

Out of Neverland

Mom arrived home and slammed the kitchen door, jarring us four kids from our television-induced stupor. We jumped! Popcorn spilled from our bowls. I wondered what was wrong as I gathered the butter-soaked kernels off the sleeping bag, popped the handful between my lips, chewed, and licked the salt from my fingers.

“Aunt Liza,” I called upstairs, “they’re home. Entering the kitchen, I said, “Hi, Mommy. Is Daddy home?”

Her hair dripped into puddles around her feet as she wiped her face with a dishtowel.

Again, I asked, “Where’s Daddy?”

She tossed the towel toward the sink; it hit the window and slid down behind the faucet. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“It’s only six-thirty. *Wonderful World of Disney* starts soon,” I said. My shoulders slumped. Had she forgotten?

She pushed past me and grabbed the empty pot off the stovetop. On her return, her clothes brushed wetness onto my pajamas. The metal echoed on the cast iron sink.

“Look at this pig sty,” she said, then ran water into the pot.

“We made popcorn, I . . .”

She didn’t listen. I stared out the window, looking at the bruised clouds.

To any adult, our farmhouse was an ordinary place plopped on a few acres of land in the middle of nowhere, Wisconsin. To Zack and me, it was a magical fort in the middle of a mystical fantasyland. The two of us explored even the forbidden lands and had

adventures like Peter Pan. Frog Pond and Corn Zombie Forest flanked the east and west. Indian Camp was on the hill near the pasture, Hangman's Tree (our hideout) was in the apple orchard, and the barn was Blindman's Bluff—the best place to explore. The Lost Boys (or as I liked to call us, the Lost Kids) also included our three ducks, two geese, the pig, and our horse, Chief.

During the late fall, Zack and I played “Protector of the forest” in the cornfield to the southeast of our graying two-story house. The corn zombies clawed with husk arms against our panting bodies as we ran through the towering forests in search of Indians, avoiding pirates. We patrolled. “Protect the lands at all costs,” I'd say. Separated and lost among our foes, we search for each other. With a thunk of boney bodies and a whoosh of escaping air, we collided. “We are not defeated,” we screamed in unison and raised our invisible swords to our guardian fairies. Over mounded dirt, we cut across several rows, stopping, listening, waiting. Quiet surrounded us. The sun above played peek-a-boo with the parting clouds on a soft blue background. Shadows slinked through the corn zombies; they swayed to music in our heads. Their whispers carried on the edge of a breeze. We listened for the crackling laugh of dried husks; a warning the squint-eyed, prune-faced Omer picked up our scent—that's what we called, Old Man Miller. The meanest pirate in the land. He had a growl like a mad dog on a piece of raw raccoon.

Now I longed for those carefree afternoons as I watched Mom exit the bathroom with a handful of old towels. “Where are your brother and sisters?”

“Living room,” I said, watching her wipe up the water on her hands and knees. *I should help*, I thought. I bent down, but it was too late. She was done. I backed out of her way as she headed to the basement door with the wet towels, words of disappointment

dropped on my ears like rotten fruit from a tree. I followed her out of the kitchen, my eyes cast down.

“Mommy,” Crystal squealed.

Mom crossed her arms. I half expected to hear, *Squaw no hug*. Instead, she pointed and said, “Go on, you’ll get wet.”

Crystal moped back to the pile of sleeping bags. Mom went to her room. I heard the door slam shut.

Wood doors always slammed in our old farmhouse. On rainy days, the four of us kids ran around the upper landing. Aunt Liza’s room was off limits, so we pretended she was Captain Hook. She was as mean when Mom and Dad weren’t home. Her room was the Captain’s quarters on the Jolly Roger. Eve and Crystal lost interest quick so Zack and I pretended the pirates captured them. We devised elaborate rescuing plans to free them from Hook’s crew. As we raced from room to room, we imagined the pirates ready for battle. Each time we outsmarted them. It wasn’t hard to do. We would thank them for a great adventure, and then WHAM, one of us would slam the door. Mom would yell, “When your Dad gets home . . .” But she’d always forget.

