

SCYLLA & CHARYBDIS

AN OBITUARY



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Edna Savage died last week, a frustrated clench of her brown-paper hands being her last action, and 'Christopher' being her last word. Her hands didn't rustle when she clenched them, although they looked as though they should, the skin brittle and taught, translucent like a damp parcel. Skin that waxed and waned with the movements of her pencil bones and blue liquorice veins that could be seen some days worse than others, the struggle to remain a creature of substance having long been under way.

Savage: She had never appreciated the connotations of her husband's surname not seeing why an historic blood tie of his should besmirch her reputation and after his death had reverted to Miller, her father's name, for casual correspondence. Yet she was legally Savage – it said so on the white plastic bottle of Sulphasalazine prescribed for her arthritis, that she kept on the mantle-piece behind the stuffed leather Peruvian frog – a gift from Anna from across the hall.

The frog was ugly, bloated and too satisfied for something cobbled together from a cow's ass, with a smile stitched in twine that bristled with dangerous secrets. Although something she would never admit, Edna behaved impeccably when in the presence of the frog, when reflected in his convex glass button eye like a fish

trapped in a bowl. He brought her discomfort yet she kept him there to the end, and not just to appease Anna who had been dead near four months, but to conceal her medication, to keep it near to hand but hidden, at least all but a peek of it. The peek was important, an advert for her silent martyrdom. The frog also bore a passing resemblance to Lloyd Savage her long dead spouse, although this similarity never occurred to Edna.

Also on the mantelpiece, to the right, Lloyd the Frog being to the left, was a small wooden frame, chipped-gold-painted wood, plastic instead of glass, and inside the frame was Christopher. Was me. The photograph had been taken during that summer when shorts were worn long, like football players as Edna remembered them, and t-shirts came with words like sorted and c'mon stencilled onto them by a graffiti artist that was really a machine. I was all by Reebok, £59.98.

Anna had never had grand-children, perhaps never children either, and was a little too keen, almost desperate Edna would have it, for any slither of news about me. My mother also interested her and she allied herself with Edna on that one –What? What did you do to deserve this daughter?My extended absence was excused; I was after all young, busy, and even a card at Christmas was enough. But for a daughter not to visit her own mother, her own sick mother, that was inexcusable. Except that photo couldn't have been taken in the summer because the catalogue business always works one season ahead (although the designers would joke that they really worked one season behind), so that it must have been taken in December. And maybe I do remember that day, sunny though it was, being cold, biting with winter. The photographer was small, dark haired and cute, with that downy moustache so many women tear out now at the

root, shimmering with its own proud coating of frost. Caught at the right angle it made her look like a stern toy-general, somehow beautiful. That was one of my last jobs.

Edna would never have told Anna about how it had ended, about how my jaw-line – or it could have been my brow, it's difficult to remember – had been only capriciously pretty and would give me only one seasons' work, and besides I had got fat and could never faux-smile with the instinct of some of the peacocks that I worked with. She would never have told Anna because Anna simply didn't need to know. How often now, it seemed to Edna, the distinction between want and need became confused, and with such ugly consequences. But Anna would ask (All these questions Christopher, why won't she let it alone?) about why there was only one photo and Edna would dismiss her with a reason too complex, too well crafted, to be untrue. She accepted this interrogation, from one less blessed and less fruitful than herself in the manner that she imagined Jesus might had he been a resident of Green Oaks: Carer Assisted Apartments (“Independence and Security, Guaranteed!”). Indeed, she was satisfied for the most part that Jesus wouldn't have acted very differently –although He didn't have any grandchildren either.

