

“Supermarket”

by Maura Lammers

At 8 a.m. on Friday morning, Mindy found a shrine in aisle 7 of the Piggly-Wiggly. A small bouquet of wilted wildflowers, a few melted votive candles, and about two dozen folded sheets of paper collected together on the linoleum floor, in the exact spot where Mr. Gillespy had collapsed three days ago from a heart attack. Mindy crouched down on the floor in her no-slip shoes, stuffed the pockets of her red smock with the notes, and tossed the candles and flowers into the trash. The supermarket was empty for now, but that wouldn't last long. Mindy ducked down behind the counter at her cash register, out of sight. With her back against the cabinet and her legs bent up to her chest, she unfolded each scrap of paper and read: *Pray for Nana, she's not getting better. Please bless Ben. Help me forgive him. I need love. I'm afraid, and I need your strength. I don't know what to do. Mindy, can you help me?* On the backs of envelopes, on index cards, on crumpled construction paper, on brown paper bags, on post-it notes. One prayer after another. She recognized some of the handwriting from discarded grocery lists she had picked up over the years – Beth Whalen's cavernous W's and Todd Fehner's slanted letters were impossible to miss – but no one left their name.

The Piggly-Wiggly doors chimed, and as Mindy got to her feet, she found Mrs. Dougan, one of the regular early-risers, pulling a plastic basket from the stack. They glanced at each other at the same time, and Mindy looked away with her usual haste.

“You doin' all right, Mindy?” Mrs. Dougan asked her.

“Oh – yes,” Mindy faltered. She was used to terse, two-to-three word exchanges with Mrs. Dougan while she sacked her groceries. Silence settled between them again as Mindy

stood uncertainly and watched Mrs. Dougan fan her jowled, deeply-grooved face with one hand. The sticky July heat must have already settled in outside. Sweat encircled the collar of her shirt like a fallen halo.

“People wondered where you went,” Mrs. Dougan finally said. “After all the commotion, you know. We were worried about you.”

Mrs. Dougan hadn't said this many words to her in years. Not since Mindy slammed a trailer door in her face. Mindy had been seventeen then, and four months pregnant with her daughter Lyddie. Her daddy had kicked her out of his house, so she moved in with her boyfriend Robbie, a construction worker living in the trailer park on the edge of town. For a week she'd been biding her time, waiting for the right moment to run back home and talk her daddy back into his senses. Then one afternoon Mrs. Dougan showed up in the trailer park with a casserole balanced in her outstretched hands, and broke the news that her dad had left a FOR SALE sign in their front yard. No one had seen him or his truck in days. Her voice sugary, Mrs. Dougan insisted that if Mindy needed any help at all, she would be there, along with everyone else from the New Canaan Baptist Church. That look on her face, that simpering, self-righteous pity, sent a spasm of rage through Mindy. “I don't want your damn charity,” she told Mrs. Dougan, then slammed the trailer door shut.

“Nothing's wrong,” Mindy said to Mrs. Dougan shortly. “My manager let me have yesterday off. I didn't care to go anywhere or see anyone.”

Mrs. Dougan moved in closer, and before Mindy could get away, Mrs. Dougan took hold of her arm with one of her long, wiry hands. “I know what you did,” she said, her eyes staring straight into Mindy's. “I just wanted to say thank you. And God bless you.”

Mindy's veins pulsed under Mrs. Dougan's grip. “What do you mean?”

“You saved Sal Gillespy,” Mrs. Dougan said. “He thought he was dying for sure but –

well, you know.” At Mindy’s blank stare, Mrs. Dougan recoiled slightly. “Don’t you know? Mrs. Gillespy told me all about it. She told everybody. The medics shocked him back to life on the way to the hospital. And when he came to, he was asking for you. Kept saying that he was going up to Heaven, but you stopped him. Your touch healed him.” Mrs. Dougan squeezed her arm even harder. “It was a miracle, Mindy. You worked a miracle.”

Mindy wanted to wrench her arm away from Mrs. Dougan, but the vision of Mr. Gillespy splayed across aisle 7 took all the strength from her body. She found him lying on the floor with his eyes bulging, his face colorless, and his wide barrel of a chest caving in as he gasped for air. As she knelt beside Mr. Gillespy and held one of his sweat-slicked hands in both of hers, Mindy thought of going to church with her daddy all those years ago, and hearing Mr. Gillespy read the gospel. His voice never shook, and he always wore a bow tie and suspenders under his starched jacket, just as he did now. His entire body seized with his next breath, and Mindy clenched her hands to his even tighter. She stayed until the ambulance took him away. For hours afterwards, she kept looking at her hands and thinking that she had touched a dying man.

