

The Lost Boy
By Michael Danese

Early in September Mrs. Gormley's sixth grade class was still getting to know her, as she also got to know them. She is 24 years old, tall and thin, with shoulder-length chestnut brown hair. She still has that excitement about her that young teachers have, you know, before they get jaded by school politics and the every day/every year grind. That exuberance shows as she addresses the class, "Boys and girls -- This year the Daily Hill Middle School is going to put on the play *Peter Pan*! I just love that play and I'm sure that you do too, I hope that some of you will try out for it!"

As she speaks, a boy in the middle of the class gets a small but noticeable spark in his eye. Robert is your average sixth-grade boy. In fact, he is so average you probably would not remember him an hour after meeting him. Average height, not too thin, not too tall, mousey brown hair. Not too much about school excites him. It is just a boring fact of life. He has never taken part in any school activity of any type. In fact, he doesn't really care for the other kids at school. "A bunch of nerds and dorks" is his standard response whenever anyone asks him about his friends at school.

But, as soon as Mrs. Gormley said the words "Peter Pan" Robert came alive! He didn't hear another word that she said for the rest of the day.

Robert lives with his mom, and she could not love him more. Susan Mason is doing her best as a single mom. She works as a bank teller and is every man's favorite, due to her big smile, honey blonde hair and attentive personality. Robert deeply resents the men that find his mom attractive, which is almost every man. His dad is out of the picture, and has been since Robert was very young, and that is really all Robert knows. His parents married too young and had no money. Bobby Mason decided to try to make a living with a gun, and had some early success sticking up stores and small businesses, until the owner of a liquor store pulled a bat. Bobby shot him in the chest and the security camera got it all -- it was curtains for him. Susan has promised herself that she will tell Robert about his father before he hears it from someone else. But she just hasn't gotten around to it.

Robert is exceptionally happy at the dinner table tonight, which is certainly out of character for him.

"How was school today? his mother asked.

"Great!" said Robert. "We got big news -- the school play is gonna be *Peter Pan* and I'm gonna be Captain Hook!"

“Really!” she said, “That sounds like fun! And you are going to try out for a big part!”

“Oh, I’m *gonna* play him – and I am gonna make him the best villain ever!” he said.

“Well, I know how you are when you put your mind to something!” she said.

From outside is the jarring sound of a barking dog.

“There goes the Murphy’s dog again. He kept me up again all last night” she said. Robert just shook his head in disgust.

“Oh” she says, “Mister Duncan, you know, the plumber, is coming tomorrow. I can’t wait to get the washer fixed!”

The next day is Saturday and it is a glorious Indian summer day. Robert is in the back yard with a sword practicing his best Captain Hook moves. “Take that, Peter Pan!” he shouts as he thrusts forward with his sword.

Robert sees some sudden movement where the sword is pointing and spies the big tabby that has been digging in his mom’s garden.

“Hi kitty, I’ve told you not to come back here – it’s time you learned a lesson!” he says to the cat in a low growl.

He gently pets the cat with his right hand, and while the cat purrs, he reaches for a pair of pliers that are on the ground near the garden gate. In a flash he clamps hard on the flabby side of the cat. The scream of the cat was enough to wake the dead. Robert gives the pliers a twist as the cat escapes out of the yard, leaving fur and some flesh in the pliers. Robert comments out loud that the cat should learn from this.

His mom quickly emerges out of the back door. “What was that?” she questions.

“I think that big cat might have caught itself on the fence,” he retorts.

“I hope it stays outta my garden!” she says.

“Me too!” says Robert.

Robert’s mom then retreats back into the house.

Just then a pick-up truck pulls up. Robert notices the fancy printing on the side – “Duncan’s Plumbing” and he watches a big lug climb out. Bill Duncan looks like one of those guys with his own home improvement show on TV; tall with dark wavy hair and a big toothy grin, wearing a pair of overalls and a white tee-shirt. He gathers his tools and heads towards the house.

“Howyadoin, squirt!” he says to Robert, but he doesn’t wait for a reply.

He takes the back steps two at a time and bangs on the screen door. “Susan, oh Susan, I’m here to save the day!”

Robert sees his mom rush to the door. “Come on in Bill!” she says with a smile.

A short while later his mom is near the door with the plumber.

Robert can just barely see Mr. Duncan run his hand down his mother's back and she spins away and smiles before his hand gets lower.

"Why don't you have dinner with me tonight, Susan, and maybe we can forget the repair bill."

"No, no, I can't do that, besides, I have Robert to consider . . ." she says.

"Ok then, maybe some other time?" he says devilishly.

"We'll see!" she says.

The plumber smiles at her as he leaves.

