Supermarket Limbo

by John Olson

I'm no good at all at spotting a fast line at the grocery store. I look for elderly women armed with coupons, bratty kids that can't make up their minds, cartloads of groceries, someone pondering a label with a look of earnest inquiry, all the usual symptoms, clear-cut signs of an interminably slow line. I am scrupulous. But I am always fooled. My precautions go awry. As soon as a complication emerges, the obvious choice is to move to another line. But I don't. I can't. I feel compelled to continue my loyalty to that line, on the assumption that if I leave, abort my position, and move to another line, I will encounter a fresh set of complications. Fate will intervene. My caprice will be penalized. And so I end up standing in that particular line for a much longer time than the other lines, even when I see the people who entered my line, then moved to another line, get through the check stand faster, way faster, absurdly faster, I stay committed to my line, thinking of it as an investment of my time, a commitment I am unwilling to let go of, simply because I have withstood its complications up to that point, its unforeseen intricacies and entanglements, believing, earnestly, that I deserve a pay-off, as if my loyalty to the line, my willingness to accept my destiny, to surrender my velleity to the vagaries of fate, needed some form of compensation, even if that compensation, whatever form it may take, which may simply be getting to the check stand at last, ends by consuming more time than it would have had I been less stubborn, had sighed, shrugged, given up, and moved to another line.

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