



Patrick Somerville

FLAT MINDY

Henry Banks stopped his car just before turning into his driveway. In a flash he had seen something in the corner of his eye, something black and fuzzy and foreboding in the middle of the road, just out in front of the gutter. His foot had gone immediately to the brake. Wind, he knew, was making fur move. Subconscious ideas connected. He wished, deeply, that he could ignore it, but he knew that he couldn't. His signal blinked. Stopped as he was, he squinted and leaned forward, over the steering wheel, frowning. There could be no doubt about it: the flat fuzzy black object was Mindy.

"Mindy," he said.

The cat. Someone had run her over. She had been with the Banks' for five years, and had participated in everything important. When Joshua had graduated from kindergarten, she had been there, sitting peacefully in the corner, observing the party. Ah! She had been so good, no matter what, with any other children who happened to be at the house. They would come to her and pick her up awkwardly and sadistically, happy to be able to pick anything up, let alone a living, sentient creature. They would squeeze her and turn her upside down, drop her when distracted, scream into her black ears, grab her by the tail as she tried to run away, chase her through the house, throw things at her—things like the dog Alfie's racquetball, which Mindy would not be caught dead chasing. She had always shown up when people showed up, and had always jumped into Henry's lap whenever he settled down to read for the evening. She was not the kind of cat who would flee to a hamper in the back of the house and not emerge for forty-eight hours if she was upset; she had never been afraid, and had only tried to love them all with her small cat brain, and now, like a cartoon, the middle part of her body was flattened on the road, and she was really dead.

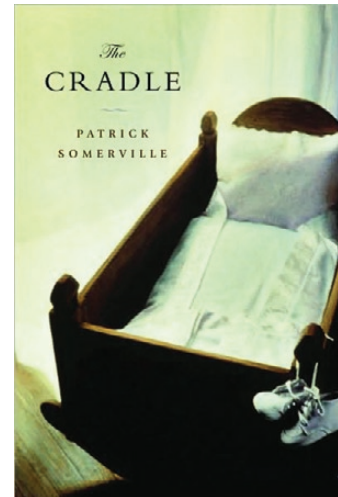
Henry was standing in the middle of the street with the snow shovel when his wife Blair came home from work.

"What are you doing?" she asked, after she stopped the car beside him and rolled down the window. She was smiling.



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Patrick Somerville's first book of short stories, *Trouble* (Vintage, 2006), was named 2006's Best Book by a Chicago Author by *Time Out Chicago*. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *One Story*, *Epoch*, *GQ*, *The Beloit Fiction Journal*, and *Best American Nonrequired Reading*. His debut novel, *The Cradle*, will be published by Little, Brown on March 9, and has been picked to be B&N Discover book this summer.



and another grayish speck attached to one thin strand of hair that was effort. There was a bit of clay on her shirt from her work at the studio, how much help she was going to be to him in the coming disaster-relief stood back and tried to collie appraise her demeanor to determine When she walked out to the street to stand beside him, Henry drove and cut the ignition.

ry heard Blair say softly. He watched as she piloted the Ford into the The stepped back. The car slowly crept forward. "Oh my god," Henry in her life, she did."

"Well," said Henry, pointing down at Mindy. "She did. At least once "But she never left the yard," said Blair.

"I promise," She looked up quickly, eyes narrow. "Promise it," she said.

"Honey," he said. "I found her like this. I didn't run her over." despite the frightened, skeptical look she was giving him.

what was once Mindy." He stepped backwards, trying to hold her gaze, this house. Two of them. Both of them ours. Both of them in love with Just a very flat body. And very soon two children will be returning to the car. "We need to say to ourselves that right now, there is no Mindy; on her shoulder. He leaned forward, so his head was almost entirely in metal of the shovel drop down against the pavement and resting a hand "We need to look at it like this, Honey," said Henry, letting the eyes. "Look at her. She's so flat."

"Mindy," said Blair, her voice wavering. He could see tears in her up. We need to mourn afterwards. Upside-down sequence."

