

# Auld Lang Boom

Jack McDevitt

I've never believed in the supernatural. The universe is too subtle, too rational, to permit entry to gods or devils. There's no room for the paranormal. No fortune telling. No messages from beyond. No divine retribution.

But I am not sure how to explain certain entries in my father's diary, which came into my hands recently after his death in the Jersey Event. On the surface, I have no choice but to conclude that there is either a hoax, or a coincidence of unimaginable proportions. Still, it *is* my father's handwriting, and the final entry is dated the day before he died. If there is deception, I cannot imagine how it has been accomplished.

I found the diary locked in the upper right hand drawer of his oak desk. The keys were in a small glass jar atop the desk, obviating the point of the lock, but my father was never one to concern himself with consistency. He would have put it in there himself: my mother had died many years before, and he lived alone. The desk itself was intact when I got to it after the disaster, although it had been ruined by rain.

Nobody will ever be sure how many died when the rock came down off the Jersey coast. Conservative estimates put the figure at a million and a half. A hundred thousand simply vanished, probably washed out to sea by the giant tidal waves. Others died in the quakes, storms, power disruptions, and epidemics that followed the strike.

That night was, of course, the kind of seminal event that marks everyone who lives through it. No family in the country was untouched by this worst natural disaster in recorded history. *What were you doing when the meteor fell?*

I was a thousand miles away, watching *Great Railway Journeys* with my family when they broke in with the initial reports. I spent the balance of the evening trying to call my father, or anyone else I knew who lived in the South Jersey-Philadelphia area. But there was no phone service.

So now I have this cryptic document, stretching back into 1961. It is less a diary than a journal, a record of political, literary, and social opinions. My father was a dentist. He was good with kids and with nervous adults. A sign in his waiting room advertised: WE CATER TO COWARDS. But his interests extended far beyond his office. He was alert to every scientific and political trend, a student of the arts, a champion of the afflicted. He was a Renaissance dentist. He was capable of sulphurous explosions when he detected some particularly outrageous piece of hypocrisy or venality. He was a sworn enemy of politicians, lawyers, and professional athletes who charge kids twenty bucks an autograph. He instinctively distrusted people in power.

He favored requiring all heads of state to be mothers with six or more draft-age children. He wanted to mount a massive national effort to save the schools, to be funded by "downsizing" the federal establishment. He would have applied capital punishment *with vigor because it has the dual advantage of reducing the criminal population, and providing the average malefactor with the attention he desires.*

My father was sexually active, and many of the women who drifted through his life would no doubt have been shocked to read his appraisals of their performances:

*Lisa: screams and groans and bites a lot, but can't act well enough to carry it off. Down deep, where it counts, she is about as wild and uninhibited as a good phone directory.*

*Michele: probably better than an old movie.*

*Martie: woman doesn't know when to quit. Would wear out a jackhammer.*

I have of course fictionalized the names.

The pages were also full of antireligious views: for reasons never clear to me, he believed Methodist ministers to be uniformly a pack of scoundrels. This was especially odd in that he had never had any connection that I knew of with that church. *The average congressman*, he wrote during the late 80's, *is roughly equal in moral content to a Methodist preacher*. The Creator himself did not escape criticism: The world is such a misbegotten wreck *that it is impossible to believe any self-respecting deity would accept the blame for it*. And: *If there is a career more attractive to scoundrels and frauds than professional politics, it must be the Methodist ministry*.

Perhaps I violated an ethic in reading my father's diary. I wish now that I had not. But the charm and vitality of his observations, his obvious appetite for life, his Olympian assaults against those he considered frauds and halfwits, were irresistible. Once started, I could not stop. And I began to realize how little I had appreciated him during his lifetime.

I started seriously reading the diary at about the time I'd given up hope that he might have survived. I'd seen the final entries, and knew that he planned to be in Atlantic City, the worst possible place. But there was the chance that he might have been sidetracked, gone somewhere else, been delayed by a woman. I know better now.

