

The Shroud of McCann

By Joseph Austin

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A curiously affecting draw you in from the get go spoof that morphs into something akin to a serio-comic 'Night of the Living Dead'. A bizarre revelation overtakes an otherwise sedate community that soon escalates into mob hysteria. And while there are many funny instances, we are never far away from a certain sinister undertow. The author's psychological insight, believable characters, nimble prose, and likeable voice that culls our sympathy, puts this 'entertainment' a stand above the rest. We think Danver Pitney is a wonderful creation. Quote: 'He felt that if Christ was to come to Dumont, New Jersey, it wouldn't be in the form of a mustard stain'.*

A silly food fight at the Annual Dumont Women's Auxiliary Hot Dog Picnic should have been a moment of pure innocent fun, Danver Pitney thought. What could have been more innocent? After all, his mother, Gladys Cola, was in charge of the homemade relish station, and was wearing the orange 2000 Hot Dog Picnic t-shirt which she had designed herself. On it was a smiling hot dog dancing with a bun dressed in an assortment of condiments.

Oh, it was innocent, Danver thought. Just as it had been every year since the picnic started. It was a fun day for Dumont and the town always turned out for the fresh food, the hot dogs, the music, the games. It was wonderfully small-town Americana until Regina Maywood noticed the stain on the back of Annie McCann's shirt.

Until then it had been just another Women's Auxiliary Hot Dog Picnic. But after Regina nearly fainted, it had become downright serious.

Danver sat in his living room by the window, watching the people move slowly up his street. There was no other way for them to move, he knew, because of the absurd congregation

that attempted to get onto Seminole Avenue. He and his mother lived directly across from the McCann's and, on a normal day, Danver could see directly into their living room. Today, he could see nothing but heads and backs, as if one thousand people were trying to assemble the world's largest human pyramid for a world record.

A driver pulled his car up onto Danver's lawn and almost had the audacity to park it there, but Danver got up from his chair and pulled open his front door.

"Get out of here! Get off my lawn, you idiot!"

Pushing open the storm door, his arm pulled back over his shoulder he released an apple, striking the rear of the car as it pulled away. He had a bowl of them at the door just for this purpose. He had managed to nail two young men, a kid on a bicycle and a middle-aged woman who had tried to set up blankets on his lawn to be close to the McCann residence.

The Cola/Pitney lawn was not Mecca, even if Gladys was across the street at dawn each day to sit in the living room with Annie and stare and pray and wait and wait.

Ricky Akin had started the food fight with a squeeze bottle of ketchup. He squirted the arm of Joey Takuji, who retaliated with a bowl of relish over Ricky's head. From that point, as best as anyone could recollect, Margie Cotter began tossing diced onions at the two men. And then, of course, anyone hit with a stray onion soon returned fire with the only ammunition possible - pickles, mustard, more ketchup, more relish, squeeze cheese, potato salad, deviled eggs. Everyone was quickly armed - hot dog condiments sailed like grenades.

Then, someone squirted Annie McCann with yellow mustard while she had her back turned to launch an assault of marshmallows at a group of women who were running from the enemy fire. Mary Ann Alonzo said she was the one to squirt Annie. Francine Block said she had

done it. Perhaps it was both of them, or neither of them - Danver didn't care. He wished it hadn't happened. He had never seen such insanity.

People came from everywhere to see what was being called The Shroud of McCann. Others, like Gladys Cola, were calling it the Dumont Miracle. By whatever name, all of these people that came to the McCann house on Seminole Avenue saw the face of Jesus Christ in the mustard stain on the back of Annie McCann's Women's Auxiliary Hot Dog Picnic t-shirt.

What Danver Pitney saw was desperation. He saw a ridiculous need to believe in something that didn't exist.

He didn't have such needs. He felt certain that if Christ was to come to Dumont, New Jersey, it wouldn't be in the form of a mustard stain. He imagined it would be something more dramatic, more elegant. If Jesus came to celebrate the millennium, it should be in the rising smoke of the bonfire at the Homecoming Festival or in a crack in the wall or ceiling of St. Mary's Church on Washington Avenue. But as a mustard stain? If there was a Jesus, Danver thought, he could do better than mustard.

