

Carole Johnson

SOLITAIRE

At thirty, I would not have sat alone in a coffee shop. People would have looked at me. Men would have looked at me, looked and wondered. I would have felt their questioning stares undoing buttons, stripping away pretence, my eyes giving secrets to those discerning enough to explore them.

Women too, might have tossed brittle glances my way. Superior smirks to inform me they knew. Knew I did not fit.

At fifty I can sit for hours, quite alone, quite unperturbed at my solitary state: Drink my cappuccino. Write my words, lies and truths blended, call it fiction. Nobody cares, nobody stares. The only whispers are those of the coffee machine spilling aroma of roasted beans into steamy air.

Men do not see me at all. Except perhaps, the grey-haired man alone at the corner table who peers vaguely in my direction through bottle-thick glasses. Wonders if I might be related to the girl from Silver Chain who dresses the ulcer on his leg each morning sharp at eight.

I am free to sit. Sit and wonder how my changed circumstance has come about? Such joyous liberation, like all else at a price. I confess I miss the roving glance, the special smile; perhaps we ...? Tentative eye to eye contact, perhaps ...?

Now I do the watching. The rules appear to have changed and I am no longer the wide-eyed girl waiting to be shaped. Why did no one warn me one day I would be out of the game?

The bonus is words—there is always a bonus. My invisibility allows me to steal them from mouths, catch them mid-air, even lift them from the back of crumpled shopping-dockets.

People give me words, quite unashamedly. I am reminded of those amazing confessions foisted upon total strangers in aircraft, or hospital waiting rooms.

Two teenage girls wearing the latest midriff-jumpers talk over the top of my head.

"It was real heavy, I felt like the worst kind of moll." Slurp of diet drink. "So I lied."

"Cool. Didja have fun?"

"The best time. Wicked. It was wild. Then she says to me, real cool like it was nothin, you're not pregnant? Are ya?"

"Cool." The admiring girl throws arms, a jangle with bracelets, about her friend. "Whadidjatella?"

"Whaddaya reckon?"

Conversation drowns in disembodied words from the public address system: Would Ms K stutter/smutter/hiss ...ton please return to the service desk in Myer.

I am left to study their empty drink cans and a half-eaten kebab. A woman gathers trays at my elbow, flicks a wet cloth expertly across the end of the table. I fashion a half-smile. She ignores me. But of course, I have forgotten my invisible state. Her skirt is too short given the nature of her tasks. She wears blue knickers. Varicose veins, visible above sensible sports-shoes, suggest her efficiency has evolved from hours of stand-up routine. Sadly, neither of us laughing.

Two young men fall into chairs opposite. There seems to be too much of them to be contained within the designated space. They arrange legs about the table pedestal, jostling for territory. Scoff mountains of dubious-looking noodles. Eye a thin girl serving bread rolls at the shop across the aisle. Their loud guffaws swagger out into the mix of lunchtime clatter and chatter.

"Who's goin, do you know?"

"Nah."

"You gunna go?"

"Dunno, Bottle reckons Farley's lot'll be there."

The thin girl is returning looks. She appears to favour the speaker troubled by thought of Farley. A wedge of blonde hair falls across her face each time she looks away.

"Fancy givin her one?" The loser in the interest stakes has decided to support the victor.

"Nah, not my type." He folds the Coke can neatly in two, leaves it alongside his plate. "Let's go."

I watch the girl's thin gaze trail behind them. I want to warn her; instead I turn back to my empty coffee cup.

At the edge of the half-circle gathered about the counter stands a frail woman wearing a faded, fabric raincoat. I line-up behind her. She has a brooch, shaped to spell MOTHER, pinned to her lapel. A velvet hat covers her head. I see her hair as white, or perhaps grey, imagine it coiled beneath the hat like a contented lizard. She glances again and again at her watch, peering towards the entrance.

The crowd shuffles forward, they snap like false teeth, forcing her to decide. She moves back. Open and closes her handbag. I step around as a woman carrying several Aherns' bags, enfolds her in ample arms.

"Emmy! How are you?" She juggles her bags to one side.

"Marion, oh Marion." The older woman caresses the arm of the other. "It's lovely to see you, dear. Oh, it's so good to see you."

A final squeeze and they draw apart.

"The funeral went well?" The younger woman straightens the lapel of the other's coat.

"Yes, I've still got heaps of leftovers. I was going to give the lettuce to the chooks, but it was so lovely and green, I've been picking at it all week."

I sense the lizard stir beneath her hat. She touches a bony hand to the crown, adjusts the brim, wisp of ginger hair bringing my imaginings undone.

"I hope you're eating properly, they wouldn't want you getting sick."

"Actually, I'm feeling quite hungry. I thought I might have one of those layered pancake things, George would never come at pancakes."

I conjure the absent George; robust, meat-eating George brought down by years of feverish attention to plates of cow.

They materialize less easily, three girls and a boy. Or perhaps, three boys and a girl? Breast-fed, each one, suckled for their first year by a doting mother. All middle-aged now, going to fat, anxious about their newly-bereaved mother's health. Fearful she may become a burden. How would they choose, they who have always shared so equally? How could they divide their frail mother, empty breasts puckered against her chest?

I order flat black, no sugar. Toy with the single, teddy-bear biscuit in my saucer. The women are sitting beneath the central, domed skylight. Together they ensure visibility; each bounces off the other. People look up at their bursts of laughter.

I make notes on my napkin, watch ink eat into paper, carefully formed letters becoming spidery and uncertain like the writing of an old lady.

A mother and daughter struggle into seats at the table beside me.

"Hang onto Jamie, Mum, and I'll get the coffee. Cappuccino?"

The grandmother nods. "And a cake," she calls, jiggling the squirming bundle.

"Anysort?"

She nods again, her gaze on the child in her arms.

I remember reading, somewhere, a warning by a woman writer penned shortly before she died: *In the end people are all that matter, I discovered that too late.*

At the time I barely took it in. Now, here in the coffee shop, her words stand up like one of those magic eye pictures.

I shape the napkin to fit into the side compartment of my purse between my driver's licence and photo of my grandchild. I have an urgent need to preserve my indecipherable words as if they might be part of the rules to some important game I have yet to play.