“I’m glad Mr. Gillespy’s all right,” Mindy said. “I never thought he’d make it through that. But I’ve gotta tell you, I didn’t have a thing to do with it. I didn’t do a miracle.”

“Nonsense. God has blessed you, dear.” With a shake of her head, Mrs. Dougan released her arm. “And I just want to take a minute and say... Well, sorry, I guess. I suppose I could have done more for you in the past. Been more neighborly. It was my mistake.”

“Mrs. Dougan —” Mindy started to say, but Mrs. Dougan blessed her again, and then went on her way with the basket held in the crook of her elbow. In her pockets, Mindy’s skin brushed against the scrap paper prayers again.

In a matter of minutes, Tippy Henderson appeared in front of her register with a half-

full cart, surveying Mindy like a deer about to bolt. "Good morning," Tippy said as Mindy started swiping cans of tuna. Mindy didn't respond, but she could sense Tippy watching her hands. At first, Tippy held her tongue, but after a minute of silence she leaned in and whispered, "Mindy? You always been able to do miracles?"

It didn't stop all afternoon. Seemed like half the people of Hartford, Alabama came up to her, asking about what had happened, thanking her, telling her what a wonder she was, until the line stretched halfway down aisle 3. Mindy repeated again and again that she hadn't done anything, but no one paid attention to her. She scanned and sacked groceries fast, moving everyone on their way so she could have a minute of peace. The worst was when a smug little man wielding a recorder pushed to the front of the line, stuck a microphone under her nose, declared he was from the Dothan Daily News, and asked if she was the Piggly-Wiggly miracle worker. Mindy threatened to call her manager if he didn't leave, but she could see him later, standing outside the doors of the Piggly-Wiggly, interviewing folks as they came in and out.

By the time Miles Mitchum showed up a little after three, the last of the crowd had drifted out the doors. Once he spotted her, he made a beeline for Mindy's register. Miles was a regular who bought groceries like clockwork every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon. Over the years, they'd struck up a friendship during the five minutes it took Mindy to sack his groceries. He was one of the few people who never faked a smile when Mindy handed over his receipt.

"Suppose you heard by now," Mindy said.

"It's all people are talking about," Miles replied. "Everywhere I go, people keep saying you're some kind of miracle worker."

Mindy shook her head. "It's a bunch of horseshit. All I did was sit on the floor."

“You know how people around here are,” Miles said ruefully. “You can't bring up God without a revival.”

Mindy noticed, yet again, that Miles didn't look good. He used to be a big man, but had lost weight too suddenly; he had too much gray in his beard and too much hush in his voice. Months ago, he walked into the Piggly-Wiggly on crutches and struggled to maneuver the cart by himself. When Mindy asked him what happened, Miles vaguely said there had been an accident, but it was nothing to worry about. But Mindy overheard Tippy Henderson and Beth Whalen whispering in the frozen food section the next day, just a few feet away from where Mindy restocked packages of hamburger. Miles and his wife Edith had gotten in a fight, and he went to the casino down by the river to blow off steam. On his way back, he lost control on the highway and smashed his truck into the guardrail, taking out half his door and crushing his foot. “Serves him right,” Tippy had said, picking up a glazed ham and weighing it in her hands. “Getting drunk at that casino, and driving? Edith must be so embarrassed.”

Now, Miles scratched at his beard thoughtfully, “You gotta admit, though, this is something special. I've lived in Hartford all my life and I've never seen the town get so wound up. You must've given them some hope.” Miles winced, then shifted his weight from his left foot to his right and leaned against the register for support. Miles's foot hadn't healed properly after the accident. On good days, he walked with a limp. On bad days, when the weather changed and his face seemed more grim, his left leg just dragged behind him like an afterthought.

“And that's supposed to make me feel better?” Mindy's eyes rolled up to the ceiling.

“No,” Miles said. “But it makes them feel better.”

“Fine, fine,” Mindy said distractedly, and then checked her watch. “I'm almost off.

I've got to go pick up Lyddie from school. Did you need help finding something, Miles?"

