

The Neverland Wars

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The Neverland Wars

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TO MY LOVE, MY ZAQ—
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PROLOGUE

THE EVENING WAS STILL BRIGHT AND YOUNG WHEN THE MUSIC started. Gwen had played all day in the backyard, and her dolls' plastic faces were smudged with dirt to prove it. They had gluttonously devoured all of Gwen's mud pies, and she was intently plucking daisy petals, one at a time, to determine if some unimagined boy was somewhere out there, madly in love with her. She had to start over with several daisies. Her eight-year-old hand did not have the requisite coordination for the task.

When she found a purple-edged daisy, she was too engrossed with its size and color to notice the music. Instead, she promptly plucked the flower and ran, barefoot, into the kitchen where her mother was still cleaning up from dinner. Mrs. Hoffman took the flower and got down a tiny vase. Gwen stood on tiptoe to kiss her swollen stomach. "It's for my little sister."

Her mother gave her an adult smile, putting the vase back into the cupboard. "I'm not sure it will keep until she gets here, Gwen. Maybe we should press it in a book."

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On the living room couch, her mother helped her press the daisy between the pages of a book, and when the doorbell rang, her father answered it. Gwen wandered back outside to play more, unconcerned with the two harried men at the door.

It was only then that she heard the enchanting music pushing its way through the evening air. She could tell it was far away, yet she could clearly hear it. Picking up her stuffed lion, she clutched him to share her excitement and his courage. The melody felt familiar but new. She wanted to follow it.

Her mother emerged at the back door in a very different mood. "Gwen, it's bedtime! Time to come in!"

The peculiar music was so much more interesting though, and she was reluctant to give up her playtime. Her mother walked out and took Gwen's hand, leading her in despite her objections. With only her lion in hand, she asked, "What about my dolls?"

"I'll bring them in later," her mother promised, but she locked the door as they headed inside.

There were two men, dressed like grown-ups, standing in the entryway with her father. One had a map, and he was muttering about the perimeter they'd established. Her father was pulling on his overcoat. "I've got to go," he said, walking over to give his wife a worried peck on the cheek. "He's close. Watch Gwen."

"Where's Daddy going?"

"To do business with his work friends," her mother answered as Mr. Hoffman's brisk pace led him out the door with the two men. "Now let's get you upstairs to bed."

Gwen brushed her teeth and was ushered into her nightgown. It seemed awfully early for bed, and horribly unfair. She wanted to know where her father was going, or at least stay up until he returned. Her mother was adamantly

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against it. Soon, Gwen was left snugly in bed, alone in her room, and wide awake.

She wanted to stay up though. It was still light out, and Gwen remained curious about the music. Slipping out of bed, she tiptoed over the carpeted floor to draw the blinds and open her window.

It was hard for her little hands to lift the heavy window pane, but she opened it enough to let the music in. There were pipes somewhere; it sounded closer than it had before. Her first thought was that it was an ice-cream truck, but this was not a trite melody broadcasted over a crude speaker. It was soft like a lullaby, yet energetic. Its complicated rhythm and endearing melody made it sound like the soundtrack to a wonderful dream.

Her mother came in, having heard the sound of the window opening. The girl assumed she was in trouble and explained, "I want to stay up and listen to the music."

Gwen was too young to understand what panic looked like on her mother's face. "Oh Gwen, no, close the window. There's no music out there. Let me wind your music box." Her mother shut the window, locking the top so that Gwen could not open it again. She wound the music box, and Gwen trudged back to her bed as mechanical tones replaced the beautiful sound of the fluting.

"I want to stay up!" Gwen insisted. "Like you and Dad. I want to stay up until he gets back."

Her mother tucked her in, again. "No, not tonight."

"When can I stay up?"

"When you're older. When you grow up, you'll be able to stay up as late as Mommy and Daddy."

She nestled in her covers, listening to the tinny sound of the music box. As her mother kissed her forehead, Gwen thought about all the wonderful things she would do, when

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she was older and could stay up late. As she began to think of the future, the piping faded from her mind.

“You’ll be able to stay up as late as you want, someday,” her mother promised, and Gwen nuzzled her stuffed lion in eager anticipation of that magical, late-night someday.



CHAPTER

1

“AND THEN WHAT HAPPENED?” ROSEMARY ASKED, CLUTCHING Tootles in her arms until he mewed with discomfort. “Shush!” Gwen warned, whispering. “If Mom hears, we’ll both be in trouble.”

