

King of the Puerto Ricans

“How dare you treat me this way!” boomed a husky voice with a thick Eastern European accent. “I’m king of the Puerto Ricans,” came the roar from the packed waiting room.

It was a warm, humid June evening, about eight p.m. Although I’d been a resident for only a few months, my instincts told me this would be one of those nights when the emergency room would earn its moniker as *Bedlam’s Door*, a revolving carousel of psychosis, with one disturbed person after another being steered to the facility by the police, family members, or friends.

“King of the Puerto Ricans,” bellowed the man, his voice reverberating through the corridor. The claim was utterly absurd—from his self-proclaimed royalty to his non-Hispanic accent. It was bizarre, even for the environs of Manhattan Hospital’s emergency room.

Another leonine roar of Slavic-sounding speech brought me to my feet.

Peering into the reception area, I saw a burly man bound securely to the confines of a high-backed wooden wheelchair.

Despite his raging, the man—appearing to be in his sixties—had a cherubic-looking face, with round, rosy cheeks and bushy, dark eyebrows. A huge mane of white hair crowned his head. Highly agitated, he struggled against the canvas straps binding him to the wheelchair. Though his ankles were secured to the

contraption's front rigging, he managed to kick and stomp his feet on the footrest.

"Let me go. I have work to do," he roared.

His words were barely comprehensible, partly due to his agitation, but also because he lapsed into a foreign language—perhaps Polish, or some other Slavic-sounding tongue. He shook the wheelchair violently, attempting to break free. A woman wearing a drab housedress tried to quiet him, but he kept shouting.

A police officer I knew saw me and approached.

"What's up, Officer Romano?" I asked.

"He was running down Delancey Street, tossing trash baskets and shouting. We couldn't control him. He's as strong as an ox. You hear what he's yelling?" Romano shook his head. Over the years, he'd brought his share of patients to our doors, but this one clearly perplexed him.

That week I'd already encountered the putative son of God, an enraged Moses, and Satan himself. But I never imagined meeting the king of the Puerto Ricans.

"Who's the woman?" I asked.

"His wife. She said his name's Nathan . . . Nathan B."

"Any previous history you know of?" I asked.

"Nope. The neighbors say he's always been a quiet guy and a hard worker. A carpenter."

A carpenter? Why doesn't he think he's Jesus?

Romano looked at me with raised eyebrows. "You're not gonna give us trouble with this one, are you, Doc?"

He knew I'd sent the police packing scores of times with drunken and disorderly miscreants they dragged to the emergency room, trying to avoid tossing them into the precinct's drying-out tank. The cops hated babysitting drunks almost as much as they loathed the paperwork involved.

But Nathan B. was a man lost in the throes of madness.

"Looks like you're safe on this one, but let me talk to his wife."

Sarah B.'s pale face sagged. Her gray hair was tied back in a bun. She dabbed at her reddened eyes with a handkerchief. In the housedress, she looked like a Russian or Polish peasant woman from a bygone era.

"Mrs. B., how did this start?"

"It was maybe two weeks ago, Doctor," she said with a thick accent. "After Nathan hurt his back."

"What happened?"

"He's a carpenter and was working on the roof of a house. He fell down onto a pile of wood. He's lucky to be alive," she said, again dabbing at her eyes. "He broke a bone in his back, and now he can't work. Maybe never . . . Only if it heals, the doctors said. And they don't know—a man his age. He's sixty-four. And, all he knows is work."

"What happened after the accident?"

"After he got out of the hospital, he was very quiet. He talked to no one—not even me. He just looked out the window. He wasn't my Nathan anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"He seemed so sad, so depressed," she said, brushing away a tear.

"Did he ever have an episode like this before?" I asked, wondering if Nathan B. might be suffering from bipolar disorder.

"No. Never. But after he got hurt, he began talking to himself—strange words. And then came dreams, terrible dreams. He would cry out in his sleep. And when he woke up, he would shake and be covered in sweat. He was so wet, I had to change the sheets. He would pace all night, like a wild beast. And talking to himself—under his breath, in Hungarian. I tell you, Doctor, we never talk in that language . . . only English.