Today wasn’t one of those rainy days though. I wondered if she slammed the door on purpose, but the rabbit’s voice from the Trix commercial snared my attention.

Mom’s door opened and she headed back to the kitchen in dry clothes. I slid out of my sleeping bag again. *Where was Dad?* I wondered. My siblings watched from the comfort of their covers. I gestured with a quick finger to my lips to keep them silent. Not interested, they went back to their show. I spied.

On the counter next to Mom were five Pabst Blue Ribbons. The sixth can she held over the drain.

“Drunk,” Mom said.

She threw the empty across the room. It hit the basement door, bounced on the marbled linoleum, and came to a rest. She ripped the next beer from its plastic necklace and pried the can’s top open. It surrendered with a sudden pop.

Wait until Dad gets home, I thought.

Dad worked at the brewery. For as long as I could remember, he came home, sat in his chair, and sampled their beer. It made him relaxed, he said. Mom didn’t like it, but she found fault with everything. Many nights their heated voices crawled up through the floor vents and strangled our dreams as we lay in our beds.

I paced the hardwood planks in front of my siblings.

Zack asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Mom’s in trouble,” I said, plopping on the bay window bench.

The freezing rain streaked the sky with long slender fingers. I watched for Dad through window frost.

Where was he? The show was going to start.

The wind weaved its way through the minute cracks and spaces in wall. It pushed through my thick cotton pajamas. I shivered.

Aunt Liza had grumbled earlier as she dished out our pizza, “Weather’s gonna ruin my weekend.” She had planned a trip into town to a friend’s house. She was in “no mood to deal with an ice storm,” she complained and disappeared upstairs.

The glare of headlights turning into the driveway warmed my mood. I burst to the door to greet him.

“Go watch TV,” Mom ordered.

I stomped out of the room and hid by the built-in china hutch.

Dad opened the door and Mom said, “Where were you?” He looked like she had swung a sword at him. She lashed again. “Two miles. I walked. Drenched. Freezing.” She stood at the sink, smearing her irritation around on the countertop with the dishcloth.

“You look dry to me,” he said, crossing her on his way to the refrigerator.

“You left me stranded.”

“You’re the stupid who left.”

Mom spun toward him with the last beer in hand. The pop of aluminum stopped Dad’s search. His veins bulged against taut skin as she tipped the can over the sink.

He rushed her. Wrestled to grab the beer, but she launched the can. It soared over his head, through the air and hit the wall, the remaining beer splattered across the floor. It spun in circles then stopped. I slowly raised my eyes from the can to my dad.

He grabbed the steel chair and launched it toward the refrigerator.

All I could think was, “*Why’d she have to make him so angry?*” It was our show night. I hated her. I cursed her under my breath and vowed I would never speak to her again as long as I lived. Zack inched up behind me, followed by Crystal and Eve. The girls wrapped their arms tight around my waist and buried their faces. Screams echoed off the peeling paint. We sunk back into the shadows and huddled, all four of us.

Mom ran past us toward their room. Dad thundered after.

“Get out,” she yelled.

Every time they had an argument, she said the same thing. Dad would soon retire to his chair to find a John Wayne western repeat, or some other show to watch while Mom sulked in their room.

My eyes stayed glued to the closed door as I waited for Dad to come out. I knew he'd calm down in his chair while watching *Disney*. The heated voices grew louder behind the oak door. Zack slumped against the wall, closed his eyes, and covered his ears. I wrapped my arms around Eve and Crystal squeezing them close to my side. Both trembled. *Why are they still arguing?*

The bedroom door opened and a smile started to break across my cheeks. Dad stepped out into the living room. The smile faded. Something was wrong, very wrong. I pushed back on my siblings, inching them further into the corner.

"I've had it!" she shouted. "I said sign the papers," she wiped the blood seeping from her lip with her sleeve.

"I signed the damn things."

"Not soon enough. Miller sold it." She tore the contract in half, then in half again. Without taking her gaze from his stricken face, she tossed the ragged strips to the floor. "We lost the house."

