

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

Lawrence Kessenich
Losing Andrea

Andrea was my friend Tony Buffacio's sister. I'd known Tony and his family since fifth grade, when they'd moved to Watertown from Providence. Tony and I got along because we were both pretty smart and liked to use our imagination. We wrote stories together and once even wrote a one-act comedy for Mrs. Beemer's eighth grade English class at St. Patrick's, which we performed ourselves. Nobody else in Tony's big family was into the arts, except Andrea. Their brothers and sisters had other interests; their mother spent all her time shopping, cooking, cleaning, and helping out at St. Patrick's; and their father, who ran a construction business, wasn't interested in anything but work and sports. Tony and I played sports, but neither of us was very good, which continually provided Mr. Buffacio with ammunition for verbal assaults.

"Hey, Antonia and Bobsie," he would say. "Are either of you starting in the big game Friday night?" Then he would crack up laughing. Tony's face would turn bright red—a combination of embarrassment and anger—but he was afraid to say anything. Mr. B was a hulk of a man, and though he never actually abused his kids physically, the threat was always there. I didn't like being in their house when he was around, and I would never stay for supper unless he was working late.

When I did stay, I always sat next to Andrea, who was two years younger than Tony and me and dreamed of becoming an actress. I thought she was beautiful enough to do it, too. She had thick black hair, big dark eyes, olive skin, full lips and a body that had started developing early. She didn't have one of those stupid button noses that a lot of actresses have, either. She had a long, straight Roman nose that complemented her big eyes perfectly. I thought she was stunning. But to hear Mr. Buffacio talk, you'd think she was a dog.

"Hey, *Senorita Schnoz*," he would say, though her nose wasn't significantly bigger than anybody else's in the family. "We're thinking of building condos on that thing. You don't mind, do you?"

And always the loud, nasty laugh. I hated that laugh. And feared it. Sometimes when I stayed for supper, Mr. B would come home earlier than expected. Mrs. B would leap up from the table as if the Pope had arrived, and by the time Mr. B would get his hands washed and come to the table, his food would be waiting for him.

"What's this crap?" or some variation on that theme was usually his first response. Then he would notice I was there and start in on me. "Well, if it isn't the Krieger girl! What's the matter, Bobsie, can't your parents afford to feed you? Considering the belly on you, I'm not surprised."

And then he would laugh that awful laugh and everyone would stare into their plates, hoping to avoid being his next victim. Everyone except Andrea, that is. She would glare at him as if she were staring down the devil. Maybe she was. I thought she was incredibly brave, because this response would inevitably cause Mr. Buffacio to start in on her. He enjoyed picking on her the most because it was easy to get a rise out of her. She never let anything go, like the rest of us did.

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

"What are you staring at, Schnoz?" he said in his most disdainful voice.

"Why don't you leave Bobby alone? Even *you* should be able to be nice to a guest."

"Bobsie's no guest—are you, Bobsie? Hell, no—"

"Watch your language, Joe," interjected Mrs. B.

"—Bobsie's family! And get off my back about my goddamn language, Gina. I won't criticize your lousy cooking if you don't criticize the way I talk."

"You criticize her cooking all the time," said Andrea.

"That's what I'm saying, Miss Smart Mouth. If she stops getting after me about saying 'hell' once in a while, maybe I'll stop complaining about her food."

"Yeah, that'll happen," said Andrea.

I was in awe of the fact that she could stand up to Mr. B that way. But he always made her pay for it.

"It'll happen when your nose starts shrinking, Pinocchio," he said, followed by, as usual, that laugh.

Andrea tried to act as if she didn't care what he said, but, sitting next to her at their crowded table, I could sense her body tensing up whenever her father insulted her. Sometimes she even got tears in her eyes, but then she'd leave the table quickly so he wouldn't see that he'd gotten to her. When that happened, I wanted to tell off Mr. B and go after her, but I was too timid to do either.

