
Wendy

BY JOANNE RENAUD

ILLUSTRATED BY JOANNE RENAUD

The rain is pounding on the roof, and I'm staring at the bottle of Ambien on my coffee table. My doctor would tell me that it's too late at night to take even one pill, but more than anything, I just want to sleep. It wasn't just that I was tired—I've had insomnia most of my life, I'm used to that—but it was that I wanted to forget.

I wanted to forget him.

Only half an hour ago, I was lying on my couch with the TV on. I usually have the TV on—it often soothes me to sleep, whether it's a cop procedural or an infomercial. As usual whenever I was trying to rest, thoughts sped through my mind like out-of-control race cars. I kept thinking how our game would launch soon, and that several of the systems designers were already sleeping at the office, and that I was behind, and if I didn't get my ass in gear for the big project milestone coming up on Friday I'd be in trouble. I knew I'd feel better if I could sleep. But I could hardly ever sleep. If only I could go on vacation—if only I could get away from my dingy apartment. If only—

I must have dropped off at some point, for the next thing I knew, I was climbing up a narrow road, the sun blazing down on my unprotected head. I could tell from the familiar dry hills, scrubby pines, and chaparral that I was near the San Gabriel Mountains. I was wearing exactly what I was wearing when I lay down to sleep, which was my usual makeshift pajamas

of running shorts and a T-shirt. But I knew exactly where I was going: I was going to visit to Wendy.

I know to most people I would sound completely cracked, but my insomnia has resulted in exceptionally vivid dreams. Over and over again, I would dream about the same places, the same things, the same people, until ultimately the dreams took on a life of their own.

This hasn't always been a complete disadvantage. I do art for video games, and my active dream-life often helps my brainstorming and character design—even though right now I mainly just render textures. My mother always said I could never grow up, so I found a job where I didn't have to. It seemed to work for a while.

I grew up in Montrose, deep in the foothills of Los Angeles, where the coyotes lurk in the pristine suburban developments and snack on any wayward pets they can catch. This narrow road was not so far from my old home. I used to walk up this very path to a broken corrugated pipe that emerged from the arroyo wall. I had climbed up it a couple of times, but I could never go too far—the darkness and the skittering noises of God-knows-what freaked me out too much. I was older and braver now. Or maybe it was because the dream had inoculated me against something as trifling as a fear of spiders.

As in my other dreams, I clambered up the pipe, as limber as a child, and climbed and climbed. It was narrow, but somehow I managed to squeak through. Strangely enough, I remembered the pipe having a few extra inches for me to wriggle through the last time I ventured up it. Now, there were only millimeters between me and the metal. Despite my diet of ramen, beer, and cheese puffs over the past month, I knew I hadn't gained any weight. I had a fast metabolism and no figure to speak of. Had the pipe shrunk?

I emerged on the other side, winded. I stood up, wiping my hands on my shorts.

The wind blew my hair as I gazed around, and I almost forgot about my insomnia. I didn't know where the island was supposed to be, or why Wendy even lived here in the first place. She lived about a mile from where I was standing, in a series of caves and corridors dug into the cliffs themselves; I stood upon a path near the very summit. Beneath me, red volcanic rock plummeted dizzily into the sea below. The cliffs circled a bay, just like Santorini in the Aegean—there the sky and sea met, both a dazzling sapphire blue, like the azure eye of heaven. It was all so beautiful, it almost hurt to look at it.

I walked along the cliffside path, looking down into the caldera, and at the seagulls wheeling below me on the air currents. A gentle breeze caressed my face, and I tasted the tang of salt. If I just let myself go, I could let the wind carry me down towards the sea, and I could fly like one of those gulls. I knew I had done it in the past, when I was a little girl, and I had first dreamed of coming here. It had been very simple; but I was too tired now. If I dove off the cliffs here, I knew I would splatter my brains on the rocks below.

The sun beat against my neck unmercifully, and I could feel my skin frying. I wished I had a hat.

