

Why

The day Faye walked out was the day Julie decided there had to be more. As she dried her tears, picked up pieces of broken crockery, and retrieved Faye's wedding ring from where it had been flung at the back of the cowshed, Julie's thoughts slowly turned to a question most of us visit from time to time: why? Why me? Why her? Why now? Why get up in the morning? Why not? It's not a very helpful question. In fact from a practical standpoint it's quite useless, self-indulgent even, because even as we ask it we know we're going to carry on regardless. Most people find an answer that satisfies them – god, love, tradition, hope, fear, perhaps just stubbornness – and stop thinking about it. But Julie, who felt as though she had nothing worth hanging around for, Faye having taken even the cow, decided that she deserved the real answer, and determined to go out and find it. She grabbed a travellers' cloak and hat, threw whatever food Faye hadn't found into a knapsack, buried Faye's ring in the vegetable patch, and set out across the hills to the wizard's tower.

Julie had met the wizard just once, many years before when Julie was a scamp on her mother's farm. A turnip patch had been afflicted with blight, and there were many grim conversations among adults that Julie was scolded for trying to overhear. She now suspected that the other farmers in the valley were conspiring to burn her mother's crop to prevent the disease spreading, and mum had gone to the wizard out of desperation. She remembered an ancient-looking woman with a bent back and a gleaming stare traipsing around the fields, poking the ground with a stick and muttering under her breath. After a couple of circuits under the anxious eye of Julie's mother, the wizard had bent down, uprooted a perfect, healthy turnip, and burst out laughing at mum's relieved cheer. The blight was banished, and Julie had learned that the wizard was a last resort, someone to be disturbed only when all other options were exhausted. Julie, whose other options had just exhausted themselves, arrived at the wizard's tower just after noon on the third day of hiking.

Her first impression was that the dwelling was abandoned and about to fall down. The tower was three storeys tall, but none of them precisely overlapped; there was a huge overhang above the front door where the first floor exceeded the ground, and an even larger one at the back where the second floor stretched out beyond both. Not a single buttress was in evidence to support the stone walls, and half the stones seemed to have fallen out anyway. The impression was of a house of cards, with the entire structure ready to fall if anyone so much as breathed on it. Certainly, Julie thought, this was evidence of the wizard's powerful magical knowledge. She didn't want to knock on the door in case it fell off its hinges, so she stood outside and hollered a greeting, making sure to be very polite – even without the fear of unknown powers, Julie was always polite to her extreme elders. At first Julie thought there had been no reply, but then she heard a sound from within – laughter, that carried on for a few moments before descending into coughing. It was weaker now and wheezier, but even three decades later Julie couldn't mistake that laugh. She pushed open the front door and walked in.

Inside was a cluttered front room that seemed mostly to be inhabited by cats. They lazed on the windowsills, slunk up and down the stairs, nursed kittens underneath the furniture, and nibbled delicately on the remains of birds and rodents they had dragged in from the nearby forest. In fact at that moment there were thirteen adult cats on the premises, participating in a communal living arrangement most unlikely for their species, and their numbers were set to increase rapidly as the new generation learned to hunt and their feral cousins in the woods heard whispers of distant opportunity. However, despite their rising hegemony, they were hushed in respect, even the kittens, because the human who had made their social experiment possible lay dying on the low couch.

"Julie, Anna's daughter," the wizard creaked. "I remember you. Why is it you, I wonder? And couldn't it have been a little sooner? Ah well, I can't complain." She looked even more impossibly

ancient than when Julie had seen her years before, her eyes barely opening to regard her visitor, her face as pale as a sheet and lined with age unheard of in those times.

“Wizard,” said Julie, realising she didn’t know the woman’s name, “I don’t know what you mean. I came here to ask your help, but it seems you’re in need of help yourself! Does anyone know you’re here?”

The wizard gently chuckled again, the sound barely escaping her. “Oh, the stories we tell ourselves. Don’t worry about me, Julie, Anna’s daughter. Don’t worry about anything. I worried so much to begin with – a waste of time. Not, I suppose, that I have wanted for time.”

“Isn’t there someone who can help you? You seem... very unwell, wizard.”

“No, Julie, I’m not unwell, just old, and there’s no-one who can help me now. That,” and she grinned as though she were telling a joke, “would be impossible. Come here and hold my hand. Mind the cats.”

Julie made her way over and sat on the couch, taking the old woman’s hand in both of her own. Tears were pricking at her eyes. The wizard was wheezing again, trying to speak.

“I don’t have the breath, Julie, to explain things, but maybe that’s alright. That’s how it was for me. Will you sit with me for a while, Julie? It’s a poor thing to die alone.”