"I asked him, 'Nathan, what's wrong?' and he said, 'I have nightmares.' But he would tell me nothing more. He said, 'Sarah, you would not want to know.'"

“It got worse. He would never leave the house.” Her lips trembled. “When he heard sirens, he shook. He thought they were coming for him.”

“The police?”

“Yes. He said, ‘They’re coming for me.’”

“Did he tell you why?”

“He wouldn’t say. He never did a thing wrong in his life.” Tears spilled from her eyes. “I know it’s from his life in Europe.”

“What happened?” I asked, fairly certain of the events to which she was referring.

“The Nazis,” she murmured, as her hands went to her face and she sobbed.

“Mrs. B., where are you from originally?”

“We’re from Hungary.”

“When did you come to the United States?”

“We came in 1947, after the war.”

“Where were you during the war?”

“Nathan lived through Auschwitz. But he never talks about it.”

“And what about you? Were you in the camps?”

“No. I lived with a family on a farm. And I met Nathan after liberation.”

“In a displaced persons camp?”

She nodded. “And we came here. We made a good life together.”

When Nathan was wheeled into the office, his eyes bulged and his face shone with sweat. His shirt was soaked with perspiration. He was restless and his eyes darted from the walls to the ceiling.

I introduced myself, saying, “I’d like to talk with you.”

No response. He seemed lost in some inner world.

He wore work pants, heavy boots, and a short-sleeved work shirt. His chest was broad and powerful-looking. His hands, large and roughly calloused, were those of a man who’d done carpentry

all his life. His forearms, strapped to the wheelchair's armrests, looked as though cables were bundled within them. A series of blue-black numbers was tattooed on his left forearm—a remnant of Auschwitz.

“Mr. B.?”

“How can you do this?” he growled. Suddenly, his eyes crawled over me. Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth.

“Do what?”

“How dare you tie up a *king!*” he shouted hoarsely.

“How did you become king?”

“God made me king. Do you question his word?” His chin quivered.

I said nothing.

“*Answer me,*” he demanded. “Do you question God’s word?”

He trembled so intensely, the wheelchair shook.

“No. I don’t question God or his word,” I said. “But why king of the Puerto Ricans?”

“Such a poor people . . . and persecuted. They must go to their own land.” His eyes roamed about the office once again. “What is this place?” he demanded.

“You’re at Manhattan Hospital.”

“What am I doing here? I’m not crazy.”

“You were running down the street, throwing trash cans . . .”

“I was calling my people . . . my subjects.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“We must leave before the SS gets here.”

“What makes you think they’re coming?”

His face tightened, and sweat dribbled from his hairline. “Can’t you *see?* There’s no time left.”

“Before what happens?”

“We’ll be taken away . . . to the camps. They want to kill all of us.”

“Kill who?”

“My people. All the Puerto Rican people. It will be a holocaust.”

“Why now?”

“The time has come.”

His eyeballs rolled upward and he fixed his stare at the ceiling. He began muttering a goulash of English, German, and Hungarian.

Nathan B.’s mane of white hair, coupled with his upward gaze, reminded me of Renaissance paintings depicting ancient prophets—maybe something by Caravaggio—painted in dusky colors with ethereal light radiating from some godly presence.

“Mr. B., I understand you began feeling bad a few weeks ago . . .”

His garbled muttering continued. He was lost in a world of messianic revelation. The extent to which deluded thinking could seize a person never failed to amaze me.

I tried again to get him to talk. “I’m king of the Puerto Ricans” was all he would say in English.

“Mr. B., I’m going to admit you to the hospital,” I finally said.

His incantations stopped. He turned to me, his eyes burning with pious fury. “You want to make me a slave, so I will work for you.”

“You won’t be a slave,” I said. “You’ll be here until you calm down.”

“You *Nazi*. God will make you pay for this.”

Id tapped into his past—and the source of his madness.

Nathan was admitted to the fourth-floor men’s ward. On the admission form, I wrote “physical examination deferred,” certain his agitation would have caused a blood pressure reading of stratospheric heights. It was far more important to sedate him and arrange for the physical examination to be done later. I wrote orders for blood to be drawn when he was calmer—to rule out blood, kidney, or liver problems that could possibly be causing his disordered mental state.

