

Peter Pan
by J.M. Barrie, published in 1911

Summary: *Peter Pan* has Peter adventuring with the Darling children in Neverland. They battle Captain Hook, defeat him, and return home.

A Lost Darling
by Tanner Hudson, 2023

Michael watched the window for his sister's return. But after a decade, he was losing faith.

He still dreamt of Peter's last visit, of flying beyond the night sky, fighting pirates, saving princesses, being enraptured in the fabled Neverland. All of it persisted in a dream-like aura which refused to materialize in reality save for one detail: the absence of his sister, Wendy.

His parents did not take her disappearance well. Michael and his brother, John, tried to tell them the truth, but when Mr. Darling gathered that his daughter ran off with a boy, he pronounced her dead to the family.

Now Michael sat alone in his bedroom, studying. No life-threatening thrills to be had. As evening faded into night, the daydreams shifted into true dreams as Michael dozed off to Big Ben tolling in the distance.

But then a knock startled him awake. Moonlight shone through the window, splaying a grand silhouette across his desk. Disbelief came first, then sheer excitement as Michael scrambled for the latch. He flicked it open. Winds slammed the windows back as a green blur shot through the air.

The nimble figure spun around, lounging back like he was in a hammock. He winked at Michael. "Boy, you sure know how to make a friend feel welcomed".

"Peter!" Michael cried. "I can't believe... Why are you here?"

"Why do you think?," Peter said, a harsh smile to his lips. "Time for more adventures. Neverland is waiting!"

Michael felt his age as he looked down at his textbooks. They were paper chains—his future. "Peter, I can't just *leave*. I'm sorry."

Peter clicked his tongue. "All about responsibility now? Suppose she would be proud of that."

She. Michael's eyes widened. "Wendy! Where's my sister? Is she okay?"

"Oh, she's doing wonderful," said Peter. "In fact, she's also why I'm here." Peter held out his hand. "She misses her dear brother."

Michael couldn't take the Lost Boy's hand fast enough.

Fairy dust swirled around them. Michael soar out the window after Peter. Worries, fears, memories, hopes, were all swept away as the second star drew closer and closer until the horizon opened up and Michael saw it.

Neverland.

He could never truly appreciate Neverland's beauty until he saw how dull everything else was. Neverland was spectacular, wondrous, magnificent!

Even the cannonball streaking toward them.

"Hang on!" Peter yelled, the cannonball shot between them. Another shot followed, fired from the distant ship below.

Peter laughed, throwing quips to comfort Michael. But Michael wasn't hearing him. All he could hear was the cannon fire.

They're here! Mr. Darling screamed in the middle of the night, voice barely audible amid the air raid sirens. *Take cover! For the love of God, take cover!*

Fear came for a split second, a drop of ink that soiled the happy thought as Michael plummeted. He wasn't sure when he started screaming, only that his mouth was bloody when he plunged into the ocean.

Time stopped. Murky darkness flowed in every direction.

Then something torn Michael out of the abyss, into harsh, blinding light. His chest burned for air. Heavy blows fell on his back. He vomited out buckets of water before sucking in a breath of air. However, when he saw his surroundings, Michael wished he stayed in the ocean.

The deck of the ship was filled with rowdy men. Guns, swords, knives, and bottles adorned their belts while tattoos and scars lined the skin. A decade passed for Michael, but for these pirates it could have been yesterday. A quick glance in the sky revealed blue for miles around—not a patch of greenery in sight.

Michael held his hands up. "Please, I mean no harm."

"Nobody ever does coming here."

Up the steps to the helm stood the tall, thin figure that haunted Michael for years: the Captain. There was no mistaking it. Boots scrubbed to a perfect black clicked against the wood as the vermillion coat swayed in the wind.

Michael froze, unable to look at the Captain's face. *It can't be. He died. I saw it!*

But the captain continued, disregarding his own death, "Won't you look me in the eye?"

That's when Michael noticed the Captain's hand. It was not a razor-sharp hook, but a firm hand resting on the hilt of a cutlass. He didn't meet black eyes that searched for any fear to exploit, only familiar ones that shone bright and defiant.

His voice cracked. "Wendy?"

The corner of her lip went up, thickening the smile lines scarring her sun-aged face. "You've grown handsome, Michael."

"I..." Michael was speechless. "You stayed. You were supposed to stay young. Peter said—"

"Peter said a lot of things," Wendy relented. "But mothers always grow old, apparently. Is John with you?"

Michael shook his head. Wendy closed her eyes and sighed. Relief pulled the years off her face like the tide, a brief return to the old Wendy, to the older sister who handled the world as it weaved its way around her needle. Then the tide went out, and the captain returned.

"We weren't the first that Peter brought here," Wendy said, nodding to the men around them, "and we won't be the last. It's a game to him. The only way we can leave is by beating him." Wendy drew her cutlass and offered the hilt to Michael. "It won't be easy, but then we can sail home."

Michael stared down at the blade, the sunlight trapped in its steel. *Now we're the pirates.* He could still run away and hide somewhere on the island, throwing himself at Peter's mercy.

Even as the thoughts came, Michael knew they were childish. He couldn't abandon his sister. He couldn't run away anymore, and Neverland revealed a core truth to Michael as he took his sister's blade:

Save for one, all children must grow up.