

Ireland

When she burst through the front door, Wendy was for the second time that day surprised by the presence of her parents.

She was a little frazzled, the dog basket dangling on her left elbow while she shook out her umbrella with her right hand, and deep, deep in her own thoughts. She needed time to reflect, to figure out the possibilities resulting from her interaction with the Shesbow twins. This meant journaling. *And* fiction. With her father home from work early and the new dog and everything, it felt like a day out of time, a holiday—so why *not* spend the afternoon writing up her latest ideas for Never Land? She would indulge herself, the same way other girls did with naps, baths, and dresses.

She had been playing with the idea of linking all her stories together somehow, maybe into a novel. . . .

"Oh," she said, blinking at the unexpected sight of her mother sitting at the kitchen table, her father standing over it, both with very, very serious expressions on their faces. Like someone had died.

And there, under her father's hand, was the very notebook she had just been thinking about.

"Mother, Father," she added, feeling something flutter and flop somewhere between her stomach and heart. *A new organ*, she told herself crazily. *One whose sole purpose is to react to the uncomfortable tension in the air.*

"Wendy," Mr. Darling said in his lowest, most managerial voice.

"Darling," Mrs. Darling said. "I think . . . I think we had better talk."

Mr. Darling coughed suddenly, like he was trying not to look nervous.

Wendy had the strange notion of asking if *she* had been let go from the firm.

"You read my notebook," she said instead.

"Yes, and really, darling, your writing is *quite* exquisite," her mother said quickly. "Really. I had no idea you were so talented with words. Your descriptions . . . Your characterizations . . . Mademoiselle Gabineau has never mentioned your facility. At all."

"She is unaware. May I have it, please?" Wendy said, unable to keep her eyes or attention off her book. The little dog waggled frantically in the basket, causing it to swing. She barely felt it.

"The thing is, darling," her mother went on, "the stories themselves are . . . well . . ."

"Oh, enough of this blustering around," Mr. Darling exploded. "They are the product of an infantile mind. The febrile imaginings of a child. I thought you had *done* with all this Peter Pan nonsense years ago! You're *sixteen* now, for heaven's sake, Wendy!"

"It's my fault," Mrs. Darling said apologetically. "I have always indulged my baby girl."

"You haven't changed at all since you were little, Wendy. These silly stories—"

"They aren't silly," Wendy said, offended by the word.

"Well, yes—yes they are, because they aren't real! None of it is *real*, Wendy! Not a deuced thing! And you write them with *yourself* in the stories, like you're some kind of hero, like you're still pretending with your baby brothers! Like you *think* it's all real!"

"I never believed it was—"

But her voice caught in her throat.

She couldn't do it.

She could never knowingly lie about Never Land—she would never betray it that way.

Her parents saw her swallow. They saw her hesitation, her refusal to finish the sentence.

Her mother's head sank toward her chest, and this hurt Wendy most of all.

Mr. Darling cleared his throat again.

"I think you have some growing up to do, Wendy. I think you need to see the world as it is, and what must be done in it to live a full adult life. I think you need a break from these environs and thoughts."

"Father, what are you—"

"The Rennets have a cousin with a country house in Conaught. Their governess had to take a leave of absence on account of her mother passing away," Mrs. Darling said quietly, almost musically. Like delivering the news in operetta format somehow made it less unappealing. "You will join them for several months and care for their five boys."

"*Ireland?*" Wendy cried. "It's . . . a long way off."

It was the first, the only thing she could think to say: she had been looking at a map of the British Isles just the other day to help fill in some descriptive passages of Never Land, and had been drawn to the county's green meadows and hills.

"I know, darling, and I will miss you terribly—" her mother started.

“Now stop there.” Mr. Darling held up his hand to silence her. “Brave heart. We’re doing this for her own good.”

“You’re sending me to *Ireland*. You are *exiling* me. To care for a bunch of . . . of . . . nasty little boys I don’t even know!”

“Think of it as an adventure! Like in your stories!” Mrs. Darling said brightly. “They could be your Misplaced Boys!”

“*Lost Boys*, Mother. And no, they can’t.”

“Well, think of it as a nice little excursion from London, then. A vacation, really . . .”

“You’re hiring me out to complete strangers hundreds of miles away just because I write stories about Peter Pan?”

It wasn’t really a question. It was a reaffirming of the facts as presented to her.

“It’s not just about the stories,” Mr. Darling said, looking desperately at his wife.

Mrs. Darling raised an eyebrow. She may have been soft in many ways, but Wendy’s mother never, ever lied.

“All right, it *is* just about the stories,” Mr. Darling sighed. “And I think you could do with a break from each other for a while.”

“We will keep the notebook safe here with us while you go,” Mrs. Darling said soothingly.

“But they’re *my* stories. They’re *mine*. They belong to *me!*”

Mr. Darling threw up his hands. “Wendy, they are not the product of a happy, normal girl!”

“No, I suppose *not*,” Wendy cried, and she fled upstairs, the basket with the dog still swinging from her arm.

Wendy Makes a Decision

This at least could be said about Snowball: the little thing curled up on Wendy's neck and breathed his soft wet breath on her cheek while she lay on her bed, dry-eyed and insensate. Nana sat loyally on the floor nearby, perhaps withholding her disdain for the new interloper in view of her mistress's distress.