The first entry was dated July 16, 1961. It spells out the rationale behind the diary, which was that he hoped his "occasional ruminations" would one day be of general interest. (My father was never afflicted with modesty.) He also revealed an ambition to become an essayist, and believed that a daily account of his reflections would be a priceless aid to such an endeavor. I should add, parenthetically, that his ambitions came to nothing. If he ever actually tried to compile a manuscript, I have no knowledge of it.

Six days later, he recorded my birth. And, in another week, the death of my mother. He seldom mentioned her to me, but the diary gave over a dozen pages of cramped handwriting to reminiscences of their early years together, and of his conviction that, were it not for his responsibilities (by which I gathered he was talking about me), his life had become worthless. Judging from the diary, he never after seriously considered marriage although, as I mentioned, there were many women. I was aware of his escapades, of course, while I was growing up. And I was baffled: my father's appearance was rather ordinary. He was also short and, when I was a teen-ager, beginning to lose his hair. It was hard to see what brought that endless supply of women to his door. I don't know yet.

By the time I had read into the late '70's, I noticed an odd trend. There are passages, and implications, which are unsettling. My father was, if anything, a rationalist. And I could sense his increasing dismay at events which he could not explain. I began to read more intently, and eventually found it impossible to lay the book aside. I will never forget the cold, rainswept evening during which I came back to the final entry. And read it in the frantic glare of what had gone before.

Now I don't know what to make of it. The only possible conclusion is that the diary is a fabrication. It *has* to be. Yet I do not see how that is possible. My wife, after she finished it, suggested we burn it.

I have not been able to bring myself to do that. Nor can I simply pretend it does not exist. Consequently, without taking a position on the matter, I have had the pertinent entries privately printed, in order to make them available to a small group of my friends, whose judgment I trust. Perhaps someone among them will be able to offer a rational explanation.

One final note: the "Rob" who figures so prominently in this narrative was Orin R. Robinson, who served 1958-60 in the Far East with my father. Curiously, they seem not to have been close friends until after the chance meeting in the Minneapolis airport described in the first entry in the Extract below. My father, incidentally, was on his way to Fargo, pursuing a young woman of his acquaintance.

**(ATTACHMENT)**

*Being Extracts from the Diary of Samuel H. Coswell*

*Minneapolis, Friday, November 22, 1963*

Black day. The President is dead.

I was having lunch with Rob. First time I'd seen him since Navy days on the *McCusker*. Hell of a reunion. We were sitting in a dark little place off Washington Avenue, all electric candles and checkerboard tablecloths and bare hardwood floors. A waitress had filled our glasses with Chianti and set the bottle down. We were already deep into reminiscing about old friends and old times, and Rob swept up his glass with a flourish, and raised it toward the light. "Here's to you, Sam," he said, "I've missed you," and in that brief hesitation, when one tastes the moment before the wine, I became aware of raised voices.

Chair legs scraped the floor. "—Shot him—" someone said. The words hung in the still air, whispered, almost disembodied. Then Kennedy's name. Doors banged, and traffic sounds got loud. Outside, a postal truck pulled up beside a mailbox.

There were bits and pieces of conversation. "How badly hurt?" "—They get the guy?" "Be fine. Can't kill—" "What time is it? Is the stock market still open?"

They brought out a television and we watched the early reports and learned the worst. "Not much of a reunion," I told Rob.

He lives in L.A. We'd met at the airport, both passing through. He's an aircraft design consultant, and he was on his way home from Chicago. We got to talking, decided not to miss the opportunity, and rearranged our flight schedules. Which was how we came to be eating a late lunch together when the news came from Dallas.

We walked back to our Sheraton and pushed into the bar. The TV threw a pale glare over the crowd, which kept getting bigger. Nobody said much. Cronkite reported that a police officer had been shot, and then he was back a few minutes later to tell us that a suspect had been captured in a movie theater. Name's Oswald. Nobody seems to know anything about him. I guess we'll start getting some answers tomorrow. Meantime, there's a lot of talk about a conspiracy. And we now have Lyndon Johnson.

I'm surprised this has hit me so hard. I've never been high on Kennedy. Although, as politicians go, he was likable. But it will be harder to run the Republic if presidents have to go into hiding.

