When I was about seventeen years old, I decided to get a wild pet. I wasn't too particular about what sort, at first, so long as it was wild. I spent my childhood deeply involved with animals, and wild ones were especially fascinating to me. I had grown up with pet snakes, I had known of pet raccoons, and a pet opossum poking its head out of a knapsack had once made quite an impression on me, but that was about the extent of my experience. Finally I settled on a wolf, I think because of my particular interest in dogs. No one I knew of had ever even encountered a pet wolf, so firsthand experience was pretty much out of the question. I found very little literature about wolves, but I read everything I could get my hands on, and none of it spoke against keeping them as pets. I came away realizing there was really very little known about wolves, and much of what was “known” was, in fact, only assumed. There began to be more purpose behind my dream. It would be a lifetime commitment, to learn all I could and to share what I learned. It was a bigger responsibility than I ever dreamed.

So I knew what I wanted before I got Bonnie. I wanted her, first of all, to really know she was a wolf, so I arranged not to pick her up from the zoo until she had opened her eyes and lived with her family for a time. I intended to raise her on my parents’ farm, to socialize her to the chickens, horses, dogs, and numerous cats. It never occurred to me she might not be just another member of the family, like the dogs were. I expected she would ride in the back of my old Chevy pickup on outings to the lake with the dogs and me. And I wanted her to become an “ambassador” wolf, like a couple of other wolves of which I had heard, so that she could teach children what the Big Bad Wolf was really like.

What I got was an infant creature that knew beyond a doubt she was a wolf, that I was not, and that I was directly responsible for removing her from her rightful family! That first night home, she mourn-howled incessantly on the vast linoleum kitchen floor; but she also knew that a seventeen-pound tom cat was easy prey for a wolf cub that was all of twenty days old (and weighed perhaps four pounds), so she bowled him over and attempted to disembowel him on the spot. The experience was one the cat and my family never forgot, and the first shadow of doubt began to creep in around the edges of my dream. On the second night, when she was three weeks old, I offered her some cooked liver from my plate “to see if wolves like cooked meat.” The next moment, she had climbed up my leg like a cat, braced
her back against my chest, and arrived in my plate, gobbling everything on it with terrible growls! The family was in shock.

In the following days, she began to dominate me, her little body rigid as she "rode up" on whatever part of me was available, with fierce growls responding to every one of my moves. Worried, I contacted the zookeeper, terrible growls! The family was in shock.

On whatever part of me was available, with collective advice was to "treat her like a mother dog would, pick her up by the scruff and shake her, throttle her, growl ferociously, make her know you're the boss!" There was no one else to call, no books to read, and obviously I had to do something, so I took their advice. What happened was that the small wolf that had begun to trust me saw that I was not to be trusted, that I was unreasonably violent, and was to be avoided at all costs. Instead of submission and love I got mistrust and defiance. So I did an about-face and let things revert to the way they had been. Bonnie happily dominated me for the rest of her life.

At six weeks of age, Bonnie killed her first chicken. The act in itself was not appalling to me, since most puppies must first kill a chicken before learning it is the "wrong" thing to do. But, as I approached her to take away the chicken and discipline her, she left her prey and came after me in the most convincing display of aggression I had ever seen. It was just about five minutes before I made up my mind, once and for all, that it wasn't just a display, that it was going to be my responsibility to keep the chickens away from Bonnie, and that training her was not in the picture.

By the time she was six months old, it became obvious that she was going to be very selective about whom she liked, whether they were family members or not. Riding in the truck to the lake was another plan I scrapped in short order, and, although she enjoyed many trips there during her first two years, it was in a secure cage built onto the truck. During her third year, she became seriously aggressive to unfamiliar dogs on our outings. It became impossible to take her out by myself since she was so strong I could not hold her back, even though I was more than double her weight. On the last occasion I did take her out alone, two foolish and unleashed Dobermans approached us down the beach. Bonnie gleefully dragged me toward battle, and my only recourse was to head out to deep water, where she swam strong circles around me, with her head, hackles, and tail high above water, roaring all the while. The Dobermans' owners, eventually seeming to sense there was something not quite right, loaded up their dogs and left. Finally, her future as an ambassador wolf was not bright. Children always made her act like a big bad wolf, and she was suspicious of adult strangers.