By the time I reached the door that led down into the caves, I felt faint. It didn't seem that long ago when I was running around here, all spastic energy, a brown-skinned little tomboy with dirty blonde hair in a bowl cut. I stepped into the shadowed stairwell and leaned against the wall for a moment, overwhelmed by the heat, and by exhaustion.

After catching my breath, I made my way down. I didn't know why I felt so uneasy. I'd feel better when I sat down and had a talk with Wendy, I told myself. No doubt it was due to my lack of sleep.

"There you are," a familiar voice called out, when I finally staggered to the bottom of the stairs. "I was wondering when you'd get here. You're usually on time."

The stairs emerged into a sandstone cave, which I knew well. The walls twisted and curved dramatically, as if they'd been made from layers of stone ribbons; and the light, bouncing off these walls, created a whole spectrum of shifting colors, all rose and lavender and amber and rust. The ribbon-walls were broken by the gnarled roots of oak and pine, which had sunk through the ceiling, and acted as furniture for the people who lived here.

My friend Wendy sat on one of these roots, and she smiled at me. Her long white hair was pinned up into a bun, and she wore the same shapeless house dress, but the glowing golden light made her look almost youthful. She might have been pushing sixty years old, but you could tell she'd once been a very pretty woman. It was all in the bone structure, as my mom was fond of saying.

I smiled back. "Hey, Wendy."

"Hello, Shay." She stood up, smoothing her faded dress. "Now, I thought hay was for horses." She sounded so gently bemused it was hard to tell if she was teasing me, or reproaching me for my lack of manners. I shrugged. Usually I'd have some kind of witty comeback, but even

in the dream, I was desperately, depressingly tired.

"I'm happy you're here—I've seen so very little of you lately. I've missed having someone to have tea with. My dear Peter..." She stared past my left shoulder and her voice faded a little, but then she forced herself to smile. "Well, neither he nor the boys are very interested in tea, and who can blame them? Boys will be boys!"

I glanced about the common room, which branched out into a maze of corridors and other rooms. A few shabbily dressed kids drifted in and out, pretty much indifferent to my presence. Occasionally one would throw a sharp glance in my direction. I'd never quite figured it out, but the boys she referred to seemed to be her charges; they lived in this cave-pueblo with the same kind of furtive wariness of teenage run-aways at a halfway house. She'd looked after me much in the same way, the first time I'd started coming here.

But even when I was little, I'd never had much to do with the other boys. I always had more to say to Wendy, which is why I guess I'd kept coming here in my dreams. For the lack of a better theory, I figured she needed someone to talk to. Besides her, I was the only other woman here, and apparently the second oldest.

"Well, I know one boy who likes tea," I said. "But he's gay."

"Gay?" I had clearly thrown her for a loop. "All the boys about here are gay—they have such merry, lighthearted spirits. Especially Peter."

Despite myself, I snorted. There she was, going on again about the mysterious Peter like he was her gold medal-winning presidential grandson. Part of me was curious as to what he was like, but it seemed I was fated never to meet him. Ships passing in the night and all that—I'd never even seen him outside. "Sure, I bet he's very gay."

She smiled a little, but her eyes were

shadowed. "It is a pity that you two have never—been properly introduced."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. You would like him, Shay. He is a delightful soul—all games and gamboling and madcap larks." She paused, giving me a mildly reproachful glance. "I'm afraid I haven't seen much of you lately. May I ask why?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've had so much to do. You know, with work and all."

Her brow creased. "Work. You are one of those modern career girls, aren't you?"

She spoke with a sweet, clueless innocence—she wasn't a bitch about it, like my mother was when she was complaining about wasting my time on "those stupid video games"—but it still set my teeth on edge. "Sure," I said. "Bills have to be paid somehow."

"I suppose. But shouldn't your husband provide—?"

She stopped, because I must have looked both disgusted and incredulous. "Oh, never mind, my dear. I have been away from your world for so long. Now, why don't you come over into the kitchen, and we can have some tea?"

