

“A Deadly Serious Joke”

There are probably very few people that dream of playing Peter Pan in front of a suburban audience of 83 people, but for weeks this was the picture that haunted the late nights of Sanford “Sandy” Duncan. While this piece of truth seems silly and pathetic, it would with haste become dark and dangerous.

Sandy—aged 36—was not especially good at anything. It was only due to the saddest manifestation of nepotism that he was able to land a job as a custodian for one of the local high schools, for he had an uncle who worked as an administrator in the district. Sandy was quite fortunate to be in the good graces of this uncle, who in turn was in the good graces of the high school’s principal, and thus was able to secure Sandy the position just a week before his unemployment checks were due to stop arriving.

Unfortunately for Sandy, he wasn’t very good at custodial work, which requires thorough doses of focus and discipline, usually for an unfair and meager wage. But despite the mediocrity of everything else in this suburban village being mediocre, the school district treated its custodians quite well, and things were cheap enough that a janitor could make a fine living. But Sandy’s being never contained the required amounts of focus or discipline for any kind of work, let alone custodial work. What his being did contain was an insufferable personality. And so it was that the high school—which didn’t want to keep him around, but also couldn’t bring itself to fire him, for fear of the awkward confrontation—relegated his schedule to about four hours of work each week, all of which were spent cleaning up vomit. The high school’s cafeteria was infamous for its sloppy joes, which to teenagers were both delicious and inflammatory, and it was inevitable that each week several students would furiously inhale the messy sandwiches, only to furiously exhale their stomachs’ contents within the next hour.

Four hours of work each week was enough for Sandy. He didn’t really care about money, or work, or a sense of achievement. He rented a small shack in the backyard of a larger house, and with an inheritance from his several-years-deceased grandmother, had enough money to coast idly through life for another seven years or so.

All Sandy really cared about was the town’s community theater. Acting was the one thing that Sandy could say he was relatively good at, compared to the average person. The term “average person” here includes every human being on the planet, from newborn infants to senile, geriatric senior citizens. The term “average person” also works under the current assumption that most of these people have neither the interest in or access to acting, and thus must include an asterisk to further elaborate that if the average person—from newborn infants to senile, geriatric senior citizens—did *any* acting, Sandy would fall below the median in acting ability. But given that most of the population does *not* care about acting, Sandy was just good enough to consistently land minor, usually-non-speaking roles in the local community theater.

Sandy did not merely enjoy acting in the community theater—he adored it, treasured it above all else. It is only with great difficulty that one could name anything else Sandy liked to do, let alone cherished with such aggression. Every other action of Sandy’s life was the result of habit and necessity. When Sandy woke up before noon and brushed his teeth and showered

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and ate breakfast, it was only because he had the bare minimum of cognitive function required to understand somewhere deep inside his mind that these are the things a human being must do to qualify as a human being. Even when Sandy vigorously masturbated to pornography, clicking through link after link of debauchurous pleasure, it was done without enjoyment. When he finished, exhausted and sweaty, he wiped himself off with a towel, which was then thrown on the floor. Nobody would be coming over anyway.

Through the first few productions Sandy auditioned for, he was surprisingly content with his roles, which, as mentioned, were primarily non-speaking. Only occasionally—in plays of a smaller cast size—could Sandy sometimes land two or three awkwardly-mumbled lines in a given night. Sandy wanted more, sure, but he saw himself as an actor in the making, and had an understanding that sometimes a diamond needs to shake off its rough before its gleam becomes apparent to all around. Sometimes, while mopping up a pile of sloppy joe fresh from a teen’s gullet, Sandy thought about how cinematic the whole thing was. Here was a future icon, laboring away for a cheap wage, unaware that a great success hung just over the horizon. He would snicker to himself, while students and faculty would wonder about this man who looked all too happy to be cleaning up vomit.

