

# THE THING ABOUT BENNY

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M. Shayne Bell first came to public attention in 1986, when he won first place in that year's Writers of the Future contest. Since then he has published a number of well-liked stories in *Asimov's*—including a Hugo Finalist, "Mrs Lincoln's China", and a loosely connected series of stories about life in a future Africa—as well as appearing in *Amazing*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Pulphouse*, *Starlight 2*, *Vanishing Acts* and elsewhere, published a well-received first novel, *Nicoji*, and edited an anthology of stories by Utah writers, *Washed by a Wave of Wind: Science Fiction from the Corridor*. Bell has an M.A. degree in English from Brigham Young University, and lives in Salt Lake City, Utah.

In the quiet little story that follows, he shows us how a small hope can bloom even on the edge of disaster ... if you know how to look for it, that is.

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**Abba, Faltskog Listing 47: "Dancing Queen", day 3.  
En route from the airport.**

BENNY SAID, APROPOS of nothing, "The bridge is the most important part of a song, don't you think?"

"Oh, yeah," I said, me trying to drive in all that traffic and us late, as usual. "That's all I think about when I'm hearing music—those important bridges."

"No, really." Benny looked at me, earphones firmly covering his ears, eyes dark and kind of surprised. It was a weird look. Benny never has much to say, but when he does the company higher-ups told me I was supposed to take notice, try to figure out how he does what he does.

The light turned green. I drove us onto North Temple, downtown Salt Lake not so far off now. "Bridges in songs have something to do with extinct plants?" I asked.

"It's all in the music," he said, looking back at the street and sitting very, very still.

"Messages about plants are in the music?" I asked.

But he was gone, back in that trance he'd been in since L.A. Besides, we were minutes from our first stop. He always gets so nervous just before we start work. "What if we find something?" he'd asked me once, and I'd said, "Isn't that the point?"

He started rubbing his sweaty hands up and down his pant legs. I could hear the tinny melody out of his earphones. It was "Dancing Queen" week. Benny'd set his player on endless repeat, and he listened to "Dancing Queen" over and over again on the plane, in the car, in the offices we went to, during meals, in bed with the earphones on his head. That's all he'd listen to for one week. Then he'd change to a different Abba song on Sunday. When he'd gone through every Abba song ever recorded, he'd start over.

"Check in," Benny said.

"What?"

"The Marriott."

I slammed brakes, did a U-turn, did like he'd asked. That was my job, even if we were late. Benny had to use the toilet, and he would not use toilets in the offices we visited.

I carried the bags up to our rooms—no bellhop needed, thank you. What's a personal assistant for if not to lug your luggage around? I called Utah Power and Light to tell them we were still coming. Then I waited for Benny in the lobby. My mind kept playing "Dancing Queen" over and over. "It's all in the music," Benny'd said, but I failed to understand how anybody, Benny included, could find directions in fifty-year-old Abba songs to the whereabouts of plants extinct in the wild.

Benny tapped me on the shoulder. "It's close enough that we can walk," he said. "Take these."

He handed me his briefcase and a stack of World Botany pamphlets and motioned to the door. I always had to lead the way. Benny wouldn't walk with me. He walked behind me, four or five steps back, Abba blasting in his ears. It was no use trying to get him to do differently. I gave the car keys to the hotel car people so they could park the rental, and off we went.

Utah Power and Light was a first visit. We'd do a get-acquainted sweep of the cubicles and offices, then come back the next day for a detailed study. Oh sure, after Benny'd found the *Rbapis excelsa* in a technical writer's cubicle in the Transamerica Pyramid, everybody with a plant in a pot had hoped to be the one with the cancer cure. But most African violets are just African violets. They aren't going to cure anything. Still, the hopeful had driven college botany professors around the world nuts with their pots of begonias and canary ivy and sword ferns.

But they were out there. Plants extinct in the wild had been kept alive in the oddest places, including cubicles in office buildings. Benny'd found more than his share. Even I take "Extract of *Rhapis excelsa*" treatment one week each year like everybody else. Who wants a heart attack? Who doesn't feel better with his arteries unclogged? People used to go jogging just to feel that good.

The people at UP&L were thrilled to see us—hey, Benny was their chance at millions. A lady from HR led us around office after cubicle after break room. Benny walked along behind the lady and me. It was *Dieffenbachia maculata* after *Ficus benjamina* after *Cycus revoluta*. Even I could tell nobody was getting rich here. But up on the sixth floor, I turned around and Benny wasn't behind us. He was back staring at a *Nemanthus gregarius* on a bookshelf in a cubicle just inside the door.

I walked up to him. "It's just goldfish vine," I said.

The girl in the cubicle looked like she wanted to pick up her keyboard and kill me with it.

"Benny," I said, "we got a bunch more territory to cover. Let's move it."

He put his hands in his pockets and followed along behind me, but after about five minutes he was gone again. We found him back at the *Nemanthus gregarius*. I took a second look at the plant. It looked like nothing more than *Nemanthus gregarius* to me. Polly, the girl in the cubicle, was doing a little dance in her chair in time to the muffled "Dancing Queen" out of Benny's earphones. Mama mia, she felt like money, money, money.

