

## Aneurysm

### *A family affair*

15 minutes. I'd arrived only about *15 minutes* after everybody else had. In reality I'd been some two hours late, stuck on the highway, held up by a flat tire I'd had to wait for someone to come and fix. I was supposed to have been there for the party's last minute preparations, way before most of the guests, but there were other people on hand and of course Ma had everything completely under control, as usual. Those last minute details had been more for decorum, really, so she could tell everyone how I'd *been* there, how I'd helped out.

I walked into the building, gingerly looking forward to greeting those family members I hadn't seen in a while, since we usually only met on occasions like this.

I usually talked myself into walking the three flights worth of stairs; one of those 'little things you can do', one of those healthy little habits to incorporate into your daily routine; though rather than to bolster my 'stay-in-shape' efforts, my motivation had more to do with the ultra-slow pace of the elevator, to accommodate the assisted living's senior citizens besides coffee hour and game time for the aficionados and the live-in physician and physical therapist.

Today, though, I was bearing a heavy backpack and two bag-fulls of stuff including a couple of bottles of last minute Canei to help oblige the birthday visitors, but mostly Ma herself; Ma's gifts (first in); my own heavy duty winter gear just in case that blizzard really hit and an armful of a particularly colorful assortment of Alstroemeria's. I usually got those Peruvian lilies for her all too rarely. Now it was just my luck that Valentine's day followed so closely after her birthday. Oh, well. I was happy to keep her happy and all flowered up for the first two months of the year.

I hated, as I called it, the 'group thing'. Avoided parties as much as I could. In the meantime my family had grown sympathetic and really appreciative when I did show up once in a blue moon. Gave myself a pep talk, bracing myself for the multiple encounter, all the way through waiting for the elevator – getting into the elevator – waiting for the elevator door to close (and no 'close door' buttons to speed up the process!) and – excruciatingly slowly – rising to the third floor. By then I was genuinely excited even though I knew full well that there would be many exclamations – and even more stares – to do with my late arrival.

The scene that hit me when I walked out onto the elevator landing was one so alien that it stopped me in my tracks. Rarely did I meet a soul when I visited my mother. None could usually be seen either on that off white, concrete landing or along the wide, two-sided, open corridor under that transparent roof. From that landing you had an immediate panoramic overview of all of the apartments; all the way to the back on both sides of the void along the middle, which allowed for a look at the lower floors, all the way down to the ground level walkway flanked by the caretakers' offices. And usually there was complete silence, as nothing could be heard outside the apartments, since their occupants had grown so adept at not being a nuisance to each other.

Today my ears were immediately struck by whispered chattering, like I stood near a beehive. There were assorted clumps of gray-haired people standing on the landing, in the corridor in front of their apartments, peeping out their windows and clinging to the railing surrounding the void. Heads had swiveled as the elevator door opened. More turned as I slowly advanced. I picked up that there were also people looking up from the second floor and even some on the first.

I could see my mother's door, a bit across from where I'd gotten out of the elevator, a short way along the corridor, and registered both that *she* wasn't standing outside and that her door was ajar. In the same instance I realized that this was the very door everyone was staring at. Now I could definitely feel all eyes on me. No wonder, as I was the only thing moving. My spine went cold and my heart dropped in my stomach. My entire body grew stiff as a board while I barely noticed having robotically picked up pace.

"What's the matter?" I asked someone in passing. She didn't answer but looked at me with large eyes frozen into her transparently moth dappled face. My hair stood on end. What was happening here? As I approached my mother's door and hesitated, some now dared call out to me. A timid lady plucking at her skirt, standing in battered bedroom slippers a bit further away – probably the neighbor on my mother's left – also with eyes dominating the face, fearfully said:

"I don't think you should go in."

At an angle behind me another woman blurted:

"We heard screaming. Something horrible happened in there."

A man close to her offered:

"We're waiting for the police."

And as if on cue, a police siren started up in the distance, getting quickly nearer, and the insistent sound hung eerily over the scene.

More people raised their voices, more and more urgently:

“Don’t go in!”

