

Just out of bed at 11:45 a.m., my mom takes yesterday's soggy filter out of the Mr. Coffee, makes a fresh pot and butters a single piece of white toast. The coffee, the toast, a few Valiums and a half pack of cigarettes will be her brunch. She pulls a matchbook out of the elastic sleeve of her red and white flannel baby doll nighty and lights up a Merit. She'll consume all four courses of her brunch at the same time, like a magician.

Beep! Beep!

Grandma Deloris always signals her arrival with two short beeps of the horn of her red convertible Corvair with white vinyl interior. These two beeps always come exactly as she turns from the street onto the driveway. She then always signals her entry into the house with a ding-da-d i n g-dong. This special doorbell ring is always followed by her yelling "HOW-dy Doody" as she passes through the screen door. She does this every time she comes over. You can count on it.

Grams hasn't bought new clothes since her second husband, Earl Skene, died of a sudden heart attack a few months after they got married. That was ten years ago when I was four. She looks great anyway because she wears the kind of clothes that never go out of style and she never grows out of them, which is another thing you can count on with Grams. Her outfit is always a pleated skirt with a turtleneck for winter or a pleated skirt, a button-down blouse and a dickey for summer. She never doesn't put on a perfectly ironed, pleated skirt as soon as she gets up at 5:30 a.m., even if she's going to be inside her house all

day putting up rhubarb sauce and isn't expecting any visitors.

I'm already at the front door. "Hi Grams!"

"Well, if it isn't Gary, uh Ronnie, uh Gary, uh Danny, my favorite grandson!" says Grams pushing my bangs back to plant a wet one on my forehead. Gary and Ronnie are her two sons. I'm her only grandson.

"What's yer mom doin'?" Says Grams.

"She's in there," I say, pointing so she looks in the kitchen and I can wipe the spit off my forehead.

Grams travels down the front hall the same way Cheryl Teigs does on the runway in her Cover Girl commercial. Her pleated skirt swishes back and forth as she snaps her hips from side to side. The way she walks and that she naturally doesn't have any gray hair make her look thirty-five at the most, instead of sixty-one, which how old she is.

"Well, good morning Mary Sunshine!" Grams says to my mom's back.

Joan can't turn around yet. She's swallowing some pills and toast with her coffee, while exhaling a puff of her Merit out of her nostrils. Voila! I told you she would consume all four courses at the same time!

"Hello," says Joan at the same time as she's chewing and smoking and swallowing. Ventriloquism is another one of her many skills.

Grams takes a seat on one of the four mustard colored stools at the avocado colored Formica counter. "They're only running one lane of the bridge at a time, a construction man slipped and fell in the river," she offers as a conversation-starter.

"It wasn't Bobby Means, was it? Wasn't he working on the bridge?!" says Joan, turning around dramatically the way Joan Crawford does in all of her movies.

"Oh, I don't think so." Replies Grams, recognizing Joan's attempt to make the tragedy all about Joan.

Joan had been engaged to Bobby Means just after high school. She always talks about how she wishes she had married him instead of my dad. Bobby owns a construction company in Prescott, but he builds cabins on lakes, not huge bridges. So that it might have been Bobby Means who fell off of the new bridge into the St. Croix River to his death was a long shot.

"Want something to eat?" says Joan while she repeats her magic trick. Smoke, chew, exhale smoke, swig, swallow, talk.

"No, I stopped at Sun Ray and had an egg," says Grams before her Zippy lighter torches a Chesterfield.

Sun Ray is the shopping center by the 3M Plant. It's the halfway point on the twenty five-mile trip from Hudson, Wisconsin, where Grams lives, to our house in Roseville, Minnesota. There's a coffee shop there.

"You must be stuffed." Joan says sarcastically.

"Yah. I had the special. It came with coffee and a slice of toast," says Grams, not getting her own daughter's joke about being stuffed from eating one egg.

Joan knows I get her lame joke. She rolls her eyes at Grams, looks at me and says, "I'm sure," trying to get me to make fun of Grams with her, but I just give her a dirty look.

"I'm Sure," is an expression that kids started saying at school last year. It's kind of a cross between "I doubt it" and "You're exaggerating." It wouldn't bug me so much that Joan stole it from me, but she uses it all the time and in the wrong way. In some cases, like this one, she says it for no reason at all except for to bug me. No other moms say, "I'm sure," but my mom loves to act like she's my age, which is why she sometimes likes me to call her "Joan."

Joan opens up the breadbox to put the bag of bread away and asks Grams if she wants a piece of toast.

"Oh no, I'm going over to see Eunis at four. It's our day to split a pork chop," says Grams.

It's not going to be an extra-thick pork chop like the ones from Polar Meat Locker that Grams will be splitting with her best friend, Eunice. It'll be a little one from Rainbow Foods that's about a half inch thick. This explains how Grams keeps her girlish figure and never has to buy bigger skirts.

