

MIDWEST REVIEW 13



FICTION

NONFICTION

POETRY

ART

Little Extras

Victor was home alone. His mother didn't really understand how bad school was for him, but she let him get away with missing a day here or there when she needed someone at the house for a repair appointment or a delivery. "How's your stomach?" she'd asked the night before, her voice runny with vodka.

Victor was lying in The Pit, watching *Days of Our Lives* and eating a second bowl of cereal, for lunch. Soap operas felt haunted to him, trapped in some lost past and skipping around between plots that seemed like they should connect but never did. A man was visiting a dying woman in the hospital, a woman who wasn't his wife. A businessman was being blackmailed by his daughter-in-law. A cold snap was wreaking havoc on a grove owner's citrus crop. The only story he wanted to watch was the one about the teenage boy who had run away to Los Angeles to become a singer, but there were just a few minutes of that right at the start of the show, where Kenny met with a producer in a windowless brown office. The man touched his leg.

The moment that plot finally returned, the doorbell rang. It was the workman from Michigan Bell, there to install the new phone line. Victor stared at the man's tool belt, plugged all around with screwdrivers and pliers, and on his hip, an actual handset that dangled from a spiral cord and ended in three clips. When they were little, Victor and Mindy would slot pens and forks into their waistbands and play repairman with the junk piled in the back of the garage. No one in their family knew how to fix anything.

The workman cleared his throat. "Are you the man of the house?" "I'm the...boy of the house. We don't have any men." Victor made a sweeping welcome gesture.

The man stared at the tattered sleeve of his purple pajama top, and held up a narrow box, shaking it like it was a silly toy. "Well, do you know where we're putting this Princess?"

Victor sank, like he did in the school halls, in gym class, when the boys called him Vicky, or Edelfairy, or worse. But then he noticed the

word, written across the box in dewy letters. *Princess*. The package featured two images: a teenage girl lying on a mustardy plaid couch looking at her green fingernails, and a woman in a red nightgown and a chunky necklace reclined on a gold bedspread sipping from a snifter. Both of them were talking on the ivory-colored phone, which had a sleek, curved shape, just right for cradling between their shoulders and ears. It was a phone for a woman.

"Up in The Cave," Victor said. "My mom's room." He bounded up the stairs two at a time but slipped at the landing. The man left the front door cracked open, as if he might need to make a quick escape.

"It's for the new business," Rhonda explained about the third line, later that night. But it rang only in her bedroom and it had no answering machine connected to it. "If I'm not home, don't pick up, and even if I am, don't pick up. And I don't want any of you using it, even if there's someone on both of the other lines." Victor was in sixth grade, Mindy was in fifth, Ethan in eighth. The telephone was their life. But none of them knew the new number, not even the first digit.

The line would ring at odd hours, not business hours, the bell muted to a clack. "She talks really quiet when she answers," Mindy told Victor as she rubber-stamped a dank Little Extras invoice. They were playing Store in the basement with their mother's old inventory—dried flower arrangements, hair clips and braiding beads, pornographic gag gifts, lacquerware bowls and trays, mosaic mirrors, baby booties and onesies, knock-off Tupperware, costume jewelry—from the string of gift companies she'd run out of the house, always Doing Business As, d/b/a Little

Extras. Mindy's bedroom was the only one to share a wall with The Cave. Back when their father still lived there, it was during rounds of Store that she would summarize their parents' fights for him. "I never heard her talk this quiet," she said, tearing an invoice from the pad and passing it to Victor. "And she eats in there late at night now, too. Weird stuff. Soup. Cold chicken. She leaves the dirty dishes, sometimes for days."

Victor dug under a box of cloisonné bangles for a mold-edged velvet sample board lined with cheap birthstone rings. His eye went right to October, to the opal, his birthstone, and Mindy's. "It's scary when she talks quiet. It sounds like she's choking," he said. Their birthdays had just passed. They were 364 days apart; her birthday was on the eighteenth, his was the nineteenth. "Even, and Odd," his father used to call them. Eighteen was the Hebrew alphanumeric for *chai*, which meant life. Nineteen was a prime number, which meant that it was indivisible. Nothing could go into it.