"Later, squirt," he says as he passes Robert and heads for his truck.

Robert watches him drive away.

After lunch Robert's mom leaves to go to the supermarket. Robert then goes to the closet near the bathroom and finds an ancient pack of razor blades, you know, the double edge kind, probably left over from his father's time.

He takes the blades to the kitchen and digs out his mom's freezer scissors. He then painstakingly cuts a few of the blades into small strips. He goes to the fridge and pulls out a plate of left-over meat loaf. He cuts two pieces of the meat and then slides the pieces of the razor blades into the loaf. He puts the meat into a sandwich bag and heads out the back door.

Robert carefully walks down the alley, making sure that he isn't seen. When he gets to the Murphy's place, he reaches into his pocket, removes the meat from the bag and gently tosses it into the yard, then quickly moves along the alley. He hears the dog chow down immediately, devouring the meat without even tasting it.

A few minutes later he is in the yard practicing his sword moves again. Just then his mom returns with the groceries. Robert rushes to the car to help her bring them into the house.

As they carry in the bags, Robert's mom says, "I saw you practicing with your sword – you are going to be the very best Captain Hook ever!"

"I'm going to make you so proud of me!" Robert beams back.

"Later that night, Robert and his mother watch the old black and white Mary Martin TV version of *Peter Pan*. His mom checked it out from the library while she was out. Robert is amazed at the performance of Cyril Richard as Captain Hook. Up until then, his points of reference were the animated Disney movie and the Steven Spielberg movie called *Hook*.

His mom then said that she had another surprise for him – she reaches into a bag and pulls out the original novel written by J.M. Barrie. Robert throws his arms

around her and tells her how much he loves her. "I was gonna get this from the school library this week!" he adds.

"I thought you would like it," his mother said. "Now off to bed."

Deep in the background they hear the dog crying in pain.

"Oh, that dog, I actually feel sorry for it, it sounds so lonely tonight. I hope someone takes care of it." She says.

Robert says, "Me too..." as he smiles to himself.

He hugs her again, grabs the book and heads upstairs as his mother pours another glass of red wine.

Robert tears into the novel. About an hour later he hears his mother go to bed. He reads for another hour or so, and then climbs out of bed. He puts on his black hoodie, a pair of black sweat pants and black sneakers. He slips out the back door and jumps down the steps. He spies his mom's garden gloves and grabs them. He jumps on his bike and is gone in a second.

Several minutes later he lays the bike down next to the pick-up marked with "Duncan's Plumbing." He slips the gloves on.

He stealthy climbs the back porch of Duncan's house and turns the doorknob. He knew it would be open, "No one locks their doors in this town. Perhaps they should!" Robert thinks to himself.

He picks up a large pipe wrench that is leaning against the wall inside the door.

He hears the TV blaring from the front room. He slowly makes his way there. He sees Duncan sprawled out and snoring on his well-worn recliner. Half a glass of beer is within reach. Robert creeps behind Duncan and with both hands he raises the wrench high above his head. He quickly crashes it down upon the plumber's forehead. A cloud of scarlet and brains sprays onto the rerun of Seinfeld that Duncan was sleeping to. Duncan's knees jerk and his feet point out straight, then they drop. Robert is proud that he was able to kill the big man with one blow. He even considered the angle so he would not get any blood or brains on himself.

Yes, he was very proud.

"Later, squirt!" he said to the corpse.

He left the way he came, dropping the bloody wrench where he found it.

He hopped on his bike and headed for home, keeping to alleys and dark streets.

Along the way he stashed the gloves into a well-used burn can, you know, those trash cans with the holes that you see behind the garage of a landscaper or a mechanic. He laid down his bike and crept back into the house. He collapsed into his bed, feeling pretty good about the events of the day.

Robert spent Sunday in the yard practicing for the much-anticipated play auditions that are scheduled for after school on Monday. His mother thinks that he is becoming a bit obsessive about the play, but on the other hand she is thrilled that he is even a little bit interested in a school activity where he can interact with other kids. “Smee, bring me my rum!” he yells while twirling his sword.

All day Monday Robert was focused on the auditions. He could hardly think about any of his schoolwork, with thoughts of Captain Hook filling all of his thoughts. When the bell rang to signal the end of the school day, he was almost drunk with anticipation. He was the first person to arrive at the auditions. Mr. Norton, the music teacher who was also the director, soon arrived and told Robert to have a seat and wait until he was called. Several other kids meandered in and the auditions began. It was the longest afternoon of Robert’s life. He sat through awful versions of Peter Pan, Wendy, Tinkerbell, and eventually the call for Captain Hook was announced.

