Winter 1959

The Salvation of Giovanni

Duane L. Coykendall
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope
Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol6/iss1/2

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Calliope by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
The Salvation of Giovanni

Dr. Dondo:

When they sent me up here from the juvenile retention home four months ago, you said that my writing it all down on paper and giving it to you would help a lot with the therapy. So here it is, the whole story, just like you wanted it.

In the first place, I didn’t get along in school. None of the kids liked me, and most of them went out of their way to make rotten remarks at me or shove me around. I guess that was because I make for good picking, being so small and all. I remember these two big guys in particular that used to lay for me after school, especially in the winter when there was snow on the ground. They got a big kick out of throwing me down in the snow and rubbing my face with it, and saying: “Baggadonis is a big bag a donuts and he’s cruising for a bruising.” I figure those two guys ought to be in here instead of me. Maybe they never started any fires or anything, but beating up on some little guy like me and calling him names is about twice as bad as burning up a few old buildings because I got feelings and buildings don’t. I remember these guys used to make me run home after they were through beating on me. If I didn’t run, they’d just catch up with me at the next corner by going around the block and they’d get me again. Sometimes they did it anyway, because I can’t run very fast. And lots of times there’d be other kids around watching these bullies working me over. It made for a pretty good show, I guess, because these other kids just laughed and didn’t do anything to help me out or anything. I know I would of done something if I was bigger and saw something happening like what those guys were doing to me, because once I saw this little kid with a toad in a quart jar. The kid was rolling this jar down the sidewalk with the toad inside it, and the toad was throwing up, and bleeding, and everything. Anyway, I took the jar away from this kid and let the poor toad go and smashed the jar. The kid bawled too, like it had been marbles or something I took away from him. But then this kid’s old man comes out and starts giving me hell, and then he runs after me and chases me away, without even giving me a chance to explain or anything. I guess most people think that nothing besides themselves has got feelings. If you’ve ever felt like a toad in a jar, Doc, you’ll know what I mean about people like that.
But getting knocked around isn't so bad as thinking about it afterwards, because when somebody's pushing you around or washing your face in the snow or chasing you, you're just scared. But when it's over, you aren't scared anymore, and you just think, and you're ashamed. You can't help but think with sore muscles or a chapped face and cracked lips all the time reminding you that you let some goon beat on you. That's the worst part of it right there; thinking about it. I remember I used to just shake for hours, and lots of times my face would heat up like I was blushing when I thought about it. I remember I had this book, too. It was called *Elements of Judo*, and it was subtitled "Science; Not Strength." It was a war-time book, and it had pictures of guys with American uniforms and guys with German uniforms. The guys with the American uniforms were always little guys, like me, and they'd all the time be throwing around these big guys in the German uniforms. I remember that sometimes I used to pretend that my pillow was one of these guys that was always picking on me. I'm telling you that I used to beat the hell out of that pillow. After I was through though, I used to feel awful silly; ashamed, I guess. Sometimes I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror without spitting on it. And that used to make me feel more ashamed, seeing my face in the mirror with spit running down it, but somehow it was kind of proper. I remember I used to think about all kinds of ways I could use to get even with these guys that picked on me all the time. I had lots of ideas alright, but if I'd had a few guts, I wouldn't have needed any ideas. I would of just called them out, but I never did until quite a lot later.

And that guy who said: "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me," he ought to be in here too. What a jerk. I guess nobody ever got mad at him and called him names, just because they knew they could get away with it. And I guess nobody ever screwed up his name and called him a bag a donuts, or a wop, or a spaghetti bender, either. And I guess girls never giggled at him either. That used to hurt me a lot, the fact that these girls were all the time giggling and laughing at me. Of course I know girls giggle all the time, but sometimes I could hear them whispering too, and I could see them looking at me like I was some kind of a disease or something. I know when I used to walk by them, they'd clam right up and look the other way, but when I was one or two steps past, they'd start up again with their whispering and giggling and staring, so I knew they were making fun of me. I'll bet they're sorry about laughing at me now though, especially the ones of them that catches cancer.

I don't know if you've ever been alone, and thinking a lot, Doc, but if you have, maybe you'll understand how it was with me. Before it got bad, I used to think it was kind of a challenge to try to
answer all these stupid questions that came up inside my head. Then, when it got bad, I figured that even though you can answer most of the questions that come up from outside your head, you can never answer the ones that come up from the inside. You can just stew and try to answer them, but you can never answer them. It's kind of funny, but I don't even remember what most of the questions were, anymore, but some of them were: "What are you doing here?" "Why can't you get along?" "What is going to become of you?" "What are you going to do about it?" And the answers came out in a kind of a chorus, repeating themselves over and over. I remember one which bothered me a lot. It kept saying: "Giovanni, you're no good. You're just a dirty, no-good wop."