He got up and went into the kitchen to fix something to eat. Through the window he could see his backyard, and he watched as a family began to climb over the fence and drop down onto the grass.

What would make this perfectly normal looking family— a mother, father, daughter and two sons— travel from wherever they had come, climb fences (which was trespassing in Danver Pitney's book) and trample through yards? The mother carried a Playmate cooler and each child was equipped with a knapsack and a fanny pack.

“You may be in search of Christ, but in my book, you’re trespassing criminals!” Danver said to himself.

He hurried out the back door and grabbed the garden hose that was coiled like a fat green snake behind his house.

"Get off my property!" He twisted the dial and squeezed the trigger to let loose a spray of cold water onto the family. They began to scream and shout, calling Danver names that most God-fearing (and Jesus seeking) people would never say. And in front of children, no less.

They darted around the side of the house and Danver gave chase. He directed the water onto them, and just when they seemed out of reach, he began to heave the spray into giant arcs so it would land farther up the side of his property, dousing them further. He watched them scoot across the front lawn toward the McCann's. The young son turned near Danver's mother's rhododendron, and gave him the finger.

"And stay away, you damn Mustard Pilgrims!!" Danver shouted.

That was it for Danver. He had to put a stop to this madness. There had to be a way to get the town to come to its senses. It was a damn stain, he thought. It was not Christ. It couldn't be Christ. He had seen it that first day, fresh in its incarnation and still a bit runny around the beard. Sure, the richest imagination could imagine Christ on the shirt, but with a squint of the eyes it could be John Lennon or that painter guy Bob Ross. Oh, Danver thought, I've got to do something.

He went up the stairs of the house and into the bathroom. He closed the door behind him and looked in the mirror. In it, he studied his reflection. He hoped to see in his face the sort of

determination he needed to devise a plan to bring Dumont around, to put an end to The Shroud of McCann. This had been a habit of his since he was in high school, some fifteen or sixteen years ago. Now, at the age of 32, he still found that studying his expression led him to better understand what he was thinking. It was almost as if he couldn't quite get a hold on his own ideas without watching what it did to his eyes, his mouth, his eyebrows, and most especially his ears, which twitched when he was in deep thought.

Nothing came right away, but he looked at himself anyway, and watched himself think. There had to be a way.

He left the bathroom after twenty minutes of intense scrutiny. He went into his mother's bedroom and looked around. She had covered her dresser with statues of Jesus and Mary (together and alone, some plaster, some plastic). These monuments to the holy mother and son were new with the arrival of the Shroud. Before that, all Gladys Cola had was a picture of her second husband, Philip Cola, now dead, and a tall, black enamel poodle from which she hung necklaces.

But now it was covered with Jesus and Mary statuettes and; Danver lifted a plastic Jesus, turned it over. Twenty-five cents was written on the bottom on a white sticker. Garage sale, Danver thought. God Almighty.

“Enough,” he grumbled. “Enough!” and he threw the statue down onto his mother’s bed.

On Gladys' bed was a plain white t-shirt with writing on it in black magic marker. "The Shroud of McCann" was crossed out and "The Dumont Miracle" was written below it. Pinned to the bottom of the shirt was a receipt from the shop that had made the hot-dog picnic shirts just a few weeks before. It read "250 shirts in yellow Biblical lettering". Danver wondered aloud what in the hell Biblical lettering looked like.

This was out of hand.

He knew the pattern of the Mustard Pilgrims. The McCanns allowed viewers into their home from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm, when they broke for lunch. Then they opened the front door again at 3:30 until 7:00. They permitted two people at a time into the living room to view the stain. Barbara, Annie's daughter, worked the front door and her son, Scotty, worked the back. Whenever Barbara allowed two to enter, Scotty was required to escort two out. Nevertheless, the room always seemed full.

