

MARY HORODYSKI

End of the Lot

MANDY DROPS THE CURTAIN'S EDGE. Mrs. Andrejik's house looks the same as usual. White chain-link fence, white stucco, brown trim. The parking pad full of snow, as it always was now that her son Andrew was gone. A lamp over the back door lights up the branches of the plum tree. Beneath the tree, the shadows cross in the snow.

Henry calls Mandy a peeper. Mandy argues that she isn't. She says peepers aren't peepers if they can be peeped at themselves. Everyone, she says, can see her as well as she can see them. She watches Henry now from the kitchen window. He is carrying the garbage bag down the shovelled path to the metal garbage cans in the back lane. As he turns back toward the house, Mandy waves at him from behind the sheer curtain. He waves back. Point proved, she thinks. If the radio wasn't playing, she would be able to hear his boots on the snow, the squeak like a knife cutting through Styrofoam that is the sound of snow at thirty below zero.

At least the cold has kept the thrill-seekers away. Not that there has been much to see. She remembers a smart-ass today at the newspaper coming up with the name *Chiller Thriller*. "Hey Mandy," he called out to her as she passed by his desk, "Any news on Chiller Thriller? You live near there, don't you? Got the inside scoop?" Mandy gave a dead-pan "No comment," and realized for a moment what it's like to be at the other end of the reporter's questions.

She tries not to listen to the jokes or rumours or gory details about what happened and instead sticks closely with the rest of the crowd from the Life section. Their current chatter is about a Valentine's Day feature on romantic gifts (don't buy her lingerie) and where to get the best chocolate in Winnipeg (Bernard Callebaut on Academy Road). Today, Julia, the new girl, gave an informal pitch around the office coffee pot for a story on prominent Winnipeggers recounting memorable first dates. One prominent Winnipegger we'll avoid, Mandy thought, is Andrew. She hoped that if anyone else was

thinking the same thought, like her, they wouldn't say it. Jokes are a sign of tension release, but she notices that most women aren't making them in this case. Maybe we are still too tense.

At lunch, Mandy had a meeting at the restaurant in the Conservatory with the president of the Manitoba Herb Society. They sat at a table near a window next to a headless lump that may once have been a snowman. The enthusiasms of the mid-January thaw were now stiff and preserved in a layer of ice after the return of freezing temperatures. Mandy thinks she can see the head of the snowman a bit further away. (Could it have been a snow woman? A snow creature? It was impossible to categorize it now.) The head had probably rolled off the melting shoulders and lay now, half-smashed, carrot nose pointing south-west. Nearby, a mitten crusted in ice was trampled into the snow.

The president of the Manitoba Herb Society, Fran Butterfield, had brown curly hair with tendrils of grey and the comfortable body of a woman who has found her own true path. Mandy believed you could read success by body type, but the successful body is not the lean, mean, pressed-and-stretched body that is so shamelessly promoted. In her fifteen years as a lifestyle reporter, Mandy discovered that the artists, musicians, writers, priests or dentists that were happiest in themselves and their work all had similar appearances; a general demeanour of mildness that cloaked a deep flowing strength, an upright posture without any taint of rigidity, and a small curved pot belly. Not the belly of the Happy Buddha, but enough to make you think of nourishment, the turning away from competition, success without grasping effort.

After the meal, the president offered Mandy cookies made with herbs and seeds. Shortbread laced with caraway. Coriander cookies. Rosemary biscuits. Mandy came away with a Tupperware container, some baggies of home-grown mint tea and a promise to attend the next meeting.

"There will be a guest speaker," the president's eyes twinkled. "A professor from the university will talk about 'Herbs in Canadian Literature!'"

Mandy tried to look similarly bright at this news but was for once at a loss for words. She excused herself by saying she had another appointment and must run. "And thank you for the baking!" she called back. The calm joyful earnestness of the woman, which should have been a balm, grated on Mandy.

"Don't you know women die horrible deaths every day!" she wanted to shout back at the herb-lover. But Mandy knew that if she herself wanted to know that she would have gone in for 'serious' journalism and not the Life page.

