



Miracle on 204th Street

by Edward Conlon

For weeks after Margarita Duarte saw the image of Jesus Christ on the bathroom window of Rosa Diez's fifth-floor apartment, on 204th Street and Post Avenue, in the Inwood section of Manhattan, the crowds gathered in the courtyard below. Over a hundred were there one recent evening at sundown, milling about, speaking in excited giggles and hushed whispers. Binoculars and telescopes were passed around; vendors sold tamales and flavored ices. The courtyard is surrounded by five five-story buildings, and many tenants looked out their windows at the crowd, staring back with the same bold scrutiny to which they were subject themselves. A few hung out laundry to dry and bedding to air, equally indifferent to public inspection and the prospect of the miraculous. Even though the window itself had been removed and boarded up, a second, though less distinct image of Christ had appeared, one apartment over, and the Virgin Mary was spotted in another window, one apartment below. Still another image could be discerned by some in a window on the opposite side of the courtyard.

Witnesses to the first image were able to attest to a likeness no more vivid than the better snapshots of Nessie in her loch, and the others were still less intelligible. Asked about the last image, one young man answered, "It's the white shadow of a woman," while a second said, "I don't know how to say it in English."

"How do you say it in Spanish?"

"Santa María."

"Saint Mary?"

"I guess."

Edward Conlon is a writer living in the Bronx.

Many of Rosa Diez's neighbors have devotional pictures and signs on their doors including one that read "YO ♥ A CRISTO" in bouncing, multicolored letters. Others have more practical accoutrements, such as the bus seat one tenant sports on the landing. The Diez apartment is spacious and spare, with a large, fluid population of relatives and friends. Mrs. Diez does not speak English, but her sisters, Finetta Delarosa and Yomarys Flores, and sister-in-law, Belkas Martinez, translated for her and supplied plentiful commentary and explanations.

"The priest heard about it and he came over. He said he wasn't seeing nothing. That the window was dirty."

"Excuse you? What about the other priest?"

"The last priest that came, he believed it. A nun came last night. She believed it, too."

"Rosa said maybe it be dirty or maybe it be something else. If that's it, why does she and the other neighbors think it was Jesus?"

"Hundreds came."

"Thousands."

"They said prayers in house. The priest washed it, with Clorox and soap, but it didn't come off."

"Three guys tried to take it off, but they couldn't. Then one girl tried, and she could. But they couldn't take it apart at the hardware store, they couldn't get the metal off, the outside part."

Such proofs of the supernatural fed quickly into the rumor pool and added to the legend of the window. Over the next few days, reinforcements from neighboring precincts were called in to police the crowd. The landlord demanded that the window be removed, and Rosa claimed that he threatened her with eviction unless she acquiesced. A compromise was brokered whereby the police would

hold on to the window, and the landlord would return it to Rosa at some later date. A sergeant wrote an affidavit, on crumpled loose-leaf, attesting to the fact that the landlord promised to give it back. The statement concludes with a sentence that attempts a paralegal specificity but attains instead the grandeur of the prophets: "It is the window in which Jesus Christ appeared."

The Diez women were content with the vatic assurances of the policeman, and the multiplication of icons seemed to bear them out. When they were asked what the last big thing to hit the neighborhood was, the vehement chorus resumed:

"Crime."

"Murder."

"We used to call this place 'Vietnam.'"

"That man coming home from the party, in 105, in the late morning. I knew the guy. I saw him shot."

"Also there was the lady who jumped off the roof."

"And the guy who did, off the fourth floor."

"And the guy Morley, he was the last murder."

"And Emilio, in his aunt's apartment in 104."

"We think that was a robbery, a holdup."

"She don't know, 'cause she don't get into personal people's business."

"And the guy, who hanged himself up."

"He was mental sick, and threw himself from the roof."

"It's not an easy neighborhood to live in. Last summer, there were so many bullets. Lots of shots last summer."

Belkas Martinez showed me the bathroom from which the window had been removed. There were no towels or toiletries in the white linoleum room, and the

chain from the light had been accidentally pulled off by one of the devout. Beneath the boarded window the congregation huddled in the courtyard, around the remains of a garden—patches of gravel and an ankle-high tree stump—confined behind a hurricane fence. Except for the sight of the faithful, there was little in the vicinity to admire, still less to worship.

Earlier this year, a few blocks to the north, the first rabid raccoon was captured in Manhattan since Wall Street was a wall. The plague to the south has been less well contained: a murder in Washington Heights occurs roughly once every three days, and the neighborhood has a fair claim to being the busiest retail drug outlet in the country. Small wonder, then, that the consolations sought in this climate of apocalypse are of an upper celestial order.

But even though the apparitions occurred in the parish of St. Jude, patron of lost causes, they have not been welcomed by church authorities. One rather harried parish priest was peremptory in his dismissal of the vision, hastily adding that he had “all respect for these good people.” Across the river, the Bishop of Trenton put the kibosh on a man in Marlboro Township, New Jersey, whose backyard shrine attracted thousands each weekend in the hopes of a glimpse of the Blessed Mother. Other faiths, in other boroughs, have seen their prayers answered with similar ambiguity: Menachem Schneerson, nonagenarian leader of the Brooklyn-based Lubavitcher Hasidim, has not with any vigor discouraged his followers from the belief that he is the Messiah. He has suffered a series of cerebral accidents but not yet met with either death or visible divinity, and so the bets, technically, are still on.

