

Solitaire

By Kathy McIntosh

Jeffrey:

One more game, just one more game of Solitaire. I told myself I'd stop after the last one, but one more won't hurt, I'm sure. What else do I have to do?

I know the minute I stop Ella will find something to fill up my time, something "useful," but really, just a way for her to be in charge, to add another "honey-do" to that long, long, list.

Why shouldn't I have time for myself? I deserve it. Forty years for the same darn company, day after day, year after year, boring, mind-numbing paperwork, useless meetings and way too much time in the company of people as bland and boring as the paperwork that engulfed us all.

Some might call Solitaire a boring sinkhole, but I track my number of games, wins, losses, percentages. Better than life, where you never know if you've won or lost, if the value of the effort you've put in equals the results gained. Better than marriage, for that matter, where you almost *never* know the score.

* * * *

Ella:

One more game. If he starts one more game of Solitaire, it will be his last. I swear it. He vowed he'd stopped that ridiculous, mind-numbing online game. A total waste of time.

Forty years, forty long years, he used the excuse that work wore him out, he had no time to do anything but sit and watch television every night. As if he hadn't been working, too. As if my job of explaining the difference in vacuum models to vacuous, slaving idiots wasn't mind-numbing as well as exhausting. At least he got to sit down most of the time.

Solitaire

I was patient, didn't argue, rarely complained. Together we made plans for the future. Retirement would be the answer, we both said. A time to see the world, enjoy each other's company, get fit, eat right, explore the wonders of all those books I'd made note of, learn to make furniture with all those tools he'd bought over the years.

We postponed projects and trips, both of us saying we'd have so much more time once we'd both retired. I reminded myself of how much I'd loved him when we met and were first married.

And after we called quits to working?

He found Solitaire. Online, after I conveniently misplaced all three decks in the house.

Me, I started my lists. Projects to be done, closets to clear out, junk to donate, recipes to sort (and one day try). And he played. On and on and on. I checked one day: 33,000 plus games of online Solitaire. I didn't check his percentage of wins. Because in my book, he'd lost.

What about all those vacations? Furniture? Gym visits?

Nope. Nothing. Just more Solitaire.

* * * *

Jeffrey:

She doesn't understand how worn out I was when we finally retired. That job had drained me of so much—energy, ambition, desire to do much of anything. I told her I needed time to recuperate, repair myself, before we launched anything big. But her biggest, first project must have been nagging. And she started in on that right away.

On the heels of "We need to plan our trip to Europe," came, "You need to lose weight before we can travel; you've become a blimp." This from the woman who could compete with an

Solitaire

ancient feather pillow for soft and lumpy. I chose silence as an answer, but of course, she wasn't happy with that.

"We never talk anymore. Now that you have all the time in the world, the only thing you focus on is that dang Solitaire. What about my lists? Our projects? Walks by the river?"

What about some "me-time?" Some privacy, some relief from your ceaseless prater.

* * * *

Ella:

I finally convinced the old fart to take me out to dinner at a place that used to be our favorite—excellent food and wine, a talented and not overpowering musician, comfortable seats—the perfect place, I thought, to rekindle the embers of romance in our dying marriage.

"Isn't this lovely?" I asked, once we were seated. "Do you remember how we used to love their appetizers?"

He scowled. "Yesterday I'm too fat, today I should chow down on rich food? Which do you want, Ella?"

Tears formed in my eyes, but I couldn't let him see or he'd win. "I need to use the restroom." I made a beeline for the women's room. I dabbed at my eyes, trying not to smear my makeup and then waved my hands furiously and forever to get the dratted automatic towel machine to release a scrap of paper. First time I'd bothered with makeup in months and Jeffrey had made me cry it off within our first few minutes at the restaurant. Why did I bother to try?

Back at the table, I slid into the booth opposite my heartless husband. He was drinking a martini, but nothing sat at my place. "Didn't know what you wanted," was his excuse, as if we hadn't *always* preceded every meal out with the same thing—he, a martini, me, a Manhattan.

Solitaire

“Older women have trouble holding hard liquor,” he said. “Read that the other day.” He downed his drink and signaled our waitress for another.

My mouth fell open. He hadn’t said that. Surely he hadn’t sunk that low. “I’ll just have a wine spritzer, perfect for the ‘older woman,’” I told our server when she arrived. “Good thing I dropped by the library today. Too much hard liquor puts a man your age out of commission. I’ll have a good book and earplugs to drown out your snoring.”

* * * *

Jeffrey:

After an obviously fake and doomed attempt to rekindle the romance at a local restaurant, Ella humiliated me by referring to my waning prowess in bed right in front of our pert and perky waitress. The witch. As if I couldn’t hold my own in that department. As if I couldn’t find better partners than my nasty, judgmental wife.

Which got me started thinking.

* * * *

Ella:

No one could say I hadn’t tried. I’d hoped we could find one tiny glow in the ashes of our dull, dull marriage. I guess before we retired I’d been too busy to notice what a sour grapes kind of guy he was. I deserved someone who was willing to talk with me, spend time with me, laugh with me. I didn’t deserve Mr. Solitaire.

I began my own online obsession, even toyed with signing up for one of those matchmaking services. But I’d be patient. It wouldn’t be too long before I gained my freedom, could spread my wings without my wing-clipping spouse to hold me down.

* * * *

Solitaire

Jeffrey:

I know enough economics to understand the theory of sunk costs. Sunk costs should not be considered when making the decision to continue investing in an ongoing project, since these costs cannot be recovered. I talked with an old friend about finding a way out of this farce of a marriage, and he said, “But think about all those years you’ve been married. You’ll be wasting them.” He obviously isn’t an economist. Or familiar with Ella.

Rather than argue with him, give him questions to answer in the future, I nodded and said, “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

This week I split my Internet time between Solitaire and essential research.

* * * *

Ella:

A brief trip to a garden store in a nearby town, followed by shopping for the ingredients of an elegant, tasty meal. Tonight I’d present him with one last gift—flowers and food.

* * * *

Jeffrey:

You can find lots of surprises in dusty old pharmacies. Ella always loved antiques—except me, of course—so tonight I’ll gift her with some lovely crystal glasses and a very special bottle of wine. I’m sure it will be the surprise of her life.

* * * *

Tucson News Online:

Recently retired couple, Jeffrey and Ella Witherspoon, were found dead today in their home in the Catalina Hills, police confirmed. The couple had been dead for several days and an investigation is pending. Initial investigation indicates possible food poisoning.