



Saturday Night in Mariposa

Michael Liam O’Byrne

The author is a member of the Class of 2007 at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. This essay won honorable mention in the 2006 Alpha Omega Alpha Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Competition.

Scottie came in from the dark. “Do you think we should check it out?” he asked. His characteristic smirk flashed, and he snapped his phone shut. Greg, Clay, Andy, and I sprawled on the concrete floor, bathed in the dull glow of the television. We had all heard the clamor. So far no one had stirred.

“It sounded like a car,” Scottie continued in his mild drawl, and with that, the six of us were up, kicking our way through the gravel and dust. The last hints of crimson-purple warmth peeked through the pines on the ridge to the west. It got dark quickly up here, and in the minutes it took to descend to the valley floor, afternoon faded to dusk. It was in this flat, half light that I heard the shouting.

At the footbridge was the van, its great belly settled down onto the roadside grass, wheels splayed out casually. A pair of trucks had pulled in from the north, their headlights glaring at the hill. The dusty air seemed to hang in the light beam,

an illusory vapor trail of the van's tumbling descent. My gaze drifted up the side of the valley wall and traced the trajectory of the van's path from the bare shoulder of the highway overhead. I scanned over the vicious gashes in the tawny soil of the road cut, spun across the shards of metal, glass, and plastic scintillating on the slope, and crashed through a mangled shrub to the foot of the hobbled vehicle. Again the shouting.

"Don't touch him."

A pair of moustaches erupted from the trailer camp across the ditch, white undershirts and jeans streaking behind. They leaned over the edge of the ditch, their words spraying out over a woman who had waded into the ditch beside the bridge, stepping towards the body. **THE BODY**. Her fists balled tight, she spoke.

"I know first aid," she said, "It doesn't matter if his neck is broken. His face is underwater. He can't breathe."

AIRWAY

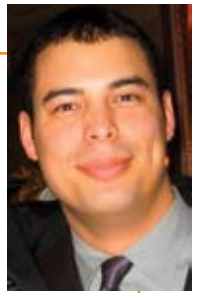
Moustache Number One's nostrils flared and he stepped forward, but we had already hustled past him into the ditch. Our minds, minutes earlier languishing in a post-hike malaise, shuddered into gear. **AIRWAY**. Capital letters underlined three times, scrawled onto a chalk board six days earlier. A single word erupted in six minds, and the smoldering scene was rendered schematic. The tension and conflict accumulating in front of me dissipated, replaced with the comforting rhythm of protocol. There were simple choices and action. **THE BODY**. It snapped into focus, face down in the water. Our initial lethargy was shed on the bank. The rustle of jeans and snap of latex gloves crackled in the dark. "Shit," after an embarrassed pause, I waded into the water with bare hands.

Clay was at the head. Cupping the neck in the pads of his fingers, he held the head in line with the axis of the body, cradling it against our clumsy maneuvers. In the meantime, arms snaked beneath the prostrate, floating thing. **THE BODY**. With a signal from the head, we flipped and raised it onto the shore.

More trucks had arrived, and their headlights illuminated the scene. **AIRWAY**. Again that word. With the head stabilized between his knees, Clay reached forward to perform a jaw thrust. I gaped, imagining the anatomy we had learned. I visualized the mandible ascending, carrying the tongue forward off of the base of the pharynx. In my mind's eye, vital vapors flowed into the newly patent airway. I felt my own breath grow stale. I knew that Clay, like the rest of us, had never done this before. He got hold of the thick of the jaw on both sides and with deliberate slowness pushed up. Everything collapsed, it seemed, at once. The jaw faltered, and halves began slipping where a whole should have been. Fragments of bone rattled clumsily, shards in a bag of flesh. With desperate determination and careful pressure, Clay held the mandible with both hands in place and thrust again. This time it held, and I exhaled. **THE BODY** did not, and the action resumed.

By and about the author

As a child, I could not understand what grownups did "at work." At the time, I planned to become a scientist, people who, I thought, worked in remote, hidden, castle-laboratories making monsters out of stolen spare parts. At Harvard, a degree in neurobiology brought me no closer to the creation of my zombie-automaton. Foiled, I posited that helping the living as a physician might serve as a fulfilling surrogate. I began medical school at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 2002. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I gravitated towards pediatrics and teaching. In 2007 I will begin residency and hope to care for the current crop of mad scientists, so that they may have the chance to reconcile their dreams and pass into adulthood. I hope my five-year-old self would approve.



BREATHING

THE BODY was now a patient, and there was much to be done. Steps were taken. With an airway opened, **BREATHING** and **CIRCULATION** rang in our heads. Hands scurried, searching for sites of bleeding, for pulses, for that magic spot on the sternum. They scurried to apply pressure, to feel for life, to pump. CPR began.

COMPRESSION

I took the small flashlight from my pocket for a moment and, otherwise unburdened, I took in the scene. The man was big. He was not huge, just gutty in the classic American way. He had not seemed heavy on the way up and out of the ditch, but laid out on the ground he seemed flabby and impossibly deflated. His crushed face had lost the thread of its own internal logic. On the gravel *terra firma*, his shattered skeleton betrayed him, a beached sea creature sagging for the first time under an unfamiliar gravity.

