalling, the vendors vending, and the pedestrians pedestrianing. Wendy and Wolf Boy walked on.

The roads ran inwards, like rays of a big circle. In its center stood a great temple, with its gold circle containing a triangle pointing up, above a second triangle pointing down: *the Temple of the Two*.

In they walked. Or would have! The men in armor who stood by the door were not parishioners, but guards. One stepped in her way.

“Sacrifice or prayer?”

“Pardon, me?” she said.

“Sacrifice or prayer.”

“Directions, rather,” she said. Wolf boy said nothing, but he looked intently at the guard.

“What are you trying to find?” he asked.

“The unicorn.”

“Trinkets and dolls, Bartlemore's Idol shop, Third and Main.”

“Not a doll. The first Avatar of Wisdom.”

“Wrong city,” he said.

“That,” she said, “is why we are here. We need directions. The oracle knows the way, or so we've heard.”

“So you wish to make a third order donation.”

“No. You see, its simple, really: we wish directions--.”

“Nobody sees the oracle without a third order donation. Three hundred gold coins. The schedule's full till next week. Appointments are made at the third kiosk down that way.” He pointed.

Hmm, thought Wendy. She glanced at Wolf Boy. He shrugged. Goals tend to complicate themselves, she thought, and if it were going to be easy, wouldn't everybody do it?

They talked it out. Between them they held 55 gold coins--not much to bargain with--so the direct approach was out. Pleading wouldn't work. Begging wouldn't either. Working for money would take too long. So now what? Well maybe the oracle had to go home sometime; she wouldn't mind a chat on the way, would she? But then again, what if she held quarters in the temple?

Finally, they decided they would duck in, plead with the oracle, and maybe coax a discount from her. If she held such oracular powers, she would surely sense the nobility of Wendy's task.

So it was settled. A day to watch, plan, and prepare.

They lunched, walked, and calculated. The guards, it turned out, switched at irregular intervals--so that was no help. And every entrance held guards--so there was no weakness there. But then Wendy remembered her wings: there would be no guards on the roof; maybe she could infiltrate from above.

Which she did that very evening. With a little planning. Wolf Boy posed a diversion, guards ran to meet his obstructive howling, and Wendy slipped to the roof. A little dancing around and poking about, and she found a set of windows, all tightly closed. All, that is, except one. She entered the open window, whose room, thankfully, contained no people, but plenty of books. They tempted her a moment, for the library comprised more than she had ever seen, and with intimidating and fascinating titles--*The Eight Faces of the Goddess; You and Your Familiar; Oracular History, the First Five Centuries*;--but she turned her face from them, crept to the door, and listened.

Quietness. The day was coming to a close. The last entreaters were finishing their entreaties, and the oracle prepared to retire.

So Wendy sailed down the stairs, and just as the last entreater left, she slipped into the oracle's marble room. It contained four flowing fountains, red carpeting, and on a platform in the center, a close-eyed woman, decked in silver robes, meditating in even breaths. At her side, a silver platter of little colored dots.

"Greetings, Oracle!" said Wendy.

Two tranquil eyes surprised in her direction.

"Terrence? Terrence? Didn't I say no more after the orchard mogul?"

Voices in the distance, but nothing definite.

"Maybe you have time for one more," said Wendy. "I mean, I've only a small matter that you could answer in less than three sentences, really."

"That," said The Oracle, "is highly unlikely."

"I'm to seek wisdom from the unicorn," said Wendy. "I need no advice, only directions. I hear you know these sorts of thing."

"They sent you here with *that* for a question?" asked the Oracle.

"Terrence, what is the meaning of this? Is this a third-order payer or what? Has she been regged or what?"

"Huh?" exclaimed somebody from the distance, presumably Terrence.

"I said how can you send a fifteenth inquirer at *this* hour, without so much as an interpreter, when---ahh!" for at the moment, she had slipped over the tray of dots, fell down her stairs, and caught her balance on Wendy's arm and came to peace.

Or would have.

Because she chose that moment to oraculize.

"Natalie Rose, *vayoshee van dulong sun voi voi voisance!*" and so much more that Wendy couldn't catch. But then it was guards everywhere, and they yanked her from The Oracle, who then had only the floor tile for her next support, and four swords surrounded Wendy's throat, and after all the disorientation, Wendy realized that things might have in fact gone a bit wrong.

"Who are you!" one of the guards seemed intent on knowing. The other bent her arms behind her back; a chain appeared, and Wendy figured their little gamble had paid off as much as it could have, when suddenly the oracle commanded with a matron's authority:

"Unhand her, you brute! You hold the Voisance."

The guards all frowned their confusion.

"Come on, step aside, step aside." She walked to Wendy, took her hands. "How weird for us to meet at all, let alone under these conditions, venerable one." Then the guards realized the new parameters of the situation, and stood aside to make Wendy comfortable. In a moment, wine poured into a cup as if by itself, placed itself in her left hand; her right was still in the hand of the oracle, who led her back to the four fountains. All the others left, except for a grey old man who called himself "The Interpreter."

The Oracle bowed. Wendy bowed. The interpreter bowed.

"The Oracle apologizes for your pains," said the interpreter. "Be not wrathful, we beg."

Wendy shrugged. "Okay."

"You wish to consort with the unicorn," interpreted the interpreter, "And seek our counsel, is this not true?"

"Directions, rather, but yes." What a relief now that things were going well.

Then the oracle asked questions of which Wendy had no knowledge or real concern, about the Goddess, heaven, the history of the ancients, and the end of it all. But Wendy cut that off by insisting on the unicorn. The oracle obliged. The unicorn's earthly home was remote. They would need an escort, so Aleda the angel of the Goddess would guide them. She was told that the Unicorn was fickle about visitors, but this, The Oracle assured her, would be no problem with the Voisance. Wendy wondered what that word meant, but, in a deeper way, thought it best to leave it a mystery. This Oracle was weird and

therefore unpredictable. How would she react if she knew the mistake she had made about Wendy's identity?

Path to Upperland

Wendy dodged the pomp and ceremony the oracle had planned for her departure by insisting on leaving immediately. The oracle stocked her with gold, sumptuous foods, and Aleda.

An angel! Wendy wrinkled her nose at first sight. Blond hair down to her ankles, shimmering blue dress, sigh-soft white wings, and the look of utter innocence. *And the prerequisite stupidity for it*, thought Wendy. Aleda bowed and smiled, giving no inclination of any malice whatsoever.

But I don't like the way she looks at us, thought Wendy. She liked even less Wolf Boy's look at her. At first he smiled with great relief that Wendy had succeeded and was safe. He had been released from the guards and seemed calm. But as he met Aleda, and was told she was an angel of the Goddess, he perked up with religious seriousness and wide-eyed hope. *What's this about?* thought Wendy. But no matter. Because now they were escorted to the village edge, they were questing again, and everything had worked out so beautifully.

They hiked for the day. It was mostly silent, and Wendy wanted it that way. But soon Aleda, biting her lip, said:

"I didn't mean to make a bad impression, Vivosha. You are the child of the Goddess, I am so honored. I love the Goddess. Like more than anything. As an angel I have no business on earth to do anything but the will of the Goddess."

"Her will?" asked Wendy.

"The mysterious edicts of the AllGoddess. She speaks to me in my dreams. She tells me what the scriptures mean."

"What scriptures?" asked Wolf Boy with a bit too much excitement.

Aleda ignored Wendy's surprise. She beamed: "The canticles of the Goddess. They were given to Woman to know her creator. I have them memorized, for 'Knowledge of the Goddess breathes the Goddess, whose breath inspired the plants and the seas, and filled the lung of life,' from the 45th canticle."

"What sort of things do you actually do with your life, to please this Goddess?" asked Wendy.

"'Treat every woman as your mother, every man as your father, and love them innocently.' 'Honor the moon and her moods.' I do those always, and I listen to the priests and oracles and serve them in all things. I am the servant to all her servants."

"Pretty nice for the priests, but why do you do it?"

"Well..." frowned Aleda, "Because that's what you do. All the angels do it -and there are so few of us on earth. I will be a heavenly angel someday, and will wait on the Goddess herself, if I am counted worthy enough."

"I'd rather sew a dress on earth than serve a dress in heaven," said Wendy.

"How odd for you to say that," said Aleda. And they fell silent for a while. Wendy wondered what "Vivosha" was supposed to mean, and why this angel seemed disappointed.

"What is the Goddess like to look at?" asked Wolf Boy.

"Beautiful. Just beautiful. Like the beauty that every woman has a little of in her own way, the Goddess has all of in every way. She is the blueprint for beauty and nothing is beautiful without her."

"So you've seen her?" asked Wendy.

"No, but I know she is because--"

"You haven't even seen her?" asked Wendy.

"Not yet," smiled Aleda. "But I will."

At nightfall they dined on sweet spiced fruits and savory carrots and corns. The oracle had sent them with good stuff. When they made camp, Wendy noticed that the angel did not sleep, but stepped aside from camp, sat with folded legs, steeped her hands in ecstasy, and prayed throughout the night.

She was still at it in the morning.

"Don't you need to sleep?" wondered Wendy.

"Oh...no. Prayerful meditation is my sleep," said Aleda.

"What is it you pray?"

Aleda repeated a few hymns and prayers to her, and Wendy was surprised at their beauty.

"Who wrote them?"

"I did," smiled Aleda. "Do you like them?"

"Yes, I actually do," said Wendy, and smiled.

And so they travelled for a week. Aleda became more interested in Wolf Boy, since she worked only with women and angels at the temple. Wolf Boy was shy, but happy to talk with the angel. Wendy foraged ahead. They were off any path now, and travel was getting dangerous. The angel could fly, Wendy could fly, but Wolf Boy could not. They needed a clear path they could all walk. Wendy could only hear bits and pieces of their conversation.

"Oh you don't say!" said Aleda to Wolf Boy. Wendy looked back to see what he didn't say, and at that moment a panther decided to leap out and interrupt her.

Not that Wendy was annoyed. Terrified, rather. It was purple, with two purple tentacles like a squid's from its sides, both of which had decided Wendy would be a good thing to grab, and they hoisted her up in the air. She shrieked.

Wolf Boy was there first. He had his bow taut, and an arrow poised, but when he shot, the arrow passed through the panther effortlessly. For the panther was magically throwing its image around and making illusions. Wolf boy poised another arrow and aimed at another purple panther, which also ignored the arrow.

Now the panther was throwing images into their eyes, and neither Aleda nor Wolf Boy could see path from tree, for they were blinded. It seemed they needed a new plan if they were going to fight blind.