“Just wait for a bit!”

“Please!”

“The police will be here any minute.”

From behind the door not a sound could be heard. Not what I was used to from a family event with my joyfully boisterous relatives.

I hesitated only a moment longer. Then I carefully positioned the bags against the wall, laid the flowers on top of them and began to strip off the heavy backpack.

“Really, don’t go in.” the left door neighbor urgently whispered, having shuffled a bit closer.

“My mother’s in there.” I said apologetically, straightening up from the backpack on the floor, steeling myself.

As I slowly pushed the door open with one hand, trying to peer behind it, I could almost feel the clusters of people behind and around me collectively hold their breath. Then I stepped into another world.

In my mother’s short hallway all still seemed as should be, aside from the abnormal, laden silence in front of me and the muffled chatter of the people behind. Not a great many coats. But this was as to be expected, as they’d probably used my mother’s bed for that, as usual.

I faced the door to my mother’s living room, also standing ever so slightly ajar, with lead in my shoes, knowing I’d have to open it. My body was now so cold it almost didn’t feel like mine. I dragged my feet forward like I would clumps of lead.

I – oh, so slowly – edged the door open onto a vista of devastation so total, that it took me several minutes before I believed my eyes. No sound. No movement. I inched forward.

“Ma?” I croaked.

*Bodies on the sofa.*

*Bodies next to and over the table.*

*Armchair overturned, in the way. Push it aside.*

*Body to the right. Half hanging In the corner. Who...?*

*‘Hector’ it flashes.*

*Squishing and crunching of hard things beneath my feet.*  
*Red liquid – ‘That’s blood!’ my brain volunteers – and shards of glass.*  
*From the display in the corner.*  
*Lump in my throat. Head like a block of ice.*  
*Turn it back to the rest of the room.*  
“Ma?”  
*Woman near my left foot, bloody black holes all in back.*  
*Woman face up over the table, head over the side. Nadine.*  
*Oh, God, what happened here?*  
*Uncle Ernesto’s massive body slumped to the side on the sofa. Woman lying*  
*over him.*  
“Auntie Elena?”  
*Hole in his neck. Holes in his chest and her back.*  
“Ma?”  
*Sob in my voice.*  
*Two more bodies slumped on chairs over the dinner table in the back.*  
“Ma?” More urgently.  
*Something stirs in the back, next to the carnage.*  
*Something that was slumped. Or crouching.*  
*Shivering. I’m shivering.*  
*Please let it be Ma.*  
*‘But then, who ... these people?’ something asks.*  
*My brain refuses to fill in the word.*  
*Shuffling behind me. The police?*  
“Holy Christ!” *Deep bass.*  
“Ma?”  
*Moaning. Rising. Sounds like her but only barely.*  
“Lady, what are you doing?”  
*Is that to me or to Ma? Is it Ma?*  
“Ma? What happened?”  
*Half-crying now.*  
*More ‘Holy Christ’s’ behind me.*  
“Ma’m, put your hands up for me now.”  
*Ma looking at me sadly, bloodspattered face and front.*

*Raises a shaking, bloody left hand holding closed, dripping scissors.*

"Where's my sister?" she says miserably.

*What the..*

"Ma'm, put the weapon down!"

"I've lost my sister." she whimpers.

"Mom, what have you done? What's happening? You were fine.

Everything was fine!"

"Lady, be careful!"

*Probably because I'm moving towards Ma.*

"Ma, give me that, okay?"

*She looks at me. Then at her hand. Something seems to shift inside.*

"Look out!" *I hear, from a faraway land.*

They can't shoot her. I'm standing in the way.

*She throws herself at me, baring her teeth.*

"MA! No!"

*Scissors painfully scraping my head and face, alongside my eye, as I throw her arm off.*

*Struggling. Grappling. Her eyes! Where's my mother?*

*Other arms. Black uniform sleeves.*

*Searing pain in my right shoulder. White flash behind my eyes. All extinguishing blast.*

*Then all goes dark.*

Submitted for Edward Hoffer Award 2014