I listen to a long conversation about who got sick and/or died in Hudson:

"Well Clyde Barns died on Friday," says Grams.

"Wasn't Nola Barns in Gary's class?" says Joan.

"Yah, but she didn't belong to Clyde, Clyde had three boys," says Grams.

"Well who does Nola belong to then?" says Joan.

"Oh, she belongs to Carl and Marilyn," says Grams.

"Don't Clyde and Carl live down by Fleet Farm in those two white houses?" says Joan.

Two minute pause.

"Do they?" says Grams.

"I thought they were twins," says Joan.

"No, they're cousins," says Grams.

"I always thought they were brothers," says Joan.

"No, Clyde belongs to Harold and Kari, Carl belongs to Mavis and Roy," says Grams.

Five minute pause.

"Are you sure?" says Joan.

"Yah, Mavis comes into the bank," says Grams.

"Oh," says Joan.

In Hudson you "belong" to your parents, even if you're eighty.

Several cups of coffee, and two ashtrays full of butts later, I follow Grams, who follows Joan down the basement stairs to look at all of her only daughter's latest projects.

I can tell Joan is pissed that Grams doesn't immediately notice the grouping of seven new Jim Croce sketches of various sizes that she has exactly duplicated from album covers in charcoal pencil, put into glass frames from Target and hung in an arrangement next to the fake window, or the new homemade slipcovers on the old club chairs, or that the whole basement has been covered from floor to ceiling in another coat of contact paper. Joan will have to point each of these accomplishments out to her mother one at a time.

This is the fifth layer of contact paper since the basement recreation room was unveiled two years ago. Everything from the bar, the piano, the stairs to every shelf, door and drawer - all sealed to the quick in the decorative film. All seams perfect, all patterns perfectly matched. Virtually everything is covered in sticky paper. Everything but Jim Croce, the club chairs, two orange vinyl day beds that were handed down from Aunt Dorothy's family room and the olive drab beanbag chair next to the stereo.

If you've ever tried removing contact paper from anything, you would know why Joan adds layer on top of layer of it when she wants to change the personality of a room. It comes off in tiny little shreds, and if you bite your fingernails like I do, you can just forget trying to remove a whole room of it in less than a million years.

Unfortunately you can still kind of see the last layer's yellow, orange and brown stained glass window design beneath the new coat of pink and purple hippie flowers on a white background. This is an obvious interior design faux pas that Joan has chosen to ignore for now, but I just know she's planning an all-nighter to put on layer number six to fix her mistake. I saw her scoping out an exciting new dark red and blue plaid pattern at Kresge's. She's probably waiting for my dad to pay down the bill on the Shopper's Charge before she walks back over to Har Mar Mall and buys it.

Grams also doesn't notice the peculiar looking fellow who is sitting on the couch, until Joan plops down and puts his arm around her. The man, in a herring bone polyester

leisure suit, a bad wig, a painted-on face, drawn-on chest hair and aviator sunglasses with the lenses punched out, sits there staring straight ahead, without saying a word.

"Oh for LAND sakes!" yells Grams.

"Well, you want a husband, don't you?" says Joan as she fixes the man's collar.

Grams is at a loss for words and yells "OH for land sakes!" one more time.

I have never seen this man before, but I assume his name is Irving because his nametag says "Hello, My Name Is Irving." I am shocked but not surprised to figure out that Joan has been up all night sewing Grams a new husband named Irving.

"Ha ha ha! I'm sure!" I can't stop laughing because he looks so stupid.

Grams needs to fill the air with words, so she yells it again... "Oh, for land SAKES!"

Joan starts to point out Irving's features. "Look, he's rich!" she says.

There's Monopoly money coming out of the pockets of Irving's vest and pants, the top of his shirt, out of his shoes and every place else. Mostly 500's.

"Well, I'll be dipped!" says Grams as she tries her best to get a hold of herself.

"He's a good dancer too, but he only follows, he can't lead," explains Joan, who orders me to "Put on a record."

My sister, Lisa, keeps all the albums alphabetized and the one I want to play is easy to find because it's the first one on the shelf. You can barely hear the music when I lay the needle down on the first song, so I crank the volume up all the way to ten. You can still barely hear anything until I notice that the faint sound is coming from the beanbag chair which Lisa's new big puffy earphones are sitting on. "GONNA ROCK - AROUND - THE CLOCK TONIGHT" comes blaring out of the quadraphonic speakers after I yank the headphone cord from its hole, scaring Grams half to death.

"TURN IT DOWN, GODAMMIT!" screams Joan, like I'm enjoying this any more than she is. I turn it down to six.

"Well, you practically scared me half to death!" says Grams with her senses now totally assaulted.

It takes all Joan's might to hoist the man-sized dummy off of the orange orange couch, but once she and Irving are standing, they dance effortlessly through to the end of the first side of American Graffiti. Joan leading.