The photo wasn't even a print, wasn't one of the ten by eight glossies they'd send you as a record of the shoot, but was cut straight from the catalogue. Edna had been surprised to discover 'her' Christopher on page 498 and cupping the book in those hands, it laid heavy in them and flopped open like a dead pigeon, had lifted it unthinkingly to the mantle-piece, to Lloyd's misty brown beads. 'Yes you do know Lloyd, our grandson Christopher, Mary's boy! I'll get a frame for it tomorrow'. Edna was meticulous. She had been at Green Oaks almost

a year before she was satisfied that the rumour she had put about – that she was staggeringly beautiful as a girl and that really you could see it if you watched the way she moved, even now, such care for her appearance, such a fine posture – had wound itself into the fissures of the virulent clique that always exists in a place like this, and pried it open enough for her to snuggle down like a snake amidst. A meticulous nature was necessary, not only to oil the mechanics of her rumour, which besides wasn't untrue (I may have lost the sex, Christopher, but I kept the sass!), but also because a meticulous nature in old age, to Edna, could be seen as nothing but the hangover of a meticulous beauty in youth. Botherless beauty was a modern invention – potentially elegant young women parading in car mechanics' denims and the blouses of grubby gypsy children, selling themselves so tragically short. It made no sense, and as far as Edna could see, wasn't worth the effort it took.

So Edna was meticulous with my picture. Using the scissors that before would cut her toe-nails until she suddenly couldn't bend enough and had to ask Kevin the nurse to cut them for her, and he had his own scissors, industrial strength, somehow menacing like a small silver crocodile that seemed to gloat before each bite, SNIP, she first cut the page clean away from the spine. My legs had been spliced with the Reebok logo so Edna could do nothing but cut straight across my thighs – a dissatisfying cut that made me look stumpy and disproportionately built, as though I ended where the picture did, as though I had asked the photographer to just once not let on about the accident with my legs. The sky above my head, blue, empty save for a gull that might have been a fleck of dirt on the lens, gave her room for experimentation, but it worked best as she had expected, six by four – the Golden

Rectangle, almost. Anyhow, I suppose I might have given Edna the portfolio print, but it wasn't that simple. The toy-general had sent it with 'call me if you like, 847-9876' dappled lightly with a nervous pencil on the back, and although I could have copied the number, there was something I liked about the way she wrote her l's, the loop almost too wide so that it could be an O if you wanted to pick holes. I couldn't call, I'd have been beset by nerves, but it was a nice souvenir. Besides, I didn't know Edna's address.

I never met my grandmother, neither of my grandmothers. My father's mother had died three years before I was born, shot through with a cancer that had begun in her stomach, but had got greedy as they always do and had taken her bowel and bladder for seconds. My mother's mother died in childbirth. Not with my mother, but with her younger sister, an Aunt who I barely knew but whose big head and brattish face couldn't help but make you think she'd buried her on purpose as some kind of advance retribution for her disenchanting life. I had never met Edna either but I can't see why she didn't have as much claim to me as these other strangers. Sure there was blood, but whenever I've seen blood it's always been pretty messy, languid and menacing, and it always stains. Whatever it was that made her cut me out and call me Christopher, frame me and introduce me to the other residents as a grandson didn't seem important, there was a purity to it all that couldn't be sullied. Like any relationship, grandmother to grandson, but bleached out under intense white penetrating lights, all words left spiralling inaudible beneath some kind of celestial hum, like listening to your heart beat underwater. A peace, of sorts.

Yet in the four months since Anna had died my importance had dwindled. None of Edna's other friends seemed to ask, burdened as they were with vigorous broods who enriched them with so many true stories that even Edna's bullish imagination couldn't keep pace. When she had decided that Mary, her 'daughter', my 'mother', was to be a disappointment – bad children having a wider scope than good, twice as much conversational currency at least, and besides a perfect family like that Madeline's two floors below, with their college educations and regular visits, are just a pain in the you-know-what excuse my language – Edna had hoped this might see her through. Small but interesting was the safest path.

But now how much she missed Anna! Sweet, barren Anna. She missed her stupidity, her dim manner that furnished her with a wish to merely get by in the world and not to understand it, that made her say things like 'I took to it like a fish out of water' and not understand that her brain had just played a joke. Edna couldn't help but think of her as a conspiracy of competing limbs, drawn together and forced to make it work, although each with its own agenda.