Rob is up one floor. We'd originally planned to have breakfast together. He has an early flight, though, and I don't think either of us feels much like socializing. My own flight's at noon. So I will sleep late. And maybe one day we'll meet again in some other airport.

*Fargo, Saturday, November 23, 1963*

Ellen and I spent the day parked in front of a TV. Gloomy business, this. Oswald looks like a looney. Still no explanations. There are theories that he was working for the Cubans, or the CIA, or the Russians. You take a look at this guy, and it's hard to believe any sensible organization would use him. He doesn't look reliable. We'll see. If we trace it to Moscow, what happens then?

Ellen is showering now. She's a knockout, enough to get anyone's juices running, but there's a ceremonial quality to the preparations. The assassination has cast gloom on us all, I guess.

*Enroute to Philadelphia, Sunday, November 24, 1963*

Kennedy's funeral tomorrow.

Never knew anyone as wild as Ellen was last night. Is this the way we hide from our mortality?

*Philadelphia, Saturday, August 1, 1964*

Call from Rob. He's going to be in town next week, and we will get together. Funny about him: when we were in the Navy, he seemed a bit stand-offish. Difficult to get to know. Maybe it's the Kennedy thing, but he seems warmer, friendlier than I remember. I wouldn't have believed he'd ever have taken the time to look me up. He's a curious mix, simultaneously idealistic and cynical, gregarious and distant. He'd be horrified to hear this, but the truth is, he's a fascist. A goodhearted one, but a fascist all the same. He's a great believer in order, and is fond of quoting Plato on the dangers of giving freedom to the undisciplined. We talked for almost an hour (his nickel). We agreed that western civilization is on its last legs. I don't really believe that, but he's persuasive, and anyhow predicting doom always gives one such a warm feeling. Is that why there are so many Fundamentalists?

We were both elated by the lunar photographs taken by Ranger 7. First closeups ever. I told him we were taking the first steps into a vast sea. He laughed. *A vast desert, maybe.* He doesn't think we will ever leave the Earth-moon system. Why not? *Where else is there to go?*

*Philadelphia, Friday, August 7, 1964*

Great day.

I don't know when I've enjoyed myself more. We spent most of the evening arguing over Goldwater. Rob is worried that Johnson will win, and then give away southeast Asia. I'm scared to death Barry would give Hanoi an atomic alternative shortly after the swearing-in ceremony. Get out or get fused.

I don't think I've ever properly appreciated Rob. The world's a more comic place when he's around. Its absurdities are a bit more clearly defined. We share a sense of the ridiculous that seems to transcend language: a word, sometimes a glance, is enough to suggest some new buffoonery on the march. He ignites insight, in the way a good woman intensifies the emotional climate. We spent the evening raking over the Johnson administration, the Bible-thumpers who are citing chapter and verse against the Freedom Riders, and the latest academic notion that everyone's opinion is equally valid. (Rob's not exactly big on the Freedom Riders either. They're another example of what happens when people start taking their rights seriously.) He thinks ballots should be weighted. Particularly his. Probably mine. *A bonus for common sense. It's in short supply these days.*

We ate a late lunch at Bookbinder's, and retired for the evening to the Officers' Club at the Naval Base. We stayed until midnight. It strikes me that the art of conversation has almost disappeared from the world. Rob, in that sense, is something of an anachronism: a visitor from the nineteenth century, from an age in which there were more important things to do than to sit around and be entertained.

He'll be leaving in the morning, ten o'clock flight.

Pity.

*Philadelphia, Wednesday, January 9, 1974*

School districts are burning Mark Twain. In California, two police officers have been sued for using unnecessary force to subdue a man who was in the act of stabbing a woman. And there's a report that a group of volunteers trying to stop their TV habit went through withdrawal. Anyone who worries that the U.S. is headed for collapse can relax. It is raining on the rubble.

Terri Hauser has begun suggesting that Sammy needs a mother. Truth is, he probably does, but that seems to me to be a weak foundation for a marriage. I know she would move in if I suggested it. But where would *that* end?

