

HOLIDAYS

Halloween is the time of year Mandy has begun to think about Christmas. She is not so interested in costumes and trick or treating—it's all too dangerous. Plastic masks that scrape her face, tripping on gowns she would never normally wear, trying to keep the flashlight focused in front of her and at her feet at the same time. Ever since moving she doesn't trust the new folks much anyway.

Being 11, helping out around the house, she gets an allowance. It started when she was 9 and her Mom needed more from her. When they lived in the city, things were easier to get done--everything and everyone within a block of her apartment. Here, down longer, darker roads, things take more time. The orange and black and the fallen leaves instruct Mandy that green and red will soon replace the screeching cats and rotting pumpkins. The time to start saving to buy Christmas gifts.

Her Mom is a hairdresser in the strip mall in town. On school holidays and vacation days she has to go in with her Mom. She doesn't much care for the smells at the parlor--singed hair, a thousand hair products, and burnt coffee. Seems there is never an up-to-date magazine to thumb through, or other kids to watch with. "Hey, look at that lady's EYEBROW " "Does that guy really think those thin hairs count as enough to be cut?" Most customers are not so comfortable when Mandy is there anyway. Her hair so different from her Mom's--"Is that really your daughter?" Some days there is no right answer. Her Mom has to get the tips she needs.

The KMart has some game machines in the entrance way. Residue from snow, mud, salt--the floors are dulled by the grit and the fluorescents. Mandy takes her time dropping her quarters in---she watches people, or acts busy for as long as possible to spread the time flat and smooth. She backs away and lets a local kid go at the game first. Nobody ever wins. The claw--no matter how much she practices---never deposits a stuffed bull frog or something for her. The sound of the occasional drop of a soda can through the machine may cause her to rethink how to spend her change anyway. She is too big for the fake Merry Go Round and helicopter outside. The pony is broken so it

never stops and the motorcycle will never start. The people who work in the Radio Shack all seem really greasy, like they'd split like a branch. They hover over Mandy as soon as she pops in, making sure she doesn't try out a toy or plastic piano. Most people just come in to buy batteries anyway, and she doesn't know what those skinny, slippery salespeople find to do all day.

The Dollar Store is a refuge---watching the merchandise go from arched black cats to candy canes without stripes or something. Mandy can spend a good deal of her day there. Enough aisles and high shelves, she does not feel watched---suspicious. Even though she is different from most of the kids around, she can recognize the ones whose clothes are always a size too big or small cuz that's what their Moms can buy. The shoes with stiff plastic soles that never get broken in--just broke. The patterns or checks with colors and shapes that do not quite match. Tight shirt, loose pants. Loose pants, tight shirt. No one mismatches mittens or socks. That is indeed what poor people do.

Some items are there year round. Get dusty. Can't even sell them at the Dollar Store! Candy and toothpaste decorated with the same colors as in the A&P, but with different names---and just do not taste as good. Items on the bottom shelves broken and misplaced. Colors and textures with the stuff hanging from the walls top to bottom. There is no place to sit down, so once Mandy's feet are tired she might sit on the bus stop bench, just for a spell, before returning to the beauty shop.

This year Christmas comes on a Thursday, so Mandy goes along to the mall when her Mom goes to work. She manages to keep up with the small jobs at home--taking the trash to the street every week--folding clothes--rubbing her Mom's shoulders and feet. She's going to buy a present for her Mom and her best friend "back home", Michelle. She has earned enough to get them each something.

"I'm sorry it doesn't work out for you to stay with the Turners next door. It's gonna be some long work days with everyone trying to get pretty for Christmas." Her Mom pulls into the parking lot---the frost still on the car windows. "Maybe by winter vacation you'll have a best friend to stay with." With what Mandy goes through at

school, she doesn't think so, but never bothers her Mom with such things. Yeah, ripe tears are always behind her eyes, but she figures she can manage the spit balls, gummed up combination locks, and intense dodge ball—"You're OUT"--cuz there are children starving in China or somewhere. "Patience is a virtue." "Hatred is just ignorance." "They'll come around."--all distracted words of encouragement from her Mom. "Meet me at the shop for lunch, and don't waste too much money."

Mandy has some cash and change for the day. Her own, since Halloween, savings and "play" money from her Mom. Since it is so cold out today, she decides to breeze past the greasy pretzel stick guys at Radio Shack, the hot air blasted foyer at K Mart, and instead, roam the Dollar store. It's pretty crowded, not like in New York, but crowded enough. She watches as women throw things into their shopping baskets, trying to fill some quota. "And I need to buy so and so something, and Mrs. So and So, and the paperboy." The ones with younger kids have them shellacked on their hips or dragging their hands, sticky from snot or candy. Sometimes only by their mittens as they slid out of a sleeve. Everyone trying to maneuver in the narrow aisles wearing bulky winter clothes. Some teenaged boys come in, talking louder than anyone else, shuffling with fringe hung at the backs of their sneakers. They look at the big bags of green plastic soldiers, then realize they're too old for those. On to candy, ski gloves, and an oversize woman's bra. "You gotta pay for THAT one, man, the chick at the register knows my sister."

Mandy steadies herself, and focuses her gaze straight on---up and down the aisles--side to side in this methodical kind of dance. The music in the background pushes her along. One row at a time, side to side, back and forth---she needs to keep the routine to view all her options---she's trying to find something that looks the most brilliant, the freshest, the most...she stops. Within her reach are tree ornaments, black angels, with thick velvet, glittery satin gowns and scrolls with music or harps. Short-haired boys, and girls with her same braids. Lush red on their cheeks, mouths open in song, or eyes shut with concentration. One angel has a blue robe with silver detail, a silver- trimmed belt, silver wings and a silver harp. She seems like the Mom angel. The one who knows the most--floating somewhere above, with careless encouragement--

she makes it seem so easy. Mandy recounts her money--yup, three dollars. She chooses a boy with tightly curled hair and a white satin robe for Michelle, the Blue Angel for her Mom and a pink-gowned girl for herself. She draws each one carefully off the hook, holds them apart so their scrolls and trumpet and such will not get tangled.

She waits in line--mostly fat butts in her way--the grainy floor, the music, the fluorescent lights---it is all a little more magical. Her turn comes and she places her purchases on the counter. The chick, looking nowhere in particular, rings up the items with one hand, and puts them in a white plastic bag with the other.

"That's a dollar fifty."

"But everything's a dollar here. I have three dollars."

"No, not THOSE angels, those are two for one dollar."

She buys just the three, and with her face as far back in her hood as she can get it, heads off to meet her Mom for lunch.

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