His left arm was open. I could just see the white edge of bone in the depths of the wound. Inches deep, the wound stubbornly refused to bleed. I looked down at his legs. On the left, his foot was twisted at an impossible angle. On his feet were soiled white socks. I peeked up to see that his sneakers were lined up by calamity in a neat pair in front of the van. Still tied, they waited patiently.

"SWITCH!"

I scooted up to the chest. It was my turn to pump. I tried to slow myself down, to be conscious of the movements I was making. Still, every movement seemed to be two inches too broad and two beats too slow. I measured out two finger-breadths from the sternal notch, knotted my fingers and

leaned into the chest. Again and again, I tried to find traction against the sternum. My bare knees dug into the gravel and glass of that roadside as I sank my weight down onto the man's hairy chest. I pumped and pumped and pumped. With each thrust, the chest gave way into the soggy mass of the man's thorax. Each repetition brought the sternum down. His chest offered only soggy resistance against the piston of my arms. I wrestled with the image of myself squelching a muddy dish sponge. I flailed. No one checked to see if the chest compressions were generating a pulse. I think we were all afraid of what it might have showed. I kept pumping.

DEAD

When it was over, after the ambulance came and the paramedics hooked him up to a portable defibrillator, after they rammed a combi-tube down his throat to intubate him, after I watched his cheeks expand under the force of ventilation, the grotesque inverse of a trumpet player, we backed away. The six of us would-be rescuers, covered in flop sweat, stepped back from the circle of light and humming engines, stepped back into the infinite darkness of Saturday night. The stunned silence lingered in the aftermath without interruption. As we gathered equipment to haul back up the hill, no one spoke. No one could say it. No one could say that the man laid out there on the ground, whom we had bagged and pumped and held, no one could say that he was dead. Dead for real. That he was dead when he hit the ground, when the van crushed him, dead when we found him face down in the water, dead when we worked on him. Dead forever.

Sweating and cold, I trudged up the hill to the warehouse where we slept. I had come to the Yosemite Valley the previous Sunday for a break, a month of training to become an EMT and wilderness first responder, as one of the last months in a gap year between the end of college and the beginning of medical school. It was a gut check to make sure that my heart was still into this "medical thing." It had made sense to test myself. I wanted to escape the backslapping and congratulations for getting into medical school. I wanted to see what taking care of sick people was like without all of that. That and I got to live twenty minutes outside of Yosemite for three weeks. With the banality of my questions laid bare, my shirt soaked with sweat, I trudged back up the hill.

As I showered, I wondered whether I was going to get hepatitis from the blood that had splattered my legs and my flashlight. Underneath the steaming jets, I could feel my skin scalding, but a chill remained.

Wrapped in a fleece and a clean pair of jeans, I lumbered back downstairs in the broad concrete shed that we used as both dormitory and classroom during the week. I slouched at a fold-out table, flicked on my headlamp and began to write. Someone had brought back a dozen Krispy Kreme doughnuts

from Fresno. I savaged the box, a half dozen honey-glazed disappeared in thick syrupy gulps. The words emerged slowly at first. Writing a SOAP note was still awkward. The jargon clumsily emerged from my addled mind. I did not resist the labor, however. Writing out the events seemed to make sense. Committing the words to their appropriate categories felt clean and clear. The conventions of craft stripped away the panic and grief and helplessness. The helplessness. I could not capture in prose the shock at seeing the senselessness and chaos of the scene. I settled for recounting the facts. Our training could not help the man in the van. Perhaps it would be enough to help me. Through the snores emerging from upstairs, I ran myself to exhaustion. When I finally climbed into my bunk, sleep was immediate. I did not dream. I was glad.

Another week of classes passed. During drills, our oxygen tanks ran out. On Saturday I volunteered to drive into town to get them filled at the paramedic station. The pale warmth of the early summer sun greeted me as I pulled into town. I stopped to buy a chocolate malt, and sipped it as I knocked on the door of the office. He was in his uniform polo, boxers and his utility boots, when he opened the door. He waddled out, squinting into daylight. I recognized him immediately: the chubby paramedic from that night. He had been the one who took over finally, who had to decide when to stop, who had carted off the body. He started chatting with me, asked about our training and how things were going. I am not sure if he heard my mumbled reply. He turned, cupping the tank to his belly and shuffled back to the shed behind the office. He bent over the tank valve still talking, his fleshy thighs and buttocks straining against his plaid trunks. I slouched against the door frame and averted my gaze. The tanks were small, and it was done quickly. I hurried out and stuffed them in the back seat of my car. I looked at them for a moment before slapping a backpack over them. I did not like the look of them sitting there. I dropped into the driver's seat and took a pull from my milkshake. Before I could start the car, I heard the medic. "Boy, you guys left pretty fast. You should have stayed and had a look. I could've showed you some of the anatomy. Once they're dead you can practice on them and learn a lot."

I drove through a dissipating breeze and lost myself in the beat of the air whipping through my open windows. I took another sip of the malt and let the chocolate melt on my tongue before I swallowed. I shuddered a bit. There was a chill in the air. I left the windows open, though. Under a flagrantly blue sky, I rocketed out of Mariposa. I kept my foot planted hard on the gas and did not let up until only trees lined the road. Another sip from my milkshake. The distant horizon melted into focus through a last salty tear.

The author's address is:

70 Haven Avenue, Apt. 6G
New York, New York 10032
E-mail: mlo2009@columbia.edu