

# Solitary Man

by Debbie Edwards

I sink my teeth into the frozen mound of rocky road. That's the only real way to eat ice cream.

Ya gotta bite it.

Soft ice cream ain't good for nothing.

God, I hate Wednesday nights. I sit down on one of the wooden benches by the fountain. It's made of slats held together by iron screws. It ain't really wood, though. You can tell by the way the wet stuff beads up on it. Probably some new kind of plastic or something.

Why do they always have water in shopping malls? I mean, all that shiny plastic, concrete, and steel, and then they got this river or waterfall shooting down at you.

Sometimes, I put my hand in the little pool—just to feel the temperature. Or maybe I'll let my hand graze the bottom and pick up a new penny from the blue tile base. The water swallows my hand, wrist,—and watch. God, I *always* do that! I pull my hand out and shake it off. The face of my Timex has gone cloudy, with little bubbles of water on the inside.

I have to switch positions on the bench. The back part never curves the same as your own back; makes you have to sit real low or else straight up. Ain't no in between.

I lie down.

Two pairs of black, polished oxfords cross my line of vision. Squids, you know, sailors from the naval base. All decked out in black, with those real short haircuts, too. Just a couple of square-heads with nothing better to do than hang around Jefferson Court all night.

Man, I'd never let anyone shave my head like that.

I get up and pull a Lucky Strike from the wrinkled pack in the breast pocket of my jean jacket. I let the tube of tobacco hang from my lower lip as I use both hands to search my faded Levi's for a match. I don't use lighters. I strike a light, cup my hands over the dangling end of the cigarette, and gently introduce the two.

There's a right way to do it.

I suck in and shake the fire out before dropping the charred strip to the gray and white flecked floor.

Man, nothing's *ever* going on on a Wednesday night. At least not here. Lots of cars are on the road outside, but they don't turn into the mall entrance. Not on a Wednesday night.

It'd be better if it was a Friday, or even a Thursday, night. I could go on up to Slicer's Pub and sit with the guys. Slicer's is a good place—with good guys, too.

A place ain't nothing if you don't got friends there. Everything's just real easy-going.

But the pub's a good place, by itself, I mean. It's real narrow and dark inside, like a tunnel with only one end open. The open end is right on the mall, and as you go in, it gets darker. On the right wall, there's a white, lighted sign, the kind with the little red and black plastic letters stuck to it. It tells the kinds of

hot dogs, chips, and beer you can buy. In the back, there are booths, old movie posters, and lots of shadows. No plants, though. Most places to eat got plants, but Slicer's don't. That's good, though. I don't like plants.

"I ain't *on* no picnic." That's what I always say, and Dirk and the guys always laugh.

Dirk would never put plants in his place; you can tell.

Everyone there is pretty cool. We always sit right in the front, facing the mall escalator and Page's Jewelers. We sit at these little, square tables that are attached to the floor by black posts. I could lift one up, I bet. Especially if some of the guys helped me. Anyway, we sit at these white topped tables in these olden-time chairs. The kind with the round, wood seats and high, iron rod backs. The iron is twisted in a wavy design, and if you lean back against it, you can feel the way it curves.

We just sit there. We have a smoke and watch the people go by and hang out. Then, someone will get a pitcher. I drink some, too. Dirk just pretends like he don't see me or nothing. He's real cool about stuff like that.

But there'd be nothing happening at Slicer's now, not on a Wednesday night. It ain't close enough to the weekend, and most of the guys gotta get up early to go to work in the morning. When I start working at the mill, everything will be great. Me and the guys can party on the same nights.

I crouch down to re-tie the ankle strap of my boots. Real lead-bottom Army ones with cord laces. Worth two hundred bucks, too. My brother got them from a friend of his who works in military surplus.

As I stand back up, an inch-long ash falls from the tip of my cigarette. Even though I jump back, part of it still hits the plastic decal on my T-shirt. It burns a small, round well just above the eye of the eagle. It feels rough, crusty. You can't really see it, though. Not against the black background.

This guard comes over and asks me what I'm doing.

I tell him I'm just standing in the mall having a smoke.

He tells me that the mall is gonna close in 20 minutes and that I should take my "smoke" someplace else. Then, get this, he asks me how *old* I am.

I take one last drag on my Lucky Strike before grinding the butt into the cement floor.

I don't answer; I just turn and walk away.

I don't believe that guy. I mean, wanting to bust me for curfew on a Wednesday night. And like I should go home so my parents can hassle me, too.