Robert was the fifth and final boy to audition for the part. “You may begin now Bobby,” said Mr. Norton.

“It’s *Robert*.” was the response. He knew that Mr. Norton really didn’t know him, since he was only in sixth grade. It was obvious that he knew the seventh and eighth graders much better. Robert thought to himself that he will know him from now on!

He began his performance -- He knew he had an advantage because he got to see the other boys, plus, no one was as well-prepared as him. He *was* Captain Hook! “Walk the plank, Pan!” he yelled as he poked his sword into the air. He knew that he nailed the audition.

The teacher-judges politely clapped when he concluded.

“Thank you, Robert.” said Mr. Norton.

Mr. Norton and the three other teachers were sequestered in a classroom weighing the attributes of the potential players. Robert waited around for more than an hour for the decisions to be posted.

Mr. Norton came into the hall and posted the roles. Robert pushed his way to the front. He ran his finger down the list and found his target:

– Captain Hook – Paul Mikuta. Understudy – Robert Mason.

“Paul Mikuta! Come on, I was better than him!” Robert yelled to himself. He then saw his name listed - “Lost Boy Number One!” He was devastated and furious.

He ran down the hall and caught Mr. Norton heading for the parking lot. “Excuse me Mr. Norton,” he said.

“Hi Bobby, err, Robert,” he replied.

“So I’m the understudy, I worked so hard...” said Robert.

Mr. Norton replied in his most empathetic voice, “Oh Robert, you did a fine job! But, you need to understand that Paul is an eighth grader, and this is his third year in my plays. He is taller, bigger and has a much deeper voice. You are the understudy and you beat out all of the older boys for the role – you should be proud! And, if Paul gets sick or something you get to fill in! Great job, Robert. See you are rehearsal!”

Robert slinked into the house, and found his mother sobbing at the kitchen table.

“Mom! What’s the matter!?” he reacted.

She reaches for Robert and hugs him tightly, “It’s my friend Bill, you know, the plumber, he’s been...killed!”

“Oh right, well my news is *much* worse!” Robert thought to himself. “I’m so sorry mom; I didn’t know that you liked him so much.”

“Yes, he was a nice guy, he surely didn’t deserve this . . . nobody does!” She said through her tears.

Robert just hugged her back.

“I didn’t get the part, I’m the understudy...” Robert said quietly.

“Oh, I’m sorry honey, maybe next time,” she replied.

“Maybe this time!” he thought to himself.

The next day was the first rehearsal. All went well. Robert was impressed with the skill of Mr. Norton. He thought the play would be great with him directing. Mr. Norton swooned over Paul as Captain Hook. At 5:30 Mr. Norton dismissed the cast and crew and told them how well he thought the first day went.

As Robert left, he followed Paul, even though he lived in the opposite direction. He eventually caught up to him.

“Hey Paul, wait up,” he said.

“Hey Robert.” replied Paul.

“You are perfect for the role of Captain Hook!” said Robert.

“Thanks, this is my third play; I had minor roles in *The Wizard of Oz* and *Oklahoma*, so I’m happy to finally get a larger role,” said Paul. He continued, “It was worth the wait. Your time will come; I thought you did great at the auditions!”

“Thanks, Paul,” said Robert.

They continued with small talk all the way to Paul’s turn off, near the lake where the road follows along the swamp.

The next day after rehearsal Robert again caught up with Paul and the small talk continued. Robert thought to himself that he can be quite charming when he wants to be.

This pattern repeated itself on Wednesday and Thursday after practice. It seems like they were becoming fast friends.

Late on Thursday night, after his mother was asleep, Robert slipped out of the back door again. He was wearing the same dark clothing as when he left before. On the way out, he grabbed a cloth sack that he stuffed with some odds and ends. He carefully slipped a twenty dollar bill into the sack, so just the tip was sticking out. He rode along the road to the edge of the swamp. The crickets and bullfrogs were in symphonic form that night. Most kids his age would not be caught dead in the swamp at this time of night, but this guy was on a mission, a well calculated, finely tuned scheme.

He located the rock pile that he arranged earlier that night after Robert made his turn. He rolled a large stone over, and pointed his flashlight and peered into the hole. He placed the sack in the hole, making sure that the twenty dollar bill was showing. He grabbed the stick he left for this purpose and pushed the sack out of reach. Then he rolled the rock back over the hole. He stood back, surveyed the area and mentally patted himself on the back. He hopped on his bike, pedaled home and slinked back into bed.

The next night after rehearsal, he again caught up to Paul in what was becoming a comfortable ritual. After some play related small talk, Robert said, "Paul, can I trust you with some important top-secret information?"

"But of course, my dear boy, we are joined as fellow thespians!" retorted Paul.

