

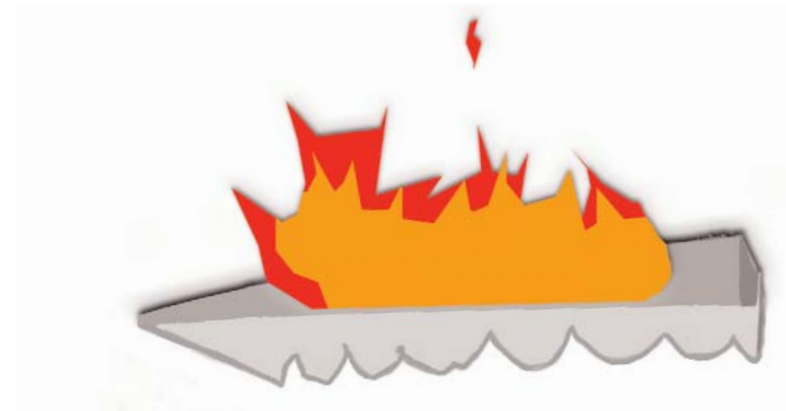
LIFE SUPPORT

BY VICTORIA LAW

PASS THIS ON TO A FRIEND!

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"Okay Eddie, where were we?"

The figure on the bed doesn't answer, just as he has not answered in over a month.

His sister picks the book off his bed, opens it and begins to read.

In March 1998, my friend Eddie was stabbed. Lacking insurance, he was rushed to Woodhull Hospital in Brooklyn. His girlfriend Catherine spent the night by his bedside, hoping he would wake.

Word spread by the next morning. Eddie was a bike messenger, activist and ex-squatter. Everyone in the squatter, bike messenger and anarchist communities recognized Eddie's hospitalization not as his own personal tragedy, but as everyone's larger concern. Over the next two months, virtually everyone came at least once to hold Eddie's hand, make small talk, read him a story or bring a gift.

That first morning, the hallway outside Eddie's room resembled that of a party more than an Intensive Care Unit. Friends came in and sat in the hall, talking to Catherine or to each other. They braved the curtain separating the still-unconscious Eddie from the liveliness outside.

Blood stains streaked his chin—the hospital staff had not bothered to wash his face. Tubes ran up his nose. Wires were

response to questions. He twisted his body as if annoyed that people were tickling his swollen feet. The doctors were baffled. The man was supposed to be brain dead, but his movements were more than simple spinal reflexes.

At the end of his stay, one nurse commented that Eddie had, by far, had the most visitors of anyone in the past twenty years. Hospital staff recognized Eddie's colorful visitors in the hall. When Fly, an artist with lip piercings, a messenger bag and numerous patches covering her shorts, appeared at the Visitor's Desk, the attendant immediately handed her a pass for Eddie's room. "Who else would you be here for?"

Despite the love and support Eddie got from his friends, the quality of the hospital care left a lot to be desired. In June, his mother decided to move him to a hospice in Boston. Two weeks later, away from his community of friends and supporters, Eddie died.

His mother buried him in a small cemetery in Massachusetts. Eddie had been fascinated by Viking burials—in which the body and a boat are set aflame on the water. That fall, Catherine, two of Eddie's half-siblings and several of his friends set fire to a papier-mâché boat and launched it onto the East River. Over a hundred of Eddie's friends and acquaintances gathered on the windy, rocky shore to say farewell.

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Others came every day. They brought novels in both French and English and spent hours reading to him. They brought stuffed animals to line his bed, flowers from the community gardens and votive candles to St. Anthony, which could only be lit in the hallway. They brought their hardcore bands' demo tapes for Eddie to hear. They also brought Mozart.

They also brought food for Catherine—not the fast food found on the neighboring streets but nourishing food so that she could sustain herself during all this. They stayed and talked with Catherine. They recounted stories, none of which painted Eddie in the best light but made Catherine smile nonetheless. "Do you remember that bike messenger party last Fourth of July?" one friend began. "Some asshole broke a bottle over Eddie's head. I remember standing outside drinking, then seeing a guy run out with all these guys chasing after him. And Eddie was in the front, with blood dripping down his face."

"I got in an accident at the race that day and got a black eye," Catherine added. "Jeez—we looked like a couple of brawlers for a week after that."

One afternoon, as we stood over his bloated body, I told Catherine about the time a drunken Eddie had stumbled up to a mutual friend.

"Hey, I always thought you were fat!" he exclaimed. "I didn't realize you had such hot legs!"

Before the woman could reply, he added, "Don't get me wrong. Catherine's my woman. She still gets me hard."

The woman drew the incident into a comic strip. Eddie had a bike tire for a head and was always holding a bottle of beer.

"That was him? Eddie! What were you doing? How embarrassing." Eddie didn't respond, but the anecdote made Catherine stop worrying for a few minutes.

His friends also talked with Eddie's mother, who felt more and more pressure from the hospital administration to pull the plug and free the bed for the next victim. His friends reassured her that if she believed Eddie would eventually wake, she was right to keep him on life support.

Eddie responded to his friends. He shook his head in

attached to his pinkie, his chest and any other free surface of his body. Every once in a while, his head jerked from the pillow as if he were fighting a bad dream. Otherwise, he was still.

