

## People-watching

By Julie Heng

The best thing about coffee shops isn't the coffee. It's sitting in the window seats, nursing a latte and watching the tide of humanity roil in and wash out, dragging or being dragged by, pulling or being pulled by love, hate, rage, boredom, fear, anxiety or a major case of the just-don't-give-a-damns.

I've always been a people-watcher, and coffee shops are perfectly situated in the middle of a busy world. Here, on the other side of the glass, I watch movies play out, sometimes in time-lapse and sometimes in slow motion.

In the early morning, passersby move too slowly (pre-caffeine injection), too quickly (post), or are stuck in between (attempting to manage a briefcase, tablet, and to-go cup all with one hand).

In the streets, people armed with badges and security codes and the irritation that comes with too little sleep swipe into their buildings. Some fumble with keys and panic. Others stare glassily from between noise-cancelling headphones. Off the curb, a black Jeep Patriot takes too long to parallel park, and the quicksilver Honda close behind gets antsy. Quicksilver driver's hand dances with indecision over his steering wheel horn.

I'm not a part of this tangled, busy world. I'm only a window-seat observer. But I'm about to become one of those unaware they're being watched: a Work Person.

In 24 minutes, I'll be at my first employee orientation, in that huge beige concrete building across the street. Washtenaw County Administrative Building, the plaque proclaims, in capital letters, down-to-business and sans-serif. There, I'll enlist in the workforce. I'll fill out tax and insurance forms. I'll get my own security ID badge.

Just last week, I was nervously awaiting the phone interview, hoping my voice wouldn't crack or break, or that my train of thought wouldn't scatter like marbles fallen on the floor.

I'm not sure I feel ready.

A man wearing suspenders and a belt and a pocket handkerchief stops in front of the Administrative Building. He checks his phone, watch, and briefcase three times in quick succession, pacing left and right in front of the entrance.

At first, I think he is lost, swept up in the morning chaos. Then I realize he is here for orientation too.

I see you, fellow nervous Work Person.

I see you, and I will soon join you. On the other side of this suddenly thin glass, I too will become a Work Person, part of this muddled, harried crowd. I too will adopt that not-quite-hunched attitude, that forward-leaning posture that Work People seem to believe will save them two steps. I will no longer have the luxury to dawdle about on summer mornings in coffee shops. My latte will serve a different function—to keep me awake rather than leave me dreaming.

Work People have their eyes trained on the block ahead. As a whole, the mass looks ordinary and almost haphazard, but each Work Person knows his or her purpose.

Across the street, the man finally calms his nerves and bolts up the steps. No looking back.

I, too, take a deep breath before finishing my latte.

And then I leave the coffee shop towards the Administrative Building, careful not to step into oncoming traffic, careful not to interrupt those paths of love, hate, rage, boredom, fear and anxiety, ready to step into my own purpose on the other side of the window.