

MY MOTHER'S MACHINES

Maxine Mellor

For a long moment it was black. There was no sound. The parts inside stiffened. And even that tree stopped whispering.

Then suddenly the girl's eyes flash open big and round and waterlogged. And her red-ringed throat expands and she gasps.

And the ice-cream van is coming along the road once again.

**1. WELCOME TO YOUR NEW MACHINE. CHILDREN: DO NOT ATTEMPT ASSEMBLAGE
WITHOUT SUPERVISION ***

The front yard of a sagging Queenslander. Red ant hills black triangles in the dark. From inside, laughter or shouting, home-made, half-played music and a television three bars full.

Out here, the hiss and spit of a sparkler. In too-small tracksuit pants and nothing else, Timothy, a boy who sees in shapes and numbers, burns gold letters into the black.

S-H-I-T.

He looks through the gilt-frame H towards the house and the gold fades away. Half-naked silhouettes move across the yellow square window.

"Get ready!"

And suddenly together inside, "10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ..." Timothy's sparkler dies, someone spews over the veranda, "Happy New Year!"

2. FOR ASSEMBLAGE IDENTIFY KEY PARTS [REFER TO DIAGRAM]

On the veranda Timothy raises his head cautiously at the window to look into the living room. There is a sunken mattress out here for him, corners missing with some hungry dog, and covered in a Smurf sheet, faded from someone else's bedwetting, and his felt tips and paper for drawing inventions. But he doesn't want to be out here.

Inside with all the noise where he looks there are fireworks on the telly and glassy eyes and pink and red bodies twisting and bending in and out of lights. And there's that man, trying to play the guitar, and there's that Leonard, with small circle glasses pinching his nose, rolling cigarettes: dirty fingers plucking strings, dragon's breath mouthing words and tongue licking papers.

It's all a whirl of grass, handless teacups, shot glasses, cigarette papers, dregs of saffron rices and smoke, and Timothy can't find who he's looking for.

And then there she is; his mother, beautiful with long hair and neck tangled in beaded jewelry, spreading her tarot cards on the floor, reading for someone Timothy doesn't know who. Perhaps his mother will see him at the window. But he's startled by a rustling that is unlike any other rustling he's heard from the tree that overhangs the veranda too much, and when he looks back through the window, she's disappearing into farther, darker rooms out of sight.

3. CONNECT A → B

Outside, there's just the sound of crickets, a distant bassy throb that may as well be Timothy's internal organs, and the soft scratch of felt pens on paper.

Timothy draws a square and puts inside it a rat with a guitar, a snake with circle glasses and a stick-figure woman wearing necklaces. Next to the stick-figure woman he draws a smaller stick-figure boy and a heart between them.

From the drawing, Timothy constructs a paper airplane and launches it through the window

with suspended breath. He watches it arch around bodies and through smoke, and soar unnoticed past that man who now pins bow-tie shaped macaroni to his neck and says, "Look, I'm bourgeois!" He traces the jet stream with invisible puff paints and urges it towards his mother.

But mid-flight, Leonard plucks the plane from the air like that giant ape, and sneers at the shrinking dot at the window.

Below the window ledge, Timothy scrunches his fists into balls. He hears paper being ripped, and a few seconds later, a smaller plane flies out of the window and lands at his feet. He flattens it: the stick-figure boy is missing.

Inside, with a tobacco tongue and smiling, Leonard uses the paper to roll a cigarette. That man crunches uncooked macaroni and bits break off like shrapnel, "Ow shit, it's sharp!"

And the stick-figure boy goes up in smoke.

4. CONNECT B → C

A twig breaks. Timothy becomes scared out there all alone. He looks wide-eyed into the dark foliage. The tree whispers and seems to grow larger – its fingers are coming closer – swelling into the veranda. Timothy scrambles backwards over dog hair and grit. He grasps a triangle wood block doorstop and chuckles it at the tree. It gets lost in the leaves for a second and then drops with a pointy sound that makes Timothy blink hard.

The tree laughs with a green voice. And a Cheshire smile appears in its branches. The rest of the body follows, sliding down onto the veranda: a girl in long johns and grass stains. She looks at his picture and then into the window.

"Zat your mum?" Timothy doesn't move. "She's priddy."

Inside his mother smiles – a glimmer of teeth before she hides behind her hands.

