

1: Peter

In 1900, when my mother was four years' old, she was foully cursed by Peter Pan in The Kensington Gardens. You will need to know more of that, of course, and you will. But that curse, laid as a single, terrible seed amongst the raised borders of The Gardens, is at last about to flower. Almost one hundred and twenty years later, as I sit here now, a febrile monster of seventy-five, quivering with age and sin in this echoing mansion in Ennismore Gardens; I tell you, that curse is finally rent open upon the world. It is a savagery, and I can barely bring myself to tell you. But I must.

I am alone here in this empty ballroom, with the last patches of crimson paint on the floorboards just visible in the evening light, and I am not even sure I have the strength to tell this, the worst of stories. But yes, somehow it must be told.

I must tell you about Mother, and about how Peter Pan cursed her to a life of unhappiness. When she was just a four-year-old girl, Maimie Mannering – who one day would bring me into the world – found herself alone in The Gardens with him, as the dawn rose on the snow-tipped winter lawns. Their meeting changed the world, as I have come to understand this last six months.

And the man who unleashed all of this, his creator, JM Barrie...ah! His name alone now would be enough to bring me to the brink of despair, were it not for the final task which awaits me tomorrow. We cross the river

together tonight, you and I.

One thing: if we are fully to understand each other, then you must seek out your own copy of Barrie's 1902 novel, *The Little White Bird*. For reasons which will become obvious to you tonight, it is one of the most misunderstood of books, and for much of the last one hundred years or so, it has lain out of print. I myself, though I can scarcely bring myself to admit this to you, commissioned a reprint in the 1980s, an indication both of my own vain stupidity and the terrible power which lies within its pages.

The Peter Pan of Barrie's subsequent years – that sugary nonsense with all those damned pirates and the absurd Hook – was a cloak, a mesmerism, to disguise the events which he had set out earlier in *The Little White Bird*. Tucked inside a sentimental tale about a lonely old bachelor in London, carefully folded into the black heart of that book, was a central section which told the true story of how Peter Pan cursed my mother. And brought us to this moment, to tonight.

My name is Peter Mannering. I am not a good man, but tomorrow I will make my amends. Tonight, I have an awful story to tell you.

2: Peter

You won't have read it, so I'll tell you briefly how Barrie's novel was structured. The narrator is a man of late middle age and fixed habits, taking his meals regularly in his Pall Mall club. From his seat in one of the windows of the club, he watches a romance bloom outside on the street over a period of weeks, between two young workers who clearly meet during their breaks. Through a sentimental attachment to the future happiness of this unknown pair, he becomes involved in their lives, becoming known to them as they marry, move in to their first home and have their first child. He befriends their newborn son, and once he is old enough, gets permission to take the son on walks in The Kensington Gardens with his dog, where he treats the boy to a stream of stories about the inhabitants of the park and the mysteries behind its elegant façade.

Then comes the central section of the book, where he tells the story which formed the core of his walks with the young boy, and this is the story of Peter Pan. Peter is a 'betwixt and between', a creature who is half human and half bird, who lives amongst the birds on the island in the Serpentine lake and who is doomed never to live amongst other humans. At night he plays on his own in The Kensington Gardens, and is favoured by the fairies and flowers and trees who indulge in this curiosity, this boy who lives halfway between the spirit world and the material world. This is the first time that Peter Pan ever appeared in print, years before the stage version with which you are

familiar, and as I will explain later, he is a very different Peter Pan to the one you were brought up with.

The central section ends when Peter Pan finds my mother, little Maimie, standing alone in the snow just as his dawn curfew is about to break. We'll come back to that scene in a moment. The book then continues on with the struggles of the young couple whose little boy had been befriended by the old fellow, and it sort of potters on until a relatively inconsequential end. And that's it.

I hate that book with a loathing you may never understand. It has influenced every day of my life, every thought I have had, every decision I have ever taken. It has run through me like the worst, most pestilent form of cancer, it has been the black book of sin sitting on my bedside table every single morning. To talk about it now, to you, makes me feel like the weight of this corrupted world is pressing down upon my chest so that I can barely breathe.

Christ Almighty. I will need to pace myself if we are to succeed in this work tonight. I must preserve what little strength is left in me.

As I look around this ridiculous ballroom, the dust particles swirl in the shafts of evening light coming through the gaps in the wooden shutters. My weak, deliquescent eyes are trying to focus on the windows which look out over the garden in the square. I might go and pull one of the shutters open a little.

This is the very same house where Mother lived, one hundred and twenty years ago, when she was the four-year-old Maimie Mannering whom Barrie portrayed in the book. On that evening, at the same time as we are now talking, my grandmother is standing in this room looking out over the square and attending to her necklace while waiting for the carriage which will take her and my grandfather to dinner at the Connaught. She has poked her head

into the children's bedroom in the attic, seen Maimie's brother Tony's tousled hair on one pillow, spied a lump in the next door bed, and has closed the door, nodding a curt nod of satisfaction at the ayah who is unfolding the next day's clothes.

