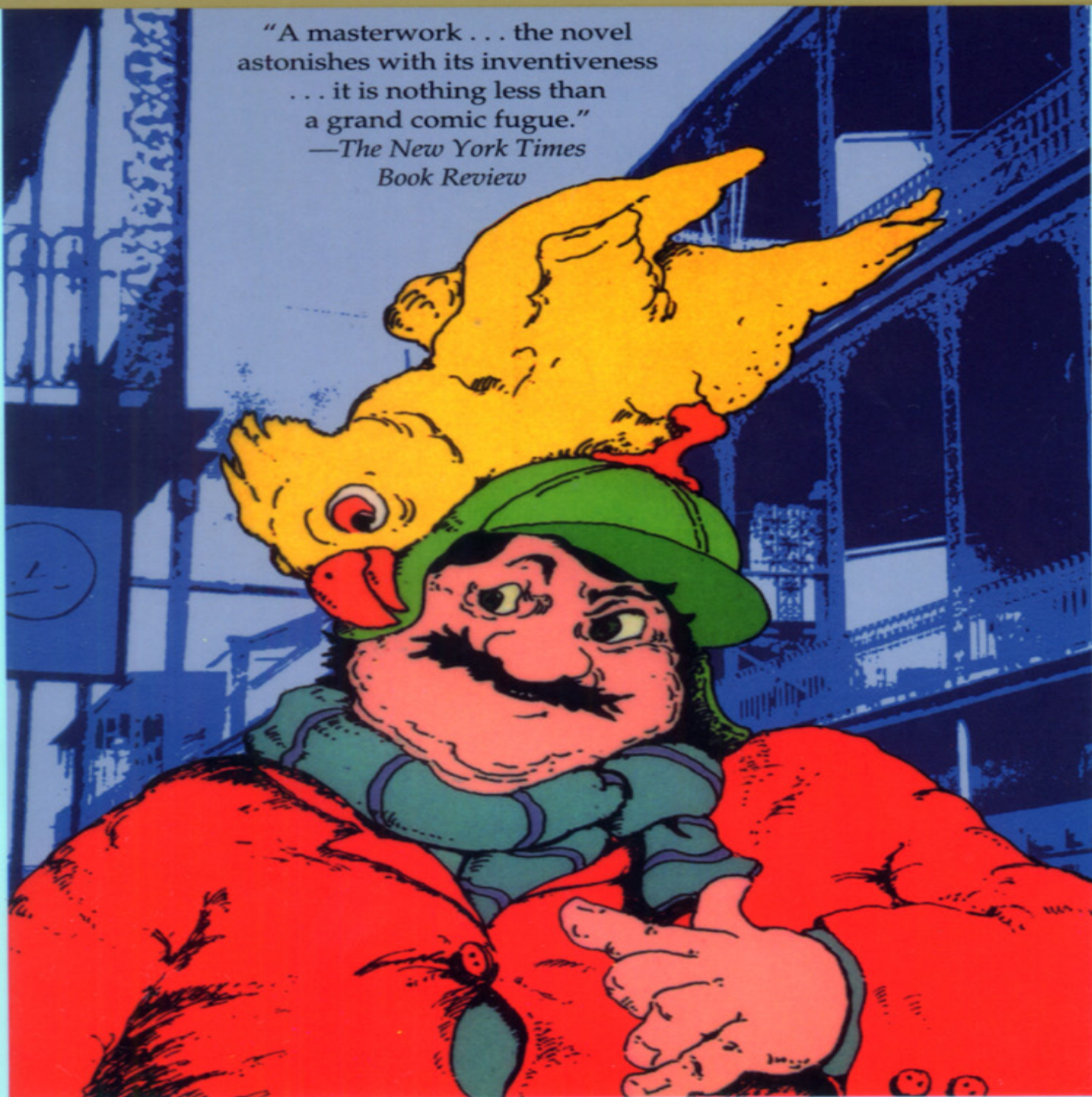


A Confederacy of DUNCES

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE

"A masterwork . . . the novel
astonishes with its inventiveness
. . . it is nothing less than
a grand comic fugue."
—*The New York Times*
Book Review





A Confederacy of Dunces

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JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE

Foreword by WALKER PERCY



Grove Press
New York

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When a true genius appears in the world,
you may know him by this sign, that the dunces
are all in confederacy against him.