Mandy left the restaurant and passed through to the Conservatory's flower display. The forced spring bulbs were out in pots. Daffodils, hyacinths, paperwhites. Their creamy curved heads erect on stiff green stems. Mandy's mother-in-law, who lives in Victoria, will phone in a few weeks to crow about the calypso orchids blooming wild in the forest near her town.

February in Winnipeg, you can stomp through the snow in Assiniboine Forest and see piles of frozen dog shit. The dog owners in this part of town are the worst. Mandy feels a wave of disgust rise up in her and suddenly extend to all of Winnipeg. The crappy shopping, the wind chill reports, the snow-rutted streets, the whole goddamn Main Street with its boarded up buildings, its bars and missions, the drunks and glue sniffers passed out or stumbling along, their jackets open to the wind, when they even have jackets. Mandy knows there are neighbourhoods in Winnipeg where there is seventy-eight per cent poverty. A social organization sent out a news package recently with a nicely coloured map. Orange was where more than seventy per cent of the households lived in poverty. Then yellow for fifty per cent and up. Blue was where there was no poverty. Tiny little enclaves like drops of water. Mandy and Andrew lived in purple, thirty per cent poverty. Andrew preyed in the orange neighbourhoods where girls hop into warm cars willingly and police don't look for them when they don't come home. The aboriginal girls. First Nations. First in the country, last on all the official lists.

Mandy passed through the building to the tropical section. There is a bench tucked into a curve of the garden path where Mandy likes to sit. She often thinks it would be a good place to sit with a lover although she has only seen old couples resting there. Elderly men and women, or sometimes two middle-aged women together happily chanting the Latin plant names. Mandy can't imagine herself sitting on that bench cooing with her husband, but she can imagine herself sitting there old, she thinks, and without a companion.

She didn't bother going back to the office and went home instead to work. In the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil, Mandy sees a television truck roll slowly down the back lane. Later again, as she returns to the kitchen just after four to refill the teapot and butter some rosemary biscuits, she sees another truck, possibly the same one. She couldn't tell whether the truck was a stray TV crew, lost and left behind by all the others, or a new superior breed, with a scent engine that could sniff out a story before anyone else even knew it was going to happen. She didn't see Mrs. Andrejik come out in her apron to shoo the reporters away like she did a few weeks ago, but neither has there been any lights showing in her house recently. Maybe

Mrs. Andrejik is away. Or maybe she is in hiding. Maybe she is sitting in her living room now, in the creeping dark. Or heating up some soup in the kitchen, making do with the winter light that still sifts in.

The plum tree branches are like an iron filigree before Mrs. Andrejik's kitchen window. Mandy remembers watching Andrew in the tree last summer picking the fruit. His shirt was off and she could see the waistband of his underwear rising just above the hip of his jeans. Mandy had stood at her bedroom window and gazed at the tightness of his stomach, the triangular push of his shoulder blades, the sheen of his tanned skin. Their back door opened and Mrs. Andrejik stepped out with a basket of wet laundry on her hip. Her cheeks were red and her greying hair was pushed back with sweat. Her legs encased in knee-high support hose. Mandy thought the tableau the three of them made could be one of those sexy magazine ads for jeans. Beautiful young man, half-naked in a fruit tree, European baba-type mother to the side, and just barely visible through a window a thirty-something neighbourhood wife looking on the son with a predator's lust and delight. Mandy had stood there a long time at her window watching Mrs. Andrejik hang clothes and Andrew pick the ripe red plums. She remembers wondering what it was like to give birth to such beauty. And then, as your child grew and became adult, what did it feel like to have their body pass from your arms to someone else's desire? When Andrew finished and went inside the house, Mandy moved away from the screen window and passed the bedroom mirror. She stopped and looked at herself. She had an imprint from the screen window crossing her nose, her flesh raised into tiny cubes.



When Henry comes through the back door, he lets in a blast of cold air. Mandy, in the dimness of the kitchen, rouses herself and unplugs the kettle that has been boiling a steady stream of steam.

"What are you doing in the dark?"

