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Witness

Smelly Capelli watched them pack me into the back of the ambulance. But he didn't recognize me. He had no idea he was seeing someone he'd known practically his entire life. I had lost so much blood by then that I no longer looked like myself.

Paulie lived around the block from where I lay bleeding. At some point he had to see for himself what all the fuss was about. The general commotion, which lasted nearly an hour, had already aroused most of the neighborhood. Once the cops on foot finally found me, they called for backup, and eventually an ambulance arrived. The police cruisers tearing up and down Guyon Avenue looking for me quickly converged at the corner of Isabella Avenue and Leeds Street. There were dozens of them. The place was lit up like an old-fashioned grand opening for a Hollywood movie. It was a spectacle. It undoubtedly was the only one the area had ever had before and likely the only one it would ever have.

Paulie was watching TV in his basement when the ruckus forced him to turn off the set, put on his jacket, and walk around the block to see what was going on. He told me that the steady drizzle nearly stopped him from going. "I almost went back inside and didn't bother walking to the spot." By the time he did, the cops had finished interrogating me and I was unconscious. When he arrived they were rolling my limp body onto a collapsed gurney. Others had emerged from their homes as well to see what was happening. Paulie had to nudge through the small semicircle of neighbors and cops surrounding me. Only days later when word spread

that I'd nearly been shot to death did he know it was I he'd seen being placed in the ambulance.

The ride to Richmond Memorial Hospital from Oakwood Heights took nearly half an hour. With today's increased traffic it might take twice that long. On the way there I flatlined. For a few moments I was officially dead. I was stabilized long enough to reach the hospital. Soon after I arrived I flatlined again.

For another hour or so while I was further stabilized, I remained firmly unconscious, until I briefly snapped out of it and saw the nurse fiddling with whatever liquid-filled bags were keeping me alive. For nearly three hours I was as close to death as anyone can be without actually dying. I would remain perilously close for several more hours and alarmingly close for a couple of days. In their extra-professional estimation of those first few hours immediately after I'd been shot, nurses and doctors spoke of how it was "a miracle" I hadn't died, with one doctor casually informing me, "You really should be dead, you know." Others mentioned how "lucky" I was. More like dumb-luck. Lucky because I was too dumb at first to realize I'd been shot by a real gun loaded with real bullets.

But it was no miracle either, as the medical staff well knew. It was a convenient turn of phrase for them, and a way of highlighting just how much my being alive was an aberration. There was nothing divine about any of it for me. Of those two hours while on the verge of death I remember nothing. It's a void because I was in one. I was blanketed by complete and utter darkness. Recently, in preparing to write this, I searched the web for "near-death experiences," hoping to find a group or organization where people discuss their experiences. I thought it might be useful and interesting to learn from others what they went through, finding out about the similarities and differences of having come so close to death. After scrolling through more than ten computer screen pages of listed sites, I gave up. Nearly every one featured contacts of people who had undergone a spiritual or religious vision. And almost all of them mentioned a bright light coming at them, or their moving toward one, or their being engulfed by it. Others claimed momentarily joining dead loved ones, greeting them in blazingly bright rooms or floating with them like cumulus clouds along a tranquil haze. A few discussed seeing Jesus or the Virgin Mary, usually in some magnificent setting, like standing at the base of a glorious sun rising on the horizon.

I saw nothing. And I think what others saw is what they wanted to see. They envisioned what already existed in their minds. I'm sure if I were to locate a website devoted to Hindus who've had near-death experiences,

they'd claim they saw Vishnu rather than Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, whom the Christians saw. And those who saw the deceased were likely grieving about their loss long before they encountered them in "the afterlife." Something tells me those repetitious recollections of rock 'n' roll light shows are manifestations of the withering physical body. I truly wish I could claim I saw such splendidly brilliant lights rather than the total darkness I experienced.

So, no, my near-death experience didn't produce any rapturous lights of transcendence or spiritual figures guiding me to glory. Nor did I see any dead loved ones, probably because no one I loved was dead. When I was unconscious I saw nothing. The same was true of my epiphany. In fact, that *was* my epiphany—the absence of time, place, and thing. I had a series of revelations when the priest was administering me the last rites, and the one that most mattered, and has no other equivalent in name except "an epiphany," took place when I did see the light. But not an actual blaze of light, more like the metaphorical kind. It was enlightenment. It lasted for only a minute or two, but it was so powerful that it felt as if the energy of the universe were coursing through the fabric of my being. I can't say for sure whether that's what saved me the most from death, the "miracle" or "luck" of that vision. All I know is that I felt the sheer concentrated force of life in those few moments. I've relied on that imprint ever since, as a way to exist in the here-and-now. Consciously aware of being so close to death transformed how I would live the rest of my life: *One glorious moment* at a time. As Blake wrote, eternity is in love with the productions of time. In some respect I had wed my hell with heaven.