Jonathan Swift—

“THOUGHTS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS,
MORAL AND DIVERTING”

FOREWORD

Perhaps the best way to introduce this novel—which on my third reading of it astounds me even more than the first—is to tell of my first encounter with it. While I was teaching at Loyola in 1976 I began to get telephone calls from a lady unknown to me. What she proposed was preposterous. It was not that she had written a couple of chapters of a novel and wanted to get into my class. It was that her son, who was dead, had written an entire novel during the early sixties, a big novel, and she wanted me to read it. Why would I want to do that? I asked her. Because it is a great novel, she said.

Over the years I have become very good at getting out of things I don't want to do. And if ever there was something I didn't want to do, this was surely it: to deal with the mother of a dead novelist and, worst of all, to have to read a manuscript that she said was *great*, and that, as it turned out, was a badly smeared, scarcely readable carbon.

But the lady was persistent, and it somehow came to pass that she stood in my office handing me the hefty manuscript. There was no getting out of it; only one hope remained—that I could read a few pages and that they would be bad enough for me, in good conscience, to read no farther. Usually I can do just that. Indeed the first paragraph often suffices. My only fear was that this one might not be bad enough, or might be just good enough, so that I would have to keep reading.

In this case I read on. And on. First with the sinking feeling that it was not bad enough to quit, then with a prickle of interest, then a growing excitement, and finally an incredulity: surely it was not possible that it was so good. I shall resist the temptation to say what first made me gape, grin, laugh out loud, shake my head in wonderment. Better let the reader make the discovery on his own.

Here at any rate is Ignatius Reilly, without progenitor in any literature I know of—slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one—who is in violent revolt against the entire modern age, lying in his flannel nightshirt, in a back bedroom on Constantinople Street in New Orleans, who between gigantic seizures of

flatulence and eructations is filling dozens of Big Chief tablets with invective.

His mother thinks he needs to go to work. He does, in a succession of jobs. Each job rapidly escalates into a lunatic adventure, a full-blown disaster; yet each has, like Don Quixote's, its own eerie logic.

His girlfriend, Myrna Minkoff of the Bronx, thinks he needs sex. What happens between Myrna and Ignatius is like no other boy-meets-girl story in my experience.

By no means a lesser virtue of Toole's novel is his rendering of the particularities of New Orleans, its back streets, its out-of-the-way neighborhoods, its odd speech, its ethnic whites—and one black in whom Toole has achieved the near-impossible, a superb comic character of immense wit and resourcefulness without the least trace of Rastus minstrelsy.

But Toole's greatest achievement is Ignatius Reilly himself, intellectual, ideologue, deadbeat, goof-off, glutton, who should repel the reader with his gargantuan bloats, his thunderous contempt and one-man war against everybody—Freud, homosexuals, heterosexuals, Protestants, and the assorted excesses of modern times. Imagine an Aquinas gone to pot, transported to New Orleans from whence he makes a wild foray through the swamps to LSU at Baton Rouge, where his lumber jacket is stolen in the faculty men's room where he is seated, overcome by mammoth gastrointestinal problems. His pyloric valve periodically closes in response to the lack of a "proper geometry and theology" in the modern world.

I hesitate to use the word *comedy*—though comedy it is—because that implies simply a funny book, and this novel is a great deal more than that. A great rumbling farce of Falstaffian dimensions would better describe it; *commedia* would be closer to it.

It is also sad. One never quite knows where the sadness comes from—from the tragedy at the heart of Ignatius's great gaseous rages and lunatic adventures or the tragedy attending the book itself.

