

### *Man Versus Beast – January 30, 2015*

I stare at my freshly washed T-shirt hanging from a string clothesline against the wall. I've seen this sight a thousand times yet never seen it at all. What a pathetic shirt. Would anyone in the freeworld wear it? Probably not. Wearing it would be frowned upon, especially in a public place like a store or restaurant. Not that I think much about what's acceptable in public, but every once in a while I allow myself a little role-playing game to fill an empty penitentiary moment. "Man Versus Beast", I call it.

Playing the role of Beast is easy — a disposable person, subhuman, monster...it's all the same. It's an easy role to play because it's the label I've been wearing for almost 20 years.

Playing the role of Man, a genuine human being, is becoming increasingly difficult as memories of civilization fade, and I become more cemented within my incarcerated reality. Still, I have logged more years as a person than I have as a turd, and there are days I can slip into the human role with ease. I can remember, pretend, become...

Ah to be a human being again! Worthy of respect and affection, capable of dignity and contribution, to have a valuable life... Now there's the rub. Through the eyes of a real person, I look at the hanging T-shirt that's nothing more than a rag. A rag, as if such a dingy waste of cloth is worthy of such a title. With a rag you could at least clean something, maybe absorb some spilled fluid, but this decayed fabric will absorb barely more moisture than a piece of plastic. Eroded, stained and full of holes — why would anyone waste time cleaning it? As an estimable being, I question why this so-called shirt isn't in the trash. It's so thin it wouldn't protect against the mildest chill, and it's so sheer it wouldn't hide a flesh-colored mole. One would look better wearing nothing. As far as clothing goes, the shirt is like a prisoner: utterly worthless.

It seems to me, human extraordinaire, that even a third-world resident would sneer at such rot. What poor excuse for a being hangs such rubbish so neatly and lovingly against the wall?

The poor excuse for a being (aka: the beast) shyly steps forth with a crooked smile. He looks at the T-shirt he has worn everyday for years and cannot help the fondness he feels for it. This subhuman sees a valuable cloth so fine; it's more transparent than a bridal veil. He winces at the holes because they foretell an ending when the special shirt he has carefully washed hundreds of times in the traditional prison manner (hand-washed in the toilet with a bar of state soap the size of two postage stamps) will no longer hold together enough to wear.

The filthy animal knows the tattered shirt is the most valuable possession he owns in this caged world of reprobates, and that he could possibly even sell it for more than what he paid for it when it was new and pristine white. Because beastly or not, when you're trapped in a poorly vented mausoleum where the temperature buries the hundred



degree mark everyday in the summer, the humidity so loathsomely thick you feel like you're suffocating in it, and the real humans make a rule that you must wear a shirt at all times — never mind that you're in an all male environment where an exposed chest means nothing, or that you're strip searched many times daily in front of the masses, never mind that you defecate in full view of anyone who cares to look — just make sure you're wearing a damn shirt. Well! Under such reasonable circumstances, the last thing you want is a shirt that conserves body heat.

The role-playing game of "Man Versus Beast" can be depressing. It's not really conducive for your self esteem to ponder the difference. But like many people, I cannot always resist dances of self-destruction. Not that I haven't actively battled my subhuman epithet over the years. Even before I came to prison, I was aware of psychological dangers like Institutionalization: a process where a person conforms so completely to the conditions of incarceration and absence of choice, that they eventually lose all sense of autonomy and are unable to cope with the choices presented to them when released to the free world. Someone that most prisoners proudly call a Convict.

I had determined that I wasn't going to be a victim of the state's dehumanization program, nor was I going to seek acceptance from my forsaken peers or buy into the twisted morals of their inmate society. I even supposed it would be easier to win than it was for others because I knew with all of my heart that I didn't belong here.

But it's hard to fight a system. Thousands of hours of relentless indoctrination eventually took their toll upon my resolve and mutated my psyche. Every day, society and its warders treat me like scum, and I find that sometimes I treat myself the same way. I had never wanted to be anything but a human being...didn't even know I could lose the distinction. I've worn many labels in my life: child, student, lover, sailor, husband, father, and countless others, but none of them had rendered my existence as absolute as "prisoner".

For the longest time I fought, I stayed a loner and pursued skills that might help me cope with the free world when the courts reversed their mistake and set me free. But it never happened and even if it had, I think it's impossible to escape institutionalization after a period of time and still survive prison. The only way to adapt to such a harsh environment is to give yourself to it completely and forget about the choices or value you once possessed as a real person and leave behind the free world.

Two decades passed, and I've basically stopped fighting the stigma society and the state have placed on me and made the adjustments necessary to live here. I accept that by society's standards, I am disposable. Yet forgetting society for a moment as they have done me, do I truly believe in my own heart that I'm worthless? Depends on the day, I guess. On a beastly day I am trash, a pathetic rag, pure shit. But on a good day — when I'm feeling particularly Homosapienish, when I play the role of Man — I see myself as a bit worn but perfectly usable fabric, valuable enough to be hung neatly and lovingly against the wall.