

chronicles of a comer

By K. M. O'DONNELL

September 14: Harder and harder to concentrate upon the demographic urges of Dayton, Ohio, that most American of the American cities. Fourteen percent of college-educated housewives believe in stronger repressive measures against the drug-culture; fifty-one percent of working-class males above the median in salary believe that television is a government plot. Etc. Sitting here, the figures heaped before me, graphing them out slowly and neatly into the presentation brochures I feel a sense of uselessness overcoming me unlike any I have ever known . . . and I have often felt useless. What does it matter? Who cares? What would the working class of males say to my condition? I believe in the Second Coming.

I believe in the Second Coming. Putting down this sentence in the journal of my thoughts and activities I have just decided to keep, I feel a thrill of sheer madness going through me; a throbbing unleashed that causes me to literally shift in place, cover this entry

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apprehensively lest a strolling Supervisor wander through to peer down at my work and see what has been written. *I believe in the Second Coming*. Perhaps I should seek psychiatric help which is at least partially covered by the company benefit program. Nevertheless I do. Indications point to it. Breakdown, dislocation, strange noises and rising from the East; assassination, great alienation and discontent, the scar of barbarism opening up deep within the layers of the culture. Conditions force. According to the most informed readings of the Book of Daniel it will occur within the next ten years; then again, according to other discredited authorities, it might have happened in 1928. No matter, no matter. It will happen. A small pulse of necessity flowers within me, guiding my hand through this entry and as if from a far distance I hear the bell of Apocalypse striking.

I wonder what form He will take so that, as promised, all witnessing will know Him.

September 15: Failure with Francine again tonight. Our marriage has arced downward, a clear bell curve of declension in recent months, now I can no longer bear to touch her. Preoccupied with the larger considerations of last judgment I cannot concentrate upon her any more; cannot even take our troubles seriously. "You don't care," she says, "you don't care about people. You're just a cold-hearted statistician who sees people as numbers and trends. You fooled me for a while but that's all you ever were. You do not care."

She is right but she is wrong. I do not care about people (because they will merely bear witness to the Coming) but I am not a cold-hearted statistician. More and more, the devices of my work seem insane to me: what does Kettering or Dayton, Ohio have to do with the high, pure cleaning flame, the clean arching notes of the trumpet signalling time come around again? It is hard to believe that I ever took this seriously. That I ever took Francine seriously. Tonight I tried, however.

I took her to dinner, listened to her little complaints and held my peace for the evening, brought her back to the apartment finally and, willing myself to focus, touched her, pressed my palms against her, removed her clothing and mounted her like a crucifix. How long, how long it had truly been since I felt desire! But even as we rocked together I felt that desire perishing; my mind scurrying off into a

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small abscess where I saw and heard the form that last judgment would take and where our pitiful little struggles would stand, against the bar of Heaven.

I slid off her in revulsion, closing my eyes and denying the seed. Behind me she said things which I would not hear. I have failed with her before but never for reasons so justified and now I am in a high, cold place where she cannot touch me. I do not care whether she leaves or not.

September 16: At lunch hour today, a quick walk on Lexington Avenue to restore the circulation, brush thoughts of Dayton machinists and schoolchildren from my mind. In the doorways prostitutes, beggars, the obscurely displaced of the city whom I once fantasized kept the machinery going through the principles of necessary inefficiency. "Give me some money, you," a particularly vicious beggar said to me as I stepped out across Twenty-fourth Street, "who do you think you are?"

The impulse for flight quickly cancelled, I turned upon the beggar ready for confrontation . . . and then it occurred to me in a great burst of light that there was no saying what form He will take upon His ascension; He is as likely to be a beggar as to return in more glorious forms. Quickly, I searched the creature's face for indications of sacrament but could detect nothing but loathing and aggression. Still, how are we to know? Can we judge at this plane the devices of the saints? "Are you . . ." I started to say and then balked to an embarrassed muteness. I realized that I was about to ask the beggar if he were the Saviour.

"My God," he said, "I think you're crazy," and sprinted from me quickly, turning a corner and being gone. In the distance I heard an explosion which might have been the backfire of a bus or the sound of the beggar reassuming his natural form and going to a High Place. Who can tell? What is there to know? I continued meditating on my way, unable to escape the exciting feeling which has come over me since I started this journal. I am in the midst of climactic events.

September 17: Nothing happened today. Air thick, oppressive, damping down upon the city; news of the shooting of yet another Presidential candidate. Indications accelerate. Francine left me to-

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day. She was not at the apartment when I returned. She had removed her clothing and I discarded her note without reading.