As the tears began to run down her cheeks, Julie nodded. “Yes. I’ll sit with you.” She shifted her weight to a comfortable position and tried to be sensible. “Are you warm enough? Can I bring you anything?”

The wizard smiled, one last time. “I said don’t worry. Things have a way of working themselves out.”

The next morning, after she buried the wizard behind her tower and opened the milk churn for the cats, Julie set out again. She had no idea where she was going, but her question had only become more urgent now. Why? Why had the wizard died now, after all these years? Why had Julie been there to see it? She supposed she should tell someone, because they would have to get a new wizard from somewhere. Certainly the townies would want one, and the Regent would probably have to be told. Yet somehow she felt no urgency in her duty as a citizen, instead desperately trying to make sense of things. Faye had left her, and that was why Julie had left home, and that was why Julie had reached the wizard’s tower when she did. If Faye had decided to stick it out one more day, if Julie had taken the scenic route, if Faye hadn’t taken the fucking cow that was Julie’s by law anyway, the wizard would have died alone. Julie could only think of one course of action: she would have to find another wizard, preferably a young healthy one, to explain it to her.

No sooner had Julie thought this than she heard a cheery cry from behind her and turned to see she was being overtaken by a wagon. Two strapping mares pulled a cart full of fruit, and a teenage girl Julie vaguely recognised was sitting in the driver’s seat.

“Julie, Anna’s daughter! Is that you?”

Julie cast around for a name and came up blank, but she was growing sure that the girl’s mother farmed the other end of the valley. She drew a breath and called back, “Aye, that’s me, and you’re Phyllis’s if I’m not mistaken? What brings you all the way down here?”

The carriage pulled up alongside as the girl expertly brought the horses to a halt. “Yes, that’s right. Zoe’s my name. The Regent put up the tax on apples again so mum wants to sell way down in Ardenvale where they don’t grow russets. I can give you a lift if you’re heading further south.”

Julie realised that she had indeed been walking southward. It hadn’t been a conscious decision. “Yes, I suppose I am. Have you been to Ardenvale recently, Zoe? It’s ten years if it’s a day since I’ve been there.”

The girl stretched and the horses stamped, all enjoying the break from driving. "I was down there last month."

Julie hesitated, but there was no point in dancing around it. "I remember that there used to be a wizard's tower just east of the town. Do you know if the wizard's still around?"

Zoe cocked her head curiously. "Reckon she is. Think I heard someone mention her. You want to see her?"

Julie couldn't help smiling. "Yes, Zoe. I do. I think I'll take you up on that lift."

The carriage ride was pleasant, much easier than walking, and Zoe's friendly chatter eased the frantic circles of Julie's thoughts. Apparently the girl had seen rainclouds on the horizon when she was up in the hills, but they all seemed to have vanished now and the weather held out. Julie avoided questions about Faye, and didn't bring up anything about the dead wizard, so she had no choice but to discuss why she was going to Ardenvale in the first place.

"You weren't planning to walk all the way there, were you?" asked Zoe, incredulous.

"No, I wasn't. I suppose I was just lucky that you happened to come past. I need to ask the wizard a question."

"Ardenvale's wizard? What about ours?"

"I want a second opinion. Do you know anything about her? Another old lady who keeps to herself?"

"No, I don't think so, she's not like ours. When I was there she had visited the town recently, and it sounded like that was normal. She's a lot younger too."

"What does she do when she visits?"

"Carouse, I think. You know, drinking, dice, things like that. My mum didn't want me to keep listening."

Julie raised her eyebrows. That was certainly a different approach to being a wizard. Presumably it made her easier to contact if there was a need. "Well, that's good. Maybe she'll be there when we arrive."

Zoe's brow furrowed. "What makes you think that?"

Julie laughed. "Oh, nothing. It would just be lucky, that's all."

Julie said her farewell and wished Zoe luck as they drove into Ardenvale the next morning. Phyllis clearly wasn't the only one who reckoned it was a good prospect: big enough to have its own baroness but small enough that the Regent mostly ignored it, the town had attracted a crowd of carriages from miles around.

Zoe laughed. "I don't think I'll stand out from the rest much. I'll just try to shout as loud as I can!"

Julie winked. "You never know. Maybe the baroness likes russets."

Taking her leave, Julie sought out Ardenvale's tavern, a proud and well-maintained building called the Loyal Sow. It was full even at this time of the morning, with a merry crowd spilling out onto the street: no doubt marketgoers taking advantage of the visit to town. Julie was a little anxious in crowds, having only lived on homesteads, but took a breath and headed in, meaning to ask after the apparently fun-loving wizard. Although it had looked packed from outside, she found there happened to be a clear path to the bar, and she went up to it, hailing the bartender.

