

**Bourne**  
**toWrite...**  
creative writing  
workshops

## One of Us

by Elaine Weddle

I walked quickly to the Yellow Café. I was later than usual and I found myself looking over my shoulder at the empty street. If my wife had been with me, we'd have been on time. She was punctual, a bit too punctual as it turned out. Although it was late, I'd made it. The doors to the Yellow Café were still wide open and I dipped inside to be greeted by the squawk of Mr Green, who turned his head and hopped up and down on his perch.

"Coffee seniorita, milk on the side, no shu-gar, no shu-gar!" said the bird.

The parrot knew me well. Better than the staff who were always polite but somehow interchangeable. I know because I cated around the entire city. Never the same place on the same day of the week, never the same place two days in a row. It was my routine-less routine. It was my reason for leaving the house.

When the waitress approached, I was surprised. Let's just say she just didn't fit the mould. She wasn't part of that army of servers with long limbs and angular faces wearing black trousers and white shirts. She was altogether rounder and her hair was difficult. More than anything I was struck by her open, friendly smile. I hadn't seen one of them in quite a while.

I pulled out a chair, new but scratched and she picked up a cup from the tablecloth which was clean but stained.

"The usual please," I said.

"What is your usual Senior?" she said tilting her head to one side like Mr Green.

"Milk on the side. No shu-gar," said the parrot.

As she walked away, the siren blared. I have to admit, I almost made a bolt for the door but the waitress knew the drill. She pulled on the heavy wooden panels and closed the blinds. The room was bathed in an orange glow from the fairy lights above the counter. It was too late to move now. Outside, heavy boots were running *right left, right left, right left*. The crockery vibrated as blades whirred overhead. In the distance there was the distorted voice from a loudspeaker telling people to ‘Stop!’ and ‘Get on the floor!’. On the next table a woman with a tiny dog continued to cradle the animal in her arms and feed it sugar off her spoon. A man sitting with a pile of books, continued to read and didn’t once look up. Even though my heart was beating so hard it could easily have punched a hole through my chest, I didn’t move an inch. The only thing that moved inside the darkened room was Mr Green who bounced along his perch, bobbed, stretched his neck and extended his crest a full five inches above his head.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot. It’s a lie, it’s a lie,” said the bird.

The woman feeding her dog dropped her spoon. The waitress appeared scooped the spoon off the floor and covered the parrot with a tea cloth. The bird fell silent. The waitress returned from the kitchen with my coffee, milk on the side, no sugar.

Minutes later the whirring stopped, the boots retreated, and the voice on the megaphone quietened. The waitress went about her business, taking orders, bringing food, collecting dirty plates. I wanted to say something. I wanted to know who she was. Instead, I slipped quietly out the café as soon as I dared.

I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t stop thinking about the waitress. The next day I decided I to return to the Yellow Café to say the things I hadn’t said the day before. I needed to look into her eyes. It wasn’t possible to hide, if she was human, I’d know. Every day I followed the morning schedule my wife always followed: waking early, grinding beans, making coffee, scrambling eggs, reading the news, checking that all the neighbours were okay. Helping was her thing, she really did like to help. I could set my watch by her. That they said was the problem, if she’d left a little earlier or a little later it would never have happened. She would have survived.

The café doors were open. I waited for the parrot to announce my arrival, but Mr Green was uncharacteristically quiet. The room is bright and sunny. The servers are back, with their sharp features and bland expressions. The waitress, my waitress, was nowhere to be seen. She’d drawn attention to herself and she would pay the price. It was happening all over again