

## Peter Never Came

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I was sitting on the edge of the counter, my feet dipping recklessly into the dirty sink, and he was sitting on the side of the bathtub, compulsively rubbing the soap grime along the rim with his thumb.

“I used to believe in Peter Pan,” I told him, leaning the side of my head against the bathroom mirror and closing my eyes. The squalor of our neglected bathroom was nauseating and I didn’t want to look at it. “I left my window open every night hoping against hope that he would come and take me away. I didn’t want to grow up.”

“You mean you pretended to believe. Like a game,” he said.

“No really.” I opened my eyes and looked at him. “I believed. And I wanted to be swept away to Neverland. I would sit by the window all night. Some kids pray to God, I prayed to Peter Pan. I prayed that he would come and rescue me from, I don’t know, the real world.” My body was twisted into a sort of pretzel and my back was beginning to ache but I didn’t care. It took my mind off of everything.

“Listen, I think we should talk about this,” he said.

“Don’t worry, I’ve already thought about it. We can go halves.”

“Wait a minute, we should talk about this.”

“I said don’t worry.”

“I’m not. Not really.” He looked at my hair in the mirror, like he didn’t actually want to look right at me but he didn’t want to look away, either. “How much longer?”

I picked up the empty container and glanced at the back, even though I already knew the answer. I had practically memorized the back of the baby blue box. What an awful color for such a package. Hadn't anybody thought about the connotations? It should have been black, just plain black with boring white lettering. "It can take up to ten minutes."

"But it might be less?"

"I guess."

"Well shouldn't we be checking it? I mean, what if it's already done?"

"You can. I think I'd rather wait." I kind of thought that getting up and looking at it repeatedly would just make me even more anxious. I didn't want him to, either; I just suggested it because I figured he wouldn't want to handle the tester, for obvious reasons.

"I guess we can just wait." He pulled a bit of soap scum off of the bathtub and rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger. It was disgusting but I didn't say anything.

It kind of irritated me that he didn't just come out and say that he didn't want to touch the strip. I mean, it wouldn't have hurt my feelings or anything.

"Why didn't you want to grow up?" He stood, shifted his weight from his left foot to his right, and then stepped to the trash can, tossing the ball of soap scum inside.

"Because I was smart. Everything is better when you're a kid. You're never bored, except when you have to go to sleep or take a bath or something. And then you're miserable, like you're missing all the fun. Now it's like the only time I'm really happy is when I'm sleeping or taking an hour long shower."

He nodded. "So I guess you like kids?"

I shrugged. "I don't want one of my own."

He sat down on the edge of the bathtub again. "Well I think maybe it's about time, anyway. Lots of people our age have two or three by now."

*Our* age. I hate that. It's like being condemned for something you had no control over to begin with. Besides, it's not like we were that old. Just because everybody else was doing it and everybody seemed to wonder why we weren't, that didn't mean that we had to go along with it. Like when he would drag me to a party, which would normally be a cocktail party or a dinner party with tons of couples and a separate room where the kids were watching Disney movies. And right when I felt like I was starting to relax and could maybe enjoy myself, someone would come up and put their left hand on my shoulder with their gaudy wedding ring sticking out and say, "So when are you two going to get married?"

He would always chuckle with that lame party laugh he's developed over years of being grown up and say something about how he's just waiting for the right moment. Like that's all there was to it. He was just going to ask and of course I would say yes. And even worse was when the person would give me this consoling look, like 'Oh you poor thing, you must be going crazy waiting.'

If I had been braver or wittier or bitchier I would have made some biting remark about how he might be waiting for the right moment but I was waiting for the right guy. But then everybody would have just felt even sorrier for me, like I was just trying to deal with being single still while everybody else was starting families. I think I would have had a better time at those things if they would have let me go to the other room and watch movies with the kids.

