

Kenna Paquin

Short Story

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My Neverland

“Mom! Dad!” I called, as I stood outside the door to my childhood home, “I’m home!” My hands began to ache after several minutes of pointless pounding on the hard steel door, so I decided to walk around back to see if my dad’s office door was unlocked. As I rounded the corner, I found the yard scattered with papers. When I took a closer look, I noticed there were ruffles along the edges, as if they had been aggressively torn from books. The pages were from my favorite book, *Peter Pan*. My dad used to read me a chapter every night before tucking me into bed. When I turned ten, I asked him to stop reading it to me because I felt I had become too old for a silly book meant for children.

He assured me in a hushed fatherly tone, “This story is most definitely not for children, young lady. That is the thinking of a pirate if you ask me! No one is too old for a good story.” I frowned and shook my head. Then, he kissed me on the forehead and whispered, “Don’t ever grow up, Danny.”

My thoughts were interrupted by a rustling in the house. I turned toward the old glass door, tinted brown with old age, shattered, and off its hinges. I placed a piece of the sharp glass in my hand, point facing out, to defend myself against the intruder. I winced as the glass sliced through my palm, but I was filled with so much adrenaline, that I continued to move forward, into the darkness of my father’s office. I heard the crunch of glass under my feet as I stepped over the fallen door. Once my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, I noticed that his desk

had been thrown across the room and papers scattered the office floor. I heard someone moving down the stairs, so I hurried to hide behind the fallen desk. I was so focused on the large bald man descending the stairs, that I didn't notice a second man had snuck up behind me. Before I could turn to defend myself, the man hit me with, God knows what, and my vision went black.

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I had a massive headache, my palm was covered in dry blood, and my eyes had to take a minute to adjust to the bright light. As the haziness wore off, I looked around and realized that I was lying on a cot in the middle of a small square cell. Two of the walls were covered in a soft white fabric, and the others were clear glass. Every surface was covered in the same bleach white, including the shirt and pants I somehow seemed to have changed into. I crinkled my face as the sterile smell of bleach filled my nose.

I sat up on the cot and tried to recall what happened to me, and where I could possibly be. I looked down at my hand and remembered everything: my dad's office, the scary men, and the total darkness that had overtaken me. But, why was I here? Where was I?

Through the glass wall on my right, I noticed movement. Something stirred under a white blanket resting on a cot. Long, shaggy brown hair peeked out from under the blanket. A boy, maybe 20, not much older than me, slowly pried his eyes open, yawned, and stretched out his arms before looking at me, smiling, and saying, "Hello, Danny. Welcome to the glorious, the mystical, the one-and-only: Neverland."

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After staring at him with blank eyes for several seconds, the strange, yet beautiful boy stood up and walked over to the glass wall that separated us. He placed his hand on the wall and

looked me in the eyes as he said, in an enchanting British accent, “My name is James Hook. It’s lovely to finally meet you, Danny.”

I had read *Peter Pan* enough to know who James Hook was. My voice cracked as I asked, “Y-you-you’re Captain Hook??”

He laughed to himself, “No, definitely not. I’m James Hook the Third. Captain Hook was my grandfather. He was killed shortly after Jezebel took control of Neverland.”

“Wait. How do you know my name, and who the heck is Jezebel?”

“Jezebel Beaumont and her army came to Neverland sixty years ago. They began in the East at Mermaid Lagoon, and quickly marched westward, wreaking havoc on the innocent civilians of Neverland. The people prayed that Peter Pan would protect them, but their noble hero had mysteriously disappeared. The Lost Boys tried to hold off Jezebel’s army, but she had grown too powerful. She recruited the help of all of the pirates in Neverland, and together they reached Hangman’s tree, the heart of Neverland, and burnt it to the ground. She forced innocent civilians into slavery to build her treasured kingdom atop the ashes of the Hangman’s tree. Without the magic of the tree, Neverland’s light faded, and I have never seen the bright and magical Neverland that is in the stories.”

