

Bennie and Cookie Survive Buf's Snow Storm, Colonel Sanders Helped.

Ishmael Reed: I wanted to know if you knew there was gonna be a snowstorm before you departed for Buffalo.

Bennie Reed: We were told it was coming, but we were told it would arrive around noon.

Ishmael Reed: What were you going up there for?

Bennie Reed: I went up there for Christmas dinner with the rest of the family.

Ishmael Reed: So what'd you take up there?

Bennie Reed: I had an SUV I rented. Lutrell (Bennie's grandson) had got a new apartment.

Ishmael Reed: Located where?

Bennie Reed: The suburbs.

Ishmael Reed: Where in the suburbs?

Bennie Reed: Amherst.

Ishmael Reed: So when did you know you were in trouble? You and Cookie?

Bennie Reed: I knew I was in trouble when I couldn't see nothing on the highway going 90 East. It was a whiteout. I left Nashville around maybe 1AM. It's a twelve-hour ride from Tennessee to Buffalo. Usually, I stop off in Youngstown (Ohio) because Cookie got family members in Youngstown. From Youngstown to Buffalo's only three hours away.

Ishmael Reed: So when did it get so bad that you had to stop?

Bennie Reed: Oh, it got worse when I couldn't see, and the wind blew my car from one side of the road to the other. So I got up underneath this bridge where a guy was behind me. He had an eighteen-wheeler. I couldn't see nothing. And I went off one exit. I ended up on this one exit. It was like a dead end. I said, "Did we get off 90?" He said, "I don't know. I don't know." I said, "Do you know where you at? He said," I dunno, neither. I'm following you."

Ishmael Reed: He's following you.

Bennie Reed: He's following me.

Ishmael Reed: So what'd you do then?

Bennie Reed: I got out of the car. The wind was blowing me all over the road. I had to walk up the little incline. I looked up, I said to Cookie, "90 East is over here." I said, "We got to back up." I'm down this little one-country road. So good thing I didn't go all the way.

Ishmael Reed: The wind took you off your feet?

Bennie Reed: It was a hurricane blizzard.

Ishmael Reed: And it blew you off your feet.

Bennie Reed: Yeah, it blew me all over the highway. Cookie was laughing. I got to look for an exit.

Tennessee Reed: They called that storm a bomb cyclone.

Ishmael Reed: What about the polar vortex? What does that mean?

Tennessee Reed: The polar vortex is a large area of low pressure of cold air surrounding both of the Earth's poles.

Ishmael Reed: So when you recovered, what'd you do?

Bennie Reed: I got back into the car 'cause I had to call the police to put us in a shelter.

Ishmael Reed: So, is that where you stayed for seventeen hours?

Bennie Reed: I said, "We gotta get up outta here. Maybe we could find an exit." So some people came by and said all the roads were closed, but they said they could find one towards Niagara Falls. I said, "No, I'm not going to Niagara Falls." That's on Interstate 190. I know that could be blocked. So I tried to follow them. They got stuck. They got stuck in the middle of the highway. I backed up all the way to get up back underneath the bridge.

Ishmael Reed: Again.

Bennie Reed: A state trooper came by. I said I was trying to get off this exit. He said, "No, don't do it. Even if they tried to plow, you're gonna be stuck." Cause that's, you know, that's Kensington Expressway by Walden. He said, "You might slide off the embankment."

Ishmael Reed: Were these white people?

Bennie Reed: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: And everybody was helping each other.

Bennie Reed: Yeah. The wind blew my car over to the median.

Ishmael Reed: Wait a minute. How did you get from under the bridge to this other location?

Bennie Reed: I just took a chance to start driving. I tried to get to the Cleveland Drive exit. It was blocked off. So I went further down to another exit, and that was blocked. So then the New York State plows came by.

Ishmael Reed: How many hours had you been stranded before the plows came by?

