

# The Fear of Flying

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He fidgets, like any four-year-old. Mama tugs on the ends of Michael's jacket to straighten it.

“You'll be good in the theater, won't you dear? Mr Barrie went to a lot of trouble to write his play,” she said

gravely, fussing with his buttons. Her finger taps his nose and Michael smiles.

“I hear that they've found a way to make Peter Pan fly, Ma!” Peter said giddily. “For real!”

“I hear that Peter is played by a girl!” John said. “Isn't that rubbish? I can't imagine Mr Barrie agreeing to that!”

“Girls are lighter for the harnesses, John,” said George, who knew so much. “That's how they make Peter fly.”

“No,” Michael said. “They use pixie dust! Mr. Barrie said so!”

Mama laughed and pinched Michael's cheek. To him, Neverland has existed ever since the second star to the right and all the others were tacked onto the sky.

Michael spends his sixth birthday ill and in bed, voiceless. When he visits, Uncle Jim opens the door before knocking, ruffles Michael's hair and squats by his bed.

“I've missed you,” he said. “Your mother seemed to think that you'd be too ill to see our play this Christmas.”

Michael nodded. He coughed into his arm.

“Well, since you're my expert on slaying pirates and chasing Indians off of Lost Boy territory, I can't have that. And I told your mum I said, oh Mrs. Davies, I can't have that! Michael has to see the play, it's non-negotiable, unthinkable!”

Michael laughed because Uncle Jim waggled his finger and imitated himself with a funny voice.

“And your mum said ‘Well Mr. Barrie, he is simply too sick!’ And you know how we must listen to our mothers, don't you? But not to worry; we always keep a little something special on hand, in case we need some magic.”

Michael mouths the words: “Pixie dust.”

“Quite right!” Uncle Jim said gleefully.

There are so many people in Michael's room, at first he doesn't understand and just curls up in Uncle Jim's lap.

“This is the magic of the theater, you see,” Uncle Jim said. “They've managed to bring our show to you.”

Michael points frantically. There's Red Chief! Oh and Mrs. Darling, there she is, she looks as lovely as Michael's mum, though he can't think about it too much because he's spotted Wendy! He watches them install what's called the ‘scenery’, the Neverland of wood and paint made for people who can't see the real thing like Michael and Uncle Jim can. And then Peter arrives! Peter's a girl again, and that's always strange, but Michael can't be disappointed for too long because he's found Michael! Yes, Michael! The boy named after him, the real Michael. This year's Michael is a lot taller than he is, but Michael doesn't mind. One day he'll be even taller.

Michael is seven years old and if he stretches he can touch his toes, and then the sky if he reaches up. Michael can't read yet though he can sing his ABCs. He doesn't think he'll ever need to learn, because he can always hear new stories from Uncle Jim. And when there's an obituary like Father's to read, George can always read it to him. Except when Mother dies, because then George won't want to do anything and it will be Michael's turn to read to Nico.

Michael meets a boy who feels colours.

“They say it's because I hit my head young,” he said. “But everything else is in order so there's no way to know for sure.”

It is the strangest story anybody has ever told to make friends at a new school. So strange, that Michael wants it to work.

“I feel colours too,” Michael said. “Yellow is happy. Blue isn't sad, it's nostalgic. Red is anything alive enough to get your heart to beat.”

The boy smiles slowly, as if hearing good news. Michael can't decide if his smile is crooked or not before he offers his hand.

“My name is Rupert.”

He was Michael.

“Nico and I checked them all,” John said, putting a stack of newspapers on the table. “The only thing the

papers are talking about is the new statue in Kensington Gardens!”

“That was a good trick, Uncle,” Peter said. “Did you know they were going to put that statue up?”

“Yes, but I wish I’d never seen the thing,” Uncle Jim grumbled. James Barrie pats Michael’s hand.

“They were meant to make Peter Pan look like you, in the statue, but the artist chose a different model and ruined the whole thing. It doesn’t show the devil in Peter.”

Michael swallows hard and speaks slowly. “There’s a devil in me, Uncle?”

“Of course there is,” Uncle Jim said. “You’re my Peter.”

And so Michael is informed that he should know the intricacies of swordplay and flight at the age of twelve.

