Summary

Be careful what you wish for. A playful toss of a coin pulls Wendy and Dipper a lot deeper in their relationship than they meant to go. . . .

Notes

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A Mirror of Desire

By William Easley

(June 2014)

Chapter 1: Moon Trap

When the Mystery Twins (junior edition) had first arrived in Gravity Falls for their third summer there, Dipper had settled back into his routine of a pre-breakfast distance run pretty easily—
especially with Wendy Corduroy as his running companion and coach.

Some days they ran downtown—between seven and eight in the morning, they always had very little traffic to contend with—and other times they ran what they called their nature trail, past the Bottomless Pit and then the bonfire glade, through gentle rolling meadows (once heavily wooded, but a forest fire some years back had cleared the trees, Grunkle Stan said) past bushy red-currant plants with their cascades of red flowers and tall grass dotted with violets—both violet and a yellow variety—and other wildflowers, out to Moon Trap Pond, nearly three miles from the Shack, around the pond, and then back home.

"Why's it called Moon Trap Pond?" Dipper asked on one Tuesday morning in June as they topped a hill and in the broad valley ahead the pond came into view, still and blue.

"Mm-oh," Wendy replied. Dipper suspected she had picked up that form of "I don't know" from Mabel.

"No legends or anything?" Dipper asked as they ran downhill toward the waiting quiet water.

"None that I know about, man. Looks sort of funny, though, doesn't it? I mean, not pond shaped at all. More like a great big round mirror. Just about a perfect circle."

"Want to go over and have a closer look?" Dipper asked. They usually did a wide turn around the pond for the sake of adding distance to their run.

"Sure, if you want to."

Deer and perhaps elk, along with the inevitable cottontails and jackrabbits, kept the grass right around the pond nibbled so close it almost looked mowed. A pair of wood ducks, drake and hen, leaped to their feet—well, it was only a two-inch leap for creatures with such short legs, but still—and then took to the sky in alarm at their approach, the male quacking, the female seeming to taunt the human couple by calling them "Weeeeeeak! Weeeeeeak!"

Dipper and Wendy paid little attention, and in moments the ducks had flown out of sight. The teens jogged up to the edge of the pond, and Dipper began to feel the goose-flesh prickle on his arms and neck. Even from up close, Moon Trap Pond did look perfectly circular—and perfectly calm. It wouldn't take very much to persuade him that what lay before him wasn't a body of water at all, but a huge mirror reflecting the clear blue sky.

"Must be, like, a spring feeding it," Wendy said. "Funny that there's no little creek running out of it, though. Most springs have outlets."

Dipper shaded his eyes, but he still couldn't penetrate the mirror-like surface of the water. "Wonder if there are any fish in there."

Wendy shrugged. "Probably, dude. They're, like, everywhere. I mean, me and Dad and my brothers have been at these wild campsites where there's like a small creek running over rocks or something? And nine times out of ten, Dad can go catch trout in those skimpy little trickles. 'Course he doesn't use a rod 'n reel. He just intimidates them until they give up and come out with their fins up."

Dipper stretched, working out a minor stitch in his side. "OK to walk for a little way?"

"Sure, dude. Tell the truth, I think you're in pretty great condition now, after a year of this routine. Tomorrow's our next day off, though, so we'll do like a round of the pond just strolling, then run the rest of the way so's not to break training. Deal?"
"Deal," Dipper said. He looked around for a pebble to toss in the pool, but couldn't find one. The centuries of forest growth, and maybe the ashes of the old forest fire, had buried any stones deep beneath the surface. "I wonder if that shape's natural. I mean, I don't think anybody would really come all the way out here and dig a pond or anything, but it's so circular! I guess it might be a sinkhole that filled up with rainwater, or a small meteorite crater—"

He broke off and gave Wendy a quick, guilty look. "I shouldn't have said that. Sorry."

With a sigh and a shake of her head, Wendy replied, "Dip, man, don't obsess over upsetting me when you got back from the crater! I already told you and told you I understand you weren't exactly in your right mind when you yelled at me."

"I still feel bad," he admitted.

Wendy had fumbled in her shorts pocket. "Hey, lookie here. I found a penny. Wanna toss this in?"

Dipper realized she was trying to tease him out of his bad mood, and to a degree it worked. "You do it. And make a wish," he suggested with a grin.

"Might as well! Gravity Falls, man, you never can tell!" She stopped and thought a minute. "OK, I wish that me an' Dipper will get so close that nobody can separate us! How's that?" She tossed the penny in a high arc, and it fell tumbling, flashing copper circles until it plunked far out into the pond.

The water accepted it.

"There you go! Boosh!" Wendy said. "Didn't see any fish jumping, though."

"Me either. Maybe there aren't any."

"I see a frog up ahead there," Wendy said, and the brown frog, speckled with darker brown and peppered with black spots, made a sudden leap into the pond, landing with a gloop!

"Columbia spotted frog. Well, where there's a frog, there's a fish," Dipper told her.

"Weird thing to say, dude."

With a shrug, he said, "Sometimes I have weird thoughts."

They picked up their pace, jogged and then broke into a full run, and headed back to the Shack. They both took quick showers, Dipper upstairs, Wendy in the guest bathroom near Mabel's room and then they dressed and met in the dining room for breakfast. "Hiya, dawgs," Soos said cheerfully from his seat at the table. He was feeding Little Soos oatmeal with banana cut into tiny baby-sized bites in it, and the six-month-old gobbled down cereal and fruit with eager nom-nom sounds.

"He's hanging around Mabel too much," Dipper said, laughing. "Anybody else up?"

Soos was doing the airplane coming in for a landing bit, and the hangar nearly nipped his fingers. "Well, Melody's driving Abuelita into Hirschville for an appointment with her podiatrist, and Mabel's sleepin' in, so for breakfast it's just, like, us."

"OK for me an' Dip to cook up some breakfast?" Wendy asked.

Soos laughed. "Do you even have to ask? Sure thing, Wendy! Make me some too, OK?"

Wendy glanced at Dipper, raising a lazy eyebrow. "Whattaya thinkin', dude? Scrambled eggs, bacon, and—hey!"
Because in perfect harmony with her, Dipper had said, "Scrambled eggs, bacon, and—hey!"

"You were gonna say 'cinnamon roll-ups!" Wendy said, smiling.

"Yeah, I was! Good guessing. That sound OK, Soos?"

"Sure, dudes, sounds great. Only how about some hash browns to go with it?"

"You got it!" Wendy said. "Dip, come on an' learn how to cook breakfast just the way I—"

She broke off, because Dipper had just said, "Yeah, just the way you like to—huh."

"This is gettin' a tad strange," Wendy said.

Mabel came in, rubbing her eyes and yawning so wide that her uvula dangled and bounced. "That guy really freaks me out," she said, scratching her butt the exact same way that Stan did in the mornings. Her eyes narrowed. She said in a slow, confidential tone, "I used to think he was nice, but I've decided I don't trust anybody who's so normal. That's abnormal! What'd you say you were cooking for breakfast?"

Together, Wendy and Dipper said, "Scrambled eggs, turkey bacon, cinnamon roll-ups, and hash browns."

Mabel laughed. "Aw! You guys are so cute! Sounds good. I'll shower and get dressed while you cook it." She bent over and pulled up Little Soos's shirt, making him squirm and giggle with anticipation. "Good morning, you prince of Oregon, you king of the Northwest Territory!" she said before pressing her lips against his round belly and blowing a farty-sounding raspberry. Soos's son squealed with delight, his voice reaching a pitch that within a three-mile radius set every dog to howling.

In the kitchen, Dipper peeled a half-dozen potatoes while Wendy took a big lump of sourdough from the vat where it fermented. She kneaded it, working in sugar and cinnamon, and then rolled it out and cut it into strips and brushed on melted butter. Dipper diced the peeled potatoes while she got out pots and pans.

"Better make some coffee—" They had both said it simultaneously. Dipper rubbed his arm nervously. "Uh, Wendy? I think—"

She stared at him. "—Moon Trap Pond must have—"

He blinked. "—done something—"

They finished together: "—to us."

And then, also in perfect unison, they said, "Weird!"

"OK," Wendy said, holding up her hand for silence. "Just keep quiet. Let's just cook without talking for a while. It'll probably go away on its own."

So she started the hash browns while Dipper got the coffee maker going. They put the cinnamon roll-ups in the oven, and after a few minutes Dipper cracked a dozen eggs—only four people were eating, but two were Mabel and Soos—and then he chopped some sharp cheddar cheese from a hoop wedge to go in them. He whisked in the cheese, added salt and pepper, then started to cook them over a low flame, carefully keeping them stirred, while Wendy put strips of turkey bacon on the grill.
This is very strange, Dipper thought. We're not even talking but we're doing everything—

"Just like a team," Wendy said aloud. "OK, Dip, this is—"

"—a mystery I have to look into, dude. Oh, man, did I—"

"—just say 'dude?" Wendy blinked. "An' now you're thinkin' about sex?"

"Can't help it," Dipper groaned. "When I'm—"

"—with me." To his relief, Wendy shrugged. "Hm. Actually, the way you're thinking about it is kind of romantic." She giggled in a flustered sort of way. "It's not like I hate it!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Dipper said. "If this keeps up, you're gonna know—"

"It's OK," Wendy said. "You're gonna know my secret fantasies, too!"

"I'll start trying to figure this out today," Dipper said. "But first—"

"—let's eat. And try to act like everything's—"

"—normal, especially in front of—"

"—Mabel." Wendy shook her head. "Oh, man! I can't tell who's thinking what!"

Dipper swallowed hard. "Uh, are you thinking about, uh, us fooling around in—"

"—the water, yeah, that's one of mine! But you—"

"—can't swim that well. Oh, man, I'm—"

"Don't be sorry, man! I tossed the freaking penny!"

"OK, we have to—"

"—just play it cool—"

"—until I can find a way—"

"—to fix this."

They stared at each other. Then Dipper felt a sudden wave of affection—whether his for her or hers for him he could no longer tell. They impulsively kissed each other. "Mm," she said, pulling back. "Just then I think I could totally—"

"—feel what you're feeling!" Dipper finished for her. "Oh, boy."

Breakfast that morning was a cheerful, but very odd, meal. The good food—and it was very good, even delicious, including Dipper's scrambled eggs, which for a change turned out light and pleasantly fluffy instead of dense and rubbery—the good food distracted Mabel so she didn't ask any awkward questions. Soos didn't need distracting. Food and his son together kept him focused on other things—especially when he tried Little Soos on a bit of scrambled egg, and the youngster loved it.

Mabel hardly looked up from her plate, shoveling eggs and potatoes in, taking not one but three of the fat cinnamon roll-ups and making short work of each, and constantly making her "nom-nom-
Meanwhile Dipper tasted cinnamon—he hadn't yet bitten into his own roll-up, but Wendy had just taken a big bite from hers—and he fought like a hero to avoid thinking of a certain redhead and how terrific she looked in a certain tight-fitting red swimsuit.

He knew he had lost the battle when suddenly she gave him a melting smile and said, "Aw! Wish I'd known then! Heh! 'Best seat in the house!' A joke! Didn't catch it back then. Thank you, man."

Mabel looked up sharply, and Dipper cringed. But all she said was, "More bacon, please!"

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**Chapter 2: Always on My Mind**

The hours from 9:00 to 6:00 made up the business day for the Shack, and also Assistant Manager Wendy's stretch of working hours (except for two fifteen-minute breaks and an hour for lunch). That day these were hard on Dipper, but harder still on Wendy. At least Dipper could go up to his attic room and try to think of some way to deal with whatever the strange pool had done to the two of them. And chew on a few pens as he did so, his usual method of stimulating thought.

Trouble was, down in the gift shop Wendy kept having his thoughts run through her head, a constant distraction from what she was being paid to do. Conversely, her making change, answering questions, and dealing with problems ran through Dipper's head. And sometimes the two trains of thought threatened to collide—especially when Dipper, exhausted from the mental effort, started to drift toward sleep and to daydream of a redheaded beauty frolicking in the water, with and without a red swimsuit. At one point, in fact, Melody asked Wendy, "Are you sick, dear? Your face is so flushed, you look like you have a fever."


Up in his room, Dipper lay back on his bed with his eyes closed, murmuring, "Man, Wendy is so hot!" Then he got a quick flash: —Stop thinking that! You're getting me all turned on—I mean you're distracting me!

He began doing trig problems in his head. However, he immediately realized that he didn't want to think about triangles, not with Wendy listening in, and so he switched to algebra. Meanwhile, down in the gift shop, Wendy said brightly to a customer, "Let X represent the price of the limited-edition snow globe you're buying and Y will be the three twenty-dollar bills you have there. Y-X will equal your change, which is $10.01. Solve for X. Thank you!"

The customer quickly fled with her purchase clutched to her chest.

Dipper, feeling giddy and disoriented, came clumping downstairs in time for Wendy's lunch break. Usually she either ate in the snack bar or, when the Corduroys had leftovers, packed a lunch, but that Tuesday she asked T.K. O'Grady, the Shack's short-order cook, to make her a sandwich to go. "Two sandwiches in fact," she heard herself say. "One roast beef on white, onions, lettuce, no tomato, mayo, and then one ham and cheese on whole wheat, with the works."

T.K. made the sandwiches, wrapped them in waxed paper, and packed them both in a paper bag with the Mystery Shack question mark logo printed on it (Soos had toyed with the slogan "Our Sandwiches Feature Mystery Meat!" but Melody had finally talked him out of that), and Dipper met
Wendy on the back porch of the Shack. He had already bought two Pitt Colas from the vending machine, and from the snack machine inside the gift shop he had purchased a couple of bags of chips, one barbecue flavored, one plain. "The bonfire glade," they said in unison.

They didn't talk as they walked past the Bottomless Pit—Gompers the goat came flying out of it as they walked by, landed, and then sauntered casually off on some goat business—but both of them thought simultaneously, Gompers is doing that a lot lately. He must have found out that he can eat a lot of the junk that never comes back but I saw just endlessly circulating down there.

As it happened, Wendy herself had never been in the Bottomless Pit, but Dipper had, and they took some time to untangle that.

They reached the bonfire clearing and sat on the log to eat their lunches. "Roast beef, no tomato," Wendy said, peeking at one of the wrapped sandwiches.

"Mine."

She handed it over. "I know, dude. Hey, barbecue chips, cool, how'd you know that I liked—oh, right."

"Yeah."

They unwrapped the sandwiches, opened the bags of chips, and popped the sodas in silence. Then Wendy began to speak—at the same moment that Dipper did:

"This is—sorry. You first."

"This is—sorry. You first."

Wendy stopped and clamped her hand over Dipper's mouth. "This isn't gonna work, dude! We gotta take turns, OK?"

Dipper nodded. When she took her hand from his mouth, he said, "It's so hard!"

"I know, dude, I know!"

With a sigh, Dipper said, "Let's eat first, then we'll talk." Wendy clenched her jaw to keep from saying the exact same thing and settled for nodding. They sat on the log in the clearing, munched their sandwiches, drank their colas—Dipper noticed that they took bites in unison, swallowed them together, and sipped from their cans at the same time, though he didn't comment on that, but Wendy said wearily, as though answering his unspoken observation, "Yeah, I know, man, I just caught that myself."

They finished their meals. Then it took about six false starts, but finally they could control the impulse to speak over each other reasonably well—enough to talk, anyway. "Man," Wendy said, "this is, like, the weirdest thing that's ever happened to me, and I'm including wrestling myself and bein' turned into a freakin' banner!"

Dipper nodded. "I know, right? I never knew—well, much of anything, really, about how, you know, uh, how—"

"Girls think, yeah," Wendy said. "Same here with boys, but I guess I've had a little more experience understanding boys because—"

"You have three brothers. Sorry, didn't mean to break in on you. Uh—did you really, that one time
that I just accidentally glimpsed in your memory, accidentally walk in on Junior when he was, uh—"

"Yeah," she said. "God, that was so embarrassing! Made Junior real mad an' scared me silly. I was, I guess, about eight, Junior twelve or thirteen, and Dad hadn't had the talk with me—he never did really, it was one of my aunts eventually—anyhow, I didn't even know boys did that. I mean, Junior never locked his door, so when I walked in that time I saw, like, everything. Hey, Dip, until we get outa each other's heads—"

"Yeah, I won't do that," Dipper promised. "Cause if I start—"

"You'll get me started. Yeah, dude, girls do that too! Don't be so shocked. It's, like, normal. Why am I suddenly thinking about a Gnome in a bathtub full of squirrels? Sheesh! I never talked about this kinda stuff before to anybody—"

"Except Tambry, yeah, I know. Uh, so do girls really learn how to kiss boys by practice-kissing each other?"

"Yeah, it's pretty common. I mean, we do it a lot. Dipper, stop thinking that, please, 'cause it is not hot! Wow, your on button is like on a hair trigger, man!" She snickered. "And I'll tell you, dude, kissing—"

"The back of my two fingers is not anything like kissing a real girl," Dipper said. "I know that—now."

They impulsively leaned together and kissed, a long and deep one. "Was that you or me?" Wendy asked as they pulled apart, her breath warm in his face and fragrant with the aromas of ham and cheese.

"I think maybe both of us at the same time?" Dipper said.

She hugged him and rubbed her hand up and down his back. "Man, we have got to control this, or we're gonna get ourselves in such serious trouble! I mean, right now I'm so keyed up I could just rip off my—no we can't do that! Stop thinking about it!"

Dipper squirmed. "I wasn't! That was you!"

"Oh. Yeah, guess it was. Sorry, dude." She sighed. "I hafta say, Dip, I didn't realize you guys thought about, you know, doin' it, like, about once every five minutes!"

Dipper shook his head. "I normally don't! But it just seems you and me are so close all the time now, because of this thing we have—"

"Yeah, an' I hafta say it's real sweet, the way you think about me, about us, I guess I mean. But don't put me on a pedestal, Big Dipper. I guess you realize now—"

"Girls think about guys that way pretty often, too. Yeah," Dipper said. "But, you know—I'm not handsome, I'm not athletic, really, 'cept for the runnin', dude, an', well, you, like, seem to sort of, I dunno, idolize me. Oh, man, saying that makes me seem, you know, so shallow! Am I picking up your speech pattern, girl?"

"Yeah, you sort of are," she said. "Maybe it's the result of propinquity—just being close like this, with nobody else around. Kind of disturbing. Although I have to admit, being alone together with you is really nice!"

"Yeah," Dipper said. "See, now you're sorta soundin' like me, I think. Or Sixer. Fordsy, I mean."
"Darn it, I mean Grunkle Ford!"

"Whoa!" she said, her green eyes opening wide. "I just got a mental flash of Bill Cipher there!"

"You're gonna find out anyway," Dipper said in a reluctant way. "You know he's real small and hangin' around his stone effigy, but there's something else I haven't been exactly clear about. So I might's well tell you straight up, I got a tiny little bit of Bill in my body. He, I guess, saved my life? I mean, it wasn't exactly a selfless act on his part, because if he hadn't done it, he'd've been microscopic and trapped in the Mindscape forever."