This panther could hide its location through illusions. Both Wendy and Wolf Boy had heard of these creatures before, but it was Aleda, who hadn't, who was the first to figure out a plan. So Aleda closed her eyes, and fanned her

wings out like Antenna. She followed the sound from Wendy, her shrieks. The shrieks were a bit pointed, since Wendy had a guess what the panther intended by all this.

Aleda's method worked. The panther couldn't escape her approach and still hold Wendy. But when the angel came close enough, the panther figured that there were no weapons on this one, just soft angel flesh, so he grabbed Aleda with his powerful purple paws, and sank his wicked claws into her flesh. The angel was bleeding, fainting from surprise, but Wendy was lucky enough to be thrown aside. At that moment Wolf Boy guessed the panther's position, and put an arrow into it. The panther didn't like that. He pulled his claws out of Aleda, and with a fierce but desperate snarl, blinded them all long enough to make an unhappy escape.

"Aleda, you saved me!" exclaimed Wendy, who wasn't hurt too badly, just ruffled up a bit.

"Of course. I am your guide," said Aleda, who also wasn't hurt too badly, if a couple inch-deep cuts didn't count as too badly.

But Wolf Boy was wise in the way of wounds, and Aleda was cleaned and bandaged, and now safe and in much pain, but grateful. They camped that night, and Wolf Boy kept vigil with silver arrow poised. Aleda promised that angels heal quickly, and it didn't matter, because they were safe. And they were all grateful for that.

Unicorn Avatar

The following week proved a little easier. Aside from two angry vipers, a harpy, a green bear, and a surly old man, they really had nothing to complain about. More to the point, Aleda really did heal quickly, as she said she would, so that by the time they got to the Unicorn's mountain, Aleda was prepared to fly.

Because really, this mountain was too much just to walk. So the two girls left Wolf Boy to camp at the base, while they packed some scraps to eat, and also Wolf Boy's wicked hand-knife (just in case), and left for the Unicorn.

"*Nobody* gets to see the Unicorn," said Aleda. "You might think, 'Oh, like that was easy and all getting a guide,' but really, the unicorn meets very few travelers, and even those who know where to go fail to see him. He shows himself only to the likely."

"The likely?" Wendy wondered.

"Yes, those likely to pass his test."

"What test?"

"Nothing you can't handle. But you will see. Come let's go."

They spiraled up the mountainside, flew high to where the air was thin, and halfway up found a crystal lake flush with ancient and flourishing plants and trees.

"This is the place," said Aleda.

They landed and Aleda guided Wendy to sit with her under a wise old oak tree which seemed to glow in the late of the day.

"Now we wait," said Aleda, "And when the unicorn decides to test us, we will be ready. Oh yeah, and we need to disrobe."

"Pardon me!" exclaimed Wendy.

"We need to be unadorned. The unicorn only comes to unadorned innocents. Fear nothing. This is a blessed woods, and no foul beast may enter." And with that, Aleda shrugged off her blue robe, and wore nothing but her long blonde hair.

Suddenly Wendy was glad Wolf Boy couldn't fly to be with them. She removed and folded her red dress and sat on her knees beside the perfect angel Aleda.

"When the sun has dipped into the underworld, he will appear," Aleda said.

They fell silent. Wendy considered the woods, which were deep with wonder. The wind ruffled the trees. The crickets bragged to each other. The evening birds sang their nighttime prayers. All was about as you would expect a unicorn's home to be: serene and easy.

"Well," said Wendy. "I wonder what Wolf Boy is up to?"

"Me too," said Aleda. "He's the very image of a Godson, isn't he? Handsome and noble. I had read stories of heroes, but I never met one." She smiled at Wendy knowingly.

Only Wendy didn't know, so she frowned. So they talked idly of the temple's inner gardens, and Wendy of her hidden garden, and both chilled a

little at the night, which was cool, but not as cool as it should have been, up in the mountain and all. Something was keeping it unnaturally warm.

Then the crickets hushed, and the wind hushed, the praying birds hushed, and even Aleda decided to notice the silence. The milky moon looked down, gently parting the clouds to see how things were going.

Something snorted! A horse-like snort, and then they saw a glowing white beast, the Unicorn, approaching on thin white antelope legs, its body dolphin sleek and flawless. His horn glowed as blue and dreamy as the angel's dress in daylight. His lion's tail perked to the left, to the right.

"Hail, visitors," said his strong unbending voice. "You wish to submit to my test and become my guests."

"We do," said Aleda.

"And you know the weight of the risk?"

"We do," said Aleda. Only Wendy didn't.

"Well then," said the Unicorn. "I will test the purity of your heart with the divinity of my horn. Whatever is impure will be rent to pieces." He stepped forward.

As he neared Aleda, she presented her chest. He dipped his horn, leveled it to her, and pressed it into her heart. *Surely she will die*, thought Wendy. But instead, her chest glowed as if a fire were inside, and the unicorn nodded out, and said:

"A pure angel, intent only on good."

Hmmm, thought Wendy, who wasn't sure exactly what the horn didn't want to find, and whether it would be as gentle upon her passionate heart, which was friend to excitement.

The unicorn bowed his horn towards her, so she exposed her heart to him, figuring whatever happens happens. But when the horn glowed blue, and her heart glowed red, and the tip was just about to press into her, suddenly the horn melted like candle-wax, and the unicorn pulled away terrified.

"Who are you, whose heart will not be touched by my horn? Speak now, and do not play tricks on a lowly Avatar!"

But Wendy had clutched her glowing heart, and the drop of melted horn had burned into her forefinger -- burned like fire!

The unicorn saw her pain, and bending forward, licked her finger. The burning cooled, but the blue mark remained.

"Did I fail the test?" asked Wendy.

"Your heart is a furnace of passion, and will never be tested by anything outside itself."

"So you will teach me?" asked Wendy.

"Whatever manner of being that you may be, I must play your game," the unicorn snorted. "Tell me what you would learn."

"I'm on a quest to discover what people should do with our lives. What should we think about? Is it all going to end, and if so, is that bad?"

"Life," said the unicorn, "is a troubling thing. Behold the clamor and clutter of man and beast, and all we need is the single light of *stillness*. What

you see as life and motion is illusion. It is like a flame that is never equal to itself, always a new fire, destroying its father and mother only to spread further and further. The flame would eat the world if it could, but instead, it will be snuffed forever."

Natalie looked at the unicorn. The unicorn looked at Natalie. Natalie looked back at the unicorn.

"That's it?" she asked. "That's what the 'Avatar of Wisdom' has to contribute to the world?"

"Not all truths are baubles for children."

"What should we do then, since we are better off dead anyway? What is this 'troubling life' you speak of? I find the troubles of life make it worthwhile. Just what should we be doing? Should we be worrying about life?"

"Rather, clear your mind of worries. Disregard your body and its impurities. Drink only water; eat only plants. Harm nothing and also, if you can, avoid being harmed. Remember to wear your silence like a pearl."

"Do nothing?"

"Pray often, and breathe correctly. Be focused only on the One Good thing, and love only that. Be gentle to all creatures. Avoid immersing yourself in the world. Do not struggle: transcend. Let your passionate heart burn only for peace. Only when you care for nothing and nobody, except for a mild benevolence for all life, will you be free of this troubled life."

"And why," asked Wendy, "Should I do any of this?"

"To bring yourself peace and joy."

"I seek no peace. And of what I have learned of joy, she doesn't hang around boring sit-and-thinks."

"My only proof is experience," said the unicorn. "I bow my head to the one idea of pure perfection, from which my horn funnels its power."

"What of creativity? What of inventing, and creative love? What of the sun and the flame of passion? What of these?"

"Those," said the unicorn, "Will worry themselves to death. Do old men toil and create? No, they rest and think. That is because they have grown wise enough to appreciate that life is found in the solitude of the mind. Whatever you would create, time would tomorrow devour. Nothing can stay, nothing abides. All is food for time."

"So what?" said Natalie. "So what if time eats what I make? My making it is joy, and that is all that matters to me. It is in the creating that I rejoice."

"Then *that* will be your wisdom to test," said the unicorn. "Perhaps one day you will meet the God of the Air, despite how promising as you are. Farewell!"

He shook his mane, the breeze curled through his beard, and like a whisper he was gone.

"But where can we find the dragon?" asked Wendy.

His voice spoke from the distance: "Follow the hawk I send, it will bring you to him. Beware his poison. He will teach you little, but what good he teaches is very good. Drink no more than a thimble of his wine. Farewell."

And silence.

The girls looked at each other.

"So did you learn what you wanted to learn?" asked Aleda.

"Actually, some things take a long time to figure out. But I have something to take home with me, and that's what every good bee wants. Let's return to Wolf Boy and tell him about the beautiful unicorn."

Dragon Avatar

Wolf Boy was impressed with the description of the unicorn, and even perked an ear when Wendy described the testing of their hearts, but what struck him most was the prediction that Natalie might meet the God of the Air.

"Why meet this person?" he asked. "We are going to meet the Four Wise Ones, and that is enough."

Wolf Boy's concern also somewhat concerned Natalie, but only somewhat, because then she was watching the hawk guide, who awaited them to pack up and follow.

Aleda, however, seemed to like the idea of Wendy meeting the Air guy, and she could even handle that one on her own, if Wendy wanted, while Aleda guided Wolf Boy home. He said nothing.

The hawk was a patient hawk. That was a good thing, because he spent most his time watching them catch up with him. Walking can be tedious.

They left the blessed mountain to travel West. A few patchy paths helped keep them steady, and they all were cheery enough, but soon the Oracle's bounty of food diminished. So they took to hunting. Wolf Boy did that. Natalie and the angel looked for vegetables. Wendy was clever enough to find fruit, knowing the sweet berries from the sour. Aleda was not so clever. She brought back a bag full of poisonous berries.

"Are they any good?" she asked.

Wendy pinched one between her thumb and blue-scarred forefinger, and tasted. Delicious! But Wolf boy confirmed that they were poisonous and wondered why they did not make Wendy vomit.

With the good stuff they had found, they ate well enough to travel. Within a week, the terrain diminished from forest to wasteland. If a dragon lived here, what did it eat? They scoured for food so they could pack extra well, considering that the path ahead looked bleak.

At nightfall, their hawk-guide slept in a crag. They camped below, and kept warm by a thin and hungry fire.

"Tell me, Wendy, what is it you wish to learn from the Wise Ones?" Aleda asked.

"I'd like to know how to best use my energy while I am alive. I want to know the best way to live."