I heard her words, but I didn't want to believe. The sound of paper ripping and the echoing of those three words, "lost the house" rang in my ears. We couldn't leave. This was our life. Two years, hundreds of adventures, all our animals and now the squint-eyed, prune-faced Omer—the meanest pirate in the land—wanted to kick us out of Neverland. It wasn't fair. My stomach twisted. I couldn't seem to breathe.

Aunt Liza came down the stairs two at a time, "What the hell's going on?"

Her eyes flitted from Dad to Mom. She lunged for the phone. Dad ripped the cord from the wall, pried the receiver from her hands, and shoved her to the floor. “None of your damn business.”

Mom reached for the teetering lamp.

“No!” The words escaped my lips before Zack could cover my mouth. They all stopped. My heartbeat roared in my ears. The room blurred as the fear and anger welled in my eyes. Aunt Liza scrambled to her feet and grabbed us, urging us out into the night. The cold ground pierced my sock-covered feet. I fought against her. White puffs of breath escaped. My teeth chattered. I didn’t want to go, I needed to stay. They could talk to Old Man Miller—he had to understand. If they’d just stop screaming and say sorry we could still watch our show. *I should do something*, I thought. *If I had only done my chores . . .*”

Aunt Liza pushed harder, and Zack pulled on my arms. Reluctance weighing on my limbs, but I followed to the back of the house. The yard light lit the way to our station wagon. It looked like a sleeping dragon with icicle teeth dripping with saliva. Dad stepped out of the house. He looked to the front, to the field, and to the back before he spotted us.

“Hurry!” Aunt Liza said, scrambling to get us in. “Lock the doors!”

Dad rushed up behind her as Zack heaved the door closed and jammed the lock into the hole. “Move,” Dad said, when she blocked him. She stood firm. He spun her around and pinned her against the car, “Those are my kids!”

“Don’t unlock the doors,” she yelled at us.

I pulled my sisters into my arms shielding their eyes. Their bodies shook from the cold—from the fear. Dad shoved Aunt Liza out of his way and she fell to the ground. I avoided his eyes. He pounded on the glass and yanked at the door handle. I cringed. He turned his back to me, leaned against the door, and hung his head. I reached for the lock. Then wavered. If I opened the door, I would betray Mom and Aunt Liza. I'd bet my life that he wouldn't hurt us. *What about my sibling's lives?* I hated the battle conflict waged on my thoughts. He's my dad. I was cold.

I reached for the lock.

Aunt Liza stood in front of the car and stared Dad down. "I hope you go to Hell!" she said.

Dad's head snapped up.

Why'd she do that? He was fine. I wanted to scream at her to shut her mouth. *Walk away, stupid.* She had to push.

She ran to the left side of the car and called him a bad name. Dad ran around the back after her. She countered his move by running to front again. He waited on the left for her to make another move. She dashed to the right side toward the house. He headed around the back cutting off her escape. She stopped and reversed. Inside, I cheered Dad on. Why'd she have to taunt him? She deserved to be punished for cursing at him.

"Couldn't shut your trap?" Dad said as he chased her to front of the car.

Aunt Liza screamed back, "She's my sister."

They played this warped game of tag until Dad finally caught her by the arm. She flung her free hand at his face. He stopped it inches from his eye. Struggling against his grip, she lost her balance and fell. Dad pinned her to the ground by sitting on her, his

legs straddled both sides of her. She swung wild punches. He grabbing at her flailing arms to avoid a direct hit.

I turned away. The scene reminded me of the fights Zack and I had when we pretended to be Peter Pan and Captain Hook. Only this was real.

“I want Mommy,” Crystal said, squeezing closer to me.

“Shhh. It’ll be ok,” I lied.

Zack drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them, “What are we gonna do?”

“I’m thinking.” I wished I didn’t have to be the one to figure out an escape plan this time. Failure would bring real danger, not the made up stuff of our fantasy games. Peter Pan never got hurt when he fought Hook, even Hook got away from Tick-Tock, the crocodile. I closed my eyes. What would Peter do? What are we going to do? Dad’s voice drew me back.

It was a low growl. “You’re just like her,” he said to Aunt Liza.

“Stop,” I whispered.