I made arrangements with HR for us to come back the next day and start our detailed study. The company CEO came down to shake our hands when we left. Last we saw of Polly that day was her watering the *Nemanthus gregarius*.

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### **Abba, Fältskog Listing 47: "Dancing Queen", day 3. Dinner.**

The thing about Benny is, he never moves around in time to the music. I mean, he can sit there listening to "Dancing Queen" over and over again and stare straight ahead, hands folded in his lap. He never moves his shoulders. He never taps his toes. He never sways his hips. Watching him, you'd think "Dancing Queen" was some Bach cantata.

I ordered dinner for us in the hotel coffee shop. Benny always makes me order for him, but god forbid it's not a medium-rare hamburger and fries. We sat there eating in silence, the only sound between us the muffled dancing queen having the time of her life. I thought maybe I'd try a little conversation. "Hamburger OK?" I asked.

Benny nodded.

"Want a refill on the Coke?"

He picked up his glass and sucked up the last of the Coke, but shook his head no.

I took a bite of my burger, chewed it, looked at Benny. "You got any goals?" I asked him.

Benny looked at me then. He didn't say a word. He stopped chewing and just stared.

"I mean, what do you want to do with your life? You want a wife? Kids? A trip to the moon? We fly around together, city after city, studying all these plants, and I don't think I even know you."

He swallowed and wiped his mouth with his napkin. "I have goals," he said.

"Well, like what?"

"I haven't told anybody. I'll need some time to think about it before I answer you. I'm not sure I want to tell anybody, no offence."

Jeez, Benny, take a chance on me why don't you, I thought. We went back to eating our burgers. I knew the higher-ups would want me to follow the lead Benny had dropped when we were driving in from the airport, so I tried. "Tell me about bridges," I said. "Why are they important in songs?"

Benny wouldn't say another word. We finished eating, and I carried Benny's things up to his room for him. At the door he turned around and looked at me. "Bridges take you to a new place," he said. "But they also show you the way back to where you once were."

He closed the door.

I didn't turn on any music in my room. It was nice to have it a little quiet for a change. I wrote my reports and e-mailed them off, then went out for a drink. I nursed it along, wondering where we stood on the bridges.

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**Abba, Fältskog Listing 47: "Dancing Queen", day 4.  
UP&L offices.**

World Botanies sends Benny only to companies that meet its criteria. First, they have to have occupied the same building for fifty years or more. You'd be surprised how few companies in America have done that. But if a company has moved around a lot, chances are its plants have not gone with it. Second, it's nice if the company

has had interna-tional ties, but even that isn't necessary. Lots of people somehow failed to tell customs about the cuttings or the little packets of seeds in their pockets after vacations abroad. If a company's employees had travelled around a lot, or if they had family ties with other countries, they sometimes ended up with the kind of plants we were looking for. UP&L has stayed put for a good long time, plus its employees include former Mormon missionaries who've poked around obscure corners of the planet. World Botanies hoped to find something in Utah.

The UP&L CEO and the HR staff and Polly were all waiting for us. You'd think Benny'd want to go straight up to the sixth floor to settle the *Nemanthus gregarius* question, but he didn't. Benny always starts on the first floor and works his way to the top, so we started on floor one.

The lobby was a new install, and I was glad Benny didn't waste even half an hour there. Not much hope of curing cancer with flame nettle or cantea palms. The cafeteria on the second floor had some interesting *Cleistocactus strausii*. Like all cactus, it's endangered but not yet extinct in the wild—there are still reports of *Cleistocactus strausii* growing here and there in the tops of the Andes. As far as anybody can tell, it can't cure a thing.

We didn't make it to the sixth floor till after four o'clock, and you could tell that Polly was a nervous wreck.

But Benny walked right past her *Nemanthus gregarius*.

"Hey, Benny," I said in a low voice. "What about the goldfish vine?"

Benny turned around and stared at it. Polly moved back into her cubicle so she wouldn't block the view, but after a minute Benny put his hands in his pockets and walked off. Well, poor Polly, I thought.

But just before five, I turned around and Benny wasn't behind me. I found him at the *Nemanthus gregarius*. Jeez Benny, I thought, we need to know the name of the game here. Declare extract of *Nemanthus gregarius* the fountain of youth or tell Polly she has a nice plant but nothing special. I steered him out of the building and back to the Marriott.

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#### **Abba, Fältskog Listing 47: "Dancing Queen", day 4. Dinner.**

I ordered Benny's burger and a steak for me. We sat there eating, the only sound between us a muffled "Dancing Queen". After last night, I was not attempting conversation.

I'd taken time before dinner to look up *Nemanthus gregarius* on the Net. It is not

endangered. It grows like weeds in cubicles. It can't cure a thing.

I didn't know what Benny was doing.

He sucked up the last of his glass of Coke and put the glass down a little hard on the table. I looked up at him.