"Well that's easy," said Aleda. "Serve the Goddess. You will be rewarded in heaven by serving her here. And she will grant you all your desires." She looked at Wolf Boy, who in turn looked at the fire.

"As you say," said Wendy. "But that is your belief, which is a little stupid. Why would the Goddess *want* to be served? Does she herself serve? Why not do well in life, do what is good, and let the judgment of the Goddess be her concern."

"Well you need to know the peace and happiness which comes of the Goddess. She fills you with joy. When I am praying and loving Her, I feel so

much more than a small winged bit of clay. I am nothing, but She fills my heart. Once you feel that, you won't need any other wisdom."

"Once you learn to do something *meaningful*, you won't need your heart to be filled with somebody else," Wendy retorted.

"Well maybe I am creative too, you know."

"Since your highest aspiration," said Wendy, "is simply adoring another, you will never be original."

She would have said more, but at that moment five emaciated wolves decided to join them. They growled, and it was a whiney, hollow growl. Wolf Boy snapped out of his daze and reached for his bow. Though as a patron of the moon-goddess he shared a spiritual brotherhood with wolves, these wolves were different: twisted and sinister. The Alpha leapt forward and bit his hand. Wendy went for her scourge, but a second wolf stood over her back pack.

A third lunged at Wendy from behind. The hawk swooped down and clawed its eyes, and Natalie rolled from under it. A fourth wolf, however, bit the hawk in its jaws and broke its wings.

Wolf Boy was wrestling with a wolf when a fifth came from behind. As it darted forward, Aleda threw herself at it, with nothing but Wolf Boy's black knife in hand. Meanwhile, Wolf Boy had kicked off his wolf and was going for his bow when the Alpha bit at his kidneys from behind. Aleda broke free from her wolf and stabbed the alpha in the neck. It screamed and spasmed, then let go. Aleda's eyes grew fierce. She grabbed a burning stick from the fire and waved it furiously. The wolves cowered at this, and seeing their leader killed,

drew back. Now Wolf Boy had his arrow and shot one into the boldest wolf. It yelped and ran away. The rest followed.

Wolf Boy collapsed. Immediately, Aleda held him, crooking his head in her arms, and cradling him in her white wings.

"Oh, darling, do not dismay! We will fix you up soon." But then she hushed, and Wolf Boy and Aleda shared what Wendy decided was a long, meaningful moment.

But they were safe for now. They must dress wounds and prepare for the morrow.

* *

The next day they were patched and ready, but they no longer had a guide: the hawk had died. They wept and buried it, Wolf Boy giving a hero's eulogy. They listened to his heartfelt poem and considered life for a while. Finally, Aleda asked:

"Should we go back to the unicorn and get another guide?" asked Aleda.

"No," said Wendy. "We're close. We just have to figure out where on this mountain to find the dragon." She looked at Wolf Boy, who could track. "What do you think?"

"These mountains reek of dragon. We could scout around, or we could wait for him to find us."

"He would find us? Why?"

"To eat."

"Ah," said Wendy. "Well that would save some time, then. We could make a fire to attract him."

"Better to surprise him in his nest. Besides, he might be asleep. Dragons sleep for weeks at a time."

"Good to know," said Wendy. "Then I think Aleda and I should fly around while you wait right here. We will see what there is to see."

So Wolf Boy, still recovering, kept camp, arrows and quiver within reach, while the girls took wing and looped up above the mountain. The mountain was a graveyard of skeletal trees, staunch weeds, and zombie bushes just barely alive. For this reason, Wendy found no trouble scouring the landscape for caves and crevices. But as simple as it appeared, they found nothing save for a dead grayish lake, a broken tooth peak, and plenty of little ridges and pockets, all too small to bother with. The mountain seemed completely solid, with no dragon sized entrance anywhere. They landed near the peak, where the air was fog and smoke.

"You didn't see anything either, did you, Aleda?"

"No," she said. "But perhaps it is further. Maybe this is the wrong mountain? Maybe we ought to ask the Goddess."

"Or maybe we should be reasonable and clever this one out ourselves. Obviously the dragon needs security if he sleeps for weeks at a time; therefore it should surprise us little that he hides so well. But he needs a large cave. Where could that be?"

Aleda decided to pray for wisdom, while Wendy decided to brainstorm. She opened her bag and retrieved her blank book, to write out her ideas. She also looked for a pen, and was surprised to see her reflection peering back at her from within the bag. She took out the mirror and looked at her deep bright eyes. The mirror reflected the sky, reflected her face, but looked like nothing in itself. Just a mirror with nothing behind it...

"The lake!" said Wendy. "The entrance to his lair must be beneath the lake. We only saw the glare of the lake, not its bottom."

They flew back to the lake, and tried to penetrate with their eyes its grey veneer. Indeed, near the Northern side, there was a dark hole. Perhaps that was it?

They returned to Wolf Boy and relayed their discovery.

"But how are we going to get in there?" asked Wendy.

"We could swim," said Aleda. "I can hold my breath for over five minutes."

"I cannot," said Wolf Boy.

"Neither can I," said Wendy.

They trekked to the lake, considering their problem along the way. The entrance appeared deep, too deep for Wendy, who was at best an average swimmer. Wolf Boy was even worse at swimming.

"Maybe I can swim in and lure the dragon out," said Aleda.

"Dangerous," said Wolf Boy, "And then we have no surprise."

"If you want to go down," said Wendy to Aleda, "maybe you can find another entrance from the inside. If you don't find anything, then you can come back and we will figure it out from there."

"I don't like the risk," said Wolf Boy. "We need another plan."

But they couldn't think of anything. So Aleda left her outer garments with Wendy, and dove into the water. Beneath the surface, she swam like she flew, with her wings working like fins. And then she was gone. They looked into the grey waters for a few moments.

Now Wendy had nothing to do but wait and wonder.

"She is brave," said Wolf Boy. Wendy nodded but said nothing.

Wendy wished she could hold her breath for five minutes. Then she thought of Aleda finding the lair and the dragon being awake. What would he do to her? Wendy imagined it. How would they get to the dragon then? It was best Aleda came back safe.

"You are brave too," said Wendy. "And you are a loyal friend to me."

Wolf Boy caught her eye, and then looked away.

"You flinched nothing at joining my quest. We could have been torn into mere memories by the Purple Panther. And those wolves were unlike your brethren whom you run with back at home."

Wolf Boy nodded, checked his bandages, and stretched his arms.

Wendy took his hand. "Of all the people on this planet, you are my favorite."

Wolf Boy looked at her. His eyes solemnly beamed into hers, and Wendy thought she detected a smile around the corners of his mouth. *And if he is smiling, then that means he likes my words*, she thought. *And if he likes my words, then he probably wants to be kissed too*. So she reached her head forward, closed her eyes, and--

"Hello!" said Aleda. "Good to see you were worried about me!"

They turned and faced a dripping wet, mud splattered, dusty haired, and none too happy angel.

"You made it!" said Wendy. "So you found an alternate entrance!"

"Yes, I did. I found an entrance for you. It was terrifying, but I did it. The dragon made no sounds, so we're safe." She stepped between Wendy and Wolf Boy. "My clothes please."

Wendy proffered the clothes.

She lead them to what turned out to be a very narrow crag behind a boulder. They had to squeeze through like bats and hold their breath, but soon all three were within the dragon's lair.

"Now leave the talking to me," said Wendy. Inside the cave hid a surprisingly well groomed nest. The walls were slick and shiny. The rocks glowed with a light of their own of placid blues and greens. Deeper inside, the cave opened into a wide and wonderful treasure room, dimly lit, with gold, paintings, tapestries, suits of armor, busts of men, and statues of beasts. A harp mysteriously played a gentle melody with nobody to pluck its strings.

Wolf Boy cocked an arrow and crouched with Aleda behind a whitewashed pillar. Wendy, however, walked directly before the dragon, clinking gold and jewels with her feet, and exclaimed, "Wake, avatar of wisdom, and speak to us."

The red dragon opened a great yellow eye, which focused intently on Wendy. It growled, and said something in dragon speech that none of them understood. With one movement, its great barbed tail swung around and trapped Wendy within a circle of dragon. It hissed and coiled its head over her. It growled again.

"As you see, I am no treasure thief. I come rather to speak of wisdom. If your wisdom must be bought with gold, we can make a deal."

The dragon considered. He looked at Wolf Boy who had an arrow aimed at one of his great yellow eyes. He laughed. Then he looked at the angel, and he breathed hungrily. He looked back at Wendy, reached with its talons, and pulled forth three gold goblets. He filled them with venom from his large viper teeth, and set them on a rock before her.

Poison, she thought. He won't talk to me unless I drink it. Yet my finger has cured poison before. Maybe that's because the unicorn horn that scarred it still has magic. She mixed the wine with her finger and took a sip. It was sweet, as the once poison berry had become sweet, and upon tasting it, her ears understood.

"Not more than a sip, little dollop, or you will die of madness," said the dragon. "And tell your friends to drink too, or I will murder them for their rudeness."

Wendy gestured them over. She gave Wolf Boy a sip from her own goblet, and his eyes opened from the wine, feeling the same rush of energy that she had felt.

"Good, good," said the dragon. "And now let the morsel drink."

But Aleda would not drink from Wendy's cup. She took her own goblet from off the rock and drank. The wine bit her mouth like fire, and she coughed. The dragon chuckled like thunder.

"A sip will open your ears and mind for a moment. A swallow will drive you mad. The full glass will kill you. You are obviously brave, but you will only get a sip of wisdom from me, weak creatures. The greatest wisdom requires the greatest strength to bear. What makes you worthy of my wisdom?"

Wendy didn't answer. Instead, she grasped the goblet with both hands, and gulped the entire thing down. She felt waves of intoxication fill her, but no poison killed her.

The dragon's eyes opened wide and he snorted. "You are either very strong or very stupid. Whichever it is, my wisdom will not live long in your heart before it brings you to death."

Wolf Boy too was wide-eyed with amazement, which did not go unnoticed by Aleda, who then took her cup, and gulped a great gulp. But her poison filled

her mouth, and she screamed in pain, as passions and madness spilled into her brain. The dragon laughed again as she wheezed.

"Aleda, no!" said Wendy. "You must drink from my cup!"

"I will not drink from your cup," she hissed. "The dragon take you and your boyfriend too. And ha ah! This gold will buy a pretty funeral. And the God and his Goddess sat on that green hill and laughed when he made man. You are only a woman. Your wings are yarn and will tear. My wings are the wings of flight and I will fly straight to heaven. Straight straight straight..."

