

AMIR AHMADI ARIAN

The Vermin

DEAR SIR:

This morning you came to visit me in prison for the fifth time and I rejected your services again. I am writing this so that you stop wasting your time. You know better than to take it personally. As you must have realized by now, I have talked to no one after the death of Mana.

I reviewed all your messages carefully again, and I have no doubt that you are right about everything. My refusal of your services as an attorney will only aggravate the situation and will do me no good. I know all that. And I am in my right mind when I ask you to give up on this case. I refuse to present any document that may help to exonerate me for a simple reason: I do not want to be exonerated. I am not being overdramatic or sentimental, nor is this a suicide note or any rubbish of that sort. I have simply resolved to stay here to the end. Thinking about the likelihood of a life sentence, or even a death sentence, hardly bothers me. I write this letter only because I am impressed by your persistence, your professional diligence, which from time to time puts me to shame. You deserve better than to come here several times a week and leave empty-handed.

So I will try to explain concisely why I killed her. I hope, after reading this, you give up and focus on your more worthy cases.

IT BEGAN TWO MONTHS AGO, when I discovered a cockroach in our toilet and I lost it.

Before getting married I had no fear of such creatures. I grew up in a house with a massive backyard, full of frogs and lizards, and coming up with new ways of dissecting them entertained me during the summers. I took out the innards of any moving creature unlucky enough to enter my purview, although cockroaches were never among them. Then I moved to Tehran and realized that here cockroaches had surpassed all the other insects. I believe they outnumber us, sir, even now that in our insanity we have exceeded ten million in number.

The ubiquity of cockroaches never disturbed me. I never took up the dissection of cockroaches, but as a lonely, troubled student embattled by

a wild metropolis, I did spend a good deal of my time watching them pacing around the toilet.

That was before the marriage. After settling in our apartment, I learned that Mana could not stand the sight of cockroaches. Encountering a cockroach for her was tantamount to facing the death angel in the flesh. Each time her screams came long and loud enough to startle the neighbors out of their TV-inflicted numbness, and a few times they even pushed their doors open to follow the drama. After a while, despite my deep compassion for small creatures, it became clear that living a quiet life required from me brutality toward cockroaches. I took the lesson to heart: entering the toilet, I would have a good look around, to search them out. Upon finding one, I would immediately kill it with my slipper and flush it down the toilet. My heart would pound any time Mana stepped into the toilet. I would stay on call, keeping my slippers close at hand, ready to take action as soon as a scream was heard.

And that's how things were, until one morning two months ago, when I entered the toilet and spotted a huge cockroach slumped in the corner, moving its antennas. I quickly picked up a slipper. It darted away and sped along the wall with an extraordinary pace. I chased and trapped it in the corner and flung the slipper. The cockroach dodged it. I trailed the vermin for another five minutes and hurled the slipper several more times unsuccessfully. My bowels were pressing badly, so I gave in and went about my business, keeping an eye on it in the corner. I could imagine its invisible mouth curving into a smirk, its mind brimming with confidence as it prepared for the next round of raids. But I had dropped my guard for the day.

As I left the toilet I came face-to-face with Mana. She was standing behind the door, eyeing me suspiciously. She asked if I had killed it. I knew I had to say yes, otherwise I would be forced to go back in and finish it off. I nodded. Mana passed me in silence and stepped in. Her action caught me off guard and set the scene for yet another squabble over my slackness in killing cockroaches. I took a seat close by and armed myself with a slipper, ready to intervene. Nothing happened. She came out and watched me in that ridiculous position. My appearance must have made her suspicious again, because after a few minutes she went back in. I remained on call but again heard no scream.

That same night, before going to bed, I again saw the cockroach, in the same corner, moving its antennas. I went for it, though less determined this time. The vermin easily escaped my half-hearted attempt. I

did not try again. This went on for several days. Mana never saw the cockroach, but whenever I stepped in there it was, in the same corner, apparently waiting for me. At this point, since it had proved itself smart enough to hide from my wife, I declared a truce.

The cockroach seemed to have figured this out. It began to leave the corner, roaming around cautiously while I was sitting on the toilet. It would still keep a safe distance, a reasonable thing to do after those ruthless raids. In the meantime I took a liking to its presence. Having it around generated flashbacks to my childhood, to the all-too-distant past when I had a fond curiosity toward vermin. Now each time I finished my business on the toilet, I would sit for a while afterward and observe the cockroach. These periods of study reignited my zoological interests. I studied certain consistencies in the mobility of its antennas, and tried to figure out how its legs worked when it crept up the wall; I studied its habits of movement for differences between walking on the floor and the wall. Mana never suspected a thing, which counted for much in itself. I had finally succeeded in getting around her; I had carved out a personal sanctum for myself.

IT MUST HAVE BEEN about two weeks after our first encounter, when I touched the cockroach for the first time.