Bennie Reed: I'd say a total of about seventeen hours. It was not a tow truck. It was the maintenance crew. They came by. I said, "I'm trying to get off this exit." It was Exit 52 East. He couldn't get off either. So he told us, "Just try to stay here." So we stayed in the car there for a while. I told them I was trying to reach Cleveland Drive. He said, "No, you're too far down. You gotta turn right back around and go off to 58. He said, "No, other cars are not gonna be coming 'cause it's closed. We already plowed exit 58. Just turn right back around." So I wasn't scared. Then he told me, "At exit 58, you'll see a tow truck, but he's stuck. When you see that tow truck that's stuck, that's where you make your turn and go up Exit 58." A whole bunch of cars was stranded on Exit 58. I kept going with it, but they didn't plow the rest of it. That's where I got stuck again and spent most of my time there. So we stayed there. Cookie said, "I see some lights flashing across the road from us." I couldn't do anything about that. Ice was building inside the car. It was cold inside the car. I take my sprinkler and scrap the ice on the inside.

Ishmael Reed: Ice was on the inside of the car?

Bennie Reed: Yes, I had to ration my gas. I had to turn the heater on. I had my gas going for maybe five minutes to get some heat, then cut it off, when it started getting cold, I turned the heat back on for some more heat for another five minutes. Cut it off. Cause my fuel was getting low.

Ishmael Reed: So what happened then?

Bennie Reed: We slept in the car all night. It's good that Cookie brought blankets and some Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Ishmael Reed: You know why I'm laughing? When we went to Chattanooga in the old days, in the 1940s, we always had to take a fried chicken when taking the train from Buffalo to Chattanooga because they didn't serve us. So we had to pack a basket of chicken. That's why I was laughing. Some thing's never change. So how many pieces of chicken did you have?

Bennie Reed: We had a big box of chicken. That helped.

Ishmael Reed: Did you have the biscuits and all that stuff too? Mashed potatoes? What else?

Bennie Reed: Coleslaw.

Ishmael Reed: Coleslaw?

Bennie Reed: Yes, sir.

Ishmael Reed: So the following day, what happened?

Bennie Reed: I tried to back up to get out of the hole I was stuck in, but it kept pushing me to the guardrail. If I got hung up on this guardrail, I'm done. So I got out of the vehicle. I see these snow plows plowing across from me. So the snow plow guy came down the road. So he tried to make a path for me to move all the snow out the back of me with his plow. I still need help getting out. Then this other guy came back with a truck. They saw me, and he came and put the tow chain on the back of my vehicle and pulled me out of that hole where I was stuck at.

Ishmael Reed: Was this a white guy?

Bennie Reed: Yeah.

Ishmael Reed: And who was he with?

Bennie Reed: The New York State Freeway Maintenance Crew.

Ishmael Reed: So he towed you?

Bennie Reed: He towed me out of the hole, but once I could get out, I could drive because he had plowed the rest of the road. He told me to follow him, so I followed him across the highway to the New York State Maintenance Building. There was another guy who got stuck. He was from Africa. He followed us as well. The crew member took us to the place and upstairs to this room where they had their meetings at. As soon as we got up there, a bunch of other people was there.

Ishmael Reed: All kinds of different races of people?

Bennie Reed: Yeah, all kinds of different races of people. We met people from India. We met a couple from Mexico. All nationalities. There were White people there with their kids and dogs.

Ishmael Reed: How about how many people were there?

Bennie Reed: Well, I counted to be about a good, I'd say about, about a good sixty to seventy-five.

Ishmael Reed: Did they have cots or sleeping cots, or what did they have?

Bennie Reed: They didn't have that. They just had big tables, like a lunch room you see in a cafeteria or something. We didn't care. We were warm and in a building.

Ishmael Reed: You had restrooms?

Bennie Reed: Yes. They got bathrooms.

Ishmael Reed: And they and they fed you?

Bennie Reed: Yes. They fed us army rations.

Ishmael Reed: Like what?

Bennie Reed: Ravioli, lasagna. Italian stuff. Stuff you had to preheat. And water and juices And then Cookie had some cookies that we brought up for them. We had a big fruit basket. We shared that, too. That was our Christmas dinner.

Ishmael Reed: Did you have a tv?

Bennie Reed: Yes, we had television.

Ishmael Reed: So you were able to keep up with the storm?

Bennie Reed: Yeah. We could keep up with the storm by looking out of the window. It went on for two days.

Ishmael Reed: So, how long you were there two days?

Bennie Reed: I was there for two and a half days.

Ishmael Reed: And nobody got on each other's nerves or anything?