He grabbed an old Little Extras pen and flicked on the adding machine, plugged into a light socket on a low wooden beam overhead, part of the cage-like structure that held up The Pit. "I almost like it better when she yells."

"I love her yell. *Min-deee!*" His sister did a perfect imitation of Rhonda's gravelly voice, the edges of her mouth drawn down tight, like a comic book villainess. "I heard her crying in her room once, last week. It went on for a long time, but when I knocked on her door and asked if she was okay, she didn't answer. She pretended she wasn't in there."

"She looks like Ethan when she cries. They both have bad cries. Not that I have a

good cry—it's too high. *A-heh, a-heh, a-heee-
aah.* You have the best cry of all of us." The
adding machine's green LED numbers flick-
ered. Victor wiggled the plug.

"I have the most practice." Mindy tapped
her fingernail against the flaking, foil-plated
edge of the opal ring, the way they'd seen
Rhonda do when she'd brought them along to
her wholesalers. "What can you do for me on
these?"

Victor studied his sister's hazel eyes, sol-
emn but threaded with gold, so much prettier
and deeper than his, which looked like flat
brown discs, like a squished raisin. He hadn't
heard her cry that much recently. Maybe
she mostly cried alone. "These are real opal
chips," he said. "But if you take a gross, I'll
give you a price."

Rhonda had recently transitioned Little
Extras out of costume jewelry. "The 80s are
all about gold," she said. Always the first
audience for her pitches, she'd assembled
the kids for a Family Meeting in The Pit. She
set her new black hardpack briefcase on the
base of the fireplace and unlatched it one side
at a time. She pushed up the sleeves of her
gold cowl-neck, and batted her eyes, caramel
in a hover of black-gold eyeshadow, like a
fancy chocolate. Then she removed a pair
of rolled-up black vinyl satchels from her
bag, loosening the elastic bands at each end
and unspooling the cylinders slowly, like a
Torah scroll, pressing them flat and splaying
their chamois linings. Victor half-stood off
his throw pillow as she revealed rows of gold
necklaces and bracelets, arrayed in graduated
lengths and thicknesses. "At a retail jewelry
store like Filstein's or Baum & Baum, the av-
erage markup is four-hundred percent. That's

because they have to pay overhead. Rent,
utilities, salaries, security," she ticked on her
fingers. "I carry my inventory with me, right
to you." She held the attaché above her head,
shaking her frizzy hair as if letting it down,
though their hair didn't go down. "This is
my only *over-head*. So I'm able to pass the
savings on to you." Ethan released a big fake
laugh, but his smile looked genuine.

Rhonda unfastened some of the toggles
that held the necklaces in place, and selected
three—a hollow rope choker, a double-length
serpentine pendant, and a thin chain braided
with strands of white, yellow, and rose gold.
Each was marked with a hand-written tag,
a code that contained the purchase date and
the wholesale price in reverse, a system she'd
developed for a previous version of Little
Extras. She'd taught Ethan how to decode it,
and he'd taught Mindy, who'd taught Victor.
Though he was the middle child, Victor was
always last to learn things like this. "He has
other skills," his mother would interject when
his siblings teased him, though she never said
what these were.

"You deserve nice things for yourself,
for your family," Rhonda said, looking each
of them in the eye. "My starting prices are
forty-percent off retail." She held up a black
ledger, one of their dad's from when he was
finishing accounting school, but with *Little
Extras* now scripted on the cover in gold
paint marker. "I do layaway." She closed the
briefcase, and suctioned a portable credit
card press to its top, fanning herself with a
stack of carbon receipts. "And I take plastic."

She fastened the choker around Ethan's
neck and the pendant on Mindy, leaving
Victor with the tricolor braid. He held up
his ratty curls and felt her nails tickle in the

trough of his neck, like when she'd picked the nits out when he'd had headlice, or when she'd put calamine on his chicken pox. She handed each of them a plastic hand mirror, which they had glitter-painted gold the week before. She leaned in, joining Victor in the gilt frame. "That piece is perfect with your complexion," she said.