But after Sandy’s fourth or fifth background role, a frustration planted roots. He wondered, Why can’t the director appreciate my talent? That director, Ty Koga, knew what real underappreciation looked like. Koga, now aged 63 years, was coming off a modestly successful career in Hollywood writing, directing, and producing a number of critically-acclaimed films, most of which painted an intimate picture of postwar Japanese-American life. Koga’s critical success never found a counterpart on the commercial side, and so the filmmaker often went without a standard of living to match his work ethic and artistic brilliance. He didn’t mind, and after several decades doing business in the glitzy industry capital, Koga decided to retire to his drab suburban hometown to direct community theater. After directing five productions in his first two years back , he began to question this decision.

Sandy’s frustration factored little in Koga’s own. Koga, in fact, would hardly notice that Sandy was upset, because he hardly noticed Sandy at all. This was lost in the narcissistic mind of Sandy, who took every action and reaction to be deeply motivated by something he did or said. So when Koga attached each actor to a character, Sandy assumed the director was challenging him, waiting for his greatness to come out. He tried brown-nosing, and often paid random compliments to Japan and its culture, hoping to touch some sweet, sentimental part of Koga’s ancestral pride. The director, who had never been to Japan and didn’t speak the language, would absentmindedly thumb through his script and his notes and mutter weak responses, something along the lines of “yes, I like sushi too” or “huh, I’ve never watched anime.” But Koga didn’t hardly irk Sandy. There was a notion in Sandy’s mind that a great actor needs a great director, and the fact that Koga didn’t directly compete with Sandy was perhaps a more important factor. Who Sandy did have to compete with, however, was Brett Simons.

Brett Simons was a trout in a puddle. At 29 years old, he had found a greater success than most in town could ever hope to find, and he did so with a greater intellect and a greater

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personality than most in town could ever hope to foster. The best people the town could produce, like Koga, never chose to stick around. Those predestined to some kind of greatness knew well in advance that upon reaching adulthood they would shed the skin of this town for a new one someplace else. Simons had figured into a middle, purgatory part of the metaphorical seesaw: He was the most desirable, interesting person in town, but would scarcely turn a head in any metro area. Whatever threat Koga’s return may have posed to Simons’s status was proven null as soon as the old man settled into a hermetic routine of marijuana and indifference. Koga didn’t care to pay attention to the dynamics of power; he simply cast people he saw fit for certain roles, and it just so happened to be that Simons was the best leading man possible, each and every time.

Community theater was not so important to Simons as it was to Sandy. It was a fun way for him to unwind and forget about the Monday-through-Friday grind, during which Simons operated a local branch of a nationally-known insurance agency. It netted Simons a cool \$50,000 salary, and when he drove around town in his fresh-off-the-lot Kia Sorento, everyone in town noted how glossy its gunmetal paint was. Sandy hated Simons. The latter was known in town to be a womanizer, although the term didn’t carry a negative connotation. Many of the girls in the community theater scene, and indeed, other local scenes, had slept with or wanted to sleep with Simons, but few made it beneath the sheets a second time. Most girls were okay with this arrangement. This angered Sandy to no end. Sandy didn’t really care about women—not as people, anyways—but they were an object, a sign of power, the kind an accomplished actor deserves. Brett Simons, with his lead roles *and* his women, was a direct foil to Sandy’s ego in a most adolescent way.

The sour taste of the Sandy-Brett relationship worked both ways, although for Simons the feeling was buried somewhere deeper in the psyche. Simons treated everyone—in the theater, in the workplace, and in his personal life—with a kind of self-righteous selflessness in which he displayed his superior sense of humility. This meant boosting everyone up, making them feel special, and patting himself on the back in the process. But Simons had to make an extra effort to show this appreciation for Sandy, who was an amalgamation of the town’s every despicable element. Sandy, simply by existing, reminded Simons that he was too good for this town and not good enough for any place else.

It is with these well-established relationship dynamics that one March afternoon Koga called the cast of Peter Pan together in the auditorium for the first time to assign characters and give general first notes. When Brett Simons was named to the titular role, it was expected by everyone except Sandy, although even he admitted unconsciously to himself that Simons was better for the role. He could accept a secondary lead or supporting role. As Koga worked the list through Captain Hook, the Lost Boys, the Crocodile, and so on, it became clear that Sandy would again be left without any kind of real part. His name was spoken last, and he was given the role of Pirate #1, which was invented just to give Sandy a place to stand. Sandy’s patience was running on fumes.