The tragedy of the book is the tragedy of the author—his suicide in 1969 at the age of thirty-two. Another tragedy is the body of work we have been denied.

It is a great pity that John Kennedy Toole is not alive and well and writing. But he is not, and there is nothing we can do about it but make sure

that this gargantuan tumultuous human tragicomedy is at least made available to a world of readers.

WALKER PERCY

There is a New Orleans city accent ... associated with downtown New Orleans, particularly with the German and Irish Third Ward, that is hard to distinguish from the accent of Hoboken, Jersey City, and Astoria, Long Island, where the Al Smith inflection, extinct in Manhattan, has taken refuge. The reason, as you might expect, is that the same stocks that brought the accent to Manhattan imposed it on New Orleans.

“You’re right on that. We’re Mediterranean. I’ve never been to Greece or Italy, but I’m sure I’d be at home there as soon as I landed.”

He would, too, I thought. New Orleans resembles Genoa or Marseilles, or Beirut or the Egyptian Alexandria more than it does New York, although all seaports resemble one another more than they can resemble any place in the interior. Like Havana and Port-au-Prince, New Orleans is within the orbit of a Hellenistic world that never touched the North Atlantic. The Mediterranean, Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico form a homogeneous, though interrupted, sea.

A. J. Liebling,
THE EARL OF LOUISIANA

A Confederacy of Dunces

One

A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. In the shadow under the green visor of the cap Ignatius J. Reilly's supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down upon the other people waiting under the clock at the D. H. Holmes department store, studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress. Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offenses against taste and decency. Possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul.

Ignatius himself was dressed comfortably and sensibly. The hunting cap prevented head colds. The voluminous tweed trousers were durable and permitted unusually free locomotion. Their pleats and nooks contained pockets of warm, stale air that soothed Ignatius. The plaid flannel shirt made a jacket unnecessary while the muffler guarded exposed Reilly skin between earflap and collar. The outfit was acceptable by any theological and geometrical standards, however abstruse, and suggested a rich inner life.

Shifting from one hip to the other in his lumbering, elephantine fashion, Ignatius sent waves of flesh rippling beneath the tweed and flannel, waves that broke upon buttons and seams. Thus rearranged, he contemplated the long while that he had been waiting for his mother. Principally he considered the discomfort he was beginning to feel. It seemed as if his whole being was ready to burst from his swollen suede desert boots, and, as if to verify this, Ignatius turned his singular eyes toward his feet. The feet did indeed look swollen. He was prepared to offer the sight of those bulging boots to his mother as evidence of her thoughtlessness. Looking up, he saw the sun beginning to descend over the Mississippi at the foot of Canal Street. The Holmes clock said almost five. Already he was polishing a few

carefully worded accusations designed to reduce his mother to repentance or, at least, confusion. He often had to keep her in her place.

She had driven him downtown in the old Plymouth, and while she was at the doctor's seeing about her arthritis, Ignatius had bought some sheet music at Werlein's for his trumpet and a new string for his lute. Then he had wandered into the Penny Arcade on Royal Street to see whether any new games had been installed. He had been disappointed to find the miniature mechanical baseball game gone. Perhaps it was only being repaired. The last time that he had played it the batter would not work and, after some argument, the management had returned his nickel, even though the Penny Arcade people had been base enough to suggest that Ignatius had himself broken the baseball machine by kicking it.

Concentrating upon the fate of the miniature baseball machine, Ignatius detached his being from the physical reality of Canal Street and the people around him and therefore did not notice the two eyes that were hungrily watching him from behind one of D. H. Holmes' pillars, two sad eyes shining with hope and desire.

Was it possible to repair the machine in New Orleans? Probably so. However, it might have to be sent to someplace like Milwaukee or Chicago or some other city whose name Ignatius associated with efficient repair shops and permanently smoking factories. Ignatius hoped that the baseball game was being carefully handled in shipment, that none of its little players was being chipped or maimed by brutal railroad employees determined to ruin the railroad forever with damage claims from shippers, railroad employees who would subsequently go on strike and destroy the Illinois Central.

