

Kirie C. Pedersen

## Rules of the Wild

**Alyssa Pinsker:** *Do you still see yourself as the “good girl” versus the “wild” one?*

**Robin Rinaldi:** *I don’t see myself in that polarized way anymore. I can be both “good” – domestic, wholesome, faithful, hardworking – and “wild” – angry, rule-breaking, messy, instinctual – depending on the circumstance. Giving myself permission to get wild helped me integrate that part of myself so I don’t fear it anymore, and also don’t feel ruled by it. . . . I want to live in a world where we all laugh at the word “slut,” so I will help create that world by standing up to them.*

– <http://www.thefix.com/content/acoa-sexual-adventurer>

Half of all migrating birds never make it to their destination. Those arcs of geese flapping overhead? They crash into buildings. They sink into chemical-laced ponds. They are submerged in oil, feathers terminally drenched. They starve or become separated from the flock.

Almost everything Jana knows, she learned in the wilderness. She learned with her feet and fingers and eyes and mouth. From the fragrance of madrone bark that peels like paper and the way the autumn sun strikes cedars sideways as each day fades. From the susurruration of waves against the basalt cliffs. From the danger and mystery of tides.

“Aren’t you scared alone out there in the forest?” That’s what people ask.

“Only people terrify me.” Jana meant to be funny, but it was also true. Pulled from the forests and cliffs to start school, she was ignorant of the rules other children seemed already to understand. She stood frozen on the playground, wanting to hide, but there was nowhere to go. When she entered adolescence, this ignorance became perilous. In college, her advisor, an economics professor, had a theory about how monogamy evolved. Females stayed with one mate, Professor Faulkner said, so as not to be prey to others, and to survive the long mammalian gestation when the babies, too, were prey.

And wild women? What about them? Jana lacked the desire to be mother or mate. If that made her bad, that’s what she wanted and that was how she wanted to be seen. When her peers talked about becoming attorneys or physicians or the presidents of corporations, Jana said, “I want to be a prostitute.” Just to shut them up. She wasn’t ready to lean in, but neither did she want to stick her head into an oven or fill her pockets with stones and stumble into the River Ouse.

Well, sometimes she wanted to. There was a time during those college years when, with every breath, she thought, *I want to die*. Failing to fit with the flock brought certain penalties. She couldn’t always bear to pay them. But if, on this wildly circling planet, only half survive the great migrations or even birth itself, Jana vowed to stay alive. Unwilling to alter her trajectory, she fell into the arms of naughty ideas, including but not limited to those of the nineteen-year-old the night of the steel drums. And when the sex doctor told

---

her he wanted to break every bone in her body, ending with her face and particularly her chin, it packed an extra blow. He knew Jana was vulnerable about her chin. She told him so herself in one of those regrettable revelations after orgasm. When she was a belligerent child, precursor to truculent adolescent and wild young adult, her father sometimes hit her in the face. Perhaps he wanted to exorcise his own father from the face of his child.

Or so she told herself.

Was it true?

Could she *absolutely know this to be true*, as the SoCal seer Byron Katie later asked?

What was true was that in her one-room shack on the reservation, Jana threw a table across the room and shattered the wood carved by some painstaking hand. When that failed to have any effect on Marco, when all he said was "I want other lovers," she tossed the shellacked pieces into the fire. Time collapsed and fell forward, moment telescoping out of moment. The broken table failed to ignite. Jana retrieved it from the flames and tucked the ruined pieces into a corner near her mattress on the floor.

"I'll find other lovers too, then." Jana said. "Maybe someone who works with wood."

She was vengeful as a witch. She wanted to die. She wanted to stalk the sex doctor. She'd already heard about him. About broken hearts (the women). Drumming circles (the men). In the small community of artists who lived on the rez, word had a way of getting around.