"I want to find a new plant and name it for Agnetha," he said.

"What?"

"My goal in life," he said. "If you tell anyone, I'll see that you're fired."

"You're looking for a new plant species in office buildings?"

"I'd actually like to find one for each of the four members of Abba, but Agnetha's first."

And I'd thought finding *one* completely new species was too much to ask.

"When Abba sang, the world was so lush," Benny said. "You can hear it in their music. It resonates with what's left of the natural world. It helps me save it."

It was my turn to be quiet. All I could think was, it works for Benny. He's had plenty of success, after all, and who hasn't heard of crazier things than the music of dead pop stars leading some guy to new plant species?

When I wrote up my daily reports that night, I left out Benny's goals. Some things the higher-ups don't need to know.

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**Abba, Fältskog Listing 47: "Dancing Queen", day 5.  
UP&L offices.**

We spent the day looking at more sorry specimens of *Cordyline terminalis*, *Columnea gloriosa*, and *Codiaeum variegatum* than I care to remember. By the end of the day, Benny started handing out the occasional watering tip, so I knew even he was giving up.

"*Netnankus gregarius*?" I asked in the elevator on the way down.

Suddenly he punched 6. He walked straight to Polly's cubicle and stuck out his hand. "I owe you an apology," he said.

Polly just sat there. She was facing her own little Waterloo, and she did it bravely.

"I thought your *Nemanthus gregarius* might be a subspecies not before described,

but it isn't. It's the common variety. A nice specimen, though."

We left quickly. At least he didn't give her any watering tips.

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**Abba, Fältskog Listing 47: "Dancing Queen", day 5.  
Wandering the streets.**

The thing about Benny is, if it doesn't work out and we've studied every plant on thirty floors of an office tower without finding even a *Calathea lancifolia*, he can't stand it. He wanders up and down the streets, poking into every little shop. He never buys anything—he isn't shopping. I think he's hoping to spot some rare plant in the odd tobacconist or magazine shop and to do it fast. I have a hard time keeping up with him then, and heaven forbid I should decide to buy something on sale for a Mother's Day gift.

We rushed through two used bookstores, an oriental rug store, four art galleries, three fast food joints. "Benny," I said. "Let's get something to eat."

"It's here," he said.

"What's where?"

"There's something here, and we just haven't found it."

The Dancing Queen was resonating, I supposed. Shops were closing all around us.

"You check the Indian jewellery store while I check Mr Q's Big and Tall," he told me. "We meet outside in five."

I did like I was told. I smiled at the Navajo woman in traditional dress, but she did not smile back. She wanted to lock up. I made a quick sweep of the store and noted the various species of endangered cacti and left. Benny was not on the sidewalk. I went into Mr Q's after him.

He was standing perfectly still in front of a rack of shirts on sale, hands in his pockets.

"These are too big for you," I said.

"Window display, southeast corner."

Well, I walked over there. It was a lovely little display of *Rhipsalis salicornioides*, *Pbalaenopsis lueddemanniana*, and *Streptocarpus saxorum*. Nothing unusual.

Then I looked closer at the *Streptocarpus saxorum*. The flowers weren't the typical powder blue or lilac. They were a light yellow.

The proprietor walked up to me. "I'm sorry," he said. "But we're closing. Could you bring your final purchases to the register?"

"I'm just admiring your cape primrose," I said. "Where do they come from?"

"My mother grows them," he said. "She gave me these plants when I opened the store."

"Did she travel in Africa or Madagascar?"

"Her brother was in the foreign service. She used to follow him around to his postings. I don't remember where she went—I'd have to ask her."

"Do you mind if I touch one of the plants?" I asked.

He said sure. The leaves were the typical hairy, grey-green ovals; the flowers floated above the leaves on wire-thin stems. It was definitely *Streptocarpus*, but I'd never seen anything like it described.

"I think you should call your mother," I said, and I explained who Benny and I were.

The store closed, but Mr Proprietor and his staff waited with us for the mother to arrive. The whole time Benny just stood by the sale rack, eyes closed, hands in his pockets. "You've done it again," I whispered to him.

He didn't answer me. Just as I turned to walk back over to the cape primrose, he opened his eyes. "*Streptocarpus agnethum*," he whispered.

And he smiled.

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### **Abba, Fältskog Listing 32: "I Have a Dream", day 2. Agnetha's grave.**

The thing about Benny is, he's generous. He took me to Sweden with him, and we planted *Streptocarpus agnethum*, or "dancing queen", around Agnetha's gravestone. Turns out the flower wasn't a cure for anything, but it was a new species and Benny got to name it.

"Agnetha would have loved these flowers," I told Benny.

He just kept planting. We had a nice sound system on the ground beside us, playing her music—well, just one of her songs. It talks about believing in angels. I don't know if I believe in angels, but I can see the good in Benny's work. Nobody's bringing back the world we've lost, but little pieces of it have survived here and there. Benny was saving some of those pieces.



"These flowers are so pretty," I told him.

Of course he didn't say anything.

He didn't need to.

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