"As thick as thieves, you might say."

"Well, funny you should say that! Ok, well, last night, after you headed up the road, I saw these two guys heading into the swamp." Robert said cautiously.

"Guys?" asked Paul.

"Well, men, actually, I followed them, at a safe distance, of course. When they got to the edge of the lake, they buried a bag full of money under a bunch of rocks!"

Robert added.

"Don't bullshit me! How do you know it was money?" Paul asked.

"I...I waited until they left. I stayed there a long time. Then I went over and rolled away the rock and shined my flashlight into the hole - I saw the whole bag overflowing with cash!" Robert said.

"Come on, you're shitting me, right? Why didn't you just take it?" asked Paul.

“Believe me, I tried, but I just couldn’t reach it! That’s where you come in!” chided Robert.

“Me?” Paul added.

“Yeah, you’re a lot taller than me, you can reach the bag easily! I’m not greedy; we can split it, fifty-fifty!” Robert explained.

“Well, how do we know it is still there?” asked Paul.

“I guess we don’t, but we will find out soon enough, we are almost to the path.

The two boys cautiously crept down the path, making sure that no one was around.

When they got close, Robert said, “Over here, it looks like no one touched it!”

Robert rolled away the rock and shined his light on the loot. “Look, see it?”

“Sure do!” said Paul.

“Think you can reach it?” Robert asked.

“One way to find out!” Said Paul as he laid on the ground and extended his arm into the hole.

In a split second Robert picked up the rock that he rolled away, then bashed it down onto Paul’s head. Paul’s eye bugged out and he rolled over, clutching the bag in his hand. Robert snatched the bag from him, pulled it open and removed a roll of duct tape. He made several revolutions with the tape around the rock and Paul’s chest, then he shoved the body of the eighth grade actor into the lake, saying, “Off to Neverland!”

Paul didn’t sink right away, and Robert thought he was sunk himself. Then Paul let out a loud sound, like a balloon losing air, and soon he disappeared into the murky water.

Robert grabbed the bag, moved around the ground to cover up any blood, slipped on a clean shirt that he also stashed in the bag, and then headed for home, knowing that the next week he would be Captain Hook!

Robert spent Saturday reviewing the lines of Captain Hook, but on Sunday the news of the missing student had the town all a-buzz. The TV news had interviews with several people that had theories and ideas of the where-abouts of Paul.

“I saw a white paneled van parked near the school last week,” said a white haired woman.

“Paul looked much older than an eighth grader, and I’m sure he was involved with an older woman,” said Zig LaMacchia, the town barber.

“We had a report that he ran away to join the Army!” said Barney Taylor, the deputy sheriff.

On Monday Mr. Norton asked Robert to report early for rehearsal.

“Robert, it is a strange situation with Paul missing, are you up to filling in until he returns? Because if you are not, I will ask one of the older boys.” he asked.

“You can count on me, sir – the show must go on!” Robert said, as if he was the first person to use that cliché.

“Ok then, let’s get to work,” said Mr. Norton.

And work they did, for the next several weeks. The rehearsals got more intense, with Peter Pan flying on wires, special lighting for Tinker Bell, and sound effects for the clock in the belly of the crocodile.

Finally, it was opening night! From the moment the curtain rose until the end of the show, the night was a blur for Robert. He *owned* the part, and, even though he was only in sixth grade, his performance stood above the other, older students in the show.

Also on this night, two men from town were meeting at their usual fishing hole. Jake Evans and Reds Kashner have been fishing that lake since they were kids. They had a few beers, told a few jokes and finally got down to some serious early fall fishing. Jake quickly pulled in two small-mouth bass, and joked to Reds that live bait was the only way to go. Reds started to believe him, as he removed his artificial lure and he rigged up a worm, added another piece of split shot, then cast into the deep part of the lake.

Pretty soon Reds had fish on the line, not too big, but full of fight. It darted around the lake and Reds was happy to tire it out. Then the fish changed direction and must have gotten snagged on a branch because it very heavy all of the sudden. Reds slowly reeled, being careful not to pull too hard and damage his reel. Now you know, gentle reader, what he pulled up – the bruised, bloated and bashed face of Paul Mikuta was staring right up at him, and the body almost seemed to jump out of the lake. Reds almost had a heart attack and peed himself a little. Jake puked on the spot. Then he called 911.

The cast of *Peter Pan* were now doing their first curtain calls. Robert proudly took his bow as the audience roared with approval. He caught his mother’s eye and she was grinning ear to ear, and bubbling over with pride. Robert took a last bow, smiled and was very proud of himself because he knew that he was the source of his mother’s happiness.

