

Lenny's Last Days... in Attica *

John J. Lennon

My biggest fear is dying in prison. I do not fear the drama of dying, whether by sword or by sickness, but rather, the idea that I will be unable to get out and give life another go. I fear the idea that *this* will be it and that is why my friend Lenny's plight has pained me. He came to prison thinking he would make it out. Turns out, he will not. This is a story about Lenny's last days.

Nowadays, the typical bank robbery is pulled off with a note, and that is how it went down at a Bank of America in New York State in September 2004. "C'mon lady, hurry up! You read the note", the robber demanded. "Give me the small bills". The teller complied. Then it was over.

The robber wore a baseball cap and sunglasses. He also sported a heavy heroin addiction. Lenny robbed this bank and two others in New York the same way before heading west where he hit another bank and was captured at the bus station with a bag of money. He served five years in a private prison and was then extradited to New York in 2010 to begin a ten-year sentence in Attica.

Today, he is a sixty-something white man, grey on the sides, bald on top, overweight, with thick, Buddy Holly eyeglasses that are surprisingly fashionable again. Lenny's glasses are state-issued, but they give him a bad look for Attica. Guards and prisoners often wonder if he is a pedophile. He is not.

Lenny and I saw each other at volunteer programs, the only forums for rehabilitation in Attica. We went to seek some semblance of sanity and of humanity. Cephias, a support group that began after the notorious 1971 uprising, is hosted by volunteers and meets twice a week. A few years ago, Lenny shared with the group that he had been diagnosed with colon cancer. "Yeah, I was out at the hospital. They gave me radiation for a few weeks, then operated", he said. "I have to wear this colostomy bag for now, and if the cancer doesn't come back they said they'll seal me up in a few months". He looked pale, but he seemed hopeful.

As months passed, Lenny seemed to lose his upbeat swagger. He walked the corridors with his head hanging, stopped shaving and his scruff grew into a gray beard. He stopped saying hello, stopped sharing in Cephias groups and seemed to stop hoping. One time, while waiting to be called out of the bullpen for a Cephias meeting, other prisoners in the waiting area began to whine about a sewage-like odour that permeated the room. "Ay, yo, who da' fuck smelling like shit?", one said. Lenny sat shamefaced as other dopey prisoners joined in on the rant and held their shirts over their

noses like mean kids on the playground. One prisoner looked at Lenny and said, “Motherfuckas’ need to wash they ass!”

Prison is crude that way where people just react – to a smell, an observation, a thought, and then blurt out whatever comes to mind. We can be abrasive, socially awkward, devoid of empathy, and we do not even know any better. Initially, I only empathized with Lenny because I have Crohn’s disease and, worst-case scenario, I may wind up with a colostomy bag or even develop colon cancer myself. So I would pick his brain about cancer symptoms and pretend to be interested in him, though I was mostly concerned about my own ass.

Some weeks ago, Lenny moved from E-block – Attica’s sweetest block, which houses prisoners assigned to cushy work details – to my company in C-block, Attica’s most notorious block – a bellicose environment where the toughest guards operate under a mantra “security... security... security”. Lenny told me he thought one of the guards in E-block got tired of smelling the odour from his colostomy bag and had him transferred, which sounds about right. Plenty of dangerous prisoners, many of whom recently finished stints in solitary, are housed in C-block. My particular company houses the block porters, like me, who do cleaning and other chores, as well as the sick and elderly, like Lenny. But why house the feeble with the fearless? Stuck with the gangbangers and all of C-block’s misery, Lenny settled in.

Recently, we were in the shower together and I saw his colostomy bag. “I thought they were gonna seal you up?”, I asked. “No. I’m terminal, John. The cancer came back”. “Oh, man... Ah, waddaya’ gonna’ do, John?”, I replied. “It’s my time”, he said. “They gave me a year, two tops”. Death had sunk its teeth into Lenny like a poisonous snake and venom was now spreading throughout his body.

At that moment, in that shower, I knew I needed to write about Lenny’s story, because it is empowering to have the ability to put pen to paper and thrust Lenny’s pain upon an audience to evoke emotions. And his story, turns out, is a sad one from beginning to end.

While writing this piece, I exchanged kites (written notes) with Lenny, transported by one of the porters. The guards like this porter because he regularly beats up rapists and child molesters for them. He is a thug with a raspy voice. “Yo, John, sup’ wit’ that old-ass white dude? He look mad funny-style”. I told him that Lenny was good, which meant that he was not a child molester and that he was my friend.