As Ignatius was considering the delight which the little baseball game afforded humanity, the two sad and covetous eyes moved toward him through the crowd like torpedoes zeroing in on a great woolly tanker. The policeman plucked at Ignatius' bag of sheet music.

"You got any identification, mister?" the policeman asked in a voice that hoped that Ignatius was officially unidentified.

"What?" Ignatius looked down upon the badge on the blue cap. "Who are you?"

"Let me see your driver's license."

"I don't drive. Will you kindly go away? I am waiting for my mother."

“What’s this hanging out your bag?”

“What do you think it is, stupid? It’s a string for my lute.”

“What’s that?” The policeman drew back a little. “Are you local?”

“Is it the part of the police department to harass me when this city is a flagrant vice capital of the civilized world?” Ignatius bellowed over the crowd in front of the store. “This city is famous for its gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, Antichrists, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs, and lesbians, all of whom are only too well protected by graft. If you have a moment, I shall endeavor to discuss the crime problem with you, but don’t make the mistake of bothering *me*.”

The policeman grabbed Ignatius by the arm and was struck on his cap with the sheet music. The dangling lute string whipped him on the ear.

“Hey,” the policeman said.

“Take that!” Ignatius cried, noticing that a circle of interested shoppers was beginning to form.

Inside D. H. Holmes, Mrs. Reilly was in the bakery department pressing her maternal breast against a glass case of macaroons. With one of her fingers, chafed from many years of scrubbing her son’s mammoth, yellowed drawers, she tapped on the glass case to attract the saleslady.

“Oh, Miss Inez,” Mrs. Reilly called in that accent that occurs south of New Jersey only in New Orleans, that Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico. “Over here, babe.”

“Hey, how you making?” Miss Inez asked. “How you feeling, darling?”

“Not so hot,” Mrs. Reilly answered truthfully.

“Ain’t that a shame.” Miss Inez leaned over the glass case and forgot about her cakes. “I don’t feel so hot myself. It’s my feet.”

“Lord, I wisht I was that lucky. I got arthuritis in my elbow.”

“Aw, no!” Miss Inez said with genuine sympathy. “My poor old poppa’s got that. We make him go set himself in a hot tub fulla berling water.”

“My boy’s floating around in our tub all day long. I can’t hardly get in my own bathroom no more.”

“I thought he was married, precious.”

“Ignatius? Eh, la la,” Mrs. Reilly said sadly. “Sweetheart, you wanna gimme two dozen of them fancy mix?”

“But I thought you told me he was married,” Miss Inez said while she was putting the cakes in a box.

“He ain’t even got him a prospect. The little girlfriend he had flew the coop.”

“Well, he’s got time.”

“I guess so,” Mrs. Reilly said disinterestedly. “Look, you wanna gimme half a dozen wine cakes, too? Ignatius gets nasty if we run outta cake.”

“Your boy likes his cake, huh?”

“Oh, Lord, my elbow’s killing me,” Mrs. Reilly answered.

In the center of the crowd that had formed before the department store the hunting cap, the green radius of the circle of people, was bobbing about violently.

“I shall contact the mayor,” Ignatius was shouting.

“Let the boy alone,” a voice said from the crowd.

“Go get the strippers on Bourbon Street,” an old man added. “He’s a good boy. He’s waiting for his momma.”

“Thank you,” Ignatius said haughtily. “I hope that all of you will bear witness to this outrage.”

“You come with me,” the policeman said to Ignatius with waning self-confidence. The crowd was turning into something of a mob, and there was no traffic patrolman in sight. “We’re going to the precinct.”

“A good boy can’t even wait for his momma by D. H. Holmes.” It was the old man again. “I’m telling you, the city was never like this. It’s the communiss.”

“Are you calling me a communiss?” the policeman asked the old man while he tried to avoid the lashing of the lute string. “I’ll take you in, too. You better watch out who you calling a communiss.”