Ethan stared at the necklaces. "How did you get the money to buy all of this?"

Rhonda narrowed her eyes. She loved to talk about money—how little their father paid in child support, how she was paid half what the men in her insurance office made. But she hated to be asked about her finances. "I have a benefactor," she said.

"The last time you said that, we had to sort through those garbage bags full of old coupons, and Uncle Irv was indicted for mail fraud." Ethan scratched at his neck, which had gone red and splotchy. "This is itching me. Can I take it off?"

Rhonda pursed her lips like she did whenever Ethan acted like a know-it-all, which was often. *My second husband*, she called him, a nickname that could be flattering or critical, or sometimes, somehow, both at once. "Some people don't respond to gold," she said. She reached over toward him, but as she unfastened the clasp, she seemed to catch a cramp. She clutched her stomach and breathed through it. Then she snatched Ethan's sparkly gold mirror and replaced it with a silver one. "For them, I have silver."

The first Little Extras Gold Party was scheduled for the following weekend in The Pit. Victor received an invite under his bedroom door, a castoff from the ones that he had helped address. The gold foil lining was sepa-

rated from the envelope, and torn, but he still found it exciting, even though, like cooking dinner for the family or riding his bike to Qwik Pick for Rhonda's cigarettes, he knew that his attendance was a job disguised as a privilege. Dressed in the white shirt and dark slacks he wore to shul, he opened the door and welcomed the "clients," he carried their coats upstairs and stacked them on Mindy's bed, and he passed around plastic cups of wine and Chinnet bowls of pretzel sticks. He and his siblings had each been given a tag line to say when someone new arrived. He wished he had Mindy's, "Come in. Stay awhile." Or Ethan's, who got to make up his own: "Have fun. But don't forget to buy something." His was, "Make yourself at home, in our home." He presented it with a bow and a fake English accent, like a butler, until Rhonda overheard, and snapped her fingers at him. "Tone it down, Kosher Ham."

Most of the women were familiar from other Little Extras sales parties, the mothers of kids in their neighborhood and these mothers' sisters, ladies from Rhonda's insurance office or from her white bowling league on the East Side and the black one in Southfield. But some of them were from the new poker game she hosted once a month. Victor's favorite was a Chaldean lady named Tainya. She had a complicated cigarette case with a skinny lighter on one edge, and she held her hand around his when he lit her Benson & Hedges, batting her eyes like he was her suitor. She was the only one who dressed up for the event, wearing a silky mint top and belted designer jeans. Everyone else was in saggy tunics or chunky sweaters. Splayed on the shag carpet and throw pillows, hissing and chattering, they looked like the

lizards in his classroom terrarium.

"They're mostly all divorced too," Ethan said. He was up on the kitchen step stool, leaning over the counter to decant Chablis into a grid of cups, his hairy wrists slithering from his shirt. "How do they have any money to buy gold?"

"Maybe Vegas?" Victor said. "Didn't the league win this year?"

"Barely enough to pay for their airfare."

"Some of them are paying with credit cards," Mindy said.

Victor nodded. "Mom says jewelry is an investment in yourself."

"Don't believe everything Mom says."

Ethan pushed the tray to the counter's edge. "Try not to swish too much, queer-bait. You'll spill."

"Appraise, and praise," Rhonda said, once his tray was empty. "And watch for sticky fingers." Victor went to his assigned end of the room and helped customers in and out of their necklaces. He held up the mirror while women held back their hair. He told women with lined faces, women who smelled of stale cheese and had cat hair clinging to their turtlenecks, "That piece is perfect with your complexion."

Victor swayed his hips to the Pointer Sisters as he waited to flip the stack of records. Mindy came up next to him, and they did The Bump, until Victor got too into it. She looked back at the crowd. "Jewelry doesn't make everyone prettier," she said.

"Jewelry is about how pretty you *feel*," Victor said. Rhonda was across the room, hovering over two clients on the steps of The Pit, but he felt her eyes dart to him.

"Space Invader," Mindy whispered.