I guess most of the questions were kind of vague, but everytime one popped up in my head, I'd start thinking. And I couldn't stop, and that was hell, and I'm not kidding. That's why I ended up doing all those crazy things, just to keep from going crazy. Sometimes I couldn't even sleep because of all this talk going on in my head. It's not what the words said so much that made me feel so rotten. It was just that I couldn't stop them and they wouldn't quit. They wouldn't leave me any peace. They'd just keep racing through my head, and there was no end to them. When I talked to somebody, or watched television, or read, or something, they'd go away for awhile. But when I was alone, which was a lot of the time, one of these stupid questions would pop up, and these thoughts would start running and jumping around in my head like they were trying to get out and couldn't. I can't tell you how bad it got, Doc, but I'd ten times rather go to an old fashioned dentist than to put up with what I had to for even a minute.

Now I'll tell you what really screwed up the works. You see, after it got so I couldn't stand this thinking any more, I started looking for some way to get out of it. Like I said, I couldn't control these screwy thoughts, but they didn't seem to bother me so much when I was doing something. The whole trouble there was that doing things generally means being around people. And for me, being around with people means getting kicked in the teeth. So the only way I could keep these thoughts from rotting out my brains was to find some kind of entertainment I could do by myself. And I'm not kidding when I say I tried everything to keep these thoughts away before Icon finally saved me from them.

Watching television was alright for awhile, but the thing there was that sometimes when these words start eating at your brain, you just can't watch television, because there isn't one around. Maybe this sounds kind of bush, Doc, but I think the mind is a lot like some kind of a poisonous jungle, and when you're in it, alone, you have to have one of these jungle knives with you and be chopping all the
time at this stuff or else it will just kind of grow over you and strangle
you. Well, I was looking for a jungle knife, and it had to be pretty
portable, because I never knew when I'd be in this jungle and have
to be hacking in order to keep this stuff from growing over me. I know
for awhile I started reading these pocket-books, and one time in the
study hall, this teacher sees me with one, and he takes it away from me
because it's got this girl's picture on the cover, and she's not wearing
much. Anyway, these words start bouncing around in my head, and
I had all I could do to keep from screaming. I even started chewing
on my collar, and when the bell rang, it was half gone. I guess maybe
I could of got up and gone to the library or something, but then
everybody would of looked at me and started laughing, and that
would have been even worse. I tried to figure out why this teacher
did what he did to me, and I finally figured he hated me because I'm
a second generation Italian with a screwy name.

I remember another time I went on this whistle kick. I guess
that was the craziest one of all. I used to whistle all the time, even
during classes when I'd put my hand over one ear and make these
little hissing noises. They'd go through the bones in my head, and I
could hear the tunes in my covered ear. Sometimes I'd pretend that
these tunes would drive out the bad thoughts, but they never did. The
reason why the whistling never worked very well was because I'd
whistle on three or four bars of the same tune for a long time, and
then the tune would keep repeating itself in my head after I'd quit
whistling it. Those tunes bouncing around up there were about as bad
as the words.

Anyhow, I figured that these pocket books were my best bet for
keeping these thoughts away. The only thing was that a lot of
these books had parts in them about people a lot like me. I
couldn't read those because they made me feel kind of embarrassed
and uncomfortable and ashamed because they were never very good
parts.

Now, this next part is pretty important because it tells how I
got mixed up in this fire business. I hope that after you read it, Doc,
that you'll know why I had to do what I did. It all started when
I was taking a long way home to duck these bullies I told you about.
You see, sometimes I could avoid them by crawling through this
hole in the school-park fence and taking a long way home. Anyway,
I was walking down past the Miller Street Market, and I smelled
smoke. You see, this place was on fire. Well, I watched this fire be-
cause I didn't have anything else to do, and all of a sudden my eyes
kind of go out of focus or something. Anyway, I go into this sort of
daze, like I was hypnotized, and I just stood there and watched this
place burn down. There were firemen there, but they couldn't do much
because the fire was a lot bigger than they were, so I just stood in
front of the market, and watched the place burn. And, do you know
that during that whole time not one of these screwy questions starts
eating at me? And afterwards I felt good, too. Sort of uplifted, I
guess you could say. I even made jokes with my old lady that night.
I hadn't done that for a long time, mostly because she's busy a lot,
and we don't think the same things are funny anymore.

Now this might sound a little screwy, Doc, but I felt so good
that night that I figured I owed somebody something. I mean I felt
so grateful for getting away from these words that eat at me that I
just figured I should thank whoever was responsible. And besides, I'm
one of these guys that likes to pay his way as much as he can. Well,
that night I had this dream. I dreamed that these little fire animals
were running around. They had white stomachs and fiery fur. They
looked a lot like a bunch of ping-pong balls that were set on fire,
and they ran around about the same way. If you've ever set a ping-
pong ball on fire, Dr. Dondo, you'll know how they ran around. Any-
way, after these little animals ran around for a while, they all came
together in this big pool and formed a sort of person. Well, this big
fire shaped like a person said that his name was Icon, and that he
was the god of fire, and then I showed up in the dream, and Icon
talked to me. I don't remember exactly what he said, but he got
real mad at me when he found out that I was afraid of him. He
started screaming at me and threatening me, but I got mad and
started screaming back and then I wasn't afraid anymore. Then Icon
sort of flowed into a horse shape, and I rode him. We rode for miles,
and everywhere we went, we set things on fire. I didn't get burned,
though, and I don't think I ever enjoyed anything more in my life
than that horse ride. But then, without any warning or anything, the
horse fell apart and formed these little animals that ran around like
burning ping-pong balls. And then all of them start talking at once,
only they said the same thing, so this voice that sounds like its coming
from a hundred different echoes says: "I am Icon, the only true god.
You shall worship me faithfully. If you do not, I would have you
remember that fire is pain as well as comfort." Then one of these
little fire balls jumps at me and hits me in the chest. It knocked me
over on top of these other little fire balls, and they started licking at
me and burning me. I tried to fight them, but they were all over me,
and when I hit one, it would bust up and make three or four new balls.
Then one of them bit me inside of my cheek because it was so hot
that I was breathing with my mouth open and he got in. Then I
woke up. I remember my sheets were soaked with sweat, and I was
afraid to go back to sleep.