I telephoned the ward and arranged to become Nathan B.'s primary therapist.

I spoke again with Mrs. B. and learned more about Nathan's background. But rather than jump to conclusions, I knew it would be better to let him reveal as much as he would about himself over the course of time. You can never learn all you need to know in one or two sessions with a patient, even if you're certain of the diagnosis.

And, in some crucial ways, a diagnosis may be secondary. Far more important in a case like Nathan's—one involving the acute onset of madness—would be an understanding of his story, by learning the trajectory of his life.

A patient's story is organic—it courses through his being. His secrets would likely be the key to his madness.

By the next day the medication we had given him had dampened his agitation—somewhat. His blood work was normal, with no evidence of a metabolic aberration causing Nathan B.'s mad odyssey through the streets. Dressed in hospital pajamas, he sat in my office near the ward's dayroom.

"Who are you?" was his first question.

I gave him my name and asked if he remembered me.

"No." His eyes narrowed.

"I admitted you here."

"Am I a prisoner?"

"No . . ."

"Then I'm free to leave . . ."

"Well, not really," I said, realizing I'd walked into a trap of my own making.

"I won't build you anything," he seethed, crossing his forearms over his chest.

"Build anything? What do you mean?"

“No bookshelves, no cabinets or furniture. I will build you *nothing*.” He thrust his chin forward.

“You don’t have to build a thing, Mr. B. And when you’re feeling better, you’ll be free to leave.”

His response was to stare out the window.

By the sixth session in the same cramped office, he was considerably calmer. His hair was neatly combed and he wore street clothing. His voice was no longer hoarse.

“So what do you want to know from me?” he asked. His bushy eyebrows rose and his voice held no trace of belligerence.

“What happened that led to your being hospitalized?”

As I asked the question, an esteemed mentor’s words came back to me: *No matter what is said, a patient can never really change the subject. It lurks beneath the surface, ready to emerge.*

He meant there’s a driving force in a patient’s inner life: a host of feelings and behaviors orbiting around a single issue. And it may emerge in the form of a mental illness.

Nathan sighed. “It’s a long story . . .”

“I have time.”

“I don’t like talking about it.”

“I’d like to hear about you.”

He peered down at his hands. “You know, I’m a carpenter.” He looked up at me and added, “Jesus was a carpenter.”

“Yes, but we’re talking about you now,” I said, wondering if this was a residue of grandiosity—from the king of the Puerto Ricans to Jesus.

“I was an apprentice when I was eight years old. It’s all I ever did . . . woodworking and carpentry.”

“It’s a valuable skill.”

“It saved my life,” he whispered. Tears shivered in his eyes.

“How?” My curiosity was definitely piqued.

"I was born in a small village a few kilometers north of Budapest." He inhaled deeply, his breath sounding like a bellows releasing air. Tears slithered down his cheeks. "There was my mother, my father, two sisters, and a brother. My grandparents, aunts, and uncles lived there, too." His hands were clasped so tightly, his knuckles turned white.

"Poor is what we were—all of us—but we were happy. My father drove a truck. My mother worked in a knitting mill. When I was thirteen, I was what you call here a master carpenter—a cabinetmaker. I could build anything, for the most beautiful homes. Rich people—Jews and gentiles—would ask for Nathan the carpenter."

I nodded, implicitly asking him to tell me more.

"When I was seventeen, everything ended." His shoulders hunched, a surefire sign of tension. "The SS came in Jeeps and trucks, men with machine guns and rifles. They went through the village—tore up everything—and pushed the Jews into the town square. We took maybe small suitcases, nothing else."

"Yes . . ."

"They drove us away . . . to another town. They took us from all the villages to this place. Hundreds of people were there, just waiting at a train station. It was so cold, my feet had no feeling. But worse was the fear."

I waited for him to continue.

"You've heard of Auschwitz and Birkenau?"

"Yes, of course."

My throat tightened.

"We were taken there—in cattle cars."

I nodded again, not wanting to interrupt him.