We were both silent, letting the weight of the story set in. James looked down at his lap and ran his fingers through his hair. He took a deep breath and continued, “My father created the Lost Boys Initiative to end Jezebel’s reign and restore Neverland to the place it once was. After, my father died last year, the Lost Boys were left to me. We fought tirelessly, and began to lose hope, when suddenly your parents appeared just outside of Jezebel’s kingdom.”

“Why? What could my parents do to help?”

“Danny, your father was a Lost Boy. He was Peter Pan’s most trusted friend. When Pan first heard of Jezebel’s appearance, he sent your dad off to Earth, with the secret to saving Neverland. There, he met your mother and together they spent their lives developing a plan to return to Neverland and defeat Jezebel, but Jezebel had grown much more powerful since the last time your father had heard of her. Your parents returned to Neverland just a month ago and stayed with us at the Lost Boys’ Headquarters, where we began our plan of attack. When Jezebel heard of his return, Jezebel’s minions attacked us, set fire to the Lost Boys’ HQ, and destroyed all of our hard work. Your parents and I were taken during the attack. I was brought here, while your parents were most likely hauled off to Skull Island, the darkest part of Neverland. Before they were taken, they said that you would come and know what to do.” He looked me in the eyes and raised his eyebrow, “Do you know what to do, Danny?”

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I closed my eyes and processed everything that I had just heard. Nothing made sense anymore. This was all a very bad dream; I would wake up in the morning and be right back in my dorm room. Neverland would still be a fairytale, James would be a dream, and my parents would be okay.

I took a few deep breaths and opened my eyes. Sure enough, I was still in the cell sitting next to Captain Hook’s freakin’ grandson. He continued to look at me during my breakdown and waited for me to respond. I was just about to say how crazy he was, but then I realized how much that would crush him. Neverland was depending on me, and if they found out that I was a fake, they would have no hope left. So I tried to put it as gently as possible, “Listen, James, you seem really nice and all, and I would really love to help you, but I have no idea what you are talking about. My entire life, I thought my parents were scientists, not the future saviors of Neverland.

They never told me anything about their involvement with Neverland, so how could I know how to help you?” Tears began to fill my eyes as the realization of what was happening set in.

His smile instantly deflated and he answered gravely, “I don’t know Danny, but what I do know is that Neverland needs you. You may not know all of the answers yet, but I have faith in your parents, and I have faith in you.”

At this, I balled harder. Why would this stranger have any reason to trust me to save his home?

“Hey, hey, hey,” he spoke gently, “It’s going to be okay. Please don’t cry.” He stroked the glass with his thumb as if he were wiping my tears away through the wall that separated us. “Shh, darling. You’re okay.”

I tried to stifle my sobs, but several squeaks slipped out in my effort: “I’m sorry. This is so embarrassing,” I wiped my arm across my tear-smudged face, “You must be so disappointed that the person meant to save you is a weak girl, who can’t handle the pressure.”

He frowned and reassured me, “I am far from disappointed, Danny. I can already tell that you are anything, but weak. You just got kidnapped, and dragged to an entirely new world, yet you haven’t once complained about your situation. You’ve only been concerned for the well-being of others.” He placed his palm on the glass, leaned forward and said, “If you ask me, you are pretty damn brave.”

Through my tears, I let out a hysterical laugh, but it came out as more of a snort: “Thank you.”

“No problem,” he leaned back from the glass, smiled, and let out a sigh, “Now, in order for you to save your parents and Neverland, we are going to need to get out of here.”

I took a deep breath, wiped away my remaining tears, put on my brave face, and asked, “Where exactly is ‘Here’?”

He tilted his head in concern. Once he was convinced that I was okay, he answered, “We are in the West Wing of Jezebel’s castle, the dungeon. There is only one way out, which is through the front door. The guards come twice a day to check up on us, and that’s when we’ll make our move.”

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James and I spent the rest of the day coming up with the specifics for our escape plan. I was skeptical if the guards would end up showing, but sure enough, after hours of waiting, I heard the pounding footsteps of two very large men making their way down the hall toward our cells. With a nod from James, our plan was set into action.