"No," he said, and shifted his weight from foot to foot again. "I just wanted to make sure you were doing all right."

"Well, now you know." Mindy untied her smock, and as she took it off, a few pieces of paper tumbled from her pockets. "Wait –" she started to say, but Miles had already crouched down and scooped up some of the prayers into his hands. "It's nothing," she said quickly, but she could see Miles's eyes roving over the scrawled handwriting. Mindy waited for him to say something, but he didn't. He held out the prayers to her, and she took them back without a word.

That afternoon, as Mindy and Lyddie walked together from school to the trailer park on the edge of town, Lyddie barely said a word. She walked with her head down and her long blonde hair in her face, kicking the gravel in the road with her dirty sneakers and shrugging her shoulders whenever Mindy asked her a question. Lyddie was usually quiet, but not like this.

Mindy reached out and tousled her daughter's hair. "You gonna just let me talk to myself, honey?"

Lyddie sheepishly turned her face to Mindy's and said, "No." She dropped her eyes back down to the road and whispered, "Everybody at school says you saved that man."

Mindy nearly stumbled over her own feet as she fought to keep calm. "Well, you shouldn't believe everything you hear in school."

"You saved me once," Lyddie said. "When I got sick."

Mindy let out a long breath through her nose. Last year, Lyddie came down with such a high fever, Mindy thought she might die, but she didn't have the money to take her to the

emergency room. Mindy drew a cold bath, dumped out all the ice in her freezer into the tub, and dropped Lyddie in the water. Lyddie started to scream and sob, so Mindy climbed into the bathtub too. She wrapped her arms around Lyddie, shut her eyes tight, and whispered prayers into her daughter's ear, her wet clothes feeling like hundreds of pounds. When she took Lyddie's temperature a few minutes later, the fever had broken.

"I didn't save you," Mindy said. "I was just taking care of you."

Lyddie dragged her feet through the gravel and her voice became even smaller.

"Maybe you and God took care of me."

"Enough," Mindy said sharply. "I don't want to hear another word about this nonsense. Understand?"

She could see Lyddie practically shrink; her shoulders scrunched down and she let one strap of her backpack fall down her arm. Mindy took in a long breath, then let it out again. Lyddie had a fragile spirit, so unlike her own.

"Tell me about school, sweetie," Mindy said. "Why don't we talk about that. Did anything good happen?"

Lyddie reached into her pocket and pulled out a crumpled-up flier. "My teacher says there's a book drive tomorrow morning. They're gonna sell old books really cheap. Can we go?"

"Sure we can," Mindy said. Lyddie was smart, much smarter than Mindy had been at her age. She could whip through a ten-chapter book in a day, and she had almost gotten through the 5-8 grade level section in the Hartford library.

Lyddie held out the flier. "It's at the Baptist church."

Mindy took the flier from her daughter's hands. A smeared, photocopied picture of the New Canaan church covered the top half, along with a blazing white cross in the corner.

BAKE SALE, RAFFLE, CLOTHING DRIVE, BOOK DRIVE made a little column down the middle. When she glanced sideways at Lyddie, she could see the expectation in her face, the fear of disappointment.

“We can go,” Mindy said. She folded the paper again and reminded herself to keep moving her feet. They were almost home.

The next morning, Mindy and Lyddie walked down to the New Canaan Baptist Church, which was nestled on the corner off Berry Road. A block away, Mindy could hear laughter, loud conversations, and the chimes of the cakewalk songs. Booths and folding tables dotted the grassy field behind the church. Some tables held tupperware containers full of cupcakes, plates of cookies, or chocolate cakes shielded in glass to keep away flies. Down the line were stacks of donated clothing, over-washed shirts folded into neat squares alongside patched-up jeans. With Mindy's permission, Lyddie ran ahead, hair gleaming white-gold in the sun, and she stopped to search through a cardboard box full of donated books.

“Mindy?” At the sound of her name, she turned to her right and found Miles seated at a booth nearby, peering at her between two tall pineapple upside-down cakes. “I didn't know you were coming.”

“Yeah, it surprised me too,” Mindy said. She cupped a hand across her eyebrows and squinted through the sun at the faces around them. Every now and then someone would glance her way and send a flash of a smile or a wave. Mindy stepped closer to Miles's booth, and lowered her voice. “I can't believe they haven't mobbed me yet.”

Miles's smile faded a little. “That's probably because you're talking to me.”