Rosemary let go of poor Tootles, and the tabby cat immediately scampered off the bed and away from the enthralled eight-year-old. Gwen sat cross-legged on her bed, trying to imagine how she could conclude her story. It was already past her little sister’s bedtime, and Gwen still needed to finish writing a paper. Regardless, she was as happy as her sister to be sitting on her downy purple comforter under the glow of the twinkling white Christmas lights strung up over her bed. “And then,” Gwen continued, knowing that Rosemary preferred all of her plot points to be prefaced with those two words, “Margaret May ran through the woods. Even though the mysterious old woman had given her the beautiful music box, she was still lost and afraid she would never make it home in time for Prince Jay’s coronation. It was starting to get dark in the woods and, seeing no other option,

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Margaret May gave up and sat down under a willow tree.”

Rosemary’s eyes went wide with disbelief. She clutched a limp teddy bear close to her, one of the many old stuffed animals that still resided on her big sister’s bed. “Margaret May can’t *give up!*”

“Shush. But she did.” Gwen chucked a handful of popcorn into her mouth and let Rosemary wallow in surprise a moment more before continuing. She ignored the chime of a new text on her phone—she held her own stuffed lion and stayed wrapped in the story she was spinning. “Under the willow tree, Margaret May did not cry, because she was still very brave. She was also very clever, so she decided to wind the music box and listen to its song. This caused something very strange to happen. Although the music box didn’t make any noise, Margaret May heard a mysterious music in the distance. She got up and followed the magical music until it stopped, at which point she wound her music box and the music started again somewhere far away.”

“Where was the music coming from?”

“Quiet, Rosemary. Mom will be mad if she finds out I’m keeping you up.”

“Okay,” Rosemary whispered. Taking a tiny handful of popcorn, she put it up to her face to nibble at it like a squirrel. She’d been chewing everything with only her front teeth for the past week.

“And then,” Gwen watched Rosemary’s eyes twinkle at those words, “Margaret May followed the music until she found where it was coming from... the raven tree.”

Rosemary gasped. “She found it!” When she laughed, she bounced on the bed, her poofy hair bobbing ridiculously with her. The missing tooth in her broad smile only made her look happier. Gwen couldn’t help but laugh too. Even at sixteen, she felt totally in her element sharing the joy of a fairy

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tale with her little sister. Rosemary's whimsy was catching.

The young girl felt totally at home in her big sister's room, still surrounded by stuffed animals, art projects, and relics from Gwen's childhood that had nowhere else to go. The biggest difference between the girls' rooms was the size of the furniture.

"After all her searching, she had finally found the raven tree, full of its feather-leaves and egg fruit. The bark was covered in little snapping beaks, but Margaret May did not need to get close in order to pluck one of the sparkling, black eggs from a low branch. Its shell looked like the night sky, and Margaret May tucked it into the pocket of her plaid dress before—"

The bedroom door opened. "What's going on in here?"

Mrs. Hoffman found her daughters huddled on the bed, staring at her with guilty eyes. Her hand still on the doorknob, an unamused look took an immediate hold of her features. She was a wiry woman, and her fashionable slacks and blouse hung on her the same way they hung on mannequins in the store. Her hair was much redder than either of her daughters, mostly due to the fact that she'd started dyeing it. "Gwendolyn, what are you doing? Rosemary, why aren't you in bed?"

"Gwen was telling a story! She was just getting to the good part."

"I was almost done. We were just going to be another two minutes."

Their mother's eyebrows rose at this response. "It's a school night. Rosemary should have been in bed an hour ago."

"Really?" Gwen's mind froze momentarily as she wondered what time it was. Evenings had a way of getting away from her when she started storytelling. Checking her phone, she saw that it was minutes to nine, and that the message she'd heard buzz was from Claire. Drawn away from her story, she checked the text.

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When r u picking me up Saturday?

“Are you listening to me, Gwendolyn?”

“Yeah, just checking the time, Mom.” She flung her phone aside on the bed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to keep Rose up so late.”

“How did you know we were up?” Rosemary asked, astounded that anyone could have uncovered their covert story time.

“A mother knows,” Mrs. Hoffman replied, having heard Rosemary’s unrestrained gasps and laughter from downstairs. Seeing the bag between the girls, Mrs. Hoffman asked, “Are you eating in bed?”

