

Fat Man in the Middle

Donald Anderson / From the Editor's Desk

You reach to displace two Diet Tonic Waters, two regular. The gin and vodka are at the cashier's. Cradling the four liters, cold against your chest, you work to close the cooler, then press up against it so as to let a man in his wheelchair squeeze by.

Thick-shouldered and log-armed, the man's head is shaved and his right leg is gone. The bulk above the knee is hatted with a white plastic knob—something to fit into a prosthetic? Gloved, and certainly capable of working the chair's wheels, he is, at present, being pushed by an Asian woman, probably Korean, whose jet hair shines. Her eyes and teeth are bright stones. The man's tee, scum-green and stenciled with jump wings, strains against his pecs. His shirt looks like Batman's armor. When he wheels by, it is as if a train has passed. There is almost the smell of diesel. The girl pushes the soldier and the bottle in his lap to the cashier and her counter. The cashier, middle-aged, burdened, no doubt, with a twenty-five-year-old of her own, looks as if she might be serving in the line of a cafeteria at a junior high. She is—how to say it?—dumpy and bland, in need of a hair net. Money is exchanged, a receipt produced. When she forks over the receipt, she intones, as if capitalizing each word: "Thank You For Your Service." The man in the chair capitalizes too: "Go Fuck Yourself." The man's words, though hostile, are not shouted. They are calm and direct: *intended*. It is, of course, this intention that startles. The pretty woman spins the chair to wheel it toward the door. You expect the soldier to kick at the tempered glass with his boot heel, but he doesn't. He carefully props the door open with his good leg and right arm. You stay to pay for the gin and the vodka and the tonic, but, like the fat man in the middle,

are sorry for being present. To whom should you apologize?

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WLA Editor since 1989, Donald Anderson's most recent book is *Fragments of a Mortal Mind: a nonfiction novel*.