"Look," said Henry quickly. "Baby. We'll need to move on the clean- When he looked back at Blair, she had a hand covering her mouth.

head explode. the laws of physics had, at least, granted her a pass by not making her

rib cage. The pressure generated must have been enormous, and yet their sockets, miraculously, despite the tire track that ran across her He looked down at the car. Both of Mindy's eyes had stayed in "Mindy," said Henry, stepping back and pointing with the shovel.

tucked behind her ear. Her alert brown eyes were ready. She gave him a tough nod. He stood silently as she bent down. He thought that she was examining the strange perfection of the wound, but then he saw her scratching the car's hindquarters.

"Don't do that," he said, scowling when he saw what she was doing. "Don't pet her."

"She is so flat."

"I tried to peel her off before."

She looked up at him with the same accusatory glare, and Henry sensed that a complicated argument would be had later that night. Exhibit C: Henry didn't care about Mindy.

Which was not true. Henry was sad about Mindy, and he longed for Mindy to still be alive. This, everything now, was simply a matter of utility, of accomplishing an important task.

As an escape, he looked up the street.

"Oh no," he said. A cream-colored minivan prowled on the horizon.

"Is Joshua...?"

But Blair had already sprung to her feet, and now commenced running down the middle of the road, waving her arms wildly at the minivan, her thinking well ahead of his. It was Naomi Wright, who was in charge of Joshua's carpool for the day. He would be inside, having finished soccer practice. He would be laughing with his friends. He would be innocent. Under no circumstance could he be allowed to see.

"Stop!" cried Blair, waving her arms back and forth.

As Blair spoke with Naomi through the window of the van about thirty feet down the road, Henry rushed into the garage and brought out the garbage can. He rolled quickly down the driveway, bent down to maximize his speed, hustling forward like a crab dragging a pile of twigs behind it. He set up and tried to block Mindy's flat body from the minivan's line of sight; glancing up, he saw that Blair was now around at the other side of the car, speaking furtively through the passenger window. But if Joshua was in the front, that meant he may have

me-downs for some other family, for some other life. he watched the bag fly and drop, rolling on its way down, a set of hand- it would land, and they would see that it was nothing. For a moment smiling, believed he could hear a gasp from the crowd below. But soon launched it over the side. It sailed and rolled end over end. Henry, So Josh squashed up the garbage bag as much as he could and "Yes," said Henry. "Please."

"Can I throw this over the side?" asked Josh.

she was. her food bowl later that day, black and meowing, the regular cat that for her. He didn't know how she'd gotten down. He'd just seen her at and amazed, pleased to know that something like balance was so easy ally across a branch fifteen feet from the ground. He had been shocked fat and silent. Henry had once seen Mindy up in a tree, walking cas- Josh the grave. All of it was there. And Old Ingersoll beside them both,

answers from you."

"Fine."

"Is Mindy dead?"

"Yes," said Henry. "She died. She was run over."

"And will she ever come back to life?"

"No," said Henry. "You know that."

"I know I know that," said Josh. "I told you that I want to hear you."

"Okay," said Henry. "Don't get excited."

"Am I going to die?"

"One day."

"Are you?"

"Yes," he said. "One day."

"What about all of those people down there?" asked Josh. He pointed to the spectators.

"Them too."

"I already knew all of that," said Josh, after absorbing these answers.

"Then you know you can't control it."

That was it—there was nowhere else to go from there, and both of them knew it. Josh first flattened himself on the branch, then let his legs dangle until Henry could reach them. Once he was inside, Henry leaned over the box and called down to the operator. He flashed a thumbs-up, and they began to move.

Not a bad rescue, thought Henry, all things considered. He put his hand on the top of Josh's head as they slowly descended.

"What's in the bag?" asked Josh.

"Clothes," said Henry. "Old clothes."

Josh picked up the bag, looked up at his father, then looked down over the side. There were so many people down below, all of them so small; from their vantage, they could see back to the house, and Henry noted all of the yards he had traversed on his run. It was probably possible, too, to see where Mindy's grave was—he would have to show

already seen... Blair removed her head from the window and the minivan began a wobbly reverse down the street in the direction it had come. Henry watched then as Naomi executed a perfect reverse Y-turn and the van disappeared around the corner. Blair jogged back.

