

## Steven L. Montez

### *Benny Before Us*

“Did you tell them that my chest hurts really bad?”

Among the last words that Benny spoke behind these walls of razor and wrong were pleadings for basic relevancy among the human race. You may feel surprise at the dismissive nonchalance illustrated in the story that follows. But none of *us* do. Not anymore. It is my hope that you will also find your way through the shame and repulsiveness, outrage even, and see the wary splendor of the only grace so many of your brothers and sisters are afforded in these dark corners—in these clandestine crypts you and I have constructed to mask our consciousness and conceal our own right names. But this day there was simply a desperation felt fully only at the crossroads of stark mortality and lost liberty.

“Yeah, I told ‘em!” barked the guard as he hung up with the nurse down in health services, not attempting to hide his disdain for this prisoner who was once so much more than a six-digit number. A paycheck. An interruption of this state employee’s task at that moment—a task conveniently perceived as the priority. “But it’s count time. So you’re not going anywhere except back to your bunk! Go on!”

“But what did she say?” Benny implored.

“She said go lay down, and you’ll be fine.”

But he didn’t feel fine. He felt the classic pains of cardiac arrest. He felt the physical symptoms. And also that innate fear of fatality. That voice in our heads that speaks in moments of trauma and distress to tell us that this is our official warning—to do something now or there may soon be nothing left to do. So after count, he went back to the guard and beseeched him to be allowed to try to walk down to health services, to be allowed to try to hold on to the only thing he had left. His life.

“It’s shift change. You know there’s no movement during shift change. Go wait until we call for you,” was the inexplicably terse reply.

Two hours and fifteen minutes after Benny first reported his universally accepted dire symptoms, he was allowed to walk under his own power down the hill from his housing unit to the health services building in order to be seen by the nurse on duty.

She mock-listened to his description of symptoms, accused him of trying to get medicine that he was not prescribed—the implication being that he intended to either sell it to other prisoners or take it to get high—summarily rejected his concerns, and sent him back up to his housing unit. Protocol, along with the basic tenets of compassionate care, dictates that any prisoner experiencing the type of symptoms that Benny had be taken immediately to a hospital for diagnosis and treatment. But it is

expensive and risky to transport an animal from his cage to a place that treats humans. There are so many important questions to ponder. What if he's faking it and just wants to take a ride through the free world and look at trees and cars and girls through the transport van's window? You know they're all liars. What if the extra paperwork keeps a staff member from going home on time after his shift? What if a fiercely guarded standard of dissociation is breached while packing up this internee's meager worldly possessions into duffle bags for storage until he is returned? If he is returned? What if he is accidentally humanized by a nurse who gently touches his shoulder and smiles and comforts him, or by a doctor who shakes his hand and calls him by his first name? What if his existence is shown mercy and significance? And finally, what if protocol is ignored? Who will know? To whom will it matter?

He climbed the hill, clutching his arm, grimacing in pain, gasping for breath. He almost made it to his bunk. But instead he collapsed on a stained blue carpet that stank of convicts' feet and aloneness, and drew his last breaths before fading into unconsciousness.

By this time, my loving wife, Barbara, was waiting down the lobby of the facility to be let in for our visit. It was Friday, and I was about to feel like a person, complete with purpose and inspiration, for a few hours in the healing arms of the one who helps me keep my breath in my own body. But first she watched them wheel Benny past the visitors to a waiting ambulance. Even unconscious, he was shackled and restrained. That is how it is done here, you know? Not even a parting modicum of dignity.

We sat together in the visiting room, a viscid pall resonating among the prisoners and their mortal host of witnesses, who have already endured too much worry and loss.

I broke the silence. "People die here all the time, baby."

But she surprised me by saying that she heard a couple of guards taking credit for saving his life by giving him CPR. Even as my spirit rolled with an indignant observation of the hypocrisy of those who work for the same disinclined system that contributed to this tragedy through aversion now taking credit for saving his life, I still had to acknowledge a pure and profound gratitude that maybe Benny hadn't died after all. Sometimes the only redemption for the crippling effects of disregard are actions whose grace is hidden beneath the mysterious layers of why things happen like they do. Maybe Benny was still alive. Was his salvation worth having to endure some culturally conditioned self-aggrandizement by the same entity that facilitated this unruly mess in the first place? Of course it was.

