Bar Lights Bare Agony

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

I parked my car, shut off the headlights, and walked back to the little knot of people standing beside the darkened highway.

Lying on his back with body grotesquely bent was a man. He had been struck by a car. Both shoes had been knocked off by the impact which had picked up his body and smashed it against the windshield. Little bits of flesh and hair were still imbedded in the shattered glass and twisted windshield wiper.

THE CROWD seemed strangely disinterested in the man's body. Someone had thrown a dirty, canvas tarp over his legs as though this were as close as they wished to get. Little groups of people stood around talking to one another. Two of the men had cans of beer in their hands, having just stepped out of a nearby roadside joint.

I knelt beside the man and heard him breathing. The neon lights from the tavern cast weird reflections on his twisted body. His eyes were open and glassy. His breath sounded like soneone sucking on a straw in a nearly empty milkshake cup.

I PUT MY HAND on his chest but quickly removed it. It felt like a plastic bag filled with water. I turned his head so the blood would run out of his mouth rather than back down his throat. I tried to brush some of the dirt and gravel from his face but it all seemed so futile. I looked up from my kneeling position but the people were still standing in little groups several feet away. No one offered to help.

He stopped breathing for

Perspective

Of Dying Alone In Crowd

long agonizing seconds, then another gurgling gasp. His body was straining to stay alive although I had the impression his spirit already had departed.

I BENT LOW over him to try to speak, but the smell of cheap liquor was so strong it forced me back. He was dying — maybe dead — drunk.

The ambulance arrived and the attendants gently placed his dirty, torn body on a stretcher and sped off into the night. I knew the report would read DOA—Dead On Arrival.

AFTER TALKING to the patrolman who had arrived I walked back to my car. I caught snatches of conversation . . . been in every bar along the road . . . staggered into path of speeding car on the four-lane.

A fat man, silhouetted in the door of the honkytonk muttered to a friend, "Serves him right. He deserved to get hit after acting the way he did in here."

I WONDERED IF he would feel the same way if it had been his son — and shuddered involuntarily as I realized he probably would.

The paper the next morning said the man had been estranged from his wife and four children. Had no friends. Had been fired from his job. Belonged to no church.

That was three years ago today. But I remember it took me several days to scrub the blood stains from my hands. However, I got them clean in time for church services Sunday where we sat in our cozy building and sang songs about how much we loved one another.