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Confederacy of Dunces #8

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois
studio1@csbsju.edu

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Confederacy of Dunces #8

My sister, Sally, fell in love with her minister. She would invite him to lunch at expensive restaurants and pick up the tab. She told him her innermost secrets, as one would do with a minister skilled in pastoral counseling, or a sensitive lover. During one luncheon she was revealing herself, making herself spiritually naked, turning herself inside out, and her pastor leaned over the table. On the tines of his fork was an escargot. He said, *You know, I only listen to about twenty percent of what you tell me.*

Sally was shocked. She felt destroyed. How could he be so cruel? She ran from the restaurant, left him with the bill. But in the subway she wondered what he was really saying. Maybe what he meant was that he was separating the wheat from the chaff, that he was only attending to the most essential parts of her.

She got off the train, went upstairs and down again, reversed the direction of her travel. She liked the fact that no one around her in the car knew of her reversal. No one knew even one percent of her. She was estranged from every other human being, except her pastor, who had discerned the most important part of her, disregarded the unimportant, the trivial, and accepted her for who she was.

She entered the restaurant, expecting him to be gone, but he was seated exactly as she had left him. He was still sipping white wine. On the table was a fresh bottle. He was a man of God, immune to anger, immune to misunderstanding. God had granted him immunity. She was not immune to anything, not anger, not food or plant allergies.

No wonder he only listened to twenty percent of what she said. To listen to more would encumber him, would drown him in wheat dust.

I had my own relationship problems, also related to a train. I got fat again to get some time off from my girlfriend. She's doesn't like me when I'm chubby. *I'm not a chubby-chaser*, she tells me, her voice lean with contempt. *Call me when you're....* she doesn't know how to

finish the sentence. It would be a lot easier if I simply waved a Twinkie and she understood my sign language and went away for a while, leaving me to enjoy the peace and quiet I crave.

This time it's different. I'm on a train near Spuyten Duyvil, and I feel it. I know we're moving way too fast. I've been on this train before and we've never moved this fast. I know there's a curve ahead. I'm glad I'm reading a used paperback, not an expensive tablet. I put the book up to my forehead, four thick inches of swollen pulp, as the car leaves the tracks. It's all the protection I have against the hard, metallic world.

It's the eighth time I'm reading *A Confederacy of Dunces*. The spine is duct taped, the pages grimy. As we lurch toward the river, I wish that John Kennedy Toole were still alive. I wish he had not taken his life in a car parked along the New Jersey Turnpike. I see my death coming. I've never created anything worth dying for, or living for. I'm just going through the motions.

I'm in a hospital bed. I'm not badly injured, but after the crash I temporarily lost the power to speak, so it seemed to the medical staff that I was worse off than I really was. My girlfriend hears about the crash. Her concern about me getting fat vanishes. She comes into the hospital room in tears. She wants me back. She doesn't care if I weigh 300 pounds. She doesn't care if I'm as fat as the Dunce in *Confederacy of Dunces*. She asks me how she could be so stupid. She tells me that people have died, people are in the ICU, that we have to love and appreciate each other, we have to take care of each other, that love is all we need. She's been reduced to platitudes by the second-hand drama of my Bronx tragedy.

I smile weakly. She attributes my weakness to the crash. She strokes my forehead. She brings her chair close and spoons vanilla ice cream into my mouth.

-Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois
Edgewater, CO