

Penny Pan and the NeverLand.com

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Chapter 1: The Game Begins

All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way William knew was this. One day when he was two years old he found his father's phone under the divan and started pressing his fingers on the screen. "It's not a toy, Willie," Mr. Darling said, gently prying the device out of the boy's hands; "you'll have one of your own before long." This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth William knew that he must grow up. You always know after they are two. Two is the beginning of the end.

Of course, they lived at 14 Kensington Way, or, perhaps it was 13. You see, it was rather difficult to tell due to the large number of terraced brick row houses all with slate roofs. Not only a few times had Mrs. Darling set off the neighbor's Peace & Protection Security System; Mr. Darling never erred; "it just doesn't smell right," he would say.

Before William came, Mr. Darling volunteered as a chat-nurse at the Great Ormand Street Hospital for Sick Children. He was a compassionate man, with a kind, quizzical mouth, and always able to select appropriate emoticons for his replies. His mind, was like those nested hyperlinks—however many you discover there is always one more waiting to capture your attention—and his mouth had one kiss on it that William could never get, though there it was, perfectly conspicuous in the right-hand corner.

The way Mrs. Darling won him was this: They were both at Pudgy's Frozen Fluff Shoppe when she looked across to the next table and noticed Mr. Darling's quizzical mouth. Any other lady would have texted first, but not Mrs. Darling. She strutted over, pulled out his left ear bud and invited him to *Peter and Wendy: The Sequel*, opening at the revival film festival that very night, and so she got him. She got all of him, except the innermost link and the kiss; she never knew about the link, and in time she gave up trying for the kiss. William thought the Duchess of York could have got it, as she was the fastest of the characters in the Royal Windsor Clones, his favorite game from the bundle he had received on his last half-birthday. But we can picture her trying, and then slamming down her Taser and fizzling off screen in a huff.

Mrs. Darling used to boast to William that his father not only loved her but admired her. She was a partner at an equity firm on Threadneedle Street, one of those computational ones who knows all about triangular credit-swap futures and cubed mortgage bundles. Of course, the fund's computers were ever so more efficient at analyzing financial data than any person, but she quite seemed to know, and she often said, "futures in; bundles out," in a way that would have made anyone admire her.

After they were married, Mrs. Darling made not just a few singular swaps and was promoted to infinite equity analyst and then to partner while Mr. Darling diligently chatted with his patients, carefully meting out emoticons, almost gleefully, as if it were a game, yet byte-by-byte his chat sessions were left unattended as he scrolled 1911's most favoured baby names. When he did respond, he would link to a brief poll as to whether William or Wilfred sounds more kickin. He snuck this in where he should have included a :-) or even a *\0/*.

"I scarce believe we have compounded our assets enough, George," Mrs. Darling responded when he sent her his latest find: a stork delivering a tightly swaddled, infant smiley. "What do you mean, Gwen?" he asked, turning that quizzical mouth into a pout. She set off to calculate expenses.

"Now don't interrupt, dear," she begged; "we have four seven naught naught in liquid holdings, and I have my earnings; I can pare down the triple lattes saving nine hundred naught naught annually, with your eighteen and three makes three nine seven; let's see...if I run it that gives us three nine seven; and we mustn't forget the baby will need a buggy and a swing—a green version connecting to a stationary bike generator, of course—let me input the swing—there, we've done it!—did I say nine nine seven? Yes, I said nine nine seven; the question is, could we manage on nine nine seven?"

Of course we could, Gwendolyn," he said, dropping a hand-quilted UV protector into his save-for-later cart at the first mention of buggy.

"Remember Papa-and-me cello lessons begin at eight months" she warned almost threateningly, and off she went again—"cello lessons seven naught, that is what I have entered, but I daresay it will be more like four—don't look at me that way—and of course there's the babyfood—puréed clover-raised beef and omega mush, or whatever it is I saw the Davies feeding their little ones—and we can't forget BPA-free teethers." So on it went, with a different total each time; but at last Mrs. Darling balanced the books with the beef and omega mush counted as one and the swing being borrowed from a neighbor.

William came first, then Jane, then Margaret. It was a water birth for all three.

After Margaret was born, William began entreating his parents to let him take care of her. Every night for about a year now, his avatar had been minding a dozen or so different cyber babies, clicking them into bed, one by one, color-coded, from largest to smallest. Such a sweet screen saver the nine of them made all fast asleep. What could his parents do but give in, and so he took on the duty of putting Margaret to sleep in the buggy; it was a Mod, the kind that converts to a baby bathtub with a nine-step maneuver, not the humble CityStroll Mrs. Darling had originally budgeted. He tied a rope around the handle and would sit playing on his reader with one hand while pushing the buggy back and forth with the other. Out goes the Mod and, ZING, three points, in she comes again and, BONG, down goes a protector. Thus it went until either Margaret dozed off or William finished the game.