“Gwen had popcorn!” Rosemary seemed surprised when her mother failed to share her enthusiasm.

“Oh goodness... Rosemary, go brush your teeth again. Gwen, you know you are not allowed to eat in your room.”

“It’s my room, Mom.”

“Rosemary, go. I don’t want to have to fight you about this.”

“But Gwen’s not done with her story! We just found the raven tree!”

This had no effect on their mother. “She can finish it tomorrow. She needs to sleep, too.”

“I need to finish my paper for speech and debate.” Gwen unfolded her legs and stood up to get her laptop off her desk. When she woke it up from the screen saver, she tried to minimize Facebook before her mother could see it. Downstairs, Gwen heard the front door and knew that her father was home from his networking dinner or whatever event he had gone to with his fellow financial advisors.

Her arms crossed, Mrs. Hoffman announced, “You should know better than to keep your little sister up and to be eating in your room.”

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“I said I was sorry. Time got away from me, and Rosemary really wanted a story.”

“You need to be her big sister, not some compatriot in mischief.”

“Why I am the only one who gets chewed out? She was the one who interrupted my homework for a story.”

“I’m sorry—are you actually surprised we’re holding you to a higher standard than your eight-year-old sister?”

“I want to hear the end of the story!”

Their mother was getting exasperated, and she was visibly relieved when Mr. Hoffman came upstairs and poked his head in the door. “What’s all the commotion up here?”

“Gwen’s telling a story and is almost finished and I have to hear the end.” The whole of Rosemary’s persuasive skills consisted of stating her position as quick and loud as possible, hoping it would be taken as fact.

“Robert, help me get Rosemary to bed. She needs to brush her teeth again.”

“What are you still doing up, Rosie?” he asked, coming over and playfully sweeping her off the bed and into his arms. He stood, comfortable and calm, even in his suit after a long day. “It’s bedtime, girly.”

“But—”

“No buts about it,” he answered, firm but not frustrated as he set her down. “Let’s go get those teeth brushed.” Rosemary trudged slowly as her father steered her to the bathroom. The Jack-and-Jill bathroom that conjoined the girls’ bedrooms was convenient at times, but it mostly served as a means for her to sneak into her sister’s room after bedtime.

“Goodnight, Rosemary. We’ll finish our story tomorrow,” Gwen told her.

Rosemary pouted in response, marching at a turtle’s pace in her fluffy, pink nightgown.

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“This is totally inappropriate,” her mother told her. “You need to stop this, Gwen. I’ve half a mind to ground you for the week.”

“You can’t ground me! Claire and I are going shopping for homecoming dresses on Saturday!”

“I can ground you for homecoming if I have to. I don’t want to punish you, Gwendolyn; I just want you to start acting like a big sister.”

“How am I in trouble for this?” Gwen looked around the room and felt that everyone was against her—except for Rosemary, who was too busy drawing out the process of going back to her room. She made a noise like a tired cow. “You’re always talking about how you want us to get along, but when we do bond, I get in trouble for it.”

“You can get along with your sister while still exercising more judgment than an eight-year-old.”

“We don’t have to have this conversation now, Helen,” Mr. Hoffman announced, now pushing Rosemary to the bathroom. “It’s late. The girls are tired.”

Gwen felt under attack though, and she was not going to drop the conversation just to have it at length later. “What do you mean? Why do we have to have a conversation?”

Trying to keep the peace, her father simply explained, “It’s just not appropriate for you to indulge Rosemary like that. We can talk about it later.”

“Make sure her window’s still closed tonight,” Mrs. Hoffman reminded her husband.

He finally got Rosemary into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him to isolate the little girl from any further distraction. Gwen was left on her bed to face the judgment of her more reactionary mother. “You should get some sleep. Your father’s right. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

“Yeah, well, whatever,” Gwen sputtered, lacking a

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response. “If you don’t mind though, I’ve still got a lot of work to do on my debate paper before I can go to bed.”

“Goodnight, Gwen,” her mother sighed, “try not to stay up too late.”

Her mother left, closing the door behind her. Alone in her room, she could hear the hum of Rosemary’s toothbrush and, later, her affectionate giggles as their parents tucked her into bed. Gwen burned with an irrational envy, listening to her parents lavish their love on Rosemary and usher her to fantastical dreams. Meanwhile, Gwen was stuck in a teenage world that was supposed to revolve around shopping, homecoming, and other celebrations of independence that could be revoked at a moment’s notice by her mother.

