

THE LAZARUS EFFECT  
by  
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In the past, dedications have been easy, as each book was written for or about or because of a certain person. That isn't true in this case. But it occurs to me that I've never dedicated a book to my Daddy, so this one's for Big Jim. Even when we weren't together, you were always there.

Remember that man's life lies all within this present, as 't were but a hair's-breadth of time; as for the rest, the past is gone, the future yet unseen. Short, therefore, is man's life, and narrow is the corner of the earth wherein he dwells.

– Marcus Aurelius Antonius, *Meditations*. iii. 10.

The quality, not the longevity, of one's life is what is important.

– Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.

To desire immortality is to desire the eternal perpetuation of a great mistake.

– Arthur Schopenhauer

## Chapter One

After his death, Gary Drake's life became more interesting.

When Drake opened his eyes, he saw that he was in a dingy beige room, its ugliness made worse by the right lighting. Everything appeared out of focus, including the white-clad person who stood before him. Drake felt more than saw his own flimsy gown. His bare legs and bottom rested on stiff sheets, beneath which were a hard thin mattress.

"Smells like a hospital. I take it you're my doctor."

The doctor tried to smile. It was a wasted gesture, which was fortunate because he failed miserably.

"Yes, I'm Doctor Nichols."

"What's wrong with my eyes?"

"That should clear up in a few minutes."

"Is that why I'm here?"

"Part of the reason, yes. You took a quite a blow to the head."

Drake paused a moment to digest the information.

"Is my name Gary Drake?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm a policeman in Durham, North Carolina. My brother is Matthew Drake Langhorn. My mother is Jo Drake. My wife is Cathy. George Bush is president. Am I right so far?"

"Um, yes..."

"Doc, I don't have to see your face to know there's something you're not telling me."

"No, Gary, everything you said was correct."

"Doc, I'm a cop. Part of my job is spotting liars. Now I'll assume you're a skillful enough doctor. But you have to work on your bedside manner. *Um* is a dead give-away. I'm guessing you're trying to spare me some unpleasant truth. I just recovered from something pretty serious and you don't want to stress me too much too soon. Right so far?"

"Yes."

"Nobody calls me Gary unless the news is bad, by the way. And you've gotta tell even the biggest whopper with confidence, okay?"

"Okay."

"Now then, the game is up. I know something's wrong, but not what it is. For someone like me, that's the worst thing, not knowing. I've got a pretty active imagination. The truth can't be as bad as what I'll come up with. So take a deep breath and tell me the truth. I need to hear it."

Doctor Nichols took the deep breath. A long one.

"Drake, tell me about the president. What year is it?"

"George Bush. Reagan's former VP. It's 1989. But, I take it that's wrong."

"It's 2008, Gary."

"What?"

"The President is his son, George W Bush. I can't remember what the W stands for."

"Well, I'll be damned. 2008. That makes me an old fuck, doesn't it?"

Nichols chuckled weakly. "Based on what you've just told me, it sounds like you have a form of amnesia, Gary. But I'm hardly an expert, just more of a general practitioner. When you've had a chance to recover from the surgery, you should talk to a psychologist who's more qualified to gauge your actual condition. You believe it's 1989, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay, this is far from conclusive, but think back on what you remember about what you think of as the present, and about the time before that. Do you notice any obvious gaps?"

"No. Doc, how is this even possible?"

"The brain's a funny thing, Gary. It's not exactly common, but there are a number of cases where stroke or head trauma can erase a select group of memories. Which is what appears to have happened in your case. I ran a CAT scan on your brain, but it was inconclusive. You've got some swelling, and that's exerting pressure on certain brain tissues in the memory region. It's possible that when the swelling goes down, your memories will return. It's also possible that those brain tissues have been damaged, in which case you'll never regain those memories." He paused. "I'm sorry, Gary."

Drake digested the information silently for a moment. "There's more, isn't there?"

"No."

"You're lying, Doc."

"No..."

"Doc, I can't see your face very clearly, but I can hear the lie in your voice. I hope you don't play poker."

"No."

"So something is wrong, besides my memory loss. Have I forgotten some sort of tragedy in those missing years? Is Cathy dead? Mom? Matt?"

A long pause. "Yes."

"Yes to what?"

A longer pause. "All of it."

"All of it? Cathy, Mom and Matt? All dead?"

"Yes, Gary. I'm sorry."

"How-?"

