

Bittersweet Freedom

by Gina Disipio

A vibration wakes me from a deep sleep. I think something is moving around in my bed. My eyes snap open, confused by the darkness. I brush curls out of my face and feel around for the source of the vibration. My hand finds the square object that is my cell phone, and I sigh in relief that it's not a mouse I'm clutching. No one calls me in the middle of the night. It is 2:00 a.m. Suddenly I am wide awake. Something is wrong.

I hold the phone close to my face, because I don't have my glasses. Squinting, the blue light hurts and with one eye open I read the caller ID: "Lily W." The name alone tells me everything I need to know.

"Hello?" She does not recognize my horse, half-asleep voice, which sounds more like a croak than a greeting. I hear stifled sobs. She doesn't need to tell me what I already know: he's dead.

I wait for her to choke out the words. "He's dead, Gina. Sam is dead. He overdosed. I just wanted you to know." Click

The full weight of my head drops back onto my pillow as I exhale all the air out from my lungs.

I slither to the floor, bedsheets trailing behind me. I drop to my knees and place my forehead on the cool wood. It's December and despite the baseboard heat in my studio apartment, the air is cold. I close my eyes and soundlessly recite a prayer into the floorboards while my mind flashes memories on the backs of my eyelids like a movie projector. The film rewinds three years.

"You're gonna have to wait in line with him, Honey. Come as early as you can," the receptionist says in a thick Spanish accent. She says "honey" like a mother would. I hear her tongue move the gum she is chewing from one side of her mouth to the other. I

had called ten different places out of the phonebook for an emergency appointment for Sam.

I close my prepaid flip phone from Walmart with a snap. My gaze shifts from the dark, worn floorboards to Sam's dirty black Converse, to his black ripped skinny jeans, up to his black band t-shirt, to the chain around his neck that I got him for his birthday, and then up to his face. He is sitting on the bed we share at his mother's house. I am standing beside him, leaning against the wall.

Before speaking, I take in his face. Acne scars and blemishes line his cheeks like constellations. A five o'clock shadow. Dirty blonde hair. Ears with black gauges. He is so thin his Adam's apple protrudes from his throat, and each tendon is visible. When he smiles, which is rarely these days, rotting teeth, brown and black around the gums, make up his wide grin.

Sam looks back at me but his eyes are not filled with the love, or the lust, I regularly saw in them two years ago when I was seventeen and he was eighteen. Now, they are an even lighter blue, like crystal, like an untouched body of water at the foot of a mountain. The specks could be fish. His eyes look through me more than at me and they are glossy, as if tears might escape them at any moment.

We decide to go to the clinic and wait in line because it is our best shot at getting Sam in front of a doctor.

We park outside the Reading Psychiatric Clinic at 5:00 a.m. and take our place in line on the sidewalk. They unlock the doors at 5:30. It's December in Pennsylvania, so Sam and I have on winter coats, hats, and gloves, mine, pink knitted mittens and his, black and fingerless. More like scraps of fabric than gloves, they are ripped and mangled at the ends, small threads hanging from each of the ten holes that hold his fingers. I don't understand the point of them because they're not keeping his hands warm.

By the time we get inside, it's 5:45 a.m. At the front desk is a wall of plexiglass that separates us from the receptionist. She taps the glass, pointing at a sign-in sheet. We place Sam's name on the list. At least twenty people are in front of him.

The click clack of the computer keyboard echoes in the dimly lit office, and I wonder what she could possibly be typing so early in the morning. Without looking up,

she points her finger featuring a long acrylic nail with pink polish and gemstones at the end, to the wall behind us where people are sitting in chairs and talking in whispers. Her words are muffled through a circle of small holes in the plexiglass. I wonder if she thinks we're dangerous.

"Have a seat."

We find one open chair, wooden with stains on the blue fabric. After wiping off the crumbs of what appear to be animal crackers, I sit down. So many hands have brushed the armrests there are divots from fingernails among carved initials. Sam is standing next to me, staring at the floor.

I glance around the room. The walls are white, more like chalk, with smudges where dirty fingers have left impressions. A print of a sunrise hangs crooked on the wall in front of me and beneath it printed in bold letters is the phrase: "*GRATITUDE: Be grateful every day for the people who drive us toward success.*" There are two windows, shrouded by yellowed blinds. An inch of dust on each panel, they are cracked slightly to let in the winter sun. The light is bleak but bright enough to make shadows of parallel lines on the wall in front of me. I count the lines silently.

A family marches in, shaking the snow from their boots. They sign in at the desk. Two adults with four small children trailing behind them, coats half off, dirty mouths. Peanut butter and jelly maybe. I wonder how we landed here, in this room, waiting for Sam's name to be called. Sam has one hand in the pocket of his jeans, the other is fiddling with the chain, then he moves his thumb to his mouth and chews on the skin surrounding the nail.

A few days earlier, he sat me down on our bed, the brown and blue striped comforter from Wal-Mart brushing my thighs, I hate the feeling of the cheap silky fabric. "I have to tell you something." I waited. He took a deep breath.

"I've been seeing things. And hearing things," he said.

"What?" My mind raced, trying to make sense of his words. "Seeing what?"