"We were squeezed in, standing, pressed together, old people, mothers, fathers, children, babies. It was dark and freezing cold. The old ones died on the train. Babies, too. I cannot tell you the horror of it . . . the moaning, the crying . . . how the train went on

and on, the darkness, the smell of it, people groaning, coughing, and dying.

“And when we got there—to Auschwitz—we stood on the train platform. Hundreds of us, shivering and frightened. They separated us. Men on one side, women on the other. Like cattle. A doctor picked out the sick ones, and they were led away. Then an SS officer went down the line of men and asked who had a skill, any skill. Men said they could do one thing or another, but he didn’t care if you were a tailor, or a butcher, or if you sold clothing.

“My father stood next to me. It tears my heart out to think of him. He poked me in the back before the officer came to me. This SS officer stopped in front of me and asked, ‘What can you do?’

“I’m a carpenter,’ I said.”

Nathan swallowed hard and continued. “He nodded, and then he smiled. It was an evil smile. He pointed with his thumb to some men standing at the end of the platform.”

Tears rolled down his cheeks.

“They put us to work.”

Nathan’s hands balled into huge fists.

“That was the last time I saw my family.”

Tears hung at the edge of his chin and then fell to the floor.

“I stayed alive because of the work. I built barracks for people who would come on more trains and work and starve, and work more, and then, when they could work no more, they would die in the gas chambers. We worked day and night, in the cold. We slept on top of one another, with men coughing, spitting up blood, and some dying.

“To eat, we had one bowl of soup a day. It was mostly water. I got weaker every day. Others were too weak to go on, so the guards shot them. I knew I could last maybe another month before I would be too weak and be shot or go to the gas chambers.”

He paused and stared out the window. Then he turned to me.

“One day I heard two SS officers talking. I knew enough German to understand. They needed cabinets in their barracks. I was very frightened—shaking began in my legs—because we were not allowed to talk to the guards. You could be shot. But I would die soon anyway, so I took a chance.

“I went to them. One pulled his pistol from the holster. I said, ‘I can build them for you.’ My German was poor, so I moved my hands, like I was using a hammer and saw. They laughed. I thought the guard would shoot me. I was shivering from the cold and from fear.

“But they got another guard who spoke Hungarian. I said, ‘I can build you cabinets. I am a master carpenter.’

“They were excited; then the one who spoke Hungarian said, ‘We’ll see if you lie,’ and they took me to their quarters.

“So I became their carpenter. I built cabinets, tables, and bookshelves—whatever they wanted. They had beautiful wood—cherry, mahogany, and ash. I stayed warm in the woodshop—not in the cold like the others. I was making furniture for the SS. They liked my work and fed me well.

“I made gifts for their wives or girlfriends. Carpentry kept me warm; it fed me and kept me alive until liberation.”

“And your family?”

“Gone. In the gas chamber, the ovens.” He shuddered. “There was smoke from the crematorium, and I knew they were there, in that smoke going up to the sky. My mother and father, my sisters and brother, everyone—all burned. I could smell them in the air. And I thought maybe I could see them in the smoke. The sky was dark with ash.” He shook his head as tears streamed down his cheeks. “How can I describe the horror of the camp . . . a place of corpses, gas, and ashes?”

I shivered at the image Nathan’s words evoked.

“And what was I doing? Eating good food, sleeping in a warm bed, alive and working for the SS.”

“Yes, you lived . . .”

“Because of these hands,” he muttered, staring at them.

“How did that make you feel?”

He said nothing, just sat amid his sadness.

We remained silent for what seemed a long time.

“And after liberation?” I asked.

He looked up. His bleary eyes swerved to me. “I was in a camp for the homeless. I was twenty years old. I had nobody. Not a soul in the world. Everyone I loved . . . all dead. The camp was where I met Sarah. And we came here—where we could live like people, not animals.”

“What happened then?”

“In America, I got a job as a carpenter. And I learned English.”

“Tell me, Nathan, did you think about your family? Did you cry for them?”

He shook his head. “I stayed busy with my work—with these hands.” He sighed, averting his eyes.

“The hands that kept you alive?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have children?”

“No. It was not to be. We take what this life gives us. You just live the best way you can.”

“After you got here, did you think about the camp?”

“Never. We had a new life here. Just Sarah and me and the work.”