"Nothing," she said. "Thinking." She takes the paper bags of take-out Chinese food from Henry's hands and he reaches up and turns on the kitchen light. They always get Chinese food on Tuesday. The owner gives them a free medium-sized hot and sour soup. Henry picks the food up on the way home from the university. Even though the restaurant is in a suburban strip mall with a Winners and a Safeway, Henry says it serves better food than any of the restaurants in Chinatown. Henry likes the barbequed ducks hanging in the window of the open kitchen. "Just like in a real Chinese restaurant." By *real*, Henry means in a big city like Toronto or Vancouver.

When Mandy tells Henry about the television truck, he doesn't suggest that they watch the news to see if anything more has happened. Even the other neighbours don't bother inviting her anymore to the low-voiced exchanges they hold in the grocery store, or on the snowy street meeting up with shovels in hand. She is glad that when the reporters came to their house, Henry refused to talk. Mandy stayed away from the door. She didn't want to be recognized.

Mandy tells Henry she has a deadline. She takes her plate of food to the den and sits down before the computer to eat. She has an idea about writing about home beauty aids: honey for the skin, yogurt for the hair (or is it mayonnaise?), frozen chamomile tea bags for puffy eyes, parsley and fennel for fresh breath. She could tie in the Herb Society and their upcoming meeting. Rosemary rinses for dark hair, she continues, marigold for blondes. Andrew used dish soap on his blonde hair. Sunlight brand. His hair was so shiny. Soft. He said that's what his mother used. Mrs. Andrejik once told Mandy that it wasn't always easy to get things during the war. "Not like here," she said. "You have everything here. Everything." She paused. "But no bombs. We had lots of bombs. Plenty." She said "Too much."

Mandy drags her attention back to her column and starts making lists. Herbs, she writes as one heading. Fruits for another. Hair and skin. Then she pauses. The first body part was found five weeks ago, just around Christmas. A dog brought home an arm. They say Andrew must have wanted to be caught, why else would he just bury the body parts in the snow. Granted, the ground was too frozen to dig up anymore, but couldn't he have thought of something else? Mandy begins speculating on places around Winnipeg to dispose of body bits during a deep freeze, then stops. This is not something she wants to dwell on more than she has already.

Positive imaging, Mandy thinks. Replace a bad thought with a good thought. Isn't that what the Dalai Lama says? Or is it Oprah? The only cure for violence is love. Or something like that. She thinks about Henry and the first time they met. He was lying on the grass next to the cricket field in Assiniboine Park. She had spent two hours circling the bike trails preparing for an upcoming column on "Sundays in the Park." She stopped her bike at the cricket field and watched the players. Why do they all wear white? Are they professional? Is there such thing as a professional cricket league in Canada? Why cricket, anyway? Why not lacrosse? Lacrosse is a French game, she remembers that from school trips to the Francophone part of the city and their *Festival du Voyageur*. Or no, wait, it was an Aboriginal game, wasn't it, that the French took over. She wondered if there was a park where people played lacrosse on Sundays.

She began looking closely at the scattered onlookers of the game, to see who was there, and as Henry would say, to see how she could fit them into one of her columns. According to Henry, all the people of the world exist only so that Mandy can consider them for column fodder. He says she has six senses: all the usual plus speculation. How many times did Mandy hear that from him: "You know, you don't ever just *look* at someone, you *speculate* at them."

Mandy saw Henry just over to her left, stretched out on the grass, his arms behind his head and his feet pointed away from the players in the field. His face tilted up, looking up through the nearby tree branches. She was close enough to see that his eyes were open. What was he looking at? An escaped bird, or even a bobcat, from the Assiniboine Park Zoo? Mandy twisted around on her bike and craned her neck back trying to see what he was seeing. That's when the bike suddenly shifted and Mandy fell with the bike in a clanging heap onto the grass. Henry came over to help her. He had a package of disinfectant wipes in his packsack. He padded a stinging wipe against her shin where the pedal had scraped.



