

Not a Pirate
By Amanda Brimley

“What time is it?” Maggie whispered.

“Five ‘til midnight,” Claire said aloud, matter-of-factly.

Sneaking into the library at night was perhaps the most juvenile thing we’d ever done, but I needed this: a break, an escape from not knowing how—or if—I should fix things. Jon was usually a good dad to Ethan, but I couldn’t unsee him hitting our nine-year-old for back-talk. It didn’t happen often. Surely, Jon deserved another chance? I pressed a hand against my head.

Claire pulled out two books from the bag she held, holding them out like snacks to her toddlers. “For you,” she gave it to Maggie. “So you can see what true love looks like.”

Maggie was recently dumped by a scummy guy who leached off her generous heart. I glimpsed the title. “Don’t you dare glance in Wickham’s direction, Maggie!”

Maggie tapped the cover of *Pride and Prejudice* and grinned mischievously.

Before our library was built, this site was covered with fairy rings. Rumor said if you were in the library and opened a book at midnight, the magic was potent. We’d never tried it as teenagers, but now, we needed some magic.

Claire turned to me. “For you, Kayley, I’m giving you simpler times; go play.”

She may not have known all the dynamics in my home, but always-perceptive-Claire guessed enough. I reached for the book: *Peter Pan*. I’d read it a million times. I smiled, envisioning myself sneaking into a hideout with the Lost Boys, hunting down beasts, and swimming in the lagoon.

Claire’s watch beeped midnight. “Now!”

I opened the book. Quick as a page turn, the library disappeared.

The ground swayed. I stumbled and grabbed a railing, squinting against a noontday sun. Water lapped nearby—I was on a ship! But the only ship in Neverland was the *Jolly Roger*. My heart raced. Had I been captured?

No, I knew who I was. In the real world I was Kayley, but here I was Two-Handed Fran.

Two-Handed Fran? I had a weird name.

I looked down at myself. I wore a dirty blouse, tucked into tan britches that ended a few inches above my bare and calloused feet. A limp rag dripped in my hand. I groaned.

I was not supposed to be a pirate! I was supposed to be a kid, running through the woods while playing make-believe and flying with fairies.

“Get this deck in shipshape, ye bilge-sucking landlubbers, or I’ll cleave ye to the brisket!”

I remembered the rag. *Oh.*

I shivered and scrubbed as the speaker passed me. Curly, black locks fell over his ruffled, red overcoat. One arm ended in a hook. *Captain Hook.* A nasal shout drew me out of my fear.

“Two-Handed Fran!” A small man in striped pants shuffled over and shook his finger in my face. “You heard the Captain! Don’t let him find you daydreaming.” It was Smee! He pushed a pair of spectacles up his nose and scurried off.

“Lost boys, ho!” The call came from the crow’s nest. Catfish Kit, that was his name.

I leaned over the railing. A group of children gathered on a rock in the cove at the water’s edge. One threw a fishing line.

“This is pirate territory, not a nursery for children!” Hook strode aft. *Huh.* I knew which direction was aft. “Cannons!”

Yes! Wait, no. That was a Two-Handed Fran thought. The boys weren’t even bothering us. They were just children! But, Hook, terrifying with emotional lack, called, “Fire!”

“Fire in the hole,” answered a pirate. The cannonball burst forth with a *boom.*

Sand flew and little boys scattered. I squinted at the beach, desperate to see if any were hurt.

“Here,” said a voice.

I turned to see a woman with long brown hair offering me a spyglass. She wore a dark blue vest over a flowy blouse. One arm ended at her elbow in a mess of scar tissue. I knew her as One-Handed Fran.

Ah.

“Thanks.” I lifted the glass to my eye. The children had fled.

I sagged with relief, but Hook railed at the empty beach. “This is not over!”

“Paaaan, ho!” Catfish Kit called.

A boy burst from the trees at the water's edge and flew toward us. I fangirled a little.

He did a loop around the ship and landed on the bowsprit. Hook ran forward, sword drawn.

"Have at me, Hook," Pan taunted, eyes ablaze.

But as the Captain drew close, Pan took off, grinning a baby-toothed grin, and landed on Catfish Kit's head. The pirate swiped uselessly at Pan, nearly tumbling out of the nest with each movement.

A bark came from the stern, "We're under attack!"

I rushed aft. While we'd watched the theatrics above, dozens of boys crawled onto the ship. They were grubby and dripping. Many had twinkling fairies on their shoulders. They faced me and the other pirates—motionless, except for the twitch of a finger on a stick or stone.

One-Handed Fran stalked up beside me. She handed me a knife and grinned. "Are you ready?"

"To fight? But they are children."

"Then, we will win!" She leaped at a tall boy with curls tumbling over his eyes. She was bigger, but he was light-footed, and the fight began. I could feel Fran wanting to fight, but I held back.

Rocks flew and flashes of sunlight reflected off weapons. Smee ran back and forth at midship, calling, "All hands on deck, all hands on deck!" and more pirates joined the fray.

Something was on my leg—pain surged through my muscle as a boy in fox fur sank his teeth into my calf. Crying out, I shook him off. He dashed away with a boy who looked just like him—his twin.

