

The Oldest Tink

Alexandra Fox

Maisie Dote, Lazy Maisie (born plain Dottie May), Maisie you soft old dote, Maisie-Maisie give me yer answer do, (once, memorably “Clarice!” in a moment of never-to-be-repeated passion from a Frenchman), Maisie in her dotage.

Mouldering Maisie, the raddled old bat, but inside she’s

Tinkerbell.

Even though she lifts her drooping face with sellotape, fixes it behind her ears and covers it with pink powder, even when her sequined leotard’s tugged out of her tummy folds with safety pins (and she wonders sometimes if she wouldn’t be better swapping them over, and pinning her face back instead), inside she’s Tinkerbell, she’ll always be Tink, and she weeps acid tears inside that people can’t *see* it.

Maisie flies, oh how she flies, and tonight she looks down from the platform and there’s a good turnout – white disc faces. And she wonders if they’ve read it in the local paper, and come to watch because it’s her last flight, like Concorde’s final fly-past (she’s got the nose for it, after all).

She pulls the string to set her ragged wings a-fluttering, steps off the platform. The rusty hand-wheel turns, jerk-jerk-jerk. She mustn’t scatter fairy glitter-dust any more. It got into a child’s eye one matinée and the parents tried to sue. But there’s a bloke up there in the flies with a hand-light

and a kaleidoscope lens. He's sprinkling pinpoint twinkles of bright light on those upturned faces, and it's *magic*. She swims her legs, points her toes, flaps her arms so delicately, so perfectly, so lightly fairylike. Green and shining silver, lithe, her hair sprayed into a golden halo, gliding on an indrawn breath as the children point fingers in the air, say Ooooh, see the fairy, mummy. Isn't she *beeootiful*.

Maisie's been every sort of Tink ... classic, modernistic, skanky. Eleven seasons in the West End, fifteen in the provinces, then smaller towns, till here she is at Hardingstone Jubilee Hall, a semi-pro touring production featuring kids from the local ballet school, battens and pulleys rigged by helpful farmers.

But for two more hours she's still Tink

Until she passes the wand to Sharon, Sharon of the overflowing tits and the pasty face, the galumphing feet and that sly "I'm blowing the director" rosebud smirk.

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Maisie comes in for a safe landing, toes skittering across the boards upstage, breathless.

"Shoot down the Wendy Bird!" Nearly fifty years of twenty-a-day unfiltered, and she can still project. Kids today don't know how to use their voices ... microphones, headsets ... crap. The volcano in the belly – that's what she was taught. Focus on the furthest face and let it erupt. Peter banishes her to the wings, and off she slopes, drooping. Nobody droops like Maisie.

There's an old white chair behind the curtain. Maisie sits, watches. She helped zip Jennie into her Peter-Pan-suit earlier this evening, straining over

the little tummy that's starting to show. Now Peter's cradling Wendy against her, her lover's head against her belly swelling with their child (they haven't told anyone who the father is, maybe they don't know the name themselves). And her voice is rough-tender with the love, the loss, the longing of these past three years as one pregnancy after another has failed, bled out into cotton pads, sheets, once during a performance under a crinoline, leaving red footmarks streaking the boards.

Peter's looking down at her, crowing with his eyes, and Wendy's singing, singing about wanting a pretty house, red walls, a mossy roof. Maisie's got mossy walls in her flat, corners black with mildew, trickling with the damp, and her white paintwork is yellow.

"Gay windows all about," Wendy sings, and there's almost a giggle in her voice. "With roses peeping in, you know, and babies peeping out."

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Maisie has no babies peeping out of her windows, never had. She was pierced, oh yes, by one cock and then another and another, long, short, thick, bent, enough to launch her career, thoughtlessly, generously gifting her young body. She'd lost count of how many men she'd made love with, but for her it *was* love, a sort of love every time. There was always some feeling, need meeting need, never just the urgent thrust, the poke of gristle into muscle.

It's not so much the sex she remembers as the arms holding her, warm soft memories. And the best of them all, Bernie at the stage door every night, Bernie flinging six red roses round her feet at curtain call, big blond Bernard bear-hugging with his heavy tweed greatcoat scratching her cheek, giant cigars, soap, clean dry skin. Bernie weeping, honking into his

handkerchief and saying why, why, he'd have helped her, given her anything. But he had a wife. And it might not have been his.

Too late, anyway. She was pierced by a steel knitting needle, heated red then white hot in the blue of the gas flame, cooled black. Stabbing into her womb, stirring, burning. She was back on stage next evening, Guys and Dolls, a Hot Box Girl packed with white wadding, clotted dark, dark brown. Still she danced. Memories. Multicoloured memories.

No. No babies for Maisie. Ever. And no Bernard.

Maisie watches Wendy go down on her knees to the Lost Boys, arms stretched out in front of her, as they beseech her with clasped hands, "Oh Wendy Lady, be our mother."

And she answers, "Of course I will, you darlings, but see I am only a little girl. I have no real experience."

No real experience, but two mothers trying to make a perfect child. Maisie feels tears well hot behind the solid green of her grease-painted eyelids, but she does not let them fall or smudge. She is a professional.