In the wake of this hopeful news, Barb and I spoke of Benny's recent

disclosure to me that he had just been diagnosed with colon cancer. I reminded her that he had been one of the first to speak to me when I got here and found myself standing in line waiting for insulin, which he took as well. We talked about how he and I worked together in one of the few jobs that fit into the parameters of my personal moral code—packaging hygiene items for indigent and segregated prisoners. How he had just had a meeting with an advocacy group who was working hard to get him released for humanitarian reasons due to his diminished health. How he was a dedicated supporter of our band and could always be found sitting alone in the back row at our shows, clapping and smiling and going someplace less brutal than here for three and a half minutes at a time. Let them take credit for saving the man whom bureaucracy had proven content to bury. There was hope behind that hypocritical hubris. Maybe Benny was breathing right now, with a kind nurse gently touching his shoulder and a doctor shaking his hand and calling him by his first name.

But Benny wasn't breathing. And never would again. The next day I learned that although initial resuscitation efforts temporarily established some vital signs, Benny died a few hours later at the hospital. Alone. Chained to a bed. Because, as I may have mentioned, that is how it is done here. But finally and mercifully at home, in some abstract way, on the living side of these walls. Home, in some literal way, as his remains could now be unshackled and returned to his loved ones—if any still remained. Home, in some ethereal way, as his soul could now be enfolded in the arms of God—if such a thing exists despite the duality of our earthly struggle.

That night after music practice we said a prayer for our brother. I was surprised to learn that most of the guys in the group knew *of* Benny and his passing, but did not really know much more about him, including his support of our group and his love of music. But it didn't seem to matter all that much as we stood in a circle, hand in hand, with a palpable hopelessness in the air and a distinct pain in our own hearts that never truly stops anymore. We prayed in our own private manner among the million ways there are to do so. We didn't have to know him in order to *know* him. Each of us *was* him. In saying goodbye to Benny, we knew full well that we also said goodbye to one more piece of us that was left. It was not mourning per se. Sadness here struggles to stay inside defined lines, as individual sorrows merge to expand and sustain one pervasive grief. It was certainly not rejoicing as the recognition and celebration of life should be. Fear? No. Supplication? Not exactly. It was resignation. It was the only way we knew to acknowledge the only members of our human community who are doomed to be taken from this world twice. We knew that his fate would be shared by many of us. We knew that he was one

of us and that his path would know our own footsteps in time. That the glory of our lives would one day know the bittersweet freedom of our deaths.

The miles and moments of the imprisoned man are a frantic search for some sublime meaning. Some recompense for a lifetime of faith that our worth is commensurate to the life and value and miracle of our creation. Some mortal quest to leave an immortal mark on something in this world that matters. Some universal language in which to say simply, "I lived" to a world that is diligently carrying out the task of forgetting.

Sometimes we search for salvation in praise and scripture, that we may one day hear the protective peal of heaven's voice. Sometimes we search for forgiveness from those who would have to forgive themselves first in order to hear us, that we may ease the futility of hoping to be fixed by the broken masses. Sometimes we search for the strength needed to walk down subjugation and indignity, that we may hold our heads high enough to see a cloud or a bird or another person's eyes and their mirror of our own. Sometimes we search for a song, a hand, a loophole, a good night's sleep, a change, a kindred spirit, a cause, a challenge, a chance, a view of something beautiful, that we may be reminded that we are still alive. And sometimes we all just search for a way home, like Brother Benny before us.

It sometimes feels like an eerily short time, but nearly a decade has passed since my days lost the wonder of a good wander. In those times, my very existence was a poem. Melodic and pastoral and bathed in free verse. Too common now are nights full of wakefulness and dread, contemplating the end of my story. Not fearing so much which words are written. Just that the last line is already down and too soon. Too soon. In short, my life has become the awaiting of one more paragraph, one more stanza, one more merciful word willing to take me back to yesterday that I may borrow from it hope for tomorrow.

And some days the only thing I can do is to throw sentences onto scraps of paper until I am reminded that for some reason I am still alive. Reflective essays about what made my life extraordinary. Ridiculous pieces about the absurdities of daily life that make my spirit laugh. Words about the joy of knowing beauty and freedom, and the trauma of having it all rent so brutally away. So until the past no longer finds me, and this day betrays the promise of the next, I will write. What more can a simple man do? Wait around for someone else to tell *their* version of my story? No. I will write. Until my journey is done, until my tale is told, until my story is over. I will write.