"I understand," she said. "Just got the whole memory in one flash. It was when the Magick Shop showed up last year, and that interdimensional dude, the Horroracle, tried to stop time and end the world. Wow. Just three or four little molecules of Bill got your heart started when it stopped, and they're still inside you somewhere. Does he bother you?"

"Now an' again," Dipper said. "In dreams sometimes, but usually just little flashes. The most annoying thing is—"

"When he makes you slip an' call me Red!" Wendy said. "Wow. That explains so much! But—you, what, like, civilized Bill or some biz? You—he—he got some of your molecules to replace the ones that got your heart started! OMG. I mean, I get the feeling that because of those, he's not near as dangerous as he was during, you know, Weirdmageddon."

"He claims that the little bit of me he has in him is making him, what, kinder and gentler, I guess? Supposedly when he grows close to his full size—that may take a century or more—he'll leave our reality forever. That's what he promised me he'd do, anyway. I don't know how much to trust him, though!"

"This is so bizarre," Wendy said. "Half the time I hear you talkin' and it's me! And sometimes I just start to sound like you! What're we gonna do, Dip?"

"It started with Moon Trap Pond," Dipper said. "So we have to—"

"—go back to the pond together, and bring some pennies—"

"—right, and maybe it has to be the one who made the wish to unwish it—"

"—gotcha, and maybe it's like just one per customer, so maybe you'll have to toss the penny this time—"

"—yeah." Dipper paused. "Except—I don't know, Wendy. I—somehow or other, I mean this is scary and all and I feel like I'm kinda losing myself, you know, girl? But then—I—"

"—kinda like the feeling, weird as it is. In a way you'd hate to lose it. Me, too," Wendy said. "I mean, I've never felt so close to anybody in my whole life! But, Dip, this thinking each other's thoughts all the time would eventually drive us nuts!"

"I know. So we have to undo it one way or another, but—"

"—now we know for sure that we're right for each other, at least."

They kissed again. Then Wendy tensed. "Dude! You packed your suitcase to leave Gravity Falls!"

Dipper jerked like someone who'd just touched a live electric wire. "I didn't want to think of that! Yeah, I did, but I'm not going! See, I was worried—"
Wendy touched his cheek and smiled, though tears stood in her eyes. "Aw, Dipper! Man, I understand! I told you I did! It was that parasite thingy, not you! But you were gonna go off an' leave me because you're scared you're not—"

"—good enough for you."

She gave his shoulder a friendly little shove. "Get over it, Dip! If you went home, I swear I would come after you an' camp out on your lawn an' lay in wait to capture you an' drag you back if I had to!"

"I know that now!"

She frowned. "Dude, are we fighting? Or are we warming up for some action—"

"—that, I think, the second thing, that. So we'd better get back to the Shack—"

"—yeah, before we do something we're not ready for. Only I feel so totally ready, dude!"

Dipper forced his feelings down and made himself say, "Me, too, but I'm still just fourteen!"

"Man!" Wendy sounded as frustrated as Dipper felt.

"Well," Dipper said mournfully, "at least when the payoff finally comes, it'll be sweet."

"Dipper Pines," Wendy said, "will you marry me?"

"Eventually!" he yelped. But he thought, Oh, my gosh, I think she's serious! Then when she grinned, he laughed. "Oh, Wendy! Let's say we're engaged—"

She took his hand in hers. "—to be engaged. Cool, Big Dipper. But for my sake, try not to think so much about—you know."

"I'll try! But, Wendy, if I wake up in the middle of the night—"

"—do what you have to, Dip. Only you know we're prob'ly gonna sorta feel what the other one's doin'. Man, I wish I could stay after work to try to wind this all up! Look, we don't have our run tomorrow, but—"

"—nobody knows that, so we can meet really early—"

"—an' go back to Moon Trap Pond."

Dipper hesitated. "That's pretty far away from everyone else. Do you think we can be alone together and not—"

"—dunno, Dip, but if I tear off all my clothes an', like, jump in the water, man you better come in after me!"

Groaning, Dipper said, "Now that picture's in my head!"

Wendy glanced down at the front of her shirt. "They're not as big as you're imagining, Dipper! But I guess they're big enough—Whoa, I can't talk about stuff like that! Man!"

Dipper writhed. "Please don't! Remember, you don't want me to, uh, wake up in the middle of the night!"
"Let's go back to the Shack," Wendy said, standing. "This is gonna drive me crazy! OK, Dip, at least try not to think about—it, at least until closin' time!"

"I'll try," Dipper said. It was the most he could hope to do—just try.

Chapter 3: Twilight and After

Mabel, hard at work in her Pig Tattoo Parlor, was trying to restrain Widdles so she could finish inscribing the bright red Valentine shape on her chest with an unfurled banner reading "Pig O' My Heart." True, she was working with colored markers and not needles, but she wanted her pigs to be trendy.

She needed to add the lettering. She had squinched a jeweler's magnifying loupe between her right cheek and right eye socket and, with her tongue protruding from the corner of her mouth, she had a medium-tipped purple marker poised to inscribe the decorative Old English-style "P" of "Pig" when Widdles began to squirm again. "C'mon," Mabel grumbled. "The French say you gotta suffer to be beautiful, so suffer a little for me, OK?"

Then someone touched her on the shoulder, and she jumped, losing the loupe, and Widdles tried to jump away and succeeded in turning over onto her stomach. Dipper had suddenly appeared behind Mabel—her tattoo parlor was located on the back porch of the Shack—and he said in a strangely manic voice, "Mabel! You're just wasting time! We haven't played mini-golf! Yet! This summer! In a long time, in fact! Let's go play a round! Or two!"

Mabel looked at him over her shoulder, her loupeless eye still squinted, and Widdles got her leg free of Mabel's grasp and took advantage to jerk away and leap off the porch. She and her father Waddles ambled away, grunting, Waddles revealing his recently acquired tramp stamp ("Born To Go Wee Wee Wee") as the two pigs made their way across the back lawn to their sty. "Dipper?" Mabel asked. "Whatchoo up to, Bro?"

Dipper sort of danced around her, his grin nearly frightening in its frozen intensity. "Nothing, Mabel. Hah-hah-hah-hah! I just love to play mini-golf. With you! Because! You're great. And you need! To keep in practice! I'm not good, but I like! Watching you! Hey! We could ride bikes!" He struck a pose and thrust out his right arm, pointing the way. "Let's go! To the mini-golf course!"

"Have you been into the Smile Dip?" Mabel asked suspiciously.

"No!" Dipper blinked and then his whole bearing and posture changed as he said, "Oh, no, no, no, you didn't! Mabes, girl, don't tell me you went back alone to the Dusk-2-Dawn!"

"Me?" Mabel asked, all innocence. "I certainly didn't go back to congratulate Mr. and Mrs. Duskerton on the city deciding not to demolish their convenience store and take them the special ghost sweaters I knitted out of spider webs and afterwards walk out of the store with a carton of Smile Dip hidden in my knitting bag, if that's what you're implying!"

"I got this," Dipper said. "Please."

"I'm just explaining, Broman! 'Cause if you think I got four dozen packets of Smile Dip hidden in my closet, we-he-he-ell! Pfbbbt!" She flapped a hand in dismissal.

"Never mind that!" Dipper said. "I just really, really, really want to go to the mini-golf course! Right now! Please!"
Mabel tilted her head sideways at a fifty-degree angle. "You—want to go back to the Putt Hutt? Really? The Lilliputtians swore they'd destroy us if we ever went back."

Dipper slapped his forehead. "Oh, yeah! I completely forgot the Lilliputtians!"

"Tell you what, Dip, my four o'clock just had to leave. Have a seat and I'll give you one of my nice soothing calming tatts. How about a relaxing, colorful sunset over the ocean? Right across your chest?"

"No, no, but let's do something! Something active."

"Dipper, you're actin' all cray-cray today! What's the matter with you?"

Dipper paced in a very tight circle, almost spinning in place like a top. "I just need to take my mind off some things. Activity helps. Come on. If you don't want to play golf, let's go to the bowling alley."

Putting on a teasing, nearly flirty tone, Mabel asked, "Will you swing me around and around in the air like an airplane and then let me slide down the lane on my tummy?"

Dipper balled his hands into fists and closed his eyes. "If you'll wear your bike helmet this time!"

She punched his shoulder. "Come on, Brobro! Seeing stars is the whole point of full-body-contact extreme bowling!" She shrugged. "But no, I was just kidding, because I can't. I'm way too busy. Anywho, I have a date tonight, Dipper."

Dipper stopped pacing and again his posture changed. "A date? Who with, girl? C'mon, dish! I didn't say that. That was not me!"

"If you must know," Mabel said, her hands on her hips, "I'm going to the movies with T.K. He asked me if I'd go with him to see *Dusklight IV: Lady and the Vamp*. I've been wanting to see it, and I knew you wouldn't go."

"Real vampires don't glitter!" Dipper said.

"Which is the exact reason I know you wouldn't want to go!" Mabel shrugged and then sounded just a bit unhappy: "You're always criticizing the movies I like. 'Real vampires can go out in the sun!' 'If he turns into a wolf, where do his clothes go, and how do they come back when he changes into a guy again?' 'What girl would want to French-kiss a guy who's been dead three hundred years?' Man, you ask such illogical questions, Dipper! Why don't you and Wendy do something together?"

"Ah hah, hah! We—can't. My dad won't—Nooo, uh, I mean—Wendy's dad wants her back home—yeah, workin' like a coal miner shovelin' out the mess he and the boys always leave! Stop, please, I got this!"

"Oh," Mabel said, unbending a little. "Poor Dipper. I see what's going on. You've got Wendy on the brain!"

Dipper had the same expression that John Dillinger had on his face when the FBI agents stepped out of the darkness as the mobster and his date left the Biograph Theater, where they had just seen *Manhattan Melodrama*. The G-men, Tommy guns at the ready, sprang out of ambush, but one of them asked, "Hey, John, before we start, is the movie worth seeing?" In other words, Dipper looked sort of trapped and startled.

He blurted, "How'd you know?"
With her hands on her hips, Mabel said smugly, "Dipper, Dipper, Dipper! When will you learn that I always know everything? All the time? Hey, you want me to patch things up between you two? I'm not just a matchmaker, I'm a surgeon of love, baby! I'll take chain stitches in your heart!"

Dipper took great deep gulps of air. "Look, Mabel, Wendy's dad came down real hard on her 'cause she was spending so many evenings here. For the next couple of weeks, she has to be home every night except on Fridays and Saturdays, when her dad and her brothers go bowling over in Pascataconagah."

Mabel chuckled. "I love that crazy town's name! Say it five times real fast!"

"Mabel, please." Dipper slumped and then sat on the edge of the porch. "I—I guess—I guess I'm kinda lonely, that's all. Yeah, Mabes, Dip an' I are fine. I mean, Wendy and I are getting along fine. I mean, we're not like Robbie and Tambry, we're not engaged or any—how could you tell her that? It's a secret! I didn't know it was a secret!"

"Wait, what?" Mabel asked. "Robbie and Tambry? He popped the question? How'd you know?"

Dipper twitched. "Look, if you wanna know the whole deal about Robbie and Tambry, go to the gift shop, and I—I mean Wendy—will tell you about it. It's OK, business is kinda dead now and will be until six."

"This isn't over, Dipper," Mabel said. "But yeah, I'll go talk to Wendy. She an' I have such wedding planning to do! I'm seeing a Goth wedding here. Bride and groom both in black, with caboodles of lace. Ooooh! Wedding cake with licorice icing! White cobweb gel frosting as decoration! Man, I am on fire!" She walked into the Shack, trailing wedding ideas behind her like a lingering perfume. Waddles and Widdles immediately returned to the porch and ate her entire box of scented markers.

That afternoon Wendy had a hard time driving home, partly because she was doubly distracted: She really wanted to go back to the Shack and snuggle and smooch with Dipper and then, too, suddenly the inside of her head was like a two-way radio.

"Wendy, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to spill Robbie's secret! Aloud—she found it easier to shape the thoughts if she spoke them—she said, "'S OK, Dipper. Mabes was bound to find out sooner or later. And you just plucked that outa my thoughts. I mean, it isn't like I told you an' swore you to secrecy, dude!"

"Oh, Wendy! This is crazy, this is crazy. I think I'm getting addicted to being inside you. Uh. Not in that way! You know what I mean. My mind in yours and vice-versa.

"Yeah, if it didn't make me feel like one of those old people who shuffle around talking to their invisible friends, it'd actually be real nice, dude. OK, I'm gonna be over there tomorrow at six in the morning. Six o'clock, remember! Get some sleep if you can!"

I'll try, but I'm all worked up! I mean, I thought maybe playing golf with Mabel might let me get my mind off your—uh, I mean off you. You think she's serious about T.K.?

"Too early to tell, man. Does it matter? T.K.'s a sweet guy, an' he likes her. Step up from Mermando and Gideon and Gabe anyway, right?"

Definitely. And you didn't know him, but she dated a real creep last spring—

"Trey Moulter!" Wendy said, feeling anger—Dipper's, she belatedly realized—rising up inside her. "Man, I'd like to give him a swift kick or three! What a jerk, man!"
Wait, wait—Wendy, I just got a little flash—did some boy HIT you? When did a boy punch you?
Who was he? Where can I find him?

"Never mind, Dip, it's nothing serious, really. I'm not gonna think of that. Tell you about that whole mess one day."

OK. We both have things we'd like to keep private. I'll respect that and you won't push me too much when I'm uncomfortable with certain thoughts, OK? Deal?

"Deal, dude. Hey, here's a thought: We can't find a cure, we go to Ford's friend the Professor, the guy who, like, had you an' your family kidnapped last summer when Pacifica's crazy cousin was plotting to kill her or marry her or both. The Prof is, like, a spymaster, right? You an' me, dude, we'd be a hell of a spy team!"

Yeah. Hey, maybe if Gideon Gleeful gets elected President one day, we could run the CIA for him!

"Pfft! Never gonna happen, Dip. I mean, be honest, who'd vote for a Presidential candidate with that kinda ridiculous hair?"

Dipper went running alone that evening, down to the high-school track and then a total of five miles around it, concentrating on exhausting himself and keeping his thoughts on lifting one foot, swinging it forward, putting it down, and then repeating the process with the other. Even so, he got flashes of Wendy cooking venison steaks for her family—though he knew she didn't like the taste of venison and wouldn't eat any herself, it was so unfair! And then they'd get up burping and scratching and go off to the TV, and not one of them would even offer to help with the cleaning up!

He tired himself out on the track and had to drag himself back to the Shack. Stan passed him going the other way in the Stanleymobile, with Sheila in the seat snuggled close beside him and, in the back, T.K. and Mabel, both of whom waved at him as they rolled by.

Instead of Abuelita's pork roast—another reason why Mabel had decided to go on a date with T.K., Dipper thought, because even though they and their dad weren't observant of the dietary rules, as the owner, friend, and protector of Waddles and Widdles Mabel had an aversion to anything in the pork line—he made himself a turkey and cheese sandwich, with a side of walnuts and pretzels and a glass of warm milk, followed by a ripe banana as his dessert.

He'd looked up sleep-inducing foods on the Internet, and every one of those was on the list.

But—as he was getting ready to turn in, he became acutely aware of the moment when, in her own house, miles distant, Wendy Corduroy stepped into the shower and began to wash her long, red hair. Darn it, he could feel the suds sliding over her wet, slippery—over her!

And he got her flick of thought: —Oh my God, Dipper! I totally didn't think! I'll rinse and get out of here as soon's I can, man! Uh—I can kinda feel you gettin'—uh, tense!

He held back, though. Later that night, after he'd tossed in bed and she'd kept sitting up and pounding her pillow as though to force some sleep out of it, they made another discovery, one that unsettled them more than anything else:

Dreams are contagious.

Chapter 4: Reflections
From the Journals of Dipper Pines: Oh, man! I've never had a night like that! I mean, Wendy and I later found out we were having the same dream at the same time, but each of us had little variant details—at least we could each remember some things the other couldn't! And when we compared notes—we BOTH then remembered it all, including the stuff that individually we hadn't noticed! I'm not sure I'm making sense.

Anyhow, as the dream started, Wendy and I were on opposite sides of a stage in a theater or something—it wasn't a church, I could tell that—and Mabel was somehow all grown up, I mean, like 18, and I guess I was too, because I looked almost like an adult. Mabel was wearing a dress! It was made of black licorice, with white cobweb decorations. I'm not sure whether she was the Maid of Honor or the wedding director or what, because Pacifica was up there with us, too, also dressed in black, with a thin black veil over her face, and her face was sad, like it was a funeral.

Because the thing is, see, Wendy and I were onstage to get married, but I was WENDY, inside her mind and body and wearing a white wedding dress, I'm saying, I was the mind inside her body, and she was ME! And she remembers being me, just like I remember being her! And—get this—we were almost the same height, except I think she still had like an inch on me!

It was so peculiar, because as Wendy I was having all these . . . strong feelings about Dipper. About myself! Because, looking across the stage at my husband-to-be, I mean at myself, I saw myself as good-looking, which I KNOW I am not, and confident and poised and, well, everything I'm not! And as Wendy, I felt competent and brave and all, but I was so scared because I kept wondering if I'd be GOOD enough for Dipper! As if there could be any question!

So, Wendy says she was me, and looking at me—me as Wendy, I mean—she said she suddenly realized that I ALWAYS see her as beautiful and radiant! Something she doesn't believe about herself. She said I was also the coolest girl in the world, but she knew that about her already. Anyway, both of us smiled like idiots, because we were so much in love with each other, and we were just about to get married!

Mabel stood in center stage and first played "The Wedding March" on the recorder—she has a recorder and can play it pretty well, though I don't know how since she never practices, and she can also play the keyboard, kind of, but she has to use the chord buttons because she never bothered to learn chords—I'm off on a tangent.

Anyway, she played Mendelssohn's "Wedding March," da, da, da-da-da-da dah, and so on, as Wendy/Dipper and I/Wendy walked toward each other from opposite sides of the stage. When we met in the center, Mabel played "Here Comes the Bride," and instead of the bride making an entrance, the audience marched in and stood in front of their seats watching us—and the audience was, like, unicorns and Gnomes and a pterosaur and the Horroracle and the Gremloblin and—just about all the enemies we fought against over the years! All of a sudden, Grunkle Ford and Grunkle Stan and Manly Dan were somehow on stage with us, dressed in royal-blue tuxedoes and carrying bouquets of black flowers, around which little fairies kept circling like a cloud of honeybees. Stan was also weeping into a white lace handkerchief and muttering, "I oughta be able to make a buck from this somehow."

And Mabel suddenly holds up her recorder like a baton and yells, "Wait! I almost forgot! We still need a reverend!"

That was when Bill Cipher, full-sized, dropped down from—somewhere—saying, "Why don't I play the reverend?" He was, sort of, wearing a triangular black suit with a white clerical collar, and he carried Journal 3, open to someplace in the middle. In that weird, playful voice, he said, "Wendy Dipper and Corduroy Pines, we are here to join you until death do you part. Which will be any
Then he snapped his fingers, the whole place burst into flames, with people screeching and Bill's laugh echoing through the inferno: "Ah-hah-hah-hah-hah!"