My grandmother stands now at these tall windows, disinterestedly watching the rooks in the trees and deciding which earrings to wear, and she has no idea at all that her daughter Maimie at that moment has emerged from her hiding place in The Kensington Gardens and is in the early evening gloom tentatively exploring the Flower Walk, or as Barrie termed it, the Baby Walk.

Only one other person knew: Jim Barrie. The sorcerer – that is the correct word for him, in my view – knew that Mother was different. He stalked her. He knew all the children in The Kensington Gardens: the doomed Llewelyn Davies brood of course, whom you will know about from all the films and the books, the five boys whose guardian Barrie became once their parents, having come into his orbit, both died; Miss Mabel Grey who used to go mad-dog and dance in puddles; Malcolm the Bold whose mother was a widow. Barrie watched them all like a goshawk, his wings muscled and twitching, waiting to pounce on that one child he knew would deliver herself to him.

And whom he in turn could deliver to Peter Pan. Oh, how he must have crowed when he finally discovered Maimie. What does he say in the book?

'Maimie was always rather a strange girl, and it was at night that she was strange.'

Those words chill me still. Barrie talks about how Maimie would terrify her brother, my Uncle Tony, in the nursery at the top of this house; how she would conjure demons from the night, send him screaming with fear

downstairs. Tony would beg her to stop, but on she'd go, summoning devils out of the darkness, creatures from beyond who seemed to respond to her call, and they would become real in the dark of their nursery bedroom, so real that Tony would have to run in tears for help from the ayah. When he'd return to the room, the ayah would see a peaceful scene, innocent Maimie fast asleep with a charming smile playing on her lips. And Tony would be ordered back to bed with a reprimand.

How did Barrie know so much about her? I think of him now, quietly encouraging her in *The Gardens* to tell him more, and more, and more, while the ayah and others watched with proud smiles as the great Victorian novelist indulged the child. Oh dear God, how he must have gloried in his discovery of Mother's strange, primitive hinterlands. It was exactly what he was looking for then, back in 1900: a victim of the highest calibre.

In the central section of *The Little White Bird*, Barrie reveals how he lured my mother. In his typical way, he used code and dissembling to disguise his intent from most readers, but if, like me, you have dedicated a great part of your life to the study of the unknown, then his strategy was very simple. Under the guise of entertaining the placid Llewelyn Davies boys in some cricket match by the Round Pond, he would have had opportunities to speak to Tony, Maimie's six-year-old brother. A suggestion here, a word there; gradually, over some weeks no doubt, he instilled the idea in Tony's head that he should be the first child to be brave enough to stay the night in *The Kensington Gardens* after the gates were locked. This was a challenge Barrie liked carelessly to offer around most children in the park, because *The Gardens* used to close at 6pm in 1900, and when the bell rang across the green slopes, encouraging nannies and ayahs and the occasional mother to chivvy

young children to the gates, it was the most serious of ceremonies, the formal end to another day of childish play. The idea that you might ignore that instruction? Well, the notion of transgression – so easy these days for someone like you to contemplate – was rare back then; what a challenge, then, what a dare, to break the rule and stay behind in The Gardens! How feted such an audacious child would be by his peers!

Barrie convinced Tony that he was The One: the bravest of boys who could achieve what no other child had done. It was brilliant. Tony dutifully told his sister Maimie, my mother, what he planned to do and she, filled with pride at the bravery of her brother, waited day after day at the end of each afternoon to see if today was the day when Tony would hide before Lock-Out.

Only it never was. Tony wasn't really brave, as Barrie had spotted; he was a swaggerer. On the few occasions he came to visit Mother and I in Wales, even I could see that Uncle Tony in his grey flannels and blue blazer was a swaggerer. That fool would never have had either the imagination or the courage to take up Barrie's challenge. Day after day, Mother waited to see her brother slip away before the gates closed, and each time he came up with a new excuse. Eventually, she realised it was never going to happen. And just as Barrie predicted, her furies were roused at the thought that the brother she had so admired every day in the park, as he strode about the cricket pitch or chased after pigeons, that brother was lying to her about his plans, was no more and no less than the coward who at night she could so easily intimidate with her conjured demons.

And so it happened that Mother, livid with the disappointment wreaked upon her by Tony, took his place and hid one night in St. Govor's Well as he raced off home up

the Kensington Road in hot-faced shame, and the ayah ran after him, thinking that Maimie was with him. Tony's final humiliation saw him stuffing some clothes into Maimie's bed and convincing the ayah that Maimie had gone to sleep early in one of her funks.

Now my grandparent's carriage is clattering off towards Hyde Park Corner, and Maimie is entering Peter Pan's lair. Barrie has achieved his dream. And somewhere in The Gardens, with his pipe made of reeds and his high-pitched laugh, with all his fey fancies and his insouciant stroll; somewhere in The Gardens, Peter Pan, that priapic little fuck, is waiting for Mother.

Oh dear God.