She fell over. Wolf Boy rushed to her side, but she was up again, wild-eyed. She laughed a deep maniacal laughter. She pushed Wolf Boy down, grabbed a handful of gold and threw it at the dragon. "And you too!" she laughed. "And you too."

Then she sprinted to the entrance of the cave and was gone, with Wolf Boy after her. Wendy, however, stayed.

"Will she be alright?" she asked the dragon.

"She will never be the same," said the dragon. "And neither will you. She drank enough for some madness. But you drank enough for death. Tell me, why do you look so straight-eyed and reasonable?"

"Because I am not your average customer," said Wendy.

"So it seems. What would you know from me?"

Wendy looked back at the entrance of the cave. Perhaps her unicorn touch would cure the angel, but she could not count on leaving the dragon safely. She decided to face her situation and leave the Angel to her fate.

"What would you say is the good of life? What should we do with our life?"

"Ha ha ha," laughed the dragon. "Life? Life thrives on life. Everything you eat and take as your own is life. Ask a tree what it thinks of your axe, and he will say 'evil.' Ask the cow what he thinks of your steak knife and he will say 'evil.' So it is with men. To be complete in life is to overpower others. The weak are clever, and overpower the strong with rules and regulations. But they are too weak to enjoy life. That is religion, which promises happiness but never delivers.

"The truth is that to be happy, you must be evil." Smoke plumed from his nostrils. "Yes, evil is the name of greatness. All the lawmakers, all the originators, all the artists hated tradition, hated followers, hated everything secondary. True love is crime. True creation is destruction. You must breath fiery words at any who oppose you.

"Consider your body. You are your body. Therefore, drink wine and eat meat. Be drunk off the exhilaration of power. If you seek love, rule by love. Practice treachery if you can, and always dominate. You see these paintings and these fine statues. They are not ideal or spiritual. They are completely physical. Art is physical. All that is good is of the body. Therefore, give yourself over to desire and lust."

Natalie considered.

"So you think we ought to take what we want, when we want it, if we can?"

"Yes."

"But that is a cheap way to sell yourself," said Wendy. "It is better to make what you need, to be self-reliant and stand on your own feet. It is better to share with others, and create in all you do."

"Create if you can, but know also the power of destroying. Destroy others, destroy all that offends you. Destroy the beauty you envy. This is power."

"But surely some powers are good and some are bad," said Wendy. "It is good to be cruel sometimes, but it is more fulfilling to love others and build them up with your creativity. Why ruin anything for the sake of ruining it? Why own something that wasn't made by your own hands?"

"To exercise your power. To exercise your strength. Only flexing your muscles will give you strength. Only intoxicating your senses will fill you."

Then Wendy thought of the unicorn. "But we are happiest when we are focused on one good thing. We are happiest when we can act without worrying about others, but penetrating our heart with the horn of singular concern, and tapping a fountain there. Inner creativity and the power of making things is the highest good. Destroying and overpowering others is ugly if it does not make something greater and more beautiful."

"Child, you have not tasted the flesh of beauty, as I have. Love and intoxication are beyond you. There will come a time when you will want a man's love so strongly, you would burn any of your creations for it. There will be a time when you would destroy God and world and your very self for love.

This is the dominance of love. It wants to own, it wants to unite, it wants to destroy itself and the other for the higher good of Us together. You will know then that desire is the greatest motivator, and for that you would destroy all else."

Wendy considered all this. So this is how dragons think?

"Well thank you," said Wendy. "I should attend to my friends now. Tell me, where can I find the Whale?"

"The whale only surfaces when she wishes. You must know when she will rise, and be there. She swims in the Green Sea at this time. Seek a ship and find her."

His tail whipped away. She walked out, and once she was beyond his chamber, she ran, snaked through the crag they had come in through, and was outside.

Wolf Boy was just returning.

"Where is she? Is she alright?" asked Wendy.

"She flew away," said Wolf Boy. "She seemed unlike herself."

"Then we will camp here tonight to see if she will return. If she comes back, she can join as we go to the Green Sea, where we will seek the Great Whale."

Wolf Boy searched her face. What was he looking for? She looked away.

They made camp and retired, exhausted from the day.

Whale Avatar

Whether the unicorn's scar could cure the angel, Wendy couldn't say, because come morning there was no angel to be found. This troubled Wolf Boy more than it troubled Wendy, who figured Aleda would heal quickly like she always did, and go about her slavish life. But really, she did worry about what mischief the poisoned angel felt. They waited, though provisions were tight.

But quests were quests, and though their luck with guides had been rather lousy lately, they could guide themselves to the nearest port and set for the great wise whale.

Which they did. It was less than a week to the nearest port. Once there, Wolf Boy said he would do all the talking, which surprised Wendy. He explained that sailors were a sordid sort, and she would feel more comfortable letting him handle them.

The sailors were actually polite, by Wendy's judgment. They could even be bribed to stash a couple extra mates on board for the low price of 50 gold pieces, which was good because they didn't have any more. And all went fine for the first week at sea. But then the sailors complained about sharing food rations, and wouldn't it be nice if Wendy did a little flying trick for them, and such and such, till finally, it seemed that Wolf Boy and Wendy ought to set their own way, and leave the sailor's behind. This was Wolf Boy's idea, in fact, and they borrowed a small boat late at night, when the sailors were done drinking, and were busy snoring.

Two oars, plenty of borrowed provisions from the sailors, and a brass compass. Wolf Boy seemed very concerned about what he called "their tough position." But Wendy was more excited about a new trick she had learned. Thanks to the special effects of the goblet of dragon's blood, she could now speak to the animals. More than just dragons: gulls too. Not that the gulls had much to say.

"Two humans, and they still look pretty lively. We'd better keep by and see if they die soon," suggested one gull flying overhead to another.

"You could come down here before we die," Wendy suggested back, to which the gull nearly fell out of the sky in surprise, and then asked her, rather politely for a gull:

"How in Hades can you speak Carusha?"

"If that's gull-speak, then its because I've dined on dragon's blood," Wendy explained. "But if you regard me as more than a meal, I should like to know where I can find the Great Whale."

"Get this," said the gull to the lady gull, whom he had been trying to impress all day, "She wants to see the great whale. Here here, human, does it look like I'm flying under water to you? If I knew when every fish was coming to the surface, I'd be a little fatter, don't you think?"

"Never mind him," said the lady gull. "But no, we don't know anything about the whales. They speak in low songs. We don't know a word of it. If it helps, and you probably know this since you are so close, the whale does swim around these parts."

"Thanks, mam gull," said Wendy, and then, addressing Wolf Boy, "See? We're right on course."

"What?" said Wolf Boy, who only heard gulls squawking. "What do you mean?"

"We're close. The gulls told me so."

"We have water," said Wolf Boy. "Its dangerous drinking sea water."

"So it is," replied Wendy. "But listen, I hear a group of dolphins, laughing and calling. Just be quiet now, I'll see if I can get their attention."

Wolf Boy looked concerned. *Well he just didn't know how carefree dolphins could be*, decided Wendy. And she called out: "Hail dolphins. Come, tell us a joke or two."

"Huzzah! What a strange voice I hear--Eeh Eeh! what is that voice I hear, I say! I say!" The dolphins called back and forth. Now they were dancing around their boat, and grinning their faces out of the water, and laughing as Wendy tried to arrest their attention, and the teenager dolphin, who was always a bit of a bully, even nipped Wendy's finger.

Not on the unicorn finger! That already hurts, thought Wendy, and sucked on her finger to ease the pain. But the unicorn purity mixed with the dragon venom in her mouth, and her lungs filled completely with a glowing effervescent feeling, and she no longer felt any need to breath.

Wolf Boy, at this point, was more than concerned. He shook Wendy and said: "Are you alright! You're not even breathing. What's wrong? Did it bite you? The beast!" And he grabbed for his dagger.

"No, no," said Wendy, "Only I've learned yet another trick. I've gained so much from this quest already!"

Wolf Boy decided that it was time to have a talk about their situation, and get a few things clear anyway, but his keen ears heard a couple of oars harshing their way through the waves in the distance, and then his keen eyes were on the sailors, who had come back and sent another little boat to unborrow their own little boat. Which made Wolf Boy grab both paddles and really lay into it to hightail it out of there. But the dolphins were playing and bobbing against the boat, and he was making no progress. He raised the oar to smack a dolphin on the head, but Wendy had a better idea.

"How about you guys go play this game with that other boat?"

The dolphins considered. "Will they like it?"

"At least as much as we do," promised Wendy. "In fact, you should just knock their boat right over."

Which they did, after a little struggle and a whole lot of cursing from the sailors. The dolphins, who had decided half way through that this wasn't a game, but a matter of honor, then attacked the violent sailors, who were reaching for knives and yelling for the ship, and wasn't this all working out quite nicely when--BAM!

Cannon ball, right on top of Wendy and Wolf Boy, with all the luck of a first shot, a whistle, a screech, and the two flew up in the air, and down in the water, both unconscious, both unable to swim, both sinking in a matter that

was entirely too unplayful for the dolphins, and that was the end of Wendy and Wolf Boy.

Or would have been. But it wasn't, and for this reason: Wouldn't it be a fun game to save the boy and talking girl, asked Sheraldine, the young dolphin, and the others agreed fully, and just how do you go about saving a drowning human, wondered the bully, and figuring that out was part of the game of course, said Sheraldine, and aren't you a know-it-all wondered the bully, and shove it up your blow hole suggested Sheraldine, and so on and so forth until Wendy and Wolf Boy woke up a day later on a sandy shore some mere miles away.

They arose at the same time. Wolf Boy seemed intent on thanking the Goddess in one of his rare public displays of piety. Wendy, however, was much more to the point.

"Thank you, dolphins, for saving us."

"Our pleasure!" they sang in chorus. They had stayed by to see if they had won the game or not, and were delighted to see that they had.

"Before you take off," said Wendy, "And a little after we have brushed off this sand, eaten a little meal, warmed up by a homemade fire, and maybe even made a boat, could we continue that conversation about the great whale? I am especially interested in that matter."

"Eeh!" they called. "You don't need a boat. We can take you to where she rises and falls. But that will do you no good because she's deep deep deep and just sits and broods all day. And eats! And broods and likes her solitude, and

we aren't going to wait all day for her to come up for you, and we aren't going to go down and bother her either, because that brings quite an earful, let me tell you!"

"No need," said Wendy. "Just bring me there. I can handle it from there."