Soon, you might have seen the three children going in a row to Mr. Fulsom's Kindergarten school, accompanied by their nanny. Mr. Darling loved to have everything just so, and Mrs. Darling had a passion for being exactly like her neighbors; so, of course, they had a nanny. As money was scarce, owing to Mr. Darling's weakness for heirloom tomatoes (the mottled kind) and Mrs. Darling's late night bidding on junk bonds, this nanny was a prim Newfoundland dog, called Augustus. He had belonged to no one in particular until the Darlings engaged him but had always thought children important. The Darlings had become acquainted with him in Kensington Gardens where he spent most of his spare time peeping into perambulators, and was much hated by those texting nannies whom he followed to their homes and complained of to their employers.

He proved to be quite a treasure of a nanny. How thorough he was with the strawberry detangler and up at any moment of the night if one of his charges needed reassuring that indeed it was all just a dream. His kennel, of course, was in the nursery. It was a lesson in propriety to see him escorting the children to school, walking sedately by their side when they were well behaved, and butting them back into line if they started fiddling with their electronics. There is a room in the basement of Mr. Fulsom's school where the nannies wait. They sat on benches texting while Augustus lay on the floor, but that was the only difference.

No nursery could possibly have been conducted more correctly, and Mrs. Darling knew it, yet she occasionally wondered whether the neighbours talked about her on KensingtonBaby.com.

She had her position at the firm to consider.

Augustus also troubled her in another way. She had sometimes a feeling that he did not admire her. “I know she admires you dear, but let me look it up to check,” Mr. Darling would say reassuringly, and then would sign to the children to be specially nice to mother.

Karaoke contests followed, during which, Miles, their sole source of household help, was encouraged to refrain from his post at the Hooverbot and join in. His comportment was not altogether unlike that King of Pop in his mid-to-late period and how the children adored watching him moonwalk across the room with his feather duster. The smoothness of those songs! And the smoothest of all was Mr. Darling, who would sing so melliflously that you could almost hear the kiss, and then if you had dashed at him you might have got it. There never was a simpler, happier family until the coming of Penny Pan.

Mr. Darling first heard of Penny on William’s blog. It is the nightly custom of every good parent after the children are asleep to keep abreast of their Internet comings and goings, making discoveries sweet and not so sweet, adding comments here and there, and hurriedly stowing various other tabs and entries out of sight. William’s blog covered an array of subjects, with compositions on the biodiversity of coral reefs, horse breeding and dressage, electric eels, and how to dress stylishly in mismatched plaids. Putting this in order would be a straightforward matter if that were all, but there is *Top Music Downloads*, *Avagadro’s Number*, *Most-Crowded Photos of the Minute*, and *The End of Gravity Debate Team* and either these are main entries or they are comments, and it is all rather befuddling, especially as entire sections are often copied willy-nilly from other pages without the least inclination to obtain permission.

We have yet to forage through IP addresses to determine whether you have visited William’s page, but if you have, you would find a running tally of how many points he had accrued in the NeverLand. The game console had arrived in the 12th parcel delivery one winter night after the children were asleep. You can be sure that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Darling had the slightest recollection of having ordered it, yet to avoid the inconvenience of posting a return, they placed it on the table and presented it to the children next morning.

At first strict time limits were imposed by Mr. Darling, though gradually, almost imperceptibly the game began to occupy increasingly more hours of William’s days and nights. When you play, the world you enter on the first screen is perpetually dark and mysterious, or then again it is light and gay. You see, the NeverLands vary a good deal depending on who is in control. Jane’s for instance, had a 400-yard-long lagoon with flamingos at which she would fire cannon balls, while Margaret, who could barely program her Kiwipad, had a flamingo to ride on and one giant cannon ball to toss around at will. Jane could operate many boats—kayaks, canoes, coracles—Margaret only one, a large houseboat that taught her the letters, while William had the royal armada at his fingertips and could construct palaces for the sailors to inhabit. Jane’s world had mermen, but no people, Margaret’s was crowded with humanity, while William’s was rife with wolf pups, one of which he was able to turn into a pet; but on the whole, the games tend to have a family resemblance, and if you put them through data analysis you could say of them that they have each other’s nose, and so forth. On these magic screens children click forever and anon creating zig-zag roads on the island, for the NeverLand is always more or less an island with astonishing splashes of color here and there and coral reefs and a ferocious beasts made to look like your favorite junk food. We too have entered the game; we can still hear the sound of the soda pop gushing, though we shall play no more.

