

DEBORAH DEFRAK

The Jacket

In college, I worked waiting tables in a bar-restaurant-nightclub, depending on what time of day, the day of the week it was. It had short, sticky carpet, a dance floor in front of a low stage, tables down the center and red upholstered booths along both long sides. No TV. No greenery, real or plastic. Late afternoons midweek, when the place was quiet, was when the vets came in. It was 1973.

I could always tell the vets by where they sat. There was a crescent booth at the far back corner, facing the doors to the outside, and the kitchen, and the bar. The vets sat there. When there was just one, he never sat to the side, but all the way to the back, with his back to the corner. If more than one, they'd arrange themselves, divide the field of view. But that corner was the point of gravity they balanced on. Usually, there'd only be one.

Most of the vets seemed to be trying to get by on the GI bill. They'd carry peanut butter sandwiches in waxed paper, no jelly. Order a draft, nurse it for an hour or more.

That night was mostly quiet, a couple of salesmen at the bar throwing back a few and hitting on the female bartender. A middle-aged couple talking in a short booth up on the platform. Some nurses from the hospital at a bigger booth, close to the bar, having pizza and wine coolers. Five tables of rowdy frat boys shoved together dead center, with as many pitchers as tables. When the vet came in he took that crescent booth, assumed the position in the corner. Ordered a draft. I saw the peanut butter sandwich in his briefcase, with an econ book. He kept the fingertips of both hands just touching the base of the mug, turning it clockwise then counterclockwise in the moisture ring, sixteenth of a turn left, then right, then left again.

The frat boys settled the tab and cleared out, leaving close to a full pitcher, still cold. I looked for the manager, didn't see him, carried the pitcher from the frat table and set it in front of the vet. "Frat boys had somewhere else to be."

He looked up at me, nodded thanks.

"It's okay if you eat your sandwich here," I told him. He didn't say anything. I left, and he went back to rotating his mug. Left, right, left, right.

I cleared off the rest of the frat boys' tables, wiped them down and moved them apart, put the chairs back in order. Some greasy, rich golf-type came in with a girl I knew was in high school, tried to buy her a martini, and gave me a hard time when I wouldn't serve her. I went to get the manager. Came back. There was some argument; she had ID, but I knew who she was, what grade in school she was. I lost. She smirked.

When that was over, I checked on the nurses, brought them a couple more wine coolers. The bartender put baskets of pretzels out on the bar for happy hour, and I took one over to the vet. Asked him how he was doing.

He looked up, and was starting to say "Fine," I think, when his eyes went past me. Fixed on something. Got hard and old and cold all at the same time.

I turned, looked.

Shit.

Booth for four opposite, two gals in ankle-length patchwork skirts, two guys in long hair, bellbottoms, one with granny glasses and a fringed leather coat that cost as much as a good bicycle, probably. The other wore a fatigue jacket. With patches, and chevron. Cloth name tag over the pocket.

The vet's fingers stopped turning the mug. His eyes didn't move from the kid in the jacket.

I walked over to take their orders. Bent down, told the kid, "See that guy over in the corner, staring at you? I'd take that jacket off right now, if I were you and didn't want trouble."

Maybe it was something in my voice, maybe he read the vet's face, I don't know, but the hippie kid peeled it off. I held out my hand for the jacket. He handed it to me. The name on the patch was Robinson, I think, or Roberts.

"You get this at the Goodwill? I asked.

He nodded. How much you pay for it?"

I carried the jacket over to the vet. "He got it at the Goodwill, for ten bucks. He'll give it up for that."

The vet opened his wallet, pulled out two fives, leaving one. He gave me the money, I handed him the jacket. His hand shook a little when he took it. He smoothed it out in front of him, looked at the patches, at the name.

I took the money over to the kid, who decided he and his friends might want to go somewhere else, do something else.

When I looked back at the vet, his face looked like he wanted to cry, but couldn't. Like he couldn't ever again. The well of pain was too deep in him for water. After a while, he folded up the jacket. Neatly, like a marine would a flag, laid it in his briefcase. Shut it. He left the restaurant holding that briefcase not by the handle, but cradled in his arm.

After he left, I cried for him.

DEBORAH DEFRAK was commissioned in the United States Navy in 1974, serving at duty stations from Iceland to Hawaii. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology from Ball State University and a Master of Science in Electrical Engineering from the Naval Postgraduate School. She is currently retired and living in Tennessee.