People always do that. They pick at you for nothing, for just being what you are. It's like that at school. I can't wait to get outta that prison. Everyone there is always on you, trying to get you to change and be like them. And do things their way, according to their rules.

But I got my own way. I got my own rules, and they're just as good as any of theirs.

You see, I figure that people always hassle you because, deep down, they ain't sure that they're really in the right. So, they think that if they get enough people to go along with them, play their game, that that *makes* them right.

When I graduate, I'm moving outta the house. Gonna get a job and my own place, too. No more hassles—just like that one old song says. The one about the solitary man.





**Photo by John Little**

I take the last three steps in a single stride. Just one smooth, downward motion. Most people take the escalators, but I don't. Too crowded. Besides, on the stairs you can set your own pace, or even do a complete turn around and go back where you already been.

And nobody's gonna say nothing about it, either.

I turn the corner by the pink shoe store. Man, who would ever buy shoes from a place with pink walls? I look through the window at one of the "dry-clean-only" salesmen. He stars at me—for just a minute. Then, he turns away and starts playing with the keys in the front pocket of his trousers. Don't worry, Bud. I ain't coming into your store. You couldn't *pay* me to go in there.

I light another cigarette and start walking towards the exit. I jam down the coin return lever on every one of the public phones as I go by the locker area. I hear a coin fall.

"Could you please help me, Son?"

I turn around. It's this old grandma-lady. She's real fat, and ugly, too. All hunched over with gray hair and washed-out eyes. And she's got wrinkles everywhere. Even on her hands.

"I seem to have gotten the corner of my walker stuck in a crack. . . . And I've dropped a package over there."

I look back at the line of pay phones. Probably was only a dime anyway.

Sure, I say. I walk over, but I take my time. Her walker's on a slant, so she has to throw all her weight to one side to even it out. She looks all bent up. She tries to be calm, but you can tell she's afraid.

I tower over her. Her hair is short and in really tight curls. She has to tilt her head way back just to see my face. Her pale blue eyes look right into mine. She smiles at me—an ugly smile.

She points to the front-left leg of her walker, and I squat down. She says she can balance herself while I make the adjustment.

I put out my cigarette. It's only half smoked, but I need two hands for the job. I pull out my pocket knife and try to ease the walker's post out of the crack. My knife cuts deep marks into the white, rubber knob on the end of the leg. Little shavings cling to my fingers.

I look up and ask her if she's really steady, and she takes hold of my upper arm. She's not very strong; so I gotta put my arm around her waist, too.

Then, I pull hard—three or four times before the post will come loose.

With my free hand, I set the walker on flat ground and check to see if it's sturdy.

It is.

I use both hands to guide her body into position. Then, I steady the walker once again.

"Thank you, Son. Such a fine young man." She puts her hand over mine. It feels warm and soft.

She smiles at me again, but this time her eyes smile, too.

"Oh, yeah . . . I mean, it was no problem or nothing." I ask her if she'll be okay—to get home and everything.

She says she'll be fine, that she's waiting on her husband to bring the van around.

I nod—and smile—before I turn to go. I release my hold on the walker, but the lady doesn't let go of my hand.

"Could you . . . my package is just right over there."

I say I'm sorry; I forgot about the package. I go over and pick up the black and yellow checkered plastic bag. How do they expect old people to hold on to bags if they don't got any handles?

I hear a shout from over by the pay phones.

"Stop right there, and put that package down."

This old man comes right for me.

"You young hoods . . ."

But before he gets to me, the lady stops him. She tells her husband what a help I was, how kind I am.

I give him the bag, and he says he's sorry. Then, he thanks me.

I tell him it was nothing.

A voice comes over the intercom system and says the mall is closing in five minutes.

The man takes a wallet out of the breast pocket of his suit.

"Just a little something for helping out my wife."

I say there's no way I'm taking any money, and I push the bills away.

He thanks me again.

I walk to the exit.

I press down the metal bar and walk out through the large glass door. The parking lot is dark, and the night air is raw. I do up the copper snaps on the front of my jacket. Then, I turn up the collar.

I walk, my hands thrust deep into the front pockets of my jeans. I stop to stare at the dimly lit highway overpass. It is completely empty.

No, nothing's ever going on on a Wednesday night.

## Untitled

*by Rebecca Lee Horne*

Sweet scented ladies  
on a Southern porch.

Only air moving,  
elegant fans force.

Cool iced tea,

Wet tendrils of hair.

Words are as water,  
pouring from lips fair.

The onset of dusk  
Softens the day.

Distress of the noon,  
melts away.