What Mr. Darling found in his travels through William's pages typically seemed innocent enough. Yet there was one friend that troubled him. It was a girl named Penny. She clearly did not pose a virtual threat, for she did not seem to be an adult chatting as a child. Rather, she seemed to be a very young girl—still with her primary teeth—posting updates as an adult, or at least someone old enough to hunt a raccoon and fasten its fur into a cap or maneuver a kayak alone through rapids or scramble up a rock face harder than harder than the V-squared adventure routes Mrs. Darling now and again watched on ExtremeStreams during short breaks at work. William's pages contained an untold number of links to the girl. The more Mr. Darling read about her, the more he felt that this cheeky rascal had perpetuated some type of identity theft.

"No, that is truly her," William responded when his father revealed his suspicions; "though I do admit she is rather cheeky."

"But who is she?" Mr. Darling pressed.

"She is Penny Pan, you know, father."

Certainly, Mr. Darling could not know of any such girl. And it worried him that William seemed to believe the comments about her that showed up. "No well mannered child, Willy," he declared after a bit of searching the *Mr. Prim and Proper* pages, "would go on about how she plays cello, violin, harp, mandolin, trumpet, trombone, tuba, guitar, piano, drums and electric flute." Mr. Darling was trying to be firm, though at that moment the thought that William's cello and piano lessons might need slight supplementation crossed his mind.

He consulted Mrs. Darling about the girl, but she did not have time for such blather. "Mark my words," she said, "it is merely some trick Augustus is using to make William want to attend his viola lessons; just the sort of idea a dog would have." Mr. Darling, you see, had added the viola. "Leave it alone, and he'll stop crowing about her."

But he did not stop; and soon the troublesome girl gave Mr. Darling quite a shock.

Children have the strangest encounters without being troubled by them. For instance, they may remember to mention, a week after the event happened, that they were at school when a crow arrived from Miss Elissa, their dead skate-board coach, the one who tragically perished executing a Nose-Slide off a Grant's Tomb. Augustus always scolded them for believing in crows from the dead with a look that said, 'only the living can crow as the dead have no way to pay for their accounts.' But the children were certain if anybody could stay connected from the afterworld, Miss Elissa could.

It was in this casual way that William one morning made a disquieting revelation. A veneer of phosphorescent dust covered the nursery floor, which certainly ought to have been removed by the Hooverbot and Mr. Darling was rubbing his finger through it when William said with a tolerant smile:

"I do believe it is that Penny again!"

"Penny? What do you mean?"

"It is so naughty of her not to clean up," William said, sighing. He was a tidy child.

He explained in quite a matter-of-fact way that Penny comes out of NeverLand at night to rifle through Jane's water pistols. Unfortunately he never woke, so he didn't know how he knew, he just knew.

"Quite impossible, William, no one can live in a computer and if she does, she certainly can't escape."

"I never said she lived in a computer, father, she lives in the internet."

"Criminy, William, no one lives in the internet either, not even in one of those social chambers. Surely, Willy, you must have been dreaming."

But he had not been dreaming, as the very next night showed, the night on which the extraordinary adventures of these children may be said to have begun.

On the night we speak of, all the children were once more in bed. Mrs. Darling was engaged in her triangular credit-swap monitoring, and as it happened to be Augustus's evening off, Mr. Darling opened the home Peace & Protection app as any good father would do, lit the children's NightLanterns and loaded a favorite electronic lullaby for each until one by one they slid away into the land of sleep. All were looking so safe and cozy that he smiled at his concerns and sat down tranquilly with his reader to review William's blog. When he found a link to a picture of the girl, it did not distress him, for he had seen her face in the faces of parents who have no children. Perchance she is to be found in the faces of some who are trying in vitro fertilization as well. But in the picture the girl had cracked the parental control software, severing the screen that obscures the Neverland, and he saw William and Jane and Margaret peeping through.

This by itself would have been a trifle, but as he zoomed in on the image, power was lost disabling the Peace & Protection app. His screen went dark, and a girl dropped in on the floor. She was accompanied by a light, no bigger than your fist, which darted about the room like Jane's Laser Ba-Ba-pointer and I think it must have been this that attracted Mr. Darling's attention.

He knew at once that it was Penny Pan. Porting only a simple piccolo, she bore little resemblance to her online profile, and if either one of us had been there we would have sent her back whence she ...ah...crap! The Great JMB has just pinged in a crow stating that in using the word *would* rather than *should* we are expressing our view much too forcefully. He says we *ought* to pay proper respect to the Queen's English. Indubitably—but there's no time for that; we need to concentrate on the girl.

You can see her now. And though she is covered in dust, if you blow hard, you may find a hunter's jacket woven out of corn silk, unbuttoned to reveal a tunic imprinted with a skeleton-leaf. Look! Not at your screen, but through it. She has spotted Mr. Darling and is gnashing those little choppers at him.