“I mean,” Mindy faltered fast. “It's not that, Miles. I'm sure that's not it.”

Miles leaned back in the folded chair. "I've been sitting with these cakes for two hours. Nobody's stopped by, not once. I'm pretty sure that's it." He paused. "It's funny, you know. The way these people work. Something bad happens to you, and they'll rally around you, whether you want them to or not. But you screw up once, and you're alone."

"I'd rather be alone," Mindy said. "I've had enough of their sympathy to last me a lifetime."

"Keep pushing all of them away like you did before, and you will be." Miles told her.

Mindy dropped her eyes down to the checkered tablecloth, running a thumb across the scalloped rim of one of the ceramic plates. The tablecloth had a hole in it, in the space where her shadow fell. If Mindy moved an inch, it would show.

"Any luck, Miles?" Mindy turned, and found Edith Mitchum standing behind her. Seeing Mindy, something passed over Edith's face. "Oh. Good to see you. It's been too long."

"Same," Mindy said, and stepped aside, clearing a path between Miles and his wife.

People had a way of overlapping with other people in Hartford. Edith started teaching music class when Mindy was a freshman in high school. Straight out of the community college a couple miles outside of town, Edith was terrified and trembling on the first day of school. That year, she alternated between being sweet to the class and slamming her hand against the top of the piano out of frustration when they couldn't keep the beat. Long before she had Lyddie and started working at the Piggly-Wiggly, Mindy used to see Miles meet Edith at the curb after school in his pick-up truck. Once, after the door slammed shut, she was sure she saw Edith crying into his shoulder.

"Nobody's bought a thing yet, Edith," Miles told her.

But Edith's attention was on Mindy. Her face was wide and heart-shaped, her cheeks

blooming pink in the late-morning heat, and they seemed to grow even redder as she spoke.

“Any chance you'd like to rejoin the choir, Mindy? You always had such a pretty voice.”

“Oh,” Mindy could feel the muscles in her neck tense. “I don't know about that.”

Edith glanced towards Miles. “Can you hold on a minute?” She took Mindy by the elbow, led her a few steps away. Over Edith's shoulder, Mindy could see the New Canaan band setting up their instruments in the clearing, the choir forming neat rows, singing scales as they fanned their faces with their hands. Edith's voice lowered almost to a hum. “You know how full the afternoon service was the day after you saved Mr. Gillespy? More packed than Easter. I really hope you'll come back to church, Mindy. People want to see you there. They feel like God's working with you. With all of us.” Mindy was close enough to see Edith take in a deep breath through her nose. “Can you do me a favor? Please? Just say a prayer for me. And for Miles. It's been ...” She let out the breath, her cheeks growing even pinker.

“I will,” Mindy said. She didn't have the heart to say no, even if Miles was out of earshot.

“Thank you.” For a moment, Edith bit her lip, but in a short spurt of words said, “You turned out pretty well, Mindy. I had some doubts, like everybody did. But you're doing okay on your own. We're all really proud of you.”

That was enough for Mindy. “I need to go. Tell Miles I say bye.”

Walking through the crowd, a few people called out her name, but Mindy walked on. She found Lyddie sitting in a patch of sunlight, a stack of books in her lap, one already open.

“Ready to go?” Mindy asked. Lyddie nodded, and as Mindy held out her hand, Lyddie passed her the pile of books. Beth Whalen was the one running the book booth, and her face lit up at the sight of Mindy.

“Good to see you! Say, I've been meaning —”

"I'm in a hurry, Beth," Mindy was already pulling a few wadded-up dollar bills from her purse. "Please just tell me what I owe you."

Beth frowned, and went through the stack. Most were marked down to a dollar or fifty cents, and Mindy struggled to do the math in her head before Beth told her.

"Looks like eight fifty," Beth said. Mindy knew without even glancing at the money in her hands that she didn't have enough, and as she finally counted, she only had six dollars. Lyddie stood beside her, watching. Feeling as though she was about to jump into a tub of ice, Mindy bent down closer to Lyddie. "You have to choose two you don't want. I'm sorry."

"Let me," Beth said suddenly. "Please. It's my treat."

"No," Mindy stood up straight and, without meaning to, smacked the heel of her palm into the table. Beth put her hands up, as though to try to stop her. The muscles in her neck were twisting harder, and Mindy knew she needed to get out. "Pick two, Lyddie. Now."