In the spring of my senior year at Watertown High, when Andrea was a sophomore, we were in "The Sound of Music" together. She had a fantastic voice and, against all odds, was chosen over several juniors and seniors to play the lead role, Maria Von Trapp. (I had a bit part, myself, as the Nazi naval commander who orders Captain Von Trapp to report to the naval base at Bremmerhaven, just before the family flees Austria.) Even Mr. B displayed some pride in Andrea for her achievement. If nothing else, he liked a winner.

"You must have wiped up the floor with those upperclassmen at that audition, huh, kid?" he said to her when she and I went to her house after the final cast list was posted.

I could see that Andrea wanted to resist giving her father satisfaction from her triumph, but she was so starved for a positive response from him that she couldn't help smiling.

I got to know Andrea better during play rehearsals, which happened to coincide with Tony starting to date Emily Michalowski. That relationship pretty much took Tony out of the picture for me, because Emily liked a dedicated boyfriend and Tony was happy to oblige. He was totally smitten with her. I decided to ask Mr. Algieri, the director of the play, if I could be his assistant during rehearsals. I entertained fantasies about being a director someday, plus it would give me an opportunity to watch Andrea's

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

performance develop. He was glad to have the help, so I was at every rehearsal, despite my small role.

Andrea was amazing. She had a face and voice that were made for the stage. But she was humble, too. And she was a perfectionist. Whenever she missed a note or screwed up her lines, she would berate herself—to the point where Mr. Algieri would have to tell her to let it go so they could move on. He got so frustrated with her over this sometimes that he would take her aside and talk her down.

“I’m so *stupid*, Bobby!” she said to me after one of those conferences. “Mr. Algieri keeps telling me not to be so hard on myself, but I can’t help it. I feel like an idiot out there when I screw up.”

“I can see why,” I said. “You’re in a tough spot. You beat out all those juniors and seniors for the lead, so you feel like they’re just sitting around waiting for you to fail.”

Andrea looked at me as if she were seeing me for the first time. “That’s it, Bobby! That’s exactly it! How did you know that?”

I shrugged. I knew it because I took in everything she said and every emotion that crossed her face, but I was too shy to tell her that. “It just seems logical,” I said. “I’m pretty sure anyone in your place would feel that way.”

After that exchange, Andrea started seeking me out at the rehearsals. I would encourage her to vent her frustrations, which made it a little easier for her not to berate herself on stage. She would even call me at home in the evening sometimes to go over what had happened at rehearsal that day. I was afraid to call her at home very often because Tony and Mr. B. would have given me a hard time about being her boyfriend. Unfortunately, she already had boyfriend—of sorts: Scott Ryan, a star athlete at the high school. Not that *he* was much help to her. Andrea vented her frustrations about him sometimes, too. From what she told me, and from what I observed, he pretty much took her for granted. After all, he was a hot-shot senior and she was just a lowly sophomore. Tony didn’t like him either, but Mr. B loved having a *real* jock coming over to the house all the time. He could spend half-an-hour dissecting the latest game with Scott while Andrea sat there waiting to go out.

“The Sound of Music” was a big hit, and for a few weeks afterward it seemed that everyone in the school was aware of Andrea. I kept hearing comments in the halls about how attractive and talented she was. I was afraid that she would get a big head and not want to hang out with me anymore, but she remained a loyal friend. Even Scott treated her a little better for a while because it made him look good that he’d discovered such a hot underclassmen before any of his peers had.

Then, one day, a couple weeks before graduation, I happened to be walking down the street where Jodi Smith, one of the most popular girls in the senior class, lived. It was after dark and Scott’s car was parked in front of her house. As I passed the car, I saw Scott and Jodi going at it hot and heavy in the front seat. Jodi was one of those upperclassmen Andrea had beaten out for the lead role in “The Sound of Music” and she had clearly found a way to get her revenge.