At the end of the night, they rinsed the

plastic cups that weren't too lipstick stained and re-bagged the uneaten pretzels. Rhonda took over the kitchen table. She was surrounded by a jumble of receipts, credit card slips, and loose stacks of tens, twenties, and a few fifties and hundreds, and she flipped through them with one hand and worked her new adding machine with the other. Though Ethan had bragged that he wouldn't be roped into anything "fishy" in this latest version of Little Extras, he sat right next to her, dutifully filling in the official business ledger, as well as the special version she kept for the IRS. "You have to cook to eat," she said, an expression she claimed to have learned from her great uncles, who'd worked for the Chicago mob. Victor dragged the heavy garbage bags out to the garage, and Mindy scooted behind him with both feet on a rag, mopping up the loose red slick he left behind.

Rhonda fed up the printout while lighting a cigarette. "The first night is always charmed. Don't draw conclusions from the first night," she said. Her new business line began ringing up in The Cave, and she cocked her head toward the ceiling briefly. "But we grossed \$2300." She flexed her arms and tooted out smoke rings. "Supermom strikes again."

Victor put his hands up and cheered, and Mindy joined in. They poked their fingers through Rhonda's smoke rings. Even Ethan smirked, proudly eyeing the cash. But then his smile vanished. "Can you move this filthy money now so I can finish my algebra?"

They were all watching TV a few weeks later when Rhonda arrived home from work carrying an overstuffed garment bag. Ethan was in a sour mood because their dad had forgotten to pick him up from computer class,

again, and he'd had to take the public bus home. "Old Lady/Cleaning Lady," he called the route, a cruel version of the system's OL/CL—Orchard Lake/Central Lathrup—acronym. Rhonda pushed herself into the narrow patch of carpet between the kids and the screen, and drew down the zipper on her bag slowly, revealing a patch of whitish fuzz. "My first fur. A gift to myself, from myself, for 32 years of hard work." She buffed the coat like it was a magic lantern. "It's arctic fox." She parted the front to reveal a shimmering, ice blue lining. Stitched into the inside pocket in white script were the words *Little Extras*. Mindy's eyes went wide. Victor gasped.

"It looks like Papa's hair," Ethan said. He craned his neck to watch as Gilligan fell out of his hammock.

Rhonda folded an arm across her stomach. "There's Burger King in the car," she said. "Put on your outfits. We have a party in Southfield."

The first two gold parties had been in their subdivision. The next one had been at Rhonda's old boss' new house, a big white stucco box overlooking a lake. But the most recent party had been in Southfield, at the house of another saleswoman from Rhonda's insurance job, a black lady who had moved into the neighborhood with her sister, around the corner from their Grandma Nicky's old house.

Victor had loved that party, not just because the music was better and the guests snuck them tips. He enjoyed watching Rhonda in that crowd. Their mother talked all the time about how she had grown up poor on Chicago's near West Side, in a run-down apartment above her uncle's shoe store, and they had been there to visit their Bubby, who

still lived there, and it was actually true. Her closest friends growing up had been black, including Victor's godmother, Auntie Shelly, who they sometimes stayed with in her lakefront apartment on the South Side. His mother didn't put on mannerisms around black people, like white kids at school trying to act cool. And she wasn't reactive, like Grandma Nicky, who power locked the doors of her Buick whenever a black person walked by.

Rhonda's new coat earned a lot of compliments at the party, and she left it on, or took it off only to put it back on again, for most of the evening. Victor understood. He couldn't stop looking at it. It was so pure and enveloping, like a cloud lair, but also cruel and decadent, made of rare animals that had been murdered and skinned. And its color was at once uniform and mutable, sometimes grey, sometimes aquamarine, sometimes platinum, depending on the light or even the airy wake of someone walking by. He couldn't figure out how many pelts it was made from. He didn't even know how big an arctic fox might be. "Where do the furs join together?" he asked Mindy. He knew she'd done a Michigan school history project on French Canadian trappers, but she just rolled her eyes and gestured toward the kitchen, where Ethan was pouring off a gallon of the sweet Zinfandel that Rhonda said this crowd preferred. "They need more wine in the rec room."