On that day, as I sat on the toilet, it stood still, right in front of me. I had always presumed it was studying me, just as I was studying it. But that day I felt the cockroach was paying me special attention. It didn't move for quite a while; its antennas hung motionless in the air. I took the gesture as, in their world, an indication of rigorous thought. I kept staring at the vermin until it dawned on me that it might be waiting for me to touch it.

I mulled it over for a while, then stretched my hand toward it as slowly as possible. No response. I stopped, less than an inch from its body. Still no reaction, no escaping away or panic. Even the antennas were dead still. The creature seemed to be looking forward to being touched. I touched it.

The tip of my forefinger rested on its back. It was smooth, sleek, serene. I stroked it gently from head to abdomen and down to its stylus. I was ecstatic, as though my finger were plugged into a source of mysterious energy. I lightly pressed the tip of my finger into its fragile back. Its carapace curved in and displayed a different reflection of light. It felt like a piece of glass scrubbed down to its finest form. After I had finished with my tactile examination, the cockroach moved. It clawed at my fingertip,

grasped it, and slowly clambered up. I lifted my hand and it walked across my palm, halting at the lines.

The cockroach's steps were light, they tickled. I closed my eyes to take in the sensation, to absorb these strokes of Mother Nature's hand, coming through tiny legs of a vermin. But before I experienced this ultimate form of purification, Mana's voice shook me out of it: "What're you doing in there? Are you okay?" "Yes, yes. I'm finished," I said immediately, and leaned down to place my hand on the floor. The cockroach hopped off and I rushed out of the toilet.

The vermin became my buddy. I began to miss it after only an hour or so, and I would pop into the toilet several times a day to visit. We got along perfectly. One day I chose a name for it. As it sat in the palm of my hand, I held it right up to my face and stared directly into what I presumed were its eyes. As my stare began to be reciprocated, or so I thought, the memory of a childhood friend materialized out of nowhere. He used to be our next-door neighbor thirty years ago. Since he was now a doctor, I decided to name the cockroach "Doctor." Now I could address it directly and talk with it.

Naming it set our relationship on a new track. Every night I would speak to it about my day: my activities, my concerns, my problems. Now that it had a name, I never hesitated to share anything with it. I had only to keep down my voice as much as possible, so that nothing would reach Mana. We set out on a daily ritual: I would sit on the toilet, Doctor would turn up and stand before me, I would hold out my hand, my finger to the floor, and it would hop on and start walking up and around my body. Doctor would go from my arm to my shoulder, from around my neck to the other shoulder, and then step up onto my head; he would wobble through my hair, sprint down along my other hand and back up again, and pass over my shoulder to get onto my back, then crawl up and down my spine and run in circles.

Its light rhythmic steps, resembling a march, possessed a druglike quality that would entice me into talking. The words would flow out and I would tell Doctor about life on the outside: what people did and did not do; how everything was expensive, how the traffic was awful and the air polluted. Sometimes I would reminisce about my childhood, and talk about my parents and my upbringing. Sometimes I would go through dark corners of my life that I had never verbalized before. I would even get into very personal stuff, from the privacy of my bedroom to the innermost secret thoughts in my head.

Such was the case, for about twenty days. Over that period, life steadily improved for me. Mentally, I felt far better. Things were back on track. Even my marital life improved, and the relationship with Mana, after years of problems, took a positive turn. Although she had not stopped being suspicious—and her suspicion was directed toward the toilet. She had noticed the increase in the frequency and length of my visits to it. Once, she implied, she knew that I talked to myself in the toilet, but she didn't say anything further. She was too polite to ask about my business there in more detail, and whenever she tried to touch upon the subject, given how devoid of irony she was, her questions tended to sound ridiculous. For instance, for a while she kept trying to discuss constipation and diarrhea, each time from a different angle, and she always ended up by asking if I had any problems with defecating.

Later on I happened to make a hazardous decision, something I would not have done had I not become overly confident in my ability to guard my secret. I thought that, if the cockroach was able to hide in a ten-by-ten toilet, then doing the same thing in a large seven-hundred-square-foot apartment wouldn't be a big deal. So I decided to let it into the house. The risk wasn't taken just for fun, there were also several benefits involved: I could use the toilet a lot less; I could have Doctor on my body, underneath my clothes, whenever I wanted, even when Mana was only a few feet away; and I could indulge in having it ambling on my skin while I talked to Mana.

AFTER A FEW DAYS of planning and working out the logistics, one day I made up my mind. After coming home I rushed into the toilet and shared the decision with Doctor, explaining why I had taken it. Doctor seemed fine with it. I came out of the toilet with Doctor under my shirt. Before leaving, I took several deep breaths, and moved Doctor to the middle of my stomach, pressing it slightly, as if to say, "Please don't move."

As I stepped out, I was confronted by Mana's stare. She stood a few meters out from the door, sizing me up. I could not read her face, but I immediately lost my cool and began to sweat. Her eyes rolled down, casting a curious look at my body. She marched toward me, put out her hand, touched my right thigh, and stepped back, all of this in silence. Her hand landed only a foot or so below where Doctor was sitting. After this action she looked angrier. I could see myself in her eyes, turning white as a ghost, quivering and sweating as if she had tightened a noose around my neck. The silence was deafening. I spoke to break it:

“What’s the matter? What’re you doing?”

