

A Retreat to Silence

Cat Reading

Hordes of people cram into this small room, and suddenly I'm glad they're not here to see me. I shuffle to the back. Hoping to go unnoticed. And with John up there, in the front of the crowd, my fears are eased. I am simply disregarded. For part of the night.

Until Anne recognizes me. Spotting me with her huge brown eyes and starting to come my way. Brief excuse me's rise above the sound of the air conditioner. "Hi," she says. Her whisper digs into my ear, and someone in front of me turns around because they can clearly hear what she says. Silence is the only acceptable talking right now. But Anne is persistent.

"How are you?" she breathes.

Her hair is pulled back tight. She's wearing her glasses even though I know she only needs them for reading. Her walk is as clumsy as her speech.

I mouth OK to her, with a nod of my head. To confirm this, I briefly smile, hoping to end a future conversation. People are staring, I tell myself.

Anne, she turns forward to the front of the room. She purses her lips together in a blotting motion and sweeps her right hand over her forehead. Then she leans over. "Do you miss her?"

For a moment I try to figure out who she's talking about. Then I realize that she wants to know about Carol. My mother. Maybe she wants the gory details of the accident. People always do.

Once when I was little, my mom woke me up in the middle of the night, warning me to be quiet because she didn't want to wake my brother sleeping in the same room. She took me downstairs and handed me a mug of hot

cocoa. She led me outside and motioned for me to sit down.

In all her years, she said, she had never seen a moon like this one. It was full and bright, but a dull yellow hue hung over it like the five o'clock shadow that my dad always had when he came home from work. She had never seen a moon like it before that night. I've never seen one like it since.

"Yeah. I miss her," I whisper.

This pleases Anne, and she begins to hunt for something in her purse before finally calming down. She reminds me of a five year old trying to sit still in the red plastic chairs during snack time. She reminds me of a dog that's been kept in a cage for too long, and all they do is run circles around you when you let them out.

John finishes talking and an "amen" resounds through the room. I don't say it with them. I notice that Anne doesn't either. She looks at the floor, ignoring a possible situation.

People slowly file out just as they had filed in. They look like a train that is black with coal, as they slowly move out of the single door. I stay in the back for a little while longer. Maybe I'm deciding not to leave this room at all. Maybe I'm just waiting until everyone's gone. And I find myself wondering if anyone will come looking for me when I'm not out there among the variety of cheese and crackers.

I'll be missing along with the knife to the vegetable spread.

Anne lingers for a second. I think she's wondering if she should stay here with me or go. She's thinking that she should mingle outside. Social situations were always one of her strong points.

"Thanks for coming, Anne," I say. I give her an excuse to go. I can tell that she doesn't want to stay here, as

if the pale yellow walls might swallow her up any instant.

"Oh well." She's quiet. "If there's anything I can do..." It's a blanket statement, and I don't mind.

I smile again and she leaves the room. She blends in with the rest of the black sport coats and dresses. I lose her in the crowd. Brushing past her, John peers in at me. He sticks his head in, motions for me to join the crowd and then he turns to talk to our old neighbor from Wisconsin. The one who would help my mom in the garden while John and I pumped and pumped on the swings.

I sit down in the back row of the chairs that are so neatly lined up. I realize that I'm tired, so I close my eyes. But I hear someone walk in, slowly. They think that I'm crying. But the truth is that I haven't cried yet.

John and I got in a fight when we were young; we got in a lot of fights that always pulled my mom to the very edge of however far she could go. When he hit me, I cried.

John, afraid of repercussions, sprinted upstairs. I made my way over to my mom, who was on the phone with her sister. When I was crying then, she picked me up in her arms, even though I was getting too big, and swept my hair to the side. I fell asleep to her laughing with the muffled voice on the other end of the line.

Back in this room, I open my eyes when they touch my shoulders. It's a gentle tap that isn't offering comfort, but rather asking if the seat next to me is free. For a moment, I forget where I am, and I ask them to sit with me, in this room that screams of faded dandelions in the sun.