The guests stayed late, especially those who complained most about needing to be at work early. Nearly everyone seemed to buy something. "The anklets are moving well, for once," Ethan said. And the crowd cheered when the hostess spotted Victor shuffling and singing along to Rick James' "Big Time," and pulled him in to dance with her. He was

a lefty, and he always turned in the wrong direction, fouling up the moves he and Rhonda had learned in her Disco dance class. "Just let me lead, baby," the woman whispered.

Rhonda seemed elated on the drive home. The price of gold had been rising—she or Ethan would read out the value from the *Free Press* every morning—and she'd jacked up prices twice in the past few weeks. "They say it could hit 1000 dollars an ounce," she said, again, on the car ride home. "Maybe you boys will be able to go to college after all."

"And Mindy," Victor said. His sister elbowed him in the ribs.

But as soon as they walked in the door at home, the business line started ringing. Rhonda went up to The Cave without even telling them the final take.

She came back down forty minutes later, flushed with vodka, her makeup blurred. She was still wearing her fur, but it no longer seemed to give her any joy. Mindy had gone upstairs to talk to her best friends, the Jens, but Victor and Ethan were still finishing their homework at the kitchen table. Another of the thin bulbs on the overhead fixture had just burned out, and there hadn't been any replacements in the closet for years. Rhonda opened the freezer and added a gluey bolt of Stoli to her glass. She scooted into Ethan's chair with him.

"You're such a good boy," she said stroking his wavy hair. She squinted at his day planner, at everything he still had to finish. "I'm sorry I kept you from your schoolwork. I know you like to turn everything in on time. I was never very good in school." She sniffled. "I'm sorry I can't help you more."

Ethan pulled his head away. "I don't need your help."

Her head went down, and she started to cry. "He promised," she whimpered, leaning into Ethan's bony shoulder. "He promised to help. To be with us. To be a father for all of you. He's good at math."

Victor had no idea what she was talking about. "...Dad?"

Ethan tried to shrug off her embrace, but Rhonda just shook and exhaled, and continued crying. Then she glanced down at her stomach and wove her hands together across it. "What would you think of having a little brother or sister?"

Victor felt a trilling rush. He loved babies, the way they gurgled and reached out for him, the way they were still excited about all the things they didn't know. But Ethan narrowed his eyes. "I already have a little brother and sister."

Rhonda cried even harder. "You don't want it either," she sobbed. "He'll never leave her. Never. If he's lying about that, what else is he lying about?"

Victor reached out his hand and laced in with his mother's long witchy fingers, every knuckle familiar. She let him take hold, but she stayed focused on his brother. Ethan looked back into his history textbook. "Probably, everything."

Rhonda slammed the front door, and without even calling a family meeting, blurted out, "We finally got our big break." She wouldn't explain further. "Outfits and coats, now." She turned off the television, which was blaring emptily into The Pit. Victor had turned it up to mask the Jazz Band riffs he was practicing on his saxophone. "Put that away," she said. "It sounds like you're choking a dolphin." She turned out the light in the kitchen where

Ethan was doing his math homework. "Give me the transitive property, or give me death," he said, squinting into his textbook. She picked up the downstairs extension of the kids' second line. "Mindy. Coat, outfit, now. We're going out."

She drove them to Excalibur. "Isn't this a nightclub?" Ethan asked. The entrance featured a velvet rope, and a classic car parked on a lit mirrored platform.

"It's a supper club," Rhonda said. "We're here for supper."

"What kind of car is that?" Mindy asked Victor.

"It's a modern version of a classic Mercedes, called an Excalibur. The restaurant is named for it."

Ethan shoved Victor and pointed at the marquee, all Gothic letters, and a long pommeled "1," ending in a knifepoint. "It's named for King Arthur's sword, moron."

Rhonda slapped Ethan's shoulder and held up one finger, like she was starting a count. "You're both right," she said. "And don't fight with your brother. When you have no one else, you'll need each other."

