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## EDNA THE CHIMNEY

*Lucas Marshall*

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**M**Y FATHER, Clark, planned a trip to Maine to see his sick mother, Edna. During his layover in Chicago, Clark listened to a message from his sister Rose while walking to the next crowded terminal. “Mom is refusing to go to the hospital, I think she has decided that she is done hanging around,” she said over the phone. It seems Edna had her own agenda for the holiday season. She had decided to die. Clark just happened to have good timing and cheap tickets thanks to the lovely people at Orbitz. Calling Rose back, they quickly made a calling tree to get the word out to everyone to come to Maine and say Good-Bye. I was one of the first people my father called. He ate almonds and listened to Clapton on his Shuffle while waiting to board.

Grandma Edna had been slapping old Mr. Death around for a few years, but she must have finally grown tired of that game and puffing on life. Over the next few days, Edna extended her stay here for all of her children to arrive, waltzing in and out of life while she waited. It would be one last get together to celebrate her life, and now her death.

Clark pressed 5, then SEND on his cell phone. ‘Conner the Great!’ appeared on the small screen.

Stepping over the gap between the plane and boarding tunnel, a sharp blast of cold wind sneaked in and sucker-punched him as he put the phone to his head and maneuvered his tall frame on to the airliner.

I was wrist deep in a pool of soapy water, cleansing dinner’s dishes when my phone attempted to escape via vibration off the cracked formica counter. I flapped water off my hands, grabbed the phone, read “Pappy” off the screen, and answered. As if I knew the call was important, I didn’t answer in my normally obnoxious tone.

“Hello fatherly figure.”

His words were soft when he told me about Grandma and asked me if I was interested in coming out. The conversation was almost one sided; I found myself welled up. I was struck with dead puppy sadness or something. I could barely speak. Maybe I had swallowed a steaming coffee cup and its condensing vapors were now welling in my eyes. Choking down emotion with the phone compressed between cheek and shoulder, I told him I would think about it and call him back. Soapy water slid off my pruned fingers, making translucent ripples in the lukewarm water, oily film clung to the corners of the porcelain

sink. I stared at the popping bubbles.

Dishes drying, I grabbed a coozie and a bottle and headed for the plaid couch in the living room and bedroom and dining room in my studio apartment. I downed the beer and duked it with my brain. I was perplexed why I had taken the news of my grandmother so emotionally. That sort of thing usually didn't affect me, but this felt different. A chord was struck inside. I had plans for winter break, but struggled for power over my own consciousness. I wanted to go cycling in California but I was sheathed with guilt. I could not put a finger on the last time I saw Edna, or even remember when I returned one of her phone calls. Damn it. Regret. Remorse. I hated myself for it. *Horrible grandson*. I wanted to kick myself in the head. I could not believe I could not remember the last time I spoke to her. I tried to crush the empty bottle in my hand with no success, just muscle cramps. *Damned physics*.

**W**ELL SHIT, maybe I can find some answers in the bottom of another fuckin' bottle of beer. So I went looking. Maybe this one? Nope. And you Mr. Adams? No answer either? Maybe one of your 5 twin brothers. Shoot, they're just as quiet as you, Samuel. Sigh. Well that did nothing but thin my blood and make the room spin. At least I know I can't count on anthropomorphic suds to give me life's fuckin' answers. Thoughts attempt processing. Staggering. If only I was flexible enough to get my foot to my head. Eyelids become heavy, twitching leg roundhouses brown bottle formation off table. Room goes black. I begin to float.



**I**T WAS a rainy day in small town Aurora. Miniature puppies and kittens fell from the sky and I caught them on my tongue, tasting their furry goodness. Grandma and I drifted across town to Chuck's Diner, hungry for a bite to eat and adventure. My boyhood mullet trailed behind us, tearing out mailboxes and downing trees with its blonde serpentine strength. I tripped a mailman and he shattered upon impact with the sidewalk. Ha ha, Go ahead and take the rest of the day off, Sir. We ordered lunch from a lipstick-wearing alligator named Marvin. Grandma Edna ate cigarettes and I ordered a pizza then turned Marvin

into a fabulous handbag. I gave it to Edna. She loved it immensely. My pizza came on a melting Styrofoam plate with a side of onion rings. I asked for French fries.

*Bitch!*

I pulled a revolver from the red band of my Smurf underwear and shot the waitress cold. My golden locks disposed of the body. Grandma Edna gave me the wink-thumbs up combo and ate another cigarette.

We blew up the diner and flew through the rain to the new recreation center. I felt bad for Chuck and destroying his place so Grandma wrote Chuck an exploding sorry letter along the way and faxed it to his ass. The mud was impassibly thick fudge at the center from the fresh construction but Edna blew fire from her mouth and dried a path to a small pond. I fell behind, too busy kicking shockwaves of patriotism into the future with my Converse high-tops. Stars, stripes and slashing jump kicks. I tossed frogs into women's panties. She called to me, telling me to come see her. I reached out, but could only whimper a goat's bleat. So far away. Wet wind whispered around my small body and raining razorblades ripped across my soft skin. My desperate fingers dripped pink droplets of despair. I clenched my little fists and sobbed. She began to disappear.