So there I was, with a maturing wolf that fit none of the roles I had laid out so nicely for her. I found myself in the position so many disillusioned exotic-pet owners reach—stuck with the prospect of keeping for life a wild animal that was costly, assertive, dangerous, and destructive and, although friendly to me within limits, not at all a "pet." It was unthinkable to destroy or get rid of Bonnie. We had grown very close. I had learned many lessons during my friendship with her. I knew now that wolves, regardless of birthplace, are as wild as the storm blowing over the mountains, that they are undeniably formidable predators, and that they are not suitable as pets! I felt bad about having gotten a wolf for a pet in the first place and wanted to do something to help keep other wolves out of the nightmare of pet situations.

So what did I do? I launched into a wolf-hybrid breeding program that was to span a number of years and more lives than I care to place on this paper. At least two wolf-wise friends advised against this venture, one out of hard-learned compassion, the other out of concern for the reputation of wolves and the safety of children. But I believed I could do better than the dark scenarios they forecast. What follows is only a small portion of my experiences as a wolf-hybrid breeder.

My intention was to find a mate for Bonnie that could produce pups that were very wolflike in appearance, so they would satisfy the urge to have an exotic pet, yet also very doglike in temperament, and therefore suitable as pets. He must be able to produce hybrid pups that were "safe" pets, since I knew now that wolves were not. At last I found him. Togiak was one of the sweetest, gentlest Alaskan malamutes I've ever met, as well as an AKC champion with an excellent background. I felt certain this distinguished dog would leave his desirable genetic stamp on a litter of first-generation wolf hybrids. Of the five resulting exquisite pups, one male was very wolflike and wild. After his new owner took him, he was never heard from again and could not be traced. One female, which I kept and of whose sweet nature I never had a doubt, was also exceptionally wolflike. Sadly, she figured out how to climb over the overhang on the wolf pen and was killed on the highway. My heart aches for her still. About the remaining three I expect you will form your own judgments.

Alphie failed in her first home as a pet, turning terribly shy by three months of age. Her second home, as a companion to an adult pure wolf, lasted only until she began nipping at her owner's legs when he cleaned the pen. Her third home lasted a full year. She lived with Arrow, a three-quarters-wolf male that had been rescued but was too shy to touch, as was she. They made a happy couple. Nothing was expected of them. But, one day while the family was gardening, the baby toddlerd over to the shy animals unnoticed. Alphie grabbed him through the wire and shredded his arm. One hundred stitches on a soft, tiny arm. Alphie was killed. I could only fault her owners for not having a safety fence to keep the child away.

Storm was big, soft, and beautiful, and his human family was wonderful. He enjoyed free run of a large yard, got lots of house time, and played gently with the children. But the owners never built the maximum-security pen I made them promise to build, and, as luck would have it, Storm turned out to be one of those hybrids that did everything in the book. He jumped over, then ripped through the fence to play with the neighbor's dog. He ignored "hot" wires. When his owner chained him as a last resort, he ate not one but two holes in the family's (rented) house large enough to admit him. His second home was in a large, wolf-proof, L-shaped kennel with a pure wolf companion. Not shy of strangers, he readily accepted his new owners. The entire yard was enclosed in six-foot chainlink, but neighbors were over for a barbecue within the yard, and their unattended child was climbing the kennel fence, when Storm grabbed him and severely mangled his leg. Storm was spared the bullet and given to a breeder. He lived for eleven years and...
I was so picky in selecting the right homes! Blue was the most doglike of the litter but, from the age of three weeks, his temperament was cold steel. He was cautious of new people but feared them not a bit. At three months of age, he began lifting his leg to urinate. At six months he had begun testing any adult but me, looking into their faces while jabbing and pinching their legs. At nine months, I knew beyond doubt that he was dangerous to children. When he was a year into his life, people were often terrified of him—even though he was securely penned: his defiant stance and cold, pale yellow stare could make your skin crawl. More than one person advised me to destroy him before "something happens." I refused—I loved him and knew he liked me. Besides, he was Bonnie's favorite! Beautiful he was, so powerful in a slate blue coat. Destroy my Blue? Never! But, during his third year, he began to threaten me when I spent daily time in the wolf pen. He was second ranking in a group of seven other wolves and hybrids. My routine involved cleaning up the large wooded pen, then just sitting and visiting or watching the animals, sometimes joining in their games. Long before, I had learned (the hard way) to stay out of dominance struggles, so I was no threat to Blue. But he began circling me, staring in my eyes and waiting. It got to where I had to sit with my back against a fence and always carry the poop scoops, to brandish and keep him back. I had a cold, sick feeling in my gut. My husband, Dan, was worried about me going in while he was at work. Finally Blue fought, beat, and nearly killed the alpha Diamond. With Blue as alpha, I could never enter the pen again, and I knew he would shortly finish off the ever gentle Diamond. I shot him as he stared down at me from the highest platform, his new throne. When I entered the pen to remove his, finally, "safe" body, the wolves were all gentle and mellow. It seemed they had expected this.