And at that point both Wendy and I both woke up screaming.

—Dip? You there?

Aloud in the dark, waiting for his heart to stop hammering, he said, "Yeah, Wendy. I just had this horrible—"

—Wedding dream, and you were me and I was you, and everybody got burned up?

"Yeah. You, too?"

—Freaky, yeah. But you know what? The fright was . . . almost worth it, man. Dude—this is gonna sound like Pacifica-level conceited, but when I looked through your eyes at me—Dipper! Aw, man, you really see me that way? I mean, I'm tall, I'm gangly and gawky, I got these damn freckles—

"Everything you say makes you more beautiful."

—You're making my heart beat so fast right now! Oh, dude, it's good I'm not over there with you right this minute, 'cause I, like, couldn't keep my hands off you! God, I really do love you, Dipper!

"I love you too, Wendy. More than I can tell you. Maybe someday I can sing—no, that would never be good enough. Oh, I wish I really were eighteen already! Did I ever tell you about being in Mabel's bubble and I thought you came to me and told me if we were the same age we could be together?"

—I'm seeing it in my mind now, Dip. Whoa! I was bein' impersonated by a swarm of ROACHES? Gross!

"Yeah. And yet—when the thing dissolved and all the bugs crawled off—I felt like breaking down and crying because it seemed like we'd come so close."

—What time is it, dude?

Dipper rolled on his side and checked the time on his phone, charging on the nightstand. "Just past four."

—Yeah, weird, I could see hanging in the air in front of me these blue phone-screen-type numbers that read 4:02 just now! Hey, Dip, this is kinda mean of me, I know, but can you feel this?

He shivered. Something warm and round seemed to have filled his right palm. He groaned. "Please don't do that! You'll make me crazy!" The feeling went away, but left another behind it.

—Oh, my God! I think now I know what a guy feels like when he gets all excited! But Dip, that was just my knee!

"Oh, I thought it was—sorry. We shouldn't do this."

—You're right. OK, I'm trying to think of something else, something that might help us. What? What
about Ford?

"Well, he'd be willing to try, but you know, this is the kind of thing that Ford can't understand. I mean, he's not much when it comes to feelings and all. But if what we're gonna try doesn't work, I have to call him in. He might know some way to break this—spell, enchantment, whatever it is."

—We'll go see him together. I think we can prove something real weird's goin' on.

"You gonna be able to sleep?"

—Don't think so. I know what you're thinking. Get dressed, wear something warmer than we usually do, an' I'll be there in like half an hour. Meet you out front. I'll prob'ly park halfway down the drive, where the shoulder's wide, so's not to wake everybody up."

"Can't wait to see you."

"Be better if the moon was brighter," Wendy muttered as they walked toward Moon Trap Pond through dewy grass that reached above their ankles.

"Yeah, the moon's waning now," Dipper told her, feeling how cold and soggy the bottoms of his jeans legs had become. "At least we've got one. It'd be hard to find the trail—"

"—if we had to use flashlights. Sorry, Dip! Your feet're cold."

"Yeah, I should buy some hiking boots. Yours keep your toes all toasty warm."

They stopped simultaneously and embraced, hugging each other close. "If we could just stop takin' breaks to do this, we'd go faster," Wendy murmured, her breath warm in his face, before kissing him.

"Mm. But I can't help it."

"Me neither. Aw, Dipper!"

"Wendy."

Wendy suddenly giggled. "Know what, dude?"

"We're sounding exactly like Chadley and Trixandra in Nearly Almost Dead But Not Quite III: The Reanimationing."

"What a stupid movie!"

Their laughter broke the spell momentarily, and hand in hand they continued along the trail. Finally, they topped the hill, and there before them lay Moon Trap Pond, an ebony mirror in the dim moonlit land. "Look at that," Wendy said.

The cold bright chip of moon up in the sky also shone perfectly clear in the water.

"That's how it got its name," Dipper said.

"Must be."

They reached the edge of the pond, and Wendy took a penny from her pocket. "This is a brand-new
one. I found a bunch of 'em in the change jar in the kitchen. So I hope the genie of the pond, or whatever, likes it. OK, Dipper–we goin' through with this, man?"

"We have to."

Sadly, Wendy said, "Yeah–but, uh, first?"

They began to groan as they hugged and kissed again. "You're right," Dipper panted, answering her thought, not her words or actions. "We'd get in such bad trouble if we did that."

"Yeah, but this feels so good."

"Yeah."

"Yeah . . . ."

"OK, if we're gonna—"

"—do it, now's the time."

They broke apart and Wendy said aloud, "I wish that Dipper an' me would go back to normal!" And she flipped the penny.

It spun through the air and hit the water.

And . . . floated on the surface.

"Oh, man!"

Dipper said, "Let me try." She gave him a penny, he made the same wish, did the same toss, and his penny landed–and stuck–within inches of hers.

"It's not taking the pennies!" Wendy moaned.

"Look, something's happening."

What was happening looked as though a heavy stone had plunged into the center of the pond–ripples spread, and the coins bounded up and down—and then with a sound like the sudden gush of water, the pennies sprang into the air, flipping over and over, and landed somewhere in the grass beside their feet. Heavy, cold drops hit them and spattered around them.

"What'd we do wrong, dude?" Wendy asked.

"I . . . don't know!"

"Think of somethin' and let me see if—oh, wow, Dipper! The public pool, with old Poolcheck glaring around! And, uh, you an' me in the water, doin' it right in public?"

"Sorry!" Dipper closed his eyes. "I'm just so—you know—and I'm not kinky like that or anything, I swear! But it popped into my head."

"Yeah, well, maybe you caught it from me, 'cause I won't say I don't find it, you know, titillating! But I'd never really do somethin' like that! Well—not with everybody in town looking at us!"

"No, I don't want to try it out right now in private," Dipper yipped. "I mean, I want to more than anything, but Wendy, I don't know—"
"—yeah, what the water in this pond might do to us—"

"—or even if it's water!"

"Ford," they both said together.

"But please, please don't tell him about everything all these feelin's we're having," Wendy begged.

"Well, like you said, we'll go together. And I wouldn't talk about them anyway because Ford—"

"—doesn't really understand feelings, you're right."

Impulsively, they hugged again, there in the moonlight. Wendy's cheek, warm against his, was so soft that he ached to—but then she whispered, "Let's go back, dude. I don't think—"

"—I can hold out—"

"—much longer. Hey, what about—"

"—Bill Cipher's statue? I don't know—"

"—what he might say or do, 'cause, like the dream—"

"—might have been a warning. But—"

"—he's helped out, like, a couple of times—"

"—so maybe it's worth a shot. Huh. If—"

"—Ford doesn't understand love an' junk, Bill—"

"—for sure won't, because there's no one else of his, uh, species—"

"—but, dude, you saw him split into himself and a female version—eww! That's kinda sick!"

"It's just—kinda Bill, I think. OK, the statue's off the trail on the way back. Let's try it."

They reached the clearing where, in a circle of weeds, the stone effigy of Bill Cipher stood partly buried in the ground. His right arm and hand remained fully extended, the way they had been when Bill shook hands with Stan, whom he thought was Ford, and so went inside Stan's mind and to his erasure from the physical realm.

"OK," Dipper told Wendy. "We have to sit on this wooden beam here, close our eyes, and breathe real slow and regular. Make yourself feel like you're sort of drifting down to sleep. That's entering the Mindscape. When we get there, you'll have to shrink yourself down to be able to talk to him, because he's still tiny. That's easier than you're thinking it'll be, 'cause you just have to imagine stuff in the Mindscape to make it happen."

"Dip, I got so much of you in my head now that I think I can just follow you, man. Let's hurry an' do it. Right before dawn, it gets real chilly."

So they settled side by side, hips and thighs touching, arms around each other. Despite a burning impulse to do quite another thing, Dipper regulated his breathing and gradually felt his consciousness dropping down in calm relaxation, a feather of awareness gliding peacefully on still air.

—Here we are. Wendy?
—Right here, dude. Whoa! Let me imagine some clothes!

—Oh, boy!

—There we go. You didn't warn me about that, Dip!

—Didn't know! I mean, I've always showed up fully dressed. That . . . I mean you . . . Wendy, I gotta say that was pretty spectacular!

—Dude, you were IN my body a little bit last year, with the carpet an' all!

—Yeah, but I was afraid to look!

"Well, well, well, well! Pine Tree! Red! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

—Dip, I don't see him!

—Shrink down. Follow my lead.

They dwindled, and there Bill was, at first just a golden chip of light, very small, but then rapidly growing—or seeming to—until all three of them were of a comparable size.

—Dude! His bow tie is all—

"Yeah, yeah, Red, 'cause I grabbed some little bits of the kid here when I was saving both of our necks. Well, figuratively. Saved HIS neck, saved a row of MY masonry! Masonry and Mason! Nearly had a joke there! What the heck, I'll laugh anyway. Ah-ha-ha-ha! Say, Pine Tree, it's getting pretty darn crowded in your head. What have you two been up to that you got Red on the brain, or should I change into a priest's costume so you can confess?"

—Can it, Bill! Look, we got screwed up because we made a wish at Moon Trap Pond!

"Don't know it. Picture it in your mind. Wait, oh, wow, Red's REALLY here—not just in your imagination! Interesting. BOTH of you picture it and let me see it."

Dipper closed his eyes, though technically in the Mindscape, he had only the memory of eyes, and imagined the round pool amid the rolling hills. He got a sudden flash of color splashing around in its heart and, startled, he opened his eyes again.

"Naughty, naughty! Pine Tree, you dirty-minded kid, ya! You an' Red didn't really go skinny-dipping and all that other stuff, did you?"

—Shut up, dude! That wasn't Dipper's thinkin' it—it was me! 'Cause him and me have feelings for each other an' I keep fantasizing!

"Oh-ho-ho-ho, it's biological, by golly! Hm. Don't know a whole lot about that. Not something you concern yourself with when you're a unique immortal being running a dimension. But, OK, the pond—it's not a normal pond."

—What a surprise.

"Pine Tree, you're getting to be obnoxiously sarcastic! Red, you sure you like this runt? He hides a shameful secret under his hair! Oh, you know about that already. Well, let me make you a preposition: Beyond! How about going beyond this loser and casting that pretty eye around for a sharp guy who knows ALL the angles?"
Cipher leaned on his cane and put a crooked finger against where his mouth would be if he had one, as though considering what she'd said.

"Well, I DO owe him. He gave me a lovely lump of gold. MY impulse is to trick you two, of course, but his molecules won't let me do that any longer! Do you even realize what a handicap it is for a tyrant to develop a conscience? It's like forcing a trout to ride a bicycle!"

—Bill, please! Come on, man, and help us if you can.

"OK, OK, Pine Tree. Here's all I got: There's some kind of, I don't know, spirit, or force, or being, dwelling in the pond. The moon's got something to do with it, don't know what. The trouble is you can't just un-wish a wish, OK? So you have to put your case to the guiding intelligence in the pond. But you can't just jump in, either! You'd never come out again. So—summon the demiurge or whatever it is. Do it at the right time beside the pond. Don't know how to do that, you'll have to find out if you can. Even then I'm not sure it'll even listen to you. Red, I got such an urge to kiss you right now! Pucker up that sweet, sweet eye!"

—Ewww! No! Dude, you froze my family into statues and turned me into a freakin' banner!

"Aw. A guy makes a few little mistakes—wow! Just got a flash of what woke you guys up earlier. That was an awful dream you had! But thanks for thinking of me like that, you guys! Seeing me as a merciless chaotic trickster who'll lure you into a wedding ceremony and then burn you and all your friends and family alive! Takes me back, you two, to happier days. Aw, you DO love me! Brings a tear to my eye! Hey, you're going away. Bye, now, but come back anytime!" And then in an oddly wistful voice: "I like visitors. I never ever got lonely . . . before."

On the weathered, rough-hewn timber in the clearing, Dipper and Wendy opened their eyes at the same moment. They asked, "Are you OK?" at the same time.

And they kissed. You'd think that would get old fast, but—they kissed some more. "We better get back," Dipper said. "You know, Bill's probably watching us."

"Mm, yeah, right, we better get back," Wendy replied. "So—what do we do? It has to be—"

"—Ford, because even though he doesn't understand—"

"—mm, THIS, poor guy, mm! But he, like knows all about—"

"—spells and conjuring and things like that—"

"—mm, Dipper, I hate to say it, but we better go right now—"

"—before we go too far. Yeah."

They rose, and walking in the way that a younger Dipper had thought was ridiculous—a guy and a girl with their arms around each other's waist, their hands in each other's back pocket—they made their way back to the trail and back toward the Shack as dawn brightened the eastern sky. They saw early rabbits, heard the shriek of a morning hawk soaring so high that he already had been painted red by the rising sun, and got wolf-whistled at by a Gnome in the underbrush.

"Those little boogers are gettin' more human every day," Wendy muttered. "That guy's a smart-ass."

"Actually," Dipper said, "I'm pretty sure that was a female Gnome."
"Huh. So the girl Gnomes got dirty minds, too?"

"More human every day," Dipper said.

Wendy shoved him, he shoved her back, and they very nearly fell clutching each other down into the wet grass and—

But with an amazing effort of will, they stayed on their feet, got moving, and went on toward the Shack, giggling together now and then as they shared a thought or two.

Chapter 5: Experts

They'd hoped to go straight to Wendy's car—it was only a minute or two past seven, and she nearly two hours before she absolutely had to report to work—but Mabel was already up and about, and she must have seen them from her window as they approached the Shack.

She came running out onto the porch, holding her big square sketch pad. "Wendy! Come here and look. I got some concept designs for Tambry's wedding dress that I want you to critique! See, I'm going for the classic New Orleans Queen of the Vampires look, but with a kind of sophisticated—hey, wait, you guys aren't dressed for running!"

"We went for a long walk," Dipper said.

"Because . . . .?"

Wendy shrugged. "Went for a long walk, Mabes. That's all there is."

"At this hour? Turn around!"

Wendy and Dipper just looked at each other. "What?" they both said at once.

"Wendy, turn around. Now!" Something in Mabel's drill-sergeant tone made the tall redhead turn away from her. "Now lift your hair!"

Obligingly, Wendy moved her great mane of red hair up so that her flannel shirt—red plaid today—showed. "What is it, girl?" she asked.

"Checkin' for grass stains!" Mabel said. "You're clean. Dipper! Let me see your back!"

"You're nuts," Dipper said.

"Yeah, you coulda been on the bottom!"

"Mabel!" Wendy said, nearly choking.

"I got this," Dipper said, and he turned around. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah," Mabel said, sounding disappointed. "Guess it would've been too cold to get naked—but, hey, the moon was out, it was real dark, and you two guys went for a long walk in the night, so what was I supposed to think—doth mine eyes spy a hint of a double wedding? That would be so cool!"
"Not gonna happen," Dipper said. "And that's not the correct use of 'doth,' because—"

Mabel overrode him: "But just think about it, guys! Tambry an' Wendy comin' down the aisle, one in white, one in black! I can just see it! It's too good not to do!"

"Mabel!" Wendy said. "Listen! I'm still gonna be just fifteen!" She blinked and glanced at Dipper. "Uh—I mean he is. I'll be eighteen."

"Eighteen," Dipper confirmed.

Mabel tucked her pad beneath her arm. "Wai-i-it a minute. Something really strange is going on. You can't fool Mabel! Dipper, you sounded just like what's his name, Agent Trigger just then, going around repeating what Wendy just said. What's up with that, huh? And Wendy, how could you forget how old you are?"

"Just . . . drop it, OK?" Dipper said. "Look, me and Wendy have to go over to see Grunkle Ford, so —"

"Shotgun!" Mabel yelled. "Let's go!"

"It's kinda private and personal, Mabes," Wendy said.

"So? Me an' Dipper are the Mystery Twins! No secrets between us! Well, except mine, but he's got none from me! So, one way or the other—"

Dipper gave up. "Listen, this does sound crazy, but let me try to explain—you remember the electron carpet?"

"You . . . guys aren't exchanging bodies, are you?" Mabel asked. "Going on long moonlit walks, holding hands, smooching, and maybe doin' other stuff? That is so disgusting! But so-o-o cool! Well actually, I think it's hot! How does it feel when you smooch? Which of you is Dipper, for real?"

"It's not the carpet!" Dipper said. "I'm me, and Wendy is Wendy! But we keep—"

”—gettin' our thoughts all scrambled up, 'cause we can, like—"

”—read each other's minds!"

Mabel gasped. "Oh, man! That sounds crazy! Wait, you already said it sounds crazy. Let me test you! What number am I thinking of right now?"

"Negative eight!" both Dipper and Wendy said together.

Mabel slapped both hands to her cheeks, letting the drawing pad fall to the front porch. "It's true! OMG, you can read minds! There goes my secret stash of Smile Dip!"

"Relax, girl," Dipper said. "Uh—that was Wendy thinking—we can't read your mind. Only each other's."

"Then how did you know my number?"

Wendy said, "Because you said once that nobody tryin' to read your mind would ever guess a negative number, and you used negative eight for an example. See, that's Dip's memory. We know what each other is thinkin' or experiencin' or, well—"

"Feeling," Dipper said. "And it's making us crazy!"
"Crazy in love!" Wendy blurted. "I didn't mean to say that! I just thought it, I'm sorry. Well, let's ask Mabel not to tell anybody! I'll try, but you know my sister."

"Wha-wha-what?" Mabel asked. "Wendy, was that, like—"

"Arguin' with Dipper's thoughts in my head," Wendy said. "OK, Dipper an' I kinda are getting' serious with each other—but it's way too early! You know what my dad would do if he thought Dip an' I were makin' marriage plans? With him only fourteen?"

"He'd kill me," Dipper said.

"Send me up to that damn loggin' camp," Wendy said.

"Wait, wait," Mabel said, seeming to struggle to keep up. "So you're saying you guys are like really in love? I mean, not just walkin' under the moon holding hands and being all smoochy and stuff? It's the real deal—"

"Dude," Dipper said, "this is how serious we are: we're talkin' about gettin' engaged when he—I'm older. Sorry, Wendy."

"It doesn't matter," Wendy said. "See, Mabes, we gotta do something. It's getting so we can't tell who's who in our heads!"

"Maid of honor!" Mabel yelled. "I call it!"

"OK, OK, Mabes!" Wendy said, wincing from her volume. "Geeze, if we get married, you got it! And I guess you can even plan it! But right now—"

"—we're going to ask Grunkle Ford for help," Dipper finished for her. "Understand now?"

"Yeah," Mabel said, blinking. "That's a good idea. He's like an expert on this supernatural, spooky stuff. Like I'm an expert in love! So—shotgun!" she yelled again.

Deliberately trying to tune Dipper out—hard because he was right next to her on the front bench seat in the Dodge Dart—Wendy asked Mabel, "So how'd the movie date with T.K. go?"