I awoke with my violent heart still beating like a redlining piston. *Jeezie Creezie, what a dream!* I wiped my damp brow and rubbed my peepers. It was only eleven. I up righted the downed bottles and picked up the phone and dialed. Two rings later, "Hey, Dad, I am coming out..."

I grabbed another chilled bottle to help me figure out what to pack.



**F**ORTY HOURS, and 6 minutes later I arrived at Grandma's apartment in Portland, Maine. Her doormat read 'I Can See Your Underwear' and I thought that was awesome. It smelled like a pool hall

sprinkled with potpourri and baby powder inside. Grandma was sleeping. I took a seat and watched her chest slowly rise and lower beneath her pastel gown. The oxygen hoses attached to her nose rolled gently against her skin. With as little as thirty percent of her lung capacity working, she was weak and slept for hours. Then miraculously, she'd wake up glowing and saying hello to those around.

Her smoky blue eyes met mine. "I'm so happy to see you made it, forgive me for not getting up," she wheezed from between her yellow teeth and cracked smile. I returned the smile while I bent over and gave her a hug. Before I got a word out, she fell back asleep. When she slept she would take as few as six breaths a minute while her heart counted down its beats. I watched her for a few more moments then greeted other relatives in the apartment.

**E**DNA WAS a fighter and a stubborn survivor. She was a single mother raising 5 children in the 50s, a wicked cribbage player and a living icon for the smoking industry. She smoked for over 60 years, because she simply enjoyed smoking. Her body had grown accustomed to it: her lips were wrinkled into a puckered position, waiting for another drag [or to kiss a grandchild], and her fingers permanently grooved and stained from holding the yellow filtered Camels. Her body did well for as much as she did smoke.

A few times during her life she did quit, but she always started back up. It was part of her existence. She knew it was bad, but it was her thing to smoke, and with a look that could curl a bull's tail, she stood [more of a crooked lean] with her choice for over half a century. Edna only gave up smoking for a little over a year before she died. Doctors said that if she wanted to live to see her 89th birthday, she needed to quit. She decided to take the advice and enjoy the rest of the life without her smokes. Unfortunately, illness and age had caught up with her. She knew it was only a matter of time.

Her children, family, and friends gathered, visited, and said farewells in her apartment in upper New England those few days of winter, the rooms tidy and neat, but covered with the stain of tobacco smoke. Her habit painted the walls a pale yellow over her eighteen years living there. Thick plastic covers

quarantined the sofa's color. It's surface made farting noises when sat on, that always made her laugh. Even though she had stopped smoking over a year ago, Ozone cleaners and air filters had to be brought in so others could tolerate her Camel-smoke barbecue-pit apartment. Surprisingly, plants still flourished near the windows; her hard-ass attitude must have rubbed off while she watered them.

**I**REMEMBERED as whippersnapper grandchildren, we'd bicker over whose grandma she was. We would flock around her while walking through the park to the playground, tromping in the green summer grass. She would stride out and smile with her posse of wee ones hovering around her barking.

"She is my grandma!" I shouted.

"No. Mine!" cousin Tiffany would snap back.

"Nuh uh, mine." Vikki would fire back.

She would slap her knee and get a good cackle off our behavior, always being careful not to burn us with hot ash. She would then round us up and tell us all that we would have to share, smiling, then taking another drag. We agreed to share and went on playing. She kept her fingernails painted bright shades of pink and red. Pungent paint hid the smoked nails beneath.

**S**TORY-SWAPPING enveloped most of the time spent in the apartment. I mainly listened and absorbed the classic tales of life with Edna. I talked when spoken to, but otherwise I kept to myself and watched the small world around me. The children's spirits were so high, they often forgot that they were there to watch their mother die. They would talk about the past and bring up fond memories of small town living, vacations, and making mother mad. Each one trying to outdo the last. They took turns laughing and crying. Edna rested and eavesdropped in the next room with a smile on her wrinkled face under the eyes of close friends.

Edna's eldest daughter, Fran, was mid-story about crashing her car and suffering mother's wrath.

"So she saw the front of my car through the kitchen window and I thought for a second she was going to come right through the wall. I hid behind..."

Edna made a sharp gasp behind them and lay wide eyed in bed. Like the final play of a football game, her children rushed over and huddled around her

bed. She stared at them for a moment, faintly whistled and said, "I'd do anything for a drag off a Camel right now."

Stunned, no one moved; she smiled bringing everyone to tears. She fell back asleep with that grin on her face. The folds of her skin drooped down to the bed mimicking the white sheets. Skin so thin, one could almost read her thoughts.

Except for her youngest, Trenton, all of Edna's children had arrived from Nebraska and Maine. My father Clark and his sister Rose [and Trent] came from the flatland Edna once called home. Fran and Paula lived only twenty minutes away in Portland and had lived there for two decades. They handled the organizing of their mother's passing. Edna had moved up to Maine shortly after they did, She sold cookware and cleaned mansions.

