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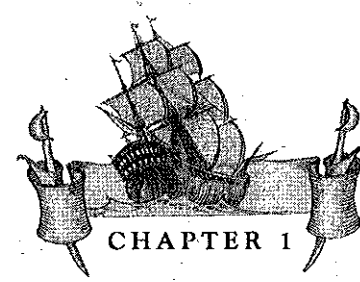
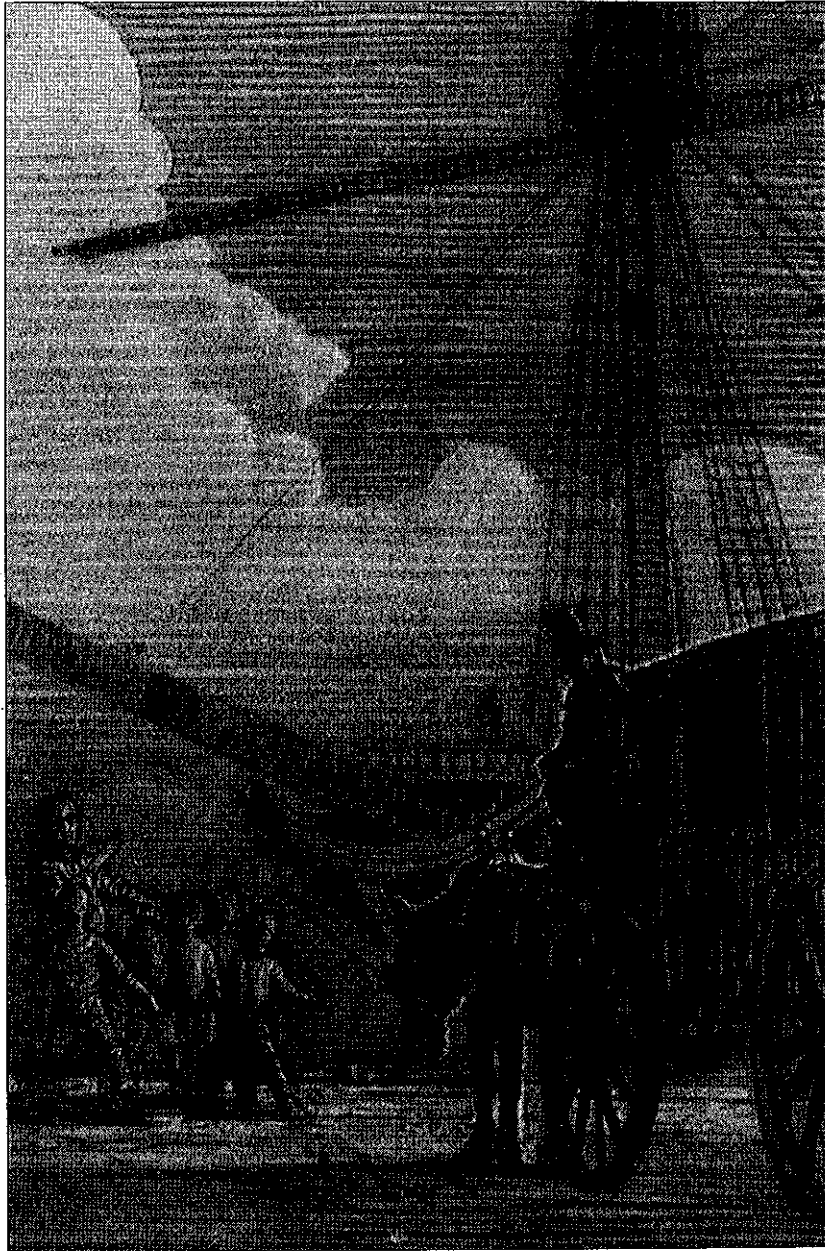
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—*Dave Barry and Ridley Pearson*



THE Never Land

THE TIRED OLD CARRIAGE, pulled by two tired old horses, rumbled onto the wharf, its creaky wheels *bumpety-bumping* on the uneven planks, waking Peter from his restless slumber. The carriage interior, hot and stuffy, smelled of five smallish boys and one largish man, none of whom was keen on bathing.

Peter was the leader of the boys, because he was the oldest. Or maybe he wasn't. Peter had no idea how old he really was, so he gave himself whatever age suited him, and it suited him to always be one year older than the oldest of his mates. If Peter was nine, and a new boy came to St. Norbert's Home for Wayward Boys who said he was ten, why, then, Peter would declare himself to be eleven. Also, he could spit the farthest. That made him the undisputed leader.

As leader, he made it his business to keep his eye on things in general. And he was not happy with the way things

were shaping up today. The boys had been told only that they were going away on a ship. As much as Peter didn't like where he'd been living for the past seven years, the longer this carriage ride lasted, the scarier "away" sounded in his mind.

They'd set out from St. Norbert's in the dark, but now Peter could see grayish daylight through the small, round coach window on his side. He looked out, squinting, and saw a dark shape looming by the wharf. It looked to Peter like a monster, with tall spines coming out of its back. Peter did not like the idea of walking into the belly of that monster.

"Is that it?" he asked. "The ship we're going on?"

He ducked then, avoiding the hamlike right fist of Edward Gremplin. He was always keenly aware of where this fist was; he'd been dodging it for seven years now. Gremplin, second in command at St. Norbert's Home for Wayward Boys, was a man of numerous rules—many of them invented right on the spot, all of them enforced by means of a swift cuff to the ear. He paid little attention to *whose* ear his fist actually landed on; all the boys were rule-breakers, as far as Gremplin was concerned.

This time the fist clipped an ear belonging to a boy named Thomas, who had been slumped, half asleep, in the carriage next to the ducking Peter.