For a while the sound of Henry puttering around the kitchen, putting away the leftovers, making tea, drifts upstairs. Henry's a good egg, she thinks. He doesn't complain when she works through dinner or reads during breakfast. Or spends whole evenings watching junk TV to keep up with everyone else's *zeitgeist*. He's a saint, that's what her sisters say. That's because he's the only man who helps with the dishes after family dinners. The other men sit around in the living room and talk stocks, sports. Henry hides in the kitchen, she wants to tell her sisters. He thinks your husbands are consumerist fascists and he's avoiding conflict. Henry's a real left-winger, won't wear anything made in a sweatshop, he wears the same baggy cords all the time because he can't find anything ethical to wear at Zellers and he can't be bothered to shop anywhere else. He's let himself go, she thinks. He's getting softer, rounder, flabbier. He started a beard last winter and his face seems doggy now to her. And earnest. He's too good. She thinks she's sick of all this goodness. But where has her big foray into being bad gotten her? Henry wants to have a baby, but at thirty-six she thinks she still has time. Maybe she doesn't. Mandy feels a stab of fear and goes down to find Henry but he has gone outside to take out the garbage. Mandy looks through the window and sees him in his old parka carrying the plastic bags of trash. Andrew's old house just beyond the garbage cans. She feels cold and goes back upstairs.

Around ten o'clock Mandy hears the TV go on downstairs. Henry must be watching the news. A few minutes later, Henry comes to the door of the den. "Andrew hung himself in jail."

At a dinner party once, when couples were telling about how they first met, Henry said that Mandy fell down from the sky on him. That he was lying on the grass one day, looking at clouds, and something soft and warm spilt into his lap. At first, he said, he thought it was one of the clouds themselves, but then he saw it was Mandy. Mandy was embarrassed by his corniness. The other women around the table all said "aaaaah," some sincerely and some ironically. Mandy had felt a surge of dislike for him, for his simpleness, his lack of guile or what she thinks is sophistication. Mandy didn't correct him, like she was first inclined to, by saying that it was more that she fell near him, than on him. And that he came over to her, a solicitous expression on his face, to help untangle her feet from the bicycle spokes.

Henry is standing in the doorway looking at her now, with a similar look of charity. Does that kindness go through and through him, she wonders, through straight to the bone? Or is there a place where it stops, or could stop? A place where this seemingly endless loving kindness meets the wall and goes no further. Mandy wonders how much Henry knows about what she did.



Andrew used to come around her office at lunch. In the summer Mandy liked to walk over to Old Market Square and people watch. As she crossed Albert Street one day, she noticed a familiar looking car. She recognized the car before she recognized Andrew. She had seen it almost every day for the last two years in the Andrejik's parking pad across the back lane. She stooped a bit as she went by and saw Andrew in the driver's seat, his head leaning back against the seat. He was wearing aviator style sunglasses. Mandy gave a friendly wave, but he didn't respond. Maybe he's asleep, she thought, and she crossed into the square without calling hello. She wondered what he was doing there. What was his job anyway? She couldn't remember Mrs. Andrejik mentioning it, and she hardly ever spoke to Andrew. Maybe he was a courier, or delivered lunches to office workers.

Andrew must have driven away while she was busy with her sandwich, because the car was gone when she crossed back to the office after lunch. The second and third time she saw him, on Albert and then on Bannatyne Street, he stayed in the car, with his eyes closed. At least, she thought his

eyes were closed, it was hard to tell with those sunglasses. The fourth time, he was waiting for her on her usual park bench. He had bought a bag of French fries from the chip truck and held it out to her.



Henry is still watching her from the doorway. Mandy feels she would like to get up and throw her arms around him. Or have him throw his arms around her. Carry her like men do in movies from the fifties. Take her down the hallway to her bed, but then just tuck her in. Let her sleep. Sit by the bed while she sleeps and doesn't dream. She thinks she should tell Henry everything, but then she thinks she shouldn't. Mandy turns her head and looks down at her keyboard. The letters could spell anything. Maybe, she thinks, I should write the newspaper's advice column: *Dear Ms KnowEverything. I had an affair, well, almost an affair, with a psycho killer. Should I tell my husband? How about the police?*