Meanwhile there was Wolf Boy to take care of. He was debating whether it was Wendy who was mad, or himself, and why were those dolphins squeaking in the bay like that, and could she really talk to them, and Wendy knew that she should ease his shocked nerves and help him out. He had proved a very good helper on this quest, but now it looked like he needed a little help.

So she sat him down. Softly. And rubbed his shoulders. Softly. And then she sang a wordless melody, and his shoulders slackened. And she smiled as he ducked to sleep. By the time he awoke, a fire burned next to him, complete with fishes burning on a stick, and a little makeshift hut. How long had he been out?

"Now, Wolfy, it is time for me to go. Eat, sleep, and be patient. The dolphins will help me find the whale. She will say her say, and we'll be on our way."

He nodded dumbly. She kissed him on the cheek. It was their first kiss, and they both burned at the touch, but then Wendy was gone into the water, wearing, apparently, just her undergarments, for her purse and red dress were drying a safe distance from the fire. And then she was gone. Wolf Boy decided

fish was a good idea, and let Wendy take care of herself, which she always seemed ready and able to do.

Wendy, meanwhile, loved the feel of riding a dolphin. Not that it was easy. Holding on was the hard part. Such slippery skin! Such muscular movements! What leaps and dives! She explained that she could breath just fine without the air, which, it turns out, was true, and the dolphins were duly impressed, because, of course, they could not.

Nevertheless, as time went on, she grew impatient with the dolphins, and began to suspect they were up to another little game. Just where were they taking her? She was too breathless to speak, and the waves and water whirled past her. All she had to do was hold on.

And then they were there. The dolphins shoaled up and circled around.

"Below, below, just below! Eeh!" they cried. "We'll take you there."

"Part way," they said.

"Half way there," they decided.

"Two thirds, and no further," they concluded.

"Three fourths, and that's final," they agreed.

"Four fifths, and not a word more," and it was actually much closer than that, and a deep ways down down down into the floor of the ocean, and now Wendy's ears were aching, and her eyes were caving in, and so dark, there wasn't anything left to see but shadows. And then they were there.

For the dolphins darted away abruptly, calling "Hello hello! Goodbye person talker! Goodbye, human talker!"

And suddenly Wendy was very alone in a very cold, very dark, very deep place. Where was she to swim to? Was this two thirds down? Was this four fifths? Where was she? Was she to swim deeper still, or forward? And she couldn't swim like a dolphin, so how far would she have to go, and would she freeze to death before she got there?

But she shrugged off these questions, which were mere trifles when she was this close. She she swam in the same direction the dolphin had been originally heading, because no matter how long it took, she would get there.

It didn't take too long. For now she saw through the dust and the krilly water an ocean bottom, and rocks. She swam forward, and discovered a huge underwater crater. In it was a big white something.

Which spoke.

"Who are you?" said the deep deep slow slow whale voice.

She swam closer. "I'm Wendy. Seeking the Avatar of Wisdom, the Whale."

"A seeker of Wisdom!" she said. "The seekers must wait for me at the surface. Never have I met a seeker at these depths. Are you a girl or are you a God?"

"Better than both: I'm Natalie Wendy, the creator."

"What strangeness one discovers in the depths!" said the Whale.

"That remains to be seen. I have some questions that perhaps you can answer."

"Then you must seek them out," said the deep sad whale voice.

"Exactly. So here I am. What should I do with my life? What is a good way to use my energy? What matters?"

The whale opened her wide mouth, drank in a wide gulp of water, and considered.

"Life," said the whale, "Is never what it seems. No matter is ever what it seems. To get to what matters, you must dare the depths. You must sink to the foundation, gather the essentials. Your mind is like an ocean, and your thoughts are like silly dolphins skipping over the waves. But the depths, the deeps, the dark parts, the hidden guilts and inner motives, these matter. Here lies enlightenment. Here lies truth."

"What kinds of truth, exactly?" asked Wendy.

"What moves you, child?"

"Creativity, to make, to come up with something new and beautiful," said Wendy.

"Why?"

"Because to be alive is to be creative."

"Why?" asked the whale.

"Because making things and inventing new things is the central will of the universe."

"And why is that?" asked the whale. "Are you assuming that to exist is good, and therefore to make exist is the highest good?"

"I never thought of that, so I doubt I assumed it," said Wendy thoughtfully.

"This is because you must think in essentials," said the Whale. "You must think about the heart of the matter, and get to the bottom."

"So I should think about the bottom of my creative ways?"

"It will help. What if you stopped making whatever it is you make? What then?"

"Then I will feel useless," said Wendy.

"Is feeling pleasure the heart of your morality?" asked the Whale.

"No, I wouldn't say that," said Wendy. "There are many ways to be happy, but happiness is just there to reward what is good. Sitting around doing nothing but feeling very happy would be bad."

"And why?" asked the Whale. "What is wrong with thinking deliberately on deep matters?"

"That," said Wendy, "Would also be creative, assuming you come to some conclusions. And if you enjoy those conclusions and communicate them, you are spreading their creativity."

The whale took a deep gulp of ocean water. "True," said the whale. "But perhaps it is not the creating that pleases, but participating in eternal truths."

"Aha!" said Wendy. "You think the innermost is eternal? Why not the most unstable? Who says the center is solid? The center is creativity. It is constantly changing."

"The deepest matters are the most dependable," said the whale. "They support the rest."

"And that is merely an assumption," said Wendy. "The dragon said that the center was body, desire, power. *Activity* is the basis of the universe, not *principle*."

She waited for the whale to gulp a meditative swallow of water, and when the whale did, Wendy thrust her self forward into her mouth.

I will get to the center of the matter yet, she thought. Cramped up in the whale, burning and slimed, she could barely hear the whale's surprise and consternation. She waited a few minutes, being completely unfree to do otherwise.

Soon, she heard the whale's innermost thoughts, bubbling like a fountain: *A child inside Leviathan and what does it mean? Am I full of God or full of nonsense? She would gather what matters merely for another play paint for her paintbrush. I am full and swollen with the sea, largest of creatures. Innermost's innermost! Does not matter constantly fall apart? How can she suggest the body is her universal? Has she no soul?*

And beneath that loud conscious thought were the inner whale songs of deeper thought:

Figure, consume, analyze. Always take more in and make it part of your body. Fullness of being: increase your wisdom.

And deeper still: *Grow, grow, enhance, become, consume, wider, fuller, deeper.*

And then Natalie listened to her own heart, and was startled to hear these words: *Create others, yes, and let others create you a little. Give yourself to love. Open your heart to another. Power is nothing without love. Love him.*

She sat in the belly of deep thought for days, until the whale vomited her out on her desert island.

Wolf Boy's jaw dropped when a whale vomited his friend, but in a way, he was losing the edge of constant surprises that haloed Wendy. So he decided to play it nonchalant.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Enlightening," she said, breathing in sweet sweet air. Her skin, by the way, had been bleached ghost white.

"Thank you, Great Whale," said Wendy. "Where can I find the sphinx?"

"The sphinx lives in the ruins of Alzora, in the plains on the West side. Beware her riddles." And then the whale was gone.

Sphinx Avatar

The sphinx was generally not hard to find. Generally in that her general location was not a mystery: the ruins of Alzora. Straight forward. Less than a week of hunting, camping, talking, and other quest type stuff. Yet when they got there among the ruins really weren't much to see. Stark white bonelike pillars encrusted in vines and creepers, all sorts of bushes and trees. But no sphinx.

Since the ruins were on a plain, there was no room for caves or nooks. Nor were any buildings much intact. Everywhere: pillars, rocks, jagged walls, pottery scraps.

Wendy discovered a clue within the remnants of an alcove: a few paintings, a few busts strewn about as if in somebody's bedroom. There were scraps of scrolls and books shuffled together into a pile. Something sentient had put them there. Had it been the sphinx? Wendy hoped so, but could see nobody.

Wolf Boy, however, had caught a trail.

"I will follow it, and will return for you. Of all the avatars, the sphinx is known for treachery. I will go first."

Wendy smirked. How could a sphinx intimidate her if a dragon ten times her size did not? But she let Wolf Boy hunt. She wanted some more time with the fragments. They read:

"...and he said 'our friendship has ended over a fish'," "The sun goes where it will and won't be spoiled," "I am looking for a man."

The fragments made no sense, as fragments often don't, but she riddled over them, intent on a clue to their owner, peering at them as intently as their owner peered at her. From the pillar. Masked in stone.

"Do you like them?" the sphinx asked.

"Who?"—asked Natalie, and then the gray pillar turned into a lion's paw pinning her left shoulder into the ground, a lion's body giving that pin weight, and a sly and impossibly beautiful woman's face breathing her queer breath unto Natalie.

"Yes," said the sphinx, "Who are you, little gible? Little human brat, hyena dog come to try the dry bones of the dead? So those pretty scrawls of writing interest you? Now I will make a pretty scrawl out of you."

"That," said Wendy, who found enough breath to speak boldly, "would be against my purpose with you. You are reputed to be an avatar of wisdom. Surely you have more wisdom than your library would suggest."

The sphinx tightened her claws, so that each razor tip pierced Wendy's shoulder and drew a pen's tip of blood.

"Why is wisdom always so intent on swallowing me up?" Wendy asked.

"Because wisdom is starved," said the Sphinx. "It hasn't enough life in its mouth." She snapped her teeth, and pulled herself from Wendy.

"You are too young to seek after wisdom. You haven't started to die yet"—lion's tail coiled into the coy of a question mark.

“I seek the aim of life, what to make of my life,” said Wendy. “I have seen the other three avatars.”

“Have you now? And you fancy yourself a disciple of the gods? There is no God—has wisdom taught you this yet? If you would learn from me, then answer one riddle, but fail and I’ll shred you like scraps of a scroll.”

“Ask,” said Wendy.

A pause. The sphinx’s tail wagged. A chuckle from her sly mouth.

“Very well,” she said. “The riddle is this:

*The needle passes through this skin,
aiming for the center,
and though she stabs again again,
still she cannot enter.*

“A moment,” Wendy said. She righted herself, brushed the dust from her dress. She had heard the standard riddles growing up in the village, but this one she had never heard. *Focus*, she instructed herself, and felt the whale’s intensity of depth press unto her.

The needle passes through this skin. A skin that cannot be entered? Surely not a literal skin, for what skin cannot be entered? And she does pass through it. So passing through must be different than entering. Maybe it passes into a wooden door but does not enter? But no, because if the needle passes through the door, it would have entered. Perhaps the skin is a letter? A skin of paper? You can pass the needle through it, but you cannot enter the letter. But how do you enter a letter anyway? What else can you enter? Maybe a drawing of a door, maybe—a painting!