"He has a lot of lovers," her friend Susan said. Jana and Susan were taking their daily walk along Reservation Road. The maples arched a deep May green above them. Susan suggested they drop by the sex doctor's cabin so Jana could see for herself. "Let's see if the psycho is home," was how she put it. They turned off just past Susan's own cottage, which was a cross between the prow of a ship and a fairy castle. Before Susan moved to the colony, she lived for seven years on a boat, sailing alone along the Inside Passage of British Columbia. Now, if she had to live on land, she still wanted to feel slightly adrift, as every white person on the rez seemed to be. Susan had sex with anyone she wanted and took none of it seriously. Relationships didn't drive her crazy. They weren't the focus of her life. Her carpentry and weaving were. She was like one of those dolls that bobbed back to center no matter what.

They walked along the narrow alley that accessed the Indian houses along the beach and just beyond those, the cottages built by the artists, all these deeply flawed people in one-room cabins within a mile of each other. The artists were ex-pats in their own country, or so they liked to see themselves. From every doorway, dogs emerged, but the women knew most by name, called out "good dog," and the guardians retreated to their small turfs.

"Richard doesn't have a dog," Susan said. "No worries there." As they entered Richard's driveway, they walked more slowly, as everyone did on the reservation, offering occupants every opportunity to complete a conversation or meal or assignation, or a visit to the outhouses that stood behind most cabins. This caution Jana already knew. When she hiked alone along the High

Divide or through the Enchanted Valley in the Olympics, if she came upon a black bear, particularly with her cubs, she offered every opportunity for the creatures to leap away. This had always worked. "The wildlife's afraid of us," she liked to say, showing off as always. "We're the predators."

Richard's cabin was elaborately constructed, with an arched window carved into the eave, and the porch seemed suspended over the cliff. "I don't think he's home," Susan said. She walked onto the porch. "His truck's not here anyways." She leaned her forehead against the window and looked inside. With a thrilling sense of danger, Jana joined her. In one corner, an oak table was covered with papers and books. More books lined the wall beside the sink. Near a fireplace at the far end, another lower table was strewn with musical instruments, and others hung from the walls: banjo, dulcimer, flutes, marimbas, drums, concertina, and a mandolin.

"You didn't tell me he played," Jana said. "You know I love musicians." But then everyone in the colony, Jana included, played at least one instrument, or sang, and on the weekends, most gathered at the tavern in the village to make music or listen to it and to dance, although Jana, determined to stay sober and straight, had not ventured to town at night.

"He plays all right," Susan said. "He's just not very good." In the middle of the room, a carved ladder led to an alcove. Jana imagined climbing the ladder, easily at first and then pregnant, navigating with difficulty because of her gently bulging belly. But this time Richard would have to figure out something safe if his mate was pregnant, wouldn't he?

"I hope he's good looking," Jana said. "I don't want to shack up with an ugly man."

"He's not," Susan said. "Not what you'd think, anyways, for how crazy he makes women." When Jana continued to look at her, as if waiting, she laughed. "And no, I haven't slept with him, so I wouldn't know." He had too many women already, Susan said, and she, for that matter, too many men. Although her pregnancy hadn't started to show, Susan cupped her palms around her belly.

"When Marco told me he wanted to sleep with other women," Jana said. "It felt like some primal abandonment."

"What did you tell him?"

"I screamed. And threw a table, and then I threw up."

Susan put her arm over Jana's shoulder. "You could have told him no," she said. "You could have said that didn't work for you."

"That never even entered my mind," Jana said. "I've always said I wanted to be wild, and now I have my chance. No more *dear sweet Marco*, as my mother calls him." She slipped her own arm around Susan's back, and, pressed together, they headed away from the ornate cabin. "You figure out which guy's the father?"

"Whoever's the biggest sucker," Susan said.

"That's sick," Jana said. "I'll be doula if none of the suckers shows up."

"You hate kids."

"I like teaching them. I just don't want to have one."

"You'll change your mind," Susan said. She shrugged. "Or not."

