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mothers

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mothers *Andrew McIver*

I shutter to discover
that my mother reached
modernity in an instant.
Thinking of a grandfather clock
that burned up because of
grandma's great grease
fire. The one of '05.
That's what happens
when you talk too long
on a phone.

Like this:

"Hello! Virginia? Is that you? It's Deana!"

(Slur it a little bit. She's drunk, ok?)

"OH YES, THIS IS SHE."

"Well good. The boys are on their way to visit tonight."

"THE BOYS?"

"The grandbabies. On their way to visit!"

"OH YES. WELL AIN'T THAT NICE."

"Yeah, it'll be nice to see 'em. We're gonna open up
some Christmas presents. And you know, Owen's got a birthday
coming up soon."

"IS THAT RIGHT?"

"He'll be eleven whole years old! Can you believe it?"

"I CAN'T."

"Well it's true! And Kelly and Paul, they're doing real good."

"REALLY?"

"Oh yeah, sure. They're doing it for the kids, I know. Trying
to straighten up. It's going real good.

We're all real proud."

"THAT'S GREAT DEANA."

"They got three months clean."

"OH YEAH?"

"Yeah, straight and narrow."

"REAL GOOD."

"I got to go Virginia. Got steaks in the oven and oil on the stove.
Can't cook a french fry without oil."

"ALRIGHT DEANA."

"Bye Virginia, I'll talk to you soon."

"BYE DEANA."

Woosh.

That's what happens when hot oil
and frozen fries collide.

Woosh.

And, for once, Deana didn't know what to say.

Like this: “ . ”

Deana didn't know what to think either.

Not once in all her years had she lit a whole house on fire in one instant.

What could she do?

“The front stoop is nice this time of year.”

An easy thought to have.

“Early December, leaves are all gone, but not quite freezing.”

(Grab your glass and don't forget the carton of cigarettes in your room.)

Deana stood, sipping a rum and Coke and smoking a Virginia Slim,
when the fire truck ripped right into her front yard.

The fireman saw a woman silhouetted by fire,

towers of it,

and they smelled—

eucalyptus.

It was the tree next to her house.

So close they burned together.

“Smell good, don't it?”

That's when we pulled up.

In a spearmint-green Buick Skylark

that mamma loved when dad bought it for her ten years ago.

Now it's too green or not green enough.

It used to be just the right size, when I was one.

But I'm eleven and my brother's seven and the backseat fits us tight.

Mamma is hysteric.

Grandma pulls out another cigarette finds a flame from her house,

lights it up, and takes a puff,

as if it wasn't our place to question why

grandma's house was on fire.

Woosh. Puff. Sip.

And how could she stand it?

The heat must have been unbearable.

So hot that firemen wore suits.

But not Deana.

Her whole life had been a flame.
She learned a long time ago that if you stand close enough,
you'll get burned but at least you'll remember it.
At least you will have known it happened.

Dad can't comprehend it.
He sees grandma next to the house
and thinks "that red-headed drunk sonofa"—
but gets cut off by the thought that inside the house
are all the christmas and birthday presents.
He's never been much of a thinker. He just does it.
He runs and grabs grandma who drops her drink and almost burns him
with the cigarette.

Mamma is still screaming.
"Kelly, calm down"
"Mamma, your house is on fire. What were you thinking
standing so close like that?"
"You want a cigarette?"
"Mamma, what were you thinking?"
"I wasn't thinking. I was making french fries."

Dad did what no one expected.
He ran into the fire.
By the time the firemen noticed and tried to stop him,
he'd already run back out with twelve presents.
When he ran back in, all that was left to get was the Christmas tree,
which he brought out, ornaments and all.
The eucalyptus collapsed.
Fell right on top of grandma's house.

"I liked that tree. Didn't yall?"
We did, grandma.
We liked a lot of things.

A china cabinet with mamma's wedding china
(grandma's china was long gone, thrown out the window,
flying saucers landing on Faith Church Road
a story below).
A roll-top desk with letters and old kodaks
(I was a baby once).
An attic full of halloween decorations

(mostly I would miss the old witch that would cackle and scare my baby-brother, but there were boo-lights and pumpkin-colored cobwebs too).

Tin cans of jewelry

(Mamma couldn't pawn a wedding band if she tried)

Music boxes that locked tight.

An old Gibson

(it was papa's but grandma kept it to spite him, I think).

Forest-green sheets on all the beds

(they smelled like thanksgiving).

Mamma missed the old grandfather clock

(the one that never moved,

but the key to open it was stuck right in the keyhole).

But Dad saved the presents

and a crispy Christmas tree.

I imagine that was the moment

Mamma realized modernity had come too fast.

Grandma had almost burned up.

And what could she have done?

She wished she would have opened the clock

and pushed the pendulum.

How necessary it is to move.