Wordlessly, I followed her into the "kitchen"—it was really just a room with a few rudimentary cooking supplies, furniture that had seen better days, and various foodstuffs stored in crates. As I sat down in a battered chair, she boiled water in a blackened kettle, heated over coals. She prepared the tea by scooping several spoonfuls into her antique teapot, and pouring in the boiling water. I always got the sense from Wendy that she wished that teatime could become a full, proper ritual, with tables, tea cozies, silver trays, and the like, but she had to make do with what she had.

"I don't have any milk," she apologized. "Just sugar. I hope you don't mind. I'm so terribly sorry—"

"Don't worry, Wendy. It's no big deal."

We drank tea in silence for a few minutes. Ordinarily, I found this all soothing, but my

head was pounding. All I could think about was how tired I was, and everything I needed to do when I went back to work tomorrow. What was wrong with this picture? Here I was, thinking about my job and my inability to sleep, even in my dreams—

Wendy peered at me closely. “Is there something wrong?”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I haven’t been able to sleep lately. It’s getting pretty bad. My mom wants me to start taking Ambien.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Wendy. “Is that anything like laudanum?”

“Laudanum?” *What the hell?* I asked myself.

“Yes, my mother would take a few drops at night whenever she had trouble sleeping. My father...he could give her such a headache. My, how that bottle frightened me! It was very clearly marked ‘Poison’ with a skull and crossbones next to it—I used to imagine the most dire things would happen if I even touched it. My heavens.” She chuckled ruefully.

I knew that Wendy was old-fashioned, but at times like this, I wondered if she was senile. “Um, no,” I said. “It’s not opium, it’s.... sleeping pills.”

“Ah! So it is more like Veronal?” I had no idea what Veronal was, so I didn’t say anything. “There are so many newfangled medications nowadays. But if your doctor permits it, I cannot see the harm.”

“I think I should be okay.” I paused uncomfortably. “But Wendy—if I start taking them, I’m afraid I won’t be able to come here anymore.”

I was afraid she would ask me why, but she seemed to understand. It was entirely possible I would dream while on medication, but I doubted it would be anything like the recurring dreams produced by my un-drugged subconscious.

“Oh.” She stirred her tea. After a moment she cleared her throat. “I am sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. If it happens, it happens, right?”

“Well... one must do what one must. I am sure your mother is only looking after your best interests.”

“Yeah, sometimes she means well.” I stood up, rubbing my forehead, since by now it was throbbing. “Would you excuse me for a minute—I’m feeling a bit nauseous. I need to go back outside for some fresh air.”

I set aside my teacup and walked back out into the common area, where several dirty-faced boys looked at me sullenly. Ignoring them, I climbed back up the staircase. I was about to emerge outside, when a scrawny ten-year-old, coming down in the opposite direction, stepped in front of me.

“Excuse me,” I said. I tried to get around him, but he didn’t budge. He stared at me so intently with his beady eyes that I began to feel uncomfortable.

“You’re not from here,” he said. He had a large nose and a receding chin, which made him look like a rat. I almost expected his nose to twitch.

“No, I’m not,” I agreed. “But I used to come here a lot. I come to see Wendy.”

“We know,” said Rat-boy.

I stiffened, but continued to smile politely. “We?”

“Peter told us,” he said. “He knows everything.”

My smile froze. Peter, again, of course. I was torn between wanting to meet someone who was clearly omniscient, and wanting to avoid him. My first boyfriend in high school had been named Peter, and that was enough for me to dislike anyone with the same name. He was a spoiled wannabe punk with bleached spiky hair, a foul mouth, and a trust fund. He ran around with a bunch of younger kids, and bullied them as thoroughly as Jack did his tribe of schoolboys in *Lord of the Flies*. Perhaps Wendy thought of Peter as her golden boy, but I found it easier to picture someone like my

ex-boyfriend holding up a rotting pig's head. I smirked.