"Great!" Mabel said. "He bought me popcorn and a large cola and taffy and caramels and chocolate mints! We held hands through the movie, an' when we got home, we kissed goodnight! And the movie was just as good as all the other Dusklight vampire pictures! So romantic! In this one Edweird finally bites Betta, so she's not a virgin anymore!"

"Mabel!" Dipper and Wendy both yelled.

"What? 'Virgin' isn't a dirty word!"

"Not necessarily," Wendy said, "in 1953 the City of Boston cited the use of the word 'virgin' in the script as the reason for the movie The Moon Is Blue being banned in that city. Wait, that's not me, that's Dipper. I didn't even know that, man!"

"Boston, schmoston," Mabel said. "Don'tcha get it? Betta's a vampire now! I'm gettin' ready for some serious fang-on-flesh action in the next movie!"

"Dude," Dipper said, "what is it with teen girls an' vamps? I don't know, Wendy. I really don't know."
"You guys are creepin' me out more than the movie did T.K.," Mabel muttered.

They drove through town and then up the hill to the McGucket house, where Wendy parked behind the Stanleymobile in the porte-cochere—How'd I even know that word? she thought, but immediately she knew. "You got an impressive vocabulary, Dipper," she said. "Maybe we don't wanna end this right now. If we can hang on for like a year, I'll ace the SAT's next spring!"

"Think anybody's awake?" Mabel asked, getting out on the passenger side. "It's not yet seven-thirty."

"Ford always gets up early," Dipper said. "Come on." He led them to the side door—normally they'd go in through the main entrance, but that might trip some of Fiddleford's intruder alarms, and since they tended to favor powerful sleeping gases and amnesia-inducing powders, he thought they'd be safer going in from the carport side.

He glimpsed Ford in the hallway and tapped on the glass in the door's small window. Ford started, turned, smiled, and came to unlock the door. "Dipper! Mabel! Wendy!" he said. "Come in, come in. You probably want Stan, but he was out late and isn't up yet—"

"No, we came to see you, Dr. Pines," Dipper said.

Ford was carrying his usual breakfast—a travel mug of coffee and an orange—and he nearly dropped both. "Me? And why are you using my title, Dipper?"

"Because that wasn't him, it was me," Wendy said. "He picked up on my thinking. It's a long story, Dr. Pines. Can we go sit down somewhere an' tell you?"

"Surely," he said. "Fiddleford won't be using the laboratory this early. Let's go there. Ah—would you care for breakfast?"

"Twice a day!" Mabel said.

"Then let's go by way of the kitchen. I'm sure we can find something."

The kitchen—not the great huge one that the Northwests used to rely on when they threw parties, but the family kitchen—was still as large as the gift shop in the Mystery Shack. It had two different stoves (four if you counted microwaves) and a walk-in fridge. They found plenty of frozen food left over from 2012, when the Northwests had been forced to sell the place, but, as Mabel said, "If it doesn't kill us, it will only make us fuller!"

They chose some frozen toaster pastries, which they popped into the twelve-slot toaster to heat up. Ford found some milk for Mabel, and Dipper and Wendy poured coffee for themselves—Wendy's with just a splash of cream, and for some reason Dipper, who normally liked his coffee heavily diluted with milk, made his the same as hers. Ford dug up some paper plates, and they carried their heated pastries and drinks to the lab, where they sat at a long lab table and ate as they talked.

Wendy and Dipper had enormous difficulty at first, the words tumbling out with no way to tell whose thoughts they represented. Then Dipper said, "You tell it, Wendy, and I'll just try to keep my mouth shut—"

"—but my mind open," she said. "See what we mean, Dr. Pines? I mean, I guess you gotta know that we're—should I tell him Dipper? OK, I will—we're sorta in love with each other. I know that's weird, but Dip's really mature for his age—well, you are!—an' I've had bad experiences with guys before—never mind, I'll tell you later—an' he's the first guy that I feel, you know, so—so good about. Anyways, I made the dumb wish an' it came true, but it's like bein'—yeah, Dipper says, like
bein' schizophrenic, or whatever, like hearing voices in your head all the time. Thank you, Dip! He just thought at me that I did a good job explaining."

"Moon Trap Pond," Ford said thoughtfully. "Hm. I don't think I've heard the name. Let me fire up a computer and access my digitized research library."

A bank of desktop computers—and a few custom-crafted laptops as well—stood against the side wall where once a row of sinks and dishwashers had rested (for this vast room had been the party kitchen of the Northwest Manor before McGucket renovated it as his lab and workshop).

Ford, who sat in a rolling desk chair, wheeled across to the computers. He turned on the one on the left end, and in moments it was up and ready. He typed in a password, called up a master folder labeled Stanford Pines RSCH, and then scrolled down to a subfolder, GF HISTORY.

"Let me see, let me see . . . landforms, nagas, Natural Features, that's the sub-subfolder we want. These files include my own essays, plus some .pdf's and scans of documents pertaining to the geography and history of the whole area. Manotaur Mountain, Megalodon Beach, Midas Cave, ah, yes, here we are . . . Moon Trap Pond. Hm. The only thing available is a copy of an 1890 article in the old Gravity Falls Frother, a newspaper that sprang up back in pioneer days . . . 'Legend of Moon Trap Pond.' Let me print out some copies of this."

"One will do for us," Dipper and Wendy said in unison.

"Very well. While this is printing, do you mind if I test how complete this understanding of each other's thoughts might be?"

"Sure, go ahead," Dipper said.

"Wendy, kindly walk about ten steps away and turn your back. All right, Dipper, just look at me and think of how many fingers I'm holding—"

"All six, dude," Wendy said. "An' by the way, Dipper's noticed that behind you the printer's flashin' a red light, like maybe it's outa paper."

Startled, Ford glanced over his shoulder. "Yes, it needs paper," he murmured.

"I'm on it!" Mabel said. She got a ream of printer paper from the shelf below the printers, tore off the wrapper, and loaded the machine.

"All right," Ford said. "Wendy, don't look around yet. Where am I touching Dipper—now?"

She sneezed. "Nose."

"Remarkable!"

"Hey," Mabel said, "when you guys go to the toilet—"

"Don't go there!" Dipper warned.

Wendy turned around. "If we concentrate, like, real hard, we can mask most of the feelings," she said.

Dipper blushed furiously. "We can?"

"Hey, Dip, don't worry. I grew up with three brothers in a house with one bathroom an' no working lock on the door. Don't sweat it, dude."
"I'll try to remember to try and block out . . . certain things," he said.

"Here you are," Ford said, handing Dipper a few pages of print-out. "And one for Mabel, and this one for me. Wendy, are you sure you don't want—?"

"I'm sure," she said, returning to sit down. "F'r instance, right now Dip's reading 'The legend of the Shining Woman of Moon Trap Pond comes down from . . . .''

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_from the Gravity Falls Frother_, Monday, August 4, 1890: Few in Roadkill County ever lay eyes upon a pristine body of shining water in the verdant rolling hills west of Durland's Crossing. As perfectly circular as any fountain designed by the Romans of ancient times, it breathes forth an air of peace and tranquility.

And yet, if the Red Men of Oregon, the aboriginal inhabitants of this countryside, namely the Chinook, speak not with forked tongue, the lovely pool possesses attractions beyond physical beauty.

The legend of the Shining Woman of Moon Trap Pond comes down from an antique time when the white man had not set foot on Oregon soil, and it knew only the soft tread of deerskin moccasins. For immemorial Indian legends speak in awed tones of an immortal Shining Woman, a veritable Lady of the Lake, who inhabits the limpid waters.

Her Chinook name might indeed be rendered as her description: "Shining Woman." A benign Genius of the Lake, she, like the Nymphs of Greek mythology, dwells in and protects the pool; and her lover, the Indians say, is the Moon, whose reflection, which is its soul and true being, she traps within her waters so the two may dally in love any time the Moon shines fair in the sky above her.

But at times when the orb is not visible—when it is new, or in the hours between its setting and rising, or when the sullen clouds obscure its glorious beams—then mortal humans may call upon the Lady and offer her a token of their thanks, and she just might attend them and grant each one a single precious wish.

Some ask for health, some for long life, some for wealth, and to an extent their wishes may come true, if the Shining Woman likes their offering. But they say her gift is most efficacious when someone makes an amorous wish, for her true power is in binding hearts to each other with silken ties of Love.

The truly importunate may seek her out on nights when no Moon shines in the sky; and then if the human supplicant asks sincerely enough, she may visibly rise from the waters and appear in her guise as a beautiful woman whose body is all made of light, and listen to appeals; but though her impulse is to help, like all spirits and supernatural creatures, the Shining Woman is flighty and not always to be relied upon.

Should the human somehow displease her, should her amiable mood shift, she might even go counter to one's wish. A man wishing for wealth might return home to find himself impoverished—house gone, farm gone, no possessions left at all, and himself a hundred times poorer than before.

At times, the Chinook say, Indian lads and lasses who made imprudent wishes and regretted them had to consult her to plead for an alteration to, or even a retraction of, an ill-thought-out request. Many times, perhaps most times, they were never seen or heard from again.
Truly, only those few who are brave of heart, pure of spirit, and firm of mind should dare to approach her with such a request. For the rest of us timorous mortals, having discretion enough to avoid her is truly "the better part of valor," as the Bard wrote.

The Chinook claim that the unhappy souls whose requests for changes do not please the Lady are banished to dwell forever in the Moon. They say that when it is full, we on Earth can view the forlorn smokes of their cooking and signal fires—the smudges that the ignorant white inhabitants of Oregon claim to be the Man in the Moon.

No, the Indians say. They are certainly made of smoke, and they come from the campfires of cold, lonely, and unhappy men and women exiled forever from the warm Earth by the beautiful and kindly, but sometimes impatient and ill-tempered, Shining Woman of Moon Trap Pond.

"Can it be true?" Mabel asked, looking up from her copy.


"Oh, boy," Dipper and Wendy said together.

Chapter 6: The Hardest Part

From the Journals of Dipper Pines: Thursday, June 26—On Wednesday morning, we got back from seeing Grunkle Ford, who said he would continue his research and get back to me. Mabel had her second breakfast in the Shack. All the time, secretly, Wendy and I kept mentally swapping fantasies of jumping into the shower together.

It is so hard! I mean, I remember after we went into the bunker and Wendy had to fight the Shapeshifter, and later she let me down easy, I felt totally empty. But we were gonna be friends. And that was great, but I was like all hollow inside—

—Aw, Dip, you're breaking my heart, man! Was I that cruel to you?

"No! No, you were thinking about the difference in our ages, and you knew I really didn't know anything about girls, though I was interested in them, and back then you couldn't tell how I felt down deep about you—man, do you notice that when we're doing this telepathy deal we don't even have to stop to breathe—and now I know you really LIKED me back then, even if you didn't LOVE me, so you were doing the right thing!

—Yeah. An' now I'd be like devastated if YOU just wanted to be friends, so I know what it must've felt like to you back then. But you know what? That fall after I went back to school I kept turning guys down when they asked me for dates and I didn't even know why! At least, I didn't then. But now I know it's 'cause I was, like, mentally comparing them to you, dude, an' none of them measured up.

Dipper had a mental flash of a certain road trip with Grunkle Stan, which he tried to suppress.
He failed, but he next got a mental image of Wendy laughing. —Aw, Dip! You flirted with girls your own age an' got 'em mad at you! But you weren't really into them 'cause you were tryin' to get over me!

"Yeah. I thought I was doing it, too, but I might as well have tried to get over breathing!"

—Aw, that is the sweetest thing you ever said to me. Get back to your journal. I'm stocking the cash register. I'll try not to bust in again.

Where was I? OK, confession time: I don't know which of us began it, or if we both did at the same time, but we've started rationalizing. I mean, you know, you start thinking that Juliet was like fourteen in Shakespeare's play, so if it was OK for her and Romeo to have like a hot affair . . . and there are some states in the US (I looked this up) where kids as young as THIRTEEN can get legally married under certain conditions . . . but just before Wendy had to start getting the Shack ready for business this morning, she and I talked it out. Even if we COULD come up with reasons that SEEMED logical, we both know that taking the big step is wrong for us just now. We had this conversation in our heads:

"So the problem is that a thirteen-year-old can get married . . ."

". . . but only with parental permission . . ."

". . . which we KNOW we couldn't get . . ."

". . . an', dude, I know too many high-school girls . . ."

". . . that ruined their lives by getting . . ."

". . . no, not in trouble, Dip, pregnant, use the right . . ."

". . . word, yeah, getting pregnant, and that screwed up their whole . . ."

". . . lives, yeah. An' when it happens with us, I mean, you know, when we get intimate, I want it to be . . ."

". . . me, too, Wendy! Aggh! I gotta stop thinkin' about you that way! OK, for now I'm going up to my room . . ."

". . . but don't do, you know, the thing that boys do when they're alone, or you'll get me all . . ."

". . . No, no, I'm just going to write in my journal and do some . . ."

". . . oh, Internet research. Uh, dude, you mean on nymphs and not . . ."

". . . NOT on naked girls, Wendy! Please, I'm sorry, yes, I've done that, but every guy does that—wait a minute! You've looked up pictures of naked GUYS?"

". . . Uh. Maybe. But Mabel prob'ly has, too! An' I guess most girls our age, pretty much, if they got Internet access. We don't want to beat each other up over that, though."

"OK, right, we can't, 'cause we both know it doesn't matter. So no, I'll just research nymphs. But I'll have to be . . ."

". . . careful, yeah, 'cause if you Google 'nymphs' you know you might get . . ."

Arrghh! That's the way our mental conversation went. It looks so embarrassing written down! I may
torn out a few pages of this Journal before I digitize it when it's finished. If it ever GETS finished.

Seriously, Wendy and I both are thinking of consequences. If we give in and get, well, physical, even if we use protection, I KNOW that means I won’t investigate mysteries any longer, I won’t run on the track team, I might not even finish high school! Because whether we could get married or not, we’d HAVE to be together, and to make a living, I’d have to go to work, and the pay would be lousy, and Wendy and I know she'd be disowned by her dad at that point, and what would we do? I mean, at my age, I can't earn any real money, and I wouldn't want to make HER work, and I can’t even touch my college fund unless I'm using it for education . . . .

The logical thing to do, the RIGHT thing to do, is for us to tough it out, wait it out. But I can FEEL her wanting me, and she can FEEL me wanting her, and it’s getting stronger. Waiting is the hardest part!

Mabel once told me to listen to my heart and not my head, but I'm not sure it's entirely my heart that's trying to do the thinking for me! Wendy just popped into my mind: "I get what you mean, dude. That's funny, but so typical of guys! Be bigger than that, Dipper!"

And then we both mentally giggled over "bigger." Sheesh!

OK, OK, my laptop's on, let me go online and look up . . . .

Wednesday had been difficult. Thursday was a little more so. Dipper still obsessively returned to the articles he had found online:

**NYMPHS (Nymphai)**: In Greek Mythology, nymphs were minor goddesses. The ancient Greek religion most notably worshiped the Olympian gods, the pantheon ruled by Zeus and his sister/wife Hera, traditionally including twelve gods and goddesses in all, including Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Hermes, and others (occasionally a new god or goddess might be added to the pantheon; the wine-god Dionysus, for example, entered relatively late in Greek history).

However, the Greeks held an almost pantheistic view of the universe and believed that gods and goddesses of minor and limited powers literally surrounded them and inhabited all of nature. Notably, the sea was home to untold thousands of minor deities: its supreme ruler was Poseidon, brother to Zeus, but he was a prolific god, and his descendants and relatives peopled the ocean: Nereus, for example, the Old Man of the Sea, son of the Titan Okeanos (the personification of the ocean) specifically was a supernatural force in charge of the fish of the sea, and his fifty daughters, the Nereids, were minor goddesses who had power over such things as the sea's salt, the foam of the waves, or particular bays.

The Nereids were only one type of nymph. Other types controlled the breezes of the air (these are called auroae), lived in and protected trees (dryads), had power over mountains (oreads) or ruled over bodies of fresh water (naïads). Their male equivalents, minor gods, also existed, including satyrs, panes (offspring of Pan, the nature god) tritons (sea gods) and others.

Sheesh, thought Dipper, this is like learning biology!
—I know, right? You know, a guy in my bio class fainted dead away when we had to dissect a fetal pig?

Dipper grimaced. Don't get me sidetracked, Wendy. Mabel's gonna totally freak next year, 'cause that's when we'll have to dissect the pig.

—Oh, man! Luck with that, dude! I gotta try to get outa your head.

Yeah, 'cause now I have to look up . . . .

**NAIADS (Naides):** In Greek Mythology, naiads were female spirits, a type of nymph (see *Nymphs*), minor goddesses who presided over bodies of fresh water: rivers and streams, fountains, springs, pools and lakes, and marshes.

Unlike the Olympian gods, naiads were not necessarily immortal. Though deities, they had limited powers and could be killed (or, like Echo [an oread, or nymph of the mountains], could physically fade from existence). Generally, naiads were described as beautiful beyond all mortal women, and they frequently seduced men whom they found to be attractive.

—Dude, I hate them already!

For example, during the voyage of the Argonauts in quest of the Golden Fleece, as the ship made the passage through the Propontis, Jason beached the Argo on the coast of Mysia and his crewmen went hunting for provisions. Hylas, the handsome young apprentice to (and lover of) Heracles, stopped to drink from a pool. Three naiads beneath the water saw the young man, became enthralled by his looks, and dragged him into the water, where they transformed him so he could breathe only water, not air, and kept him there with them forever as their love prisoner, a fate so intensely erotic that he completely forgot his former life and dwelled with them as the lover of all three.

—My opinion, man, they're nothing but supernatural skanks!

Wendy, please!

—Sorry, dude. Tourist bus comin’ in. Maybe that'll distract me.

The naiads could occasionally be destructive toward people, but only rarely were regarded as actively evil. They often acted from motives of misplaced and occasionally selfish love, and many willingly became the devoted wives or consorts of human heroes and kings.

In the *Odyssey*, Calypso (a nymph and in some sources a naiad whose original home was a pool in a deep gorge on the island of Ogygia) became infatuated with Odysseus and kept him her prisoner of love for seven years, sharing her bed with him and delaying his return to Ithaca after the Trojan War. Not until Zeus forced her did Calypso allow Odysseus to leave her island, and even then she bitterly complained of unfair treatment by the male gods, who took any human lover they pleased, whether married or single, male or female.

Another famous myth about a naiad tells the story of Salmacis, a naiad who fell in love with Hermaphroditus, the handsome son of the gods Hermes and Aphrodite. Salmacis burned with lust for the young man, and her dearest wish was to be inseparably united with him forever.

When one day, hot from the chase, Hermaphroditus rested near her pool, she lured him into her pool, Salmacis Fountain (in modern-day Turkey) to cool off and relax. When he waded into the water, she seized him, clung to him so tightly he could not push her away, and her body physically
fused with his, their bodies becoming one being, both completely male and completely female at the same time, one body with all the primary and secondary physical sexual characteristics of both genders (hence the term hermaphrodite).

Dipper sat back in his chair, gulping. Oh, man! Did you get that?

—Dude, I did! Oh my God, that was so much like my crazy wish!

Wendy, we gotta be careful!