Post Office returned Rob's Christmas card today, stamped MOVED — FORWARDING PERIOD EXPIRED.

*Philadelphia, Friday, November 2, 1979*

Rob is back.

There've been a few changes in his life. He's living in Seattle now. And he's gotten married. They'll be here on one of these Amtrak plans where you get to ride all over the country. Her name is Anne, and she is from Vermont. The plan is that she will go up to visit her folks for a few days, and Rob will stop off here. I wonder if he will be able to figure out a use for this home computer. I thought I might be able to get it to do my taxes, but they keep changing the laws every year.

*Philadelphia, Sunday, November 4, 1979*

The train was late getting in. I had to hang around 30th Street Station two hours. But it was good to see him again. Been a lot of years. We came back here, got settled, and then went to the Berlinhaus up on the Boulevard for sauerbraten. Lots of talk about a sex poll that was released yesterday, indicating that women are as adulterous as men. We tried to imagine how it might be possible to poll people about their sexual habits and come up with anything close to valid results. The Ayatollah also took his lumps. *What do you suppose it would be like to sit down with him for coffee?*

Later in the evening, we stopped by Janet's place. She'd asked to meet Rob, and that went pretty well too. We probably drank a little too much. But I don't think I've ever seen Janet enjoy herself so much.

Rob has gone completely gray since the last time I saw him. Otherwise, he doesn't seem to have lost much ground.

Incidentally, toward the end of the evening at the Berlinhaus, someone at the next table overheard us talking about Khomeini and asked whether we'd heard that the Iranians had seized the embassy in Teheran?

It was true, of course. They've taken fifty or sixty hostages. State Department isn't sure yet how many. It must be a first of some kind: nobody ever seized diplomatic people. Even Hitler didn't do that. It's what happens when you put an amateur in charge of a government.

Well, they'll release everybody tomorrow. And apologize. If we behave according to past practice, we'll lodge a stiff protest and go back to business as usual.

*Philadelphia, Monday, November 5, 1979*

Another delay with the train this morning, but Rob finally got away. This time, we've agreed to get together again soon.

The Iranian government claims it has no control over the students who've taken the embassy. Rob thinks we should give the Ayatollah a list of targets and start destroying them one by one until the government discovers it *can* do something to release our people. I'm not sure that isn't the best way to handle it.

Question: what should our primary objective be? To get the hostages released? Or to act in such a way that future hostage-takers will think it over before trying the same thing?

*Philadelphia, Tuesday, September 7, 1982*

Rob's marriage has collapsed. I had no idea it was in trouble. He doesn't talk much about his personal life, and of course over a telephone you don't really get to see anything. He's obviously shaken. I get the impression *he* didn't see it coming either. I suggested he might take some time and come here, but he says he'll be fine. I'm sure he will.

I never got to meet her.

*Seattle, Tuesday, January 28, 1986*

We've lost a shuttle. And a crew.

Grim day. I'd been looking forward to this trip for a long time. Rob picked me up at the airport, and we stopped for lunch on the way out to his place. The waitress told us about *Challenger*.

Rob looked at me very strangely, and I knew what he was thinking. We'd been able to get together *four* times over the course of a quarter-century. And three of those occasions had been marred by a major American disaster. There had been far greater catastrophes in the world during the period, in terms of body count. But we seemed to be tuned to a *local* wave length.

Neither of us said much. Until we heard the details, we hoped that the crew might have been able to survive, although it was difficult to visualize any kind of shuttle explosion that one could walk away from.

*Philadelphia, Wednesday, March 4, 1987*

...(Madeline and I) were talking about the various ways in which miniscule events produce results out of all proportion. Like the short cut through a park that generates an accidental meeting that ends in a

marriage. One of the Kennedy assassination theories holds that Lee Oswald shot down the President because Marina Oswald indicated a sexual preference for *him* over her inadequate husband.

Madeline said she'd heard once that a butterfly, moving its wings in Africa under the right conditions, could produce a hurricane in the Caribbean. Interesting conceit.