"Did I say something funny?" Rat-boy demanded.

"Uh, no, sorry. If you could let me by..."

Rat-boy pushed his head forwards. "Maybe I will. Maybe I won't. Do you have something for me?"

I stared. "What?"

"What's in your pockets?"

Something to shut him up, I hoped. I dug through my pockets. Some lint. A Starbucks receipt. Wait, here was something... A tampon? My period had just stopped yesterday...

"Let me see that!" said Rat-boy, and grabbed it. He unwrapped it like it was a candy bar, and started pulling at the string. "What is it?"

"It's a tampon," I said, inwardly cringing.

He stared at me blankly for a moment. "It's something...for girls," I added.

"A girl toy?"

I didn't know what to say, so I just nodded.

At that, he laughed—it was a high-pitched, unpleasant laugh that grated against my nerves like a metal file against glass—and he bounded down the stairs, swinging the damn tampon like a yo-yo.

I shuddered, and tried to put it out of my mind as I stepped back into the sunshine.

I felt a little refreshed now, but it was still very hot. I walked along for a little while, until I felt like collapsing. There were few trees and no springs of fresh water on the top of the cliffs. I didn't want to, but I knew I needed to go back. I should say my good-byes to Wendy. Hopefully next time when I visited her, I wouldn't feel so exhausted and irritable.

I kept telling myself that as I walked back to the caves, down the staircase, and into the common area.

And that is where I saw him. He was leaning against a tree root, surrounded by a gang of boys—and although he wasn't holding a conch

or the head of a pig on a stick, his authority was clear. He looked almost exactly like my ex-boyfriend—possibly a little younger, and definitely with less acne, but with the same colorless hair, and the same smirk. My eyes widened.

I knew who he must be...

"Peter!" I exclaimed.



He gazed at me, but there was no recognition there. As I examined him more closely, I could see the resemblance was less than what I had originally thought. His face was oval, his nose was straight, and his mouth was pretty as a girl's. He could have modeled for a statue of an angel in church, but there was something strangely feral about him. I almost expected to see pointed teeth when he smiled.

"So, you're Wendy's friend," he said. He had a boyish, almost musical voice. "I've heard about you."

"I've heard about you, too," I said.

"Of course you have." He cocked his head at me, all cool confidence. I found this a little strange, since Peter looked poorer than the poorest bum on Skid Row. One arm was akimbo, the other rested on a rope belt. He wore a ragged hoodie covered with patches, and a pair of jeans so ancient and tattered they looked as if they'd been dug up by archaeologists. His feet were bare, and encrusted with dirt. He could hardly be older than seventeen—he still had baby fat in his cheeks—but the black almond-shaped eyes that met mine were ancient and unreadable.

I began to wish that it was my ex-boyfriend there. As horrible as he was, at least he was familiar. This boy here—there was something deeply unsettling about him. There was something familiar, too. On my first trips here to the island, when I was very young, I vaguely remembered seeing a teenage boy with the same white hair, red mouth, and black eyes...

"Ratty just told me about your gift."

I could see Rat-boy practically dancing with glee. "Yes, so I did, Peter, so I did, she gave me a toy, she said it was for girls, only for girls—"

"Shut up," said Peter, and Ratty fell back, cringing. "I let you come here because Wendy wanted your company. She needed another girl to talk to. But now—"

"Now what?" I said. "What's changed?"

"You have."

Peter's gaze only flickered over me for a second, but I felt incredibly conscious of just how little I was wearing. My legs were bare, I wasn't wearing a bra, and I was so sweaty from walking in the sun that my thin t-shirt clung. I fought the urge to wrap my arms around my chest.

"You need to leave," he said, and there was a murmur of agreement among the other boys, like trees rustling in the wind.

"Shouldn't Wendy have something to say about this?" I said. I saw her in the background,

her face very white, her hand to her mouth, her eyes as wide as saucers. She looked as frozen and helpless as a child.