“You can’t arress me,” the old man cried. “I’m a member of the Golden Age Club sponsored by the New Orleans Recreation Department.”

“Let that old man alone, you dirty cop,” a woman screamed. “He’s proolly somebody’s grampaw.”

“I am,” the old man said. “I got six granchirren all studying with the sisters. Smart, too.”

Over the heads of the people Ignatius saw his mother walking slowly out of the lobby of the department store carrying the bakery products as if they

were boxes of cement.

“Mother!” he called. “Not a moment too soon. I’ve been seized.”

Pushing through the people, Mrs. Reilly said, “Ignatius! What’s going on here? What you done now? Hey, take your hands off my boy.”

“I’m not touching him, lady,” the policeman said. “Is this here your son?”

Mrs. Reilly snatched the whizzing lute string from Ignatius.

“Of course I’m her child,” Ignatius said. “Can’t you see her affection for me?”

“She loves her boy,” the old man said.

“What you trying to do my poor child?” Mrs. Reilly asked the policeman. Ignatius patted his mother’s hennaed hair with one of his huge paws. “You got plenty business picking on poor chirren with all the kind of people they got running in this town. Waiting for his momma and they try to arrest him.”

“This is clearly a case for the Civil Liberties Union,” Ignatius observed, squeezing his mother’s drooping shoulder with the paw. “We must contact Myrna Minkoff, my lost love. She knows about those things.”

“It’s the communiss,” the old man interrupted.

“How old is he?” the policeman asked Mrs. Reilly.

“I am thirty,” Ignatius said condescendingly.

“You got a job?”

“Ignatius hasta help me at home,” Mrs. Reilly said. Her initial courage was failing a little, and she began to twist the lute string with the cord on the cake boxes. “I got terrible arthiritis.”

“I dust a bit,” Ignatius told the policeman. “In addition, I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip.”

“Ignatius makes delicious cheese dips,” Mrs. Reilly said.

“That’s very nice of him,” the old man said. “Most boys are out running around all the time.”

“Why don’t you shut up?” the policeman said to the old man.

“Ignatius,” Mrs. Reilly asked in a trembling voice, “what you done, boy?”

“Actually, Mother, I believe that it was he who started everything.” Ignatius pointed to the old man with his bag of sheet music. “I was simply

standing about, waiting for you, praying that the news from the doctor would be encouraging.”

“Get that old man outta here,” Mrs. Reilly said to the policeman. “He’s making trouble. It’s a shame they got people like him walking the streets.”

“The police are all communiss,” the old man said.

“Didn’t I say for you to shut up?” the policeman said angrily.

“I fall on my knees every night to thank my God we got protection,” Mrs. Reilly told the crowd. “We’d all be dead without the police. We’d all be laying in our beds with our throats cut open from ear to ear.”

“That’s the truth, girl,” some woman answered from the crowd.

“Say a rosary for the police force.” Mrs. Reilly was now addressing her remarks to the crowd. Ignatius caressed her shoulder wildly, whispering encouragement. “Would you say a rosary for a communiss?”

“No!” several voices answered fervently. Someone pushed the old man.

“It’s true, lady,” the old man cried. “He tried to arrest your boy. Just like in Russia. They’re all communiss.”

“Come on,” the policeman said to the old man. He grabbed him roughly by the back of the coat.

“Oh, my God!” Ignatius said, watching the wan little policeman try to control the old man. “Now my nerves are totally frayed.”

“Help!” the old man appealed to the crowd. “It’s a takeover. It’s a violation of the Constitution!”

“He’s crazy, Ignatius,” Mrs. Reilly said. “We better get outta here, baby.” She turned to the crowd. “Run, folks. He might kill us all. Personally, I think maybe *he’s* the communiss.”

“You don’t have to overdo it, Mother,” Ignatius said as they pushed through the dispersing crowd and started walking rapidly down Canal Street. He looked back and saw the old man and the bantam policeman grappling beneath the department store clock. “Will you please slow down a bit? I think I’m having a heart murmur.”

