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The American Prison Writing Project
c/o Hamilton College
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RE: Article Submission

Dear APWP:

I am able to submit articles through the JPay.com email system... I can send and receive emails from my cell every five minutes. I have sent you an invite but have received no response. If you send me an email through Jpay.com I can respond and provide articles at less expense and it may be more cost effective to copy and past my email to your database. The following is for the archive. Also enclosed is the permission slip. Please provide another so I can retain the information on the back of the form

MY CELLY, LITTLE DANO

As a prisoner I have little responsibility. My food, electricity, rent, is all provided. I'm told when to eat, when to sleep, when to shower. About the only things I am responsible for is trying to navigate the 136 poorly delineated and overly broad rule violations, and guarding against being sexually and/or physically assaulted. I do miss being responsible for the normal daily problems of the non incarcerated and having others rely upon me.

One morning, while walking in the yard, a praying mantis landed on my shirt for a free ride. Who am I to deny the little guy some help so I walked him straight to my cell and found him a good perch to hang out. I showed my friend Dano my new celly. He asked what I named it and as a joke I said "Little Dano".

With any new celly you try to figure out their habits and pet peeves to work around. I opened my eyes one morning to see Little Dano's goofy face on my pillow staring at me. Now, while its hard to have a bad day when it starts out with such a goofy face staring at you, I realized there was a danger of squishing the little guy in my sleep. So each night I make sure he is on a perch not likely to end up on my bunk. We started a game of hide and seek. Each night I make sure he is on a safe perch. Each morning I move carefully around the cell until I find his hiding spot.

You may be wondering how I ensure Little Dano has his daily nutritional needs met. I'll tell you I rarely if ever see any other bugs in my cell. He does eat the tuna fish, chicken, and baffling to me the turkey ham from my daily meals.

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I must admit I was leery to feed him the turkey ham as I swear that stuff is slowly killing me. But Little Dano really likes the gristly greasy thing and will gnaw on it for 30 minuets.

When I go to yard I collect various bugs and worms. My friend told his mother the highlight of his day was watching how excited I get collecting bugs for Little Dano. The other day, as I was returning to my unit, out of the corner of my eye I saw a fat bug, scooped it up into my pocket for Little Dano. Unfortunately, what I had put in my pocket was a stink bug. It took three days to get the smell out of my pocket and cell. Little Dano didn't mind and gobbled the poor thing down.

I became concerned that Little Dano was not getting enough water so I put some on the end of my finger and stuck it in his face. Had I given it a little forethought I would have realized bugs, like humans, don't like a giant finger poking its face. Little Dano immediately latched on to the end of my finger with its needle ridden forearms and began chomping away at my fingertip. Shoot. Now what? I gently tried to nudge his forearms off as he's eating more of my finger. It started to really hurt until I had to shake him off my finger. Gnaw gnaw gaw ouch ouch ouch. Finally Little Dano lost his grip and went flying into the either.

Being a father at 17 and sole supporter of a wife and two kids thereafter, I miss being relied upon for others safety and security. One day Little Dano decided to crawl off his perch and plopped into the toilet. I'm quite a germafobe, but the panicked look on Little Dano's face as he laid on his back in the middle of the toilet let me know he was in serious trouble. As the giant hand scooped him from the bowel he latched on with those needled forearms for dear life. He was further terrified and dug in when the giant hand gave him a fountain bath. I felt bad but I could not have him crawling around the house in toilet water.

About a week later Little Dano took another dive into the toilet. This time not seeming panicked at all calmly crawling into the giant hand and enjoy the following fountain bath. As this is not a game I'm willing to play the toilet is now covered with a T-shirt and is just a trampoline.

Little Dano has a lot of characteristics of a cat. He grooms himself and has the same attitude. Playful at times and irritable at others. I took a square of toilet paper and rolled it into a pencil shape. I'll poke the end around the corner of Little Dano's perch and he perks up into attack mode, attacking like a cat.

After a particularly good day collecting bugs, Little Dano ate half his body weight of spiders, bees, and a moth. Shortly thereafter he fell off his perch, stumbled around, and appeared sick. I was rather worried. Afraid I may have poisoned him. I placed him in a special perch were he would not be in jeopardy of falling and said a small prayer for his recovery.

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I woke to quite a surprise. Little Dano was not a he and now is an expecting mother as she was proudly standing over an egg sack. Needless to say Dano was not happy about the name and suggested I rename it to Little Dannat. To late. You can't re-name a pet months latter. Too confusing.

Little Dano has since laid three more egg sacks and I discovered that each sack called an "ootheca" can produce between 30 and 300 young mantids. When I told this to Dano he said "your going to have some explaining to do when they all hatch." Which I replied "I know. How am I going to explain why they all look like me?" Just kidding. Although they probably will all have my hair style. Two straggly hairs on top.

In all seriousness. Having Little Dano as my celly brings purpose and joy to my life and joy to the others in my unit. Little Dano is the model of patience. She will stay in one spot without moving for days. When I get stressed, just looking at her brings me calm. Not only do I enjoy finding and feeding her and making sure she has safe perches. Others in the unit enjoy bringing her food and checking up on her condition.