

We shall overcome.

CODELL WAS a regular at the Bronx bar, a block away from his apartment building. In Detroit's Cass Corridor just about anything could happen, and the Bronx bartender put up with just about anything. Late one weeknight, no one was in the place except the bartender, Codell, and two saturated patrons sharing a couple of pitchers. Maybe it was more than a couple. The two friends realized at the same time that their bladders were full, but the men's room only had one working urinal. The other urinal was out of order and taped off. Should've been no problem. One drunk would use the working urinal and, because the bar was empty, the other would use the women's room, right? Nope. Instead, one drunk went to the men's room. The other stood, turned his back to the bar, and urinated in a beer pitcher.

When he finished, he turned unsteadily to see if the bartender was watching. The bartender, a conglomeration of sternness, tolerance and restraint, crossed his arms.

"If you ever do that again," the bartender warned, "I'll have to throw you out."

That depravity was, surprisingly, more tolerable than the everyday annoyances that Detroit's Cass Corridor could throw your way.

Take, for example, one of the other Bronx regulars, a middle-aged man with silver hair and glasses with thick, black, plastic frames. He wore a dark suit that looked like he'd been wearing it since the 1950s. Stolidly affixed to his bar stool, he drank his beer interminably slow. He always sat at the corner of the bar near the door. He and Codell knew each other by sight but not by name. Codell named him his "buddy."

Buddy moved little and talked less, so when he slammed his hand on the bar one night, it made Codell and the bartender look. A second later, he slammed the bar again, harder, palm down. Codell turned toward him and shrugged his shoulders and raised an eyebrow as if to ask, *what?* Buddy frowned.

“Cockroach. Missed it.”

“Both times?”

“Yah.”

“Didn’t know they were on this side of the street,” Codell deadpanned.

Buddy pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “They *own* this town.”

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Unfortunately for the human inhabitants of the Cass Corridor, Buddy was substantially correct about cockroach prolificacy. Cockroaches were a fact of life that the Bronx bartender, and pretty much everyone in the neighborhood, put up with. Detroit was the City of Churches, but the Cass Corridor was the Corridor of Cockroaches. From the temple of the cupboard in Codell’s efficiency apartment, the scurrying of cockroaches reverberated like a distant hymn: “We Shall Overcome.”

The building management fumigated every month to kill the roaches and who knows what other vermin. The super never said when they would do it, but you could always tell by the smell. The poison didn’t seem to do much, at least to the cockroach population.

The failing fumigation meant that tenants all shared their apartments with cockroaches. Codell got used to them. He scared them more than they scared him. At

first he tried to kill them, but their shells were so hard, they didn't squash easily, and there were too many of them. If one was out during the day, Codell spied on it, fascinated by the back and forth motion of its head and its methodical roaming for offal. They reigned as scavenger T Rex in the urban insectarium.

Cockroaches were voracious and indiscriminate eaters. They ate what you ate, and what you wouldn't eat. Codell kept his food in containers, but cockroaches didn't limit themselves to the kitchen. You would think that they couldn't get into refrigerators or that the cold would kill them, but Codell found them there alive. If you left out an unsealed envelope, they'd eat the glue off it. They'd eat the glue off postage stamps. In the bathroom, they would eat off your toothbrush if you didn't wrap it up. Their droppings looked like caraway seeds.

If a roach roommate was really large, Codell would catch it and keep it for a while in an Oriental cricket cage his mother had given him when he was a kid. They were hard to catch. They ran in straight lines, but they ran a lot faster than you'd expect, incredibly fast, and they leapt when they were in danger. When Codell came in late or was up during the night, in the kitchen sink there would be dozens of them. If he had the right equipment, a big net or trap or lure or something, he could've caught hundreds. He could be the Pied Piper of cockroaches. He could process them into high-protein food. He could end world hunger. He would win a Nobel prize.

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