

PETER

by PAT MURPHY

I went to see Wendy when I was in London. For old times' sake. It's a drag, but she expects it, and what can I do.

"Oh, Slightly, you really are a sight," she says, and smiles as if she expects me to share the joke. "You look so silly in that black leather jacket. And why do you have a hoop in your ear? Do you think you're a pirate" laughs girlishly, even though she's over thirty, saddled with a kid, afflicted with a husband who's never home.

I don't even know why I go to see her. She always insists I stay to tea and serves sweet biscuits and fusses over her kid the whole time. She gets to me. We have what passes for conversation in her household,

"Slightly writes for the newspaper, Jane. What do you think of that?" Wendy asks the kid. Jane looks at me owlishly and says nothing,

"He just got back from somewhere very far away and exotic. Where was it this time, Slightly?"

"Nicaragua," I say. "I was a stringer for the Times. Covering the war. You may have heard about it?"

Can't get under her skin. She smiles sweetly and I just can't bear it. "I suppose. It's so far from our little world here."

"Could you please call me Hank," I say, a little testily. "I really prefer it."

"Very well, dear," she says, She looks hurt but covers by busying herself with cleaning up a spot of tea that has dripped from the teapot spout onto the oilcloth table cover. "I will."

She won't. She never remembers.

Finally, the kid goes out to play, dressed in a little pink frock trimmed with lace. Wendy herself is wearing a housedress that looks a bit worse for wear, but the kid has to have the best. "She's such a dear," Wendy says, and then settles in her chair to reminisce, "I was just her age when I first flew off with Peter."

I don't want to hear about it, but she's off and running. "Remember the lovely little house you boys made for me? Oh, I was so happy there." And then she goes on and on, about the sweet little room under the trees and the fun we had chasing the pirates. In her memories, she even likes Tiger Lily, the Indian princess, though I recall at the time Wendy was quite put out by Tiger Lily's obvious interest in Peter.

Wendy's memories are all quite tidy. She remembers the sweet room beneath the trees and doesn't remember that it stank like wood smoke half the time because the chimney didn't draw. She remembers the jolly pirate ship and forgets the death cries of the dying pirates. The deck was slick with blood when

we were done. I remember it, even if she doesn't.

They died horribly--two in the cabin at Peter's blade. The rest on deck, mobbed by the lost boys, harried by Peter. I didn't kill any myself, but that doesn't mean I was innocent. I carried the lantern and called to the other boys to follow. I remember flashing the lantern in one man's face - Bill Mullins, I think his name was and he ran out half blinded, to be cut down by three boys, Fair play didn't enter into it-we were just kids, Kids with death in our hands and a song in our hearts. The air reeked of blood and we watched Hook leap overboard into the jaws of the crocodile.

Wendy seems to have forgotten all this, She remembers a tidy Neverland, Perhaps she believes the Disney version, where people died neatly, never soiling their pants.

I look around the room as she talks, chattering about fairy dust and Tinker Bell. The arms of the chairs are covered with off-white doilies that are a little lumpy and don't lie flat. Wendy's work, no doubt. The windows are covered with a thin layer of dust, the kind of dirt that hangs in the air of industrial towns, settling on everything. By the door, the carpet is worn; the underlying threads show through. Wendy herself looks worn-tired around the eyes, Her hands are a little chapped; she hasn't been taking care of herself.

Her husband is an actor, or so Wendy says, He gets work now and then-minor parts in minor productions. Never anything big. He's a good-looking man, in a callow, beardless way. I've met him once or twice, and I didn't much care for him. When Wendy's reminiscences slow down, I ask about him. "How's your husband? Getting any work?"

She looks worried. "Oh, he has hopes. He's being considered for a part."

"I see." I see all too well. His sort is always being considered for a part. Always having lunch with a producer. Always chasing after the dream and never catching it, leaving his wife to grow worn and tired alone.

"And what about you, Slightly? Are you seeing anyone?"

I've been married three times. And divorced three times. It never takes. The third one was the worst. "I don't mind that you're gone half the time," my wife told me. "I knew that when we got married, But you're not looking for a wife. You're looking for a mother to rock you to sleep."