---

Neither of them knew, of course, that on that bright May morning, the stratovolcano the Indians called Lawetlat'la was about to spread fire and ash across their wilderness. That millions of cedar and hemlock and maple and Douglas fir, and the birds and mammals and snakes and insects and microorganisms that lived in and around the canopy would be destroyed, and men and women too, those who strayed too close or refused to flee even when the lava and mud were upon them.

Not long after that, at dawn, Jana told Marco she couldn't take the back and forth of it, the uncertainty of when he might be with someone else. He cried. "I thought we'd be together forever," he said. But now Jana had her plan, and she wasn't turning back. Over the next six months, she gained twenty pounds and lost them again, two sets of thrift store clothes hanging from hooks on her cabin door. She invited Richard over for dinner, roast chicken with tamari and garlic and ginger with juices that ran like red and golden rivers, and then she passed in and out of his attic alcove more times than she could count. Finally, she gathered Richard's other lovers, one for each day of the week, from in and around the colony. She wanted revenge on dear sweet Marco, and instead she took her revenge on Richard. The women nestled in the fragrant water of Jana's cedar hot tub and laughed so hard they howled.

"You're addicted," Susan told them. She sat on the edge of the tub because the water was too hot for the growing foetus. "Why do this to yourselves?"

"You're headed for a fall," Richard told her. Jana had invited him to her first solo concert, if you could call it that, in a tiny Portland coffee house. She could taste the dust from Lawetlat'la's latest eruption. "You're too high on yourself. I see it coming. You're going to drink or drug or die."

Three days later, as she sat cross-legged on the floor with her hammer dulcimer students, Jana leaned back as if all the blood had drained from her body. She waited until the children's parents arrived, and by the time she made it home, she'd spiked a fever of 105. She hallucinated strings of dinosaurs swinging from the eaves. When Susan drove her to the emergency room of the tiny rural hospital, she was immediately admitted into intensive care.

"Young girls like you don't get this sick," the doctor said. Jana had an unusual kind of pneumonia, he said, something usually old people got. His face soft with concern, he leaned over her. "What have you done to yourself?" When the nurses brought trays of soft food, Jana screamed with a kind of horror, as if what she'd loved was now vile. Susan smuggled comfrey she blended into juice, and she forced Jana to drink tall glasses of the stuff. Marco visited, kind and loving as always, with a bouquet of Coyote's eyes, the wild buttercup Jana loved. He was engaged, he told her, and his partner expecting. Jana hated all those words and the way they rolled from his mouth: engaged and partner and expecting. What did any of it mean?

Richard sent a note. She wasn't really sick. She was trying to manipulate him. But he was willing to take her back.

After two weeks, Jana was released with warnings her recovery would take a long time. She needed to take better care of herself. Her cabin smelled musty and stale, but the mattress on the floor was neatly made, as if for the

organized and healthy life she would now begin to lead. Susan had also repaired the broken table, and it sat in another corner with a chair Susan must have found in the village thrift shop. And she'd left a basket of fruit and cheese and homemade bread, along with a note. "Meet me at steel drums."

Although so weak she could barely stand, Jana showered and then pulled on leggings and a pale blue blouse Susan had given her after she outgrew it. "But you have to give it back," she'd said. "I plan to be sexy again the moment this thing is out of me." The blouse had ruffles and ribbons that floated as Jana moved. She French-braided her hair, and when it was dry, she released it to form a wild halo around her face. Then she drove past the native cemetery with its too-young babies and mothers and she crossed the bridge to the mainland.

In the bar beside the slough, the steel drum band from Trinidad played. As she moved across the wide wooden planks of the bar, the music pulsing and the ribbons streaming from her sleeves, Jana felt energized. She danced sensually with the women, and then, holding the hand of the youngest and most handsome man, she walked onto the back deck suspended over the slough. Almost everyone was getting high, swaying to the music. And at one corner was Susan leaning over the railing, and at the other corner Richard, dancing by himself. As if standing outside herself, Jana watched him catch sight of her and step forward, and then how his face changed as the beautiful young man dropped her hand and drifted away.