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Why is it, thinks Maisie, as she tiptoes round the set, throwing her hands back in horror at the sight of Hook placing the rich damp cake by the Lost Boys' tree-holes, why is it that men like that are so obnoxious? There's no honesty in Hook, with his black toupee and upper-crust accent.

Honesty? Who's she kidding, anyway, with her sellotape facelift, her thinning hair backcombed like feathers? At least she lets it go when she comes offstage. There's a despairing cruelty in Hook. He never stays after final call, fades back out into the hard darkness. If he's got a cat she's sure he kicks it.

She's had so many eyes on her, so many years. How can tonight be the end of it all? But she thinks of her naked body drooping, those endless veined legs. Of course she's bloody invisible. She's *old* for fuck's sake.

So why doesn't she feel old? It's so unfair. Why can't her spirit droop like her tummy, hide the edges of her sex so she forgets it's there? Why can't her soul seep itself empty of longings, hang flaccid like her breasts? She needs to backcomb her spirit like her hair, make it stand out like a buffer, let her go through the rest of her life unbumped. Oh, but she'd love to be bumped. Just once more.

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It's the interval now. Maisie throws an anorak over her leotard. She leans against the wall outside, feels the bricks pressing cold into her back. She lights up with a steady hand, cupping the flame from the wind, takes a deep, deep drag, holds it inside. Maisie exhales.

It's so ridiculous having to stand out here. The harsh security spotlight makes the blackness darker. At her feet is a cigarette graveyard. There's a subtle hint of rich cigar smoke, old, but reminiscent. Maisie breathes deeply. She remembers other stage doors, other intervals, Bernie waiting outside, streaming with the rain. Sneaking into the dressing room, locking it. A slick quickie, urgent on the make-up ledge, spilling the thick pink scents of Coty, Leichner, semen, too swift for sweat. That drenched trench-coat, steaming in the heat, her head banging back rhythmically against the lights around the mirror, crack, crackle, an electric shock running through the two of them.

She grinds the stub out with her foot.

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Back in the wings she watches the mermaids taking up their positions, dancing school kids. She can recognise the haughty ones, the might-be swans, leggy and eager like she once was, and one delicious chubby little girl with round pink glasses, curled up on the rock, long tail wrapped around her feet, thumb firmly plugged into her soft pink mouth.

The music brings it to life, even now, every time, the music and the lights.

Maisie doesn't wear her glasses on stage. Everything's slightly hazy, Barrie's magic. The lagoon's a shapeless pool of lovely pale colours hanging in the darkness. She squeezes her eyes tight shut, looks again and it's taking shape, vivid colours, shafts of fire. It's just one heavenly moment, a flash, but she feels that if there ever was a second moment she might see the surf move, hear the mermaids singing.

But it's polystyrene, mirrors, dusty stage lights. Really.

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It's all going far too quickly. The mermaids have come off; the NeverBird's sitting in the giant hat, and Maisie's glad to see that tonight the wings are staying attached.

Is that what's left to her? Sewing, mending costumes in a dingy yellow-gloss dressing room because it's better than sitting at home alone, warmer, people around to talk to? Auntie Maisie, the old has-been with the smoky creaking voice, telling tales.

She's done it all, been a waitress, dresser, shelf-stacker – all those “resting” actress jobs. But always there was Christmas to look forward to, plays, pantos, shows, becoming as famous a Tinkerbell in her way as Mary

Martin was as Peter. What do old dancers do when they finally hang up their shoes?

Peter's crowing on the stage, exultant but careful.

Maisie thinks of fairy godmothers, that when a new baby laughs for the first time a new fairy is born, and as there are always new babies there are always new fairies. But babies grow into children, so there's always room for new babies. What happens to the old fairies when the new ones come?

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It's Tinkerbell's big moment. All that business with the bottles, Hook and his vial marked "poison" with a skull and cross-bones, Tink being the good fairy for the first time, because she loved Peter really, and all the bitchiness was only jealousy.

Maisie *is* Tink, standing centre stage, tipping the bottle into her mouth. She gives Peter's nose a (staged), loving bite, whispers "you silly ass" loudly into his ear, totters over to the bed and collapses into a dramatic heap.

Will the magic work, this one last time?

Peter's striding round the stage, imploring. "Children, children everywhere. Do you believe in fairies? Only you can save Tinkerbell. If you believe, clap your hands."

But there's only silence.

Silence.

Tink looks down into the auditorium. Dear Jesus, there's a sound of weeping. A girl is standing up, stumbling. She's got her arms out, she's trying to push forward across the rows of seats, and she's crying.

"Don't let the fairy die. You've gotta gotta gotta help the poor fairy. Don't let the pretty fairy die ..."

Her face is clear in the reflected lights. Slanted eyes, folds of skin around her nose. She's speaking wetly around her tongue and her cheeks glisten.

“Clap your hands. Hands. Save her. Clap.”

Around her there's movement. Oh, Christ alive, Maisie sees these damaged children, a coach-load from some institution, bent kids, some in wheelchairs, bursting with spirit and soul, setting themselves free in their desperation to help her. Living, loving, giving the dream.