"I've sworn off marriage," I say, "I'm always gallivanting off to some adventure or other."

"You sound so much like him," Wendy says wistfully.

"No. Don't say that. It's not so." But even as I deny her words, I know she's right. He left his mark on me, just as he left it on her. When all the lost boys came home, I was the one who never fit in. At school, I told the other kids about our adventures with the pirates, the battles with the redskins, the long afternoons by the mermaids' lagoon. When kids called me a liar, I fought back with my fists and got a reputation as a troublemaker, a bad boy. When the other lost boys were promoted to the next grade, I was kept back. But by that time, it didn't really matter to me. I couldn't talk to them anymore. They were busy forgetting the island, forgetting Peter, adjusting to the real world.

Wendy is staring into the fire, ignoring me. I care about Wendy, you know. For all the nasty things I say, I care about her. Though she was just a little girl herself, she tried to be a mother to us all. She tucked us

in; she told us stories, And Peter treated her worse than he treated any of the boys.

When he left us here, he promised to come back each spring and take her to Neverland for a week. She was supposed to go help with his spring cleaning.

I found her sitting by the open window the year that he forgot her. She wore a frock that looked too young for her. Though she was only eleven, she was growing up fast.

"What do you think has happened to him, Slightly?" she asked, peering out the window. "Do you think he's sick?"

"He's never sick," I told her. "The bastard just forgot," She slipped his mind. She didn't matter, any more than the rest of us mattered. I put my arms out to comfort her, but she ran away crying. And after that, she grew up quickly,

She looks up from the fire and meets my eyes. "It's almost spring," she says. "I wonder if he'll come this year, I think he will, I have a feeling that he'll come soon. Maybe tonight."

"Forget it, Wendy. Just forget it. Lock the window, for Christ's sake. He's gone."

Though she nods as if she agrees, her gaze returns to the fire. I stay for a little longer, then excuse myself, She smiles and hugs me when I go, but her thoughts are elsewhere.

When I leave Wendy's house, I go to my motorcycle and then hesitate, considering what Wendy said earlier. She's right-there's a feeling in the air, a sense of anticipation.

I wait in the darkness by the window to Jane's bedroom. Wendy's left it open, of course. I knew she would. It's dark, but her husband hasn't come home yet. He'll be home late and drunk, if I know the type, Through the window, I listen to Wendy read a Disneyfied version of Snow White to her daughter and bid her goodnight.

The blind at the kitchen window is up. I watch Wendy take a whiskey bottle from the cupboard and pour herself a glass. I wait in the darkness, watching Wendy drink.

My second wife once asked me about my family. I told her as close to the truth as I could manage: "My father left me and my mother when I was just a kid." She asked me if I had ever thought about trying to find my father. I said that if I ever found him, I would kill him for what he did to me,

He didn't mean to do it, He didn't know what he was doing. He was cocky, thoughtless, and innocently heroic. And he blighted my life. All my life, I have wanted to be like him. I run from continent to continent, from war to war, writing stories and books and searching for the great adventure that he always promised us. I look for a leader who laughs in the heart of the battle, sublimely confident in the way that only a boy can be.

I don't belong in this place, any more than Wendy does. But he left me here. And there's nowhere else to go.

He'll come tonight, I know he will. And I know that I would fly away with him if I could.

If he took me by the hand and told me I could fly, I would go back to the island with all its joys and

terrors, I would follow him and join the lost boys once again.

But I can't go back. I lost my innocence long ago; now I have lost my youth as well.

Though I am only thirty years old, I feel ancient, worn-out, used up. The butterfly knife that I bought in the Philippines fits comfortably in my hand. I have learned a thing or two about fighting in my visits to various war zones. If I take him by surprise, I'll have a chance, I think.

Tonight, it's either Peter or me. And if he wins, he won't think twice. He'll slit my throat without hesitation, never recognizing his old companion. He'll laugh the careless laugh of childhood and fly off on the evening wind, eternally proud, eternally careless, eternally young.