

*In the forest of awaiting.*

Wendy Dunn © 1999

1

***Title:***

***In the forest of awaiting.***

Author: Wendy Dunn

The bright sun reached its noonday peak, the morning dew long gone from grass crushed beneath hoofs and feet, as the spirited stallion pranced, sporadically shaking its head, following rather than led by the reins his young rider held. Only a short time before, the man had fallen off his horse, not because he lacked riding ability but simply out of pure exhaustion. A good thing too they were friends – the dark haired rider and his coal black horse – otherwise it would have been such an easy thing for the horse to break away; leaving the man completely alone to confront the unknown.

After long hours of negotiating the leafy wood, where light wrapped around itself a green-like veil and towering, overhanging trees imprisoned the man on either side, the forest path brought him to a clearing. Overwhelmed- in this treeless place- by the power of the sun, its onslaught of brilliance forcing the man to raise his free hand to rub hard first one eye and then the other, he felt blinded, wholly assaulted by light; his throbbing head hurt more than it had done while making his way through the forest. His stomach heaved, forcing him to kneel on the ground before it rose up at him. He wondered how he possibly could go on.

As his sight began to return to normality, the young man slowly lifted his head, looking left and right, trying to make sense of this place where he found himself. While stricken with near sightlessness, he had found himself growing fearful of all the unrecognized noises around him, One noise frightened him more than any other, now he distinguished it as the sound of a heavy waterfall cascading into a deep, wide pool.

The pool overflowed from one end, forming a narrow stream, slithering its way through more woodland, which edged the other side of the clearing. He felt relieved. Since the day before yesterday, continual humming afflicted his hearing and, added to this humming, the noise from the waterfall only served to make him think his senses deranged.

Having isolated one sound, he now recognised other noises: the buzzing of nearby bees, the chirping of nesting birds, the heavy, snorting breathing of his patient steed. But what of the long-haired girl approaching him? She who moved towards him with an unhurried dancer's grace; the man found himself thinking, 'her footsteps make no sound'.

Beautiful wasn't a strong enough word to describe her. Adorned with a garland of wild flowers, her loose hair, golden red, shined so bright it appeared alight when set against the backdrop of blue, cloudless skies and the greenery of not too distant trees. Her

face was oval and pale, the young woman's skin so pure threads of veins showed clearly at temple and neck; with her countenance uplifted by eyes that were glistening orbs of deepest blue. Curved in a gentle smile- a dimple formed in each flushing cheek- her rosy mouth revealed white and perfect teeth. Wearing a green, velvet gown, the woman's laced bodice clung to her upper body before falling, in flowing drapery, from her slender hips to hint at fragile, naked feet.

There was such a line to her very form, beginning from the well shaped head, held Queen-like high on a slender neck, down to the pink, translucent nails on her toes, that spoke simply of grace and sang out loud to the glory of her young womanhood.

'I remember...' he thought. But the brief moment of remembering passed, as does the memory of a dream on sudden awaking. Leaving the young man only with the sense he floundered, twisted and turned in his struggles to break his way through to true awareness.

Seeing the woman come closer to him, the man feebly let the steed's reins fall to the ground. The horse wasted no more time, taking its freed reins as permission to graze on the lush, green grass. The stallion pulled grass from the soft ground and busily chewed, moving further and further away from his human companion. His rider, suddenly aware of this, glanced to ascertain that his horse stayed safe. When he returned his gaze to the approaching girl, he found her standing in front of him with a tenuous fingered hand outstretched.

"Come," she said. "You are thirsty. Come and drink."

Without ado, she helped the man up from his kneeling position and took him through the foot-sucking sedge to the harder ground at the side of pond, gently assisting him to sit on one of the rocks bordering its closest side. Then she stood behind him, with her hands lightly resting on his shoulders, making no attempt to give him some of the nearby water to moisten his dry mouth.

The man felt another moment of utter confusion, and tried to glance, around the body of the girl, back at the way he had come – the trees so far away, blurring as he looked. The girl squeezed his shoulders, giving him a slight though gentle forward push. Suddenly concerned for his balance, the man spun around to look forward and down at the pool of water. In an instant, the man forgot the importance of his backward glance,

importance he now never needed to fathom, and found his upper body leaning even further towards the water.

He thought, 'the pool is so beautifully clear. Not only can I see the girl and myself as if I held a huge mirror before us, but there is something here I cannot grasp. It's like the body of water is enchanted; a huge, rippling mirror that draws from me and gives me back something I have yet to fully understand. My ears have finally stopped the dreadful humming. I felt weary and sore, now it is as if my body is no more. Likewise, I felt dying of thirst yet that need too is quenched.'

He gazed into the shining, clear water, staring at his reflection and that of the red haired girl. It was as though the rippling water, sparkling with brilliant sunlight, began to turn their reflections into something other than two human forms until it was that the water simply shone with stars.

\* \* \*

The young woman sat by the hospital bed, all her attention closely focused on the shallow fall and rise of her husband's chest. For three long, terrible days she had watched her husband's struggle to fight death become weaker. Three long days – time enough for this small room to evolve into a world closed in- all else shut out. Three long days... time enough for the woman to lift her gaze to death.

They said it wouldn't be very much longer- even less time now. Only moments ago, the medical staff switched the life support machine off. She touched his hand and then took it up quickly, beginning to rub. He felt so very, very cold. If it weren't for the rising and falling of his chest and the occasional jerk of his fingers, she would think him finally gone.

Strange how she now came to some sort of heart-aching acceptance.

When the woman first arrived here, after being told of her husband's car accident, she railed at him, crying out, "don't you dare let go! Fight, my love, please, please fight. You must fight for me." Yes- just for her- the man must fight even death.

She refused to listen to the medical staff when they told her it would be best for nature to take its final, relentless course. More than any thing else, she wanted to keep her face turned away, away from those horrible, horrible facts. Facts telling of a reality that she never thought to contemplate- a reality that gave her such little hope, offering no way for him to surmount his injuries, or return to her.

Even on the second day, wiping away a flow of blood seeping from his ears, she lay her cheek against his and implored, whispering, “please don’t leave me, darling. I don’t want to be alone. My love. My love. How can I live my life without you?”

But on this last day all hope died. She understood his injuries were such it would be only a cruelty for him to live. She could no longer abide his body being tortured and know his spirit was clipped and flightless. Unable to speak, she nodded when they asked again to turn off the machine giving his body illusion of life.

She lay her head on his chest, her ponytail snaking in a red spiral, and stayed there without moving, dry-eyed, listening to the weak, irregular drumming of his heart, thinking of their time together, of every joy and heartbreak. And the woman told him that it was all right for him to go – death simply cannot be the end.