I recognized the first man immediately. He was the tall bald man from my dad’s office, and I’m guessing that the other big burly guy with a long beard was the one who knocked me in the back of the head. Knowing this, I did not feel sorry for what was about to happen to them.

The guy with the beard knocked on the glass of my cell with the back of his gun and spoke with a hideous deep and scratchy voice, “Hello Danielle, welcome to Jezebel’s home. You are a guest here, so please make yourself comfortable. We like our guests to be as pleasant as possible before they are tried at the Never Council, and NO one has ever survived the Never Trials. You, sweetheart, will not be an exception,” he opened a flap in the glass door and slid a tin bowl of gunk through, “Enjoy your dinner.” The two cackled and moved toward James’ cell.

As soon as they saw James lying in a strange position on the floor, the bald guard spoke, “Is he dead?”

His friend answered, “I don’t know. Go in there and check.”

Yes! The plan was working. The bald guard opened the heavy glass door to James’ cell and walked over to his seemingly lifeless body. He nudged James with his foot, and before the guard could think to defend himself, James pinned him to the ground and stole his gun. He pointed the gun at the other guard and threatened him, “Give me the keys to Danny’s cell, or I’ll shoot. Don’t test me. I’m warning you.”

The large man tossed over the keys immediately, and as soon as James lowered his gun slightly, the guard sprinted out of the dungeon in fear. James hit the bald guard on the head with the back of his gun and locked him in the cell. Then, he used the keys to free me. “Thanks,” I whispered, “Now let’s get out of here.”

We only had a few minutes to make our escape before the rest of the guards figured out what was going on, so we sprinted down the hall and out the front door of the dungeon. One of Jezebel’s minions saw us run down the steps outside of the West Wing and yelled, “You there! Halt!”

James grabbed my arm and yanked me around the corner of the building, where we ran smack dab into a tall, intimidatingly beautiful woman, most likely in her late forties. She raised her eyebrow, but before she could say or do anything, James dodged the woman and dragged me with him. He pulled me along behind him as we sprinted toward the woods. Once we reached the cover of the trees, we began to slow, but kept at a steady jog.

James spoke between heavy breaths, “That was Jezebel. I don’t know why she let us go like that. She could’ve easily stopped us.”

“That was Jezebel? Isn’t she supposed to be really old?” I panted.

“She is, but she uses the magic of Neverland to appear so young.”

“Oh,” we came to a silent agreement to not question the strange confrontation with Jezebel further and focused on our steps as we ran. The last time I ran was for my high school track team, but I kept pushing on as I thought about my parents. James breathed heavily, but he was in much better shape than I was. I could tell that he was holding back so I could keep up.

After 30 minutes of running, we decided to rest for the night and plot our next move. James pushed open a curtain of pink leaves, which hung from a beautiful weeping willow tree, and sat on a large root that emerged from the crisp green grass. I sat on a smaller root, a few feet away. He looked at me and asked, “Danny, how can you still manage to look so beautiful after running for your life?” I blushed at his compliment, and my stomach turned at the way he said my name. No one ever called me Danny, except for my parents, but I loved the way he said it. He continued as if he had not just made me turn beet red, “So, it’s about a 10 hour walk to the shore and a 20 minute swim to Skull Rock. You up for it?” I nodded my head unconvincingly, which he noticed: “You don’t need to impress me, Danny, it’s okay if you need a break,” he scooted closer and put an arm around my shoulders to comfort me, “I’m sorry if I’ve put too much pressure on you. You are not alone on this journey, and I will have your back every step of the way.”

I smiled at him and leaned into his shoulder, “Thank you James, that means a lot, but I can handle it. I’m strong, and I am going to need to put Neverland’s needs above my own. My

parents spent their lives trying to save this beautiful world, and I think I owe it to them to do the same.” Our noses nearly touching, I looked into his beautiful blue eyes, and whispered, “I’m beginning to realize how amazing this place really is.”