“If I answer this question for you, what wisdom do you know other than to confuse your answers with your questions?”

“Child,” purred the Sphinx, “A question is always a confusion until it is answered.”

“Then I have a riddle for you: this question dies when she is fed, but doubles twice doubles when she is bled.”

“What is this?” sneered the Sphinx. “Do you intend to escape your death through questioning me—answer me my riddle.”

“The needle passes through the canvas of a painting, but does not enter it. Done. Now answer me mine.”

“To be figured out is to be murdered! What have you come to me for—wisdom for life? But only death requires wisdom. As to your question, it is no fair riddle, for you leave too many answers open. But in a word: the question mark is *desire*. Now I will tell you the wisdom of the sphinx.

“Live life by the wisdom of your whim, that will-o-wisp which flits faster than logical feet can follow. Don’t seek a purpose in life: any purpose imposed on life is death. Live free and wish nothing more than to taunt at life, to play games. Truth must be filtered through a jester’s cap.

“Don’t be like the monomaniacs who are pouring into this continent from the West. They worship a Father God, and with their crusades would take over the continent. Anything to escape themselves. Know your own soul and know that she will die. All things die. Many Gods have died already, and pass on to become better things. Can you escape it? You wish to live a wise life and you

assume this will make you happier. But mockery is the happy life. Write your own bibles. Mock, mock at man."

She stalked around Natalie, looking her over.

"Never give others what they want. Be no man's slave. Take what you take and count the world wealthier for giving it to you."

She stood in front of Wendy, lion body at rest, woman's face intent, and brought her lips close to Wendy's ears, so their cheeks were touching.

"Dance, and mock, and mix with the world. Immerse yourself in the world. But remember that happiness is in the prank. Be prankish and particular. Spit on kings and outrage priests. Only then will you have the only thing that matters:

"The only thing that matters in life is the free dancing will. Only your free spirit, unfettered by any convention and law, using convention and law for diversion, only this will make you happy and proud. All else crawls up from dark tombs."

Wendy listened on, even after the Sphinx had stopped talking. The Sphinx seemed to skate over too many ideas and sayings so that Wendy had only a flavor and feel for her wisdom, but could not formulate it. Then she realized that this too was a sort of riddle to be figured out. What was the sum of the Sphinx's message?

"So you say freedom matters more than force? That my independence is more important than what I do or why I do it? Yet my creativity seeks to better mankind, for this fulfills. To dance for the sake of dancing—fine, but that is not

all. If I were meant to be a solitary dance, then why am I born with a heart to love and share?"

"Life is for freedom," said the Sphinx.

"Rather, freedom is for life."

And then Wolf Boy's careful footsteps were heard, Natalie turned, and the sphinx turned into a second shadow to a pillar, and the interview was up.

"She did not hurt you," Wolf Boy said.

"No, not with her paws. Any other wounds I will have to lick clean with the tongue of time. But now let us return home: our journey is done."

PART 3: Natalie Learns life

A place in the village

Wendy decided that her return was marked by a surprising amount of surprise. Sure, she had expected to be missed, but when she walked into the market on her way home, the village boys did a double take, realized they had seen correctly, made the crescent of the goddess on their forehead to ward off evil, and ran screaming. The adults were hardly better. They stared in amazement.

“Something is afoot here, Wolfy,” she said.

But that she could handle. Her mother she could not. Here her own mother, who should be happy to learn of her only daughter’s success on a quest few had dreamed of, and all she could think to do was crescent herself.

“My daughter, why have you come back? Though there was no body, we buried you, according to the laws of the Goddess. Does your spirit have no rest?”

And then Wendy instantly wished she had left an explanation by way of "be back soon" note, because it wasn’t convenient to be thought dead by such a superstitious mother. So she hugged her mother and reassured her that she had not died, but gone on a quest for wisdom, and what did her mother think, that she and Wolf Boy coincidentally up and died with no bodies to show for it? Besides, they were both too young to die.

“You can die at any age,” her mother replied, and paused as if pulling forth a storm of rebuke, when instead she threw herself upon Wendy’s shoulder and cried: “I’m so glad you are alive!”

Wendy decided it best to keep quiet. She hugged her mom and couldn't help crying too, though nobody was dead, that the two had obviously gone on a quest, that it wasn't a big deal at all.

But to the town it was. Oh, it started small. Word was she had visited the four avatars. That was something. But word also was she had come back from the dead, and that was just bound to spark interest, though Wendy knew that having wisdom was a much greater feat than coming back from the dead.

So their visits started. The mothers came first, seeking advice, asking questions. What should their son aspire to be? Would their husbands get better from illness and would Wendy pray for them? Wendy didn't pray and told them so, but they took this the wrong way and began praying to her. So Wendy told them that she was just Wendy, and she would love to talk to them about their questions, but really, she needed time to be alone and play her flute. She would, however, speak once a week at the village meeting.

Which she did to great success. Soon all her ideas she had been hording in the blank book came alive to the people, and they all wanted them. Wendy at last realized what she could do with her life: teach. And for a long while after she did just that.

**

But again something was missing. And this time she was a little smarter at finding out what that was. Or rather, *who* that was: Wolf Boy.

She probably knew it for months before it hit her. As she sat in meetings with the elders, discussed the future of the village, and debated how to address rumors of the invading “Army of Jakazek,” she wished to be with Wolf Boy. Her days were so long. She wrapped her arms in gratitude around her pillow at night, at the times she used to sneak out to be with Wolf Boy. And suddenly she thought: *and what is to become of us?*

It was the 'us' that struck her. She had been so used to planning out her life, making a way to flourish in the world, that she had never thought of Wolf Boy and her as an 'us.' Did he think of them as 'us'? Well there was no sense debating it in her head if all she needed was to ask him.

“You know, Wolfy, some of the Elders have daughters my age.”

“That is true,” he said.

“I'm considered an elder now, and to be an elder, you must manage your family well—that's a criterion for Elderhood.”

When he didn't respond, she expected to see him gazing at the moon, but instead it was his eyes that were moons, and they were on her.

She blushed.

“The Wise Avatars we visited have filled me with ideas that confuse and intrigue me still, but they were silent on one point that I didn't expect them to be silent on.”

“What point?” he asked.

“On the point of love,” she said slowly and with significance, but then caught herself and said, “On what we are supposed to do with it, and whether

it improves life, or is it just a passing torch that keeps life going from generation to generation? I wouldn't say it is the purpose of life, but life wouldn't be here without it, and just what goes into love? Should you sacrifice for it like they say—and wouldn't that be a great waste? And all that wouldn't even matter when really what I really want to know is"—she looked up at him, and his somber lips didn't even flicker in smile, but he looked directly at her.

“Do you—love—me?” She breathed.

“Yes,” he said. He said it, his voice gravity, his hands river banks, and her a river of exultation as he pulled her into him, bowed his wild head, found her lips with his, and stopped her breath with a kiss.

And then the councils and the elders were far away, the avatars of whatever were far away, that nuisance philosopher was eons gone, all her poems which could never catch this—all forgotten, pushed out and disowned so that she owned only this, owned only this world of wealth, this embrace with this man, *her* man, her Wolf Boy, her Love. And her heart grew wider than the moon that night. They held each other for a long time afterwards.

Fierce Heart

Nobody was surprised. "Of course," they said, "They belong with each other. They've been friends since they were toddlers." But Wendy knew that everything seems so obvious in retrospect, and people talk too much anyway.

Not that she was much better. She talked of Wolfy constantly. Her pen was too dumb to speak her love, her hand too slow to keep up with her heart, but her mind raced.

There was talk of marriage, not least by Wendy's mother, who knew that one ought to enjoy love while she can, and also knew that life was short. But Wendy was still getting used to the idea of life and love, and knew also that it is better to take your time in these matters, for love is like a garden: you must be patient and never expect a rose bush to blossom before it is ready. Yet she felt ready for Wolf Boy. She felt ready to be beside him at every moment.

Only she couldn't. She was an elder now, in her own way. They expected her to teach, to preach, and to discuss town affairs. More still, they did not approve of Wolf Boy. Not that they said as much. Wendy had long realized that she had enemies in the village, especially among the elders, who were jealous and suspicious. *Such is life, she thought, that's how people are and why let it trouble her?* Yet now the talk was less masked, less polite.

And what was wrong with Wolf Boy? she wondered. Emera, a matriarch of fifty years, and also her friend, explained, "He is not part of our village. We

do not know his parents—if he has them. He has not said a word in town all these years, and besides he does not have friends in town.”

Hmm, thought Wendy. She had been so used to Wolf Boy’s shyness that she had just accepted it. She assumed he had friends and family somewhere, but knew how guarded he was with that. Well Wolf Boy was for her, she knew that, and she was now a village leader, and so, she concluded, she would just have to make Wolf Boy fit in.

But how? *He needs to talk more*, she thought. *And sleep during the night, at least sometimes, because then he could be up at day and meet with people. And what about town festivals? He should make an appearance. That was the glue of the town, and since they were a couple, they ought to be seen together—it was just that simple. And she would sew him some new clothing—why hadn’t she thought of this before?—and was it asking to much that he write a little more, and maybe talk back when she brought up her ideas and poetry?* And she was on such a roll of renovations for Wolf Boy that it surprised her when her mind forgot it all that night by the lake, for the first hour completely. But finally:

“Wolf Boy?”

“Yes?”

“Its like this. I want to marry you. And you want to marry me. And I am a leader in this village now, and you're family to me. So I was thinking that maybe you could sleep when I sleep, and show up to village meetings—just

once in a while, you understand. So people get used to us marrying and get used to you're being the husband to an elder. Right?"

He looked away. She counted out her breaths. Had she offended him? Had she betrayed him? Could she just unsay it and pretend nothing had happened? What was he thinking?

"I will go to the next town council," he said, "If you wish it."

"Thanks," she said. She kissed his ear.

**

And then it was measurements and cuts, and she had him suited up with her own stitching. But wouldn't he look so much more handsome if he weren't acting so awkward? It is, after all, high fashion.

Which was, incidentally, the last thing Wolf Boy wanted.

Next to last was attending the town council. They whispered of course. Some politely gossiped about him, but others didn't even care if they were overheard. But the people were even more interested in the envoys from the Capital. One was a grey man in a grey suit with a red kerchief. His partner (possibly his son) was also clad in grey. And he did not go unnoticed by Natalie.

