

Chuck was a large, overly-gregarious man, in his mid-forties. I didn't like Chuck very much. We met on the day of my transfer to SCI-Frackville, following my arrival on the block. He was housed in the adjoining cell, and our cells shared a vent. Within minutes of my arrival on the block, Chuck called me through our vent and immediately asked way too many questions. Later, I learned that Chuck was in prison for sex crimes against children. But he was disliked even more because of his persistently ingratiating manner, his constant borrowing, cadging and bumming of smokes or coffee --and because he constantly informed prison administrators of every small thing he discovered about others here. It may be an understatement to say that Chuck was not a popular guy. Indeed, he (quite prudently) never went out to the prison yard where prisoners crowd together, where others might attack him.

Years of hiding on the block must have worn on Chuck, because this summer he finally succeeded in finagling an outside caretaker job. Prisoner caretakers work outdoors, but within the prison compound, where a guard is always present. Chuck probably thought he could get some time outside, under the relative safety of the guards' watchful eyes. But life is often ironic, and Karma can be a bitch.

About two weeks ago, on a bright-hot day of our waning summer, Chuck was out in the compound, cutting grass with a push-mower. The afternoon yard was out, and I caught occasional glimpses of Chuck through the fence while doing my sit-ups. I looked up to see Chuck cutting grass near the guard post, and at the next glance, I discerned Chuck, prostrate on the ground! Naturally, that caught my attention, so I stopped to watch as the guard, and then, other prisoners, hovered over Chuck as he lay flat on his back. Eventually another guard arrived, then even more came and then lieutenants came too. They chased the prisoners away. The guards knelt down by Chuck, but did not administer CPR or render any obvious aid. Chuck simply laid there on the ground, his chest heaving, his arms twitching about.

About five minutes later, two nurses strolled out of the medical department, carrying a small oxygen tank and other equipment --but no stretcher. I watched as the nurses slowly made their way across the compound towards the guard post where Chuck was. The unreal incongruity of the situation struck me then: those nurses' leisurely pace seemed unrelated to the man laying on the ground. I had to wonder if I misperceived the situation. Perhaps there was no emergency, maybe Chuck was simply pulling some kind of stunt? The nurses finally got to Chuck and eventually started manual chest compressions. I knew then that it was no stunt. I also knew that Chuck was, by then, probably long past a point where CPR might help.

Soon the prison administrators arrived to join the crowd. An ambulance came in into the compound through a back gate, and the EMTs also joined the crowd. The emergency --if it was ever even considered that-- had passed. Chuck remained on the ground, unmoving, obviously dead. But the routine here goes on, the schedule must be followed, and afternoon yard would soon be over. So Chuck's body was put on a stretcher, shoved into the ambulance, and driven out of the compound.

The crowd quickly dispersed, and afternoon yard was terminated. As I walked back to my block, I looked down at the place where Chuck died, where his body lied on the ground until just moments before. I felt conflicted. Even though I hadn't liked him much, I also thought he deserved more somehow. Better treatment. Or at the very least, some sense of urgency in responding to his emergency. Although he was a prisoner, and despised by many, Chuck was still a human being. The delayed, lackadaisical response by the guards and nurses amply demonstrates their rejection of Chuck's humanity. The scary thing is that their attitude had little to do with Chuck personally, as an individual: any other prisoner dropping where and when he did would have been accorded the exact same lack of care and concern. No, I most certainly do not look forward to the inevitable time when my own emergency occurs.