"He saw," she said, jogging past him. "I'm going to pick him up at the ice cream place and take him straight to the video store for something about dying."

"What was his reaction?" Henry called, over his shoulder. "Sensitive or destructive?" He remembered learning that these two emotions could predict a child's future.

"Not good," he heard her say, but before she could explain any more she sped off down the street.

He pushed forward now, hard, with the shovel, and Mindy came up immediately.

He hoisted. While he was considering how to dump her—turn the shovel sideways or lean the shovel down and forward, like he was pouring concrete—his daughter emerged from around the side of the house, saw what was happening, and began to scream.

"No!" he cried at her, not knowing what to do with Mindy. Eventually he decided to ceremoniously lower the shovel to the ground and to leave the body there, as though to imply to his daughter that this were all an elaborate, sanctified burial ritual. Leaving Mindy, he jogged across the front yard to Angela, who continued to scream.

"Honey," he said.

She was still screaming and couldn't hear him. He knelt and took hold of her shoulders.

"Honey!" he yelled.

"Daddy didn't do it," he said. "Daddy did not do it."

She wouldn't talk, and instead, as she sucked in air and her pigtail bobbed, she tried to look past him, over his shoulder, at the shovel on

the ground. As he watched her maneuver, he wondered at her thoughts: he knew that she was just old enough, just aware enough, to know, beyond whatever emotion she was feeling, that something tremendous had happened. She was detached and scientific, and had been running experiments in the shower with the different brands of shampoo. Henry had, in fact, recently destroyed one of her experiments by taking a cereal bowlful of Prell and rubbing it into his head, only to find out, later that day, that Angela had been attempting to grow hair from the Prell itself, amidst the humid air of the shower, a kind of inhuman hair, and that he had ruined everything. He hoped now, for the sake of the emergency, that she would find a way to grasp that aspect of Mindy's demise, the terrible hugeness of death, the objective wonder of it, and therefore circumvent the grief, at least until he could get her wrapped up in the bag and thrown away down at the dumpster near his office.

He rubbed at the tears trickling from her eyes. "Okay," he said. "Okay."

"Did it hurt?" she asked him.

"No," he said. "It didn't hurt." The he looked at her. "Did what hurt?" he asked. Suddenly he thought that she might be asking whether it had hurt him to scrape her up. Yes, he would have said.

"Her dying."

"No."

"How do you know though?" she asked.

"Because everything was crushed right away. There wasn't any time."

"Her brain was okay, though. And that's how you feel things."

"Not in the same way," he said hesitantly, "for cats."

And then, to his amazement, she conceded this point, and she asked if she could watch him throw Mindy away.

He agreed, but was slow about it—he wouldn't put it past her to have come up with some sort of trick, some plan to get close to the body and then run off with it in order to try and reincarnate her.

"Where will it go?" she asked, when they were both standing at the

men who work on the electrical wires use."

"Is this just an elaborate ruse to get me into a compromising situation?"

"He's up the tree, Henry," Blair said. She slapped him on the shoulder, hard, and then once on the chest. "Go get him."

"Okay," he said. "Okay."

Her eyes suddenly then lit up, and she ran over to the car. She opened the trunk, dug around, and returned with a garbage bag. She pressed it into his hands. "Here," she said. "It's the Goodwill. Fake him out."

He took the bag. "Fine," he said.

They stood together, the three of them, as the pickup with the cherry-picker crane slowly rolled its way down the road. The fire truck was moved; various policemen backed their cars out of the way; the crowd parted; Henry prepared himself.

"What am I supposed to say?" he asked Blair. Together, they looked up at Joshua, a virtual dot of blue and white sitting on a branch that was, thankfully, wider than the benches down on the ground. He wasn't moving, but Henry felt him watching.

"Just tell him the truth," Blair said.

Then she added, "But don't tell him Mindy's not in the bag. Actually, tell him that Mindy's alive."

"Don't have him say that, Mom," said Angela. "That's not accurate."

"No," said Henry. "I'll just get him in. I'll talk to him, get him in, and hold him."