"No. That's enough for now--"

Drake sat up suddenly, his angry blue eyes locking onto Nichols' worried brown ones. Nichols was of average height and slim build, maybe 40 or 50 years old, with wrinkled brown skin and graying brown hair. He seemed to wilt beneath Drake's angry stare.

"The hell it is! How did Cathy die?"

Nichols did not reply.

"Answer me. How - did - Cathy - die?"

"Oh, God. She had AIDS, Gary."

"Christ." Drake slumped onto the bed and closed his eyes. "Doc. Do I have AIDS?"

"Gary..."

"Doc, I want you to tell me every detail about me and Cathy. How did she get AIDS? Did I give it to her? Were we still married when she died?"

"Gary--"

"Everything."

"I hate this job."

"With all due respect, fuck your sensitive feelings. Tell me what you know."

"Cathy left you a long time ago, Gary."

"I was too dedicated to the job, no doubt. Then what?"

"Some time after that, she developed AIDS. You were tested, naturally, and you came up HIV positive. Nobody knows how either of you got it, but you always blamed yourself. You assumed you got it searching a suspect and stabbing yourself on an infected needle, or beating up an infected suspect until you were both bloody. You carried the guilt."

"And I watched her die."

"Yes."

"Hell. I still don't remember any of it, Doc, but I know damn well I never stopped loving her. Damn!"

Drake punched the bed, his eyes wet with tears. Tears of sorrow, tears of rage. Rage at his life, rage at his weakness. He fought against his emotions. In his mind, there was Cathy as she'd looked the last time he'd seen her. In his mind, that was only yesterday. Long blonde hair, tanning-bed skin, a warm smile. A kiss goodbye at the door, and a long look at him as he walked to his squad car. No doubt she was thinking what she always thought. *Please, let him come home tonight.*

After that, nothing. A brick wall. His absolute last memory was of that cool autumn morning. The sun was shining. The breeze was blowing. The garbage was stinking. The singing of the birds was barely audible over the din of car horns and traffic noises.

"Doc, you've just taken away my whole family. Are you sure my amnesia was caused by the head injury? I mean, it sounds like the kind of thing a person would want to forget anyway."

"There's no way I can answer that, Gary."

"Yeah yeah. Save it for the shrink, right?" He opened his eyes. "Tell me how Mom died."

"A burst aneurism. Peacefully. In her sleep. No one ever knew it was there, but even if they had it was too deep for surgery."

"Some things are meant to be, huh? She raised me, you know. She raised both of us. Alone. She went through hell doing it, too. Damn good woman." *I wish I had her strength.* "How did Matt die?"

Nichols swallowed. He didn't want to tell Drake this, any more than he'd wanted to tell him about his wife or his mother. But with those blue eyes boring a hold through his skull, he had no choice.

"Drug overdose."

Drake sat up sharply. "No! Not Matt. No."

Nichols said nothing.

"What happened to your hand?"

"What?" Nichols glanced at the stump of his left hand. "Oh. Frostbite. It happened three years ago, on a skiing trip that didn't quite go the way the brochure advertised."

"And you're still a doctor? Just what kind of hospital is this?"

"It's a prison hospital, Gary."

"Prison?"

Nichols nodded mutely.

"For how long?"

"Twenty years with a chance of parole in 10. You've been in 9 years."

"Why?"

"You confessed to three counts of aggravated assault and battery. The charge of attempted murder was dropped. You're serving concurrent sentences."

"Good things come in threes. Was it anybody I know?"

"Is that really important?"

"Yes."

"Fine! You beat up a preacher on the church steps on Sunday after he gave a sermon on good works. Then you beat up a shopping mall Santa on Christmas in front of some kids. Finally you went down to the police station and beat the hell out of a cop."

"If you don't give me a serious answer—"

"I am serious. That's what you did. You admitted it in court and you went to jail. The cop was named Charles Weaver. Do you remember him?"

"Yes. He's – he was – my field training officer when I was a beat cop. Why did I kill him?"

"He was stealing crack from an evidence locker, poisoning it, and getting it back out on the streets." Another pause. "Matt was one of his

victims. The DA couldn't get a conviction, so you took matters into your own hands."

"I went vigilante to punish the vigilantes."

"Yes."

"Daddy would call it redneck justice. Oh, and there's your anti-poker face again. I take it he died too."

Nichols nodded.

"Do I have AIDS?"

"What?"

"You already told me I had HIV, and that Cathy died from AIDS. I've been in prison nine years, so I think I can safely assume I've had HIV longer than that. Do I have AIDS?"