And then Richard was leaning into her face. "You're the most destructive person I've ever met," he said. "You've destroyed this community." For a moment, as if a stone had been tossed into water, the dancing bodies separated around them. Jana started to follow him. All she'd wanted was to show him the rag of his actions. To show him the dust they were breathing.

And then, instead, Susan stood beside her. "It's happened," Susan said. Jana hadn't followed Richard after all. She stood beside Susan looking back across the slough at the reservation where they all lived in their makeshift shacks and fantasies. For a moment, Jana thought Susan meant she was proud of her, that finally Jana stood up for herself. She rubbed the tight spot at the base of her neck and wondered how she'd make it through the night. Then she noticed Susan's golden skirt and the stain that spread down the front. Susan giggled. "My water just broke," she said. "Let's get out of here."

It was far too early, Susan said, to call the midwife, so Jana drove Susan home and brewed cups of chamomile tea while Susan called everyone in town. It seemed Susan had invited all of them to be doula, but that was okay. "I'll be back later," she said as people began to arrive. Outside her own cottage, she walked beside the stream with her flashlight, gathering *Rubus Spectabilis*, the Salmonberry, as her neighbor had taught her. She filled a white ceramic cup with the citrusy fragile fruit, and she listened for the Swainson's thrush with its fluting cry. "That's when you know Salmonberry is ripe," her neighbor said. Jana tucked the cup into a basket with the Gouda and goat cheese and dense sourdough Susan had left for her earlier, and then she slept on top of the freshly-made bed. Just before dawn, she headed back to Susan's.

---

Naked and glistening with sweat, Susan was sprawled on her mattress surrounded by the women who soaked in Jana's hot tub earlier that year. Everyone joked and told stories and ate the berries and cheeses and bread, and it felt calm and close and warm, as if they had formed their own family in this safe place. Nobody could ever hurt them here.

"Let's make bets on when it'll be here," Susan said. "I'd say within the hour."

Everyone laughed and agreed. "Maybe by noon," Jana said, and Susan frowned.

"You're such a downer," Susan said, and Jana's sense of community and family vanished in a second. "Do the pendulum," Susan said. Jana tied Susan's lapis ring to a piece of yarn and dangled it over Susan's belly. In seconds, the ring started to whirl. "It's a girl," Susan said, and then she was happy again. There was a commotion at the door. The local midwife, Judith, with her white pile of hair and skin flecked with rain from a sudden burst of storm, came bustling in. She looked at the dozen or so people crowding the room, some on the floor playing Scrabble, others eating fruit and cheese, still others trying to nap. "You've got quite a crowd here," she told Susan.

"We're quiet during contractions," Susan said.

"You want everyone here for your exam?" Judith asked. Susan shrugged. Susan's cervix, it appeared, was not cooperating, and Judith took Susan's hand. "I'm going to give you some IV fluids," she said.

And then Susan, always so calm and regal, began to howl. "I want everything natural," she wept. Jana placed her hand on Susan's shoulder, but Susan shrugged her off.

"This will give you energy," Judith said, and she went about her work. Almost immediately, Susan stopped crying and seemed to fall asleep. "You should all get some rest," Judith said. "I'll be back in an hour or so."

By the time Judith returned, Susan was awake and crying again. She had changed her mind, she told Judith. She didn't want this baby after all. "Just cut it out of me," she said. "I'm done." But as the sun reached its midday height and light streamed onto the bed through the window, finally there was Lily, a sweet pink and puckered face.

"Who cuts the cord?" Judith asked Susan, and Susan nodded to Jana. In the crowded room, the women moved in closer and began to sing.



Kirie C. Pedersen earned her M.A. in literature and fiction writing from Western Washington University. Her fiction and essays have appeared in numerous journals, with links available at [kiriepedersen.com](http://kiriepedersen.com). As a citizen-activist, she has spearheaded campaigns resulting in the preservation of four forests adjoining significant shoreline habitat in Washington State.