

Yours

By Nina Gaby

“I mean, they say you die twice. One time when you stop breathing and a second time, a bit later on, when somebody says your name for the last time.” —Banksy

You carry the boxes out of your office while it’s still light. A generic office in a general psychiatric clinic where you have spent moments of such sheer immersion that often you blink hard into the sunset at end of day, unsure and breathless.

Rifling through the papers you realize these are papers from your last office. Actually the one before that, which was the same facility you are now leaving again. No, the dates indicate another decade, another state. You wonder why you aren’t able to stay in one place for more than a year and a half, sometimes less, convinced it’s your fault but then realize no, it’s the system and nothing is really going to improve no matter where you are. It’s healthcare, after all.

The antique lamps that you think might be your mother’s but maybe you are wrong about that—she’s gone so long now—are already packed in the car, supported by the oriental rug that you also drag from place to place. The rug and the lamps spiff up the office spaces you are assigned, especially if you don’t get the windows you were promised. There’s a particular peachy salmon that you generally paint your walls, a color that picks up shades of the border in the rug. The color goes back thirty years, to your first office. A rich and lucky color, like a gemstone, maybe like hope. This time you didn’t hang the four large gesture drawings you did at an art residency a decade ago, before circumstances forced you to go back to work in the healthcare systems you thought you had escaped. And this time you weren’t allowed to paint the walls of your office, and you didn’t argue it, as if it was very clear you wouldn’t be staying. What a relief not to have to carefully pack them today and feel bad about the holes you leave in the walls.

The next day you are unloading the car, having brought home the boxes full of papers, too lazy and dispirited to go through them in the office. Most of it should have gone to the shredder.

You start throwing papers into the woodstove. You make a separate pile with cards and notes from patients, from students, proof of worthiness and connection. Your hand hovers between that pile and the fire. In the other room there are boxes from another move. You toss the cards into one of those boxes and shut the woodstove. You left all this stuff around instead of hiding it in the barn, out of sight, out of mind, what’s wrong with you? Once you left a box under the piano for over a year, unsure of how to let it go.

Wiping your hands on your sweatshirt you go over and stand in front of the open refrigerator for a moment but nothing appeals so you go back to your task.

From the bottom of the farthest box you yank a manila envelope with an address from a police station in a distant state. The envelope looks old, the scuffed label handwritten, and you wonder how it got in the box from this office. You separate the frayed edges. Inside is a police report. Then you remember.

The patient was referred by their workplace for an evaluation after getting drunk and threatening a coworker. We will call the patient Sal. We will not identify a race, a gender or an age. We can use third-person pronouns. We will just say that the contents of the envelope are almost an inch thick and include photographs. All this would now be digitalized, it's physicality shredded in that distant office in a distant state.

You will now recall the night you received it, several offices ago. Sal had come in for a few appointments and after establishing you as a safe person (more invested in Sal than in Sal's employer) Sal told you about their mother's murder. For decades Sal had kept the police report but had never opened the envelope. Often Sal would put the envelope on the nightstand of whatever dorm or shelter they were living in, alongside a pint of Jack Daniels. "It made it feel like she was closer to me. And Jack, well, you know." You do know, but now is not the time for that.

Sal would never say exactly if they witnessed the murder but over time, before the envelope arrived, you were able to glean enough detail to make the PTSD diagnosis anyway and offer appropriate medications, which were politely refused. Often Sal would miss appointments, and you sent your brief reports to the employer hoping Sal could keep the job, stop drinking, and come back to see this through.

"Would you let me bring in that thing?" Sal finally asked. "Would you open the package? Would you read it?" It seemed therapeutic, so you agree thinking Sal wanted you to read it together. "I've dealt with worse," you think, but barely.

"I just have one question," Sal asks of you. Sal's lively dark eyes flatten and you reach out with a steadying hand. You don't want to know the answer to this question but you have already promised.

So you schedule another appointment. You make a plan. Together you will move carefully. You know all about survivor guilt and trauma. You've been doing this for years.

Sal dropped off the manila envelope at the reception desk and never came back.

And now it's yours. As long as there are people like you, no one ever dies. And the envelope goes into a box and the box goes into a pile and the pile grows larger, and you now move it into the barn along with ratted prayer shawls and tiny bottles of dried up ink and drawings framed from another time. Menorahs from other countries, Scrabble tiles bounce along the

floorboards, children’s scribbles, costume jewelry. Photographs of strangers. Your father’s unfinished novels. Like magical thinking, this pretense that you have some gift to keep things alive.

You don’t remember what you thought you would say to Sal about what you read. But then you didn’t have to.

Nina Gaby is a writer, visual artist and advanced practice nurse who specializes in addiction and psychiatry. Gaby has worked with words, clay, and people for five decades. Her essays, fiction, prose poetry, and articles have been published widely, most recently in *Psychiatric Times*, *The Rumpus*, *McSweeney's* and *The Brevity Blog*. She was chosen as runner-up in *Quarter-After-Eight's* Robert DeMott Short Prose Contest and in *The Diagram*. Her artwork is held in the Smithsonian, Arizona State University and Rochester Institute of Technology. Her anthology “*Dumped: Stories of Women Unfriending Women*” was published in 2015. She exhibits her mixed media widely in the Northeast, and maintains a clinical practice in psychiatry. In addition to a Master's degree in Psych-Mental Health nursing, Gaby holds a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts, offers trainings, workshops, and has taught at several universities. Find out more about her work at www.ninagaby.com.