Because Lenny and I attend another fellowship together, I know he knows about good sobriety and the honest self-reflection that comes with it. So I asked him about making amends. “What about scaring those bank tellers?”, I wrote. I immediately regretted asking him that, because it is a bit much for a convicted murderer, like Yours Truly, to solicit contrition from a man who robbed banks with notes. Lenny kited back: “John, I know about empathy and amends, but at this point I just don’t care anymore. I’m very negative now. I just want to die”.

Lenny entered the system young. He told me he was fifteen when he stabbed his alcoholic father with a kitchen knife because he hit his alcoholic mother. He was sent to juvenile hall, then wound-up in foster care, and then he became an emancipated minor. After that, his dysfunctional life played out. He became an alcoholic and addict, a lousy husband, a deadbeat dad, a liar, a thief, a jailbird.

If he had stayed sober out there, he probably would have had a shot at a second act in life. Sadly, though, Lenny’s life has resembled one long, self-destructive, drama-filled first act. Now he is dying slowly, in a humiliating way, in a disgusting place – in Attica.

Recently, Lenny and I marched through a gauntlet of guards and headed to our evening group. He was randomly pulled off the line to be frisked before entering the chapel. Because of his pierced eardrum, he did not hear the fresh-faced guard ask him if he had anything on him. When the guard felt the colostomy bag, he squeezed it, which caused fluids to seep out. He then shoved Lenny’s face against the wall. “What the fuck is that?” “It’s a shit bag. I have colon cancer”, Lenny said. Disgusted, the guard said, “Get in the chapel. C’mon man, hurry up!”

In November 2014, a version of this piece ran in *The Marshall Project*, a news organization focused on the American criminal justice system. The article garnered some positive attention. There were letters to the editor, and Lenny received letters too, sympathizing with his plight. Then the doctor spoke with him for an hour. He told me that had never happened before.

However, the guards read the article too, and they threatened Lenny, called him a whiner, and told him he was not the only one with a shit bag. They broke his fan and lamp during a cell search. Then they left him alone for a bit. Due to the odour, they moved him to the last cell on the company, which had no running water. Two weeks passed. At our evening group, a dehydrated Lenny told me about his ordeal. I had since been transferred out of C-block, and, fortunately,

had not received any reprisal myself. I immediately wrote to the superintendent and cc'ed it to a reporter I knew was writing an investigative piece about Attica for *The New York Times*. Lenny's water was fixed the next day.

At our next evening group, Lenny told me that the plumber said that the valve had simply been turned off. Lenny could not see why the guards would intentionally do that to him. "Man, the poor bastard that was in that cell before me must have really pissed off the guards", he said. Lenny's naiveté was almost endearing. "I'm glad your water's back on", I said.

There was no need to tell Lenny that it was likely he who was the poor bastard. I felt bad that I had caused Lenny more pain. But how can someone read this article and think that Lenny deserves to suffer more? There is a meanness that exists in Attica, which surely oozes out of some of us prisoners, and the guards allow it to seep into their souls. It is also the drudgery of the job, I suppose, the us-versus-them mindset that has cascaded from the 1971 uprising. The result is apathy.

Sadly, the Attica guards are not the only apathetic ones. Lenny's application for medical parole was denied a few months ago. He was told to reapply. In January 2015, a specialist told Lenny his days were numbered. I pray he gets medical parole next time. Admittedly, this story is as much about my own existential purpose, as it is about my own desire to feel empathy. In the end, perhaps my biggest fear is living life like I am dead inside.

ENDNOTES

An earlier and shorter version of this article first appeared in *The Marshall Project* (see <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2014/11/15/dying-in-attica>).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John J. Lennon was born and raised in New York City. He used drugs, sold drugs, toted guns and eventually shot another man to death. He is in his fourteenth year of a twenty-eight-years-to-life sentence. He is currently in the Attica Correctional Facility, where he has been participating in a creative writing workshop since 2010. He also participates in a privately funded college program, from which he expects to graduate with an associate degree in 2015. He was first published in *The Atlantic* in August 2013. His work has also appeared in *The New York Times* blog nytimes.com/ontheground, *Times Union*, *Grapevine* and *The Marshall Project*.