THAT EVENING with candles surrounding her bed, holding vigil, her children had a feast made in Edna's prized Saladmaster cookware. Fran's husband, R.J. made twelve-hour pulled pork and for a few hours the aroma of food overpowered the smoke. I ate my bodyweight in delicious food then slid from my chair and rolled over to the plastic sofa. It farted nicely when I sat down.

The children discussed plans and arrangements for her burial and funeral; all was in order, with only her passing now to happen. Fran and Rose made flower bouquets and R.J. showed everyone pictures of the casket he recently finished, custom-made for Edna. He hoped the handles didn't fall off when they had to lift it. No one doubted his wood-making abilities since he had made the table and chairs they were currently lazing in.

Trenton arrived late that evening and the night drew on. He passed out cigarettes and the children had a cigarette in honor of their mother's damned stubborn habit. Except for Trenton, no one regularly smoked any more, but all had for some stint of their lives. Just like mom. I watched the five of them standing out in the bitter North Eastern cold, it was a quiet moment, every one huddled and shivering while trying to "enjoy" the cigarette in the midnight air. They stood strongly until Fran choked on the smoke and started crying and laughing, almost falling of the balcony. They all broke down after that and

rushed to get back indoors. Her children took turns staying up to watch her, while the others napped in ancient furniture surrounding her bed.

VERY EARLY in the morning, I got my chance to catch up with my grandmother. I told her about my life and I apologized for not returning her calls. I told her about my hobbies and college classes and friends and relationships and adventures. I apologized again for not returning her phone calls. My father sat by my side asking questions and comforting me. He told me she heard everything I was saying. I convinced myself that he was telling the truth. He gave my shoulder a squeeze, the way dads do, and I responded with a half smile with glassy globes perched above my cheeks. I retreated to Edna's office study and curled up in an oversized vinyl chair and kicked my shoes off. I had to double check that it wasn't on fire the seat smelt of smoke so strongly. It might as well be charred and smoldering. I stared at family photos illuminated by moonlight until sleep took over.



WITH THE tenacity of an animated Lucille Ball, Grandma whipped out the alligator Marvin bag and scooped me into it with her thirty-yards long, skinny arms. Bingo wings flapped in the rain-enriched wind. She winced and bit down on her cigarette, struggling to reel me in. As a full-grown man, I barely fit into the bag. She blew a smoky sphere from her mouth that encompassed our little sanctuary by the pond. Protected from the wet, grass grew beneath our feet, and flowers shot out small starbursts of light. We sat on a chuckling log in silence, sharing a strawberry malt, my hand on top of hers. It was our moment in time.



THE SUN was shining the next morning, another beautiful and crisp winter day. Voices echoed through the apartment and the aroma of coffee stimulated my senses. I awoke stiffly to join the clan of Edna's offspring at breakfast. I glanced at family photos again and slid my hand against the textured wall paper as I left the room.

She awoke briefly the next morning and Trenton was there by her bedside. He talked and talked while she slept and died. She listened. The voices of loved ones seeped through her hollow skin. Her veins poorly hidden beneath, like stray pieces of yarn from an unraveling afghan. The sun poured into the room that morning, bathing her and her prized African Violets in warm swashes of color. She slept, barely breathing, for most of the afternoon. I pawed through National Geographics from the 60s and 70s and caught up with relatives. At one point Edna had to be lifted out of bed to change the sheets and while being returned, she awoke, startled, while her sons whooshed her down on to the bed. "My Lord," she exclaimed, "who knew dying would be so much fun!"

Staring at the yellowed spackle ceiling, Edna would tell about all the people she was seeing through her eyes, people that had come to see her pass. Most of them had been dead for many years; she said they had all come to greet her when she was ready to come home.

Clark asked, "Do you see Grace and Darrel? Do you see your parents?"

She sternly replied with scoff, maybe even rolling her eyes, "Well, of course, they are here; they wouldn't miss this."

Her friend Gloria, and older brother Glen were dancing in the light she said, they were asking her to do the same. She had not the energy to lift her arms, so she spun her twiggy fingers around in small, perfect circles. Her traveled feet twitched beneath the linen. She danced.

Grandma slept as the sun painted ever-changing shadows across the room from one side to the other, crossing cigarette burns and hand-made rugs. Her flowers opened and closed. She died almost without notice that evening, her last breath just a rumor. We said final prayers for her as the hospice orderlies entered to take care of her. Tears streamed over smiling faces, and her candles surrounding her bed were blown out except a single white candle, left to burn itself out.

**A**FTER LEAVING the apartment we caravanned to Fran's house. I quietly sat in the back seat and wondered if I had made peace with myself. Had I met

redemption with my small moment with Grandma Edna? Was it enough to satisfy my inner relationship with her? I stared into the black space that flowed by. I took a deep breath, blinked my eyes. My gaze shifted to my own reflection in the window. My reflection nodded to me and I returned the gesture. Life continued to stream by, the seconds passed, and hearts beat.

Edna was buried on a Wednesday under a bouquet of lavender violets and a pack of Camels. Beauty and death on top of hand polished oak. Everyone danced at her funeral, even me.

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