"I don't know."

"Excuse me?"

"You had AIDS yesterday. We might have accidentally cured it."

Drake leaped to his feet and grabbed the doctor's wrists.

"*Accidentally* cured it? You're gonna explain that. Right now."

The door opened. Three large uniformed men rushed toward Drake and Nichols.

"It's all right!" Nichols stated, facing the men, putting himself between them and Drake. "He's had one hell of a shock. Several, actually."

*I'm in prison, I'm over 40, I have AIDS, and my whole fucking family's dead. Yeah, Doc, that qualifies as a shock or two.*

Drake stared at the three men. Crewcuts and attitudes. Drake had been one of them. In his memory, it was fairly recent. In reality, it had been over 20 years ago. He'd guarded an overcrowded jail, where any excuse to take an convict down a notch was welcome. He didn't fault the guards for that – it was the only way to survive.

In the silence that followed, Drake didn't turn away. Finally, reluctantly, the guards left.

"We're on camera," said Drake.

Nichols nodded. "Video recording, no sound."

Drake sat on the bed. "I guess this being tired will go away too."

Nichols slumped into a nearby chair. "Yes."

"Good. At least my eyesight's coming back. Now tell me how you may have accidentally cured me of AIDS."

"As I said, you've been in prison for nine years. Our best guess is, last night, your secret got out."

"Which secret is that?"

"That you used to be a cop. Do you remember a J.C. Croom?"

"Vaguely. Now isn't that funny? Everybody I ever cared about dies and I forget that, but I remember some two-bit vending machine bandit I arrested when I was still a beat cop. Didn't he have a swastika tattooed on his arm?"

"I don't know, Gary. But what I do know is, Croom recognized you. Then several convicts beat you to death. I can only guess at why."

"Do you mean they *almost* beat me to death, or do you mean they beat me to death?"

"You were clinically dead for four minutes."

"Four minutes. Is that some kind of record?"

"It's close."

Drake briefly wiped his hands across his eyes. "I guess I should be grateful that my brain still works at all."

Nichols nodded mutely.

"Doc. Thanks for bringing me back."

"Are you sure you're grateful?"

Drake considered the question. "Yeah. I am."

"Good."

"How'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Bring me back from the edge of death. My head was bashed open, AIDS-infected blood spraying out, in a prison with a one-handed doctor. I presume surgery of any sort isn't your specialty. Maybe a few stitches after a prison fight, but nothing like this. So how did you bring me back?"

"I have an assistant to help me suture, and I can still do a pretty damn good butterfly stitch with one hand, thank you very much."

"Doc, I was dead for four minutes. I've lost 19 years. Even if you're God's fucking gift to the butterfly stitch, you'll never convince me that was enough to save me."

"Does it really sound so incredible?"

"Do I look like a fucking idiot to you? My brain isn't *that* damaged."

"Gary. I came in here to talk to you, right? See how you felt, how your memory was. But you've made me spill my guts on – oh let me think now... AIDS. Your mother. Your brother. Your wife. The fact that you're in prison. Damn you, isn't that enough?"

"No."

"You know what, Gary? I've had it with this fucking job." He rose to his feet. "I quit."

"Wait a minute, Doc."

"No, I'm tired of this shit. Patching people up who probably shouldn't be alive in the first place, treated like shit, laughed at because I'm a damn cripple who can't work in a real fucking hospital, and now you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. I come in here ready to follow the book, bring you down easy, and you get inside my head—!"

"Oh you poor baby. I've been awake what, ten minutes? You tell me I've got nothing. No job, no future. I'm a psycho killer wannabe and I have or had AIDS. I killed my fucking wife."

"You don't know that!"

"She died of AIDS, right?"

"It was an accident, Gary. You couldn't know you were infected. The gestation period is so many years—"

"If I'd never married her, she'd be alive today. And since we got a divorce anyway, which I can't even remember, what was the fucking point? Did we have kids?"

"No."

"Then what was the fucking point?"

Nichols didn't know what to say. He wanted to be anywhere but in this room, with this man. This good man, who certainly didn't belong in prison any longer. Especially now.

"Then the Gestapo comes in wanting to bash in what's left of my brains. But oh, excuse me, you've got it worse. Just walk out and be glad you can."

Nichols sat down and rubbed his eyes.

"Meanwhile you dangle this fucking carrot – maybe you cured my AIDS, maybe not – and then you just let it drop. I deserve some fucking answers."

"Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right."

"I signed an agreement – Jesus fucking Christ, I've told you too much already."

"Don't you think I deserve to know?"

Nichols signed heavily. "Yeah, you do. I'm still quitting, though. There's nothing I can do for you, and everyone else in this place can kiss my ass. But first, I'll tell you all I know."

"How did you save me?"

"An experimental drug."

"How experimental?"

"As far as I know, you're the only human it's ever been used on."

"And you started with a prisoner. Imagine that."

"It wasn't my idea. Well, okay, it was. Your head was split wide open and I couldn't save you. The shit's been in my refrigerator for months, and I swore I'd never use it, but—"

"I'm one of the good guys."

"I didn't even know you. You were just a slab of meat on the table. One more that the gimp couldn't save. And then I thought, fuck it. Why not?"

"Does this drug have a name?"

"Lazarus."

Drake laughed. "Oh, that's rich. Back from the dead like Lazarus. Well, I suppose four minutes does beat four days."

"What?"

"Lazarus was dead for four days. Don't you read your Bible?"

"Yes. No. Sometimes. Not lately, though."

"I love a straight answer. Tell me about my AIDS, Doc. Do you think Lazarus cured that?"

"I have no damn idea. We mapped the human genome and started working on DNA-based medicines a few years ago. One of the end results was Lazarus. It drastically accelerates the body's ability to heal itself."

"My head, split wide open, sealed itself up?"

Nichols nodded. "It's a bit more complicated than just giving you a shot and sending you on your way, but basically, yeah. You were shanked in the stomach first. Not even a scar."

Drake chuckled dryly. "Didn't I see this in a Chuck Norris movie?"

"On a prisoner, as I recall."

"Let's hope I'm not that psychotic."

Unable to think of a response, Nichols returned to his original subject. "The Lazarus effect isn't permanent."

"What?!"

"No, Gary, that doesn't mean you won't stay healed. That much is permanent. What I mean is, it may or may not help you if you get injured again. We don't know what the duration is. A shot a few days before the injury or shortly thereafter, it works. Past that, you're just a normal person again."

Drake chuckled. "Making the name of the drug appropriate. Would you like to hear some more about the Biblical Lazarus?"

"Why not?"

"Jesus brought him back, Jesus left town, and the soldiers killed him again. End of story."

Nichols was at a loss for words.

"Tell me about my AIDS."

"We're much better at treating it than we were back in 1989, by the way. We can't cure it, but many people have lived with it for many years."

"If they've got the money, I presume."

"Yes."

"Or are in prison."

"Anyway, I ran some blood tests on you after your recovery, and your CD4+ T cell count was up. I can't explain that, not in a case as advanced as yours. I can't explain it. Your blood still had the HIV virus, but it might be going away. It's hard to say. I really need to get you to a real hospital and run some more specific tests. And, of course, just see what happens to you with time."

"You signed an agreement to keep quiet about Lazarus."

"Yes."

"I'm guessing it wasn't with the local AIDS council."

"No, it wasn't."

"Then who was it?"

"I wish I knew. Someone from the government."

"You might not be able to quit."

"Looks like we're both prisoners here."

Drake looked at Nichols' missing left hand again. Nichols saw the direction of his gaze.

"I won't say it hasn't occurred to me. But I figured, you first."

"Age before beauty?"

"Pearls before swine."

Drake had to grin. Two guys swapping Dorothy Parker lines in a prison hospital. "Thanks a lot, Doc. So where do we go from here?"

Nichols sighed. "As I said before, I need to – somebody needs to run a lot more tests on you than I can run here. Brain damage, AIDS, Lazarus–"

"Which nobody can know about."

"Forget I told you."

Drake laughed. "Don't worry, Doc. I've gotten pretty good at forgetting things lately."

Nichols sat in silence for a moment, then glanced at his watch. "The warden will be here in about two hours. I'll see about moving you to the hospital then."

"Under constant surveillance, of course."

"Of course. Remember, I never told you about Lazarus."

"Sure." Drake half-smiled. "But thanks."

Nichols absently waved the gratitude aside with his stump. "Under the circumstances, I think your parole hearing should be moved. You're due in just under a year. Do you have a good lawyer?"

"There's no such thing."

"I'll see if I can find you one."

"Thanks again. I mean that."

"Gary, is there anything else I can do for you?"

Drake thought a moment. "Yeah. Get me a mirror."