

## ACROSS THE MOOSEHIDE SLIDE By Lulu Keating

Mandy clambers up into the cab. As she pumps the brakes, she retrieves the screwdriver, wedged against the brake pedal. Screwdriver into the ignition. Twist. Engine roars to life. She says, "And that's the right answer!" It's 11 a.m. Mandy, still drunk from last night, flicks her head for me to join her.

I'm confused. We weren't supposed to drive anywhere. I'm all packed and ready for an overland hike. We're supposed to be climbing a trail, crossing the Moosehide Slide and walking three kilometres to Mandy's cabin, north on the Yukon River where she's taking care of sixteen mushing dogs. After visiting a few days I'll hike back alone.

I'm a teacher, I'm a mother, I'm 50 years old. I know better than to get into a vehicle with a drunk driver.

"Where are we headed?" I ask as I climb into the passenger seat.

Mandy slurs, "Glory bound."

I do something I don't do in Dawson City: I put on my seatbelt.

She says, "Next time I get paid, I'm gettin' insurance."

With each bounce through spring ruts, Mandy's long brown curls extend and retreat around her broad face. She's strong, stronger than any woman I know. She's also beautiful, and I guess in her late twenties. It's been a long winter for her. She says the routine is what drives you nuts: get up, feed the fire, eat, chop wood, feed the fire, eat, feed the dogs, feed the fire, sleep.

I used to live in a big boring southern city. After the last kid moved out, my husband shackled up with his Admin Assistant. For a year, I kept teaching and kept house, waiting for him to come back. I shovelled snow all winter, mowed the lawn in the spring, raked leaves in the fall. I had a recurring dream of a body hanging from the big oak tree in front of the house. When I realized it was me, hung out to dry, I applied for the teaching position in the Yukon.

As I watch Mandy grind through the gears of her geriatric truck, it occurs to me that if I still lived down south, we'd never be friends. It was like this when I was a young teacher in Kenya. I discovered that isolation, whether geographic or cultural, makes for unusual companions. Friendships ignore education, religion, race and age. The noose of social expectation is loosened.

Mandy pulls into the Liquor Store. While she's inside, I slide over into the driver's seat. When she discovers me behind the wheel, she tells me to pump the foot brake before releasing the emergency.

“Next time I get paid, I’m gettin’ the brakes fixed.”

The sled dogs, she says, are like a cast of characters in a play – the romantic male lead, the seductive female, the tragic hero, the jester. Her favourite dogs get an extra salmon or a bigger chunk of bear meat. “It’s Day Three for the dogs,” she says. According to Mandy, sled dogs can go three days without food. I’ve never heard anyone say that before.

The truck bounces us back to the shed where Mandy stays when she’s in Dawson. She calls it her ‘Crash Crib’. Mandy has already killed her hangover with the first third of the bottle of Baileys. She offers me a shot. When I turn her down, she curses me for not drinking.

There’s a hammock strung between birch trees. I float in the hammock, watching fresh new leaves on the birch trees quiver in time to the music, while Mandy packs her bag. She shouts along with Johnny: “And it burns, burns, burns, the ring of fire”.

This time of year reminds me of my father. He went on binges. In the garage, he’d guzzle vodka for four or five days. Mom sat with him to make sure he survived the rough ride down. I was sixteen when Mom refused to do it anymore. The vigil fell to me. “Keep him sitting up,” Mom said. “If he lies down and vomits, he might choke.” Even though I was studying for my final exams, I had no choice. I had to sit with Dad.

Mandy steps outside. She drains the last drop from the bottle, shoulders her pack, and heads off.

The trail up from Dawson is a steep climb through wooded slopes. Mandy’s legs pound like pile drivers, wham, wham, wham. I flounder like a rubber Gumby. When it gets steep, she bounds up the slope like a mountain goat. She claims that if she were a hundred miles from town with a compass and a hatchet, any season of the year, she could make it back in good shape. I believe her.

We stand beside each other on the edge of the Moosehide Slide. Hundreds of years ago the whole side of the mountain broke away and plunged into the river. Photographs of Dawson during the Gold Rush show the exposed face of the mountain, lording it over the matchstick town.

Here in the north, nature doesn’t pull its punches: the Slide is treacherous. It’s half a kilometre from one side to the other. The path is narrow and the shale is slippery underfoot. The steep slope is strewn with boulders the size of outhouses.

“Good thing it’s dry,” Mandy says, striding forward.

In no time, she’s far in the lead and then I lose sight of her behind an outcropping. When I round the obstruction, I see she’s left the path. She’s no longer moving forward but straight up the slope.

I yell, “Hey Mandy! The path’s down here!”

She keeps scrambling up the steep face. Loose rocks roll out from beneath her feet. Now large stones are tumbling down in a loud avalanche. I take cover until it roars past me. Far below, the stones bounce onto the rocky bank and splash into the river.

Far up the vast slope, Mandy calls for me to join her.

I shout, "No! You come down here now!"

When she turns and looks at me she suddenly realizes she's in trouble. Even from this distance I can see she's swaying drunkenly. She clings to a boulder. She doesn't move, says she can't move. Turns out that Baileys is not a good travelling companion.

I could climb up to her, guide her down. But she's unpredictable – it would be dangerous for both of us. The other option is going for help. Getting to town and back would take at least an hour. Leaving her alone is out of the question. I plead with her. I tell her to walk diagonally across the slope, down to the trail. She stares back at me, says she won't move. Her flat, blank face reminds me of that old expression, "rum dumb".

Years ago, in that other standoff, Dad sat rigidly in his rocking chair in the garage. He watched me while I studied my science textbook. It was exhausting, memorizing the periodic table and watching him guzzle, but that's what I had to do. Dad promised to take me out for a milkshake if I did well in the exam. And he promised he'd never drink again.

Far above me, Mandy sings, "And it burns, burns, burns." Suddenly I'm pissed off. I scream her name. I'm so angry I can see my command shoot up the slope: "Get down here NOW!" Mandy lets go of the boulder. Sliding on her butt, she tumbles down. She curses as jagged rocks cut her. She uses her hands to keep from tipping over. Stones and clods of earth come with her. I shuffle along the path to where she's headed. I stand underneath, dodging the rockslide. When she slides close, I reach forward. I grab her and pull her to me.

I punch her in the shoulder.

"What's bugging you?" she slurs.

I yell, "You gotta stop this shit!"

She spits on her hands and rubs them against her legs. I see streaks of blood on her ripped jeans. She turns and continues across the Slide. I watch her walk away. Mandy realizes I'm not following. She looks back at me briefly, turns and hikes on. Her arm extends in a giant wave above her head, but she doesn't look back.

The night I was with my father, I fell asleep. I dreamed an earthquake was shaking the house. My mother was with me as we raced outside. We stopped in front of the garage and watched it crumble, the walls folding in. It fell out of sight into a deep crack. We walked over and looked down. There was my father's empty chair far below, making a scraping sound as it rocked back and forth. I woke to the noise of him choking. He was on the floor in a pool of vomit, gasping for air. He was an unnatural grey-green colour. By the time the ambulance arrived my father wasn't making noise anymore.

Like a lot of the big incidents in life, Dad's death has never been discussed. Mandy and I are still friends but we never talk about the hike across the Slide. She still drinks. Me too, but whenever the alcohol starts to have an effect, I feel a vibration not unlike an earthquake. Fear keeps my drinking in check. I don't want to loosen a whole mountain down on top of me.