I clutched the sore spot as confusion creased my brow. Why had the twin attacked me? I hadn't joined the battle. I hadn't hurt anyone! But then I looked at the knife in my hand and the clothes I wore... I looked like the enemy. It didn't matter that I hadn't hurt the Lost Boys: I had watched as others did.

In front of me, a pirate named Slop threw a fist at a sandy-haired child, and a Kayley-memory flashed through my mind. I shuddered to realize that I hadn't escaped my real life at all.

My fists clenched. There I stood, just like at home, paralyzed by fear as the pirate swung again and again, but then I remembered: I was in *Neverland*. And in *Neverland*, whatever you pretend becomes *real*.

The knot in my stomach unwound. I imagined I was brave and decisive, letting the feeling expand until I believed it. Then, I took a deep breath and rushed at Slop, slamming him against the rail. I shoved him overboard.

That felt good. I turned to the Lost Boy.

“You saved me,” he said, eyes round with shock.

I nodded.

“Why?”

I whispered, “Because I’m not really a pirate.”

He leaned forward conspiratorially, like we were playing a game. “Then what are you?” He stared into my eyes.

“I...” I dropped my gaze. What was I? I couldn’t be a Lost Boy. I was grown-up (unfortunately), but I didn’t want to be a pirate.

Then I knew. I smiled at the boy, “I’m a Mother.”

His face brightened. “Then, will you help us?” He paused, then added, “Mother?”

I straightened my shoulders and said, “Of course. That’s what Mothers do.” But what could I do? I thought for a moment, then had an idea. I jogged to the mainmast.

I pretended I was very strong. Then, I clenched my knife between my teeth and climbed. Neverland obliged my imagination and I made steady progress. I ascended until I reached the lowest rope of the rigging and I sliced it.

A pirate’s ax embedded into the wood just below my left elbow, chased by the sound of the blackest of curses. I looked down into a sea of scars and sneers. If this didn’t work, the pirates would eat me alive. Beads of salty sweat pearly on my skin. I continued upward.

I heard a tinkling of bells in my ear and it felt like encouragement. Was that a gold-limned fairy hovering in my periphery? I continued, and with each rope that snapped, the others grew more taut with the weight of the mainsail. At last, there was only one rope left. I grabbed the knife from my teeth, but my fingers, slick with sweat, dropped it.

I watched in horror as it fell. *No*, I thought. *I was supposed to save them.*

Just then a blur of leaves swept across my field of vision. Peter Pan snatched the knife out of the air and held it out to me. He smiled hopefully, like he wanted me to be proud of him.

“Here you go, Mother!”

I took the knife. "Well done, Peter," I said, feeling very much like a girl pretending to be a grown-up.

Peter whooped and flew off toward Hook. I smiled at his back and returned to my task.

I sliced; the rope snapped. As the sail fell, a sparkling cloud of fairies rose and took hold of the edges. They spread the cloth wide and let it settle over the battle.

The pirates thrashed in confusion, swearing and hacking uselessly at the thick canvas. The Lost Boys simply dropped to their knees and crawled out.

I slid down the mast and landed on my toes. "To shore!" I shouted, and we ran to the edge of the ship. The children jumped into the water without hesitation. I peered over the rail. Below us were half a dozen little boats.

"Are you coming, Mother?" The sandy-haired boy was at my side. I hesitated, looking back at the *Jolly Roger*. I'd been a pirate all along. It just took coming to Neverland to realize it.

Air whipped my hair as Peter flew toward the island, crowing triumphantly. My heart soared; I wasn't a pirate anymore! "Yes," I said, and I jumped.

There was no splash.

"Kayley, Maggie!"

I opened my eyes. Claire was shaking me, her face pale. The first wisps of dawn light peeked through the library windows.

"You were here, then when you opened the book, you were gone! It worked!"

I quirked an eyebrow at Maggie. She smiled a small, private smile and said, "Bingley."

"You chose sweet, generous, would-happily-be-cheated-by-his-servants Bingley?"

She nodded. "I couldn't settle for anything less."

I gasped. Magic, indeed.

My friends looked at me. How could I explain that I'd been an evil pirate who'd finally learned to side with the children? I simply said, "I helped the Lost Boys escape Hook. And I think a fairy sat on my shoulder."

They grinned and tried to ask questions, but I motioned to the exit. "Let's talk later. We need to get out of here."

We slipped out the back door we'd propped open when we snuck in and headed to our cars. As we crossed the dewy grass, unusual clarity filled my mind and the courage I'd found in Neverland lingered. I needed to act before it was gone.

"Hey, Claire? Can Ethan and I stay at your house for a bit? I need to... figure out some things. With Jon. And I need to keep Ethan safe. I need to do better at that."

Claire's eyebrows shot up. I watched as she schooled her features and said, "Of course, Kayley. As long as you need."

Maggie put her arm around me. "We're here for you."

The tension in my shoulders released. This wasn't going to be easy. Jon needed help and probably I did, too. But I would do the work. I looked up at the sky where a few stars still laughed overhead. I didn't know which was second to the right, but I didn't need to. I knew I was a mother, and mothers protect children.