"Ireland . . ." Wendy finally whispered. "I don't want to go to Ireland.

"Unless . . . *maybe* I would if I got to go in an airship.

"Or if I went by regular ship, while chasing pirates.

"Or if I wasn't alone. If I was brought there by . . .

"Peter Pan."

This time hearing her voice aloud didn't make her braver at all.

“Peter Pan,” she repeated bitterly.

“*Peter Pan*, who only visited when I couldn’t see him. Peter Pan, who left his shadow and never came back for it. Who never came back for *me*.”

She turned her head to look out the window, but all she saw was gray. The same gray that was inside her head; the two reached out to each other, like sensing like. Wendy closed her eyes, severing the connection. But it was still gray behind her closed lids.

What had happened?

Somehow her life had gone from heady days of playing games with Michael and John and telling stories about pirates to . . . passing time until they came home. And then there were no more pirates anyway. Something had slipped out of her hands. There would be no pirates of any sort in her future. No fairies, no Peter Pan, no Never Land. Just banishment to another family in another drearily real country. And there? And then back home? The same: social mistakes, misery in a crowd, boys who probably didn’t like her anyway.

She sighed and looked at Snowball. “Pretty doggy,” she said, giving him a pet. “When they gave you to me they were only trying to make me happy. They really do think this nannying abroad, this . . . *gothic situation*, would be good for me. But I don’t like gothic novels, Snowball. They’re dreary.

“I suppose it could have been worse, like an arranged marriage. All right, perhaps that’s going a bit far. It’s really a bit more Charlotte than Emily. ‘A serious introduction to a proper boy,’ then.”

She carefully moved Snowball so she could give Nana a good petting too.

“I thought *Peter Pan* was the proper boy for me. But all I have is a shadow of him.”

She paused for a moment, wondering if that sounded too dramatic.

“But I really did think he was going to come back, Nana. At least to fetch his property. It’s his *shadow*, for heaven’s sake. What is he doing without it?”

She went to the bureau and opened the drawer and regarded the black non-object that lay there unmoving, darkening the shapes under it.

“He mustn’t need it anymore,” she said thoughtfully.

“He mustn’t *want* it. Anymore,” she added after another moment.

Nana let out a sound somewhere between a growl and a chuff. Almost like she knew what Wendy was thinking.

Wendy herself wasn’t sure what she was thinking. An idea was just beginning to form in her head—an extremely alien idea, but one that opened a space in the clouds even before it was fully formed, like a sigh that precedes great things.

Things that did *not* include Ireland.

Acquiring these things would be tricky, however.

Apart from maths, nothing in Wendy's life was strictly transactional—though certainly there were times when the boys were younger that she'd had to divide time into five-minute slots so each could have a turn playing with a favorite toy. And, of course, she often overheard Mr. Darling going on about how if Mrs. Darling bought a new hat they wouldn't be able to afford a new tea service—and her mother calmly agreeing, to her father's never-ending surprise (for she was practical underneath her lashes and perfume, and quite good at maths).

But the idea of *worth . . . of trade . . .* of something having value to someone else in a way that was useful to *her*, to Wendy . . . this was new, and a little frightening.

Here were the facts: Peter Pan didn't value his shadow anymore, apparently.

But someone else might.

No, scratch that; someone else *did*.

She wouldn't let herself think beyond this. She wouldn't let her mind chatter the way her mouth did, ruining everything. This time she would *do*.

She looked around until she found the perfect thing: a delicate linen and lace envelope for keeping her nightgown in that she had done a pretty job of embroidering. She

carefully scooped up the shadow, folded it, and slipped it in.

What else might she need?

A sewing kit, a tiny lady's knife, a muffler, a half dozen extra hairpins, some string and ribbons. She put all this along with the envelope into a worn leather satchel and slipped it under her bed.

Then she took out a pair of stockings and began to darn them, an innocent and useful task should anyone come upon her unexpectedly.

Hours later, Michael and John returned home full of their usual youthful energy and droll remarks. Wendy neither remonstrated them nor laughed softly; her brothers remarked on her distracted nature.

When Mrs. Darling came into the kitchen it was with a tentative step and furtive looks.

"How is your little pet?" she eventually asked.

"What? Oh, he's absolutely adorable," Wendy said, remembering to toss Snowball a tidbit of mutton. For Nana she reserved the bone.

"You can . . . take him with you, you know. To Ireland. He would be a delightful little travel companion."

For a moment, just a moment, Wendy looked at her mother—*really* looked at her, steadily and clearly.

"You would never send the boys away."

The statement fell hard and final and full of more meaning than anything that had ever been said in the kitchen before.

“But they didn’t write the . . . fantasies. . . .” her mother said quietly.

Then Mr. Darling came in, loud and blustery, talking up Irish butter and clean country air.

Mother and daughter both ignored him.

Wendy went to bed early that night, claiming fatigue. Since the sun had almost won its daily Sisyphean battle with the weather, the sky was light a long time before the air became heavy enough to subtly infiltrate thoughts with sleep.

“Hook . . .” she whispered, finally drowsing.

“I have his shadow. . . .”