We sat like that for a little while, then found our separate spots in the soft grass, to rest for the night. We slept under the protection of the willow tree, and in the morning, began our journey to Skull Island to save my parents.

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Skull Island was much scarier than the book made it out to be. It was mid-day, and yet the sky was dark, the water was foggy, and the large skull sitting atop the island seemed to stare at anyone who looked at it for too long. James and I swam for 15 minutes before we reached the beaches just outside of the strange structure. It was clear that we were not alone on Skull Island because there was a pirate ship anchored around back, and footsteps in the sand going in and out of the mouth of the skull. A single pirate kept watch outside of the entrance to the cave, and the rest were either inside or working on the boat. James crouched down to hide behind one of the rocks that protruded out of the beach. He leaned back against it and whispered into my ear, “I’m going to distract the pirate outside, Peter Pan style.” He winked: “Sneak through the entrance while he is gone and find your parents.” I nodded and began to move, but James grabbed my hand and looked me in the eyes as he said, “Good luck, Danny, please be careful.” He slowly leaned in to me and gingerly placed his lips on mine, but the moment ended too quickly. I was still dazed and my stomach was still fluttering as he replaced his hand in mine with the hilt of a gun. He pointed at different parts of the gun as he explained how it worked. I nodded along to every word and was ready at all costs to defend my parents.

James and I whispered our “good lucks” and went our separate ways. I wasn’t too sure what James’ plan was, but I sat behind a rock to the right of the entrance and waited for my time to sneak past. All of a sudden, I heard an echo of a familiar voice (so that’s what he meant by Peter Pan style). James was using the skull to create a booming echo of his voice; he spoke loudly and powerfully, “*Go, trespassers! Do not tread on this sacred land! If you disobey my order, you shall be haunted by the ghost of Captain James Hook forevermore!*” The pirate was frightened and snapped his head in every direction to catch sight of the spirit who spoke to him. He ran to the boat, most likely to tell the rest of the crew of what had just happened.

I used this opportunity to sneak into the mouth of the skull. I held the gun with both hands and kept my back to the wall as I descended a set of old stairs into the depths of the cave. I reached the bottom of the stairs, and cautiously walked down the hallway. I saw a light at the end, and silently approached it. I turned the corner into the illuminated room and immediately saw my parents chained to the wall. My mother’s face was wet from her own tears, and her body was covered in bruises and blood. I couldn’t tell whether the blood was my father’s or my mother’s, but they both looked badly beaten. My dad lay on the ground, his head resting in my mom’s lap. I rushed over to them both, when my mom saw me, she began to cry harder and reached out for my face with her bloody hand. She stroked my cheek and spoke quietly, “Oh Danny. Your father and I love you so very much. We knew you would find Neverland eventually. It’s your destiny.” She silently cried, her tears flowing in an endless stream. She pointed at Dad and whimpered, “Sweetie, I don’t think your father is okay. Jezebel has been torturing us. She knows that we found a way to restore Neverland’s magic, but we refuse to tell her. If she finds out, she will destroy all hope for Neverland.”

I grasped my mother's hand and cried with her. Then, I looked to my father and stroked his cheek with my thumb. "Dad?" I cried. "Please answer me. You have to be okay." My tears dropped onto his blood-smeared face.

His eyes opened just a little and he spoke hoarsely, "Danny?"

"Yes Dad, it's me."

"You must know that you are the key to saving Neverland. You are the solution. Stay true to yourself and you will find the answers you desire," his eyes closed and he muttered his last words, "Don't ever grow up, Danny." I wrapped my arms around my father's lifeless body and sobbed into his chest.

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Our moment was interrupted by the sound of shuffling feet. Jezebel had entered the room, and by the looks of it, she had heard every word of what my father had said. The pirate from the entrance had James trapped in a chokehold; James struggled to free himself, but the pirate was too strong.

Jezebel tapped her knife against her open palm as she spoke to me, "Well, well, well. It's lovely to properly meet you, Danielle. It really is too bad I'm going to have to kill you now. It's nothing personal, it's just that you are kind of a threat to the Neverland I worked so hard to create, and we can't have that, can we?"

