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Oxuricide

Isaac Birchmier

I. Myrtle — “The Home”

Myrtle Centas had lived in an old folks’ home for as long as she could remember. She was sent to The Home because it was too much work for her kids to take care of her. Her daughter, Eliza Centas-Stanhope, couldn’t maintain three children and her mother with the accounting position she held and the meager income from the optometry clinic her husband ran. Money was scarce, and Myrtle required constant attention, what with her arthritis and bad back. The Home was the only remaining option. Tom, her other child and only son, had become a famous chef around town, and he lived in an apartment with his girlfriend, Amethyst (what an exotic name!), who always had mascara running down her face as if she had been crying. Tom still visited and kissed his Ma on the cheek, and he had a foul musky smell and wore a wifebeater. He had maple leaves and tiny cigars tattooed all up and down his arms, but that was the style nowadays, Myrtle supposed.

As Myrtle sat in her wheelchair, waiting, she thought back on her life and how careless she had been with the gifts she had been given. At one point in time, her fingers had been flexible, operative, capable. Yet she never saw this as a miracle. She never even gave it a second thought. Her fingers worked. Of course they worked. They always had worked, and she never gave thought to the fact that they would someday stop working. Now the fingers of hers were locked, like claws, and she could barely lift her mug to get coffee in the morning. Her legs were shot. She was deaf. She had been wreckless with her gifts, and now she was suffering. She would pop her joints and crack her knuckles and bend her fingers far back on her hands just to prove she could. And now she was paying the price.

From out the corner of Myrtle’s eye, Tom appeared. She never could understand how Tom did it, this magic trick of appearing and disappearing at will. No matter how long (too long!) she stared at the staircase, it didn’t matter, because Tom would always somehow find a way to pass her by and end up on that chair (always the same chair)

beside her. That sneaky Tom!

This time around, Tom had a big cut on his leatherish forehead (just like Ammon!), and it was scabbing over diagonal stitches. A bit of string hung from where the doctor had removed the needle.

“Oh, Tom, what happened to your forehead?”

“Oh, this?” He felt at it as if he had forgotten it was there. “I fell.”

“You klutz. You really oughta be more careful. And look at those stitches. It’s as if the doctor were a retard or something.”

“No need to be so loud, Ma.”

“Oh, was I being loud? Who can ever tell with these damned hearing aids? Anyway... Where did you go to get those stitches? Was it that Moron at Saint Pete’s, Sobretti? I’ve told everyone that Saint Pete’s needs to fire that guy.”

“Mr. Sobretti,” Tom said.

He kept flaring his nostrils, as if suppressing an itch.

“I knew it was that damned Sobretti.”

Tom was itching his eyes.

“Such bad stitchwork. Someone who works on puppets could do a better job. My son, a puppet? Ha! I’ll give that Mr. Sobretti a piece of my mind, that’s what I’ll do.”

Tom kept itching his eyes.

“That damned, stupid Sobretti.”

“Ma!”

“Huh? What?”

“It wasn’t Mr. Sobretti.”

The pain it looked like Tom was in made Myrtle sad, and the way he had snapped at her told her that not everything was alright. Myrtle looked at Tom with sympathy. Things had been rough ever since Ammon had left, and she knew that Tom was upset. She felt bad for her son and wanted to comfort him.

“Tom, baby,” she said, looking deep into his eyes. “You need to relax. You’ll give yourself an aneurysm yelling like that.”

Tom looked tired. His eyes must have hurt because he kept rubbing them. He was whispering to himself now, and was sweating profusely because he wasn’t used to how hot The Home was, Myrtle understood.

Myrtle thought back on her life and wondered where Ammon had gone. He had been such a good man, a loving husband, then one day (poof!) he disappeared, and it hurt Myrtle’s head to think about it.

II. Tom — “The Trial”

The name’s Tom Centas, and I specialize in amphetamines. My decision to be a dealer wasn’t one I originally planned. I was a normal kid, and you gotta hear me out on this. I was a normal kid until The Incident happened. When my Ma, in an act of insanity, dropped a fully-loaded, three-hundred and fifty pound Frigidaire on my father’s head, flattening it to a crown. I was seventeen at the time, and nothing could match the hatred I felt for her after that. My father’d been a good man, and to think that Ma was ballsy enough to kick a fridge on his head just rubs me the wrong way.