There was some discussion of a fireman coming up along with Henry, but Joshua called his mother when he saw what was happening, and it was agreed that Henry would go alone with the bag of old t-shirts and jeans. He climbed up the back of the truck and stepped through the small metal gate of the cherry-picker's box, wondering whether or not its reach would be long enough. The operator assured him that it would get him there.

"Five stories," he said. "No problemo."

On his way up, Henry wondered whether or not Mindy would have approved of such a production, especially from Joshua, who had always been the most distant with her, the most concerned by the existence of something that was both alive and not human, both thinking and not thinking like him. If Angela was a scientist, then Joshua was a pre-Socratic philosopher, unconcerned with the minutiae and the details of a slow and labyrinthous method. He was looking for something larger, something comprehensive. And in this case, Henry sympathized with his son; it was so extremely bizarre that these small creatures wandered around among them all, so far from normal, and yet most people's simple reaction was to love, to love anything that showed an interest. Angela could come to terms with Mindy's death in a very material way. Henry knew, as he moved up past the branches and the leaves of Old Ingersoll, that he would not be able to come to terms with it using any rational approach.

Up he went, through the branches. Leaves scraped across his head, down his face.

"Josh," he said, when he was close enough for his son to hear. "How did you get up here?"

"Hi Dad," said Josh.

The crane came to a jolting stop, the limit of its height, a couple of feet below the branch where Josh was sitting.

Henry looked up at him.

"What's happening here?" he asked.

"Is that her?" asked Josh, motioning to the bag.

"Yes."

"No it isn't."

"It is," said Henry. "Come down here."

"I have some questions," said Josh.

"Okay," said Henry. "Ask away. No problemo."

"I want you to know, though," said Josh, "that I already know the answers to the questions. I already know them. But I'd like to hear the

But Henry had not waited at the door any longer than it had taken him to realize the full extent of the situation. When he had, when his mind possessed him with the image of his boy standing on a branch six stories in the air, furious at this existential information he'd accidentally

“I can drive you down there—”
 “Right now,” Henry repeated, this time waving one hairy finger up and down in the air, in front of the cop’s chest.

Old Ingersoll was a 274-year-old Redwood in the middle of Kesselman’s Park.
 “Now, sir,” said the cop. “He is currently at the top of Old Ingersoll.”
 “You’re saying now? Right now he’s up there? Or was?”
 “I’m not sure I understand,” Henry said to the policeman at the door. “You’re saying now? Right now he’s up there? Or was?”

together.
 they could all have their traditional Wednesday Enchiladas and give

Lhe police came with the news about Joshua well after Mindy was in the ground and Henry and Angela were back in the house, cleaned up and waiting for the other half of the family to get back so

Not Mindy, exactly, but some other car.
 Burial was a better idea.

Henry had never before realized how much both of them resembled a car.

He looked at her, and they thought together. Her face was inquisitive and compassionate, yet retained the same thoughtfulness it always had. He recognized an expression of his wife’s. What was new was that Henry had never before realized how much both of them resembled a car.

“Why don’t we bury her?” said Angela. “Instead of just throwing her away.”
 “Maybe you should go inside,” he said to her, looking at the shovel, and at Mindy resting on top of it, like it was a platter.
 “The body?”

come across, he had yelped once, turned on his heel, and run through the house, to the back door. Kesselman’s Park was not far, and running at top speed would get him there much faster than a lackadaisical ride with some emotionless cop.

He had only made it out of his back yard when he realized that Angela was running beside him.

“Hi!” she yelled.

She zoomed ahead, weaving around a short bush, and he decided, realizing that she was probably faster than him, that he would have no say in it because he would not be able to catch her anyway, and that she was coming, like it or not. He allowed himself to abandon his powers as an authority figure and concentrated instead on locating his son. They approached a low wooden fence; Angela ducked under, and Henry rolled over the top with the dexterity of a tranquilized sea lion.

“Wait,” he said to Angela, trying to catch up to her. She looked back and slowed, slightly.

