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Across the Cafeteria and On to the Mall

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ACROSS THE CAFETERIA AND ON TO THE MALL

(WITH APOLOGIES TO ERNEST HEMINGWAY)

They entered the cafeteria at two minutes after twelve and there were many empty tables and they walked to the center of the room and they claimed one, one girl seating herself with her back to the door and the other with her back to the wall, as people did who had been in danger and were once very afraid and now knew to protect themselves.

“What shall we eat?” the girl with her back to the door asked.

“I don’t know,” the other responded. “What would you prefer?”

“I don’t know. I was thinking perhaps a bagel,” her friend said.

“Bagels are good,” the other agreed. “Especially if they have poppy seeds on them. Then they are very tasty and very good and it is hard to eat just one.

“Are they good with cream cheese?” her friend asked.

The girl with her back to the wall knew little about cream cheese except that some of it came in silver foil and the silver foil often had blue letters printed on a white circle and the letters said “Philadelphia.” And though she had never been to Philadelphia, she had heard of it and what she had heard had not been all bad, so she thought that this cream cheese might be good. Not that it couldn’t be bad, because many things are bad. But then one must try everything to know the good from the bad and when one does that then one can be sure.

“So are they good with cream cheese?” her friend repeated. Then,

“They are, aren’t they?”

And the other girl did not want her to see her uncertainty, so she nodded. And the two of them rose and they stood in the empty line, which was empty but for a cheery librarian, and they ordered their bagels and cream cheese and took them back to their table, which was in the center of the cafeteria, and they sat in their chairs, the one with her back to the door and the other with her back to the wall and they ate their sandwiches and they were good and the one who had known nothing of cream cheese knew about it now.

“One day,” she said, “I will go to Philadelphia and try a cheese steak.”

And the other, her mouth full of the soft white cheese and the firm poppy bagel nodded and said, “Good. Very good.”

They ate for what they believed to be forty-five seconds. Then they rested and the one with her back to the wall said, “Perhaps I should try another college.”

“Listen,” said the other, “going to another school doesn’t make any difference. I’ve tried that. You can’t escape homework and teachers by moving from one college to another. There’s nothing to that.”

“But you’ve never been to where I want to go.”

“Hell. If you went there as you are now it would be just the same. This is a good school. It will not kill you.”

The one who had been told this gazed out the window towards the parking lot. There was no promise nor hope of sun; only the

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same strong rain, cold from the sky. And while she would not say it, she knew that her friend was wrong. School broke everyone. It took tuition from the very good and the very bad and the very smart and the very stupid impartially. And those who could not pay, it dropped.

“Cheer up,” said the other. “Didn’t your father get you a credit card?”

The girl pondered this and sipped at her coffee, it was thick and rich and flavorful in her paper cup and a part of her was happy that they were there in the light and warmth of the cafeteria, though another part was sad because her thoughts were as formless as gruel.

“Look,” said her friend, whose hair was brushed back like a boy’s. “There’s the English teacher who gave me a C. He said that I wrote too much and that it was a virtue not to write unnecessarily in his class and that he had always considered it so and respected it.”

The one with the mushy thoughts looked from her coffee. At the head of the serving line was a man. Not a big man, nor a wide man, nor an old man. But a spectacled man with skin that was clean and lotioned and smooth. She watched him walk from the cashier through the now crowded lunchroom. His pink tray was held close to his waist and he flicked it so that the color caught the eye of a busboy pushing a cart. The busboy jerked the cart aside out of reflex, avoiding the clean-skinned man, but finding a student. The edge of the cart

sliced the student’s down jacket. And the coat bled feathers.

The girl saw this and remembered an hour she had once spent with her sister at Filene’s. It was the one day of the year when the store’s wedding gowns went on sale. The doors opened and there was a great roar from the crowd, and running with her sister, she watched a buxom woman lunge toward the racks with open hands. The woman wanted to pull as many dresses as she could from their hangers. But two other women bumped her, one pushed her with her shoulder, and the other elbowed her against a column as the last of the crowd went by. There were so many women running that one tripped and fell and disappeared under the feet of the throng. And when she rose from the floor, there was a shoeprint on her cheek and the dresses were all gone.

The English teacher continued to walk in the way that only teachers who made you read books and write papers and take tests could walk. When he passed them, her friend nodded and he smiled and his eyes were as tender as they ever were, which was not too tender, as he knew.

“He reminds me of Manuel,” said the one with her back to the wall. Manuel was a waiter at a tapas bar on Halsted. One Saturday he had told them about a loco old man who would come and sit in the shadow of the lampposts that fronted the bar until all hours of the morning. The man had taught Spanish once, Manuel said, but he

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was deaf now. And if anyone asked him a question, he would say “nada.” And if they repeated it, he would say, “pues nada.” And if they asked it a third time, he would say “pues nada” again. The girls smiled at this as only the truly amused can smile, since it was pleasant to know that those who castigated them now would have less than a fine time later.

“Do you ever think about calling Robert?” asked the one with the boyish hair.

“No,” said the other. She picked lint from her pullover sweater, then brushed at her tweed skirt. “He’s an Honors Student. It means a lot to him, that title, but I’m not much impressed. We made love once and he was really very fast. When it was over he called me ‘little bunny’ and asked me if something had moved.”

The two finished their sandwiches and looked at the clock. It was twelve forty-five and the one with her back to the wall announced that the bell for their Math class would toll in fifteen minutes.

“Want to skip it?” said the one with the boyish hair. “Want to drive to a mall?”

“All right,” said the other. “I haven’t seen Gurnee Mills. I should see Gurnee Mills.”

“Are you certain?” her friend said. “Because I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to do...”

“Nor that isn’t good for me,” the girl said. “I know. But this is fine.”

They put on their coats and went out through the door closest to where their cars were parked. It was cold and damp and wet. The one with the brushed back hair dashed through the rain and went for her Toyota. When it pulled to the curb, the girl

who had been waiting got inside and they started away from the college grounds.

“Well, sister,” said the driver. “We’re going to do some damned fine shopping together.”

On the shoulder ahead was a police car waiting for speeders. As they passed, the policeman inside wagged his finger and ignited the dome lights.

“Yes,” said the other girl. “Isn’t it precious to think so?”

— *Robert N. Georgalas*