It wasn't Togiak's fault. It wasn't Bonnie's fault. It wasn't even their puppies' fault. It was mine, for selling wolf-hybrid time bombs to people who refused to believe the warnings I steadfastly sewed into each sale. I was so picky in selecting the right homes! I was so careful to educate prospective buyers about what they were getting, or might be getting! But even as I chose this huggly-soft malamute sire, I guess I knew deep inside he couldn't do magic. Beyond a doubt, he was safe. His hybrid puppies were not. There is no such thing as a "safe" animal to cross with a wolf. The wolf is first and foremost a formidable predator, and if not even thousands of years of domestication have made him thoroughly safe (as evidenced by the many unsafe dogs we all have known), how can anyone expect to undo in one generation, or several, what nature spent millions perfecting?

My career as a breeder came to a close. More often than not, I now voice a strong opinion about hybrids not being suitable pets and try to convince other breeders to see the tragedy their programs are causing. I have kept my own animals all these years (Bonnie died just shy of sixteen years) but not without price. After seeing all the trials and tragedy we imposed on the wolves—and they imposed on us—friends and family members made it clear they felt we were foolish to drag around "those animals." Finding a home where you may keep them is not easy, whether renting or buying. Every place we lived with the wolves and hybrids—and, I regret to say, there were many—we had neighbor trouble. Wolves cause suspicion in neighbors, whether they are next door in town or twenty miles down the mountain and just happen to own a wilderness parcel near yours! Permits to keep the wolves do not protect you from neighbors who are either unnerved by the presence of wolves in the area or object to their singing. We were called on to defend the wolves in court, in public hearings, and in the local newspaper. They were accused of howling (true), getting loose and wreaking havoc (false), causing chickens a mile away to die of fright (false), and of causing the bears, mountain lions, and golden eagles to leave the vicinity (preposterous)!

Finally, in 1982, I came to work at the Folsom City Zoo, a small zoo in Northern California which houses a number of non-releasable North American native animals and, notably, discarded wild-animal pets. Here I have been witness to the tragic stories of countless unfortunate wild-animal pets. My experience with wolves and hybrids and, now, the zoo, has led me to realize that the majority of exotic pets (and here I include hybrids) are dead before they reach the age of three. Although this is a home for refuge animals, it is still a zoo, not a refuge, operated with city dollars, and under a master plan, which means we can offer refuge to perhaps a lesser number of animals than could a private refuge. Most of the animals living here had only euthanasia in their future, and most of the hundreds of animals we turn away are killed. During the first three years, the animals most often offered to the zoo were yearling raccoons, but, over the last five years, the wolf hybrid has risen to this ill-fated station. Frequently we receive requests for information about how to handle a difficult situation with a wolf hybrid. More often it is a desperate plea for a home for an animal that has turned out to be nothing like the owner expected, more like a wild animal than he/she is prepared to handle, and a big problem the owners need to unload. The zoo now has a permanent exhibit of wolf hybrids as an educational public service. Signs on the exhibit tell the true, and unhappy, stories of the hybrids within and stress the serious drawbacks of such animals as pets. I know the strategy helps, but it reaches so few, and most of those it does reach believe, as I did, that they can do it better.

The strongest and most painful lessons I have learned are the ones I am most grateful for. Now I know the far-reaching responsibilities one assumes when one "owns" an animal, especially a wild one, and I am committed to sharing that knowledge for the good of people and animals alike. Mine is a personal hell, for not only do I have many regrets about what I have done, but often the animals I must turn away to an uncertain future are, in fact, descendants of pups I once sold. I am directly responsible for their tragedies, but the only atonement I can offer is in speaking out against the animals I so dearly love.

Terry Jenkins, her husband, Dan, and daughters Lena and Mary Ruth live in California with a number of animals, including two mustangs and a dwindling pack of wolves and hybrids. At the Folsom City Zoo she concentrates on improving the animals' living conditions and developing the zoo's credo, "Animals are not disposable." The Jenkinses also own Walking Wolf, a business producing animal-oriented art, embossed stationery, and jewelry.