Danver had not ventured over to the house yet. He had been too disgusted with the way this had taken hold. The Catholic Church had made a royal visit three days ago, filled with the typical fanfare of a filthy rich organization. A limousine ambled up Seminole Avenue and Ford Escorts and Tempos, Hondas and Jeep Grand Cherokees cleared the way as if they were the rolling waves of the Red Sea and it was Moses himself coming to the McCanns. Four men had exited the limo, two in clerical garments and two in black suits with fedoras. Danver watched from his living room window and wondered if the Fedoras had guns strapped beneath their armpits.

The press had arrived earlier in the first week and was still stationed outside in white vans. Big-bellied cameramen wearing backward baseball caps trampled over the McCann's impatiens and tulips trying to get the best shot. A newswoman from the local channel stood on the front lawn talking into the camera. She spoke so loudly that Danver could hear her across the street and through his living room window. He had closed the windows and turned on the air conditioners to block out the din of the gathering.

At 7:00, they closed the doors. Some people left, but most did not. They remained in their lawn chairs and on their blankets and played radios and portable CD players late into the evening. Lanterns were lighted, flashlights were perpetually glowing and pizzas were delivered.

The police did too little to halt any of the traffic of the Mustard Pilgrims. They hadn't any idea how to handle such a massive crowd. Danver was sure that there had to be at least 150 people, maybe more, at any given time. This spectacle had even drawn the attention of wise vendors who sold hot dogs at the curb in honor of the venue of Christ's visit. Yellow mustard was free. Gulden's was 25 cents extra.

And unemployed, 32 year-old Danver Pitney had nothing else to do but be subjected to this Second Coming. And he would not be subjected to it any longer.

Once again, he stared at himself, but this time in the mirror above his mother's dresser. He watched his eyebrows move up and down, his eyelids spasm with the excitement of an idea. He saw his upper lip curl into a smile, dragging his lower lip with it. His ears twitched. He knew exactly what needed to be done. And he was going to do it now.

Danver moved his bulky body through the crowd of Mustard Pilgrims. Despite the heat of the August day he was wearing his long gray raincoat, belted closed around his big waist. His hair was a mess from having run his hands through it while he watched himself think. He was afraid there might be a devilish look in his eyes; he didn't want to look suspicious. Danver lowered his head and pushed through the pilgrims.

He forced himself close to the front of the line. This was hard to do. Even though these people were here to see Christ, they were far from charitable about giving up their spot in line.

Danver made his way to the front door. He pushed aside a nun dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, with a white and navy blue habit over her head. Then he knocked.

Barbara answered the door.

"Pit, you finally gave in," she said.

"Finally," he muttered.

"I knew you'd be here eventually. Your mother's here."

"Yes," Danver said. "I know."

"I was next," the nun said.

"It's two at a time," Barbara told her.

"Well, then." The nun gave Danver a look that should have speared his soul. He returned it and she stepped back, a bit afraid.

"Can I see it?" Danver asked.

"Certainly. There's a dollar tithing," Barbara told him. "For charity, of course." Only Danver knew that Charity was the name of the McCanns' cat.

Inside the house, the living room was filled with Mustard Pilgrims. Danver's mother sat on the sofa beside Annie McCann, the two of them like saints, or worse, mothers of saints.

"Danny!" Gladys called out. "I'm so glad you came over. You've got to see this up close. You've got to experience the warmth and joy emanating directly from the image! Oh! I'm so glad you came."

"I thought I should at least see what's causing all the fuss. I only got that one look at the picnic and I thought, well, maybe there's more to it now. Maybe Christ cried or spoke!" Gladys took Danver's sarcasm for genuine zeal.

"I'm so happy. Come, take my hand," she said and led her son toward where the shirt was suspended in crucifix-like fashion on the wall, adhered by Fun Tak.

Danver slowly approached the Dumont Miracle. He stared at the stain. He looked at what was meant to be the crown of thorns, the sad eyes, the beard and the mouth. He saw the long nose and the long hair. He could see what people had seen in it, but he could also see John Lennon.

The room was full of people. Women were crying, men were whispering to their wives and children. Some prayed for themselves, for others. This was certainly something, he thought. These people needed to believe in this so badly, they so needed this stain to be a true sign from heaven that the Lord was among us that they would pray to it, cry for it, love it. And of all places for Jesus to make his triumphant return? Dumont, New Jersey, of course, at a hot dog picnic. Of course.