Shuddering began in his shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he whispered, staring downward.

“It doesn’t look that way.”

His eyes rose to meet mine. “I would be fine if I could be a carpenter again.”

“It was when you hurt your back that this trouble began?”

He looked away.

"That's when the dreams began, right?"

He turned chalky white. His lips trembled.

"Tell me the dreams."

"It was horrible . . ."

He'd said "it." He hadn't used the plural "they."

"What was horrible?"

"The camp. That place . . ."

"Is that what you dreamed about?"

He nodded.

"And the dreams began after you were hurt?"

"Yes."

He fell silent.

Had I pushed too hard, too fast? Had I broached his past too quickly? Had I picked at the scabs of his wounds too soon? He might become agitated again and try to redress the wrongs in his life. It might be better to end the session rather than to let him talk more about Auschwitz.

I waited, not sure what to say or do.

But then he looked at me in the strangest way. The skin around his eyes tightened.

"You have no idea what it was like . . ."

I nodded, understanding his meaning.

"If you live a thousand years, you should never see what I saw."

"The horror of Auschwitz," I said in a near whisper.

"Auschwitz and the dreams." Tears dripped to the floor. "I never dreamed of it in all the years after liberation. I kept it from my thoughts. But then it all came back—forty years later. It came alive, like it happened yesterday."

"Can you tell me the dream?"

He locked his eyes onto mine. "In the dream, I'm back there—at Auschwitz, with my tools, going to the workshop to make furniture and gifts. The wind blows and the sky is dark. The prisoners are in rows . . . starving, standing on dead feet. Some are shot

through the head—one by one—men and women. The children are already dead. Dogs are barking—vicious beasts with wet teeth. If you don't obey, the guards let the dogs tear you apart.

“The bodies are piled high, near pits; hundreds and hundreds of naked corpses on top of one another. And there are mounds of shaved hair, mountains of suitcases and clothing, shoes stacked as high as your shoulders, and lines of naked men and women being whipped and pushed to the gas chambers.

“The dead are thrown into wheelbarrows—their arms and legs hang over the sides and swing like toy dolls. They wheel them to the crematorium to be burned, to turn into cinders. Death, disease, and starvation are everywhere. The lucky ones never live more than a day in the camp.

“The air is filled with smoke and the smell of burning flesh, and the sky turns green and black. When the wind blows, ash goes in my mouth and nose. I try not to breathe, but maybe they are the ashes of my mother, or my father's flesh, or that of my sisters or brother, and I can breathe them in, and if I take the air in—I can have them with me once more.

“You can smell it for miles,” Nathan said in a trembling voice. “I cover my eyes and nose with a rag, but there's no escape from it. It's the smell of death. There's shouting in German and Polish and Hungarian, and the barking dogs, and the people crying and moaning, going to the gas chambers.

“But not me . . . the carpenter, the one the Germans loved because of these hands.”

“And this is what you see in your dreams?”

“I see it . . . every night. After forty years with no dreams, it all came back.”

“The dreams,” I said tentatively. “You never had them before you hurt your back?”

“No. Never before. I was living a normal life—like it never happened. That's all I wanted in this life, to live and be left alone.”

He sighed.

"I just wanted to make a new life with Sarah, here in America."

"And . . . ?"

"I *had* to forget. I used these hands, and I worked and worked, and never stopped."

"Do you think you forgot your past?"

He shook his head. "It's all back now, like it was yesterday."

"It was never gone," I said.

He gazed into my eyes. "It's—it's such a terrible thing, the past. It hangs around my neck like a stone."

"Your past life . . . ?"

"Yes. And the anger I feel."

I nodded.

"This bitterness . . . it eats at me. It's . . . it's . . . I cannot describe it." He peered out the window and then turned to me. "If I could tear open my chest, and if you could lick my heart, it would poison you."

A lump formed in my throat.

"And now it's all back," he whispered.

"The past never dies," I said.

"The poison came out." He closed his eyes and clasped his hands.

"So, Nathan, do you remember running down the street and shouting you were king of the Puerto Ricans?"

"I have some memory of it."

"Do you know why that happened?"

"I wanted to save them. I was crazy."