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

Naively, I waited to hear from Andrea that Scott had broken up with her, but graduation came and went and nothing changed. Scott continued to see Andrea while he was fooling around with Jodi—I wasn't the only one who had seen them together—and finally I knew I had to let Andrea know she was being taken for a ride. One evening in mid-June, she agreed to take a walk along the Charles River with me, so I went over to her house to pick her up. Mr. and Mrs. Buffacio were sitting in lawn chairs in front of the house.

"Hey, Bobsie," said Mr. B as I got out of the car, "where have you been hiding? Our food bill has gone down while you've been away, but I miss having you to kick around."

"Thanks, Mr. B. I've missed you, too. Is Andrea around?"

"I think she's upstairs polishing her nose. Go on in."

Soon, Andrea and I were strolling the path along the Charles, listening to the birds sing their evening songs.

"I'm going to miss talking to you at school every day next year," said Andrea.

"I'll just be over at Emerson."

"But you'll be living in a dorm. I bet you won't come home much."

"We can talk on the phone."

"You'll be too busy for that, college man."

"I'll always have time to talk to you, Andrea."

"You're a good friend, Bobby. Lately, it seems like you're better friends with me than you are with Tony."

"Tony has Emily now. They're pretty tight."

"I think he lets her run his life a little *too* much."

"You said it, not me."

We laughed.

"Speaking of girlfriends and boyfriends," I said, seeing my opening, "how are things between you and Scott lately?"

"About the same. Why?"

Suddenly, my stomach felt tight. I knew I had to tell Andrea what Scott was up to, and I'd even imagined I'd get some satisfaction from busting him, but suddenly I realized that this was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

"I think there's something you ought to know about Scott."

"What's that?"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, Andrea, but..."

I hesitated.

"But what, Bobby?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

"Scott's fooling around with Jodi Smith."

Andrea stopped walking and looked at me incredulously. "What are you talking about?"

"People have seen him making out with her"

"I don't believe it."

"And last weekend, when he told you he had a baseball workshop, they apparently went up to her family's cabin in Maine. Jake Fisher told me that and he's—"

"Scott's best friend."

Andrea turned away and stared out across the river for a moment. She took a few deep breaths then turned back to me.

"I don't believe Scott would do something like that."

"It's true, Andrea. There's no doubt about it. I saw them making out myself."

"You what? When?"

"About a month ago."

"A month ago? Where?"

"In his car, in front of her house."

Now she was angry. "You saw this a month ago and you're just telling me *now*?"

"I'm sorry. I thought Scott would be man enough to break up with you, so I wouldn't have to tell you about this at all. But he's such an asshole that—"

"*He's* an asshole? What about you? You're supposed to be my friend! People have been laughing at me behind my back for a month and you didn't tell me about it?"

"Nobody's been laughing at you behind your—"

"What kind of friend does something like that?"

"I didn't want to hurt you."

"Oh, and *this* doesn't hurt me? Thanks a lot, 'friend.'"

She turned on her heels and started walking back in the direction of her house.

"Come on, Andrea. Where are you going?"

"I'm walking home, Bobby. I need to be away from you right now."

"Don't walk. I'll give you a ride."

"I don't want to ride with you."

"I was just trying to help you out, Andrea. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you have—a lot. Don't call me, okay? I don't think I can talk to you for a while."

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

“Come on, Andrea...”

She kept walking. I was crestfallen. I stared across the river for a while, wishing I could take back everything I had said and let someone else break the news to Andrea. Finally, I trudged back to the car.

Partially because our friendship, as such, was pretty new and I didn't know the rules, and partially because I can be an idiot about the way women feel, I took Andrea at her word and didn't call her, even when I heard that she'd broken up with Scott. (Since then, more than one girl-friend has accused me of not getting the subtext of her statements.) Of course Andrea wanted me to call her and was disappointed when I didn't. Tony might have clued me in about what she was really feeling, but he was still too preoccupied with Emily to pay much attention to either of us. Andrea got increasingly hurt as the weeks went by and I didn't get in touch, so that, by the end of summer, when I was packing for the move to Emerson and finally decided to call her, she was cold and distant—which hurt *me*.