So young, she thought. So I am not the only "child" Elder; it seems the big city has a prodigy of its own. And he was no mere token, for he did most of the talking.

"As you know, the army of Jakazek is amassing in the East. We have long been neighbors to the worshippers of Jakazek to the South. They worship

the Father God and have not mingled with our people. Nor have we imposed our laws on them or collected dues from them. They claim to share no fealty with the invading army from the East—and yet they refuse to help in protecting against them.

“A city of this size must not be ignored. Their implicit alliance with the armies of the East will give the Jaks a lever for displacing us. I say that we prepare an army and take the Moromi city to the south. Without them, the East has no chance of opposing us.”

The congregation broke into discord. First the village chief spoke, and then the Elders interrupted each other with concerns about “overreacting” and “causing a war by trying to prevent it.”

An Elder thought he had decided the matter when he said, “The Mother came before the Father. Therefore, their armies cannot defeat ours. She will not allow it.”

“And do you really believe in a literal Mother and Father?” asked the young man. “They are metaphors for Nature and Mind. They do not decide politics and wars.”

Now the council was assaulted with shouts and disputes. Dishes were slammed, men jumped to their feet.

“And what do you think?” asked the young man (his name was Jason), smiling with esteem at Wendy.

“What do I think?” she repeated.

“We’ve heard much about you, Wendy,” he continued. There are many tales about you—so many that at least some have to be true.” He winked.

“What do I think about the Goddess?” she asked. He nodded. “I think that the God and the Goddess are just the universe. I think we must prepare ourselves for war, but not declare war against our neighbors to the south.”

And now Wolf Boy surprised them all by jumping to his feet and saying to her. “But there is a Goddess!” Stifled laughter. But he was focused on her. “I have known her, I have felt her. I have talked to the Goddess.”

And now the entire hall was laughing, and a resenter of Wendy called out, “The master is challenged by her own dog.”

But before Wendy could silence them, before she could explain herself to him, he was gone. And she was right after him, except Emera pulled her back with her firm grip and whispered: “You cannot leave now. The eyes of the village are on you. You must do your duty.”

She stayed, though her heart was elsewhere. Jason asked her many questions during the meeting, and lingered afterwards to talk with her. But she looked at the people, remembered their sneers and guffaws at Wolf Boy, and realized that she was on the break of an important decision. She knew that Wolf Boy expected her to meet him at their traditional spot by the lake. She knew she would have to apologize. But she knew that this decision was larger than this, that if she really loved Wolf Boy, she had to leave this town, leave these people who revered her so. She knew already that this would be her final decision. Yet she was not ready to make it. She needed time. She needed her

garden, if only for a few hours, to clear her head. Then she would meet Wolf Boy. So she walked to her garden.

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Wolf Boy wasn't quite that patient. He waited the first hour fine. But his body was unwilling to crouch in patience. He paced. Not much help. He was out of his fine clothes, back into his regular outfit of black and grey.

And then he surprised himself and went back to town. Was she chatting with Jason still, and was that why she tarried? The townspeople had indeed seen Jason linger with her afterwards. He caught her trail, and Jason's scent accompanied hers, for a ways. But then it was hers alone. Where had she gone?

His keen nose took him past brook and briar, through field and finally through the thick of the woods. Was she meeting Jason at a rendezvous? Or why had she come into the thick of the woods alone after dark?

At last he came to a small clearing, and her scent ended. She had pulled her wings and flown. Where to? He decided to return to their meeting point. She was probably already there, and wondering where he was.

But then he heard her flute. To the South. She was playing her flute at night in the thick of the woods. He followed its sound through the dense underbrush till he came to a mountain of thorns. He circled it, and eyed through it that there was a wall behind it, and above that wall, a dim light!

Who was she playing for? What was this place? He decided to find out.

Wendy knew none of this. She had made her decision, and it hurt her. She would leave for the Western wild, and start a house with Wolf Boy. This had been his dream for years, and only his friendship to her had kept him from it. Rozhia knew that she was playing the flute angry, and as the flute was wont to do, it called forth eddies and winds, which buffeted Rozhia's whiskers.

Imagine Wendy's surprise when a thorn cut Wolf Boy crawled over the wall and leapt down into her private garden, and in instant Wendy knew that this was right, that Wolf Boy had found her in the secret garden of her decision. He didn't look happy however.

And then it was a complete blur. Rozhia cried a Tiger's fury, and suddenly the two were rolling on the ground. The tiger was a flame of claws and teeth, Wolf Boy already had his knife into her, and all Wendy could do was cry for them to stop.

If Wendy had stopped to reflect on her reaction, she would have realized that she was in the tiger's embrace, that she was bleeding and not Wolf Boy, that she was stabbed mercilessly with that perfect knife.

And then Wolf Boy had the knife in the throat of Rozhia, and not the tiger, but Wendy died. He gasped, struggled to his feet, looked at Wendy in confusion, and then he himself collapsed.

If Wendy had stopped to reflect, she would have felt her heart stop. But her mind was all Wolf Boys, and she perched him on his back.

“Wolfy, I never told you about this place. I’m so sorry. You’re going to be scarred for life because of my folly. But talk to me. Or let me talk to you. I won’t wait until you’re better, you have to know my decision. Wolfy? Open your eyes!”

But he heard nothing. Wolf Boy was dead.

The summer night was silent with the creaking of crickets, the gollup of frogs, and deep in the heart of the woods, a few villagers recognized the unworldly wailing of a lone woman.

Maze

She buried them both, each on a side of the looking pool, and planted a tree over both. She knew she would never return to this garden, but she wanted to keep Wolfy's life going somehow. She gathered her poetry, her flute, set them in her purse, and the mirror fell out. She picked it up, peered at it. It reflected only sadness. She hurled it at the looking pool, and it shattered on the stony edge. The pieces melted and slipped into the ground. She ruffled her wings and flew away.

She did not appear in the village that week, or the next. There was talk, but this was to be expected. She was off questing again for sure. Or maybe the Wolf kidnapped her.

She had not left. She mourned in her room at mother's house. Her mother turned out to be remarkably wise in the realm of mourning—which means she knew when to keep quiet. Wendy didn't eat for a full week. But then she was eating again, but still not speaking much. What was there to say? But her mother knew what to say. Her mother's husband had died, and taken her heart with him. They understood each other now in a way never before possible.

But after a few months of slowing reentering society, of doing her public duty, her mother thought the time right to insist on Wendy performing the proper burial rites for Wolf Boy. Prayers must be said, water must be spilt.

So Wendy returned to her garden, though she thought she never would again, with provisions for giving Wolf Boy a proper funeral. To her surprise, the sprouts above their tombs had grown to complete trees! Their roots had broken the looking pool wide open, and fully drained it, its bottom had become like a stairways down!

Even in the pain of the moment, Wendy was curious. What was down that stairwell? She stepped in, and down. It led down, down, down and emptied into a room, lit with glowing moss. The walls were earth and stone. As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she made out two doors, one labeled “Yes,” the other “No.” Above the doors a question written in black: DID YOU LOVE HIM?

What was this? Wendy wondered. *Had somebody built this in her garden?* She hesitated over the Yes door, wondering if this were a trap. Then she opened it and entered. She found herself in an identical room: dirt and stone walls, two doors marked “Yes” and “No,” but a different question. WOULD YOU DIE FOR HIM?

What did this mean? That she could die and bring him back to life? Or that she would die to be with him, assuming there was a heaven? Or that she would die in grief? Wendy decided the answer for all three was the same: No. She valued living on earth too much to die, even for her love. She took the No door.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT LOVE IS? The door asked. Wendy considered. Didn't everybody? Did the question mean that she must not know what love

was if she wouldn't die for him? But nobody should die for anybody else, she decided. And she knew she felt love for Wolf Boy. She chose Yes.

IS LOVE GREATER THAN CREATIVITY? Well that was simple. Love was a part of creativity, and so creativity was more important. She chose No.

WOULD YOU KILL TO BE CREATIVE? Hmm. This was getting frustrating. Where was all this leading anyway? Her first impulse was No, but then she thought, What if somebody broke my hands so I couldn't write or sew or play the flute? Wouldn't I kill him to prevent it? But what if the question means I would murder to be more creative? She chose No.

IS DUTY GREATER THAN CREATIVITY? Well this was just a form of the other question. If murder was against duty, then she had agreed that duty was more important than creativity. But that wasn't right. She only played at duty to allow more creativity. So she chose No.

IF THE GODDESS ORDERED YOU TO STOP CREATIVITY, WOULD YOU CHOOSE HELL? What a weird question? The Goddess represented creativity. This didn't make sense. But she refused to be intimidated by mere power. It had to be just. She chose Yes.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE GOD AND GODDESS? And now her heart hurt, because this was the question that had broken Wolfy's heart. Even if there were Gods and such, why would they want to be believed in? That is a primitive and superstitious assumption. Insofar as there is God, we must not believe in him. Any God worthy of respect would require her not to believe in him, but to believe in herself. She chose No.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN HEAVEN? Now her heart bucked. Where was Wolfy now, if not in heaven? But heaven was the curse on earth. She might believe in her soul's immortality, but not in heaven. She chose No. With tears.

IS LIFE WORTH LIVING IF WHAT WE CREATE AND LOVE WILL DIE?
And now she knew the answer without question. She chose Yes.

Inside, darkness, except a glowing stone guitar in the center of the room, dripping with blood and mirror tears. She looked it over. What was this? It wasn't a normal hollow guitar. It was solid, and shaped like an axe. She picked it up. It was heavy as stone and doubly cold. What did this mean?

On the back was scripted: ARIUS. That was all.

Now she was alone, cold, weeping, but she had one arrow through this grief, though she knew it folly. To bring her grief to Arius, the god of the air.

Wandering

When she left this time, she told her mother. Not only that, she told the town—had to really—because much was expected of her. And as she explained as firmly and elusively as she could manage that she had serious business elsewhere, the town council made her feel wanted and needed.

Flying would be difficult with a stone guitar—so there was that. And walking by foot would be slow and lonely (she had no companion)—so there was that too. She decided to fly, and sewed a strap for the guitar.

But where to go? There were many Gods throughout the lands, born that way or worked their way up to godhood, and all of them mortal. Some had made cults for themselves, others lived in quiet oblivion, like the butterfly goddess.

Arius wasn't a real god, Wendy was almost sure. Or at least she used to be sure. He was a demon invented by the Father Worshipers, imagined to be like God's bad son or personal enemy; he represented music, the body, the lusts, the dark side of everything positive the fatherfolk worshipped. In short, he made no sense, had no plausibility, and not only didn't exist, but probably couldn't.