After The Incident, I vowed that I was gonna kill Ma on the day of her trial. She was evil, and she killed a good man. It made me furious to even think about it. I went and bought me a Ruger Mark Three from my friend, Jeff, who ran a business of stealing guns from a local pawnshop and selling ’em for cheap. I filled the thing with ten rounds in case the first nine didn’t do her in, and I prepared my four hundred dollar investment for its usage: to kill Myrtle Centas, the craziest damn woman on the planet, a woman who marked the end of good people.

I remember the day well. I wore sleeves to cover up the blunt tats on my arms. I hid the gun in my belt. I wore a heavy, black sweater. I splashed water on my face at the apartment before I left. I felt woozy from all the Ice I’d taken. My eyes were sunken. I had to use my right arm because I couldn’t feel the left. When I tied off I immediately felt like vomiting. The face in the mirror swirled. A Frank Sinatra song played on repeat. I didn’t know whether it was in my head or if it was coming from my laptop. The meats of my teeth itched. I put Visine in my eyes and prepared to kill my mom.

So, anyhow, yeah, I showed up to the trial. The place was full of people I didn’t know and had never met a day in my life. The walls inhaled and exhaled with each step I took. As I made my way down the center aisle, I could see all these miserable people looking up to see me: the son of the killer. Then, when they saw me, they immediately put their heads down, pretending as if I weren’t there. I moved forward, my eyes never leaving the silver hair on the back of my Ma—the defendant’s—head.

The ceiling pulsed.

After a while, Ma got put up on the witness stand. She looked clean as a whistle, as if she were unaffected by having outright killed my father. I was angry beyond belief. I could feel myself shaking in anger. My hand kept reaching for the gun in my belt. But, no, I kept telling myself, let the murderous bitch say just one word, one word, about how she enjoyed killing him. Oh yes, I would've loved if she woulda spoken out about how satisfying it was to have crushed my dad's skull, to have flattened his head into a crown. I had the gun ready and I was prepared to kill. She just needed to say one word. One goddamned word.

But she didn't.

"Please stand up for 'The Oath,'" the judge said.

Ma stood up.

"State your full name for the record."

"Myrtle Artemis Centas."

"Do you have any objection against taking 'The Oath?'"

"Oh dear no."

"Do you swear that you will, on the evidence placed before you, give a verdict on the issues to be tried? If so, please raise your right hand and say 'So help me, God.'"

"So help me, God."

"Thank you very much. You may be seated."

Ma had already been said to be, beyond a reasonable doubt, the perpetrator of the crime. I had not been in the house when she killed my father. And for that I'm thankful. I only had the news from the I.R. and my own imagination. But I still was prepared to kill her. And when Ma took the stand for the first time she looked so oblivious, happy, ignorant. It made me furious.

But then she spoke:

"Oh yes, I had been cooking for Ammon, because he was hungry. Oh yes, I had made scalloped potatoes and there was pot roast in the pressure cooker. Oh yes, and Tom and Ammon and I were getting ready to go eat dinner. Oh yes."

The people in the jury mumbled and somebody blew their nose into a Kleenex. My eyes felt like they were trying to crawl out of my head. Her attorney pleaded insanity: It was granted.

I became what I am because Ma did what she did. She killed my father, robbed me of the central figure who was meant to raise me, to watch me grow in his image. I'll never get the satisfaction of having

become the perfect, molded individual that is compressed as a figure, strong and proud, in his eyes. He'll never watch me graduate because I dropped out sophomore year. He will never watch me love a girl because I've lost all sense of love. He will never see me become that fireman I promised him I would become because he's dead. To think that my father, a man like a king, an emperor over noble lands, met his end by the hands of my mother, Myrtle, why, it disgusts me. Even her name is disgusting. Myrtle. I am now a dealer, and I have Myrtle Centas to blame for that. It's all Ma's fault.

Every weekend or so I've made a pact of going to the old folks' home to visit my batshit-crazy Ma. We talk about what she's been up to, and more often than not her attention turns to my teeth, and she's of the mind that I need to brush 'em. I say, "I do brush my teeth, Ma," and she just keeps on rambling, and the other folks begin to look at her as if she were crazy, and that's because she is.

III. Myrtle — "Ammon"

There Ammon was, and Myrtle was so happy to see him. He was standing right beside her, with those same piercing, green eyes she married him for.

"Where have you been?" she asked him.

But Ammon had already left, and Myrtle didn't care either way, because why would someone disappear that fast if they didn't love you in the first place?