Peter smiled. "She does what I tell her."

"What?"

"This is my island," he said, with a chilly assurance that made my skin crawl. "I let her be the mother here. I'm her husband."

"Her husband?" I said incredulously. "What? How—"

His beautiful lips curled with contempt. "It's not what you're thinking."

"So you're a mind-reader?"

Peter's eyes narrowed. "We need a female around. But only one. For spring cleaning, you could say."

"Awesome," I snapped. "So, you and your gang have your very own maid?"

"Yes...and no."

"Well, what is it? Yes or no?"

"You seem very intent on finding out about us, Shay." He placed special emphasis on my name, lengthening the vowel as if it were some exotic word he'd never heard before. "Is there a reason you're so interested? You keep coming back here. That takes a special talent."

As he stepped towards me, his black eyes boring into mine. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

Despite myself, I stepped backwards. "No. I don't know why I keep coming here. I guess it was because Wendy needed someone to talk to—"

"That's true enough. But there's something else, isn't there?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. Even though I knew, rationally, that it was only a dream, I was beginning to get really frightened. And furious too.

"No, there isn't anything else. I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Oh you don't, do you?"

"No!" I shouted. "What is wrong with you? Why do you have to keep Wendy here? Is she your

slave? Does she have to spend the rest of her life picking up after you and your little cult followers? What makes you so goddamned special?"

"What makes me so goddamned special?" He smiled so broadly that his face seemed to split in two, with his teeth gleaming like needles. "If you're so curious, Shay, then I'll show you."

Then he stepped even closer towards me...

And he seemed to grow taller. And he changed. As his hair trailed out like pale vines, the whites, pupils, and irises of his eyes became a liquid black, and his skin took on the white papery texture of birch bark. His fingers distended into darkened tapers, like overgrown fingernails, or the wind-blasted branches of a pine. I could still see beauty in his face—his features remained delicate and symmetrical—but it was nothing like his previous appearance. As he leaned over me, I was overwhelmed with the smell of the earth, decomposing leaves, and the odor of rotting flesh. Gasping, terrified, I scrambled backwards, backing into the wall, and sliding down to the ground. Everyone else in the room faded away into nothingness, and I all I could see was the huge black eyes of this creature... Peter, if that was even his name...

I bring these boys here, he said—and his voice, whispering directly into my brain, sounded like leaves at midnight. I take them away from your world. They follow me, and only me.

"Wendy—" I croaked.

She has loved me for several lifetimes. Do you think she'll leave me now? For some ignorant girl who fancies herself her friend?

He reached his hand towards me, smiling all the while, and with those fingers touched my face lightly. It felt cold, bone-cold. I shivered.

Go back to your own home.

"I..." I gasped.

Don't come here again or I'll break the cord that joins your waking and sleeping selves. If by any chance you ever have a son... He chuckled.

Be careful where you put him. I might bring him here.

Or better yet... you'll have a daughter. Who knows? Maybe she can be my mother and my wife.

At that, he threw his head back and started to laugh. It was a strangely childish laugh, high, trilling, and abandoned—and he didn't stop. It grew louder and louder, pounding relentlessly into my ears, until I felt that my brain would split in two. And then I felt myself falling, and falling...

And all of a sudden I was there, back on my couch. The TV was still on, but there was nothing but snow.

It's just a dream, I told myself, trembling. Just a dream—

But my feet were filthy.

It's still raining, and I still can't sleep. All I can see when I close my eyes is his face. And I can still feel the cold touch of his fingers.

Unless, of course, I take a pill. But then I'll never see Wendy or Peter again.

I stare into space for a while before I make my decision.

It only takes a few minutes for the drug to start working. But as I lose consciousness, I feel a strange ache, and I wonder, distantly, what it would be like—to be his mother and his wife.

Dangerous words...
Fiction on the bleeding edge
of a black and beating heart...

Dark Valentine Magazine



Coming Spring 2010

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