Excalibur was dim and overheated, and smelled like static. Up front, women in flimsy dresses sat on bronze vinyl stools at a mirror-topped bar or squeezed together in orange banquettes with men in belted jackets and thick moustaches. The dining room was a maze of wood-paneled pillars and op-art carpeting secreting tables with burgundy tablecloths. "They hide all the spilled wine," Ethan said. Everyone was looking around anxiously, like they were waiting to pay and go somewhere much better. A black man in a ribbed brown turtleneck was playing a silver

flugelhorn on a tiny stage. They were the only kids there.

Rhonda checked her fur, and made the kids check their coats as well. She handed Ethan a five to put in the jar. "If it moves, tip it," she said, strutting to the host's stand.

Victor tugged at the seat of the purple wool pants he'd insisted on wearing. His clothes felt tight in all the wrong places, but his mother looked at ease, even in the old emerald dress she'd worn to Ethan's bar mitzvah. Her frizzy hair was picked out into a rufous cloud, and the lights in a potted palm shone through like it was ablaze. A dangly gold necklace kept lassoing her left breast. The tuxedoed maître d' knew her by name.

Rhonda insisted that the waiter bring a split of champagne right away, and she let each of the kids try a sizzling sip. "It's a personalized barrette order," she said, raising her flute. "From Hudson's. Five hundred pairs, for the Christmas rush."

"Aren't barrettes costume jewelry?" Ethan asked.

"Little Extras is Little Extras. The name is the brand." She pointed at the label on the tiny green wine bottle. "It has to be from France to be called champagne."

She didn't even let them look at the menu, but chose everyone's meal, perfectly, down to the dressings for the salads: a filet for Ethan (blue cheese), lobster tail for Victor (thousand island), veal for Mindy (ranch), and surf and turf for herself (Russian). The portions were overwhelming even before the sides of creamed spinach and scalloped potatoes, and they all ended up with piles of leftovers, including the slackening tureen of bananas foster that had been prepared and lit on fire

tableside, even though everyone knew that Mindy hated bananas. But Rhonda insisted that they leave everything behind. She threw down her napkin. "Doggie bags are for dogs."

Though she'd had a giant martini with dinner, Rhonda insisted on starting the order as soon as they got home. She sent Victor down to the basement to retrieve some old Goody inventory—a muddle of jewel-toned barrettes in cloudy plastic bags. Mindy joined him, and they carried the box up together in procession, step by step, even though it wasn't that heavy, and set it on the kitchen table like a coronation offering.

"If I do fifty a day after work, I'll be done before Thanksgiving." Rhonda unscrewed the cap on a tiny jar of white acrylic paint, and poured a dab into a Chinet bowl. She unfolded the list of names the store had sent and dipped her brass-tipped calligraphy pen. *Angel*, she wrote in fluid script across the blue plastic, adding a flower at each end. She repeated this on its twin, then grabbed a thick black marker and crossed the name off the list. She smiled her best, most genuine smile. Mindy nudged Victor. He felt a tingle. "We clear two bucks on every pair," Rhonda said. "Easy money."

The barrette job went wrong right away. Rhonda talked about it all the time, cataloguing every problem, in detail, over and over—on the phone with her friends, while driving Victor and Ethan to Hebrew School, during family meals, in the evening after her first vodka. It became a litany. She had to front the cost for all the materials and wouldn't be reimbursed until the order is complete. She'd underestimated the number of discards

she'd have to make due to errors—the paint couldn't just be wiped from the crevices, and solvents removed the gloss. She got reprimanded in the insurance office for painting barrettes at her desk. She had to cancel two gold parties, and now this bitch from Gold Fingers was stealing her idea. She eventually had to hire her friend Irene to help, and when Irene fell behind, she pressed the kids into service. "Ten pair, each, every night—after homework, before TV."

Ethan and Mindy's handwriting was clear, and they made quick work of their assignments. But Victor had poor penmanship, and his left-handedness meant that he had to contort his wrist and hold the pen high, or the heel of his hand would drag across his script. His discard rate, according to Ethan, was nearly one-in-three. "You're not even a good slave, Vicky. We're probably going to lose the house because of you."