IV. Tom — "J."

Last time I'd visited Ma there'd been a large cut on my forehead and it was scabbing over the stitches. This cut had come about from a dispute I'd had with a dealer. His name was Jason, but people called him "J." Simple as that. And from last I can recall he had a system of paying some of the teenagers round town with coke or X or whatnot to spraypaint a "J," the period and all, on streetsides, so he could claim ownership of that turf. The kids really liked the guy too from what I could tell, so if some other Mafioso decided that he'd fork over twice the X to paint "R." or something up on the walls, the kids would just downright refuse, and, wouldn't ya know, "R." would be gone within the week.

The place where J. did his operations is exactly how ya'd expect a junkie's apartment to look like. Prostitutes swarming about outside some vacant looking rundown motel that's actually still in service and has quite a number of paying "residents." To get to J.'s room you'd have to climb a flight of stairs and turn a sharp left, walk all the way to end of the balcony. He lived in (and still lives in, to the best of my knowledge) the room 207. The "Magic" Motel, it's called. The sign outside's water damaged and has that stereotypical image of a cartoon magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. The IHOP a few blocks down is missing the "P" in its billboard. The residents of the Magic Motel frequent that very same IHOP. I know this because I've been there a few times myself.

Anyhow, back to how I got this cut: The inside of the apartment had been hazy, bare-bones, skeletal, messy, filled with empty bottles, pots and pans, the occasional needle. The place was just the kind of shithole you'd expect. And J. was the sort of livewire with the reputation of having quick wits, of being sociable, of being a charmer, of having no fear. In my thirty two years of life, I've learned that it's the men without fear that're capable of anything, from heroism to the darkest of evils. And, in J.'s case, killing someone was an infinite possibility. This made me a bit frightened, of course.

So I went to J. and asked him for a little something even though I didn't have money. I got high beforehand, of course, but that was far from a preparation for what awaited me.

When I knocked on the door, I was still a little on edge from the coke my roommate'd left for me in a Ziploc baggie. So on the drive there I was a bit jittery. When I made it to the front door and knocked, I was greeted by the door opening through a slit, the chain which keeps intruders out slamming, and a bloodshot eye peering out from the slit.

"Whaddyawan?" the eye gargled.

"I'm here to see J."

"Who is it?" J.'s voice came from the distance.

"Who are you?" the eye asked.

"Tom Centas. I'm here to see J."

The doorslit closed and I heard some rustling and commotion, the unlatching of a chain, then the door swung open. I walked in and closed the door behind me, checking if anyone had seen me enter. My assumption (coupled with a few rumors I'd heard from friends) was

that J. was paranoid of the satellite function on Google Maps, and he heard instances where people were caught committing crimes cause of it, and J. said he couldn't leave the door open when any of that was goin on: It wasn't good for business.

"Tommy-boy!" J. said, an unlit blunt in his mouth. J. usually wore a wifebeater and torn blue pants. He looked like a less pale, much more muscular version of me. His wifebeater actually fit him.

"Hey J.," I said.

"So what've you come here for?" his voice suddenly taking a tone of business.

I'll just go ahead right here and save you the time and me the breath and just tell you that I was severely beaten. J. and his crony threw me to the ground and gashed my head open. I almost had to go to an E.R., and I would have, if I hadn't been so worried of what the tests would have told. I ended up returning back to my apartment, bleeding a trail through the Magic Motel parking lot to where my car was. I got back to my room and stitched up the gash with a needle and a set of transparent string I had prepared in the medicine cabinet. When I came back from stitching up the cut in the bathroom, my pal Harvey Ruth said to me "Who let Frankenstein in? Ha!" Then, when I hit his beer to the ground: "Da fug, mayne?"

The weird thing is, when I feel at the cut now, there's no pain, and I often forget it's there, as if it has been a part of me for far longer than I can even remember.

V. Myrtle — "A Dialogue"

"The crime rate sure is astonishing nowadays, isn't it?"

"Mhm," Tom agreed.

"I mean, all those drug dealers and whatnot..."

Tom looked uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry. I'm not trying to scare you. It's just that the streets have been so terrible as of late."

"Yeah, I know, Ma, let's just stop talking about it."

VI. Tom — "The Weekly Visit"

I took a visit to The Home, and Ma was there, as usual. (I mean, where else could she go?) For Ma, The Home was a large improvement

from The Asylum, but I think that after about fifteen years of being in The Asylum, where her legs gave way beneath her, that anything would've been an improvement. It took me that whole period of her being at The Asylum to forgive her. By the time she could no longer walk, and her fingers became useless, well, that was good enough for me. Old age is always the best way to end a grudge. Ma's been without working legs in The Home for about four years now. I visit her almost every weekend. She goes on ridiculous rants, making her intolerable, and I'm forced to leave after a half hour tops, but it's good to go to The Home to see her, because she's old now, too old to be crazy.