Anyway, he was sitting there on the edge of the bathtub and he kept jiggling his foot the way he does when he gets nervous or upset. I knew it meant he had something to say but he wasn't sure how to say it. I figured as long as his foot kept moving we were okay because it meant he was still nervous and wasn't going to say whatever it was. It was bound to be something bad; there was nothing that he could say that wouldn't be.

All the different possibilities paraded around in my head. He might want to break up. And I didn't want that. I didn't want to marry him but I still wanted to be with him. He might want to have the kid and that would be worse than being dumped. He might want me to have an abortion, which was what I wanted but it wasn't his decision to make. Or maybe he wanted me to have the kid and put it up for adoption, which would just piss me off worse than anything because it's like saying, "I don't want to have to deal with it but I think that you should still go through all that pain and fatness and everything just to avoid my conscience being burdened." I made up my mind that if he asked me to do that I would just tell him to fuck off. That kind of thing makes it easier because whenever you get down about it you can just remember that awful thing he said right before the end and feel better off.

His foot stopped moving. My stomach went cold. "I don't really like kids," I blurted.

His foot started jiggling again. "Not at all?"

"Not even a little bit." This wasn't completely true. I do kind of like kids. They're cute and sweet and fun, when they're not being little terrors. But the thing is: I wouldn't want one of my own. Because when it's someone else's kid you can just hang out with them when they're being adorable and give them right back to their parents when they start crying or wetting the sofa or breaking things. And if they break something of yours their parents are always so apologetic and they pay for it if you want them to. And if you don't then they think you're some kind of an angel for being so understanding and all that. Half the time it was just some ugly vase your boyfriend's sister bought you for Christmas and you're happy to be rid of it because if you had thrown it out yourself he would have had a fit, going on about how she didn't have to get you anything and blah blah blah.

"This is something we should talk about," he said. "Even if you aren't... you know. I mean we've never really talked about it before."

“What do you want to talk about?” I was beginning to wish he would just say whatever it was he wanted to say because this subject didn’t seem much better.

“Well, I want kids. I wasn’t planning on having one right now but I do want to have them someday. Are you saying you don’t ever want to have any?”

“I’d make a terrible mother.”

“But you’re great with kids. I can’t believe all of the sudden you’re saying you don’t like them. Could have fooled me.”

“I just don’t want to have any, okay? It’s just not something that interests me.”

“But you say it like it’s something that people choose to do because it’s interesting. I just assumed you wanted kids. Everybody wants kids.”

“Apparently not everybody.” I curled my toes up in the sink and watched them relax again. The sink was even dirtier than the rest of the bathroom, filled with little black hairs from when he shaved his goatee off. It was repulsive and I wanted to tell him to clean it but I didn’t want to get into all that. It was so boring, fighting about things like cleaning up after yourself or turning the lights off when you leave the room.

“I think you need to be open to discussion on this point.”

I hated it when he talked like that. Real people don’t talk like that.

“The thing is it isn’t just you here, you know? We’re in this together and you can’t just decide that we’re not ever going to have kids and not even take my feelings into consideration.”

“Fine, how do you feel about it?”

“I feel that our lives would be significantly emptier if we don’t have a family. I also think you, well both of us, will regret it when we start getting older and we don’t have any kids to come visit and no memories of family holidays.”

“Is that all?” He looked kind of hurt and I wished I hadn’t worded my response like that but I figured it was too late so I might as well keep going. “Because I have very strong feelings about it, too. I feel that you shouldn’t be forced into parenthood if it’s not what you want for your life. I think being a parent isn’t something that you should just do to make someone else happy. Because then you’ll be a horrible parent and you need to think about the kid. How would you like to be raised by a mother who never really wanted you, she just had you to appease your father?”

“But I don’t think it would be like that. Women have an immediate bond with babies. It would happen without you even trying.”

“But I don’t want it to happen.”

He looked down. I think he was thinking about what he had wanted to say earlier. The whole situation was starting to feel unreal and I started thinking about Peter Pan again. I knew he didn’t understand but there was something special about that book. It was just so right on. Even when I was a little kid I knew it; I knew it was true. Being grown up isn’t worth it.