"Cept her teeth are dead."

Already opening the door, she is cast in light.

"Coming?"

Timothy looks hesitant.

"I wanna see inside."

And rather than be alone, he follows behind the slip – a foot into the room and he stops: so close to the creatures – while the girl is drawn deeper.

The man is writhing in his armchair bashing guitar, whooping and singing with eyes shut.

Timothy's mother sits tuck-legged on the couch, sorting her tarot cards. So close.

The girl explores the filthy kitchen: things burnt hard in saucepans, kettle angrily boiling, sharp knives, brown peels, and split packets. The girl picks at scraps and pokes through drawers. She sees a jar of macaroni shapes on a high shelf. Smiles. Scrapes chair legs across the linoleum.

Timothy imagines a step towards his mother, but Leonard moves in and drapes a necklace over her head, coiling his bare-chested body around her as he does it up. She laughs, covering her mouth with a card of The Lovers. She disappears behind Leonard's smoke, but his eyes burn through the haze and straight through Timothy too.

Timothy stumbles back – "Look what I've found!" – and he's swept up by the rattling girl on her way out with a jar underarm.

The man becomes alert at the sound: "Hey, what the, go on, get!"

He throws a cushion at the closing door.

5. USE THREAD TO CONNECT C → B → A

The vestigial traces of the word 'shit' dissolve into the darkness as Timothy sits hunched on the stairs. There are busy fingers in his periphery and macaroni in the mattress.

Some dog in the yard interrupts the black. Timothy focuses hard on it. He imagines attaching a sparkler to the dog's tail. He watches it burn along its tail and body, erupting into orange felt flames. But the dog just blithely eats the vomit in the bushes.

"See what I made."

The girl holds up a string of macaroni.

"Necklace. You can give it to your mum."

Timothy turns back to the dog chasing its tail.

"You just gotta sneak in like a spy."

6. ATTACH B TO FLAT SURFACE [NOT AT X OR Y]

The man is picking blisters on his feet over the coffee table. He laughs at a banal ad on the telly.

Timothy is sliding past on his stomach, clutching the macaroni necklace. At his height, everything is a tower. His mother must be in one of the bedrooms. As he goes, he glances into bowls for remnants of food – finds ash. He meets a rug and climbs under it, wearing it as camouflage.

"Woo ..." The man notices the rug, "Is it just me or – the floor's moving ..." But Timothy can't hear anything except the blood in his ears.

Through the doorway, he sees his mother asleep on a bed, clutching her cards. Leonard is sprawled next to her, stroking her hair and smoking.

Leonard sees Timothy's head sticking out under the rug. He pounces up and stalks towards him, doing up his drawstring pants. The tarot cards collapse from the bed and The Magician slides under Timothy's chin. Suddenly from behind him, the rug is stripped, leaving him small and flat against the floor. The man, holding the rug like a cape, looks pleased to see him there.

"Aw, it's the little retard!"

Leonard squishes Timothy's hand and necklace into the floor. The macaroni crumbs, Timothy squirms. Leonard bends to face him. He hisses with a tongue of smoke, "Shoo." And he's already gone.

The macaroni necklace lies forgotten on the floor and on the soles of feet.

7. TRACE PATTERN ONTO FLAT SURFACE

He is on one end of the mattress and she is on the other. She threads macaroni onto string with her hands, but her eyes try to catch his, hidden under a cliff edge. He doesn't look away from his page, and he pushes so hard on his felt tip pens that they shrivel up into their casings.

He draws and the pictures come alive in twelve-pack colour.

The rat swallows a bow-tie and it gets stuck in its throat. Its tail is dismembered, tied into a noose and tightened around its misshapen neck. The rat's eyes are crossed dead. Dots of tobacco rain down on the snake and bury it under a pile. The snake burrows out of the mound but the dots grow legs, turning into ants and eat the snake down to its spine. A burning cigarette appears below the bony snake. The flames grow bigger and the snake shrivels into a circle. It eats its tail so tight that it busts into dust. The circle glasses remain, until the frames break and slide off like snakes.

And he draws all sorts of contraptions – all to scale, showing all working parts – rat traps and apparatus to skin snakes, things to prolong torture and confuse and disorientate all there in diagrammatic detail. And his red felt pen is fading like blood loss, and the girl is sleepy under a paper blanket when he finally stops.