But in America, which worshipped the Goddess, Arius was borrowed into the religion as the spokesman of the Goddess, the messenger God, the prankster. It was this image that Wendy had grown up with. Whatever had put the maze under her garden had meant for her to seek him out.

She headed North, figuring that since the oracle seemed such a fan of Wendy's, maybe she would help her again. Of course, Wendy would have to explain what happened to one of her angels so long ago, but maybe Aleda had recovered, and everything was good again?

Since the guitar was heavy, she stopped often. One stop proved especially picturesque: a small waterfall over some jagged hills. She unpacked some jams and bread from her bag of carrying, nibbled on it reflectively, and placidly watched the water.

That is, until a naked and wild Aleda burst forth from the water with a fish in her mouth. Wendy gawked as the angel ate the fish alive and wriggling. Wendy shrunk down, but the angel had spotted her, and laughed:

“O moomer, O silly sputter! Are you here to steal the fishes, or the grand Fish, who I’ve just gobbled? Haha!”

“So you’re still intoxicated” said Wendy.

“Nay, nay, nay. I am fine. Such epiphanies I’ve had since we’ve last spoke.” She donned a questionable looking dress, sat down. “But tell me, how’s the beau? Where is the Wolf?”

Wendy hung her head. She was amazed how quickly her mood could sink to tears. “Aleda... Aleda, he’s dead.”

“Nay, nay, nay!” laughed Aleda. “But where is he?”

“I buried him myself. He died.”

“Then he is everywhere, and you can’t have him,” but then the angel melted with sympathy. “Oh, Wendy, dear child. I hope he died well. No? Well no

matter. You loved, him, I know it. And he loved you too. But truly, he is gone, and now you are here and alone. Poor darling. Poor child.”

And now all her angel demure was pouring forth, from where Wendy had no idea, but the look of pity was so intense that Wendy felt like choking. But the dark moment passed, and Wendy suddenly sang out:

*“O my soul, sore and yet wanting more?
Will you really moan for more?
Will you really call for pity,
adding self pity and neighbors’ pity
to your wounds?
No! My bold wisdom accepts
no pity from any direction.
My strength will not beg nor grovel.
My pain is my own
and in my pride I cover my pain
and let it die in my heart.”*

And now the angel was taunting. “Oh proud one. Proud proud one! Did you kill your love? Did you eat up his heart? Or perhaps you exhausted him with your passion? Or perhaps you crossed yourself and let him hang from a tree for his love? Tell me, who was responsible for his death? Yeah? Go ahead and hit me then?”

Now Wendy roasted in fury. But the dark moment passed, and Wendy suddenly sang out:

*“Hold back, O hand,
stay your wrath
and stave your frustration,
and pour it into self-smelting,
waste not violence
on those unworthy of your roar!”*

But she sang that only after she had cornered the angel over the edge of the waterfall. Now she sat down and looked down into the mist of the water.

Aleda sat next to her.

“You know Wendy, life is a trifling thing. If you took off your dress, you could fall into this river and meet the same fate as that fish. Don’t you know that that fish is proud to have died? And you will too.”

But this dark moment passed too, and Wendy suddenly sang out:

*“Life O life,
always worth living,
always worth striving,
I will forever pledge
my breath and heart to you,
and continue till flame is spent
—never smothered.”*

But the angel at this time grabbed the guitar and flew, and now Wendy was all wings and fury after her.

The angel, in her madness, found the game too charming. She was faster than Wendy, and flew further. Wendy chased her till night fall, and then into the night, till finally, the angel was gone, and the guitar was gone, and she was without hope. And that dark moment lasted longest of all.

Theocracy

It was four days of flying in the same direction—what else could Wendy do?—till she caught up with the angel. On the hill loomed a fantastic city with tall thin pillars, and a great sky-scratching spire. Aleda, meanwhile, was amidst soldiers, in a cage, and the soldiers were inspecting the guitar.

“She is an agent of Arius. This abomination bears his name. We must not take her into the city, but must burn her immediately.” The others concurred.

This was serious. These were Jaks! Wendy flew into their midst and said:

“Release my friend. That is my guitar which she stole. She doesn’t know what it means. As for myself, I have no interest in your city.”

“Scarlet lady, you come to disturb the Mourning of Tribulation! We will not tolerate it.”

And now their arrows were cocked and intent on her flesh.

Wendy shrugged. “Let the angel go, return my guitar, and we will never cross paths aga---“ but then an arrow pierced her shoulder, and she fell.

“Lock her! Cage her!” And now they manacled her arms and wedged her into the cage. But not without a fight. Right when she seemed unconscious and ready to fall in the cage, she bucked a kick into the soldier’s face. Aleda sprang forth, and took flight. Their arrows missed and she was gone.

They slammed Wendy into the bars of the cage, and she fell over. They slammed the door. She was prisoner to the Jaks.

**

The arrow wound had merely nicked her, and since she had gone through much worse, she ignored that and listened as the soldiers talked. For all her “temptations” the soldiers decided to wagon her into the city and lock her up till the Mourning of Tribulation had finished. Wendy learned that this was a yearly day of penance in which all criminals and troublemakers were locked up (or killed in advance), and the city poured dust and filth on their head to show their contrition before God the Father, so that he might spare their city. God’s fury, evidently, focused most on those he expected the most from, namely: the Jaks, his chosen people. He was fierce with them so that they would be fierce to the world.

The priest reinforced the snippets she heard. He proved surprisingly generous and understanding, recognizing her as an elder from the North, and promised her an escort once the festivities were done. That is, until the subject of the Goddess came up.

“Of course, you believe in the Goddess because you do not know the scriptures, and the truth of the unutterable name of the Father, the only God that is God.”

“No, I don’t believe in her either,” said Wendy.

“You...don’t believe in the Goddess?” he said.

“No, I believe the Goddess is the universe as a whole. But there is no God or Goddess.”

“An atheist wearing scarlet!” he yelled. “And carrying the shrine of Arius into our city!”

And he did a lot more howling and accusing, which Wendy could handle, but then she overheard him ordering the 'demon-dress' burned, and then she had to think fast.

First, she turned her purse of carrying inside out, so that it ate itself, being magic, and nothing was left but a piece of zipper, which she bit unto it.

Quickly, the soldiers had crowded her cell. They ripped her dress completely off, so that she was naked, they sneered, and shoved her down.

Then she was alone. *You never know what the world will bring you*, she thought, mostly to coax herself, because now she was furious.

She was no less furious when she peered out her jail cell (she was on the second floor) and saw the soldiers preparing a fire to burn her dress. They also held the guitar. She cried out for them to stop, but they cursed her and laughed. The fat soldier made a show of ripping her dress to ribbons.

Then into the fire it went. At first it was as dreadful as to be expected. But then the fire started billowing like a great wind was on it. Magic burns in strange ways. The dress crackled, burned lava red, then halo yellow, and finally an earthly green—which was all very beautiful (and horrifying to Wendy)—when suddenly the dress, the fire, the colors all exploded and Wendy had to hide herself from the fireball. The soldiers were killed instantly.

Suddenly, the city was on fire. She looked back out, at the grand spires, each with a stone eye on top. In the center was the main spire: a colossal

spiral, a great pinnacle high as a cloud, with a grand eye and lightening bolts below it. All that was a pretty background to the chaos below. Soldiers shouting, the villagers gathering, fearful that God was unhappy, and had sent a forewarner of his anger. The flame was indomitable. It ate the stone buildings, the stone street, as if stone were straw.

Nobody's eyes were on Wendy.

She spit out the purse zipper, turned the purse right-side out, and pulled out the flute. It was the tornado man's flute, and contained the power of winds in it. Wendy finally felt the fury of the tornado in her. She flared her fingers of the flute, and pierced the wind with the silver daggers of music.

And now the winds were picking up, flames danced, leapt, and thousands of men and women dressed in white were pouring dirt on their faces and crying out for forgiveness.

The jail's roof shook, and then burst, with Wendy lifted from the cell, her eyes closed in the peace of sleep, the flute back in the purse, and now her voice singing the tornado song, for her heart knew it now, and the jail flew in pieces around her, flames around her, and the thousands of people below were covered in flame and stone.

Her singing stopped, and she raised her hands as if holding the sun. She centered the tornado, and the tornado burst the city apart from the heart.

Her eyes remained peacefully closed, but she hovered in the center of the tornado, naked and beautiful. Then before her, through the dust and flames, came the great eye of God, on its long mighty spiral, with thunderbolts flashing

down the stone. She opened her eyes, looked into the infinite eye, and saw through it.

At the moment her hand snapped out of the air the stone guitar. She cocked it in her hand, lifted it high above her head, and slammed it unto the grand spiral, splitting it from top to bottom. The stone screamed as she broke through the centuries of tradition, but the cry from the guitar was louder, for it had come to life in her passion, and now it was flying a power chord until the entire city shook with the finality of a bass boom, and God was dead.

The spirit of Arius flew free from the temple, into the wilderness. Wendy's feather soft foot alighted on the broken floor of the city. She walked out, surrounded by screams, moans, and flames, carrying the living guitar over her back.

Return

Arius wasn't far. She walked up to the God of the air, still naked and unconcerned, and said, "Here is your guitar."

Arius smiled, and his haloed head shook its fire red hair in amazement.

"Wendy the Woman," he said. "You have destroyed God and yet you smile so modestly. Here, wear this," and he robed her in red.

"Thank you," she said. "I came to you in grief. But I know in my heart that you cannot bring back to life the one I've lost."

"No," he said. "I cannot ease your sorrow, sweet woman. Let us rather sit together and talk and share souls, for my soul calls to you and waits for you."

For the first time throughout the whole travail, Wendy permitted herself two tears. But she said, "I do not serve you or the Goddess, and what I love is beyond your understanding. You must protect the Goddess you serve, for what she is worth. I've done my part to free you. Serve the one who owns you. Never return to this America: I am now God of it. Protect it from afar."

"Wouldn't you like to know who your true mother and father are?" asked Arius.

"Not what I was, but what I am concerns me now. Not where I came from, but where I am going is my business. Where my heart is, nothing on earth or beyond this earth can touch. Am I immortal? So be it. I've freed you. Do not approach or lay a finger on my freedom."

She left him there, with his guitar and his baffled expression, while she returned to eternity, the first and final place, the ultimate place, where she would return again and again, as a musician, as a difficult child, as a wife, as a mother, in many forms, but now in this form, to begin where she began, the Goddess of America, which she recognized with these words: "I am Ama."