"OW!" said Thomas.

"Do not end a sentence with a preposition," said Mr. Gremplin. He was also the grammar teacher at St. Norbert's.

"But I didn't . . . OW!" said Thomas, upon being cuffed a second time by Gremplin, who had a strict rule against back talk.

For a moment, the carriage was silent, except for the *bumpety-bump*. Then Peter tried again.

"Sir," he said, "is that our ship?" He kept an eye on the fist, in case *ship* turned out to be a preposition.

Peter was thinking about trying to run away, but he didn't know if that was possible—to run away from "away." In any event, he didn't see much opportunity for escape; there were sailors and dockhands everywhere. Carts and carriages. Near the back of the ship, fancily dressed people boarded via a ramp with a rope handrail. Toward the bow, some pigs and a cow were being led up a steep plank, followed by commoners dressed more like Peter and his friends.

Gremplin glanced out the round window and grinned, but not in a pleasant way. There wasn't a pleasant bone in his body.

"Yes, that's your ship," he said. "The *Never Land*."

"What's *Never Land*?" said a boy named Prentiss, who was fairly new to the orphanage and thus did not see the fist until it hit his ear.

"OW!" he said.

"Don't you be asking stupid questions!" said Gremplin, who defined "stupid questions" as questions he could not

answer. "All you need to know is this ship will be your home for the next five weeks."

"Five weeks, sir?" asked Peter.

"If you're lucky," said Grempink leaning out of the carriage now to study the sky. "If a storm doesn't blow you halfway to hell." He smiled again. "Or worse."

"Worse than hell, sir?" inquired James.

"He means if the ship sinks," said Tubby Ted, who had a gift for looking on the dark side, "and we wind up in the sea, swimming for our lives."

"But I can't swim," said James. "None of us can swim."

"I can swim," Tubby Ted declared proudly.

"You can *float*," corrected Peter. Even Grempink cracked a smile at that, yellow tooth-stumps showing through chapped lips.

Peter looked down the wharf and saw a much nicer-looking and bigger ship, painted a shiny black. Its crew wore uniforms, unlike that of the *Never Land*. It, too, was being loaded and seemed ready to set sail. If it came down to choosing between the two ships . . .

"It don't matter," said Grempink, brightly, his mood improving. "Swim, sink, float—the sharks will take care of all you boys before you get a chance to drown."

"Sharks?" said James.

"Big fish with lots of teeth," said Tubby Ted. "They eat people."

"What if there's no people in the sea?" said Thomas.
"What do the sharks eat then?"

"Whales," said Tubby Ted. "But they like people better, and there's plenty of people in the sea. Ships is always going down. I heard about one . . . OW!"

"That's enough of your jabber," said Grempink, who had a rule against too much jabber.

The carriage pulled to a stop beside the ship. As Grempink and the boys climbed out, a thick, bald man in a grimy officer's uniform thumped down the gangplank and approached the carriage.

"You Grempink?" he said.

"I am," said Grempink. "And you are . . . ?"

"Slank. William Slank. First officer, second in command of the *Never Land*." The man made a face as if he'd just bitten into a rancid prune. It occurred to Peter that Slank didn't like being second in anything. "These are the orphans, then?"

"They are," said Grempink. "And you're welcome to them."

"I don't care for boys," observed Slank.

"Then you'll definitely not care for these," said Grempink.

"We've had boys on board before," said Slank. "They was always stirring up the rats."

The boys glanced at one another. *Rats?*

"The thing to do," said Gremplin, "is keep them disciplined." To illustrate, he shot his fist sideways, not looking where it was going. It struck Prentiss, who, being fairly new, had not yet learned that it was unwise to stand immediately to Gremplin's right.

"OW!" said Prentiss.

"Sir," said James, to Slank, "there's rats on the ship?"

"Don't you be playing with the rats!" said Slank, cuffing James on the ear. "They make a tasty treat when the food runs out."

"The food runs out?" asked Tubby Ted, suddenly reluctant to take another step. "When?"

Slank slapped him across the ear and said, "After we eat you."

Gremplin nodded approvingly, confident now that he was leaving the boys in good hands.

Peter scanned the area for a place to run and hide. He saw a supply store offering pulleys and hemp rope, some taverns—the Salty Dog, the Mermaid's Song, *Mermaids?* Peter wondered. But everywhere he looked, there were sailors and dockworkers, rough men with rough hands. He wouldn't get ten paces before one of them would collar him, if Slank didn't collar him first.

"I'll be getting back to St. Norbert's," Gremplin said. He turned toward the coach, paused for a moment, then turned back and said, "You boys better watch out for yourselves."

In seven years, that was the nicest thing Peter had ever heard Gremplin say.

"All right," said Slank, as Gremplin turned back to the coach. "You boys get on board. We're waiting for one more piece of cargo, and then we cast off."

Peter eyed the nicer ship down the wharf. Some soldiers were approaching it, carrying rifles with bayonets. The soldiers wore crisp blue uniforms and black, shiny boots. They walked on either side of a horse-drawn cart that carried a single trunk, black, done all around with chains and padlocks.

The boys hesitated, taking their first good look at the *Never Land*. It wasn't as big as they'd expected, and it looked old and poorly kept—frayed ropes, peeling paint, barnacles and green slime climbing the hull from the waterline.

"Get a move on!" said Slank.

"I can't swim," whispered James.

"We'll be all right," said Peter. "It can't be worse than St. Norbert's."

"Yes it can," said Tubby Ted. "The food runs out."

"Sharks," Thomas reminded them. "Rats."

"We'll be all right," repeated Peter, and he started up the gangplank, being the leader, but still thinking about finding a way to escape before the ship set sail.