And she was so dear! She would buy the kind of presents that Edna would have bought as a joke, as an act of malice to make the recipient feel as though they were sitting on an awkward chair but didn't want to say, and would give them with such sincerity that when you looked at them they really weren't as bad as all that, were they..? Although most of all, she missed Anna's hunger for The Word. Her ceaseless probing that had at times seemed riddled with mistrust, but that after her death and the taunting empty pews at her funeral (Were the flats built next to the crematorium or the crematorium next to the

flats? Which was worse?) seemed infinitely more sincere; as though I, as though Christopher, really meant something to her as well. But she died. She died of an Abdominal Aortic Aneurism that no one could have seen coming, so the doctors had said. She died some time during the same week that I had crashed my car into the front wall of the house that belonged to the mother of the toy-general, who had telephoned me later the same day to ask if I would like to go for a drink and to say that she had got my number from her mother and she hoped I didn't mind. Had Edna not married me off at twenty four, the same age that she had married, Lloyd was twenty six, this would have been the news she had itched for – 'her' Christopher meeting a girl. But she had set this eventuality in the current long ago, it had bobbed and curled into engagement, and braved the eddies of minor marital strife. Since Anna had died it felt as though I had, as a source of news, grown stale, long washed out to sea.

It was sad in a way because it meant that Edna had missed out. Missed out on the way the General's dress kinked above her hip, somehow born of her nerves when she walked. She missed out on the long-faded dyes that had left their trace, as a kind of biography of this woman until now, in her choppy black hair and the way the mist from the beer, after she'd taken a sip, glinted for a second on those hairs that really weren't as long as I had thought. She had missed out on knees purposely brushed under the table, that worked to set four hands loose from an unnatural interest in the dynamics of the beer tumblers onto shoulders then legs then faces. She had missed out on the kiss that included teeth just as it had when at fourteen it was all new and as big as the world. She had missed out on the slow walk to a house that the General shared with a sprat of a girl journalist who should have

worked me up into something, but didn't. And she missed out on us naked, lost in each other, not slick, smooth and cold as the films dictate, but clumsy, fleshy and damp, hanging funny and vanquished in a fug that should have smelt bad but which we drew in with ever deeper gasps. Although maybe that isn't the sort of thing you tell your Grandmother.

Edna died a little less than four months after Anna with a clench of her hands and one word: 'Christopher'. The nurses who worked the circuit of the care assisted flats told the doctor who came to issue her death certificate, that as they had seen so many times before it was almost as if Edna had sensed she was going to die. Just as a cat will slink away to its death, quiet and dignified, unassuming beneath a tree, so Edna had in her own way prepared. Her rooms had been cleaned and her clothes packed with a glint of her job done attitude that the priest would comment on, to a chorus of polite snorts, on the day of her funeral.

I was, of course, never told of her death. Why would I be? My only connection with her was that she had framed a photo of me, seeming a little too ecstatic with the middle distance to be convincing, that she kept above her fireplace. All I knew of it was a kick, a strange protestation from my stomach at the very moment that she died, whilst I was talking on the telephone with the General, explaining that she hadn't met my mother because she couldn't, because I didn't know where she was, and was really OK with it now after a few years of being a bit messed up. The kick receded and something else rose up from deeper inside, something good, something that I had suddenly to share with the General...

The doctor couldn't tell what Edna had died of. There seemed no suspicious circumstances so she was

assigned to the natural causes line and told to wait her turn. She had left little money and no children, no surviving children at least, so the manager of Green Oaks called in a clearance firm to empty her rooms for their new resident. There was, after all, quite a waiting list. Some of her clothes and all of her books they kept and sold, but everything else, from a tattered old photo frame to a grinning leather frog, they left out the back, bagged up in black polythene. It's strange that they never knew what she died of, that's the easy part. What someone is born of, that's usually more difficult.



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