The basement goes silent when the needle automatically returns to its perch. I want the party to keep going, so I take this opportunity to put on my favorite dance album: "Mary and Dean Constantine Teach You the Basics." Mary and Dean Constantine are the elegant couple that teach social dance to my folks and other officers and their wives at the

Fort Snelling Officer's Open Mess on Thursday nights. They actually have their own instructional LP! Once, they came over to our house for drinks on a Saturday after the club closed, Mary looks like June Cleaver, Dean is a fox and has got the whitest teeth I've ever seen. I think he's Italian or something. I wanted to ask him to sign the album jacket but I was too embarrassed.

The first cut of Mary and Dean's album, "Intro to the Cha Cha Cha" comes to an end and Joan throws Irving onto the couch next to Grams. "Don't you wanna dance with him?" asks Joan, who is sick of dancing with her creation. The cha cha cha music starts and Joan grabs my right hand and left waist. She wants to dance with her other creation: Me. She lets me lead, which is fine because she's the best follower I've ever met. Grams just sits there, laughing at me and Joan trying to figure out the steps, politely ignoring Irving, who is face down and ass up in a pile next to her.

"Your both such good dancers! Where did you learn to do that?" asks Grams while she goes into her shiny red purse for another Chesterfield. She knows where we learned it, from her. Grams is almost as good of a dancer as my mom. I know because I've done the Lindy with her at plenty of my relative's weddings. I'd like to ask her to dance but right now it's all about Joan, and Joan wants to dance with me and Joan wants Grams to dance with Irving, even though Grams is way too little to lift him off the couch even if she wanted to, which she doesn't.

Unfortunately there's more instruction and less peppy music on this cut of Mary and Dean Constantine's album than I had

remembered and the Cha Cha Cha song is cut short, which quickly kills the party. Joan huffs and puffs on the couch and says, "I gotta make supper, Danny, put Irving in Grandma's car."

Grams looks at me and says, "Don't you dare!"

"What? Don't you like him?" says Joan.

"Well, what am I gonna *do* with it?" says Grams, almost in a whisper so she doesn't hurt Irving's feelings.

"Well what am *I* gonna do with it?" asks Joan, mocking her mother's tone.

"I'm not driving down I-94 with that thing sitting next to me. I've got the top down!" says Grams."

"Then put the top up!" insists Joan.

"I don't want to put the top up!" insists Grams.

Joan has to think for a second. "Okay, we'll take him over with us on Saturday. He can lay down in the way-back." She says.

Grams keeps insisting harder, "You'll do no such thing, if anyone spots that thing on my couch, they'll send me to the nuthouse!"

But now Joan is ignoring whatever Grams says, "He'll probably be hung over, we're having Lois Dumont and the

Gummerts over on Friday night for drinks and they never leave till six in the morning. You'd better have Bloody Marys ready, Irving likes them with lots of Tabasco." Joan adds.

"Why don't you send it home with Lois?" Pleads Grams, now not caring if Irving can hear her or not.

"Lois is going out with that guy with the crew cut, she doesn't need a boyfriend," says Joan, looking Grams square in the eye.

"Well, for crying outside, neither do I, *that* bad," says Grams as she puts out her cigarette and grabs her purse to get another one. "God."

"Just see if you two get along. I don't have a bed for him," says Joan.

Having had enough, Grams stands up, pulling her skirt around to center the zipper, breaking her unlit cigarette in the process.

"Like he wants to sleep alone in the basement," says Joan, "I'm sure."

At the suggestion that she should actually sleep with the fake stuffed husband her daughter had sewn for her, Grams litters the broken Chesterfield onto the turquoise blue and green shag rug, grabs her purse and heads up the basement stairs, skirt swishing again with her fantastic walk. I walk up right behind her, leaving Joan snickering nervously

beside her piled-up Frankenstein, who has been hanging on this whole time to a fake gin and tonic with the fingers Joan has made for him by inserting clothes hanger wires inside his canvas skin.

"Aren't you even going to give Irving a kiss goodbye?" says Joan, sounding precious like Shirley Temple, one of her favorite movie stars.

But the screen door upstairs has already clapped and Grams is already in her car.

I turn around and see Joan coming up the basement stairs. She looks at me and says, "I'm sure," which makes me want to hit her.

Static from the River Falls station comes blaring out of the radio of the Corvaire as Grams frantically starts the engine to get out of here. She pushes another button and some old fashioned song comes on way too loud. *What's with all the A.V. problems anyway?* I think as I run out the front door onto the driveway to say bye to Grams from the front of her car. Grams sits up higher on the convertible seat to talk to me over the windshield.

"Danny, your mother's driveway doesn't go all the way down to the street. You know that, doncha?" says Grams.

"Yeah, I know," I say as Grams sits back down, stretches out her left leg to press down the clutch and puts the stick in reverse.

Beep! Beep!

Grams always says goodbye with two short beeps of the horn of her white Corvair convertible with red plastic steering wheel as she turns from the driveway onto the street. She does this every time she comes over. You can count on it.