So too, the Diez women, who have in the Latin fashion politely ignored curial impediments to their devotions, persevere in their hope that God has not forgotten 204th Street and Post Avenue.

“It’s the best thing that could happen.”

“Now there’s a lot of people in other windows.”

“The guys that hang out down there, they believe it. They say, O my God!”

“To me, I think it’s a miracle that comes to this house. I want to see if this neighborhood changes, if this changes the neighborhood.”

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NUMBER 113, FALL 1993, PRICE: \$5.50

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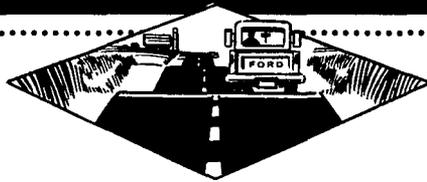
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The Framing of Pat Nolan

by John Von Kannon

State Assemblyman Pat Nolan is not known to many people outside California, but his story is an important one. It is a story that shows just how hard bureaucrats—even gun-toting bureaucrats from the FBI—will work to justify their existence and past mistakes. And it's important because Pat Nolan is a principled and effective politician who could still have a future in front of him.

Nolan was first elected in 1978 as one of sixteen new Republicans in the 80-member Assembly, and soon distinguished himself as the principal architect of a Republican revival. By 1988 he had worked his way up to Republican leader, and was within five votes of unseating the powerful Democratic speaker Willie Brown. Some pegged him for a future governor or senator. What's more, he had broken Stan Evans's Law that "when Our People get in a position of power, they cease to be Our People." That Pat Nolan remained true to his conservative principles even as he advanced may have been the root of his downfall.

In August 1988, the FBI conducted a sting operation against Nolan's office and announced that he was under investigation. Last April, California's U.S. attorney filed charges against him for racketeering and money-laundering.

This is how the sting worked: The FBI set up a phony company, Peachstate Capital, which sought special legislation to reduce its bonding requirements so the company could start doing business and providing employment in a predominantly black neighborhood. The bill did

not involve the use of taxpayer money. As a free-market conservative who first introduced enterprise zone legislation in 1981 and who has supported virtually every effort to reduce government regulation, Nolan voted for the bill. It passed 62 to 5 in the Assembly and unanimously in the Senate. Nolan had voted for a virtually identical bill that passed two years earlier but was vetoed by Governor George Deukmejian, who had been tipped off by the FBI that it was part of an undercover investigation.

After the vote, which took place on May 19, 1988, one of Nolan's legislative aides, Karen Watson, urged him to meet with people she thought were the owners of Peachstate Capital but who were, in fact, FBI agents. She told him they wanted to contribute to his effort to elect a Republican majority. After several requests, Nolan accompanied Watson to a meeting on June 29, where the undercover agents thanked him for his support and handed Watson an envelope, which turned out to contain two postdated checks for \$5,000 each, marked "Payable to the order of ____." (The *Sacramento Bee's* press accounts to the contrary notwithstanding, Nolan was *never* videotaped receiving the envelopes.) Since corporate contributions are legal in California, Nolan's staff deposited one of the checks in his campaign committee account and the other into the Republican Assembly campaign committee, *not* in his own personal checking account. By depositing those checks, his staff inadvertently set Nolan up for a money-laundering charge.

Nolan had voted for the bill twice, and his vote was consistent with his overall voting record and publicly stated views. He had had no contact with the phony company before these votes, and only after the *second* vote did he receive an unsolicited contribution—which by

all appearances was perfectly legal. As Republican leader, Nolan was responsible for raising campaign funds. (The \$10,000 from "Peachstate" represented .314 percent of the \$3.2 million Nolan raised that year.)

Nonetheless, when the charges surfaced, Nolan stepped down as Republican Assembly leader. He has since been re-elected to the Assembly three times.

Pat Nolan is an old friend of mine. I was living in Sacramento in 1988, when the story first appeared, and the rumor around town—recently repeated by Dan Walters, the top political columnist for the *Sacramento Bee* (and no supporter of Nolan)—was that the FBI had originally set up its sting with the idea of catching Assembly Speaker Willie Brown. Brown is the influential and flamboyant lawyer/politician whose income from legal fees has soared since he was elected speaker. (His law office is conveniently located two floors below his Assembly district office in San Francisco.)

But when news of the FBI sting hit the press, Brown was not implicated. It was not lost on Sacramento pundits that the targets eventually chosen were people Brown and his allies wanted taken out: three conservative Democrats and two Republicans, including Pat Nolan.

Whether or not Willie Brown used the FBI to divert attention from himself, it is clear that the FBI had no case against Nolan. Not until April of this year did U.S. Attorney George O'Connell file charges. Four years and eight months after Nolan was targeted, days before O'Connell's term of office was up, and just four months before the statute of limitations would expire, O'Connell—reportedly hankering for a federal judgeship from the Clinton administration—decided to indict a Republican.

John Von Kannon, former publisher of The American Spectator, is vice president and treasurer of the Heritage Foundation.