“Nothing. How about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah of course. I’m fine. Why do you ask? What’s your problem?”

“Oh, you’re fine. So why do you look like you’re dead? Why is your hand shaking?”

“No, no. It’s not. I’m okay.”

I dashed into the room. She followed. I sat on the bed. She stood at the door.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I shouted with a trembling voice.

“What do I look like? An idiot?” she yelled. “Each time you stay in the toilet for fifteen minutes, talking under your breath . . . my god. You’re such an asshole, did you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just shut the fuck up, will you!” she screamed.

I sat on the bed for a while, thinking hard about what she meant. I reviewed our little drama, and I put my hand on the same spot where her hand had rested. The bulged-out bulk of my cell phone was under my palm; I hadn’t taken it out of my pocket after arriving home.

I should’ve laughed. I should’ve reassured her that she was wrong. I didn’t. For a moment, I wished that it was in fact the case: that I was indulging in some pathetic cheating in the toilet, touching myself while having phone sex chat with some other woman. What would have happened had she known that it actually all came down to intimacy with a cockroach, slumped onto my stomach next to where she found the phone?

Doctor plodded to the right and stood on the curve of my side. Pretending to scratch, under Mana’s piercing gaze, I put my wobbly right hand there and signaled it to move. It tiptoed toward my back.

I should’ve laughed out loud. I should’ve cried, “Are you out of your mind?” like they do in the movies, calming her down, reassuring her that I loved her more than the entire universe. Not that I can’t lie. If there were some sort of fantasy sex involved, I would’ve lied. But no, sir, it was just a vermin, and thinking of it had made my tongue numb. I kept silent. She stood there for a while, waiting for a confession or a denial. When it became clear that she would get neither, the door slammed.

OUR LIFE turned to hell. We hardly had a quiet day from that point on. As the dust settled on that first day, I managed to muster my fabricating skills

and tried to convince her that no woman was involved. It was too late. Squabbling and sulking became exhausting activities, day-in and day-out, and had there not been Doctor's soothing steps on my body, I would've gone crazy. From that day on, Mana completely ignored my body, so Doctor could live permanently under my shirt. I gradually became addicted to its presence on my skin. Now and then I would let it get off in the toilet to take a rest in its accustomed environment and search for some food, but each time, after less than an hour, particularly when a squabble with Mana broke out, I realized that I could not afford to be without Doctor. The serenity caused by the rhythm of its legs became a matter of survival. And yet this uninterrupted march, without food or rest, was weakening Doctor. I could feel when its movements got unsteady and its pace slowed down. That was the time for dropping it off in the toilet.

Once I didn't shower for three days, and, as a consequence, I discovered something: from a slight burning, I realized that Doctor was jabbing its palpus into my skin. It had found a new source of nutrition; it could live off the molecular layer of dirt on my skin. I appreciated its creativity and decided to avoid taking showers for as long as possible. It could find food on my body over the course of the day and have its nights on its own in the toilet.

And then, just when things seemed to be relatively settled, disaster struck.

IT WAS A surprisingly quiet day. No bickering, no screams, no irritating allusions. I'd taken a shower the day before, so Doctor hadn't eaten anything for more than twenty-four hours. I left it in the toilet and lay on the bed. I was in a fine mood, feeling a peculiar elation I hadn't experienced for a long time. I heard Mana's steps, and the toilet door was shut. I thought of reconciliation that night. We both were fed-up and tired, willing to normalize our life and finish the constant bickering. I just had to go forward, apologize for the crime I hadn't committed, and thank her for her magnanimity. That night, I was happy to take that step.

She came out of the toilet and walked into the room. She sat on the edge of the bed next to me, put her hand on my forehead and fondled my hair. The unexpected gentleness brought tears to my eyes. A rush of relief traveled through me and a huge burden was suddenly shaken off. That made me more determined than ever to make up with her. I grinned as broadly as I could and looked gleefully into her eyes. Under the dim light of the bedside lamp I couldn't see her clearly, but she looked odd: pale, wide-eyed, open-mouthed, casting a frozen unblinking gaze at me. I

moved over to sit up, but she pushed her hand on my head and kept me back. Then I realized that all along she had been keeping her other hand behind her. I felt threatened. She noticed my attention to her other hand, and, before I managed to move again, she held it out.

Her hand had held the biggest knife in our kitchen. I had always found it particularly ugly, as its long blade was disproportionate to its short handle. At the tip of the knife, the carcass of Doctor stuck out. The knife had torn its back, piercing its guts and had jutted out of the stomach, the knife tip smothered with a white slime. And then its legs, sir. Those gentle legs that had brought me such composure were pointing up motionless, and the antennas were drooping miserably.

Now you tell me, sir: what would you have done, had you been in my shoes?

Sincerely,

K.