

Cockroach

Tom Suarez

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The brief flutter of her eyes away from the soldiers told me that the young Palestinian woman next to me also saw it crawl out from near the guard booth to our left. Large and nearly black, it looked like it had stepped onto a paved stage whose backdrop happened to be the gate to the Erez Crossing into the Gaza Strip.

Had it emerged a short while earlier, it might have been unceremoniously trampled by the doctors and academics who, along with a few non-professionals such as me, had swarmed the metal gate. We were supposed to have crossed through it today to attend a conference organized by the Gaza Community Mental Health Programme. But, although the conference had been planned through proper channels more than a year in advance, although the World Health Organization and the European Union were among its sponsors, although we each possessed signed entry documents from the W.H.O. — and although Israel claims not to be occupying Gaza — Israel refused to let us pass. And so we became just another tiny footnote in its hermetic blockade of the Gaza Strip. But unlike the million and a half people trapped inside it, we could protest, and do so in relative safety. White Western privilege and the presence of myriad cameras protected us and, for the moment, the few Palestinians among us.

So protest we did. We held banners and chanted slogans. We tried to talk to the soldiers in the hope of eliciting critical thought. And we made noise. Those of us at the front set upon the metal links, rattling them with such enthusiasm that the soldiers seemed to think we could not possibly sustain the din for long. But when we proved to be as relentless as locust, they dragged out barricades and ordered us behind them, physically removing us if we refused. Several soldiers positioned themselves in the narrow corridor newly formed between the barricades and the fence to be sure we caused no further mischief.

We might have been left to stand there, defeated and impotent, had we not quickly discovered what effective drums the flat tops of the dense plastic barricades make. So we laid sonic siege once again, pounding our new war drums with flattened palms. And it was then that the cockroach stepped out from the shadows into the mid-afternoon sun, crawling east to west through the forbidden space.

The young woman next to me saw that I, too, was looking at it. While our hands hammered away on the barricades, our eyes followed it crawling into greater and greater danger, nearer and nearer the soldier positioned directly in front of her and me. Would it be crushed deliberately? Or inadvertently? It could not possibly make it to the other side through the minefield of Israeli Defense Forces boots.

And then our soldier spotted it.

When in the United States one hears Palestinians referred to as cockroaches, this is the honest talk, is the honest talk, not the sanitized code-talk of politicians and the mass media that achieves the same message under the guise of “information”. In Israel, government representatives have even publicly referred to Palestinians as cockroaches, and such statements have been met with a chilling

absence of outrage. Thus when the soldier, after observing the insect for a moment, bent down to pick it up, I imagined him pretending to be nabbing one of those same *untermenchen* in his fingers, free to direct or end its life as he pleased, with the same impunity as if it were a schoolchild on the other side of the gate. Like the character in Kafka's novella, the world had forgotten them, too.

But what did it mean that the soldier collected the cockroach very gently, as if careful not to cause it harm or even distress? My drummer neighbor and I exchanged suspicious glances. I could think of only one answer, and so mentally prepared myself to have a huge cockroach catapulted into my face. I resolved not to flinch — that would be my defiance, to keep pounding away at the barricade drums without missing a beat. Or was it destined for my neighbor? I sensed that she was equally prepared.

So it was in utter disbelief that she and I watched as the soldier, cockroach gingerly in hand, turned and walked to the guard booth, knelt down by a shady, sandy patch, and carefully set the wayward creature free.

Israel and Gaza are often juxtaposed in quasi-religious terms of Good versus Evil, Israel's militarized barrier being all that keeps the barbarian hordes from overrunning Civilization. Thus I saw the entrance before me as the very Caspian Gates, the mythical threshold protecting Humanity from the Biblical monsters Gog and Magog. The soldier had left the apocalyptic Gates partially unguarded in order to deliver the roach to safety.

Their mission of charity completed, his fingers slipped back against the metal trigger of his US-supplied weapon. He walked back into formation and resumed his stance in front of us.

My neighbor pulled out a fat green marker that she'd used earlier for making banners, and now banged away with a two-tone protest, her right hand using the marker's hard end while her left hand persevered with her palm.

“If it was us?” she said just loud enough for me to hear over the drone, “he would have shot us.”



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