Bennie Reed: No. We were just happy to be safe.

Ishmael Reed: That's 'cause they didn't have no whiskey. That's why that happened.

Bennie Reed: Thank God for that.

Ishmael Reed: So, so when did you guys leave there?

Bennie Reed: There was this one young lady. She wanted to get the hell outta there. We tried to get the hell outta there too. So I remember the second day I was trying to leave early in the morning 'cause it was calm. And they said: Well, good luck because you might not make it." I said, "What do you mean?" "'Cause the storm gonna be coming again." I said, "Maybe I should leave." I was gonna leave at like around four o'clock in the morning. I'm glad I didn't 'cause the storm came back. So later in the evening, we left and I followed this girl, this girl was going in the same direction 'cause her people stayed off Main Street too. And I remember if the guy that pulled me out the hole, I told him where I was going. He said, "Well, that's good because you don't have to go on the east side because the east side is shut down." That mayor (Byron Brown) ain't did nothing. He said, "Go down Walden and go straight down Julian Road down Julian and make a left on Main Street because that's where we plowed. But the East side wasn't, so I went around the whole city to get to Crystal's house. (Crystal is his daughter, a dietician at one of the hospitals).

Ishmael Reed: And so that's where you ended up?

Bennie Reed: Yes. And Lutrell was stuck for like three days at the hospital. That's where he works at.

Ishmael Reed: Which hospital? General?

Bennie Reed: No, he works down there in South Buffalo. He works with his girlfriend at the hospital.

Ishmael Reed: Well, they got plenty of food in the hospital.

Bennie Reed: He got paid for overtime. He ate good. I said, "Well, you good man. You eating good. You got a place to sleep. Don't worry about coming out in the storm with that car.

Ishmael Reed: Was he gonna come out in the storm?

Bennie Reed: No. He saw the storm. He said he is not going out there no way.

Ishmael Reed: What are people saying about Mayor Brown's response?

Bennie Reed: I know the executor of New York, he was pissed off because the mayor was slow about initiating snow crews and preparing for the snow at an earlier time. He should have got on it earlier. The mayor had halted the slow plows and didn't have them put the salt down. That's what the New York State Freeway Maintenance Crew told us. They thought it was a shame. He must have done it because of the whiteout. They couldn't see. The winds were going over seventy miles per hour, like a hurricane, and it was snowing heavily.

Ishmael Reed: Well, what was he waiting for? Carl Paladino to tell him what to do?

Bennie Reed: There's no telling. But everybody's pissed off at him.

Ishmael Reed: Everybody's pissed off? Are black people pissed off?

Bennie Reed: Well, yes. Cause a lot of people died. A lot of black people died. They're still pulling them out of the snow banks.

Ishmael Reed: Oh, they, they still pulling them out?

Bennie Reed: Yeah. Just my sister-in-law called today. They're still pulling people out. Yeah. Two weeks later. Two weeks later.

Ishmael Reed: So what about Cookie's cousin?

Bennie Reed: Oh, he found him dead in the snow. We buried him today.

Ishmael Reed: What was, what was he doing out in the snow?

Bennie Reed: He was trying; I think he was trying to go out to get something to eat or something. I don't know why he went out there then. He wasn't appropriately dressed. So he went out there, then he came back, then he went back out there. Then he tried to make it home. He froze to death and fell out in the snow. His son came out the lift him in the snow bank. He called the police. The police said, "We can't do nothing. Just leave him there. Cause it's already cold." They took his body home.

Ishmael Reed: Who took his body home?

Bennie Reed: His son.

Ishmael Reed: His son found him.

Bennie Reed: Yeah. His son found him and took him home.

Ishmael Reed: God, that, that's gotta be horrible. What was his name?

Bennie Reed: They called him Harris.

Ishmael Reed: And what did he do? Did he have a job?

Bennie Reed: No, he didn't. He did a lot of church work.

Ishmael Reed: Tell me about the tags.

Bennie Reed: The yellow tags meant the cars were abandoned. Now, if you have a red tag means that the car is abandoned and there is a body inside.

Ishmael Reed: Did you see any of those?

Bennie Reed: Yeah, Lutrell pointed those out to me because I didn't know. I asked about the tags and colors, and he told me about it.