"Maybe *it* was crazy, but *you* aren't crazy. I think you understand what happened now."

Tears shimmered in his eyes. "It was after I hurt my back, yes?"

"When you could no longer be a carpenter."

He shook his head.

“It’s what held you together . . . from Auschwitz until now. The wood, the hammer, and the nails.”

“So what do I do now?”

“We don’t know yet. Your back could heal.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“There’s woodwork with smaller things. Not houses.”

“Will it be enough?”

“We’ll see. Along with some medicine—at least for a while. And if we keep talking about what poisoned you—the things you’ve held in—I think you’ll feel better.”

“I can’t hold this in my heart anymore.”

“It would be better to talk about it.”

“Will I still see you?”

“We can arrange that.”

“Nathan B. survived the concentration camp because of his skilled hands,” I said to Dr. Conway, my supervising psychiatrist.

“But the horror smoldered inside him,” Conway said.

“It took forty years to surface.”

“Yes, it lay dormant,” he replied. “And it erupted when he could no longer work. I must confess, in all my years of practice, I’ve only seen two cases of delayed-onset post-traumatic stress disorder. This is the second one . . . but it was delayed by forty years.”

“But king of the Puerto Ricans? I’m not sure I understand that,” I said.

“It was PTSD complicated by psychosis. In his delusion, as king of the Puerto Ricans, he could—in fantasy—*save* people rather than merely survive the terror of his past. He was trying to assuage his guilt for having survived when the others died,” Conway said, lighting his pipe.

“And carpentry was the link to his past,” I said. “But for as long as he could work, it kept the horrors buried.”

“That’s right,” Conway said. “Carpentry was the outlet valve. It kept his memories in check. But without his craft, the valve was gone, and he was thrown back to the camps, where he relived the horror.

“This man’s pathology demonstrates something very important, in psychiatry and in life,” Conway said. “You can’t just shove the past aside. It stays with you, whether you want to acknowledge it or not.” Conway paused and added, “As William Faulkner said in *Requiem for a Nun*, ‘The past is never dead; it’s not even past.’”

Afterword

Nathan B. continued his treatment in the outpatient clinic. Over the next few months he was able to return to a limited form of carpentry. He no longer worked for the construction company, but instead became a freelance carpenter working from his home.

As when he was a boy, the neighbors knew of his skills and called upon him frequently. They asked him to build small items. Nathan’s basement was filled with woodworking equipment. He built mantelpieces, jewelry boxes, birdhouses, chairs, stools, small tables, and cabinets, requiring no heavy lifting, climbing, or strenuous activity.

I saw Nathan once monthly for the next year and maintained him on a small dose of antidepressant medication, which, after six months, was no longer necessary.

The home-based carpentry work was enough to soak up his mental and emotional energy. And as it had done for years, the work reenacted his survival at Auschwitz, but also allowed Nathan to rebury the bitterness in his heart.

What would happen years later when, as a very old man, he could no longer work? Would he again go mad? Or would his newfound understanding enable him to adapt to that stage of life? It was impossible to know.

But for the time being Nathan B. was able to relegate the horror of his past to the darkest recess of his mind and go on with his life in America.

Nathan's story illustrates many things: survivor's guilt, the horror of post-traumatic stress disorder, the strange tenacity of memory, and above all, the enduring power of past experiences on a person's functioning—even on an entire way of life.

It also reveals the Herculean efforts made by a traumatized man not only to suppress the terrors of his youth but to relegate them to the deepest recesses of his mind. Nathan tried valiantly to discard the trauma of Auschwitz, to banish it from consciousness, only to have it resurface hauntingly when his defensive construction—carpentry in America—crumbled.

His illness was a magical attempt to undo his helplessness as a prisoner in Auschwitz. So, in his sick fantasy, he became a “king.” In essence, it was a mad reconstruction of his life, a redrawing of his terrifying inner mental and emotional landscapes. His insane dash down the streets of New York, and his grandiose delusion of kingship, were the refuge of last resort, one to which he retreated when his life as a carpenter seemed about to end.

Nathan's madness—a desperate attempt at restoration and redefinition—was a final common pathway for the entire arc of his tragic life.

