

The Greeter

by Bill Lee Janiec

We've all seen them. They're the greeters at the doors of the large superstore chains who address customers as they make their entrances and exits with a sunny "Welcome to ____,," or a "Thanks for shopping at ____." We pass by most of them without a second thought, these men and women culled from the masses. Old, young, fat, slender, the only thing they seem to have in common is interesting hair and--if we did think twice about them--a marginalized existence...as if, through either a lack of luck or ambition, this is where they ended up landing. They're not very well paid, but generally conduct their jobs with a pleasant smile, betraying no animosity toward their position or rank in the social order.

At one particular store, there stood a greeter who was no exception to the rule. He

could have been twenty-five, or thirty-five years old. He could have been white or he could have been black. If you asked ten customers, no one would remember him. How long he had been there, no one could say. He performed his duties in an adequate manner; he always smiled, his shirt was always pressed, his fingernails trimmed, and he was always present for his shift and always on time. In fact, if anyone cared to inquire, he would admit that his punctuality had always been a secret sliver of pride.

One day while working at his usual station at the door, his boss approached. His boss was a big man with thick jowls, thinning hair, and puffy eyes. Though not inordinately tall, he always gave the impression you were looking up at him. It was odd for his boss to approach--for any of the bosses to approach--since bosses and associates rarely interacted. In fact, the only occasion our greeter had ever heard this boss speak was some time ago during a group orientation meeting.

“Thomas,” the boss said to the greeter on this particular day. “Ya gotta lose the mustache. New store policy. It has to go.” A stray shopping cart must have caught his boss’s attention because no sooner had he uttered this remark than off he went. The boss was a busy man.

Now the greeter wasn’t particularly attached to his mustache. What he saw on his face when he shaved in the mornings was a pencil-thin streak of sparse brown hair, neatly cropped at the corners of his mouth. (So sparse, in fact, it reminded him at times of a barcode.) The only comment anyone had ever made about it was once when his mother remarked that it made him look like a cop. But that was long ago and she was dead, and since it held no essential value for him, the mustache was lost. The next day he showed

up for work on time and clean shaven.

Some weeks passed, the greeter going about his duties with his customary smile at the door, when another boss approached. (He had a number of bosses at the store--so many, it's true, that he could distinguish most only from their classification tags.) Her ruffled gray hair upon her shoulders looked like a mop, and she smelled vaguely of dust and toothpaste.

"Jerry, word's come down from the home office," she said. "Greeters are now allowed to have only one leg. It's up to you."

He pondered this a moment as the implication set in, and then for the remainder of his shift began chipping away at the negative in his mind and actually began to embrace the idea. After all, he told himself, how often had his legs grown weary at work as he stood all day? This way only one leg would grow weary...and...and he could lean against a crutch for better back support--that is if the company allowed crutches. Plus, he had a choice, didn't he, of which leg to keep and he had always favored his right over his left. No, it wasn't so bad.

So there he was a few weeks later, our greeter minus his left leg, with his usual smile and cheery disposition, leaning against a post near the door. (Apparently, the company hadn't allowed crutches.)

"Mike, I need you get rid of that leg," said a man quickly in passing. The greeter wasn't sure who the man was; he could only see the back of him now, with his choppy, little steps, scurrying past the cashier rows. He was wearing a blue, company boss's vest, as the bosses sometimes did, so he must have been a boss--but: Get rid of his leg? It was

the only one he had. As he considered this new decree, a hint of sentimentality crept over him. He had used this leg to kick cans as a boy and...he enjoyed stretching it from time to time. And yet, in the end, was it really something to get emotional over? What did he really need the leg for? He took the bus to work--he bought all his groceries and sundries at the superstore, he didn't own a car and never walked. No, the final verdict was in: the leg, it seemed, was expendable.

It was not long after when the greeter, comfortably snug in his wheelchair near the vestibule (a small enclosure between the outer and inner doors--as it was known), was approached by a little girl.

"Pookie," she said to him, her tiny mouth smeared with chocolate and a spattering of rainbow doughnut sprinkles, "Your right arm has to go bye-bye. Daddy said." She bent to pick up a napkin which had fallen from her hand, when a gust of wind sent it sailing across the floor. Skirting the legs of shoppers and the careening clatter of shopping carts, she chased it into the store and disappeared.

This was getting bad, the greeter thought. A mustache, two legs--and now his right arm? But then again, how bad was it? His father had lost an arm in the war and still managed to stab his mother to death with the other. And then there was the famous baseball pitcher who hurled a no-hitter with only one arm. Classical marble statues with only one arm were admired worldwide for their beauty. Many things could be accomplished with only one arm. He could drop acid. He could learn to write left-handed and then join that club for "lefties" that people were always talking about. There were many positives.

Days later the greeter could be seen in his wheelchair, smiling at the customers and waving them in with his one hand.

He now felt a tap on his shoulder. It was Barney, the purple anthropomorphic dinosaur. This gave the greeter an immediate feeling of warmth and comfort. So reassuring was this feeling that it didn't even dawn on the greeter to disagree with Barney when Barney asked him to chop off his other arm. Go away bad feelings!

Then minutes later the first boss came by again, the one with the thick jowls, thinning hair and puffy eyes, only this time he had an erect penis sprouting, like a miniature rhinoceros horn, from the middle of his forehead.

"Britney," the man said to the greeter. "The leadership has decided. You need to lose your voice." He spun on his heels and began to rush off when suddenly the greeter stopped him.

"Sir," the greeter hollered. He had never spoken to--let alone yelled--at the boss and realizing this, quickly tempered his tone. "If I lose my voice, how can I greet our customers?"

The boss cocked his head, eyeing the greeter steadily while stroking his cranial penis, and thought. "Hmm...good point. Let me think on that."

We SMASH CUT to sometime soon after, the greeter now at the door in his wheelchair. There is a gauze bandage stained yellow with tincture over his larynx. Balanced in his lap is an assortment of pastel placards, which--by clutching with his teeth, then lowering and raising his head (like that novelty bird bobbing for water)--he flashes at customers as they pass. They READ: "Welcome to___," and "Thanks for

shopping at ____,” etc.

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In the year 2525, the greeter was approached by Albert Einstein. Albert had interesting hair and wore a blue boss’s vest. He leaned to the greeter and whispered in his ear, “Esh shshshsh”--a secret to be shared by only the two of them. Whatever it was, they both chuckled.

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About...when? Sometime ago, as our greeter took his position near the inner doors, a voice said to him, “You. Out with your pineal gland!”

It’s mid-afternoon, a beautiful spring Saturday and the superstore parking lot is jammed with cars. Consumers are funneling through the doors and departing with shopping carts loaded with bags.