Dad rocked back. Both stopped moving. My stomach turned sour. Leave it go, Dad. *She’s just stupid and mean.* Be the bigger person like you always tell us. *It was an accident,* I thought, wishing he could hear me. But it was too late. A solid right landed across her mouth. Her cry echoed through the orchard. The fight gone, her arms crossed in a defensive shield in front of her face. Dad swung blow after blow, pounding her arms and shoulders. Air gushed from my lungs.

Don't be like that, Dad. Happy thoughts . . . like taking Zack and me fishing and camping. Teaching us the proper way to bait the hook, to cast our lines, and to set the hook after a fish took the bait. Be the person I love.

I released my sisters and grabbed Zack's shirt, "Go to the neighbor's. Get help."

"What? Why me?"

"You're older."

"It's too dark . . . too far," he quickly corrected.

"Don't be a baby," I said. *Why do I always have to be brave?* "On the count of three." I grabbed the handle in one hand and the lock knob in the other. Zack readied himself. I watched Dad and Aunt Liza. "One . . . two . . . three – go!" I pulled the knob up and flung the door open. He tumbled out and I closed the door, locking it again. He hesitated inches away from the wrestling match. *Why are you just standing there? Run.* I slid the lock open again and held my breath.

"Noooo," both sisters cried.

"Stay in here," I said, my voice shaking. "Lock the door."

The wind wrapped around me as I slipped out of the car and grabbed at the door. Dad heard it slam and dislodged himself from Aunt Liza. She scrambled for the safety of the car. In the commotion, my sisters forgot to relock. She climbed in.

I looked back at the car. My sisters pressed their faces against the glass with question marks for pupils. My legs felt like twin sticks of lead as indecision plagued the rational side of the brain. My dad stood between Zack and me. Nervous anticipation jolted through my body as I waited for someone to make a move. It didn't take long. Dad

had made up his mind. He had chosen his target. It was me. I tensed. *Would the first blow break my jaw or my heart?*

“Run, Zack! Run . . . don’t stop!” My voice went hoarse.

He woke from his trance and took off toward the cornfield. I tried to run around Dad. He reached out with no effort and grabbed me around the waist. I squirmed. He yanked me into his arms and crushed me against his chest holding tight. The sweet smell of oak, of the woods, of all our camping trips together broke my resistance. I blinked back the hurt, and swallowed my anger.

“I would never hurt you, sweetie,” he finally managed in a whisper. He loosened his death grip. “I love you . . . all of you.”

I felt my legs shake. The cold air stung as I swallowed.

“I love you too, Daddy.”

Was I a traitor to Mom and Aunt Liza? He squeezed me in his arms. I could trust he wouldn’t hurt me. *I knew it.*

“Take your sisters inside to bed,” he said. “Before you freeze to death,” he added.

“Aunt Liza too?”

“If she wants.”

I wiped my nose on my sleeve as he turned away. I thought about my brother racing through the dark rows of corn stalks in his thin pair of pajamas. *What had I done?*

I gathered my sisters and we walked back to the house.

Inside, Mom was cleaning up. I ushered both girls passed her in a hurry, not sure what to say. I was afraid she’d feel betrayed by me, that the fighting would start again. Why’d she have to be so angry? We headed upstairs. I guided them to their beds and

kissed their foreheads. Blankets tight against their bodies, I turned on both nightlights and waited at the door for any resistance. When none came, I inched out into the hallway, glancing only once at my brother's empty bed. We'd switched rooms shortly after moving to the farm. Zack hated the dark. I liked it dark at night. My room was at the far end of the hallway with a great view of our property from the window.

Crouched at the top of the landing, I listened. Aunt Liza rushed up the stairs, saw me, and hesitated. She turned right taking the long route passed the bathroom and my room to her room. She slammed her door without uttering a word. Drawers opened and closed, hangers clanged together, and words I was not allowed to repeat filled the dark hallway. I replayed the scene in my mind and tried to recreate the night with "what ifs." If only I had said or done something. Each time the voices picked and scolded until my head pounded. I didn't want anyone to be mad anymore. I wanted to find my brother. To stop him. My body refused to listen.