"Do you know where I might find the wizard?" Julie didn't bother to buy a drink first; there was clearly no shortage of business.

The bartender, a woman around Julie's age but supremely confident in the noisy, cramped space, looked surprised. "What do you mean, where would you find her? She's about to take the pot."

Julie's eyes widened and she turned around. The centre of the room was dominated by a vast wooden table with a dozen or so people playing cards around it. As soon as she looked closely it was obvious. On the far side, near the entrance to the tavern, sat a woman Julie had never seen before, and yet who looked immediately familiar. There was nothing outwardly remarkable about her – she was average height and build, with plain clothes and hair in a traditional bun – and yet she had a look, a gleam, a swagger that Julie had seen only once before. Feeling as though this were a dream, Julie moved towards the table, the assembled crowd parting without her noticing, and took a seat. Most of the players barely glanced at her, staring glumly instead at their losing hands, but the wizard looked up sharply and their eyes met in a moment of confused recognition.

The dealer looked at Julie quizzically. "You want to join now? The stakes are high, and the game is about to finish." She gestured to a pot in the centre of the table, so full of money that it was spilling out. "The wizard is about to see off another table of challengers."

Julie looked at the pot, and the defeated gamblers slumped around her. Nothing to lose – that's why she had started all this. She took off her wedding ring and tossed it into the pot. "Deal me a hand."

The dealer slid her three cards face down, and the wizard's face broke into a grin. She revealed her hand. "I'm so sorry, stranger. I have the Queen, with the Knight and the Hound to guard her. Almost perfect. The pot is mine."

Julie knew, now. She could feel it. She flipped over the first card without looking, and said, flatly, "The Poppy, to dope the Hound so it won't bark." The room went absolutely silent, idle watchers suddenly intent. She flipped the second. "The Lover, to steal the Knight away from her post." All the blood had drained from the wizard's face, and her smile had become a grimace. Julie flipped the third card. "The Knife, for killing a Queen. A perfect hand. I win."

The room erupted into deafening life around them, but Julie didn't move. As she held the wizard's frozen gaze, they understood one another. The wide-eyed dealer began to slide the bulging pot towards Julie, but she held out a hand. "Keep it. I don't need it."

The dealer spluttered. "But what about your ring?"

Julie laughed, the tension evaporating, letting the wizard's gaze drop at last. "I definitely don't need that."

The crowd, intent on celebrating the wizard's historic defeat, seemed to forget about Julie for just long enough that she could slip away. She already knew, of course, that Faye was just outside, that this was where she had come when she left, that she had seen the whole thing. After all, she just would be here, wouldn't she?

"Julie," said Faye, wearing a new tunic Julie hadn't seen before, with her hair all done up nicely, "Why did you follow me?"

Julie threw back her head and laughed, really laughed, until she had tears in her eyes. "Oh Faye," she said when she managed to stop, "You should try poetry. It would suit you."

Faye's eyes narrowed. "I won't come back."

"I know. I'm leaving now and I'll never come back, I promise. I suppose the Regent will claim the house back eventually, although I do think it would make a marvellous home for a few stray cats."

"What are you talking about? Have you gone mad?"

Julie reflected. "Maybe. But in a rational sort of way. I really am leaving now – have a nice life. If you need it in writing send Zoe with the divorce papers next time she's here." She went to walk past Faye, but her ex-wife caught her arm.

"Julie, what's happening? You've changed, and that... with the cards... that was impossible."

Julie chuckled again. "Impossible? No it wasn't. Those cards were in the deck, and the dealer shuffled it before she dealt. It was perfectly possible for those to be the top three cards. Anyone can

see that.” She shook her arm free and went to find Zoe, leaving Faye standing speechless in front of the jubilant tavern.

Julie reached the town gate just as Zoe pulled up with her empty cart. The girl looked tired but ecstatic, and when she saw Julie she began to speak.

“Julie, you’ll never believe what happened! I was in the square with my cart when —”

Julie cut her off. “When the baroness came up, sampled an apple, declared it the best she’d ever had, bought your entire stock and ordered a dozen more cartfulls?”

Zoe’s mouth was hanging open. “How did you know?”

Julie smiled. “I didn’t — just a feeling. I don’t suppose you could give me a lift back as well?”

Zoe was speechless for a moment until deeply ingrained politeness took over. “Of course. Back to you and Faye’s house?”

“No thank you. Just about where you picked me up would be fine.”

“The wizard’s tower again? Why do you need to go back there?”

Julie laughed again. She couldn’t help it — it was just so hilariously funny. “Absolutely no reason, Zoe. Absolutely no reason at all.”