—Yeah. ’Cause, man, I don’t even want to IMAGINE my dad’s face if that happened to—

It’s NOT gonna happen to us!

—Yeah, ’course not. Although in a pervy sorta way the idea’s kinda—

DON’T. EVEN. THINK. IT!

But you know how thoughts are. You shoo them away, and like pesky flies, they come back again.

To get away from them, Dipper checked an online moon ephemeris.

That very night might be their best chance. It was to be a new moon—in other words, the dark of the moon, when the pool would be empty of reflections. According to the Chinook legend, as reported in the old newspaper article, anyway, you could communicate with the Shining Woman only when it was night and no moon appeared in her water.

—I’m kinda leery about this, Dipper!

I know. Me, too. I’m not scared of the dark, but—

—a supernatural creature like that, her power—

—might be strongest when it’s totally dark, yeah.

—Dad an’ the boys’ll turn in at like ten o’clock. I could slip away any time after about eleven. They all go right to sleep an’ snore like a convention of circular saw operators. Do we go? I guess we sorta have to.

So . . . what do you think? Go alone? ’Cause Ford’ll probably go with us if we ask.

—Yeah, but I don’t think we better. If he’s there—

—she might not even appear. It’s sorta like she already knows us—

—an’ we don’t wanna drag anybody else into this mess—

—I know. We got in it together, we ought to get out together—

—Right, or just, you know—give in together.

So, what? Plan to get there at midnight?

—Midnight, right. Witchin’ hour, dude. Like they say in England, in for a penny, huh?
Chapter 7: A Little Bit of Stanford's Day

"So," Stanford said to Fiddleford McGucket on Thursday morning, "you don't know anything about Moon Trap Pond or about nymphs?"

"Not hardly," the distinguished-looking—well, relatively normal-looking—scientist told him, scratching his balding head. Really, with his superfluous arm cast removed, his weird glasses replaced by normal bifocals, his teeth fixed, his white beard neatly trimmed (and a fossilized Band-Aid removed from it), and his sole garment of overalls replaced by a white shirt, lab coat, and respectable olive-green trousers—and with shoes on his big feet (though admittedly he could still only tolerate soft moccasins), Fiddleford looked, um, some better.

He shook his head. "Sorry Stanford, but to tell the goat-kickin' truth, I must've slept through mosta my undergraduate literature classes. I don't remember diddly squat. I'm about as useless in this situation as a French bow tie on a Mexican grasshopper. Hm. Now, do we know anybody what was a humanities major?"

"I didn't make friends easily in college," Stanford confessed. "In fact, you're about it! Then in grad school, of course, I associated only with science majors. But there must be someone in town—"

"Well, now, lemme think. There's a nice lady-type woman at th' library that useta let me set inside an' warm up in cold weather, what's her name, now? Lorena! Lorena, um, I got this somewhere rattlin' around in my creaky old head . . . don't never shoot yourself with the Memory Eraser gun, Stanford, it scrim-scrambles up your brains worse'n a drunk skunk in a whiskey tornado. Lorena, what was it? Kinda an exotic name . . . um . . . oh, yeah, Lorena Jones!"

"Lorena . . . Jones," Stanford said, writing the name down on a pad of Post-It notes.

"What about her?" Stanley had come wandering into the lab. He was wearing a pale blue suit—not his usual attire these days—with a very natty tie, not his normal string bow, but a regular necktie. True, it had been hand-painted (by Mabel) with a fairly tasteful representation of Gravity Falls Falls, but still.

"What about who?" Fiddleford asked. He still had a slight tendency to forget the last fifteen seconds if he wasn't concentrating.


"I'm looking for someone who knows about old Native American legends about the valley," Stanford explained.

"Oh, well, then, Lorena's your gal," Stanley replied with a big grin. "She's on th' board of th' Historical Society an' all. Her family goes way back in Gravity Falls history, an' her grandma told her all the old tales. You want my advice, Poin'dexter, give her a call at the library—it'll open in about half an hour—an' ask for her at the reference desk. Tell her ya got some questions about the Falls an' see if you can take her to lunch. She'll like that, an' you just might get lucky."
"I could use some luck," Stanford admitted.

"Can't we all!" Stanley said with a laugh. "Oh, well, Sheila's got the day off, so her an' me are gonna cruise around a little an' visit some other tourist traps. How does this look?" He reached in his pocket and produced what looked like a gray mouse—until he stuck it to his upper lip, and then it became a fake mustache.

"Looks like a baby possum's a-fixin' to hibernate up your nostril," Fiddleford said. "I like it!"

"Stanley," Ford said, pushing his glasses up and rubbing his eyes, "why would you wear such a hideous thing?"

With his orange-red nose twitching and his eyes watering a little, Stan told him, "'Cause I'm goin' undercover! With dark glasses an' a hat, I'm gonna be Mr. Tourist Guy, an' Sheila will pose as my wife. See, I gotta scope out the competition an' report to Soos, an' him and me will come up with ways to compete with any new attractions the others got. By the way, you ever take a date out, my advice is don't take her to Mystery Mountain. They got a serious spider problem up that way."

"All . . . right," Ford said. "Uh—will you be away overnight?"

Stan waggled his shaggy eyebrows. "Depends on whether Sheila gets lucky! Hah! Hey, Poindexter, for real, you could do a heck of a lot worse'n Lorena! See ya in the funny papers."

When he left, Fiddleford asked, "What did he mean by that?"

"I . . . don't know," Stanford confessed.

"Huh. You know what? I'm real lucky I got married. An' got my wife back after she left me. I'd hate to be back in the datin' scene at my age! I can't sing karaoke fer sour potaters, an' th' onliest dance I can do is th' Hillbilly Hootenanny." He did a few hamboning steps. "'Tain't as much fun as slow dancin' with my darlin' would be."

At 11:45 that Thursday morning, Ford found himself agreeably surprised when he walked into the library, located the reference desk, and saw Lorena Jones. She was a tall woman, fiftyish, with a good, plump figure, a pretty, lively face, and attractive black hair going steely-gray. She wore a modest knee-length dress, peach-colored, with a lacy summer-weight sweater over the top. He introduced himself and she shook her head, smiling. "I would recognize you anywhere. Of course, we never met, but I remember your twin brother very well! I knew him all the way up through Never-Mind-All-That. He was sort of rough-spoken and a bit too jolly for me, really, but he amused the children. Well, I have two hours. Shall we go?"

She had no preference for lunch, and Ford was so absent-minded that he could never remember where he'd eaten (or whether the food was any good). However, he definitely did not want to settle for Greasy's, Yumberjack's, or Hermanos Brothers, so he drove them a few miles outside the Valley to The Bread Basket, which—he vaguely recalled—Stan had spoken well of.

It wasn't a fancy place, just a neat little family restaurant with farmhouse décor—red-and-white checked tablecloths, figurines of roosters and hens on shelves on the walls, lots of potted plants—and a plain menu of American foods. Lorena decided on a cup of tomato bisque and a club sandwich, and Ford asked for the first entree on the menu, grilled rainbow trout with roasted new potatoes and broccolini. And he didn't even know what broccolini was.
He admitted as much while they waited for the server to bring them water and coffee. "Oh," she said, "broccolini was hybridized in 1993. It's a cross between broccoli and gai-lan—that's Chinese broccoli, you know, a related cultivar of Brassica oleracea."

"Of course," Ford said, though he'd never even heard of Chinese broccoli. Hm! he thought. Hybridized in '93. No wonder I never heard of it! I was in, let me see, Dimension Wi-F42 for a lot of that year.

"You'll like it, I think," Lorena was saying. "Its flavor is a little sweeter than asparagus, but it's reminiscent of both broccoli and asparagus. The florets are more tender and dainty—Oh, my, I'm just running on and on."

"No, it's fascinating." And Ford liked listening to her. As they ate—and the meals really were very good—she told him stories about Moon Trap Pond.

"The Chinook legends are probably behind it all," she said. "But the early European settlers also spoke of a shining white spirit that sometimes rose from the pond. I don't know that any tragedy ever occurred there—no one drowned themselves in a Romeo-and-Juliet suicide pact or anything, and there are no monster tales—but for some reason people just tended to avoid it. When I was a girl, some of my classmates went out there one night to, well, I'm afraid, to swim without suits, you know? They didn't, though. They showed up at school really jumpy the next morning, and none of them would talk much about what happened. But it didn't involve skinny dipping—forgive the lapse into a colloquialism."

"That's quite all right," Ford said. He kept thinking I have never seen anyone with eyes that blue!

When he asked about nymphs, he got an encyclopedia article—or a college-level lecture—on mythology from her. He rested his elbow on the table and his chin on his hand, smiling and absorbing it all. She had a pretty voice.

"...so," she finished, "nymphs played quite a role in both Greek and Roman mythology. Most of the stories present them as timid, playful, and sympathetic to humans, but of course there are exceptions, and even tragic stories. Daphne, for example—you remember? No? Well, according to Ovid—Metamorphoses, you know, that great Latin compendium of mostly Greek myths—she was a nymph, daughter of Peneus, a river god, and Gaea, goddess of Earth. Apollo saw her from the heavens—he was the sun god, you know—and fell hopelessly in love with her. He tried to seize her, she ran, and she begged the gods not to let her be taken and ravished by even the handsome Apollo. They changed her into the first laurel tree, which then became sacred to Apollo, who truly loved her but lost her forever. He made the laurel wreath his personal symbol after that. 'Daphne' comes from the Greek word for 'laurel.' I'm boring you."

"Not at all," Ford said, though he'd not taken in absolutely every detail of all she'd said. "Not at all. I think I'm in love!"

She blushed and made a pushing gesture. "Oh, don't tease me. I'm getting to be an old lady!"

Ford reached over and took her hand. "Not at all," he said again, more softly this time.

She looked down and said, "Oh, my!"

He started to jerk his hand back, but she caught it and stopped him. "Uh—yes, I have polydactyly," he said.

She squeezed his hand. "Oh, silly, that doesn't bother me. I saw that first thing." She leaned closer
and smiled. "That is not at all what I meant by 'Oh my!' Would—oh, dear, I feel so forward!—would you mind terribly if I called the library and took the rest of the afternoon off?"

"Not at all," Ford said, more softly yet.

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Chapter 8: Waiting for Midnight

From the Journals of Dipper Pines: Thursday afternoon—It's DEFINITELY getting stronger. I'm sitting in the gift shop, on a stool behind the counter with Wendy right next to me, the Journal propped on my knees, writing and trying to concentrate. For some reason when Wendy and I are separated the telepathy thing just overrides everything else.

I mean, when we're apart, I can see through her eyes! I was up in the attic on my laptop and suddenly, there was this guy in front of me asking how much some trinket was, and I told him! And then I realized I was tuning in on Wendy's brainwaves or something. I could hardly find my way down the stairs, because I kept getting pictures of what she was looking at and had the weird feeling I was in two different places at the same time.

She knew. The second I set foot in the shop, she said, "Me, too! I kept seeing those web pages 'stead of the Shop!"

So I sat down close to her, and that stopped. But now we're sort of sending each other waves of . . . emotion, I guess? I just sit here and want to be alone with her so bad—I just got "Me too, dude!" from her—and all these tourists are milling around in the shop, I mean a TON of them, buying this and that and the other, and Wendy has to keep an eye on them and sell stuff—I don't know how we can stand this!

It's almost lunchtime. I can smell the burgers that are already on the grill in the snack bar, Abuelita is set up with the cash register, customers are lining up to order, and Mabel is in the snack bar flirting with T.K.

Funny. I HATED Mabel's spring romance, sleazy Trey. And her first guy, Norman, flat-out terrified me way back when, even though he turned out to be a stack of Gnomes. Also, I did not care for her first kiss, Mermando. Gideon Gleeful—yechh! And all the others in between—they made me REAL protective of Mabel.

But T.K. seems interested in her, and I know they probably kiss and fool around some, but—meh! It doesn't bother me. I like T.K. for one thing.

Wendy is reading over my shoulder, or maybe through my eyes, and she just thought to me, "Yeah, T.K.'s a nice dude. He's a little low-key for Mabes, but she's got enough zip for two people, anyhow!"

I think another reason is that—well, Wendy's gonna hear my thoughts, but what the hell? Yeah, I can think hell. "You go, Dip!" Wendy just sent me with a mental chuckle. OK, Wendy, I think I'm not as bothered because I'm starting to think everybody should have love in their lives! Painful as this is, I —I wouldn't trade it for all the mysteries in all the towns in all the world!

Because it feels right. I mean, it's not complete, we haven't done, and we aren't going to do, anything physical—Wendy's teasing me: "Aw, darn it! An' I wore my lacy undies!" She doesn't have any lacy
"So," Mabel said to T.K. as she assembled a hamburger to order for the tenth customer so far, "what do you think of releasing a box full of bats when they come out of the church? I've seen doves, but bats would be so cool!"

"Um, do bats even fly in the daytime?" T.K. asked, reaching for the next order slip.

"Don't they? No, I guess not. So—A night wedding! The lovely couple can walk out of the church as the bell in the steeple tolls twelve! The guests open their boxes, and—flubpt, flubpt, flubpt! That's my impression of bat wings."

She had done it with tongue and lower lip, and T.K. picked up a napkin and wiped a little spray of spit off his arm. "Sounded just like a box of bats being set free, too. Fries up?"

"Yeah, they're ready. I'll drain 'em and salt 'em in a second. Here's your Mystery Burger, sir! Medium-well, cheddar cheese, lettuce, tomato, bread and butter pickles—you daredevil, you!—special brown Mystery mustard with the zesty zing, and mayo. Enjoy!"

The customer, a man in a dark suit and dark glasses, didn't look like the usual patron of the Mystery Shack—or, as Grunkle Stan called them, "suckers." But he thanked Mabel, opened the top bun to peek at the burger, took a bite, and called out, "Delicious!" to T.K. and Mabel.

Mabel had dumped the French fries into the warmer and was assembling the next order: jumbo basket of fries, an Iceburger (not chilled, but with iceberg lettuce and onion only), and a hot dog Chicago style. (Grunkle Stan: "Ya wanna know what Chicago style is? Ya put one of our dogs in your gut, it puts you in the hospital! That's Chicago style!")

In fact, it was a specially-spiced grilled frankfurter in a fresh poppy-seed roll, topped with yellow mustard, chopped onion, tiny pickled hot sport peppers, sweet relish, chopped fresh tomato, a dill pickle wedge as long as the bun, and then sprinkled with celery salt. The couple whose order it was tasted their food, and the guy actually stood up with his fists in the air high over his head and said, "Yeah! Man! I ain't had one of these since we moved outa West Englewood! This is the stuff! Kid, ya grew up somewheres along the Loop in Chicago, am I right?"

"Nope," T.K. called back with a smile. "Ashland, Oregon and then Gravity Falls!"

"Yeah, he's local, but he sure can drag a dog through the garden!" Mabel said loyally.

The man had a mustardy grin as wide as the hot dog was long. "Yeh? Good on ya, kid! Tell ya what, I'm eatin' this one—and then I want two more just like it!"

"You got 'em!" Mabel said. "Sir, I admire your intestinal fortitude."

"You don't have to sleep next to him," the guy's wife said, but in a relatively fond tone.
Abuelita passed down three more order slips. "Man!" Mabel said as T.K. read them and started to cook again, "keeps up like this, Soos is gonna have to expand the snack bar! Maybe he could build like a separate little restaurant and put you in charge."

"Well—I do like to cook," T.K. said.

She poked him in the ribs. "Yeah, but you're so thin! What's up with that?"

"I like to cook more than I like to eat, I guess," T.K. said as he plopped five more beef patties onto the grill. "But I don't want to be a chef. What I'd really like to do is direct."

Mabel's eyes widened, and her brain danced with an image of a buffed-up T.K. looking sharp in an immaculate dark-blue uniform and badge. "Traffic?"

He gave her a surprised over-the-shoulder look. "Movies. I mean, I love literature and language and maybe I could be a screenwriter first, but then I'd like to direct movies!"

"Oh!" Mabel passed out the next order and then in her flirtiest voice said, "Well, Mr. Director, maybe you'll be wanting a star!"

He grinned, reached back, and gave her hand a quick little squeeze. "I think I may have found one!"

Out in the gift shop, the bustle suddenly paused as people froze, listening.

In the unexpected hush, Wendy spoke aloud this time: "What was that? Like, a jet flyin' too low or somethin'?"

"Nope," Dipper said, not even looking up from his Journal. "That was just Mabel squee-ing."

At six p.m. Soos flipped the sign on the door to "CLOSED," and Wendy used an old-fashioned adding machine to balance out her register. She totaled and checked the closing balance against the money she'd put in at the beginning of the day and whistled. She tore the adding-machine tape out, folded it, and with a red ballpoint wrote the profit on the top. "Soos, man, we just set a record!"

Soos had sunk into a chair and had removed the fez and the eyepatch. "Dude, I totally am not surprised! Six tours! An' I got like three hundred bucks in tips. Remind me to divvy it with you an' T.K. tomorrow, huh? Listen to me—I'm like hoarse with success!"

T.K.—who had already generously split his own tips with Mabel and Abuelita—had gone home, but Mabel was there. "Soos, T.K. left a list of groceries you're gonna need to get tonight. We're nearly out of everything!"

Soos stretched and yawned. "OK, dawg. I'll get Melody to go with me an' we'll stock up. We'll get some take-out for tonight's dinner. You watch Little Soos for us?"

Dipper waited for Wendy to lock up. For a change, they seemed to have caught a break. Somehow Wendy had learned they wouldn't have to worry about Manly Dan, and though he had caught that thought, Dipper really didn't yet know why, because Wendy had talked to her dad on the phone, and her feelings about her father were so mixed up, irritation and humor, exasperation and love, that he
couldn't quite follow the train of thought. He was dying to ask her about it.

"Of course!" Mabel said. "That'll let Abuelita put her feet up."

"No," a voice drifted in from the next room. "I vacuum now."

"Uh, I'm just gonna—if it's OK," Dipper said, "uh, ride home with Wendy. I'll have dinner with her. Her family. And I'll walk back? I guess."

"Don't do that, Dip," Soos said. "Me an' Melody will go right past their road on the way back from shoppin'. I'll give you a call, an' you can walk down the drive an' meet us and catch a ride with us. We'll just be, like, an hour or some junk."

"Thanks . . . Soos," Dipper said, his smiling teeth clenched.

Wendy got her stuff from the locker, they climbed into her car, drove halfway down the drive, stopped to hug and kiss and moan a little, and then headed for the Corduroy cabin. "OK, dude, I know you're wondering. Dad called me a little while back to say he and the boys are going to White Rapids to visit my aunty," she said. "They won't leave until, like, seven, and since she lives up in White Rapids, they won't get back until maybe three o'clock in the morning at the very earliest. Yeah, it's nuts, but she always wants to celebrate the anniversary of her first husband's demise with a midnight supper, 'cause he died on the last stroke of midnight, and sometimes Dad goes to make sure she doesn't get all weepy and depressed. We'll let them think it's a movie night for us. We're cool."