It was enough to make Danver want to vomit.

He had to end all of this. He had to prove once and for all that there was nothing holy about this shirt. Nothing at all.

He smiled to himself. He undid the belt on his raincoat and it fell open. No one noticed him. Even Gladys had turned her attention back to the shirt, only occasionally glancing up at her son to glean the sense of awe and appreciation he must be feeling.

When she looked away, Danver reached inside his coat and withdrew a bottle of ketchup. He looked at the shirt on the wall, and pointed the bottle upward and squeezed.

Horrified gasps filled the room. Danver laughed out loud as he held the bottle low and squirted the ketchup up onto the shirt. He was sure no one could see the bottle, but he didn't

really care. He knew the moment that the ketchup hit the shirt, it would be apparent what he had done. But no one could hear his laughter through the throttled sounds of gagging surprise.

He heard the hysterical sobbing throughout the room and Gladys fainted beside him, hitting him on the leg, forcing the bottle to go even higher, targeting the crown of thorns.

"He's bleeding!" Annie McCann screamed. "Christ is bleeding!"

The nun dropped to her knees and nearly collapsed in reverent prayer.

The room was turned into a mad house. A screaming, wailing, gnashing-of-teeth-speaking-in-tongues revival meeting.

Barbara came from the door and grabbed Danver by the shoulders.

"You made him bleed! You brought the Christ to life!" she said.

Danver had just enough time to slip the bottle back into the inside pocket of his raincoat before he was pulled backward into the mass of Mustard Pilgrims and hauled toward the front door.

Annie tended to the fainted Gladys, but not whole-heartedly. She couldn't pull her eyes from the bleeding Christ.

Barbara dragged Danver out onto the lawn. She had her hands around his shoulders and now Danver Pitney thought he would faint, wished he would.

"He took one look at the Christ and it began to bleed! Bleed!" she cried out and the people rose from their lawn chairs and rushed Danver and rushed the front door and soon, no one paid a tithing to the cat. Everyone shoved his or her way into the McCann's living room.

Danver's mind whirled. If he wasn't being escorted through the throng of people, he might not have been able to even walk.

The local newswoman scurried over to him. She was dressed in a pale blue suit and she shoved a microphone at his face. The big-bellied cameramen surrounded him. Danver used to look at these camera men out of his window and feel a sort of kinship with them - running around as if they had no true direction with their big stomachs leading the way. But now, as they grouped around him, they terrified him, like giant monsters with long steel and glass eyes.

People pulled at his clothing, aching to touch him. Children grabbed at his legs. People hurried toward him in wheelchairs, on crutches.

Suddenly, adrenaline surged through him. He let out a scream and shrugged off Barbara McCann with too much force and sent her sailing back into the people behind him.

Then he took off running across the street as fast as he could.

The crowd followed.

He made it inside his front door and looked out the small pane of glass at the top.

They began to knock, to rap at the windows. The reporter was there, tapping with her microphone on a window.

Oh, Danver Pitney thought, what in the hell have I done?

Within twenty minutes, half of the crowd from the McCann's lawn had migrated across the street to Danver's lawn and he knew, as well as he knew his name, as well as he knew it was only ketchup and not blood on Annie McCann's shirt, that the Mustard Pilgrims were never going to leave him alone. Ever.

And he wondered, as he climbed the stairs toward the bathroom to look at his face in the mirror, when the limousine would be returning to Seminole Avenue and just what the Fedoras would say to him.

"Oh, Christ," he said, staring at himself, watching his ears sit motionless at the side of his head, no good ideas hatching forth, as the pilgrims rattled the windows and doors below.

He took the bottle of ketchup out of his coat and put it on the edge of the tub like a bottle of shampoo. He sat down on the toilet seat and buried his face in his hands.

Danver could hear them outside of his house like zombies come to feed on the last surviving human. And he knew that soon his mother would rise from the floor of the McCann's living room like Lazarus and lead another brigade of Pilgrims to their threshold.

And then Gladys would stick her key into the lock like it was right into Danver's heart and they would pour into the foyer like toppling dominoes.