Surely, everyone bemoaned the inbetweenness of being a teenager, yet for Gwen, it was something else entirely. There was the inescapable sense that she was being forced in a direction she did not want to go. It was not that the transition into adulthood was hard because it was a transition, but rather because it was hurtling her toward something unpleasant and irreversible. At least her peers were assuaged by a sense of impending freedom. They carried a sense of conviction that adulthood held some liberating significance to it, but Gwen was blind to the glamour they saw in adult life.

Admittedly, she finally got to stay up late, but what for?

She plugged away at her paper for a few minutes, but was checking Facebook and scrolling through someone’s summer vacation pictures when she heard a noise at the bathroom door. Rosemary peeked out to look at Gwen.

“Rose, go to bed. I’m in enough trouble with Mom already.”

“That’s okay. I just wanted to say goodnight,” she explained. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why? Did Mom and Dad tell you I’m not?”

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“No,” Rosemary answered. She was quiet for a minute, staring up at the vast collection of books and stuffed animals on bright blue bookshelf Gwen had painted years ago. It seemed most of the things that came into Gwen’s room never left. Finally, trying not to arouse suspicion, Rosemary asked, “Gwen, what are hormones?”

Gwen set her laptop aside on the nightstand. She smirked, but she resented the implication that all of her behavior and feelings had been dismissed as an inevitable, impersonal product of her adolescence. “They’re little things that get inside of you once you start growing up. They’re like tiny bugs that start changing how you feel about everything. They bite at every part of your insides, infecting you with grownupness before you even know you’ve caught them.”

Rosemary stared at her, almost as horror-stricken as she was curious. “How do they do that?”

“Very slowly,” Gwen told her. “They change everything inside of you, filling you up with seriousness, replacing all the parts of you that remember how to play with your toys and how to dress up. They make it so you hate when things don’t make sense. Then they make you so incredibly silly and irrational that you hate it when you realize nothing inside of you makes any sense. Finally, when you hate it enough, things start making sense again, and that’s when you’re an adult.”

Rosemary stoically took in her explanation. “So they’re like cooties?”

“Pretty much,” Gwen admitted. “Only you don’t realize you’ve caught them until it’s already too late.”

Tootles mewed, and then bounded onto the bed. Gwen welcomed him into her lap, and the orange cat purred as she petted him. The more she thought about it in Rosemary’s logical framework, the more her own life made sense. Nothing was fundamentally wrong with her—she was just trying to

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stave off a terrible case of cooties that left her nostalgia-prone and quick to fight with her mother. It made so much sense.

Rosemary pensively stared out the dark window. Finally, she asked, "Should I be scared?"

Tootles sashayed to Rosemary, but the younger girl was too engrossed in her concerns to pay attention to him. "No," Gwen assured her. "It happens whether you're scared or not... and everybody goes through it, so it can't be that bad, right? And grown-up things are fun... right?"

Rosemary didn't have an answer.

Gwen sighed and repositioned herself on her bed. "You should go to bed, Rose."

"But you get to stay up! It's not fair!"

Gwen smiled, remembering when that had been her view of the world as well. She wished she could break the vicious cycle for Rosemary, but the inevitability of adulthood hung before both of them. "I've got to stay up and write this paper."

"But you have to wake up before I do! When do you sleep?"

"After the hormones, I think." Gwen rubbed her eyes. "I've got to get back to work, and you've got to sleep."

Reluctantly, Rosemary wandered back into the bathroom and toward her room, taking Tootles to her room as a consolation.

"Goodnight, Gwen."

"Goodnight, Rosemary."

The little girl hung back in the bathroom doorway, swaying as she held onto their tabby cat. Gwen pulled her computer back onto her lap, but looked up when she noticed Rosemary still at the door.

"Gwen?" she finally asked. "Is it worth it? To grow up, I mean?"

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Gwen took a deep breath, remembering how often she had wondered the same thing when she was Rosemary's age. She had reached all the wrong conclusions about it on her own. Everyone she knew had lied to her about it, and now halfway to adulthood herself, she knew why everyone always lied to children. She knew what she was supposed to tell Rosemary, but Gwen couldn't bring herself to fill her little sister with all the same delusions she had grown into—that staying up late would be glamorous, and that dress shopping and homecoming were somehow better than raven trees.

“No,” she answered. “I don't think it is.”