

VANISHING

by Cathy Jewison

I'm terribly sorry, miss."

"Don't worry, it happens all the time." Carol looked up at the old man from where she was lying, right underneath the canned peas.

"Can I help you up?"

"No, really, I'm alright." Carol managed to get herself upright quickly, even though she was disabled by her parka.

"I'm really sorry miss. I just didn't see you there."

"It's perfectly alright. It's not *the* first time it's happened."

At least this time she was wearing something thick, so she wouldn't get those ugly bruises, like she did the last time someone drove a shopping cart into her hip. That was during the summer, and she'd been wearing a sun dress.

This man had been nicer than the fat lady who had run her down that time. Her cart had been full, and with all that weight behind it, Carol didn't have a chance. "What are you doing there?" the woman had asked. "You weren't there the last time I looked/" As if Carol had materialized out of thin air just to spite her.

"I've been standing here for the last five minutes trying to decide if it's better to buy the large box of cheese crackers or the smaller one," Carol had

replied. "The bigger one is cheaper, but half of them will probably go stale before I get around to eating them." She didn't usually babble at strangers, but she was trying to give the woman a chance to apologize.

"Well, it's *my* turn to look at the cheese crackers, so pick yourself up and get out of my way," the fat lady had said.

just like that. No "I'm sorry" or "can I help you?" or anything. Carol had been quite angry. But that was before she found out something funny was going on.

Carol was invisible.

Now, Carol wasn't a paranoid schizo and it's not like she didn't have friends and never went out. She did, but she was invisible all the same. Actually, it was a guy she met in the bar one night who made her realize the truth.

She had been sitting there with her friend Wendy, when Alan and Chuck came over to introduce themselves. They all laughed and chatted for a while, like you do in a singles' bar, and then Chuck asked Carol to dance. They danced quite a bit. They talked about their jobs, joked about singles' bars, discussed the Nuclear Question. Chuck asked her back to his place, but Carol said no, she had to work the *next* day.

Carol didn't think about him again for a couple of weeks. Then Wendy called to say she was bored, and wanted to go to the bar to see if they could find Alan and Chuck again. Sure enough, they turned up and Wendy flagged them down.

They said "hi" to Wendy and asked her how it was going. Then Alan said: "Who's your friend?"

And Wendy said: "You remember Carol."

And Alan said: "No, we've never met."

And Wendy said: "Well, Chuck will certainly remember Carol."

And Chuck said: "No, we've never met."

And suddenly Carol knew it was true. It explained so many things. Like all those times when she was walking out of a store, and the person right in front of her just let go of the door, without holding it open for her, even though her hands were full. And it explained why people would walk by her in the street pretending they didn't know her, when they actually did. And it would certainly explain why that middle-aged man tried to cut into the bank line ahead of her yesterday. He wasn't being rude—he just couldn't see her.

So she had a minor conversation with Alan and Chuck, and told them all the same things she had a couple of weeks earlier—where she worked, how dumb she thought singles' bars were and why she didn't think nuclear bombs were a good idea. She wasn't really sure why she was bothering at all, but it seemed like the polite thing to do.

At first Carol felt bad that she was invisible. She thought she must have a personality defect—like she wasn't interesting enough to be visible, or something like that. But how did the fat lady in the grocery store know what kind of a personality she had? She decided invisible people must be born that way, just like some people were born left-handed.

Once she got over feeling bad about being invisible, she began to relax and enjoy it. When walking down the street, she no longer felt obligated to stare at people she knew so she could say "hello." She stopped feeling that she had to do a big makeup job on her face every morning, because no one would see it, anyway. She even stopped going to singles' bars because there didn't seem to be much point. She used to go to

see and be seen, but she was obviously missing out on half the deal.

There were some things Carol had to learn, too, for her own self-survival. Like when she was in a lineup in the bank or the grocery store, she would have to stand right behind the person in front of her so no one could cut in, then say "Oh! I'm sorry™! didn't see you." (Actually, Carol wondered if she could cut in line in front of other people, since they'd never know the difference. But she didn't have the nerve, and besides, it would be an abuse of her powers.)

Carol also had to learn to weave around people when she was walking down the sidewalk. People were forever sauntering out of stores right in front of her, then plodding along while she tried to get by. For years she thought they were jerks, but now she knew better.

She had to be especially careful when she was driving her car, because her shield of invisibility seemed to stretch right over that, too. She had often wondered why people made left turns in front of her when it was quite obvious (or so she had previously believed) that she had the right of way. She couldn't begin to count the number of times people had tried to change lanes right into her car.

It took Carol several months to learn to live with her condition. She was finally getting used to it, when Wendy saw her in the street. She was a bit shocked at the way Carol was dressed—an old pair of sweat pants and an *I~Love-Moose Jaw* T-shirt. Carol used to wear designer casuals just to clean the attic. She wasn't curling her hair anymore, either. When Wendy asked her what was going on, Carol was surprised she'd noticed the change.

"Why wouldn't I notice?" Wendy asked.

"As time goes on, fewer and fewer people see me," Carol said. "It must be a progressive thing. It's moving at a pretty quick pace these days."

They went for coffee, and Carol mentioned that she wasn't bothering to go out much—there just didn't seem to be any point. Wendy suggested they do the town some night soon, but Carol said "no."

Wendy paid the bill and said it was nice to talk to Carol again, and that she'd see her around.

Carol smiled and said, "I don't think so."