September 18: Problems at the company. Called into the supervisor's office this morning; told that my work had been falling off seriously in recent weeks. Simple statistical errors, flaws of computation a child would not have made, misplacement of median and mode. "We cannot tolerate this kind of thing," the supervisor went on to say (am omitting proper names from this journal as much as possible; Francine's only mentioned because she has no effect upon my life), "precision, grace, close tolerances, market research, dependent advertisers, key demographics," and so on and with a final admonition sent me from his office with the clear indication that career and salary plan or not, my position may be considered somewhat endangered at the present time.

What would it benefit him if I told the basis for my distraction, outlined my conviction that very little can be taken seriously at the present moment since time itself is ending? He would not understand and my job would be further endangered and then again, more terrifyingly, he might understand perfectly and his bland, blank eyes would focus upon me in perfect stillness and peace, all of his features rotating toward waxy flexibility. "Just tell me how soon," he would say then in a little voice, "that's all I want to know. How soon because really, I too cannot take this any more."

September 19: At lunch hour I think I saw the beggar again but then I am not sure; he fled so quickly when our paths intersected on the sidewalk. "What's wrong with you?" a voice said to me while I was walking abstractedly, "anyway, give me all your money," but as I turned to the sound he must have recognized me and whisked away. Maybe. Perhaps. It does not explain the source of his terror (unless any knowledge of his true identity would shift the Plans) nor does it bring me any closer to a pinpointing of the date when he may be expected to shed his earthly mask and appear before us in His true substance.

Utterly missed a distribution curve today and had to redo an entire chart. I agree. My work is not what it once was.

September 20: The wounded Presidential candidate may recover. Then again he may not. It is difficult to make a medical judgment at this time; fortunately he is a minor party candidate so the true course of the election has not been affected. Candidates from the major parties have reduced their speaking schedules to closed auditoriums and security has been tightened even further. Two Eastern nations, through the proxies of their Heads of State, have declared a final war. The President, himself not a candidate for reelection, has appeared on television urging calm. In Dayton the appeal has been met with apparent calm. The indications quicken; the world is a great artery being brought to the knife.

Francine reappeared. "I thought you would worry," she said, "I thought you would try to find me. I thought you would read my note and understand that I only left you out of desperation and wanted to shock you into understanding. But now I realize that I was wrong all the time and that there is nothing there. This is the last time. I am coming only to pick up my last things; my lawyer will hear of this and he will be in touch with you. Do not speak to me. You didn't even read my note, did you?"

There is nothing to say to her. I have nothing to say to her. While she bangs around the apartment, muttering, I sit in a corner of the living room, in a chair, and read the newspapers carrying further reports of the wondrous signs and portents. It occurs to me that perhaps I should check her out more carefully, at least to see if there is any possibility that He is made manifest in her . . . but that is clearly impossible. This at least I know if I know nothing else; He would not return to earth in the form of a woman.

September 21: Forty-three percent of central America disapproves of the shooting of even minor candidates for President, tentative conclusion. Disapproval is highest among college graduates, lower as expected in those with only a high school education. There is a coefficient of correlation of .85 between approval of the shooting of bizarre candidates and a belief in the immorality of pre-marital sexual intercourse. I do not know what to make of this nor are my speculations needed. I convey the figures, the charts, the random patterning, the tentative graphs to my supervisor who looks at them quizzically and says that they will have to be forwarded on for further processing.

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At lunch hour I look for the beggar who has become an important part of my life but do not see him. Perhaps He is already at this moment in seclusion, preparing His garments for the Ascension and no longer walking to and fro in the Earth or upon it as He prepares for His enormous tasks.

September 22: He will come wearing a crown of fire, He will come from the high place and stand above us, He will bring down His hand and signal the beginning of the one thousand years of destruction which must precede His eternal reign but even knowing this, I am calm; time has come around again, we can no longer tolerate what has become of us. My belief has become my armor; in its coolness I dwell, acceptance of the spirit, no trembling of the flesh and when He brings down His hand then to start the fires I will stand among the steadfast, calm in the righteousness of my vision, protected by the depth of my acceptance.

One of the wounded candidates passed into a coma this morning and is not expected to recover. Bombs are falling upon the nations of the East and no quick conclusion to the war is expected. In the mails this morning arrived a letter from a man representing himself to be Francine's lawyer, asking for a full accounting of my position. I wish, I only wish that I could share it with him.