Thirteen-year-old Michael is not too old for games as they walk home from school. Rupert balances on the edge of the road, touching his toes to his heels as if crossing a tightrope. Michael carefully slows down to match his pace.

“What does that one feel like?” Michael said pointing to an enormous pink dress, bobbing along in front of them.

“Like the kind of toothache you get from eating too much candy,” Rupert said immediately. He turned around in time to catch Michael’s smile.

“And that one?” Michael pointed to a lawn.

“Like a growing pain in your knees,” Rupert said.

“Would you care to point out the grass’ knees for me?” Michael asked.

“Shut up and give me another,” Rupert grinned.

“Alright,” Michael said. He pointed to the sky. It hadn’t quite recovered from a storm that had drenched London that morning, and hovered between grey and blue. “What does that colour feel like?”

The sky was Michael’s favourite part of the game.

Rupert answered carefully.

“Like a hand you can reach but cannot take,” he said.

“Can’t or shouldn’t?” Michael asked.

Rupert shrugged. “It’s all the same.”

He hopped onto the road and walked next to Michael. Their hands only grazed once.

Michael is a hundred years old. George died. Jocelyn died. Maurice looked as if he were going to live but that moment, pregnant with foolhardy hope, quickly passed. These names are both fragments of a complicated scarlet registry, and brothers woven into the fabric of their survivors.

Michael and Rupert are too young to enroll, but they have suffered anyways and so don’t see why not. They have to try twice. The key was to register alone so that it didn’t look like a schoolboy’s dare. Or so Michael and Rupert, by all accounts brilliant, determined the last time they met and shared a soda. Michael had been wearing his uniform, still stiff from the factory. Rupert thought the shade of brown felt like a great and terrible adventure, perhaps with ancient Egyptian tombs and curses. He liked the untarnished buttons best.

For whatever reason, they both avoid tombs and manage to claw their way out of the melee- or nearly. Michael’s foot got caught in the door on his way out. He still thrashes in his bed every night, as if those twists and turns counted as hits in the war his mind waged. That’s why Rupert crosses their dormitory room and slips into bed to hold him, with arms made strong by laps in Oxford’s pool. Strong enough to ground Michael, but gentle enough to soothe him and lure him back to a safe place where sleep is sound and Michael’s soul has signed the peace treaty too.

Michael is turning nineteen. The morning of, as they dress for class, Rupert whispers to him to expect nineteen gifts this year. When questioned, Rupert simply states that he will find the times and the dark, hidden places to deliver on his promise. It’s still not clear to Michael if Ru’s smile is crooked or not.

Michael doesn’t mind, he can actually feel the spot on his neck which is Rupert’s favourite. But it’s the first time they’ve planned for anything. It’s a beast of its own, usually; one whose many heads sprout back at will. Does brewing your own poison make it deadlier?

“Uncle Jim,” Michael said. “I’d like you to meet my friend Rupert Buxton.”

Ru shakes James Barrie’s hand, charming as always.

“Rupert is my oldest school friend,” Michael continues. The words taste sour.

Peter Pan has never lied about anything. Peter calls Hook a codfish, calls Tinker Bell an ass and stitches his shadow to his shoes every time it escapes. He doesn’t even run away: he flies.

“You’re the one who feels colours,” Uncle Barrie said.

“Yes,” Rupert said. He looks up. “Today’s sky is the change of air when you paint a room and then open a window to breathe.”

Michael was choking.

From that day on, he feels a day older every time Ru buttons up a shirt, buckles a belt or leaves early, so they don’t arrive to class together. The fabrications are endless. Every lie takes a day off of Michael’s life until the days turn to years. Michael cannot be a hundred years old and forever a boy all at once. He wonders, then, what he is.

Rupert takes Michael on long walks, deep in Oxford’s woods where they are usually alone. Michael hates the crease on Rupert’s brow, and slips back into their childhood game to lighten his worrying. They were children once, after and despite all.

“What does that feel like? The leaves, not the bark.” Michael said, pointing to a particularly knobby tree. He could picture it in a fairy tale, or imagine it engraved with initials. But not now.

“Quit pointing at trees,” Rupert said. “You haven’t even done the sky yet.”

Michael doesn’t ask. Rupert describes it anyways. “It feels like impatience boiling in the pit of your stomach, like a robin’s egg about to hatch.”