“Oh, shut up. How you think I feel? I shouldn’t haveta be running like this at my age.”

“The heart is important at any age, I’m afraid.”

“They’s nothing wrong with your heart.”

“There will be if we don’t go a little slower.” The tweed trousers billowed around Ignatius’ gargantuan rump as he rolled forward. “Do you have my lute string?”

Mrs. Reilly pulled him around the corner onto Bourbon Street, and they started walking down into the French Quarter.

“How come that policeman was after you, boy?”

“I shall never know. But he will probably be coming after us in a few moments, as soon as he has subdued that aged fascist.”

“You think so?” Mrs. Reilly asked nervously.

“I would imagine so. He seemed determined to arrest me. He must have some sort of quota or something. I seriously doubt that he will permit me to elude him so easily.”

“Wouldn’t that be awful! You’d be all over the papers, Ignatius. The disgrace! You musta done something while you was waiting for me, Ignatius. I know you, boy.”

“If anyone was ever minding his business, it was I,” Ignatius breathed. “Please. We must stop. I think I’m going to have a hemorrhage.”

“Okay.” Mrs. Reilly looked at her son’s reddening face and realized that he would very happily collapse at her feet just to prove his point. He had done it before. The last time that she had forced him to accompany her to mass on Sunday he had collapsed twice on the way to the church and had collapsed once again during the sermon about sloth, reeling out of the pew and creating an embarrassing disturbance. “Let’s go in here and sit down.”

She pushed him through the door of the Night of Joy bar with one of the cake boxes. In the darkness that smelled of bourbon and cigarette butts they climbed onto two stools. While Mrs. Reilly arranged her cake boxes on the bar, Ignatius spread his expansive nostrils and said, “My God, Mother, it smells awful. My stomach is beginning to churn.”

“You wanna go back on the street? You want that policeman to take you in?”

Ignatius did not answer; he was sniffing loudly and making faces. A bartender, who had been observing the two, asked quizzically from the shadows, “Yes?”

“I shall have a coffee,” Ignatius said grandly. “Chicory coffee with boiled milk.”

“Only instant,” the bartender said.

“I can’t possibly drink that,” Ignatius told his mother. “It’s an abomination.”

“Well, get a beer, Ignatius. It won’t kill you.”

“I may bloat.”

“I’ll take a Dixie 45,” Mrs. Reilly said to the bartender.

“And the gentleman?” the bartender asked in a rich, assumed voice. “What is his pleasure?”

“Give him a Dixie, too.”

“I may not drink it,” Ignatius said as the bartender went off to open the beers.

“We can’t sit in here for free, Ignatius.”

“I don’t see why not. We’re the only customers. They should be glad to have us.”

“They got strippers in here at night, huh?” Mrs. Reilly nudged her son.

“I would imagine so,” Ignatius said coldly. He looked quite pained. “We might have stopped somewhere else. I suspect that the police will raid this place momentarily anyway.” He snorted loudly and cleared his throat. “Thank God my moustache filters out some of the stench. My olfactories are already beginning to send out distress signals.”

After what seemed a long time, during which there was much tinkling of glass and closing of coolers somewhere in the shadows, the bartender appeared again and set the beers before them, pretending to knock Ignatius’ beer into his lap. The Reillys were getting the Night of Joy’s worst service, the treatment given unwanted customers.

“You don’t by any chance have a cold Dr. Nut, do you?” Ignatius asked.

“No.”

“My son loves Dr. Nut,” Mrs. Reilly explained. “I gotta buy it by the case. Sometimes he sits himself down and drinks two, three Dr. Nuts at one time.”

“I am sure that this man is not particularly interested,” Ignatius said.

“Like to take that cap off?” the bartender asked.

“No, I wouldn’t!” Ignatius thundered. “There’s a chill in here.”