Ishmael Reed: So what about the looting?

Bennie Reed: Oh, all the looting was just ridiculous, man. All the east side was looted. They even got Tops over there where the people who got shot up by that racist guy. They hit that store too. Why would you wanna hit that? They've already been a victim of violence.

Ishmael Reed: And what other places did they hit?

Bennie Reed: The Save A Lots.

Ishmael Reed: Are these gangs or just individuals?

Bennie Reed: They're just people randomly. They had a posse with rifles and stuff.

Ishmael Reed: White men?

Bennie Reed: No, they are Black.

Ishmael Reed: Black guys were with rifles robbing places?

Bennie Reed: There was a retired policewoman, and they caught her robbing. She had a big truck trying to pull stuff out.

Ishmael Reed: She was robbing, too? A retired policewoman? So they shut down all the stores because of that, or what happened?

Bennie Reed: They shut down all the stores because they were looting. The Arabs bought a lot of stores on the east side.

Ishmael Reed: They're usually armed.

Bennie Reed: Yeah. They had U-zs.

Ishmael Reed: You telling me that Arabs armed themselves with Israeli-manufactured guns?

Bennie Reed: Yes.

Ishmael Reed: Well, that Buffalo's a mess, huh? So tell me about **Vincent** (Reed, our brother.)

Bennie Reed: Yeah, he was messed up too.

Ishmael Reed: So, was he already in Buffalo?

Bennie Reed: He had no electricity. No heat. The heater blew up.

Ishmael Reed: So, how did he get warm?

Bennie Reed: He didn't keep warm. He did the same thing I did. Turn the car engine on for some heat, turn it off, turn the car on for some heat, and turn it off. Repeating this.

Ishmael Reed: So, did he have any food in the house, or how did he feed himself?

Bennie Reed: De didn't complain about the food. He had to go in the garage and get his barbecue grill and some charcoal to heat up some meat.

Ishmael Reed: So this was quite an experience you had here.

Bennie Reed: His friend stayed down the street around the corner from him on Cleveland Drive. And his friend said, "Well, just come on over and walk over here, and we'll shelter you." I got a hold of Chris Watson and told him of Vincent's situation. Chris's daughter went and got him because his phone was gone. He couldn't use his phone.

Ishmael Reed: So, did he go over there?

Bennie Reed: Nope. He went back to the cold house. But Chris was trying to tell him his daughter's number, so be ready because it would be hard to get him because he was on Eggert Road. He wanted me to come to get him. I said, "I can't; I'll get stuck."

Ishmael Reed: So why do you think the White neighborhoods were taken care of better during the storm than Black neighborhoods?

Bennie Reed: I'm glad that Crystal's in a White neighborhood.

Ishmael Reed: They get better service.

Bennie Reed: Oh, most definitely.

Ishmael Reed: So there's still racism even when it comes to the snowstorm.

Bennie Reed: Well, a lot of that's on that mayor, man. Yeah. That mayor wasn't doing his job, man. He's the one who could have provided shelter. Even the churches didn't let people in. Come on, man.

Ishmael Reed: The Black churches didn't let people in. What about the White churches?

Bennie Reed: I don't know about them now, but I know most the inner city churches didn't let 'em in.

Ishmael Reed: Why is that? Were they afraid of the posse of the guns and all that? Or what?

Bennie Reed: It's a possibility. 'Cause you know, they are shooting in churches.

Ishmael Reed: They are shooting at churches?

Ishmael Reed: How old are these people? In their twenties? These people with guns and everything?

Bennie Reed: Yeah. They're some young kids. Yeah. They broke into a bank.

Ishmael Reed: Well, Black people shouldn't be robbing banks. They should stick to Pampers.

Bennie Reed: You know what's so stupid about them? They broke into a stupid bank but couldn't get into the vault.

Ishmael Reed: That's not no black crime, man. You know, you, you gotta come from generations of bank robbers to know that stuff.

Bennie Reed: That's right.

Ishmael Reed: So we are bad at crime. That's why black people should quit crime. Cause they're not successful at it. Okay, well listen, this has been great. I'll talk to you later.

Bennie Reed: All right, Ishmael.

Ishmael Reed: Okay. Thanks for this. Take care.