

# Dunce

**By Mike Russell**

Everyone calls Dunce 'Dunce'. Everyone thinks that Dunce is an idiot. I used to think so too but not anymore.

Dunce is completely bald and has a really pointed head so the temptation to get him paralytic on his thirtieth birthday, carry him to the tattooist's and get a nice big 'D' smack bang in the middle of his forehead was too much for me. Trouble is he can't afford to have it removed so he wears a big plaster over it. Gangs of children tease him.

'What's underneath the plaster, mister? Show us!'

They swear he has a third eye under there.

My name is Bill but Dunce calls me 'Fez' on account of my hat. I've known Dunce for over sixteen years. I don't have to use my memory to work that out; I just count the number of boxes of Turkish Delight I've got stashed in my cupboard. Dunce buys me a box every birthday. Dunce thinks that because I wear a fez I must be Turkish (I'm not) and that being Turkish I must like that powder-covered gunk (I don't, I hate the stuff).

On my last birthday, after saying:

'No, Dunce, I'll eat it later,' and stashing box number sixteen in the cupboard, I decided to take Dunce to the theatre. He'd never been before.

The play was called 'Death in the Dark'. We had front row seats. Dunce was captivated. He stared at the actors with a gaping mouth.

The lights dimmed to darkness. Kitty Malone, the beautiful star of the show, was stood centre stage. A shot was heard. Dunce jumped right out of his seat.

'What was that?' he said.

The lights came back on and Kitty was lying in a pool of blood. Dunce let out a scream then shouted:

'Someone call for an ambulance! And the police!'

The audience thought that Dunce was an actor, that the play was being cleverly extended beyond the stage, questioning the boundaries of theatre.

'What's wrong with you?' Dunce shouted at the audience. 'How can you carry on as if nothing has happened?'

'This is wonderful, just wonderful,' I heard someone say behind me.

Kitty was stoically sticking to her role, thinking that the show must go on, but Dunce was clambering up onto the stage, crying, stroking Kitty's hair and checking her pulse.

'She's alive!' he shouted with relief.

'No I'm not!' Kitty hissed at him through clenched teeth.

That was it; I was in hysterics. What a birthday treat this was turning out to be.

'I'm acting. It's part of the play. No one really shot me,' Kitty hissed at Dunce.

The realisation was excruciatingly slow. I watched Dunce's face change from shock to confusion to understanding to embarrassment. He made his way back to his seat. He didn't speak or look at me until the play was over. The play got a standing ovation and we headed for the bar.

Kitty was in the bar too. She smiled at Dunce who blushed. She seemed to be fascinated by the top of his head. She walked over and invited him to her dressing room.

Twelve hours later and Dunce was in love! How about that? And what's more, Kitty was in love too! And not only that but they were in love with each other! Kitty fell for Dunce. Not 'fell for' as in 'was deceived by' because there's no deception where Dunce is concerned, he can't do it, but she fell from her deceptions towards him. I couldn't believe it.

'It won't last,' I said to Dunce. 'Enjoy it while you can but face facts: you are Dunce and she is Kitty Malone. Think about it.'

Dunce told me that Kitty had a thing about ice cream cones, a fetish you could say. She ate six a day. She liked to bite off the tip of the cone and suck out all the ice cream. She had a recording of ice cream van music that she played whilst they were having sex. She was forever stroking the top of Dunce's head.

Then came the day. Dunce came round looking really worried.

'Fez, have you seen Kitty? Do you know where she is?'

'No, I haven't seen her. Why? What's the problem?'

'I had a dream last night,' Dunce said. 'I dreamt that I was in bed and I looked at the calendar by the side of my bed and it was tonight. I put out my hand to touch Kitty but she wasn't there. There was just this cold sludge covering her side of the bed and this smell: vanilla. It was melted ice cream.'

'So what's the problem?'

'I think that something is going to happen to Kitty. I have to find her before tonight. I don't want to wake up tomorrow morning alone in a bed full of melted ice cream.'

'Dunce, dreams don't mean anything and prophecies are impossible. Sit yourself down. Let's have a couple of beers.'

I opened a cupboard, reached in to get the beers and a pile of boxes of Turkish Delight toppled over and fell out, breaking open and spilling their contents all over the floor. Dunce looked at the boxes then looked at me. I watched his face go through the same slow transformation from shock to confusion to understanding to embarrassment that I had witnessed so many times before.

'You don't like Turkish Delight?' he said.

I said nothing and guiltily handed him a beer.

Dunce sighed then said:

'So why did I have that dream?'

'No reason at all,' I said.

We sat in silence for a while then Dunce suddenly stood up.

'It's no good, Fez, I have to find her.'

Dunce found Kitty in the centre of town, lying on the pavement in a pool of blood. An ambulance and the police were on their way. An ice cream vendor was crying and yelling:

'I don't understand! I don't understand!'

A huge, plastic ice cream cone was protruding from Kitty's chest. It had fallen from on top of the ice cream shop for no apparent reason, smashed through her rib cage and crushed her heart.

Dunce cried. Then he cried some more. The next day, he cried and the

day after that he cried. Three weeks later, he awoke, dressed, ate some breakfast, then cried. The next day, he came round to see me. He was crying.

'Hello Duncce,' I said. 'Do you want a beer?'

'What's wrong with you?' he said. 'How can you carry on as if nothing has happened?'

'It was an accident, Duncce,' I said angrily, 'a random occurrence. These things happen. You just have to get on with life. Why are you so stupid?'

I regretted saying it as soon as I heard it come out of my mouth. Duncce stared at me with tears in his eyes.

'A fez is only a severed cone,' Duncce said. 'At least I have a point.'

I took off my hat and looked at it sullenly. Duncce had a point that he had a point. If he'd found Kitty a moment earlier... if I hadn't delayed him with my arrogance, my cynicism...

'Fez,' Duncce said, 'you remember the tears that I cried in the theatre when I thought that Kitty was dead but she wasn't? I think that the tears I am crying now are the same as those. I didn't understand what was going on in the theatre and I didn't understand what was going on when the cone fell on her. I think that maybe we only cry because we don't understand what is going on. Maybe if we understood what is really going on we wouldn't cry at all, ever.'

Duncce smiled through his tears and beneath the plaster on his forehead I swear I saw something move.