“Suit yourself,” the bartender said and drifted off into the shadows at the other end of the bar.

“Really!”

“Calm down,” his mother said.

Ignatius raised the earflap on the side next to his mother.

“Well, I will lift this so that you won’t have to strain your voice. What did the doctor tell you about your elbow or whatever it is?”

“It’s gotta be massaged.”

“I hope you don’t want me to do that. You know how I feel about touching other people,”

“He told me to stay out the cold as much as possible.”

“If I could drive, I would be able to help you more, I imagine.”

“Aw, that’s okay, honey.”

“Actually, even riding in a car affects me enough. Of course, the worst thing is riding on top in one of those Greyhound Scenicruisers. So high up. Do you remember the time that I went to Baton Rouge in one of those? I vomited several times. The driver had to stop the bus somewhere in the swamps to let me get off and walk around for a while. The other passengers were rather angry. They must have had stomachs of iron to ride in that awful machine. Leaving New Orleans also frightened me considerably. Outside of the city limits the heart of darkness, the true wasteland begins.”

“I remember that, Ignatius,” Mrs. Reilly said absently, drinking her beer in gulps. “You was really sick when you got back home.”

“I felt better *then*. The worst moment was my arrival in Baton Rouge. I realized that I had a round-trip ticket and would have to return on the bus.”

“You told me that, babe.”

“The taxi back to New Orleans cost me forty dollars, but at least I wasn’t violently ill during the taxi ride, although I felt myself beginning to gag several times. I made the driver go very slowly, which was unfortunate for him. The state police stopped him twice for being below the minimum highway speed limit. On the third time that they stopped him they took away his chauffeur’s license. You see, they had been watching us on the radar all along.”

Mrs. Reilly’s attention wavered between her son and the beer. She had been listening to the story for three years.

“Of course,” Ignatius continued, mistaking his mother’s rapt look for interest, “that was the only time that I had ever been out of New Orleans in

my life. I think that perhaps it was the lack of a center of orientation that might have upset me. Speeding along in that bus was like hurtling into the abyss. By the time we had left the swamps and reached those rolling hills near Baton Rouge, I was getting afraid that some rural rednecks might toss bombs at the bus. They love to attack vehicles, which are a symbol of progress, I guess.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t take the job,” Mrs. Reilly said automatically, taking *guess* as her cue.

“I couldn’t possibly take the job. When I saw the chairman of the Medieval Culture Department, my hands began breaking out in small white bumps. He was a totally soulless man. Then he made a comment about my not wearing a tie and made some smirky remark about the lumber jacket. I was appalled that so meaningless a person would dare such effrontery. That lumber jacket was one of the few creature comforts to which I’ve ever been really attached, and if I ever find the lunatic who stole it, I shall report him to the proper authorities.”

Mrs. Reilly saw again the horrible, coffee-stained lumber jacket that she had always secretly wanted to give to the Volunteers of America along with several other pieces of Ignatius’ favorite clothing.

“You see, I was so overwhelmed by the complete grossness of that spurious ‘chairman’ that I ran from his office in the middle of one of his cretinous ramblings and rushed to the nearest bathroom, which turned out to be the one for ‘Faculty Men.’ At any rate, I was seated in one of the booths, having rested the lumber jacket on top of the door of the booth. Suddenly I saw the jacket being whisked over the door. I heard footsteps. Then the door of the rest room closed. At the moment, I was unable to pursue the shameless thief, so I began to scream. Someone entered the bathroom and knocked at the door of the booth. It turned out to be a member of the campus security force, or so he said. Through the door I explained what had just happened. He promised to find the jacket and went away. Actually, as I have mentioned to you before, I have always suspected that he and the ‘chairman’ were the same person. Their voices sounded somewhat similar.”

“You sure can’t trust nobody nowadays, honey.”

“As soon as I could, I fled from the bathroom, eager only to get away from that horrible place. Of course, I was almost frozen standing on that desolate campus trying to hail a taxi. I finally got one that agreed to take me