"I'm starting to have second thoughts about going out to the pond," Dipper admitted.

"Yeah, an' I know why. Nobody around, no supervision, warm night. Dangerous territory, Dip."

"Oh, Wendy—I know I'm not old enough or ready for, you know—intimacy. But—I don't know if I can keep myself from—look, promise me you'll keep me from doing anything stupid!"

"Aw, I dunno. 'Cause I'm awfully, uh, edgy too!"

"Yeah. But I don't want my first time to be, you know. Sneaky. And I'd probably be horrible at it."

"Don't sell yourself short, man. I've seen your memories. You practice a lot when you're alone."

Dipper tried to get mad, but wound up laughing. "Hey! You've got a lot of room to talk! Kissing Tambry—"

"Don't go there, man!" She made a turn and sighed. "Dude, you never asked, an' I kept it off my mind. I appreciate your tact, I guess it is? But I'm gonna tell you straight out, 'cause I want you to know. When it happens, it's gonna be my first time, too."

He couldn't doubt her. He felt the truth of what she said—and felt the flutter of mixed emotions rising inside her: embarrassment and excitement, wistfulness and anticipation, fear and curiosity. "I didn't know," he said. "I was never gonna ask."

"Yeah, people assume a lotta crap about me, man. 'Cause I'm totally a freak—tomboy good at lumberjack skills and physical stuff, outgoing, kinda laid back—or so everybody thinks. I'll tell you, though, I get serious come-ons from guys, like, all the time! Even older ones, like forty and over! And from girls, even, who think the tomboy stuff means I'm into that. But, I dunno—I'm always stressed out 'cause of my family, an' I'm kinda a scaredy-cat down deep, I guess. So really nothing. Well, that's not true. Me an' Robbie did some pretty heavy touching once or twice, an' some of my other dates have, you know, touched me up here. But I've always kept my clothes on. So. Yeah, I
want our first time to be right, man, because it'll be a first for both of us. God, I can't stop going on and on. Stop me from talking, man. I'm worried now that I've said so much you'll stop liking me."

"When my heart stops beating," Dipper said. "And I hope not even then."

Dan Corduroy and his two younger sons took off almost as soon as Dipper and Wendy arrived. They had a hurried dinner of sandwiches, sat on the sofa in front of the TV—Wendy asked if Dipper wanted to go watch in her room, and he said, "Uh, we'd be on your bed, and I think that might make me crazy."

So they made out on the living-room sofa—for a limited definition of "making out." After too short a time, but perhaps just in time, Dipper's phone went off. Soos, of course.

He tucked his shirt back in, Wendy buttoned hers, and she said, "OK, dude, I'll be over there 'round eleven. You got any hiking boots?"

Dipper shook his head. "Wish I did. The dew goes right through my sneakers."

"Just a sec." She left the room and came back with a scuffed pair of brown boots. "I think these might fit you. Try one on."

It did fit, though it felt just a tad large.

"S OK," Wendy said. "Wear two pairs of socks. Those useta belong to Junior, but he grew out of 'em in like, a week. Keep 'em."

"I better go. Soos and Melody will be coming along at any minute."

"See you at midnight," Wendy said, kissing him.

"Let's hope for the best," he murmured.

And then he had to go.

Chapter 9: Dark of the Moon

"So if you want to see for yourself," Lorena Jones murmured to Ford, "the time to do it would be tonight, a completely moonless night. Mm. But maybe . . . not right away. Mm!"

Ford was visiting her in her home, a cozy cottage on the cul-de-sac at the end of Beech Street. "Ahh," he whispered. "Lorena, I have to admit something: I've never done this before."

She sighed and chuckled. "Ford," she said, stroking his bare back, "at this point it really doesn't matter, does it? And you're doing . . . very well."

A few minutes later they lay in the darkness side by side, holding hands. "I've dreamed of this so many times," Ford confessed.

Lorena had an adorable gurgling chuckle. "I hope it lived up to your dreams!"
"A thousand fold," he said. "Oh, my dear, I'd long ago resigned myself to a life of celibacy. I've always lived in such a crazy, random way that I've had no chance for love, only mysteries and dangers. If I told you even one of my adventures, you'd think me insane."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't," Lorena said, rolling on her side and throwing her free arm across his chest. "Remember, I went through Never Mind About All That. That demonic triangle, whatever it was, froze me and put me in his throne and sat on me! Did you know we were conscious the whole time we were frozen? And besides, I've lived in Gravity Falls all my life. Even before that craziness happened, I'd seen so many odd things—lots of Gnomes, though at the time I didn't know what they were, of course. I think once a Manotaur, but that was in the distance. And my late husband died when some sort of crazed creature that looked only half human came out of the woods and attacked him one evening at dusk when we'd driven up into the hills to walk around and look at some property he'd inherited. We were thinking of building a house there when this—thing came leaping and screeching out of the woods."


"I don't know. The creature moved so fast I never got a good look at it. But whatever it was terrified Michael into a heart attack. He barely had time to bundle me into the car and he locked and slammed the door to protect me, and then as he tried to run to the driver's side, he fell as that horrible thing leaped and danced all around screaming and gibbering and pounding on the hood and car roof, and then it ran off again. I got out and found Michael lying on the ground in front of the car. It took everything I had to lift him and put him in the passenger seat—he was a big, heavy man—and then I had to get the car keys from his pocket. Back then I'd never learned to drive, but I somehow did it and got us into town without wrecking. At that time, old Doctor Kotter—he passed on years ago—lived here, though his clinic was up in Mossy Run. I drove to his house and woke him up, but it was too late. My Michael was gone."

Ford squeezed her hand. "I'm very sorry."

She sighed. "Michael was almost ten years older than I, and he didn't take good care of himself, I'm afraid. I can't say his death was completely unexpected. That was fifteen years ago. The heart heals with time, Ford. But I miss him still." Ford could hear the smile in her voice: "Like all couples, I guess, we'd talked about what might happen if one of us died first. He made me promise that I'd remarry if the chance ever came. But I was thirty-seven then, and it seemed too late for that." She squeezed his hand and rubbed her other hand over his chest. "I never expected to fall for a man again."

"It's not too late even now," Ford said warmly. He reached to caress her cheek. "You hit me like a bolt of green lightning in the 191/m Dimension. I have to ask. Is this—what we had—I hope it isn't just—"

She laughed softly again. "What the young folks used to call a one-night-stand? No. Not if you don't want it to be. You're the kindest, gentlest man I've ever met. And I warn you, when I do fall, I fall hard!"

It was Ford's turn to chuckle. "I'm here to catch you. As for gentleness, well, I sort of have to be gentle. If you turned on the light—I'm not asking you to!—you'd see that my body's a patchwork of scar tissue. If I tried to be less than gentle, I might fall to pieces like a jigsaw puzzle."

Her voice became sympathetic: "I felt some of those ridges on your back."

"Big raised welts of criss-cross scars. Yes, those are the souvenirs of whip cuts," Ford said shortly. "From my being tied to a tree and lashed with a nasty knotted rope because I couldn't explain how
I'd materialized in the courtyard of a paranoid and petty king. I couldn't explain because I didn't know! I was traveling randomly from dimension to dimension back then, and I couldn't control when or where a passage would open and zap me to another bizarre place. That was in the first few weeks of my wanderings, when I was terrified and confused."

"How did you escape?"

He sighed. "That's a story too long to tell right now. Another day, maybe." Ford looked at the luminous blue numbers on her clock radio. Though twilight lingered outside, the curtains on her windows darkened the room. "It's nine-twelve. Do we really want to go out to Moon Trap Pond tonight, Lorena?"

"I do," she said at once, sounding thirty years younger than her age and spunky as a teen. "It's the ideal time. And a librarian doesn't get many chances to go adventuring with a battle-scarred hero."

"More like a battle-scare hero," Ford said ruefully. "I was lost between dimensions for thirty years, and though I constantly bluff my way through, I think I was terrified for about eighty per cent of that time. Do you have suitable clothes to wear for a long night walk?"

"I can round up some. My husband and I used to hike the mountains a lot, in fact, and I can still fit into my jeans and boots."

"Then you get ready and get dressed. I'll drive back to the McGucket house—"

"Oh! Is that where you live?"

Hesitantly, remembering how Fiddleford had been the more or less official town idiot for so many years, resisting stiff competition even from Deputy Durland, Ford said, "Well, yes. Dr. McGucket and I used to be fellow researchers, and my niece and nephew were instrumental in his regaining his sanity. In gratitude for that, and for our rescue of his long-lost wife, he's given my twin brother and me a whole wing of the house as a permanent residence—and the run of the kitchen, library, and dining room, of course."

Softly, Lorena replied, "He was always such a nice old man, even when he wasn't making much sense. I used to let him shelter in the library on especially cold or rainy days. Every time he'd bring me little presents in return. Pieces of string, empty jelly jars—scrupulously clean, always—sometimes an assortment of odd shirt and trouser buttons, the sort of things a kindergarten boy might bring to a teacher he loved. I'm glad he recovered."

Ford nodded his agreement, though in the dark, he realized, Lorena couldn't see the gesture. "Not only recovered, but he's very wealthy. He had earlier patents that continued to accumulate royalties during his, ah, illness, though for thirty years he even forgot their existence, and he invents something new almost every day. He deserves that mansion of his."

"I've always heard it's splendid. Maybe I can come and see it some time."

"Of course! Any time you want," Ford said. "I'll show you all around. You can meet Mrs. McGucket—Mayellen. You'll like her. She's a fine woman, and they're very happy together."

"I remember a Mayellen Tate from high school. She was sweet and shy."

"That's Fiddleford's wife. She was astonished to learn that he lives in a mansion now."

"When the Northwests owned that house," she said wistfully, "I always wanted to see what it was like inside. I missed out on that one occasion when they had the big party and let the whole town in."
It was my night as a docent in the Museum of History, and no one came in that evening! I didn't find out why until the next day. No one told me everyone was invited."

"Well, as it happens, you escaped some unpleasantness, I understand," Ford said. He got up and retrieved his shirt and trousers and other bits of clothing from the chair where he'd draped them. "I'll go home and get into my gear and then come back and pick you up. Forty minutes?"

"That should be plenty."

He leaned down in the darkness and kissed her. "I have to say—you're a wonderful woman, Lorena. I've never felt this relaxed, this peaceful, this happy before. Not ever."

"It's called," she said, softly wrapping her arms around his neck, "the afterglow."

Dipper and Wendy talked very quietly as they sat in the Shack. Sometimes they only thought to each other, completely silently.

"If we set out at eleven," Wendy said.

"—we should get there just before midnight—"

"—yeah, even though we gotta walk instead of—"

"—running."

"Dude, I guess we need flashlights this time. I mean, no moon, it's gonna be pretty dark."

"I've got that covered," Dipper told her.

"No," Wendy said. "I don't at all."

Dipper grinned. "I didn't even ask the question before you answered! No secrets. You really don't regret, uh, you know, what we did back there?"

"Never," Wendy said. "We didn't go all the way! We just . . . relieved our tensions a little bit."

"I loved it. I love you."

"Yeah, it was real nice. But we're lucky—"

"—Manly Dan didn't come walking in—"

"—yeah, dude, like he did that one time when I was massagin' your back—"

"—because he forgot his bowling ball!"

Wendy shook her head. "No secrets at all, man! We're, like open books to each other."

"And I love you more than ever," he said.

"Same here, Dip. If—if we fix this—an' I still think we gotta—"

"—I don't know how much we'll lose, Wendy. I wish I did."
"But we've still got our pact, right?"

"Yeah. Oh, yeah. And unless your dad pounds me into hamburger when I ask for his blessing—"

"I'll take care of my dad when the time comes. Yeah, dude, but don't tell your sister too soon, OK? I mean, not until your eighteenth birthday's just 'round the corner."

"I won't." Dipper sighed. "She'll know when I tell Mom and Dad, though."

"You really think your mom's the problem?"

"Oh, I don't know," Dipper said. "But anyway, it won't be Dad! Dad, heck, he thinks you're great! You had him when you drove up in the car you repaired yourself. He loves vintage cars. If worse comes to worst, you could offer to trade him the Dodge Dart for me."

"Hmm," she said.

"He'd take you up on it," Dipper pointed out.

"I'm thinking it over!" she said, making Dipper laugh—because he saw in her mind that she'd do that without hesitation.

"Mom, well, she can be overprotective," Dipper said. "But she won't forbid us. She might try her best to argue us out of it—too young, no means of support, that kind of thing."

"But you got a plan already."

"You see that, too?"

"Yeah, dude! Just like I know you're gonna want to rent a secluded cabin for the honeymoon. One with a great big swimming pool in the back yard . . . and a tall privacy fence around it!"

"Yeah," Dipper said, speaking of his half-formed plan, not the pool and the redhead in it and himself diving in after her. "What I'd like to do, see, is write maybe a couple or three books in the next years. If I can get them published—and Ford thinks I can write well enough for that—then maybe I can make some money. Save it all. Have it in the bank for us to get started. I know it's risky. Not one writer in a thousand can get a book published."

"You're gonna write about Gravity Falls."

"Yeah, in a fictional way. I mean, the books would be novels, you know? I'll dream up some other town to set the stories in. And I'll use different names for the characters and all, maybe do the books under a pseudonym so if later on I want to do serious books on the paranormal for adults I can use my real name. But anyway, for the novels I'll write fictionalized tales about mysteries and monsters. Maybe books for kids or teen-agers."

"You can do it. I believe in you." Mentally, Wendy added: —Why are you thinking of a girl named Eloise, Dipper?—

—I knew you'd pick up on that sooner or later. I mentioned her before. She's the girl I met in the Westminster Mystery House. Kind of like me, in a way—except she has this psychic gift, Second Sight. She can see ghosts.

—Was she pretty?

—More cute than pretty. But she lives in the Midwest, and I haven't heard from her in months. I liked
her the way you meet somebody and like them, but not anything more than that. We weren't interested in each other, except we got trapped in the house and had to find our way out.

—Man, I can see you're tellin' the truth. OK, Dip, confession time. I keep tryin' to hold back on a couple things, so you're bein' more honest with me than I am with you. I'm sorry for that. But I promise you, I'll tell you everything, maybe when you're like seventeen. It's not bad—I mean, I didn't do anything to be ashamed of or to regret, but I got myself in trouble at school and all. Will you trust me and not probe in my head to find out why?

—Always and forever I'll trust you, Wendy. That's a big, big thing for me.

They sat in the parlor, on the sofa, and they hardly touched each other's hands. People were still awake, and every half hour or so, Mabel came in with her sketch book to get Wendy's opinion on wedding plans and ideas. Now she was toying with seeing if the Navy would lend a submarine so they could have a Goth under-the-sea reception.

Finally, though, the house got quiet at a quarter to eleven, and they slipped up to the attic and changed into their hiking clothes. Together. After all, they kept their underwear on. For the most part.

Then, each one equipped with a powerful flashlight, Wendy and Dipper silently left the Shack and headed down the trail to whatever waited at Moon Trap Pond.

Chapter 10: A Gathering

"C'mon, Teek!" Mabel urged, shoving through some heavy brush and letting it lash back.

"Mom and Dad will kill me if they find I sneaked out," T.K. muttered. "Where are we going? It's so dark! Ouch! That slapped me right in the face!"

"Well, I'm sorry, but if you'd come up beside me here, we'd shove the branches aside together! And don't worry about your folks. They're snoring away. I mean, it's after eleven! All parents everywhere are in bed by this time!"

The pine branches rustled as T.K. pulled up beside her. "OK, I guess. When are you going to tell me where we're headed?"

"It's like a wishing well," Mabel told him, reaching and fumbling a little to hold his hand. "My brother told me about it. Well, part of it, but I eavesdrop a whole lot! He an'—well, a girl—made a wish, and it's made them fall madly in love!"

"Uh—I don't think we need to make a wish for that," T.K. said nervously.

"Not a wish to fall in love, silly!" Mabel said. "Just to be happy! That's all. Heck, we can handle the rest of it ourselves! Huh? Huh? Huh?" She gave him a sharp nudge with the old elbow.

They were following, roughly, the same path that Wendy and Dipper took when they ran the nature trail, but since Mabel, though very active, was not into running as exercise and had never traveled that route, they had missed the path and instead the two of them were going overland, uphill and down again, wading through tall grass and patches of brush higher than their heads. The vegetation brushed against them and the long grass soaked their jeans with dew. "Are you sure you know where it is?" T.K. asked.
"I know exactly where it probably approximately is!" Mabel shot back. "And even if we get lost, so what? It doesn't matter so long as we're in this thing together. We're having an adventure, Teek! Uh —by the way, I never asked. Does it bother you that I'm callin' you Teek?"

"Huh? No, I like it!" T.K. gave her hand a little squeeze. "Nobody's ever had a nickname for me before. Well, if you don't count 'Four Eyes' and 'Dorky McDorkface.'"

"I don't count those at all," Mabel said. "Look, I got it, we can wish for you to have a great career as a movie director! And if it's not real magic, so what? It's like, inspiration! You make the wish an' it inspires you to work hard to make it come true, right? You know perspiration is ninety-nine percent inspiration! Or something. Dipper's said that before, I think, or something a whole lot like that. I don't always pay close attention to Dipper."

"Uh, OK, I think I know what you mean—oof! Wait! Wait! Gopher hole! Darn it! Hang on, Mabel, I have to get my shoe out!"

He knelt and stuck his hand down into the hole that he'd stepped in. Then he jumped back, falling on his butt. In the glare of Mabel's flashlight, a Gnome with a crumpled red cap popped out, holding a blue sneaker and rubbing his head. He glared at T.K. and gabbled at him in Gnomish, waving both arms, before hurling the shoe with all his might. It went about six inches and plopped down on the ground. The still-grumbling Gnome withdrew underground again.

Mabel held her flashlight beam so T.K. could see how to put the sneaker on and re-tie the laces. "I'm having a hard time getting my head around those Gnomes," he said. "You see them a lot downtown now. Never used to! Nobody bats an eye at them anymore, but they're weird, man!"

"They're a civic treasure!" Mabel insisted. "What other town has a population of little bad-tempered pointy-headed guys with beards? Besides, they're personal friends of mine. I nearly married a thousand of them when I was twelve! But there was no chemistry between us, I swear. They meant nothing to me! Well, very little. Not like you and me, Teek!"

T.K.—Teek, as he was beginning to prefer to be called—gave her a shy smile, shading his eyes from her flashlight. "Just a passing summer romance, then?"

"Yeah. Come to think of it, more like a summer horror movie, really."

"I thought the Gnomes lived up in trees or something."

"The civilized ones do. They used to all live underground, Dipper says. Ages ago. Now just the feral ones make burrows. Got your shoe back on? Forward! I think it's this way."

And not so far away—

"The air feels funny," Dipper said, sniffing like an apprehensive rabbit. "Tingly."

Wendy put her hand on his arm and gripped it as if she were nervous. "I know, man. Electric, like right before a big storm."

"Yeah."

Then she was in his head:
—Dipper, this has been botherin’ me, man. What did you mean when you said if we, you know, really got together you wouldn’t even finish high school?