They'll all want a piece of me, he thought. They'll all want to touch me, to hold me, grab me. They'll stick sick and healthy babies in my arms, cry on my chest, kiss my face. And all the gimps will be right behind them, Danver thought.

He got up and opened the medicine chest so that the mirror faced the wall. He'd done enough thinking for today - he didn't trust himself with one more thought.

Then he heard it. The creak of the front door and the sound of the mass invasion, Gladys' big mouth leading the way.

"Danver!" He heard it the way he imagined Joan of Arc must have sounded screaming on the stake.

Now they all knew his name and took it up as a chant as they ascended the stairs.

"Dan-Ver!"

"Dan-Ver!"

"Dan-Ver!"

The bathroom began to close in on him. He could only smell traces of ketchup that must have hit his clothes. All his other senses had begun to fail him, but the smell of that sweet, tomato syrup began to fill his head like a nauseating reminder of what he had just done to himself.

He tried to move the mirror into place to see if he could get a grip on himself, but it was fruitless. He reached for it, but never made contact. The sound of the Pilgrims' feet marching up the stairs, of Gladys' commanding chant, turned Denver's legs to water, washing him down to the floor.

Sight went soon thereafter, and just before he was in a land of total nothingness, he attempted one final struggle to regain his brain and body, but the awful, twisting sound of the turning doorknob on the bathroom door knocked him out cold.

When he awoke, he was in his mother's bed. Mustard pilgrims surrounded him. He thought he was dead. There were flowers strewn over him. They had stripped off his raincoat and taken off his shirt, making him as comfortable as possible. When he opened his eyes, someone took his picture and it nearly blinded him. There he was, in his mother's bed, his big belly rising up for everyone to see and they were taking pictures!

"What the...!"

At that moment, Gladys stepped over to him and whispered in his ear so no one else could hear her.

"Thank you, Danny. Thank you. You don't know how big Annie's head was getting over this. Now we're the stars. Now we're the stars."

She took his hand and pressed her face against his.

Someone took another picture.

Someone began to sing "Amazing Grace." The entire crowd joined in.

Of course, he didn't know how to get out of this situation. He asked his mother for a mirror. She ran and carried one to him. A woman in a jogging suit brought a sandwich. Another woman brought fruit. A man carried a pizza and a bottle of wine. More flowers were thrown onto the bed.

"Eat something. You must be so weak."

"Drink some wine. It's good for the blood," the man said. "Blood," he repeated, and the room became silent.

"Did Jesus say something to you? Did he say anything at all?"

"Did he cry?"

"Did you feel his pain?"

"Did you see through his eyes?"

Danver sat up in the bed. He put a hand on his stomach and pushed away some roses and daisies. They were probably from his own garden, he thought. He looked at the food that surrounded him. He looked at the people that had come to worship him. He thought about what it would be like to have this for a few days.

He didn't need the mirror to know that his ears were twitching.

His ears settled and he gripped the mirror tightly. Inside, he grinned. Oh, why not let them? Why not?

Then, in a quiet voice Danver said: "In three days, I need to return to the McCann's. Then, He will speak."

The Condiment Pilgrims hushed among themselves, quietly mumbling, the group of them sounding more like static than speech and Gladys pulled the new t-shirts out from under her bed and held them up for sale.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The inspiration for The Shroud of McCann came from a writing exercise. Danver Pitney came to life when I first wrote this story in 2001 after reading A Confederacy of Dunces by John Kennedy O'Toole while also going through a very big John Irving phase. Often, I try new things as a writer, I would try to create a character or plot that celebrated what I had read, (imitation is the greatest form of flattery, they say) and Danver and Gladys were born from reading a lot of quirky stories that also addressed real things. Over the almost twenty years this story has existed, I revisited it often; I needed to make it my own, make it funny, and hopefully bring it to life. I felt it was finally time to submit it and introduce it to the world. I don't often write comedic pieces, so I'm thrilled that this story found a home.*

BIO: *My name is Joseph Austin, a writer from Forest Hills, Queens, in New York City. I have been published previously in Christopher Street Magazine, The First Line, Gloom Cupboard and Newtown Literary Journal.*