Lyddie pulled the first two off the top of the pile without looking at the titles, and pushed them away. Beth stared at them. Mindy placed the wrinkled bills and change on the table, put the books under her arm, and walked with Lyddie back to the main road.

On the sidewalk, their sandals scraped the pavement, and as they walked through the neighborhood Mindy looked up at all the houses, with their fresh paint and gardens and clean windows. Working at the Piggly-Wiggly kept Mindy on her feet, but would never get her a house like that. Not that they needed the extra space. It had always been the two of them. She and Robbie managed to put up with each other for six months after Lyddie was born, before he walked out in the middle of the night with a duffel bag and told her he wasn't coming back. The outpouring from Hartford that followed was worse than when her daddy left. At work, people tried to buy diapers and formula for Lyddie. People left baskets of muffins and rolls outside her trailer door, which she left there for the birds eat. She turned

down rides around town, offers to baby-sit on the weekends, and donations of every kind. Mindy wouldn't fall for it. People helped in Hartford because they were told it was what Jesus would do. But those who received help were the ones who never left. If she ever wanted to get herself and Lyddie out of Hartford, Mindy had known all along she'd have to do everything herself.

It was late in the evening, and with Lyddie already sound asleep, Mindy brushed her teeth in the small, cracked mirror that hung over the bathroom sink. She felt as though she hadn't seen her own reflection in days. The circles under her eyes were almost purple, like bruises, and the worry lines across her forehead were becoming more pronounced. Mindy spat foam into the drain and rinsed the sink. As she turned out the light and moved towards the bed she and Lyddie shared, she thought she heard a rattling knock on the side of the trailer. Wiping her hands on the legs of old sweatpants she wore, Mindy crossed the trailer in three steps to open the door. Miles stood there, blinking in the sudden light escaping through the open door.

"Sorry to bother you," he said.

"What are you doing here?" Mindy asked. "Is everything okay?"

"Kind of," he said. "I just need a few minutes."

Turning her head slightly, Mindy could see the lump of Lyddie's body lying still in bed. She took the long step down from the trailer, onto the ratty rug she'd left outside last year to clean and never bothered to put back. With the door shut, the only light around them came from the dim glow of a streetlamp, shining through the trees by the road.

"I don't know what Edith said," Miles began. Even in the dark, she could see him wince a little. He put his weight on his right foot and leaned in with his right hand braced

against the trailer. "But whatever it was, I'm sorry. I really am. She should have left you alone."

"Why would she? No one else has." Mindy said. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at her bare feet. "I hate that they need me now. After everything that's happened."

"They don't need you," Miles said. "They need some kind of salvation. And you're the closest they can get to that."

He turned his head away, into the darkness around the park. She could see everything he saw: the barking mutt chained to a post outside her neighbor's door, the crumpled piles of trash left in the grass, the abandoned and graffitied truck down by the road. Mindy felt shame curdling in her stomach like sour milk.

Miles's hand scraped against the tin as he pushed himself off the trailer wall. He took a few hobbling steps away from her, as though he was going to walk back to his truck. Then he stopped, and he slowly let his body crumple down until he sat with his legs sprawled in front of him, his left foot bent at its strange angle. Mindy felt stranded, standing there alone. She hesitated, then knelt down beside him. The ground below was hard and packed down, and the grass around them grew in sparse patches. From the trailers close by, Mindy could catch muffled words in conversations and televisions full of static. Somewhere in the next yard, the dog barked louder, then broke into a whine. She heard her neighbor cough and spit into the dirt.

"Can you fix it?" Miles finally asked.

Mindy couldn't see his face. His shoulders curved down, and his head bent towards his chest as though it weighed too much to hold up. In the dark, Mindy found his hand, and pressed her thumb gently across his wide knuckles. Before her lay two feet, one whole and

one mangled. She had her own missing parts that she didn't know how to heal.

After a long time, Miles lifted his head, and pulled his hand away.

“I know you can't,” Miles said. “But I still hoped.”

He tried to stand up, but couldn't quite get his balance right. Mindy took his arm, steadied him, and together they got to their feet. Miles mumbled a short thank you, and Mindy watched him limp back to his truck. She stood there until the headlights blinked on, and slowly, the truck backed down the dirt road. Before Mindy went inside, she glanced at the wall of her trailer, in the place where Miles had stood. His hand had rubbed off a layer of grime from the tin and left a dim shine behind.