—Well, you know, I’d have to support you somehow. I mean, we can’t just start, you know, doing it. Neither of us would feel right about that. We were toying with the idea of marriage—

—yeah, it’d hafta be that, or for sure, my dad would take an axe to you—an’ me both, probably. So—

—so I’d have to get a job to support us, and I’m fourteen! Working at a burger place, or whatever, you know, minimum wage.

—Soos would hire us both on.

—Sure, and Grunkle Stan would back him with enough money to pay us so Soos wouldn’t lose on the deal, but do we want that? Depending on our friends and family instead of making it on our own?


—Yeah, and anyhow, Wendy, I want to do it all the right way when the time comes! I want us to be off to a good start, and I want us to have a real future ahead when we do it. I mean, we could go to college together—

—Hah! As if I could get admitted to one!

—You know you could!

—Aw, Dip, they’ll look at my school records—

—your school records won’t matter. Not when they learn about you, not when they see you—

—What makes you think that?

Dipper gave her a punch on the arm—really the lightest of taps—and said firmly, “Because you’re a flippin’ Corduroy!”

After a few moments of silent walking, Wendy said, “You know what, Dip? You’re a smart guy, an’ I know you can prob’ly get into any university in America. But hear this, man: whether it’s Backupsmore or Harvard or even West Coast Tech, I solemnly swear I will get admission and I’ll be an A student, too, just so’s I can be with you. And you’re right! I am a Corduroy! In your face, College Board!”

"I love you so much right now!"

"I know, dude. Tell me about it later! ’Cause at the moment, well—"

Let’s face it. People in love stop and kiss. A lot. But soon they resumed their walk.

And only a few moments later, off in the deep night, they saw a dark circle ahead in the distance, barely visible in the very pale light of the stars.

They grabbed hold of each other’s hand. And together they thought, This is it.

They were almost there.
Ford led the way, and Lorena—well, she sort of shambled after him, frequently catching her toes on roots or nearly blundering into a tree. Ford called back, "That was a very good idea of yours, to check the aerial survey maps in the library! Good thing you have a key!"

"Thank you, Ford. Or—would you mind if I called you 'dear'?

"Oh, yes, certainly, that's customary," Ford said. "Very well. Yes, I'd like that—darling."

"Dear, your hand is so big and warm and strong."

"Yes, polydactyly will do that. Ah! There's our landmark ahead. I'll bet we saved at least twenty minutes by parking behind the sawmill and cutting through the woods rather than going around by way of the Mystery Shack."

"I wish we could see better."

"Oh, wait, I forgot." Ford stopped and reached over to switch on Lorena's night-vision goggles. "I meant to power these up earlier. There! Is that better?"

"My, yes! Very clear. Except everything's sort of green! But at least I can see now!"

"I have flashlights, too, if we need them. Now look: There's the creek that forms a break in the woods. We just follow the direction of flow until the land opens up. Past the edge of the forest we'll come upon a low grassy hill, no trees and a very gentle slope, and once we climb that, we should be within a few hundred feet of the pond. It's in sort of a dale just on the far side of the first hill."

"You lead," Lorena said. "I'll follow."

"I'm still not sure what we're going to do when we get there," Ford admitted.

"Well—I can't speak Ancient Greek, but I did memorize an English transcription of a song written in the eighth century BC by Hesiod. It might or might not work. It's called 'Na kalēsei tis Nýmfes.'"

"Hmm. 'An Incantation for Nymphs.'"

"You speak Greek?"

In a modest tone, Ford said, "Well, a smattering. I'm really only fluent in French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Scots Gaelic, but I can converse after a halting fashion in Danish, Dutch, Finnish, Greek—sorry, I'm sounding like a boastful jerk."

"No, you're not—mon amour!"

"J'taime," he said, smiling in the green-lit darkness. "Lorena, I hear Paris is a delightful place for a honeymoon!"

They topped the hill and gazed down. "Oh, my," Lorena said softly.

"We may already be too late," Ford replied, staring at what was happening below.

"Here we are," Wendy said. "OK, you naiad, or whatever. You tossed back our second and third
pennies, so we came back when there's no moon. We have to ask you for a favor."

"We have to talk," Dipper said to the still water. "Please."

"The wish, like, came true too well," Wendy explained. "We're almost one person, the two of us. But it's not workin' out so good for us!"

"We don't want to fall out of love, though. We just need your help!"

"Dude," Wendy said, "I think something's happenin'!"

The pool became visible, glowing a soft yet penetrating blue—an ice-blue, an aurora-blue, the full moon shining on snow, or the moonlight filtering into the depths of the sea. The color slowly pulsated, lighting up the whole area, silvering Wendy's and Dipper's faces. "It's so beautiful," Dipper said.

"Look—it's moving!"

The pool was not rippling exactly—more like bounding up and down in very slow motion, a trampoline surface on which something invisible and huge leaped up and down, up and down. Now the center bulged, now it sank.

—Dude, it's almost like—

—something's trying to bust out—

—oh, man, there's like a woman—

—made of water—

—and light—coming up from the depths!

She rose from the radiance, a being human in form, tall and slim and shimmering, utterly transparent, glowing from within, like a living crystal statue, or one carved from living ice—and yet she was liquid, her features shimmering and fluid.

She was beautiful and nude—

—Dipper, man! Seriously, is that the FIRST thing you notice?

—with shapely breasts, a narrow waist, long graceful legs. Her hair was even longer than Wendy's, but it wasn't hair; rather it was a bubbly waterfall cascading down her back, clinging to her round buttocks, dripping down her thighs and audibly into the water. She had no . . . feet, or at least they did not show. Her ankles remained in the water.

She did not walk, but glided toward them, and stopped only a couple of feet away. If they took three steps to the water's very edge and she stretched out her arm, they could have touched her fingertips. She tilted her face to the left and right, her eyes open, no irises or pupils visible, but she clearly could see them. She smiled, and the smile had no threat in it, but a great gentleness.

—My children.

The words had not been spoken, but they shimmered in Wendy's and Dipper's minds, soft and motherly and reassuring. Dipper felt—well—awe. This being was more than human. She had ethereal beauty, and in her he sensed great force, sublime power.
He loved her!

Not as he loved Wendy, but with a kind of adoration. He almost wanted to fall on his knees and worship her—and, he felt sure, so did Wendy, but she seemed to be resisting—

—Don't do it, Dipper!

—and his knees locked. "I won't," he said aloud. "That would be wrong. Look, uh, Shining Woman—is it OK to call you that?"

—My name is Numina.

"Numina, we feel that you're greater and, and more powerful than we are. And we, uh, honor that. But please, take back the gift you gave us. We don't want to fall out of love—"

"Yeah, we don't want that, but sharing every thought, every feeling, well, humans aren't made for that! It's too much for us."

—Maybe taking back the wish can be done. But it could hurt you. It could cost you. One of you must retrieve the token.

"The penny, you mean?" Dipper asked.

"Oh, girl—uh, Numina, do you mean we have to, like, dive in and hunt for it?"

—You must seek it in the depths, grasp it, and return to this world with it. If you lose it—you can never return to the world of air.

"I got this," Dipper said, tossing his cap on the grass and pulling off his shirt.

"No way, dude! When you were assistant lifeguard I found out that you can hardly swim! I'm goin' in, Numina!"

—It may well hurt you.

"Wendy, you can't! If it's dangerous—wait, how will it hurt?"

—You have touched transcendence. Without it, a part of your heart may forever ache.

Wendy asked, "But it won't, like, make us not love each other, right?"

—That is up to you. I will say only that true love may save you, for it alone makes hearts whole. How true is your love, my children?

Wendy stripped to bra and panties. "True enough that I'm goin' in. Dipper, no!"

He was holding her wrist, and he had stripped to his undershorts. "We go together," he said firmly.

—Then be brave, my children.

Dipper took a deep breath, he and Wendy made just one small step to wade into the water—

—and immediately plunged in over their heads. As they dropped, Dipper thought—but he wasn't sure—that he heard both Grunkle Ford and Mabel both shouting his name.

Then water and silence filled his ears, and he and Wendy had transformed into figures of shimmering
light, like Numina, and they floated in a world of illuminated men and women in pairs, who smiled at them and beckoned them to sink ever deeper, ever deeper.

Down.

Down.

Down into darkness.

**Chapter 11: Whirlpool**

Floating, disoriented by being beneath the surface, able to move in three dimensions, Dipper reached for Wendy's hand, and their palms and fingers merged, like two streams flowing together. He sensed that he could release her any moment he wished, but he felt a pleading tug and held on.

—Dipper, I'm scared!

And he felt that thought, too, honest and without pretense or acting. Wendy really was frightened, and he knew how much it cost her to make that admission.

He tried to make his thoughts as reassuring as possible, not an easy task considering that he, too, felt panic-stricken: —We're together. You'll be OK with me.

—We're not BREATHING, man!

The moment she said that, he made a convulsive gasp, but nothing happened—it was as though he had no lungs, no nostrils.

And as though he didn't need them—or a heart.

—I . . . don't think we have to. Either this is an illusion, or our bodies have changed. I can't feel my heart beating, either, but—it seems to be OK. Oh, Wendy! Look at you! You're more beautiful than ever—you're like an angel underwater!

Like a faint scent on a breeze, Numina's thoughts drifted to them from the surrounding darkness. "My children, your time in this realm is short—or it is eternal. Consider what you want."

And again Dipper felt that tug from Wendy, this time urgent, pulling him downward.

—Come on, man! We gotta get to the bottom! She descended like a skindiver, her lovely legs and feet propelling her downward at nearly a ninety-degree angle.

They swam through a crowd of human figures, all in pairs, all touching or close enough to touch, and all of them glowing silver. None looked at them.

Past the figures, a deeper darkness enveloped them, soft, like a welcoming velvet blanket. Far above them the glowing couples swam, or drifted, or spun together, becoming figures of broken light against a rippling sky of blue, all moving the same way in a circle. Or spiral. Or whirlpool.

Dipper thought, *Numina! Who are those people?*

"They all are lovers who wished never to be parted. I granted their wishes, welcomed them into my waters, and here they remain forever. Some united when old and worn-out, at the end of their lives,
and here they are forever young again. Some, though, perished too early of despair for lovers whom on earth they had lost."

Lovers? Dipper looked back upward as Wendy pulled him deeper and deeper, trying to remember what the whirlpool of lost lovers reminded him of. Not a movie or a video game, but something he had read. The Journals? No, it had been back in the winter, at school, in the library. In fact, he had been reading—

—Dante!

—Help me swim, dude! What do you mean, Dante? Come on, kick! Wendy struggled hard to swim downward, and he realized belatedly that he was more of an anchor than a help. She still held his hand, but her other arm was pointing downward, and she was working her long legs in that strong scissors kick, powering them both toward the bottom.

Dipper began his awkward frog-kick, the only way of swimming that he knew, and he felt the pressure of their joined hands ease. He was helping, at least a little. His chest kept frantically trying to pump—but if his body was like Wendy's transparent form, he had no lungs! Maybe they were absorbing oxygen through their glowing skins, as frogs do.

—Wendy, I read a translation of Dante's Divine Comedy for extra credit last year. This reminds me of the first part, the Inferno, where Dante tours Hell! This is like the second circle! Souls of lovers whirling around, but in the air. Always together—

—That's sweet, but—

—No, Wendy! Not sweet! They're in Hell!

—Kick, dude! We gotta find the bottom!

This was reminding Dipper of something else. He had once felt something very similar to this floating—but then it hadn't been a struggle, but a kind of easy, smooth flow. A dream? No, he thought, it had been real. But he couldn't quite remember.

—Oh, man, Dipper, it's gonna be too far for us! What's Numina playing at, making us her pawns, her puppets—

And like an unfocused photo suddenly clicking into sharpness, he had it, remembering a taunting shout: "Sorry, kid, but you're my puppet now!"

—Hang on, Wendy. Stop kicking.

—But Dip!

—Trust me on this.

—O-OK, man . . .

Her legs stopped their rhythmic scissoring. Dipper realized that the light flowing from her body had been pulsating with her efforts, but now it steadied into an enchanting glow.

—Now I'm gonna let go. Don't worry, I won't lose you. I'm gonna try something.

—Dipper, if we fail at this—remember I love you, man, whatever happens. Her despair was so strong he could almost taste its bitterness.
—We're NOT gonna fail. OK, watch me.

He released her hand, then doubled up, raised both of his arms—an underwater Superman without a cape—straightened out and zoomed without stroking or kicking! He spun, making loops around Wendy, zipped away, zipped back, graceful and confident.

—How're you DOING that?

—Think of it and it happens, like in the Mindscape when we shrank down to talk to Bill! Get it? We're like ghosts here! Just point your arms where you want to go, keep your legs straight, and THINK of gliding there. Yeah, you got it! Race you to the bottom!

At first she was slow, uncertain, but he urged her on, and in moments she was streaking downward, her hopelessness dissolving in the sheer joy of moving.

—Way to go, Wendy! The secret is not to struggle! Use the water, don't fight it. Let it take you where you want to go!

Dipper had only thought that, but he got an answer from Wendy:

—Good thinking, Dip! This is FUN, man! Whee!

And side by side, graceful as two courting angel fish, they swooped, they spun, they looped—

And they descended, no longer minding the dark . . . .

At the surface, and at the same time but from two different directions, four people came running to the edge of the pond, their flashlight beams jerking with their strides. "Mabel?" Ford shouted. "Is that you?"

"Grunkle Ford?" Mabel asked. They turned their lights on each other.

"Uh—this is Mrs. Jones," Ford said as Lorena came gasping up behind him. "She works in the library."

"Hi," Mabel said. "This is Teek. Teek O'Grady. He works in the Mystery Shack."

"Um—hi," Teek said. "I, uh, I'm the one who checks out all those movie books, Mrs. Jones."

"I recognize you," Lorena said. "And I've seen you in the library, Mabel, where there's a very strict no-food policy. You left a big pile of taffy wrappers on a table once, I'm afraid. But the important thing at the moment, I believe, is that we're standing right in front of a naiad!"

The tall glowing woman in the pond stood silently watching them, her expression not angry, not happy, but simply serene. The four humans stared at her. Her watery body glistened in the glow of their flashlights. Teek hastily turned his down toward the ground—it had shone right on her full, naked breasts. "Sorry," he mumbled, but in silent response the naiad only gazed quizzically back.

Mabel stepped forward and cleared her throat. "Um, hi, Miss Naiad, Mabel Pines here, big fan of love, quite a matchmaker myself. Um, these things lying here on the grass are Dipper and Wendy's clothes? You know, the two kids who jumped into you? I mean, into your, um, house, I guess? Could we have Dipper and Wendy back, please? Dipper's my twin brother, and Wendy's one of my best friends."
"Whether they return or not is up to them."

"Are they drowning themselves?" Ford asked, taking off his coat.

"No. That is not possible in my pool."

Ford paused, looking uncertain, but then shrugged his coat back on. "Oh. Uh. Well, Mabel's right. Dipper is my nephew, and I want him back! And Wendy! They're from the human realm. You have no right to them!"

"I understand. But they came to me freely and by their choice to ask a boon. I have granted it. You must wait for the outcome."

"But they're underwater!" Mabel wailed. "They're just in their underwear! And even worse, they can't breathe!"

"Yet they are safe in my care. If only their love is strong enough, they will be no worse for the experience. If only they are brave enough, they will come through alive. At least there is a chance."

"Oh, well, love and courage, no worries, then," Mabel said, relaxing a little. "Um, couple of questions, water lady: Why don't you have any internal organs? What's the deal with that? And second, do you have any connections in the film industry?"

Absolute inky darkness now, the swirling lovers high overhead merely a remote dim glimmer. Dipper strained his—eyes? Like Numina, Wendy now had no pupils or irises, as he supposed he did not, and yet he could see her and she could see him. And both of their strange liquid bodies glowed with that eerie blue illumination—yet it had nothing to shine upon. No floating specks in this pool, where the water was so clear they might as well have been moving through air.

He glided downward a little behind and above her, and he couldn't take his eyes off her.

—Oh, Wendy, your hair—it's spread out like an angel's wings!

—Huh. Thanks for lookin' at that, dude, 'stead of my chest or butt! If you haven't noticed, we're kinda naked.

—Yeah, but we're kinda made out of water, too. I think if we tried to, uh, do anything, we'd just melt together.

—Like the dude in the myth! So forget that for now. Look down there, man. Is that sand I'm seein'? Dipper forced his gaze downward. Yes, silvery sand, lying in sinuous ripples, tiny particles of silicon or mica gleaming from their reflected light.

—It's the bottom! We must be hundreds of feet down!

—Look for the penny, Dip!

But what they first saw stared back at them from dark and empty eye sockets. Though missing a lower jaw, it seemed to smile in sinister welcome.

It was a human skull.
"How can they stay under so long?" Teek asked in a worried voice. "Maybe I should dive in after them."

"Don't do it, son," Ford said. "The naiad wouldn't lie to us, not while in her sacred pool. This is something paranormal. It's—it's not like the everyday reality of life, but something beyond that, something extraordinary. It's—it's—"

"It's Gravity Falls," Mabel said.

"Yes," Ford said as if that explained it all. "It is indeed."

They saw no good place to sit, so they stood clustered a few feet from the shore. The naiad, Numina, had turned her back on them and had drifted to near the center of the pool. Standing still with her hair bubbling and dripping, she looked for all the world like a strange enchanted fountain whose illuminated jets took the form of a beautiful woman.

"I know about the Gnomes and stuff," Teek said. "Well, a little. I mean, my family and I have lived in town for two years now. But this is like something out of a nightmare."

"Teek," Mabel said, "if you're gonna live here, you gotta learn to love it or it'll drive you bonkers. Let me tell you a little story, OK? Now, picture a perfect summer day. Summer's a time for relaxing, for kicking back, for having an epic romance, right? Unless you're me! I'm Mabel. The guy who was drivin' the golf cart is my brother Dipper. And there was a reason we were being chased by a living tidal wave of Gnomes."

"I never heard this story," Ford murmured to Lorena as Mabel, with gestures and sound effects mostly produced by her tongue, went on.

"I haven't, either," Lorena whispered. "But it all sounds strangely familiar, somehow. Like a . . . a fairy tale that I heard once when I was a girl."

Teek didn't say a word. He simply listened to Mabel with a rapt expression, as if he had been spellbound.

It was—what was the term? A charnel house! Dipper had seen photos of the Catacombs beneath Paris, human skulls piled ceiling-high, human femurs lying in stacked piles like a thousand years' worth of firewood, dismembered finger bones like the cocoons of gruesome moths dumped in heaps.

—Thousands of people must have died here!

—Or maybe just . . . didn't go back to their real bodies?

—Wendy, I think you got it! These—these are the bones of all the lovers up there! The ones who decided to stay!

—But why, man? Why would they do that?

In their minds, the voice of Numina answered calmly: "Because they had no hope on earth. Families separated them, barriers of society separated them, years separated them. Only here could they be eternally together and eternally youthful. A young girl's father hated the family of the boy she loved.
They would never be together, the old man swore. And so the boy and the girl came to me and entered my pool, and now they are together always."