A pounding at the door made me jerk awake. I slinked down the steps, avoiding the two near the top that creaked, and stopped at the edge of the shadow.

"No, officer, everything is fine," Mom lied. "Just a misunderstanding."

"But Mom—," Zack said.

"Go on up to bed, it's been a long night," she said. "And take your sister with you."

We both trudged upstairs, dragging out the climb, hoping to hear more. The distance muffled their voices. I wanted to ask Zack tons of questions. I didn't dare. He went left; I turned right at the landing. I looked out my window down at the cars

wondering where Dad had gone. I sighed. My bed warmed my limbs, and I concentrated on breathing, in and out until I felt the weight of my body sinking into the mattress.

As daylight broke and stretched its arms across the horizon, I heard a familiar sound: Dad's shotgun. The station wagon roared to life outside my window. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and glanced at my clock. It was too early to be up for school. My feet drug across the floor, I peered down at the driveway. Mom and Aunt Liza were in the station wagon. *Where are they going this early?* Mom backed the car down the driveway. The tires spun, it fishtailed, and then straightened out. I lost sight of them until I spotted the red taillights on Franklin Road heading towards town. In the glow of the morning, the trees and telephone lines drooped with ice. The landscape looked unreal. I imagined I was Princess Skylar of Iceland high up in my castle surveying the beauty of my land. The dead stalks of corn glistened from the blanket of ice, the tractor by the shed looked like it had been dipped in an ice bath, and long icicles draped from the roof of the barn. Then I noticed the barn door. It stood wide open. *Did Zack start chores without me?* I wondered. *Maybe he's still mad. Nah. If he was mad, I'd be doing 'em myself.* A new adventure waited, I thought.

I slipped pants over my pajamas, grabbed a sweater, and headed for the barn. I knew the barn better than anyone did—from the hayloft to the stalls below where Petunia our pig, our two geese, and our three ducks lived—even in the dark. This was my Neverland playground. I crossed the barn and headed below, searching. Thin streaks of light pushed through cracks in the barn walls and created a spotlight stage for dancing dust particles. I inched through the corridor listening, while the wind whistled through the old barn and played on my nerves.

I avoided walking in front of Petunia's pen knowing she would beg for food, for her favorite treat of orchard apples. Her gluttony would wake the whole barn. I crawled under the gate of the tack room and cut through toward the side of our geese's pen. As I approached, I saw Dad standing inside the large pen. A warmth spread outward from my chest as the smile reached my eyes. I rounded the side toward the gate opening, but stopped short at the sight of his gun drawn to his shoulder, the barrel pointed into the darkness. A sliver of light in the corner drew my eye to the white of Egor's feathers, our male goose. Before I could process the scene, the blast of the shot ripped through the silence. The echo ricocheted off the walls. Ringing filled my ears.

I had helped Dad kick up pheasants like a dog on a cool fall afternoon—two, three at a time. This was different. The ducks, the geese, they were our pets. They were part of our fantasy gang, The Lost Kids. I wanted to run as far from the barn as I could. I had been so stupid for believing the games Zack and I had invented could become real. Neverland was a fantasy, not reality. I ran past Petunia not caring if she made noise. I wanted the barn to wake up. The closer I came to the door the farther away Neverland seemed, it was fading like a dream upon waking.

I slipped on the slick ground and fell twice before making it back to my room. Another shot shattered the frozen landscape. I stared out the window trying to make sense of it.

In the yard, near the barn I saw Dad's shadow moving toward the house. His Browning shotgun carried limp against his side. He looked up at my window. I was afraid to blink. I took a deep breath. I wanted to jump in my bed, throw the covers over my head, and cry myself to sleep. Instead, I stared him down.

"I hate you," I screamed, but my words bounced off the closed window as he stepped into the mudroom. I heard the door close and he reappeared, then got into Mom's red Gremlin.

A puff of white exhaust rose from the tailpipe as he drove toward the road. I pounded on the window knowing it was too late. Like Mom earlier, he disappeared into the distance. I watched his taillights fade down the road.