Anyway, I figured this Icon would give me the works again if
I didn't play it like he said about the worshipping. So that afternoon,
after class, I bought six of these big yellow candles, and I lit them in
my room and started praying. I felt real good then, I guess because I didn't feel anything. I was just sort of dazed, looking at the flames and all. I remember I noticed the way these little flames ate away at all the wax like it was nothing, and I figured that maybe I should be more like a flame. After I went to bed, Icon showed up again, but this time he was real warm and friendly. He looked something like a transparent rubber light bulb would if it was lit and if there was such a thing. I remember he told me he was real pleased with the candles and the prayers, but he told me that I should make bigger sacrifices than candles and have commandments if I really wanted to worship him right. Well, the whole thing made me feel kind of proud because Icon was pleased with me, and I was darn sure going to try to do him right for it.

So, the next night after school, I got busy with the commandments. I thought about them a lot. This is what I finally came up with:

**COMMANDMENTS**

1. Whoever offends me offends Icon because I am his earthly representative. Anybody who offends Icon by harming me must be punished accordingly. If I fail to punish the offender, I become responsible for the offender's sin, and then I will have to punish myself. I will do this by: laying two safety matches on my forearm and lighting them with a third. Then I must let them burn according to Icon's will until they are out.

2. Since Icon is the only true god, I will break one of the false god's commandments each day. If I fail to keep this commandment, I must punish myself by burning two matches on my forearm.

3. When the Miller Street Market is rebuilt, I must sacrifice it to Icon because it was there that I first saw the light. If I fail to keep this commandment I must punish myself by burning two matches on my forearm.

4. I will make at least one sacrifice a week to Icon; a building if at all possible. If I don't, I must punish myself by burning a whole book of matches on my forearm.

Well, after I made up these commandments, I printed them up real neat. Then I painted this matchbook black, and I folded the commandments up as small as I could, and I stapled them into the cover. The next day I got this little fire-breathing dragon decal at the dime store, and I pasted it on the matchbook cover, only it wasn't just a matchbook. It was more like a bible. I sure got a lot of comfort out of that matchbook. No kidding, Doc, I felt like I had something solid; something I could grab on to, and something that could
save me from these crazy thoughts that went tearing through my head. And I’m not kidding when I say that just having those matches kept me from going nuts.

The next day in school, the girls giggled at me just like always, and the fellows made rotten remarks. After school these two guys I told you about got me and washed my face in the snow again. It was a bad day, and when I figured it out, the first commandment had been broken seven times, and I’d let the offenders get away with it. I felt awful guilty about it, like I’d let my only good friend down. And besides that, I figured Icon might give it to me again in my sleep like he had that first night. But mostly, I felt guilty, real guilty, and, well, seven offenses at two matches apiece makes fourteen matches, and I guess you’ve seen the scars on my forearms.

After the first day, though, things were different. I got this one bully with a brick after school. I’ll bet he’s still drinking his dinner. I never got the other guy, but someday I will. The only thing, I didn’t know what to do about the girls. They were the worst offenders to Icon of all, laughing at his representative like they did. But you can’t come right out and hit a girl with a brick. I worried a lot about what to do to the girls until I read this article that said women can get cancer in the breast by getting pinched there. So I started backing them off in corners and pinching them just as hard as I could, and I hope everyone of them gets it and rots away like old lady Webster across the street did.

I guess you know the rest of it Doc. I set fourteen fires in two weeks. I won’t have to give you the play by play on that, though, because it made all the newspapers. I’ve still got the clippings if you want to see them. As a matter of fact, I’d like for you to see them. There’s a real good picture of me in one of them. Icon was real pleased about that.

And another thing, when I got caught and took down to the juvenile retention home, one of the people down there asks me why I set all those fires, and I says: “Just because I’m goddamn religious, that’s all.” And this guy looks at me real funny, like I was a nut or something. I guess he didn’t know about Icon’s second commandment. But then, that didn’t surprise me much, because a lot of people are ignorant about the true religion, and how important it is, and all. I know when I get out of here, I’ll just have to spread the word—for the good of mankind, I guess you could say.

Giovanni Bagdadonis,
Icon’s representative