



Andrew Coburn

Greeters

The following piece flips back to the last century, to the miniature mill city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, where all the taverns had greeters. What follows is a definition.

A GREETER is a guy who has been going to the same joint for years, which makes him a fixture. He sits at the bar near the door where he can see everyone coming in and everyone going out. When you come in, he shouts, “Hi, how are you?” whether he knows you or not, and in his mind he does. Usually he’s clutching a draft beer, and he squints because his eyesight isn’t what it used to be. Younger than he looks, he has white hair that has yellowed and blue eyes that have faded.

He sits among men of World War II vintage who wear sweaters relatives gave them years ago for Christmas. They watch in stone silence (while the greeter only half watches) a movie they’ve seen a dozen times before, like *The Great Escape* with Steve McQueen. Which is why they watch it. No surprises. Letdowns are cushioned.

These are men who salt their beer and pepper their pickled eggs. The pepper comes in a baby-food jar with a perforated cap. Some eat kielbasa, hot dogs, or American cheese sandwiches. From time to time, one will buy a shot of tomato juice. The greeter eats nothing, for he doesn’t have a dime in his pocket and is forced to nurse his draft.

The bartender is heavysset, bespectacled and potbellied, and wears a nondescript sports shirt and

gray pants with a press no longer permanent. Or else he is uncommonly lean, usually bald, and wears a starched white shirt with collar open and cuffs folded back. Each type is robotic in his duties. Two or three times during the evening, especially if he's the lean one, he'll make himself a Bromo Seltzer with ice and down it in two gulps, three at the most, while the greeter glances at him with silent concern.

On the wall behind the bar are packets of Planter's Peanuts and Bill's Redskins, a numbers pool list, at least two outsize plastic clocks (compliments of Narragansett and Schlitz), a thermometer (compliments of Houlihan's or Labatt), maybe a turn-of-the-century print (rouged women with heavy hair and low necklines), and a hand-written notice that reads: "Elks Charity Tickets Sold Here." The bottles behind the bar are of limited variety: blended whiskies, gin, vodka, anisette, and brandy of many flavors—cherry, blackberry, coffee, and so on.

On another wall is usually a black phone bearing no number. It seldom rings in the evening, but during the day it's quite busy. Post time. The greeter, who is here day and night, never pays any attention to the ring. It's never for him.

Booths lining the far wall appear empty until someone coughs. Then you glimpse the faint flicker of a cigarette. Occasionally card players occupy a booth, men of few words. All you hear is the snapping of cards, as if from twigs crackling in a camp fire. The game has no obvious winners, no apparent losers, and the players have no faces.

In the depth of the tavern looms a doorway with a sign welcoming "Ladies with escorts." But the room is vacant and pitch black, as if it had never been entered, a sexless world halfway between here and Hell. The greeter has forgotten it's there.

During commercial breaks in the movie, beer glasses are refilled, except that of the greeter, who, aided by one of the plastic clocks, carefully times his sips and avoids the mirror behind the bar, as if the mirror might resent his image. Taking turns, men make quick trips into the minty aroma of the men's room, which is kept reasonably clean, a mop and bucket in plain view, along with a bottle of ammonia. Anyone leaving the facilities soiled faces censure.

Scattered conversations break out like small-arms fire, much of it bantering. Two fellows younger than everyone else in the place yammer

about the go-go joint down the street where strippers mime the music and shed spangled costumes. No regular patron joins them in the conversation, and the bartender ignores it as he does almost all conversations. He has acquired a remarkable insensitivity to the feelings of others and, like God, views their pains, misfortunes, and sufferings in the abstract. At times, however, he'll raise a calming hand as if to bless.

At midnight people begin to leave, and that's when the greeter goes on the alert. Men who spoke to him only once before in the evening when they came in now make a show of saying goodbye, italicizing each word, patting him on his thin shoulder. And the greeter, glowing in the attention, says, "You guys be careful on the road, you hear!" He knows everyone by name, though he doesn't always get the name right, and to a man named John he says, "Good night, Joe. You all right? Want me to carry you to your car?" Which draws a laugh because the greeter is a pint-size Irishman with kindling for bones.

John, all smiles, shouts, "You kiddin'? You wanna fight?"

"No, sir," the greeter replies, with every year of his life threaded into his face. "I don't wanna hurt you. But you be careful, you hear. Drive slow."

After a while no one is left in the tavern except the bartender and the greeter, and that's when the bartender gives the greeter a shot of whiskey.

On the house.

Under his breath, the bartender murmurs, "Now get the fuck outta here."

Andrew Coburn is the author of thirteen novels (including *Goldilocks* and *On the Loose*), three of which have been adapted into French films. His work has been translated into thirteen languages.