

My Cellies

By John Purugganon

My cellie was diagnosed with lung cancer. He did the chemo and the radiation therapy. What was hoped was achieved, the cancer spots shrank. Now all we had to do was get his weight back up so he can have surgery. He goes to the doctor for a routine check up. Sends word back to me that he's going to the hospital for a few days. No big deal, he was told they'd be doing more testing; they just can't tell us when, due to security reasons (if we knew what day we were scheduled to leave the compound, we could have an escape plan and a car waiting). Nine days go by, no word about my cellie, medical staff can't say anything, privacy issues and all, but I'm told he's not dead.

Now, I have an old pocket-watch hanging on my wall; my mom got it for me my first year in prison. I woke up one morning two years ago and it's dead: died at 2:24. Just been hanging there ever since. Okay, ninth day of my cellie's absence, my buddy got his quarterly package, he'd ordered a watch battery for me. I hook it up, it works fine.

Next morning, guard tells me to roll up my cellie's property. "He died last night." No details, guard doesn't know. Jump to that afternoon, after completing my laps on the track. One of my co-workers tells me a C/O is looking for me. I track him down. He used to work in my building, knew me and my cellie. He told me he was there last night when my cellie died. He'd been on life support, they took him off to see if he could make it on his own, and he died. Why, I asked, was he on life support? C/O says, "Well, he had cancer, didn't he?" "Yes," I said, "but he was fine, in remission."

Did they go ahead and do the surgery? (Which might have been malpractice, at the very least, since he wasn't at safe weight for surgery yet. My paranoia tells me they killed him because of the multi-million dollar lawsuit he was filing. He complained about chest pains for three years before they finally gave him a chest X-ray and found the cancer. But I'm getting sidetracked here.)

"I don't know about no surgery," the C/O said. "I only worked the hospital last night. Just thought you'd like to know what happened. Your cellie died at 2:24 a.m."

Poor bastard. Poor Brad.

More weirdness. The fourth day he was gone, a friend of his told me he'd had a dream my cellie died, and when he told me (in the dream) I was all broken up, crying. My response was; "Why, because he owes me 10 bucks?" I knew the dream wasn't prophetic or anything. I knew this because I knew there was no way I'd be crying if he died. Never happen. No way, right? When I learned Brad was actually dead, my emotional response took me by complete surprise. All day long I was fighting tears. Whenever anyone would say something like "Well, he's in a better place now," I'd get all choked up and have to get away from whomever was speaking. Big, tough lifer.

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A few months later, I came back from a visit and find my cell all dark. My new cellie, Jeff, had the window covers up, I thought he was sleeping. Figured I'd change out of my visiting clothes and go back out, let him get his lounge on. I went to turn on my homemade night light, which hangs under his bed on the top bunk, and as I went to connect the light cord to my extension cord, I felt warm drops hit my forearm. "I hope to hell that's sweat," I thought to myself. I plug in and there's blood on my arm. Jeff's arm is hanging off the bunk, slashed, lengthwise, wrist to elbow, dripping with blood. I look down and see I'm standing in a puddle of blood. "Jeff, what the fuck?" I said, and then turned on the overhead light. Jeff said, "I need help, John." I told him "Okay, but I can't fix this, you need a doctor." He said, "Okay."

I'd left the cell door cracked so I was able to go directly to the control booth guard and tell him, "Man down." "Really?" he said, thought I was joking. "Open the door and let me see." The blood was clearly visible, and he hit the alarm. Minutes later, when they dragged Jeff out of the cell, he was unconscious. The lieutenant told me that protocol dictates that I go to the hole until an investigation is completed.

They locked the unit down. There's a gang of blood in front of my cell, along with Jeff's bloody mattress. I ask if I should clean the cell. After all, I'm a porter. "That's a negative," he said. No one can enter the cell until S&I (Security and Investigation; we call them the Goon Squad) does their thing.

I wandered around to various cells to hash out the incident with some of the guys. Around 5 o'clock I asked the control guard what was going on. He says they've fed 1-Block, 3-Block was walking, and our block would be the last to chow. Shortly later he hollers down to me, "Purugganan, they want you to lock it up in a shower." So I go borrow a book, then lock myself in a shower. Goon Squad shows up, cuffs me, and escorts me to the Program Office. They put me in a holding cage (picture a phone booth made of chicken wire). They leave. Come back. Take my statement. Leave. Two hours later the Lieutenant tell me that my cellie's been stabilized, has cleared me with his statement. I'm not going to the hole. But I can't go back to my cell, technically it's still a crime scene, and the Goon Squad put a cap on it (which basically means no one enters the cell but their department until further notice), so he needs to find me a spot for the night. Hour and a half later he comes back and informs me there is not a single empty bunk in the entire compound, save one, in The Hole, Administrative Segregation. Ad-Seg.

I'll save that adventure for another day. Two days later when I got back to my cell, I noticed a note taped to Jeff's TV. No one had noticed it, not even the Goon Squad with their pictures. Jeff's suicide note: "I'm tired of prison and I just want out. Please call my mother and tell her I'm sorry and that I'll love her and miss her. Also my Aunt Bernice. My cellie was at a visit when this was wrote at 1:40 pm Sunday."

I was glad to see he'd thought of me and attempted to protect me from suspicion. That night, when I was finally alone in my cell, I re-read Jeff's note and it broke my heart. Jeff had asked to move in with me as soon as we got word my previous cellie had died. I'd known Jeff for over 10 years. We were on D-Yard together, back in the day, when it was crackin, when it was a political yard. In the cell he was respectful, courteous, and upbeat. Zero tension between us. The night before he tried to check out he was in high spirits, had gotten in touch with his mother, found

she was safe from some mid-West storms. So he was, you know, glad. Next morning he'd slept in, but sat up as I was leaving for my visit to wish me a good one. And then, well, you know the rest.

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I'm generally light hearted, even in the cell, and even when I don't feel happy I make it a point to appear so. This, I realize, might make me somewhat inaccessible to, say, someone who might need to talk, because they're contemplating suicide. It's selfish. It's me. I don't like to do serious. Life is serious enough without being so serious about it. If I had a therapist I'm sure he or she would say this is my personal defense/denial. Poor Jeff. He obviously needed someone, and wrongly chose me.

I've been told he's doing fine, and is sorry for what he did. A lot of guys are angry with him. In prison, suicide is considered the ultimate act of weakness, of a coward. Everyone keeps asking if I'm okay. I'm fine. I sent him a kite: "You had a bad day, fuck it, move on."

One cellie died. Another tried to die. What is the message the Universe is trying to send me? I'm not beating myself up over any of this. I'm much too self-centered for that. I'm more concerned that, perhaps, I'm supposed to, at the very least, be a little more serious about things. And that's no fun.

For an audio reading of this story by Robert Moulthrop, please visit <https://qarrtsiluni.com/2011/06/03/my-cellies/>