“Here I come,” he said, panting heavily. She must have seen something in him she didn’t like—the panting red face of her father, the very faint glimmer of death itself lingering on his shoulders—because she frowned, opened her eyes wide, and then began to sprint again, this time with her head pointed down at the grass. They went on, through the Yarbroughs’, the Glasstones’, and the Mickelsons’ yards, each presenting their own pitfalls and traps—a compost, an imported sundial, two chained dogs, a kiddie pool. As he ran, Henry could not help his thoughts about his son from drifting away and becoming more contemplations of Mindy. Was this the route that she had taken every night, patrolling the neighborhood, encountering threats, prey, and her cat-boyfriends? He had seen on television just how complicated the nightlife of an outdoor cat—even an outdoor cat in a suburban neighborhood—could be. In a way, it made all of them wild, all of them part of an ecology, of a system. How easy it was to not be a part of nature.

He got tangled up in a hose and rolled down a hill.

er to take you up. He said he wanted to see you in the machine that the
 “He’s refused the ladder,” said Blair. “He’s asked for the cherry pick-
 “That’s good, Angela,” Henry said to her.
 “I helped,” Angela said. “I was comfortable with it.”

“Besides, we already buried her.”
 Henry turned to Blair. “I’m not taking Mindy up there,” he said.
 to collectively reject the idea that all of this could end in tragedy.

Henry looked around at the crowd. They were all listening, and watching. Only the other boys, Joshua’s friends, his team, continued to look up at him. They pointed and laughed. It appeared they had agreed

“We have no idea.”
 Ingersoll. I couldn’t get up there.”

“How the fuck did he get up there?” asked Henry. “That’s Old In-
 and I’d like for you to consider acting as courier for us.”

“Be that as it may, sir, we are currently in this situation right now,
 “We never should have gotten him that cell phone,” Henry said.

der. “Would you like to be the courier?”
 for you to be the courier.” The cop blinked, then took Henry’s shoul-

called, actually—demanding to see the body. He’s told us that he’d like
 answers coming just like that. Your son sent down a message—he

“Now,” said the cop. “Okay. That’s all right. Keep the
 “Yes,” said Henry.

“Your responses.”
 “Sir, this is a high tension situation. I need you to be speedy with

Henry stared at him.
 car has recently passed away to the other side?”

turned to Henry and said, “Now, sir, am I correct when I say that your
 polling at this height would make your son bounce too far away.” He

“Madam,” said the cop. “Please. We have it under control. A tram-
 telling them that they need a rampoline down here,” she said.

Henry frowned. Blair, then, was beside him, talking to him. “I keep
 if we extend the ladder.”

“Help,” he said to his daughter. “Help me.” She came to him, and untangled his feet, and soon they were off again. The edge of the park was now visible, and together they curved down the road and ran alongside the fence on their way to the gated entrance. Henry looked up and to his left, toward the top of Old Ingersoll, which looked majestically out toward the neighborhood. There was no sign of Joshua all the way at the top, which was good. Most of the tree’s body was concealed by the other trees, close up against the fence.

A fire truck passed them and turned into the park.

“Faster,” said Henry.

The scene he and Angela found near the base of the tree so dramatically altered the typical landscape of the park that Henry thought that they had changed it: moved the tree, rebuilt the gazebo, altered the shape of the parking lot, and painted all of the benches. Police cars were parked at strange angles up and down the road leading to the park’s center; the fire truck had gone all the way to the tree, and the ladder was pointed up, as though it were about to be extended. Blair had parked the car near the tree, too, and Henry could just see her at the edge of a crowd of police officers. Naomi, with the minivan full of Joshua’s teammates, all of them now covered in ice cream, was there. The whole crowd was looking up. Someone had a bullhorn.

And there he was. Fifty feet. In his soccer uniform.

“Don’t jump!” one of the cops said into the bullhorn.

Henry pushed himself through the crowd, furious that anyone would be stupid enough to tell a 10-year-old boy not to jump from the tree.

“He’s not trying to commit suicide, you idiot,” Henry said to the cop with the bullhorn, once he’d reached him. People turned to look. “He’s stuck.”

“Sir, please,” said the cop. “I’m working the bullhorn.”

“I’m the father,” said Henry. “And I’m telling you that he’s gotten himself stuck. He’s not trying to commit suicide.”

“With all due respect, sir,” said the cop, “he is threatening to jump