As Andrea had predicted, once I was ensconced in my dorm at Emerson, college became my life. I started losing touch with Tony, and consequently his family, met other girls and eventually started thinking of my feelings for Andrea as a childish high school crush. Every once in a while, I'd hear something from my mother about her doing well in a school play or concert, but I never went to any of them. I still felt uncomfortable about the way things had ended between us and, besides, it was high school stuff.

In her senior year, Andrea won an award at a state drama competition and got a scholarship to study Theatre at Boston University. I ran into her once during the summer before she started there, and, I have to admit, felt a little of the old attraction. But she had moved on, and so had I. We agreed that we ought to get together sometime during the school year, since I was studying Film and she was studying Theatre and Emerson and BU were only a few minutes apart on the subway.

But it never happened. I was part of her old life, as she was part of mine, and I'm sure she wanted to leave the old life behind as much as I'd wanted to when I started college. Somehow that desire is intensified when you go to college so close to home. By my senior year at Emerson, Tony and I had lost touch completely and I'd almost forgotten about Andrea. I never ran into her or any of the Buffacios, because I was living in Jamaica Plain with some fellow filmmakers and was so busy that I only went back to Watertown for big family events.

In mid-April of my senior year, the day before the Boston Marathon, I found myself burned out from working on my senior film project, so I took the day off to go to the Boston Theatre Marathon. It's was a crazy annual event—the artists' answer to the jocks running in the streets—ten straight hours of original ten-minute plays, which I'd intended to go to for years. I'd been given two tickets by a friend who found she couldn't go, but none of my other friends were interested, so I ended up going alone.

The Marathon was held at a BU facility with two small theatres, tucked behind a Burger King on Commonwealth Avenue. Both theatres were packed, so I ended up standing at the back of one of them. The plays were

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

surprisingly good, so the time flew by. It took me a long time to get tired of standing, and when I finally did I was hungry as well, so I took a break and went over to the Burger King. I ate at a table by the window, watching the cars fly by on Commonwealth and the people strolling along in the promising spring air.

When I was finished, I took my tray to the waste receptacle, barely registering the fact that a woman was sitting at the table next to it. I had dumped the waste from my tray, put the tray on top of the receptacle, and turned to go, when the woman said, "Bobby? Don't you recognize me?"

I turned to look at her and, in fact, did not recognize her. I figured it was either a case of mistaken identity on her part or that I was about to be embarrassed at having forgotten someone I should have known. She wasn't a bad looking woman, but her strong features were unbalanced by a small nose that didn't seem to fit her face. Definitely not my type.

"You really don't recognize me do you?" she said.

Then I recognized her voice, and all of her features, with the exception of the nose, and it all fell into place.

"Andrea?"

"I had my nose done," she said a little sheepishly. "I thought I'd have a better chance to make it in show business this way. What do you think?"

It *was* Andrea. It couldn't be Andrea, but it was. It felt to me as if she'd disfigured herself. It actually made my stomach a little queasy.

"What's the matter, Bobby? Don't you like it?"

I was speechless. A profound feeling of sadness and disappointment washed over me. The girl who had once been able to stare down her evil father had finally caved in. She had let the Mr. B's of the world get inside her head and make her *see* herself as ugly, and in response she'd actually *made* herself ugly. I couldn't say that, of course—and perhaps someone who had not known her before the nose job would have still considered her beautiful—but the Andrea I had known and loved was gone. Ultimately, I had to say something, so I said the only honest thing I could say without hurting her feelings.

"It's fine, Andrea. It's just that..."

"What, Bobby?"

I shrugged.

"I always thought you were beautiful the way you were."