When I entered, everything was the same. The ceilings were tall, the grass outside green, the automatic doors slow to open for the old folks, maybe to make 'em feel as if they went at normal speed, or maybe to save electricity from having the door stay open for the long time it took 'em to get inside. Who knows? There were elaborate staircases, though I always found these confusing, since many of these old people were in wheelchairs. It always worked out that Ma sat by herself, her wheelchair next to an empty seat, staring at the wall. She began talking as soon as we came in contact, somehow able to sense I was there without even looking at me.

“Uh! Babe, uht hap te ye for'd?”

The drugs they kept her on to calm her down slurred her speech. It was a bitch at first, trying to understand what she was saying, but I've come to figure out what she means.

“Oh, this?” I felt to the gash in my head from where J. and his crony slammed it against the concrete. She looked at the wall, as if she somehow knew before I visited that I had a cut on my forehead. She spoke to the wall behind me. I still to this day don't know how she does it.

“I fell.”

Now she grew passionate, and not even the medication they had her on could defend against Ma when she was angry.

“Y' klutz!” she yelled, that killer instinct still in her eye. If I were to have been twenty years younger and she wasn't in a wheelchair, I would have been running behind the couch or someplace else in fear. “Y'lly gaw' be muh' cay'fuh!” she yelled. “N'd'ook a'dose stishes! 'Zasif the do'tor'usza retard or so'thin'!”

The other residents from across the hall began to stare, as they usually did when I visited. Her face was a deep red, a red so red it

must've had all the blood her legs didn't need anymore. She looked straight at me.

"No need to be so loud, Ma," I said.

"Eh? Oh, s'I be'n low?" she mumbled. But then the rant continued, "Who k'ever te' wi' ease gaw dam earin' a's!" She was waving her arms at the brick wall. "D wheredya g'e'em stishes! 'Sit tha morn at Say Peace, S'bretti! I tol evern that Say Peace nees to fie at guy!"

"Calm down, Ma. It wasn't Mr. Sobretti—"

"Knew's that dam 'bretti!"

It was as if her mind was on purpose ignoring what I had to say. "It wasn't Mr. Sobretti, Ma," I said, rubbing between my eyes. I always got these headaches when she spoke: like trying to talk to a brick wall who talks to a brick wall.

"Sush bah' stishwor!" she yelled.

The residents cross the room looked off into the distance, opposite where me and Ma sat. Not even antipsychotics could pin down her rage. "Some'n uh wor's o' pup'ts cuh d'a be'r job! My so', pup't?" Then she gave out this deep laugh which made me jump, and woulda made the other folks jump too hadn't they left. "I gi' that 'bretti piece a my min', tha's I' do."

"It wasn't Mr. Sobretti," I tried telling her.

But she wouldn't listen.

"That dam S'bretti."

At this point I had grown so annoyed that even I began to yell. "Ma!"

"Huh? W't?" She looked around, inspecting the corners of the wall.

"It wasn't Mr. Sobretti," I said, trying to relieve myself of this terrible headache.

This is when she looked at me, when she put her eyes not on the brick wall, but on my face. There was silence between us and I looked up and saw her eyes for the first time since I was a child and I felt sympathy and sadness. I felt as if our hearts were connected for the first time since she killed my dad. This is when she said to me in the clearest, most coherent and soothing voice I've ever heard in my entire life:

"Tom," she said, "baby, you need to relax. You'll give yourself an aneurysm yelling like that."

The words came forth clearly and it was a miracle and it was

instant, and the words came from the mouth of my crazy damn Ma, and I understood them without even trying.

I looked at her and I looked at the sincerity in her eyes, and I felt like crying. I felt like crying tears that had been building up for so long. “You bitch,” I said. “You bitch,” the tears running fast down my cheeks. And I wiped my sobbing eyes, and Ma looked at me with this quiet concern, and I wiped the tears away as they poured down fast. She looked at me and her voice’d been clearer and more coherent than anything she’d ever said to me in her entire life, and the tears poured down fast.

I wiped the tears away, choking on my sadness, and I looked up to her, and I said, my voicebox crying, two words I’d been meaning to say for a long long time:

“Sorry, Ma.”

But it was too late: she was already gone.