His friends talked with him, some uttering a few short sentences, then backing away from this obvious sign of mortality. Others were stronger, standing beside his bed and chatting in low voices.

Eddie didn't respond. He didn't miraculously open his eyes. He didn't move his fingers or his toes. Yet the screen showing his heart rate kept its steady pace of beeping.

Because Catherine and Eddie were not legally married and there was no documentation that she was his health care proxy, the hospital staff refused to tell her anything. Instead, they contacted his father, from whom Eddie was estranged, and his mother, whom Eddie had not seen since she told him a year and a half earlier that he had no right to be outraged when the city tore down his home. "You chose to live in a squat," she had said. That was the last time Eddie had spoken to her.

However, the couple's friends were not about to let Catherine's concerns be dismissed. One followed the nurses into their office, arguing that, since they had lived together for seven years, Catherine and Eddie were married under common law. Thus, Catherine had a right to be kept both informed and included in the decision-making. Others were more worried about Catherine's lack of sleep and her refusal to go home despite the number of friends willing to stay with Eddie.

"We'll call you if anything changes," we all promised. Still, she refused, worried that Eddie would wake while she was at home. No one mentioned the other possibility: that he might die without her by his side.

"Do you have a cot?" one friend asked a nurse.

The hospital, the worst funded in Brooklyn, didn't.

The nurse did find a spare pillow, sheet and blanket to be stretched on the row of uncomfortable seats in the hall. At first, Catherine refused to lie down.

Then, Alice, a five-year-old squatter for whom the couple had sometimes babysat, took charge. She lay out the sheet and the

blanket, taking care to fold down a corner so that Catherine could lift it and climb in. Then, she pulled Catherine towards her improvised bed. Catherine obediently lay down.

Her friends stayed all day. They cluttered the hallway and were the only visitors the ICU had seen all day. The nurses, aware that the hospital had a rule of only two visitors at a time, pretended not to notice the obvious fact that people had snuck in and that no one held a Visitor's Pass. They even tried to overlook Alice's presence, which went against the ICU's policy of admitting visitors under the age of ten.

No one thought that this scene would be replayed day after day, week after week, month after month. Everyone believed that, although he had been stabbed twice in the chest and once in the stomach, Eddie would soon wake.

Instead, he stayed asleep. After the third day, hospital staff cleaned the blood off his face. His body, once tall and lean from forty hours a week of cycling through New York City traffic, began to swell. His once-thin arms became fat from liquid retention and the lack of movement. His mother flew into town and became, in the eyes of the hospital staff, Supreme Authority with the power to decide life or death. Eddie's numerous half-brothers and half-sisters arrived from across the country, adding to the dread-locked, tattooed and pierced crowd who overflowing from the ICU's tiny lobby area into the corridor.

The staff alternated between being amazed at the amount of support that Eddie had and being annoyed at the constant traffic. One nurse always told the motley group of friends when the official visiting hours ended. Another always turned a blind eye to the fact that there were many more than the two visitors per patient that the hospital allowed.

Sitting on the floor of the lobby area, one of Eddie's half-sisters observed, "The gypsies do the same thing. When one of their own gets sick, they all camp out in the hospital. They bring their animals too—their chickens and pigs and dogs."

None of us brought animals. We debated trying to smuggle in Eddie's two cats—Tuscany and Boo—but decided against it.

As the days turned into weeks, we stopped sneaking the chil-

dren in. Parents came while their kids were at school or took turns babysitting so that they could visit without having to introduce the reality of death to five-year-olds. They brought colorful drawings and homemade cards to tack on the small bulletin board at the foot of the bed.

Because Eddie had no insurance, hospital staff pressured his mother to place a "Do Not Resuscitate" order on her comatose son. As the weeks dragged on, they began to pressure her to pull the plug. The hospital did nothing except keep Eddie (barely) alive. His mother sought specialists, often having to scrape up the money to pay them out of her own pocket.

The community rallied to help. The day after Eddie's stabbing was the weekly punk show at ABC No Rio, a community arts center that he and Catherine had both volunteered at (and even briefly lived in.) The organizers of the show asked the bands if they would be willing to take a smaller percentage of the proceeds so that money could be put towards Eddie's medical costs. All agreed. In addition, an announcement was made between bands, a hat was passed around the audience and more money was raised. In the weeks that followed, virtually every No Rio volunteer made the trek to visit Eddie at least once.

This was not the only time the loose-knit community of punks, activists, squatters and bike messengers came together for Eddie. The bike messengers held a benefit poker game at one of the squats. They sold beer and asked that a portion of all the winnings be donated towards Eddie's medical fund. They raised over five hundred dollars that night and brought it to the hospital the next evening.

That was the night that Eddie was pronounced brain dead.

That night, the tone in the lobby was somber. Instead of chatting, gossiping and exchanging Eddie anecdotes, the visitors were quiet.

Eddie was a mess. The muscles in his face had relaxed, causing it to droop. One eye was swollen shut, the other swollen open. His mouth hung open as if in a silent scream.

Despite both the prognosis and his appearance, his friends and acquaintances continued to visit. Some came every week.