He stood up and walked over to me. I had my hands laced around my legs and he peeled them apart and held them in his own, much bigger hands. It felt good but in a sad way, like when you realize how much your grandmother loved you at her funeral.

He kissed the knuckles on my right hand, then my left. “I love you.”

I wanted to jerk my hands back. It’s not like it was the first time he had said it but it felt different this time. It felt like he actually meant it. Instead of ripping my hands away or running screaming from the room, I dropped my head onto my knees and started crying. He let go of my hands and wrapped his arms around me and started kissing me all over my face and even in my hair. He kept saying it over and over, “I love you, I love you,” and every

time he said it I just felt more and more like I wanted to die.

“I can’t do this. I just can’t. I’m not ready.”

“It’s okay. I’m here.”

“If it’s positive I’m going to get an abortion.”

I felt his muscles tighten but he kept holding me and kissing me so he must not have been too upset. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“I don’t want to talk about it at all.”

He pulled away and put his hands in my hair, one on each side of my face like he was trying to keep my head from falling off. He looked into my eyes and got that intense expression on his face that guys always get when they’re trying to talk sweet. I hate that more than anything in the world. They get that look and their voice goes all husky and deep and they say the cheesiest things about how beautiful you are. They act so serious but it isn’t a serious thing, really, love and sex and relationships. It’s all pretty ridiculous if you think about it. The only way I can even stand it is if the guy can at least accept that it’s actually comical and not important at all.

It’s like when he was holding me and kissing my hair and saying “I love you” over and over again. It was kind of nice because it felt good and all but at the same time it made me cry even harder. Because it just wasn’t real. It’s like some cheesy romance where the guy says something sweet and the girl just melts. I always think the girl is an idiot because it isn’t going to be like that always. She’s lucky if it’s like that ever again. I’m not saying that things like that shouldn’t happen at all, I just think they should always be accompanied with somebody slamming a pie into a clown’s face or something because it’ll even it all out somehow. It’s about as meaningful and intelligent as slapstick, anyway, so the two would go well together.

So he had that look on his face and he cleared his throat like he was about to say something really important. "I think we should get married."

It was just like him to say it like a statement rather than a question. Like how he had supposedly been waiting for the right moment and now that it was here he would just let me know so I could go all gushy and that would be that. Only I didn't go all gushy. The truth is I felt sort of sick

"What do you think?" He kept that horrible look on his face and for a second I was afraid I was going to burst out laughing.

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" He let go of my head and stepped back, crossing his arms around his chest like he was getting ready to scold me.

"I mean I've never really thought about it." That was true, although I probably shouldn't have said it because he looked so hurt I thought he was going to cry.

"Not even a little?"

"I'm sorry. I don't think I want to get married."

"Not to anyone?"

"If I don't want to marry you why would I want to marry someone else?" I thought that would make him feel better but I guess I said it kind of harshly and he actually did cry. I think he did, anyway. He turned away from me and when he turned back he was wiping his eyes. Maybe he just wanted me to think he cried.

"I just always thought we would get married and have kids one day. Look, if you're worried that I'm just saying it because... I mean, if you think I don't really mean it don't worry. I've been thinking about proposing for a while."

"I don't think that you're just saying it because of all this." I did. "I just don't think I

want to get married. I don't want to have kids and I don't want to get married."

"Then where do you see this going?"

"What?"

"Us."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I want to marry you. I want you to have my babies. I want us to have a family and I want to be with you forever."

Oh god that stuff makes my stomach turn. But I couldn't very well tell him that, not right when he was pouring his heart out about it all. "I just don't think this is something we should rush into."

"Rush into? We've been together for almost a year, and we're not getting any younger. So, now you're telling me that this whole time you never had any intention of making a commitment to me. I feel betrayed."