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Koga went on to explain that there was a new tech crew and an improved budget, which meant a better set and better equipment. With a new system of ropes and pulleys in the wings, the director was pleased to announce that Peter Pan and the Darling siblings would actually be able to fly during the show. A string was plucked in Sandy’s stomach. Flying across the stage would be quite an experience, and to watch another group of people get to do so again and again through rehearsals and performances, it would just tear him to shreds. He couldn’t bear to see Brett Simons’s cocky smile hoisted some 15 feet in the air.

After Koga was finished giving notes, he dismissed the cast and walked outside to light up a joint. Sandy, who was usually surprisingly skilled at hiding his disappointment, could not do so this time. He scoffed and kicked his feet across the floor, sitting by himself in a corner of the auditorium. Simons, who noticed Sandy in his periphery while talking to a female castmate, was unable to give into his own disgust, and walked over to Sandy while protesting furiously in his own mind.

“Hey, buddy, what’s going on?” He placed a hand on Sandy’s shoulder and immediately regretted it.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just annoyed with the casting choices. I got a stupid loser role again”

“Well, hey, man, it’s okay. *Everyone* in the cast is important. And who knows? You could get a lead some day. You’re always here, putting in the work, and you’ll get better.”

“Thanks Brett.” He mumbled the words so softly, Simons wasn’t sure he said them at all.

Sandy abruptly stood up and walked outside. Koga, cool and collected as usual, looked stylish with his gray hair hanging over his thick-rimmed glasses, his left hand in the pocket of an unbuttoned wool jacket, his right lifting the sweet taste of reefer to his lips. Sandy approached the director with a stance intentional and aggressive, but Koga didn’t turn his gaze away from whatever distant object had caught his attention.

“What is it, Sandy?”

“Mr. Koga, I was just wondering, uhh, you know I was thinking, and there’s no reason Pirate #1 shouldn’t be able to fly, right?”

“I’m sorry, Sandy, but there are plenty of reasons. Only Peter and the Darling siblings will be flying. Unfortunately, we don’t have enough resources or time to ensure everyone a chance to fly.”

Sandy nodded and left to pout things off at home. Shortly after his departure, Simons approached the director.

“Poor guy isn’t happy with his role, huh?”

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“I’m sure he isn’t, but he wants to fly, and there’s no goddamned way I’m letting that moron fly.”

If Sandy could have cared about any practical thing as much as he cared about the chance to fly onstage, he might have been able to scrape together some kind of respectable life. That night, after blowing off some steam ala pornography, Sandy began devising a plan. What he eventually composed was something he viewed as quite brilliant and sinister, but in reality was only mildly clever. It was also perhaps more feasible because no one really cared about his goings-on.

The plot was set in motion a few weeks into rehearsals. One evening, after some line reading onstage, Sandy walked out the doors with the cast, intentionally leaving his backpack inside the auditorium. He asked to borrow Koga’s key for a moment in order to grab his things, and the director obliged, thinking nothing of it. After Sandy was inside, he pulled a mass of Play-Doh from his pocket and pressed the key firmly into the blob. He then grabbed his backpack and hurried back out. Before going home, Sandy stopped by the local hardware store.

The first phase of his plan complete, Sandy had to wait a few more weeks to enact the second and final part. It began once the tech crew came in and began developing the pendulum system with which the characters would fly. Sandy watched with an intense and deadly envy as the lead actors and actresses were harnessed, the ropes pulled, and the stars began soaring gaily above the rest of the cast. He paid a special attention to the form and body positioning of his castmates as they stepped off the ground and floated daintily in an arcing motion, which would bring them in step with the ground once more. He paid little attention to any of the other details involved.