If she could, she would tell Henry that she met Andrew almost every week last summer. That it was nothing, that he was just a kid, and their neighbour too. She meant nothing by it. It meant nothing when they sat in the park, or he took her for drives in his car. It was an innocent flirtation, she would like to say, a casual flirtation at most. Although why was she flirting at all, she wonders? She is sure Henry will ask that. After all, it's not like there is anything really wrong with their marriage. Mandy doesn't think her affair, no, her flirt (it was just a flirt!) was a rejection of their marriage. She just wanted to remember what it was like to really want a man. To feel the pull on her eyes. That where he was, was where her eyes went. Roaming him, searching for the everyday places of open skin. His cheekbones. His jaw. The place just under his mouth. His exposed neck, the vee of his chest before his shirt began. Her groping lust for the rosy veined landscape of his forearm, the flowing speeding blood, the contours beneath of muscle, the hard smooth bones she would like to get to. All that. And the usual, too. The sliding glances at his crotch. Her eyes following the seam of his jeans down the centre of his ass to where it slips beneath. Mandy stops. She just wanted a little thrill, that's all. Doesn't everybody? Doesn't everybody want that?

She knows she should tell Henry, and she worries she should tell the police, that Andrew took her, one lunch hour in the rain, all the way to Higgins Avenue, where he drove to a parking lot behind an abandoned warehouse. He stopped the car and put his hand behind her neck and pulled her toward him. His mouth tasted like mint gum and cigarette smoke.

Mandy felt a rush. She pulled his T-shirt out from his jeans and ran her hands over the skin of his back and chest. She pressed herself against him and bit his lips. A strand of his long blond hair slipped in to her mouth and she sucked on it along with his tongue. The gearshift was in the way, she remembers thinking that. She kneeled on the seat and leaned over him while he slid down so that her breasts were in his face. Andrew stuck his hand up her skirt and pulled down her panties. His fingers jabbed into her. She came in less than a minute.

She felt stupid after that. Her skirt jacked up so her bare ass was exposed. She was glad the rain and their breath left the windows steamy. Her hand on his crotch. He didn't seem that hard. "I shouldn't have done that," she said. She pulled up her panties and pulled down her skirt and sat down.

Andrew lit up a cigarette and cracked open his window a bit. He turned the key in the ignition and the radio came back on. He turned on the windshield wipers. Mandy looked out the window at an old wooden shed standing tilted and alone at the end of the lot. Its door banged gently in the wind and rain. Led Zeppelin's "Going to California" played on the radio. The wipers and the banging of the door of the shed were almost synchronized. Robert Plant sang "she plays guitar and cries and sings la la la la." Mandy felt almost mesmerized. Unreal. It couldn't have been her making out with her neighbour's twenty-two-year-old son. Andrew tossed his cigarette out the window and said he'd take her back.

She didn't see Andrew again after that. She stayed in the office for her lunch. When she left the office in the evenings, she made sure to leave with one of her co-workers. Once Andrew pulled up in his car beside Mandy and Julia, and he rolled down his window and called out to her. She pretended she didn't know him, and walked quickly away, holding on to Julia's arm. He didn't come again.

The shed took her by surprise when she saw it on TV the night Andrew was arrested. At first she didn't make the connection, the lot looked different in the snow, cordoned off with yellow police tape. When the location hit her, she felt Andrew's hair again slip into her mouth. She saw the shed door banging in the wind, felt Andrew's hands pulling down her panties from under her summer skirt. She tasted his hair, the blonde strands in her mouth. She heard the shed door bang. Henry held her head as she started choking over the edge of the sofa.



Henry comes through the doorway of the den to stand by the window. He looks out across the back yard to where Andrew had lived across the lane. "Poor Mrs. Andrejik," he says. His sympathy seems so clean, like she is just any mother mourning a son. But Mandy wonders, is he still her son? How do you mother a serial killer? How do you mourn the passing of one?

Mandy looks at Henry to see if he is casting any oblique glances at her. But he seems to only be thinking of Mrs. Andrejik. She comes to stand next to him. "You know," he continues, "The first time I heard the term 'serial killer' I pictured Cap'n Crunch running amok with a sword." Henry made a sound. Mandy couldn't tell if it was a laugh or not. "And now I can't imagine ever being that innocent again."

He turns to Mandy and she moves herself to hold him. Her hands rub his back as she looks past his shoulder at the yard. She wishes she could step out there now to the snow, strip off her clothes and lie down naked in the icy whiteness. She would slowly wave her arms and legs in the shape that children make, the shape that da Vinci drew. Then she would get up, move over an arm's length, and lie down again. She would do it over and over, until her skin burned from the cold and she circled the entire yard.