There's a clapping, a wild thumping of feet that fills the hall.

Magic.

Further magic as Maisie glances over to the corner of the front row. There's a big man sitting there, hunched in an overcoat. He raises a flask to her, salutes, drinks.

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Through the final scenes, this last time, Maisie doesn't look at the stage. She's seen it all before. Instead she watches the audience, seeing even in that dim light bright faces mirroring the action on the stage, Mr and Mrs Darling welcoming their children home through that ever open window. Finding them perfect in their beds, undamaged, as though they'd never been away. The joy.

She wonders if there could be a little place for Tinkerbell after all, when her sewing's done and enough pennies earned to keep her flat warm. She wonders if these children here might sometimes need a fairy godmother, a fairy grandmother even, coming to visit them. Would they see the raddled

old harridan of the outside-Maisie, or could she wear her wings once more, bring them, share with them the Tinkerbell on the inside? Just occasionally?

All children need magic, and these special children need it more than most.

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When it comes to the curtain calls, Maisie's almost expecting the red roses at her feet, and sure enough they fall around her, six of them, and that's magic too.

Maisie strips off her leotard, cleans her face with a dollop of cold cream. She isn't leaving the costume for Sharon.

The rest of the cast are busy packing. Peter's not an actress any more. She's thinking about maternity smocks, blooming, moving on. Maisie's sewn a tinkling silver bell onto the gypsy robe, passing on the Tinkerbell legacy.

And now to the ending of it all. She hesitates in the doorway, looks back, steps out into the cold. But Bernie's waiting outside the stage door. Of course.

Will he embrace Maisie, crush her to that tweedy chest and say he's been looking for her for near on forty years, and now he's found her again he'll never let her go? His wife died ten long, lonely years ago and he's been waiting, searching. He lives in a prosperous neo-Georgian house with white pillars and a block-paved driveway in a tidy cul-de-sac, and when they get out of the taxi and open the front door a ponderous yellow Labrador will come wuffling out to greet them, lick her master, and Bernie will turn a little pink, and say, "Meet Tink, Tink."

But no. He takes Maisie by both hands, looks her up and down and says, “Hi, Tink. How’s tricks?”

“Oh, Bernie. It’s so wonderful to see you again. How did you know it was my last time?”

“I read about it in the paper. I couldn’t let my favourite fairy fly out without a wave and a flower, could I? You haven’t changed a bit. I can’t believe it.”

“You silly ass. And how’s life treated you? She still ...”

“The old toad hasn’t croaked yet. No.”

So the bloody wife’s not dead. She should be. She was always so fat, squatting at home like a steaming toad on a rock, glowering. She’s called Freda and, oh yes, she knew all about Maisie, put up with it for a while because it meant he dealt with that messy sex business without her. Then she saw it was going too far, too deep, put her foot down and phoned Maisie with foulnesses. Yet Bernard’s stayed tied all his life to this creature, for his children’s sake, for decency, because, despite it all, she’s his wife. Maybe because she is so very unpleasant, so sad, so unable to find anyone else.

But he’s hung onto one faded, drooping Maisie memory and brought her six red roses.

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It’s yet another goodbye in a long evening of last times. Maisie thanks Bernie, gives him a quick hug, kisses him awkwardly on the cheek, on the side of the neck, steals a quick indrawn breath of wet wool, cigars. He’s wearing a new aftershave, but still smells of Imperial Leather soap, clean dry skin.

But (and this was never meant to happen) ...

As she pulls away, leaving just her kiss behind, her lips happen to brush his, and his kiss, intended for her cheek, lands full on her mouth. It's an accident. Honestly. She stops, slapped by astonishment.

Maisie can't help it. Bernie's eyes are soft, periwinkle blue behind his glasses. His body may be thickened, grown prosperous, his goldy hair thin now and grey, but his mouth is the same sweet kissable shape. She opens her mouth to him, catches him, deepens the kiss, runs her tongue gently around the inside of his lower lip, breathes his taste. There's a pain like rising tears inside her chest and her whole body's yearning, wanting to be wrapped, enfolded. It's like she's flowing into him, she can't stop herself, and it's all she ever wanted. Her hand reaches out, unstoppable, cradles the back of his head, works his mouth against hers, deep, profound.

Bernie wraps his coat around them both, holds her close, closer. She looks up at him, that dear face, the soft smile. How can her body still be sixteen when she's sixty? It *feels* the same, responds in the same way.

Oh help. What do they do now? Where do two such very old decrepit people go for love? They can't stand in the street, necking like teenagers. Those same children who so willingly come to see the fairy, clap their hands for Tinkerbell, a few years older and they'll stand, point, laugh at two old dinosaurs making out on the pavement.

Her flat's got mouldy walls, damp sheets, sordid, cold. His has a resident toad.

They can't let it go. Not now.

So Maisie turns, rattles the handle on the stage door, pushes. It isn't locked against her, not quite yet. She takes Bernie by the hand, and leads him back inside just one last time.

She won't turn on the lights around the mirror.

They'll both just close their eyes and share the fading of the magic.