“It’s a hand you can reach but can’t take,” Michael corrects.

Rupert takes his hand. Michael doesn’t care enough to let go. The crease on Ru’s brow deepens, and Michael realizes why he is worrying.

Michael is a hundred and one, but Uncle Jim wants a vacation and he wants it on the isle of Eilean Shona, which has acres of woods, a blue lagoon and hot white sand. Michael has never been able to say no.

They spend hours wandering. They save crusts from their breakfasts to feed the bravest birds, and bits of chicken to crab when the tide allows. Every now and then James Barrie slipped back into the all-consuming world of Neverland. Michael jumped on the occasion to stare blankly at his own notebook and feel the agonizing trickle of time slipping through his fingers. He can’t even manage a letter to Ru.

“It seems ridiculous that there’s only one mountain on this island and we haven’t bothered with it,” Uncle Jim said one morning.

The hike isn’t very long. No matter what he says, the energy of youth still haunts Uncle Jim’s bones. The breathtaking view they reach warrants an afternoon of dallying.

“It is like climbing Neverpeak Mountain,” Uncle Jim said.

Michael wants to hate it, but the old man’s eyes are twinkling. He pictures a child cranking a key in a toy soldier to make himself say: “I thought it was easier to fly to Neverpeak.”

“That was always your favourite part of our stories, how Peter never had to walk,” Uncle Jim said, admiring the view. Suddenly Michael feels brave, like a boy in a book. Brave enough to try, anyways.

“Uncle Jim, what if I told you I was actually afraid of flying,” Michael said looking over his shoulder. The wind rushed by, trying to push Michael back.

“Don’t say things like that, Michael,” Uncle Jim said. “That ruins it.”

“It does,” Michael agreed. It’s important that he not be ruined.

He sat in the grass, and touched pen to paper for the first time in months. He barely paused to breathe, much less look up and consider the scenery. But looking down from the mountaintop, he knew that there wasn’t so much as a word out of place. In blue ink, he underlined his last line.

“Man rose to his master-height, shivered, and turned away; but the mist were round him.”

Michael, age twenty, showed his brother, age seventeen, the poem.

“I don’t understand,” Nico said.

“This isn’t a story,” Michael said. “Not like other people tell them. You need to look. You need to think about what the words are shaped like and how...”

Nico apologized, shrugged and handed it back.

“But it’s so simple,” Michael said. The prayer echoes back.

Rupert put the poem aside and drew Michael into his arms fiercely, as if he could burn Michael to his chest.

“Michael,” he said quietly. “Michael, this isn’t your height. I’m not your height.”

He knew he was shaking only because Rupert stood so solidly. They had once been soldiers.

“You are not falling.”

Usually he believes Ru, the boy who doesn’t see like the rest of them. But Michael’s eyes are open now. He doesn’t like it.

“Don’t tell me I’m wrong,” Michael said. “I ought to be the boy who never grows up but I’m already a hundred years old, Ru, and I don’t know how... Don’t tell me I’m wrong, I think that would kill me.”

“You’re not wrong,” Rupert said. He tightens his embrace. Michael still shakes.

You’re the best part of me. I can’t pretend anymore,” he said.

“Michael, you know I hate it too, but there’s no-”

“Yes there is,” Michael said. Rupert looks at him, stunned and scared. Michael scrambles to fix the crease on his brow.

“I don’t want to live in a world where I can only see colour,” Michael said. His hands are flat against Rupert’s chest. “I want to touch it. To hear it. To taste it and feel it. All of it. I can’t live with less feeling than I know now- than you’ve shown me.”

Rupert’s face becomes neutral, as if he’s been drained.

“I know a place,” Rupert said. “Where they tell people not to swim because it’s dangerous. The water is so dark and grey, it feels like running ashes through your fingers. Lots of people have drowned there.”

“I can’t swim,” Michael said carefully.

“And I can,” Rupert said. “They’ll think I tried to save you.”

Rupert wraps his arms around Michael and kisses him plainly. No poison was ever sweeter. Michael is suddenly happy; happy to drink.

“If we hold hands on our way down, they’ll even think I was close,” Rupert said.

Michael kisses him.

He will never be twenty-one years old.