*Philadelphia, Sunday, December 18, 1988*

Rob called today. *He'll be in the area Wednesday. Did I think we could manage dinner without provoking an international crisis?*

I explained that I won't be able to pick him up at the airport because I'm booked at the office. He will take a cab.

*Philadelphia, Wednesday, December 21, 1988*

It's happened again! A London to New York flight with more than two hundred people disintegrated over Scotland while Rob and I sat in a restaurant out on the Main Line.

I'm spooked.

So is he.

*Philadelphia, Thursday, December 22, 1988*

People died on the ground as well. The photographs from Locherbie, the crash site, are just too much. I stayed away from the TV most of the night. I've got Dickens beside me, but I can't keep my mind on it. They are saying now that it looks as if there was a bomb on board. How can people be so evil?

And we were together again.

Kennedy.

Teheran.

*Challenger.*

Flight 103.

*Here's to us.*

Rob left on an afternoon flight. We tried to calculate odds, but neither of us is mathematician enough to be able even to frame the problem. Rob, who is ordinarily a world-class skeptic, wondered whether it was possible that we might sense oncoming disaster? And instinctively huddle against the storm? I told him about Madeline's butterfly.

*Has it happened every time?*

We both thought so. But I went back through this diary tonight. On August 7, 1964, we got safely through a meal.

One exception to the pattern.

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The bond between my father and Orin Robinson grew closer, possibly as a result of the curious intersections between their quiet reunions and the series of historic disasters. They came to refer to this trend as the *Tradition*. Their phone conversations became more frequent. They discounted their alarm on the night of the Locherbie flight. Absurd, they said, to think they could be connected. And anyway there was, after all, the exception to the general pattern. *Thank God for 1964*. That phrase became their watchword.

It was during this period that my father engaged in his brief flirtation with Catholicism. Rob was horrified, but took the position that it was my responsibility to stand by my father during this aberration.

There were still occasional echoes of the *Tradition* in the diary....

*Washington, D.C., Tuesday, February 4, 1992*

...Visited the Eternal Flame today. It is a lovely and sober spot.

How does it happen that the shots fired in Dallas so long ago still hurt?

If Rob and I had not run into each other in Minneapolis that day, is it at all possible it might not have happened? Does that make any kind of sense at all?

*Portland, Oregon, Saturday, December 12, 1992*

The (dental) convention's a bit dry. But I got together with some of the guys from Chicago, and we went

over to Margo's. It's a topless place, and I guess it's a sign you're getting old when you wish they'd move so you could see the basketball game.

I would have enjoyed getting together with Rob. But we let it go this time, more or less by mutual consent.

*Philadelphia, Tuesday, June 14, 1994*

...Rob confessed tonight that he has been east any number of times over the last few years, but has not mentioned it to me. *But it's dumb to behave as if we have been doing something dangerous.*

He's right, of course.

*I'll be in New York this weekend. I could get down for dinner.*

I keep thinking about the butterfly.

"Listen how about a change of venue?"

*Okay. What did you have in mind?*

"I don't know. Something more exotic than Philly."

*Why don't we meet in Atlantic City?"*

"Yeah. Sounds good."

*Dinner by the sea.*

Be nice to see him again. And the world looks quiet. Here's to us.

*Philadelphia, Wednesday, June 15, 1994*

I'll be glad when it's over—

*Philadelphia, Friday, June 17, 1994*

Rob tomorrow. I cannot imagine what life would have been like without him. Yet I've seen so little of him.

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As the world knows, the meteor fell at 7:22 p.m. on the 18th of June. Possibly just as they were sitting

down to dinner.

I've read through these passages until I have them by heart, and I can offer no explanation. The correlation between meetings and catastrophe is necessarily coincidental because it can't be anything else.

But there's one more point: I've gone back and looked closely at August 7, 1964. The exception to the Tradition.

Robinson and my father were wrong: there *was* a disaster on that day. But its nature was less immediately cataclysmic than the other events, so it's easy to see why it might have passed unnoticed.

In the late afternoon of that date, the Congress, with only two negative votes, approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution.

We didn't know it at the time, but the United States had formally entered the Vietnam War.

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