"Things that aren't there." His head hung so low it was almost in his lap.

I felt my eyes widen as he said this. Any words of comfort got stuck in my throat, my heart rattling around in my chest. My sister is schizophrenic, so my mind started to catalogue all possible solutions, listing them off one by one.

Hospital, doctors, medication, halfway house, doctors, groups, therapy. In the thirty seconds it took for my mind to recite all possible solutions, Sam spoke again.

“But you can’t tell anyone.”

With those five words, all my ideas went up in smoke. He went on to describe the most recent hallucination. “I just got out of the shower and was drying off. I looked at myself in the mirror and I was holding like a long hunting knife. Uh,” he paused, trying to read my face. “I held the knife up to my throat and started cutting. Blood started pouring everywhere, all down my chest. I kept cutting but when I looked down nothing was there. I’m fucking scared, Gina, it was fucking scary, okay?” He buried his face in his hands.

I spent the next thirty minutes convincing him to let me call a doctor and finally, he gives in.

In the waiting room, three hours after writing his name on the list, we hear the nurse call, “SAM WINTERS!” With a wave of her hand, she is motioning for him to follow her.

He looks at me, not needing to ask, I know he wants me to go back there with him. In single file we walk down a dimly lit hallway, I am wringing my hands and chewing on my bottom lip. When Sam looks back, I smile and give him a thumbs up.

We met on Myspace when I was seventeen years old, sharing music and our favorite poetry. When we finally decided to meet in person, we sat in the parking lot of the mall in his beat-up purple Ford Focus, an anarchist bumper sticker on the back window, for four hours. When I saw lip piercings, fingerless gloves, a band t-shirt, and a black beanie with dirty-blond curls peeking out, I knew I was in love. I would follow this kid to the end of the earth.

The nurse ushers us into a small room, closing the door behind us. The doctor turns around in a black swivel chair and puts his hand out, “Mr. and Mrs. Winters, I’m Dr. Chaundry, pleasure to meet you.” We don’t correct him for saying “Mrs.”

“What brings you in today?” Sam looks at me. I lift my shoulders and make a waving motion with my hand, urging him to speak. Just fucking say it, I think.

“Uh well, I have been having a lot of anxiety lately,” he said. ANXIETY? YOU’RE CALLING HALLUCINATIONS FUCKING ANXIETY NOW? My head is screaming, but I say nothing. I stare at the floor.

The doctor, the light of the computer screen reflecting off his glasses, is tapping away at the keyboard. Then he starts asking a series of questions.

“Any suicidal thoughts?”

“No.”

“Are you having trouble taking care of your hygiene? Showering? Brushing your teeth?”

“No.”

He asks about a job, his medical history, about drug and alcohol use. And finally: “Have you ever had, or are you currently experiencing, any auditory or visual hallucinations?”

I hold my breath.

“No.”

Oh, fuck.

My heart sinks from my throat to my stomach and I feel like I am going to throw up. A half hour later a script for Valium sits on the dashboard, staring at me, and we are silent the entire car ride home.

I stayed for three months after that, joining a roller coaster of daily drug use and lies, while Sam suffered through more hallucinations, doctors, and medications. I escaped via rehab and while there, cut Sam off completely.

I spent the last three years in the basements of churches, drinking coffee out of Styrofoam cups with grounds at the bottom and starting my sentences with: “Hi I’m Gina, I’m an addict.”

I moved to another county several hours away from Sam and ignored the messages from him on Facebook that he posted every month or so:

“Hey, how are you?”

“You look like you’re doing well, I’m happy for you.”

I answered occasionally, asking how he was doing. I received paragraphs about how he just got out of the psych hospital for the fourth time this year, recently kicked meth but was still snorting Percocet on a regular basis.

When the messages started coming every day, I let him know that I couldn't respond anymore and to stop checking in with me. "I'm trying to save my life, Sam. If I use again, I'll die," I wrote. He said he understood and would stop sending messages. I said I was sorry.

"It's okay, take care."

The last four words I read in a daze, never imagining they would be the last four words I ever received from him.

For months after the phone call from his sister informing me of his death, Sam is in my dreams almost every night. He is unrecognizable to the Sam I left to get clean years ago. He is smiling and laughing, telling me not to worry. He isn't so skinny, his teeth are gleaming white and intact, and his eyes are full of life.

I collect these images from my dreams and store them in my memory as permission to abolish my guilt. For not rescuing him when things got worse, for running away when he needed me, for saving my own life and not being able to save his. In my dreams, his eyes are blue again. I run a hand through his clean, dirty-blond curls and know I am forgiven. Sam didn't achieve the freedom he was searching for on this earth, in this life, but in my dreams, he is everything he ever wanted to be.



Gina Disipio was born and raised in Pennsylvania and currently lives in Lancaster with her husband and two dogs. She holds an MPA from West Chester University. Gina is in long-term recovery, celebrating eleven years of sobriety in January. She has spent the last decade dedicating her passion, education, and expertise in combating the stigma of addiction and being an advocate of the voiceless and marginalized populations often outcast by society. She works to ensure recovery is accessible to everyone. This is her first published essay.