Hanukkah started, but they forgot to light the candles. "So, the Maccabees were slaughtered for nothing?" Ethan screamed. The weather turned frigid and the pipes in their bathroom froze, forcing them to fight over time in Rhonda's tiny shower. Hudson's added a list of inventively spelled names like Tanikka and Shel'vray that not only increased their error count but caused the kids to snicker. "You're being racists," Rhonda snapped. "I didn't raise you to be racists." And when the order finally wrapped, she discovered that her contract only paid the high rate on barrettes that actually sold.

"We've still got ten days until Christmas," she announced as they drove to dinner at the Palace of India. "I'll need you all to turn up the compliments at the next few gold parties."

But don't overdo it." She glanced at Victor in the mirror. "You brought your wallet?" she said to Ethan. "You know that I would never badmouth your father in front of you, but he's three months behind on child support, as usual, and I'm a little short."

"Maybe we shouldn't go out if we can't afford it," Ethan said.

Rhonda lit a menthol. "That's exactly when we need to go out most."

The pipes were finally fixed just before Christmas break, but the hole in the wall was un-patched and ringed in wooly mold, and Victor had gotten used to using Rhonda's bathroom after school. He was mocked in the boy's room between classes, and he felt safe and private in The Cave. He could touch his mother's things, try on her jewelry, dig through the jumble in every drawer, flip through the *Playgirls* piled under her bed, unzip her purses and breathe in their scent: lipstick, cigarettes, Wrigley's original, butter rum Life Savers, Obsession. But as he snuck in there late one afternoon, he found his mother lying on the bed, her arm over her eyes. The room smelled rank, like the guts of a carved pumpkin.

Rhonda turned to face him, her cheeks streaked with mascara, yet she didn't seem startled, or angry. She just extended her arm, inviting him in. Victor crawled up next to her, tentatively. If he ever had a nightmare, he would tiptoe into Mindy's room and sleep on her floor. He hadn't been in his mother's bed in years. Her pillow was damp. "Did they let you off work early for the holidays?" he asked. "Do we have a gold party?"

Rhonda didn't answer. "Oh, Bug," she said, finally, reviving an old nickname she

hadn't used in years. "You're so sweet to check in on me." She stroked his head. "I always said you're the most like me out of all you kids. Creative. Nurturing." Her free hand moved to her stomach, tracing circles on her silky cream blouse. "If I needed your help you would help me, right? You would help Mommy?" She started sobbing in earnest, and she suddenly grabbed his hand, and stared him in the eye. "I need someone. I need...someone...to help me," she cried.

Victor's stomach cramped. His shoes were always untied, his hair tangled, his mannerisms wrong, his homework returned *Illegible. Do Over*. He lost his lunch money, he lost his way. He couldn't even take care of himself. He clutched her fingers. "...I can help."

"Good." She hugged him tighter. "Good. Good boy."

The business line rang, clacking on the nightstand, and Victor felt Rhonda's arm shudder. She picked up the handset and held it for a moment, then set it right back down on its cradle. Victor saw the script on the phone's soft edge. *Princess*.

Rhonda started to cry again. "He said he didn't want it. He made me...get rid of it," she clutched him tighter with each word. "He doesn't want to help. He doesn't want to take care of us. But I've got you, Bug. I've got you. You'll help. Right? Won't you?"

Who? Victor wondered. *What?* He ticked through scenarios in which he could be helpful. Would he get to use the good knives? Assign chores to Ethan? Mow the lawn? A boy in his school had lost two toes to a lawnmower and got to wear a special shoe and skip gym. Victor hated gym.

He wanted to ask questions, to ask the right questions, but the phone rang again

and his mother turned away. This time, as the receiver hovered, he could hear a man's voice, angry, and familiar. *Rhonda. Please? Talk to me. I need you to talk to me right now.* It was not a very businesslike tone.

She pressed the disconnect button and dropped the handset on the bed. Her forearm fell over her forehead, over her eyes. "Unplug it for me, honey," she said. The phone slid down, and onto the floor. "Just unplug it."