Cheesy, stupid, boy-trying-to-seduce-girl talk. And it made me really angry. What was he trying to say? That I hadn't been committed to him for the past year, just because we weren't married? For that entire year I had never once thought about cheating on him, I had seen him almost every day and believe me there were days when I didn't feel like it. I went on dates with him. I spent Christmas with his family because he said it would probably be his Grandma's last. I hung out with his friends, even though I didn't like most of them. We had even bought a dog together. We gave him away after a couple of months because he kept peeing all over everything but still, if that wasn't commitment then I don't know what the hell he wanted from me.

"I'm sorry." Lame, I know, but I didn't know what else to say.

"That's it? You're sorry. You wasted a year of my life and you're sorry?"

That was low. “I didn’t realize you thought of it as such a waste. I love you even if I don’t want to get married. I figured we would just stay together, like this, forever.”

“Well I’m just not sure I can be with a woman who doesn’t even feel strongly enough about me to marry me. We’re adults. You might not want to act like one but I certainly do. I can’t spend the rest of my life like this. I need commitment. I need security. If you really loved me you would do it.”

I had heard that before but not in this context.

All of this mind-numbing chatter was starting to make my head hurt and I was beginning to think maybe it was better if we did just break up. At least I wouldn’t ever have to have another conversation like this. I wished I had never even told him about being late to begin with. If I had just taken the test alone and then handled the problem myself none of this would ever have happened. I guess I’m just too honest for my own good.

“I think it’s probably ready,” I said.

His harsh expression softened a little. He reached out and helped me down from the counter. I walked over to the back of the toilet seat and picked up the tester. I looked down and then handed it to him. He stared blankly at it.

“What does it mean?”

“One bar is no. Two is yes.”

“Oh.” He handed it back to me and I tossed it in the trash. “Do you think you should take the other one, just in case?”

The box had come with two inside. I didn’t know if it was for really slutty girls who needed them on a regular basis or if it was to double check the first results. “I don’t know. I’m sure it’s right.”

“I’m sorry. About what I just said. I didn’t mean it. I love you and I don’t think of

one second that I've spent with you as a waste."

I nodded and looked down. I didn't want to look at him. Suddenly I wasn't sure how I felt about him anymore, like some things can't be taken back.

"I understand about you not wanting to get married. I won't press it but if you change your mind will you let me know?" He stepped forward to put his arms around me again but I walked around him before he had a chance. He followed me into the bedroom.

"Sure." I shrugged. I sat down on the bed and stared at the bookshelf, looking for B, looking for Barrie.

"So what happens now?" He sat down beside me.

"I'm tired. I just want to go to bed."

"Are you mad at me?"

"No."

"Do you still love me?"

I hate questions like that. I always want to say no, just because they asked. "Yes."

"Me too."

He put his arm around me and started kissing me again but I didn't much feel in the mood after all that so I yawned right in the middle of a kiss. He must have gotten the hint because he just kissed me once more on the cheek and then lay down on the bed. He patted the spot next to him and I lay down, too, but I had lied and I wasn't really tired.

He fell asleep pretty quickly. He drops off faster than anyone I've ever known. I just lay there staring at the spot on the bookshelf where my copy of Peter Pan should've been, only it wasn't there. I don't remember if I gave it away or sold it or what. Somehow that made me even sadder than everything else that had happened that night.

The window was open. It had been pretty hot the past few nights and we had never

bothered closing it. That night it was kind of chilly, though, and the wind that was coming in through the opening was starting to make me shiver. I stood up and slid the window shut and then I started crying again. Not because of the fight or the test or even the fact that his mind was so simplistic he could just drop off to sleep like that while I lay awake mulling everything over. I was crying because of that missing copy of Peter Pan. I hadn't read it in years but it made me cry anyway.

I thought about how I used to leave the window open every night when I was a kid. I'd leave it open all night and just wait for Peter Pan to come and take me away. I was so sure that he was out there, that he would come for me. But Peter never came. And after a while the breeze from the open window stopped being soft and inviting, cool and hopeful. After a while it just became cold.