I let go of my father's hand and stood to face Jezebel. I stepped closer until I was just a few feet away from her. I mustered up all of the confidence I had and said, "Well, see Jezebel,

the thing is you are kind of a threat to the Neverland I love, and we can't have that, can we?"

Jezebel looked surprised by my sudden show of confidence.

I took another step toward her and channeled all of the anger and despair I felt, to say, "You messed with Neverland,"

Another step, "You messed with me,"

Another large step, "And you messed with my family."

With that, I raised the gun I had in my hand and pulled the trigger. But nothing happened. Jezebel quickly tackled me to the ground and placed her knife at my throat. My mother screeched and James struggled to gain freedom from the pirate.

"You are nothing special, Danielle. You're a *weak, pathetic, worthless little bitch*," she spit in my face with each word. I tried to push her off, but she had my arms painfully pinned beneath my back.

I cried in defeat, "No I'm not!"

"Please, the 'Key to Saving Neverland'," she mocked with detest, "You are nothing compared to me. You are powerless."

I screeched in pain as she pressed the knife further into my throat, and blood spilled down my neck: "Stop it! Please!"

"Aww, poor, beloved *Danny* has no one to save her now. Daddy can't come to your rescue anymore, little girl."

She had gone too far. She had killed the most important person in my life, and she deserved to pay, but there was nothing I could do. I was about to die, and Neverland would be

left to perish in Jezebel's hands. I closed my eyes and with all of the hope I had left in me, visualized the world Neverland could be; a world filled with bright blue skies, majestic seas abounding with fish of all colors, and forests filled with trees just like the one James and I spent the night under. A world filled with hope. Hope for a better future. For a joyful life. For a home.

I opened my eyes and suddenly, a blinding light appeared above me and began to take shape. It was a boy, with a green cap and a red feather. I looked at James' face, and based on his response, I knew exactly who the boy was. He kicked the knife out of Jezebel's hand, and was momentarily distracted from killing me, so I took a chance, grabbed the gun off of the ground, cocked it, and pulled the trigger.

Jezebel's face was filled with shock and terror. She rolled off of me and onto the cold floor. We did it. We had stopped Jezebel.

James quickly elbowed the distracted pirate in the gut and wrestled him to the ground. I figured he had it handled, so I looked up to the hero I had read about in the stories. He reached down, grabbed my hand, and helped me up. I whispered in awe, "Thank you."

"No, thank you, Danielle, for protecting Neverland, while I couldn't." He walked over to my dad, frowned, and spoke with reminiscence, "Goodbye, Old Friend. You will be greatly missed and remembered as a hero to Neverland." He folded my father's hands, one over the other, and laid them on his chest. He smiled at his friend one last time and turned to walk outside of the cave, and onto the beach.

I followed, looked to the boy in the green cap, and asked, "Where were you all this time?"

“I traveled to Earth to visit my dear Wendy, but I was unable to return because there was not enough faith and hope left in Neverland for me to travel here. Like I always say, ‘The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease forever to be able to do it.’ You brought back the hope I needed to return, Danielle. You hold more hope, faith, and love than all of the people of Neverland combined. Thank you. I must go clean up the mess that Jezebel left of Neverland now, but I’ll see you around.” He turned to leave, but hesitated and put his hand on my shoulder, as he smiled and spoke with genuine kindness, “Your father was a great man, and he would be so incredibly proud of you.” With that, he pushed off of the ground and flew up into the air. It was incredible; he bolted up into the clouds and flipped his way toward the Neverland he left so long ago.

James emerged from the mouth of the cave, carrying my mother and wearing the same expression of awe on his face that I had, as we watched Peter Pan soar through the sky. I moved toward James and Mom and wrapped them in a huge hug. I was so grateful for them. These past few days were a catastrophe, and I would not have been able to get through them without Mom, James, and Dad. It would take a long time to recover from the death of my best friend, but I knew that if I just had faith and hope, my dad would be watching over Neverland, his home, for many years to come.