



"I Beat You, Bitch!"

A meditation on Meritless Self-congratulation

(Or, "How prosecutors earn their roachy wings")

~The Chino Chronicles, Pt. 4~

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Chino prison is dirty and infested with cockroaches (entertainingly, the sign at the main entrance proclaims, "Setting the standard since 1941." I agree!). I'd heard the bugs were bad here, and so far I've seen 3 — ^{one alive} ~~one~~ in my cell, and two dead out in the main hallway. It's been nearly three weeks though, so I suppose that's not really such a bad tally. Seems it could be much worse. Still, it's bad enough, and the thing about roaches is: I HATE them.

So here's what happened. I'm no clean freak, ok? I'm about as far from OCD as you can get, and especially here in prison, I just have NO inclination to tidy up a cage. None. But still, there are limits, and this current situation exceeded mine, so I recently cleaned pretty thoroughly. I'll post a separate blog about just how filthy my last cellmate really was, and you'll understand. Oodles of ew. In any case, last night I was sitting on the bunk when I noticed a black spot against the base of the toilet. I couldn't see it clearly, but due to its size and shape (roughly 2 inches long, slightly curved), along with the buggy reputation of this prison, I doubted it could be anything BUT a cockroach. Since it was totally still, perhaps a dead cockroach. I wasn't sure, but a dead roach seemed at least as likely as my having overlooked something that just resembled one on the floor I'd just cleaned, and since a roach could've plausibly crawled in and died in the interim, it seemed like the slightly better explanation.

Ultimately, I really needed to confirm (or, I hoped, disconfirm) that what I saw in the dim light was a bug's body, but I just couldn't bring myself to look more closely that night. It was awful to think of sharing space with a cockroach, even a dead one, especially one of that size, but I was even more repulsed by the thought of positively identifying it and then being stuck with THAT image in my head all night. Better to retain some small doubt and not bring on an ACTUAL picture to haunt me, especially since the cell door was already locked and so I couldn't do anything with it anyway. (You didn't think I might pick it up for disposal in the toilet or trash can, did you? HELL no! I would sweep it out the door, from as great a distance as possible, then let someone else worry about what to do with the remains in the public area. Of course.) So, I did my best, which wasn't very good, to put the whole ugly matter out of mind until morning, convinced that if it was what I was increasingly sure it was, then at least it wasn't alive. This consoled me not at all, and I remained fixated on it for hours.

The next morning, cell door open again and ready for insect ejection, I reluctantly resolved to look and see if this was actually the cockroach carcass I knew it must be. That took some doing, because I genuinely did NOT want to see this thing, but I certainly couldn't carry on with it right next to me either, so I steeled myself to make the ID. I was full of dread at the prospect of seeing, then having to touch this horrid thing, even if only by proxy through a towel or makeshift broom, and I wondered when I'd be able to eat again, after my gruesome imaginings through the night became irrevocably real. The morning sun was infinitely

better for the task than the fluorescent cell light I'd had all night, so the picture came into focus quite clearly and I immediately saw that what I'd seen was, in fact... not a cockroach. It turned out to be just a dark, rusted old bolt at the toilet base, with 2 inches of crumbled caulking giving the appearance of a roach-sized body atop the light colored caulking around it. I felt like a six year old at Christmas; I was nothing short of jubilant. Victorious, even, which is the feeling that inspired this post. I was so ~~so~~ relieved that the first thing that came out of my mouth (I'm not proud to admit) was: "I beat you, bitch! Ha! I BEAT you!"

I know — that's an exceedingly stupid thing to say, to think. Yet it is what I thought and said. And quickly it occurred to me... I had beaten WHAT, exactly? How had I beaten anything? The "what" that was beaten, first of all, was an illusion. A mistake. As ridiculous as it would be to loudly proclaim victory over an insect's remains, it is still considerably more absurd to do so to ~~a~~ a rusty old bolt you just thought was a bug. My silly imagination and utter abhorrence of cockroaches had made me conceive one where one wasn't, nothing more. So, I beat a phantasm. But really, not even that, and here's the real point: I didn't "beat" anything at all simply by being lucky that my imagination had run wild. That's not how winning works. Yet how often DO we "win", do we come out ahead in some way, through absolutely no achievement of our own? How often do we take credit when that happens? A lot, I think. We love to feel accomplished; we crave to "win", to "beat that bitch." But so often, our good luck is also just dumb luck, yet still we revel in it, triumphantly tossing even those scraggly, unearned twigs atop the pile of whatever constitutes our self-esteem, crowing as though we've won some heroic personal victory. In reality, I'd been all but paralyzed over facing this imaginary dead roach — I did NOT want to interact with it, and in the end, I didn't have to. Thus, I felt I beat it.

Yeah, right. I beat it. I "won", much like prosecutors claim to "win" guilty verdicts that no modern jury would ever deny them just because that's the world we live in. I won, sure... just like smarmy, smirking pigs take credit for trial convictions that even a cockroach corpse in a suit would've "won" just as easily.