—That's just so wrong!

"Is it, my daughter? I see the fear in your heart and in the boy's, fear that you two are separated by years, by duties to family, by your own weaknesses and lack of trust in yourselves. Here is peace forever, union forever, quiet joy."

—Don't listen to her, Wendy. Look for the penny!

Undulating like dolphins, they skimmed above the bone-scattered sand, stirring no current, disturbing not a single grain of silver sand. They saw rounded pebbles gleaming turquoise, deep red shading to black, now and then a hint of coppery brown, but always only a round stone, no coin.

Until Dipper spotted a gleam within the eye socket of another grinning skull. Whatever shone looked flat and round, it reflected the light, and though in the dimness and in the prevailing blue light it looked nearly the color of blood, it just might be a penny.

—Here! Wendy, here!

—Dude, I think you found it!

But with hands made of water he could not seem to get a grip on the dome of bone. —Help me!

She came beside him and her hands joined his. Together they lifted the skull and moved it a few inches, as though it were drifting in a strong slow current—

And there on the sand where it had been gleamed their penny.

—Got it!

Dipper's transparent hand closed on the coin.

And his hand became suddenly pink.

Weight fell into him and darkness flooded his sight.

And his chest heaved, because his light had gone out and he again was flesh, blood, and bone.

And he was . . . drowning . . . .

Chapter 12: Sacrifice

Wendy had not transformed. She seized Dipper's wrist—even in her watery form she could grasp it, unlike the trouble Dipper had moving the skull—and with the other arm stretched out, she streaked upward, desperately sending him thoughts:

—Hang on, Dip! Hold your breath!

But she felt a great emptiness. Dipper . . . wasn't there.
They shot through the whirling cloud of lovers, she saw her mirror image rushing toward her real self, and then they hit the level horizon where water met air—

In an explosive spray, Wendy broke through the surface, hauled Dipper's head above water, and pushed him to shore.

And there holding a flashlight stood . . . Mabel. His great-uncle knelt on the verge, reaching for Dipper.

"Where's Wendy?" Mabel shouted.

—**Mabes, I'm right here!**

She had no breath. She could not speak. And Mabel could not hear her thoughts. But T.K., squinting, asked uncertainly, "Is—is that you, Miss Corduroy?"

Suddenly aware that she was naked—though somehow Dipper's underpants had come back when he regained flesh—she sank so that only her head and shoulders showed and nodded. "How can we help you?" Ford asked.

She raised an arm and pointed toward Numina.

—**But Dipper! Help Dipper! Tell them to help Dipper, Numina!**

"She wants you," Numina said—or perhaps thought-projected, for she'd had eons of practice that Wendy lacked—"to save the boy."

"We're trying!" Ford had already turned Dipper on his stomach and hand-pressed his back, forcing out a gush of water from his stomach and lungs. Now he flipped him over, put a hand on his chest, and yelled, "His heart's beating, but he's not breathing!" He bent over and started mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Wendy turned to Numina. —**We brought back the penny! He's still got it in his hand. Let me go!**

"For the moment. Go to him if you feel you must."

Then without transition, Wendy felt heavy, floundering. She had become real again, but so bone-weary that she had no strength to swim.

She was close enough to the edge to throw her hands over and grasp the long grass, and Mabel ran to help pull her out. She floundered onto the shore on her belly, ashamed of her weakness. And everyone had their lights on her!

At least I got my **bra and panties on!** she thought. She half-crawled, half-flung herself over to Dipper and pushed Ford away. "I got it, man! I've had CPR training!"

She pressed her mouth against Dipper's, pinched his nostrils, and breathed into him. When she moved her head back, her own breath huffed out from inside him. "Come on, man! Come back to me!" She breathed for him again. And again. Once every six seconds, ten times a minute.

Wendy hardly felt it when Ford delicately draped his coat over her shoulders. She was crying, but she did not, would not, could not give up her efforts. Two minutes. Though she felt his heart pulsing beneath her palm spread on his chest, Wendy couldn't tell that he was breathing on his own. Another half minute—
At last Dipper coughed and gasped, but his eyes did not open. She bent down, her lips close to his ear, and whispered, "I love me some peppermint, Dipper!"

And then—he breathed! One long gurgling breath, and then another.

And he moved. She felt him stirring and sat back on her knees, Ford's coat falling down off her left shoulder. She ignored it, thinking only Thank God!

In the light of T.K.'s flashlight, Dipper's hand turned over and opened, and the penny gleamed on his palm. He coughed again, opened his eyes, saw Wendy, her sodden hair hanging down on either side of his face and trailing over his bare chest, and he smiled, reached a trembling hand up for her—

And then convulsively rolled over on his side and vomited.

"It's a normal reaction," Ford said, trying to pull Wendy back.

"Let go of me!" she said fiercely. The coat dropped completely off. She knee-walked sideways and cradled Dipper's head, one hand supporting his forehead, the other stroking his wet hair. "Get it all out, Dipper. Go ahead. Puke it up. 'S OK, man."

He retched again, and a glurge of clear water poured out of his mouth. He panted hard for a second and then rolled onto his back and rasped, "Are we dead?"

"Nope," Mabel said. "You're just soaked an' in your wet, clingy, see-through underpants, brobro!"

"Here," T.K. said, laying his shirt over Dipper's torso and waist. "Until you can get dressed again."

Mabel turned her light on him. "Wow-wow-wee, Teek! You got muscles on top of muscles! I wouldn't have guessed. Hey, let me take off my shirt an' give it to you!"

"Uh, thanks, but I'm OK," Teek said, pushing his round glasses into place and then rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. "It's a warm night."

Ford had given Dipper his handkerchief, and Dipper wiped his mouth. "I don't even remember what happened after I grabbed the penny," he said.

Ford draped his coat over Wendy again. She nodded her thanks and said, "I pulled you up, dude, but I was like, still made out of water! But Numina turned me back an' I came to help give you mouth-to-mouth!"

"We did it," Dipper said. "My magic girl! We did it! But—" he frowned and then thought, —Do we still have our link?

"Oh, Dip, I'm so sorry I ever made that stupid wish!" Wendy said, stroking his face.

She can't hear my thoughts any more. And as much as he loved Wendy, as glad as he was that the two of them had lived through it all, Dipper felt a sharp stabbing pang in his heart. Sharing thoughts had been terrible. But wonderful. And it was gone. I should have told her more. I should have opened my whole mind, showed her everything in my soul while we had the chance. Now it's gone.

"Wendy, Dipper," Ford said, "you'd better get dressed. We'll help you home. You've been through a lot. Come on, people, let's give them a little privacy."

The group walked twenty or thirty steps away, leaving the two teens beside the still pool, their only light coming from the fountain-like figure of Numina, out in the center. Dipper couldn't help smiling
a little when he heard Mabel saying, "Do you have to put that hot old shirt back on, Teek? It's such a warm night!"

"Where are my clothes?" he asked. Dipper's legs wobbled under him as he found shirt and jeans. He was still wet, and it was hard to pull the jeans on. Wendy said, "Aw, let me help you, Dip," and she tugged the back waistband up. And patted his bottom.

He put a hand on her smooth, warm waist. "You'd better get dressed, too," Dipper told her softly.

"Yeah." She reached down for her clothes.

Dipper was pulling his shirt over his head when he heard her panicked voice: "Dip?"

His head popped through, and he looked at her. She still wore only her underwear, and she was holding up her hands, her expression terrified.

In the pale blue light from Numina—now near the shore again—Dipper saw why: Wendy's fingers and palms had become clear and transparent again and were beginning to glow. And the change moved down her arms as he watched. "No!"

"I—I gotta get back to the water!" Wendy said, giving him a wild, pleading look.

She turned and though she ran, by the time she reached the edge she was the glowing water-Wendy again, naked. She collapsed forward, falling apart like a wave crashing, and shapeless, she cascaded into the suddenly sparkling pool. Dipper saw her glowing body immediately re-form just under the surface.

"No!" he shouted so loudly that his throat felt torn.

"Every boon requires a sacrifice."

"I won't let you have her!" Behind Dipper, both Ford and Mabel yelled his name again—

But he took three running steps, launched himself, and arched back into the terrifying dark water.

Chapter 13: Decision

This time the water gripped his whole body with a cold fist, shocking him. He almost breathed it in—but then Wendy was beside him, and he heard her: —No, Dipper, get out! You'll drown!

—I'm staying with you!

"Shall I keep one of you?" Numina's voice asked.

Weirdly, a bubble formed—one containing only Dipper. It felt as if he were inside a giant rubber balloon, but at least he had air. It was so jiggly and elastic that he couldn't stand, couldn't punch through—he tried, wanting to reach Wendy, but the bubble simply rebounded, and the shape forced him to lie on his back as though in a curved hammock. Wendy hovered just outside, the luminous Wendy, hair afloat, her hands spread against the bubble's outer surface, and helplessly, Dipper lifted his own hand and put it palm to palm with hers.

—Send him back, Wendy thought. If you have to keep one of us, make it me!
—No! If you do that, I'll come back and dive in, and if Numina rejects me, I'll keep diving in again and again! Send us both back, Numina! We took back the penny!

"But love means anguish," Numina said, her voice still strangely gentle. "If you were older, you would know that."

—You try to keep Dipper here, I'll show you anguish! Wendy, lashing out. She didn't have a water-world equivalent of her axe. If she had, Dipper thought, she'd be wielding it now.

—If there's anguish ahead, it's ours! Dipper thought. WE own it, not you! We accept it, if it means we can be together and in love!

"Love is powerful," Numina agreed. "It can defeat almost anything, even the deepest pains. Can you bear its power, mortals?"

—If we're together, yeah! But it has to be in our world, see? Not yours! Dipper and I have a PACT!

—I want us both to go back, no matter what. But if you keep one, you keep both of us!

—An' if you do, that means you broke your word, lady!

"If you return to your air world, you can never again come here."

—Fine by us! Right, Dipper?

—Yes! Just let us go. That's all we ask!

—You can even keep the freakin' penny!

"The connection between you is strong, my children. It had to be tested. I do not need your token. I send you back—but you will not be the same as you were. Love changes you."

—Makes us better! Dipper thought.

—Makes us more than we could ever be alone!

"A wish un-granted, a lesson learned. To your own world now be returned!"

Wendy suddenly turned pink and red again—and Dipper saw she had lost her bra. He hugged her against him, trying to protect her, to shield her from view—

And he realized that the instant she changed, she had somehow melted through and come inside the bubble with him!

—Dip, we can touch! Hold me! Something's gonna happen!

She wrapped her arms tight around him—

—and the next thing Dipper knew, water gushed upward all around them, as though they were standing over a geyser at eruption time, and they catapulted up, fell back, hit the ground and rolled in the tall grass, over and over, their arms around each other, not letting go—

—I've got you!

They both thought it and heard it at the same moment. The others came running toward them—Ford with his trusty coat ready. He spread it over Wendy, but she was laughing and kissing Dipper and
would not let go of him.

"Give them a minute, Grunkle Ford," Mabel said.

—Are we really free?
—Yeah, Wendy, I think so!
—An' we still have this—power?
—For now. I don't know if it will last.
—Know somethin'? I like layin' on top of you like this!
—I like it, too.
—Yeah, I kinda noticed!
—Are we still gonna—
—hold off, yeah, we promised each other—
—so we'll hold off until I'm old enough.
—Give us somethin' to look forward to!

Aloud, Wendy said, "Dudes, I kinda got separated from my top, so if you'll give us a couple minutes, we'll get decent."

"What happened?" Mabel asked, lingering as the others retreated. "Here, if you're embarrassed, I'll turn off my flashlight. But it's not like I haven't seen boobs before! In fact, if I look in the mirror—"

"Mabel!" Dipper said. "Please. A little privacy after that last long struggle?"

"Long struggle?" she asked. "Broseph, you an' her were only back in the water for, like, ten seconds before it belched you out again!"

"We do need some time to get dressed, Mabes," Wendy said.

"OK. You two behave, now!" She went to join Ford and the others, who were now about thirty feet away.

—Numina slowed down time for us somehow.

—Guess so. I don't know whether to thank her or come back out here with my brothers an' fill her pool up with concrete!

—Let's just let her be and hope she does the same for us.

—Gotcha.

Wendy got off Dipper, wrapped the coat around her, and fumbled around for her jeans, shirt, socks, boots, and trapper's hat. She turned her back and put on the shirt first and then handed Dipper the coat. "You're dressed, except for the boots—there they are—but your clothes are soaked. You're gonna need this more than I do."

"Thanks," Dipper said. He thought You were beautiful in the water. But you're even more beautiful
"Ugh!" Wendy was struggling to pull the jeans on. "I'm havin' the same trouble you did—the
denim's draggin' on my wet skin. An' I think for some reason my butt's bigger than it was." She
glanced at him in the dark—Numina had gone, and her light with her, but the glow of their friends'
flashlights gave them a little illumination. Then she said softly, "You didn't get that, did you?"

"No," Dipper said. "And I tried to send to you a second ago, and you didn't get that, either."

She sighed. "Guess we lost the telepathy."

"Guess so," Dipper stooped. "Here's your other sock, if that's what you're feeling for."

"Thanks, man. An' here's your pine-tree hat." She reached to make the exchange, and their fingers
momentarily touched.

And immediately he heard her in his mind—Hope it's just water weight!

Wendy said, "Dipper! I got that! You said I'm—beautiful!"

He laughed. "You made a joke about your butt! Don't make fun of it, though—it's perfect!"

They hugged.

—Is it working again?

—Yeah, dude, we got it back!

—Wait a minute. Let's step away from each other.

They did, and Dipper thought —If you get this, kiss me now!

Nothing. He took her hand. —I think it only works if we touch.

—Yeah, it does! You got it! We can do it whenever we're touching—uh-oh, Dipper, look, they're
coming back. You're gonna have to wait for that kiss!

Wendy swore them all to secrecy, and then she and Dipper told them the whole story as they walked
back through the woods to where Ford had parked his Lincoln. "Not a word to Soos about this,
T.K.!!" Wendy warned. "What goes in his ears comes right out his mouth sooner or later, an' Dip an'
me have to keep this between us. And I mean for, like, four more years!"

"Grunkle Ford, I think it's better if Stan doesn't know either," Dipper said. "And especially not Mom
and Dad. Got that, Mabel?"

"Aw!" Mabel said, sounding pouty. "Can I at least plan the wedding in secret?"

"Knock yourself out, but use code words for the couple's names," Dipper said.

"Great idea! What about Dodo and Foxy?" Mabel said. Then she sounded sad: "Ohh."

Wendy took Dipper's hand. —Dude, she's thinkin' about Russ.

—I know. Mabel's improvised nickname for Wendy had reminded her of Russ, the skin-changing fox
boy, who'd had a crush on Mabel—who in fact loved her so much that he gave his life to save her
from an interdimensional monster. "Come on, Sis," Dipper said as though he hadn't noticed. "You
can do better than that. Anyway, I'm not being stupid Dodo! I got pretty good at codes from my reading. I'll help you come up with something."

"That'll be fun," Mabel said. It was in a draggy voice.

"Sure! Mystery Twins!"

She sounded perkier: "Mystery Twins!" And they did the fist bump. Then, to T.K., she said, "I'll tell you about the Mystery Twins when you're older. It's a Gravity Falls thing."

"Uh, yeah, I kind of got that," T.K. said.

They dropped Wendy off halfway up the driveway to the Shack to reclaim her car. She asked what time it was—her phone had fallen out of her jeans somewhere along the way—and Mabel said, "Nearly two o'clock, Friday morning."

"Good! If Blubs an' Durland are sleeping as usual, I can speed home ahead of Dad. Remember, guys, I haven't been here!"

"Kiss her goodnight, Dipper!" Mabel chirped.

So Dipper got out of the Lincoln, embraced Wendy, and kissed her, right in front of everyone.

—Still working, dude?
—Still working, Lumberjack Girl.
—Dude, give Soos back his forty bucks. You won't be needing a bus ticket!
—I'll do it tomorrow when I see him, Magic Girl.
—Why am I hearing, like, an imaginary tune?

Dipper slammed the lid on that thought. "Earworm, I guess," he said out loud. "I'll, uh, tell you about it before long, I hope. Goodnight, Wendy."

"G'night, Big Dipper. We gonna go camping again soon?"

"Whenever you want."

"Yeah, but Mabes has to come along. We need a chaperone."

"Yeah. I know," Dipper sighed and, in the darkness and on the side away from the people in the Lincoln, he patted her hip. "You'd better git! Git! Git!"

"Oh, you're channeling Mayor Cutebiker now?"

"Just keeping you out of trouble."

"See you tomorrow for our run?"

"Through town," Dipper said. "Not the nature trail."

They kissed again, a quick one, and she got into the Dodge Dart, backed expertly down the drive, turned, and sped off for the Corduroy house.

"Dipper," Mabel said from the window of the Lincoln, "we're gonna go drop Teek off. You better
"I will. I'm gonna just walk up the hill. See you in the morning." He'd left Ford's coat in the car, and his borrowed hiking boots squelched all the way up the driveway. At the top he met the Lincoln coming toward him—unlike Wendy, Ford had driven up to the parking lot to turn around. Though he couldn't see them, what with the headlights in his eyes, Dipper waved at Ford, Lorena, Mabel, and T.K. Or as Mabel was calling him now, Teek. Dipper sneakingly hoped that Teek would be Mabel's epic summer romance—she'd waited so long for one!

Dipper let himself into the Shack—he and Mabel had their own keys this year—and in the dark, not even needing a night light, he paused just inside the door to pull off Junior's hiking boots and carrying them, he climbed the old familiar stairs silently (except for the odd creak and groan of wood) in his wet socks, all the way up to the attic. In the bathroom, he stood under a hot shower for five minutes, then toweled off. Afterward, dressed only in the towel wrapped around him, Dipper went into the bedroom he and Mabel had shared their first summer in Gravity Falls.

So much had changed since then. And so much was the same. Same-y, but different-y, Mabel would say.

Dipper pulled on dry underpants and a T-shirt and fell into the bed.

He had the oddest feeling of being at the end of one journey—but it wasn't a real end, only one stage, a resting place, really only the first step. Yet he had a sense of arrival, a deep feeling of happiness, tinged with just a bit of regret. The trip had been difficult at times, terrifying at times, and it had changed Dipper himself, not always for the better. But now he'd arrived, well, here, on this night in June. Tomorrow he'd get up and head out and who knew what might happen next? Plenty of summer left to explore Gravity Falls. And after that?

A far longer journey stretched ahead, the way hidden and dark, with so many twists and turns, surprises and dangers, laughter and tears, that he couldn't even guess what to expect. It frightened him. But it also excited him and filled him with that familiar old tingle: Mysteries to be solved! Mysteries outside his head—and also inside it.

And as he slipped beneath the sheets, he felt comfort in thinking he would not be making the trip alone. Never alone.

—Goodnight, Magic Girl.

He got no answer and did not really expect one. He was not physically touching Wendy. But it didn't matter. They touched where it was most important, away down deep, far below the surface of it all, down at the level of their hearts.

The End

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