

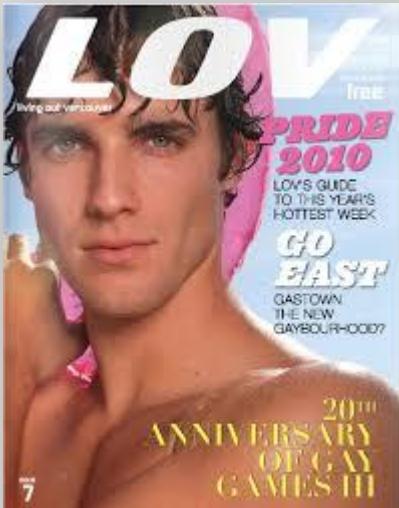
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WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR WILLIAM DOWREY?

“He can talk, but he rarely makes sense. His words are jumbled. He is speaking a code that only he knows.”

On March 13, 2009, 62-year-old football fan William Richard Dowrey, aka Ritchie Rich to friends was punched by a fellow patron at Vancouver’s popular Davie Street gay bar, The Fountainhead, resulting in serious and irreparable brain damage. The alleged attacker is 35-year-old Shawn Woodward. The incident enraged the gay community, with calls for a hate crime designation. Dowrey’s friend Lindsay Wincherauk, an author and journalist, was there that night. In a chapter for a book-in-progress tentatively entitled Play, he has written a personal account of the subsequent media coverage, public reaction, visits to his friend in the hospital, and his own experience of trying to make sense of it all. This is an excerpt.



FRIDAY, JUNE 26, 2009

Cameron and I have now visited Ritchie in the neighbourhood of forty times over the past fourteen weeks. I don’t see life in his eyes. I see a tortured reminder of the injustice thrown his way in a single pulse. I see a prison where his mind cannot and likely will never again compute who he is or who he once was. I see a man who died on March 13, while I hear the world hiding behind the hope of him making a triumphant return.

I see a mother who wants more than anything for her wonderful son to flash the brilliant sparkle that used to shine brightly in his eyes. I see a portion of a family drained by tragedy not understanding or accepting that if Ritchie is gay, it doesn’t change who he is or who they are. He still doesn’t know where he is. He

doesn’t know who we are, with the exception he realizes we come often and he is always happy to see us.

He can talk, but he rarely makes sense. His words are jumbled. He is speaking a code that only he knows.

He’s confined to a wheelchair or bed. Food is a struggle because he often doesn’t recognize it as food. Therapy is a struggle because he cannot understand the commands the therapists are giving him. He can’t go to the washroom by himself.

“Hello” is met with, “Your wife was here today.” I don’t have a wife.

We bring him chocolates. He doesn't know what it is. He loves it, giving a thumbs up, then, in true Ritchie fashion, offers some to everyone passing by.

We meet his daughter. She is touched by our efforts, hugs me, and shares a tear. I still can't find one. The pain of not being able to understand is relentless and wearing; the impact unforgiving. I can't fathom the extent of the pain Shawn Woodward's punch has inflicted upon Ritchie's family.



It's time to leave Ritchie for the day. He's going to be moved out of the hospital soon to a facility in Langley. Thrice-weekly visits will become a difficult task for Cameron and me and for his family as well.

Ritchie is not well. He may never be again. Every day that passes cements that fact more. He asks us to stay but he doesn't know where he is. He shakes Cameron's hand then mine, and smiles as we leave, even though he no longer knows who we are.

I'll continue to visit. I'll continue to try to summon a miracle. I'll continue to be his friend.

As much as I don't want Ritchie to die, I don't want to see him live the way he is. I feel guilty for those thoughts. I've realised why so many can't find the strength to visit Ritchie – they don't want to remember the painting they'd likely see. I've made the step, and there is no turning back. At first, each visit burdened me – with each additional trip, I still see the inevitable outcome. Ritchie is going to die; it may be tomorrow, next week, or in ten years.

I never fully understood the magnitude of our friendship. It was a friendship discovered in the Fountainhead. Somehow in our interactions, we became connected, and a mutual love and respect was found. Gay or not, who cares? What matters is the essence of his soul. He supported all, without expectations. Up until the punch, he was smiling. How many people can say that when their life is abruptly ended.

Lindsay Wincherauk

In November 2010 Shawn Woodward was sentenced to 6 years in jail. Judge Jocelyn Palmer said the "outrageous" unprovoked assault fit the framework of a hate crime.

In May, 2013, Woodward was granted full parole.

Ritchie Dowrey had been in care facilities unable to live independently since sustaining the catastrophic brain injury from Woodward's sucker punch.

Ritchie died around noon on Saturday January 31.

"I think it's important that all of that was for something," Wincherauk says. "Do people just die and nobody cares? I think it's important not to let that happen; that we remember him and that he was a great guy and a happy guy. And that nobody deserves it."

- Excerpt from Xtra West Article: Ritchie Dowrey's stolen life.

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