He looks for a long time at the stick-figure woman on his first crumpled page. He hesitates, then wipes a row of crooked, dead teeth across her mouth like broken piano keys.

"You're a good drawer. But you should draw nice things. Everyone likes nice things."

Her yawn eats her face. She purrs with sleep as the tree of last night retreats with the year's first gold.

8. BEND WIRES TO U SHAPE, CONNECT TO B

Timothy's shadow casts a grotesque shape as he stands at the threshold of the living room; his limbs entwined with metal barbs fashioned from sparkler wire. A folded drawing held in his teeth stains his lips yellow-green.

The telly is still on. The man is staring at it, red-eyed, comatose, squished into a rut on the couch. A mosquito investigates his slack mouth. Timothy must act quickly.

He tiptoes through the room without snagging his spikes and reaches the broken macaroni necklace at the doorway of the bedroom. He can see his mother asleep, alone, in front of him. His heart bulges in place of an Adam's apple. He doesn't know if he should touch her in his metal cage.

"What do you think you're doing?"

There's the old-smoke smell of Leonard and his tight, hot grip at the back of the neck, pulling him away, back into the living room. Timothy thrashes and screams through a mouth of paper.

The man livens, "What have you got there?"

"Quick, give me a hand!"

Timothy knocks the table: maggoty rice flies, the cigarettes are disrupted.

"Hold him!"

But they can't. Timothy twists and kicks and spins. Leonard breaks away, sucks in deep on his cigarette, runs his fingers through his longish, thinning hair. The man dances and ducks trying to grab the metallic blur.

"Ahh, fuck, he got me!"

Timothy breaks free and scuttles to his mother's bedside.

"She's asleep, you little shit, leave her alone."

But she's not asleep, she's waking, her eyes half-open – she sees him!

Timothy takes the soggy drawing from his mouth and opens it for her. The stick-figure woman has been stuck onto the centre of the page and a stick figure boy drawn next to her. The drawing comes alive, glowing in his hands, with fields and clouds and sunlight, and friendly, domesticated animals.

Leonard leans against the doorframe, shaking his head, smoking.

"Dickhead."

His mother closes her eyes.

"Be a good boy. Go play outside, okay."

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Timothy shakes the picture harder. He glances at Leonard.

"You heard her."

Timothy desperately and inaudibly mouths, please.

His mother absently searches the bedside, sees Leonard and wants his cigarette. Leonard smiles defiantly, stretches out next to her and gives her his cigarette. She draws in, deeply satisfied and notices Timothy as she exhales.

"Shit," she fans the smoke away from Timothy, "go on!"

Timothy screams on the inside, scrunches his drawing underfoot and runs outside with fire-limbs, past the man in the living room licking blood from his wounds.

9. CONNECT THREAD TO C USING U SHAPE

The whole veranda shakes with the slamming door, and the girl wakes to see a boy struggling to escape the wires on his arms or even his arms themselves.

"Hey!"

The sharp, little voice makes him look. That girl is still here, with bright morning catching her hair. She smiles and holds up a string of macaroni.

"Can you do this up please?"

His arms throb, his brow itches. She hands him the necklace and holds her hair up off her neck.

*** CHOKING HAZARD SMALL PARTS**

It is too bright behind her eyes to sleep so she rises and pulls her hair into a ponytail. She tidies her tarot cards but there's one that makes her pause when she finds it on top. And all of a sudden she needs to pick up the crumpled piece of paper at her feet. And when she flattens it under hand, she can see what he was pointing to. She can see it in her stomach, rising to her throat and forcing words out strangely like her feet now force her out over macaroni glass unfelt.

"Where is he?" Her voice is too high, but she already knows.

She opens the door to the light. Her pupils shrink. So does her heart. There's two small black shapes, one pointy, one soft.

"Timothy?!"

In sudden fright, he releases the string, and the girl's body slumps onto the mattress, broken pasta sticking to skin and hair.

Timothy looks up at his mother.

More people rush out into sunbursts with useless faces and covering mouths.

But Timothy will never forget the ugly face his mother made that day. Nor she his.

**CONSTRUCTION NOW COMPLETE
WITH PROPER CARE YOU AND MACHINE WILL ENJOY LONG LIFE TOGETHER**