Typically, Sandy held no virtues of any kind, least of all patience, but perhaps a kind of sobriety overcame him for he suddenly saw the error of his past ways and realized that by waiting, he could better accomplish his goal. It’s unfortunate that Sandy had no such clarity of sight with anything else in his life. Three more days of rehearsal passed before Sandy made his next move. He wanted to watch the actors and actresses become more graceful and elegant in their movements, if only to see what heights—literal and figurative—could be reached.

That last night of watching his castmates, Sandy went home after rehearsal, as did the rest of the cast. He was sweating with anticipation and didn’t want to arouse suspicion. Not that there would have been any. Sandy could have worn a gorilla costume and continued sitting in the theater after rehearsal, and Koga would have turned out the lights and locked the place up without acknowledging Sandy’s presence.

The poor manchild was so nervous that he went home and waited two hours before finally bringing his plot to fruition. His palms were so moist with perspiration that they fumbled over everything and he could not even perform his usual evening ritual to calm his anxiety. But as if from a machine, the god of soothing came out just before the pivotal hour and placed a miraculous calm upon Sandy. At 10 p.m. he went back to the theater.

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Brandishing the shiny new key, Sandy opened the doors to the theater, and then the second set of doors leading to the auditorium. He moved about with surprising stealth for a man as uncoordinated as he was. The stage was powerful and intimidating in the silent dark, a monolith hanging over an absent audience. Sandy gazed upon this altar with a solemn resolve.

Slowly and clumsily Sandy clamored onto the stage and located the ropes and harnesses, as well as a pile of sandbags. Since he had paid no mind to the weighing and function of the pulley system, he didn't know how many sandbags to carry. He only knew that he wanted to go *high*. Sandy carelessly counted the number of sandbags he figured it would take, placing four upon his shoulders, and tying six to the end of the rope. He then tried to buckle the harness, but it wasn't fit for a man of his size, and so with its straps he tied a loose knot around his stomach.

All this time, Brett Simons was high up in the rafters above the stage with his darling Wendy, the actress who played Wendy Darling. As the two were working through the motions of their fornicating, Simons thought he heard the doors of the theater and then the auditorium opening and then closing, but in the passions of his animalistic instincts he could pay no mind to anything until his procreative task was completed. As he finished and experienced that sudden rush of self-awareness, the sound of feet stepping and sandbags dragging was quite audible. He looked down from their little nest and saw Sandy tying up the harness. Simons then uttered the same words he had been uttering moments earlier, although this time with a drastically different tone.

“Oh, shit. Oh, fuck.” He pulled his pants up and hurried down the complex set of stairs and ladders that led back to the stage.

As Sandy finished with his harness the sandbags on his shoulders were beginning to crush his clavicle, but he ignored the pain for just long enough to create a dramatic moment. Most of Sandy's inspiration came from high-budget-but-low-talent films of the action and fantasy genres, and thus he hadn't much of a way with words. So as Sandy braced for his triumph, he closed his eyes and celebrated with a cliché and awkwardly muttered line.

“And now, like the eagle, I shall fly!”

Sandy shook the sandbags from his shoulders, and with the loss of weight the bags on the other end of the rope dropped to the ground and sent Sandy rocketing toward the ceiling, with no ability to control his movements. With the weakness of its knot the harness began to slip off and threatened to drop Sandy from two stories high, but as the harness was moving up his frame he caught hold of the straps and cinched the knot more tightly. He did so just as the harness reached his neck, and as he pulled the knot closed it pushed his Adam's apple back into his throat. And so it was that Sandy hung there suspended above the stage, gasping for breath.

As Sandy reached his highest point Brett Simons and Wendy reached the stage, but upon seeing him the pair withdrew in horror. Simons, despite the nagging of his conscience

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begging him to help the poor fool, felt every ounce of hate he had for this town swell up within him, and he took flight from the auditorium in a sprint. Wendy could do nothing but cover her eyes and sob.

Sandy struggled—his face turning purple—to put a hand between the harness and his trachea. As he tried and failed again and again, his vision turned blurry and he began to wonder whether he would die like this, suspended by ropes above the stage. And the sad truth was—the suspense was killing him.