
Alfred Bower's Brain Damaged

by Carlos J. Perez

Gary stares at the body of a young man with red hair. The body is wet and its lips are fading from pink to blue.

The whole scene has a hazy fog over it, like a Fellini film. Gary watches as the medics quickly and methodically attempt to revive the body. It's been twelve minutes since they dragged it from Tacoma Lake. A voice from behind pulls Gary from the sight.

"Gary?"

Gary turns to see a young blond-haired man dressed in a gray business suit and white sneakers. He's around twenty years old, not much older than Gary.

"What?"

The young man walks over to him.

"It's okay, relax. My name's Mike."

"What's happening here?"

"You had an accident."

"What?"

Mike grasps Gary by the arm and leads him to the drenched body.

"That's you, Gary?"

"But..."

"Take it easy. I know you're confused."

"I don't understand."

"You were in a canoe, remember?"

"Uh..."

"The canoe tipped over and hit you on the head."

Gary reaches up and touches his head. He peers down, over the medic's shoulder, and notices the ace bandage on its head.

"You weren't wearing a life jacket."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Mike. I'm here to take you with me."

"What?"

"You're dead, Gary. You drowned. I'm here to take you on ahead."

"Where?"

Gary looks once again at the medics, who now have it hooked up to a machine that reads its pulse and helps it to breathe.

"I'm dead?"

"Yes, about twenty minutes now."

"If I'm dead, why are they doing that?"

"To bring you back."

"Will they?"

"It's possible, very possible."

"Are my mom and dad okay?"

Mike grabs Gary by the sleeve and leads him to the other side of the ambulance. Gary sees his mother and father sitting on the ground; they are still wet from the lake. Gary's mother, Elizabeth, is crying, and his dad, Andrew, is holding her close, consoling her softly.

"Don't worry, honey, we'll get him back. I promise. I promise."

Gary turns away from them.

"This can't be real. I can't be dead."

"You are for the moment."

"I don't understand."

"None of you do. I should've waited, you're not ready yet."

"No, what do you mean?"

Gary follows Mike to the edge of the lake. The two of them stare into the water for a moment before Mike begins to speak.

"What you don't understand is that while time ticks away, so do you."

"What?"

"Shh, calm down" Mike sits down on the shore. "Sit down with me."

Gary sits beside him. Together they listen and watch the warm water as it gently splashes against the bank.

"It's a pretty lake. You come here often?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Me and my parents come here every spring."

Mike picks up a small brown rock from the shore. The water pours back into the opening left by it. He throws it into the water. It skips four times, then sinks to the bottom. Gary does the same, but first he hunts the shore looking for the right rock. He picks up a smooth, flat, gray-black rock and throws it. It skips seven times before sinking.

"Pretty impressive."

"My dad taught me. The rock has to be real flat."

Gary pauses for a moment.

"I don't get it."

"What?"

"I just picked up a rock and threw it. I didn't think dead people could do things like that."

"There are a lot of things dead people can do."

"So, I'm not gonna make it?"

"I didn't say that."

"You mean I might live?"

"You've got a good chance of surviving."

"Thank God!"

"It's not God you should thank."

Mike turns away from Gary and stares back out at the lake.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Gary. How do you feel?"

"Okay, I guess, only..."

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"Only what?"

"I feel like I'm being suffocated, like I gotta big weight on my head."

"That's your body. It's coming back to life."

"That's great."

Mike continues to stare at the water.

"What's the matter with you? Pissed off cause you lost one?"

Mike throws a glance at him.

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean it that way. Why aren't you happy, man?"

"I better go."

"Wait a minute. What's going on?"

"Nothing."

Mike stands.

"Hey, hold it. I'm starting to not feel so good."

"That's because they're pulling you back. How do you feel now?"

"Sluggish, like I'm dreaming or drugged."

Mike looks down at the weeds in the water.

"Something's wrong, isn't it?"

"I better go."

"No!"

Gary grabs Mike by the arm.

"Something bad's happening, isn't it? Please tell me what's happening."

"I'm not supposed to, I . . ."

"Please!"

Gary starts to choke.

"I feel nauseous. There's a rotten fishy taste in my mouth."

"It's the lake water."

"Oh, I think I'm gonna be sick. Tell me please."

"Damn. When you get back you won't be who you were. You won't be Gary, the first baseman from Raleigh High, or Gary, the kid who spends his spring swimming at the lake. You'll be Alfred Bower."

"Who?"

"You remember Alfred Bower, the kid you teased in fifth grade?"

Gary chokes again. "Yeah, so what? What's he got to do with this?"

"You called him brain damaged, remember?"

"What?"

"You heard me?"

"That's bullshit!" Gary chokes again.

"No, it's not. You've been dead over forty minutes."

"You're lying!"

"I wish I were!"

Gary turns away from Mike.

"How bad off will I be?"

There is silence.

"How bad off will I be?"

"You'll probably spend the rest of your life in a bed living off IV's."

"Screw that." He chokes again. "I'm not going."

"Doesn't work that way anymore, Gary. There was a time when you had a choice, but not now. Once, we could rely on human error; your will could make a difference, but the machines don't make mistakes. I'm sorry, man, twenty minutes is about it."

"But I don't want to go back. I don't want to live in a dead body!"

"I know you don't."

"Then help me!"

"I can't."

Gary coughs, then gags. Mike watches as Gary's soul fades from view and returns to his body. The medics begin to cheer and Gary's parents hug each other. It's been forty-five minutes.

As the ambulance drives off, Mike shakes his head, and slowly fades away as the sound of sirens mixes with the splashing of the waves.

Editor's Notes

This issue of **Midwest Medical Ethics** offers a paper on philosophical aspects of privacy, two review essays of recent books, and two case commentaries on AIDS. There's also a surprise! We hope you'll enjoy the variety.

In preparing this edition, we have benefited by the thoughtful contributions of Marta Skalacki. Marta is a newcomer to Kansas City, and joined our staff in January of this year. She earned her B.A. in Industrial Psychology at Northeastern University, in Chicago. Marta previously worked at The University of Nebraska Medical Center in the Department of Preventive and Societal Medicine. Marta provided key assistance throughout the editing process, and made the production smoother and quicker. We're pleased that she'll be helping to improve the quality of **MME**.

We are pleased to acknowledge the continuing support of the Francis Families Foundation. Their commitment to **MME** enables us to publish a variety of articles in many areas of health care ethics. We appreciate their understanding of just how important it is for such a publication to explore even the most controversial topics.

Here it is well to remember that one of our key purposes at the Center is to encourage public discussion of difficult ethical issues in biomedical technology. To preserve our ability to facilitate civil, tolerant conversation, Midwest Bioethics Center takes no position on any issue.

From time to time, the Center needs volunteers to help with special projects. We'd like to establish an "on call" volunteer pool for specific tasks at peak times. If you are interested, please call Sherry Anspach at 756-2713.

Alan S. Lubert, Ph.D.