September 23: Dayton, Ohio reacts, according to the first quick surveys, with great calm to the death of the unfortunate Presidential candidate. The coefficient of correlation between acceptance of his death and the belief in a really effective headache remedy appears to be upwards of .75. These conclusions will be telephoned immediately to our client, the headache remedy company. "It's a crazy business," my superior says (he has moments of recrimination), shaking his head, and I do not have the heart to tell him that soon his business, along with everything else, will be no more. Like so many of us, like the way I used to, he holds onto the devices of his life as if they were imperishable artifacts bridging or containing all reality; I would not take this away from him. In time he too will accept the judgment. For now he contents himself with verifying and transmitting the tentative conclusions as locked to my desk I work my pencil through the forms and look out the window occasionally, waiting for

the first glimpse of that rosy haze which, I know, will signal culmination.

September 24:

September 25:

September 26: Still too weak to write today. Maybe tomorrow. Oh my God.

September 27: I did nothing; he fell upon me like a beast and oh my Lord my body is a wound. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I will be better. I will write more tomorrow. At least I did not have to be hospitalized although the company would have covered everything.

September 28: Stronger, but inside broken. The end of the weekend which coincided with the attack so at least I did not miss more than three days of work. Back in the office tomorrow. Everyone very sympathetic. Even Francine called, but when she found that the injuries were essentially superficial and limited to what is laughingly called "cuts and abrasions" she hung up.

September 29: I do not know how I feel about the beggar, now that he has beaten me. Today, driven by an impulse I could not understand, I visited him in the security ward where he is being held for observation. He made no attempt to escape after the beating, merely standing over me and muttering strange threats while the large crowd which had gathered parted for the police to take him easily. "Why?" I asked him through the little window, "why did you do it? I would have given you money. I would have . . ." In my mouth are the words: *I would have given you anything if you had asked; I thought you were the Saviour*, but I do not say them. After all, I am in a mental hospital; our conversation monitored. Also, I am not sure that I believe this any more. Everything that has happened to me in the last months, everything that I was thinking, seems to have been a strange illness that was battered from me; not only my blood but convictions poured on the stones. "Why?" I said again weakly.

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The beggar said nothing. His eyes cold and empty, his hands rigid on the panels, his body a withdrawal. Nothing, nothing. Is it possible that he was a simple lunatic from the beginning, the beating merely because I became a focus by our constant interception of paths? Or has something gone away from him; that which I suspected never to be touched?

It does not matter. I left, telling the authorities on the way out that no, I would not press charges if the beggar were confined for a long, long time.

No rising, no fire, no music, no thousand years of destruction. Only this grey inelegance but looking through the trap of choices, I see that it could have been no other way. We are not for the quick-fire.

September 30: The President was shot in the shoulder while leaving a press-conference. The assailant has been seized; a foreigner from the East protesting the President's policy of non-involvement in the war. He seems barely coherent but is perhaps merely excited. The shot narrowly missed the President's temple at close range but due to the fortunate escape, he is expected to be back at his desk within the week. Already he is conducting business from his hospital bed and has released a statement to the nation calling for calm.

Another call from Francine tonight, sounding much calmer herself, as if the near-assassination had deeply touched her. She said she felt guilty in some way for my severe beating and wondered if somehow, some way, we could make another try at our marriage.

I told her that we would see. Tonight, she is supposed to spend the evening with me. The thoughts are less tormenting than they have been for months and I think that I may, if circumstances turn a certain way, be able to function. I want to function; it is the least that I could do in line with the gravity of events and with the President's appeal.

October 14: Only a few weeks but September seems so far from me now. A different world; an enclosure from which I have been sprung. Francine has come back to live with me; my work is becoming meaningful again, the word from the networks and newspapers merely uncomfortable but no longer signs and portents. The beggar has been found insane and remanded upstate. It does not seem to

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have happened. Reality has once again overtaken me; joyfully I will confront it.

This morning, at the agency, working on skewed responses in Dayton to the President's quick and astonishing recovery, I thought once again that I saw a vision of the Coming but it was not as it had been before and not as it had ever been in my life. Looking at the charts, the figures, the slow curves being traced out, I thought I saw in that lovely coldness, entrapped in peace forever, the face of the Saviour, and the joy that I felt as I moved the pencil to capture the details, the vaulting of the heart as I saw him pure before me in the forty-seven percent of Dayton that no longer accepts the teachings of any Church . . . this arc of happiness took me like grace and falling all the way down, I sung the sound of Gabriel.