

XO

I know a story about a daughter who abandoned her mother.

It began with a discovery.

Xanna Orissa brings words to life in her paintings. Like a magician, she confuses, stuns, and impresses with her work. Colors that you thought could never match together marry; colors of the same shade repel each other in contrast, like bitter lovers amidst a heartbreaking separation. She is ambiguous, always inciting others to confusion.

And her greatest confusion yet was the day she abandoned her mother.

She didn't escape to the streets, nor decided to live independently. She is not a rebel or a liberal. She is an artist living in her own world.

And all invaders will be prosecuted.

Mrs. Orissa, better known as Mia, found an empty canvas in her daughter's room on the fourth of September 2009. She noticed that the door to the patio was open. Xanna sat on an old chair, motionless, deep in thought.

"What did I say about your empty paintings? What are you doing? The art contest is tomorrow and you have nothing?" Mia grabbed the collar of Xanna's shirt, revealing a line of faded scars across her neckline, caused by Mamma Mia herself.

"I can't."

Fast forward. Now Mia is leaving the patio with a trickle of blood on her fist.

Fast forward again. Xanna wins the contest.

Exhibited in the local art museum was her artwork: a chilling portrait of a chair facing forward, its back to the viewer, sitting in the middle of a desolate land.

That land is the Orissas' patio, the last place Mia Orissa and her daughter interacted.

The artwork's caption was "discovery is the first step."

Xanna did not abandon her mother.

This is not a story about familial relationships. That's not it.

Mia kicked her out of the house, exploding with merciless rage after seeing the painting. She had ordered it to be burned, but Xanna refused. She was not a rebel. She is an artist protecting her work.

“I hope you discover how much of an demanding brat you are. I paid for your stupid material for sixteen years!” Mia then insulted Xanna with a sentence that I cannot exactly quote.

But they scarred her for life. I know this as Xanna left, with Mia regretting her last words everyday.

It is the fourth September 2014, five years after the feud. I’ll tell you who I am. I’m a writer for *The New York Times*, and I heard this story from Mia herself. Mia and I are close friends, and I feel like our minds function as one. We met two weeks after her and Xanna’s fight, and in those fourteen days she was choosing between taking therapy and taking up a writing workshop. She chose the workshop.

That’s when we met. She cried the first day of the program, telling the conductor, Mrs. Sales, and me, how an “ungrateful brat” Xanna was. She said all she wanted was for Xanna to be normal and stop “changing her artwork themes every time.” I explained to her that artists *have* to change their designs constantly to keep exciting the audience.

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“I think what Xanna meant to say was that discovery is the first step to change. Maybe that’s what she meant.”

It took her five years to accept what I said.

Now, I have to write a review about Jordan Tame’s new play, *It Ends With?* Tame is a novel playwright with experience as a graffiti artist in Brooklyn. *It Ends With?* is about a girl who lives under the Empire State Building for five years, hiding from security, sneaking herself in hidden spots, and stealing sandwiches from Subway. The girl’s history is unknown, but we know that she went on, in her words, an “artistic pilgrimage” and owns an art museum showcasing eccentric paintings in the end, each painting’s level of eccentricity increasing with every one.

Tame opened her play with a strong statement: “someone told me I could only ever change the color of my paintings, but never my words. But I have created for myself a world that changes the colors of its trees, altering the spoken word whenever a change occurs. Sometimes those spoken words are not so soothing. The spoken word reacts impulsively: they can hurt.”

A familiar feeling clutches my heart as she says the word “hurt.”

“But words also act proactively: they can heal the scars that they place on their victims. This is not a story about change.”

The scene changes to a woman who sits on a chair, motionless, deep in thought. Another woman enters and demands her to get up. The first woman declines. The other woman retaliates. The sound of a punch is heard.

I know who Jordan Tame really is.

“This is the story of transformation, the king of all continuous improvement.”

After *The New York Times* hired me, I lost contact with Mia. She and I were close, although she was never my friend. I never understood why she had been so bitter. But I understood why she changed.

Dear Ms. Tame,

I watched your play yesterday night; it was a very elaborate and well-executed work. I am writing to ask if I could interview you tonight for a special column on The New York Times. The column is called “Transformations.”

I would like to know your story. Because you would want to hear mine.

*Yours,
M. Orissa*

We were once the same person.

I know a story about a mother who found her daughter.

It didn’t take a search, only a discovery.

This time, life is brought to words.

It is the fourth of September 2016, two years after I offered to be Jordan Tame’s press agent. She hired me to edit her book, the bestselling *Transformations*. I told her the title was too dull.

So she changed it to *Transformations of X.O.*

I know those two letters stand for something more than love.