

A Quiet Place to Read

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The aroma of cucumbers wafted up the stairs and found its way to the bedroom that Zoie shared with her aunt Erin, a twelve-year-old shoplifter and pot smoker who sometimes crawled out the window at midnight, returning at dawn. Cucumbers at two o'clock in the afternoon meant finger sandwiches. And finger sandwiches meant visitors. Grownup visitors. And that meant kids were to stay scarce.

Outside the open window, rain poured out of the sky, thick and warm and smelling of summer. Zoie looked at the rain gauge and thermometer that her grandfather had installed for her. She wanted to be a meteorologist, or maybe a geologist. Maybe both. Definitely a scientist. She wasn't sure. She was only eight years old. She still had time to decide.

She watched the rainwater roll down the sloping roof and pour into a gutter. Leaves and twigs rode the current, some disappearing down the gutter, others forming a dam. Three inches of rain so far today. And it was still ninety-two degrees. This place was nothing like the New Mexican desert she knew so well. Here, it seemed to rain all the time. And when it rained, it was impossible to be alone, never mind finding a quiet place to read.

Zoie picked up the paperback book that moments before she had rescued from the bathroom floor, eager to read it. She took a slow step into the hallway. Rain and the whir of a box fan. She sniffed at the air and listened for adult voices. Her grandmother was moving about in the kitchen, singing and clanking plates. Now, the aroma of fresh brewed coffee reached her nose. She heard two more voices. Aunt Noreen, not a nice person and difficult to hide from. Aunt Joan, loud and pushy. They lived in the house, too, and made reading a book in peace impossible.

As she moved down the hallway, the floorboards creaked. She paused. Every floorboard in this old house creaked, every single one of them. Some groaned. The one in front of her mother's bedroom

door squeaked like a toy duck. She took another slow step, and then another, until she was at the top of the stairs. She stood there listening, still gripping the paperback.

Her grandmother was singing loudly now, one of her usual Broadway tunes. The house dog, a one-eyed Pekingese, barked at something somewhere. The sound of rain filled the rooms. Everything was sticky. She decided to make her move.

She slipped down the stairs and around the corner and into the living room, undetected. There, she noted a few changes. The coffee table had been cleared of debris and was now covered in doilies. The TV was missing. A batik curtain covered the bookcase. There were no ashtrays.

“Well, Mother,” she heard Joan say, “you should have asked him when you had the opportunity.”

“Really now,” Grandmother replied. “it won’t be the end of the world if he prefers tea to coffee.”

Zoie heard their footsteps headed her way. She ducked into the coat closet, not an easy task given the heap of things piled up on the closet floor. Decades of not fully dried paint kept the door from closing completely, leaving it forever ajar like other such doors in the house. Through the narrow opening, she could see anyone who came into the room from the hallway.

And here came Joan, wearing a long, cotton gauze tunic printed in brightly colored paisleys. She wore nothing underneath it. She never did. Many people complained. Joan didn’t care. Strings of red, yellow, and orange beads rattled against each other as she stomped across the floor in her bare feet.

“Why are we doing this, anyway?” Joan asked. “What’s the point?”

“Because this is what we do,” Grandmother replied.

“Since when?” Joan shot back. “Honestly, mother, I find it quite hypocritical, this whole thing.”

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Through the narrow opening, Zoie could see her grandmother, resplendent in a blue and green floral dress, carrying a tray to the coffee table. Joan kept complaining, even as Grandmother walked away.

Zoie sighed. She had two options now. She could try to exit through the front door, onto the porch, and maybe find a quiet spot out there to read. Or she could try to get back upstairs, unnoticed.

Just then, the front door opened and closed. She heard footsteps moving around the room, then approaching the coat closet. She detected the scent of her mother's perfume. There was a thump just beyond the closet door. She forced herself into the recesses of the debris pile, onto an old boot jammed into a back corner.

"Mom," she heard her brother George say, "there's nothing to do. I'm bored."

"Go play with Benny," her mother replied.

"He's a baby," George said. "He doesn't understand comic books."

"Well play something else. Play cards. Or checkers," her mother said.

"He can't even play Candyland the right way," George replied.

"Look," her mother said, "Father Gormley will be here any minute. So, go upstairs and find something to do for a couple of hours. And keep Benny occupied. And keep it down. Don't wake baby Liam."

Benny was Zoie's four-year-old uncle. A four-year-old uncle had been a difficult idea to accept. He wasn't fully potty trained. And he still liked baby food, and, according to a woman at the supermarket, he was only recently weaned. The other baby was Joan's. He wasn't really talking yet. But he was a biter.

Ten-year-old George was not into babysitting. But on a rainy day in the middle of a hot southern summer, with the TV gone and the adults having a get together, there weren't many entertainment

options. Zoie could hear her brother groaning and dragging his feet as he receded into the guts of the house, no doubt returning to the bedroom he shared with baby Benny.

There was just enough light entering the closet for Zoie to see the title of the rescued paperback. She moved closer to the crack and held the book up to a narrow band of light. On the cover was a drawing of an empty desk facing an open window. The title "A Room of One's Own" had gotten her attention. She wanted her own room again, filled with every kind of book.

In this rickety old house, there was little else for a kid to do but read or get in trouble, and she had read almost every book in the house. Before, when they lived on the air force base, her parents had bought her lots of books. She had no idea where all those books were now. For that matter, she had no idea where any of her things were. Dolls and games and clothes and books and a collection of rocks and a geology kit and a microscope. Everything was gone. The only books she had now were foundlings, except for the ones her mother let her buy at the Saint Francis Thrift Store, ten for a dollar.

"Well, here are the watercress sandwiches," she heard her grandmother saying.

"This is too much food," Joan said. "You always overdo it, Mother."

It fascinated Zoie how everyone in the house called Grandmother by a different name. Joan called her "Mother" (not in a warm way) and Erin called her "Lady" (upsetting everyone). Noreen called her "Mom." Another aunt who lived far away called her Momster. And Zoie's mother called her "Mumsy".

"I will not have you picking a fight with Father Gormley!" Grandmother was saying. "Now is not the time for you to split hairs over doctrinal differences. This visit is not about you. This is about Noreen."

"I know that," Joan said, "but you cannot possibly believe that you can just ignore these doctrinal differences, Mother. This is at the core of all that is wrong with the church and the people in it. Like you."

“I will not stand here and listen to you cast aspersions on other people’s beliefs,” Grandmother said. “So, you either act as though you are a respectable young woman, or you leave the house this instant. This is not your afternoon to destroy.”

“Destroy? Hah!” Joan shouted. “I’m trying to save Noreen from a life of inequality and misogyny. Why should she promise to obey a man? Especially that man. I can’t believe this is happening. I just can’t. Noreen is only seventeen!”

“Oh, just stop it!” Grandmother snapped.

“Oh, for god’s sake, Joan!” Zoie’s mother shouted from the kitchen, “just leave it alone. It’s not your wedding. You have no say whatsoever.”

Joan retreated to the kitchen, stomping her feet along the way. Now, there were more voices coming from the kitchen, and they were all talking at once. Typical, Zoie thought. They never stop talking. They make everything hard. Reading. Writing. Just trying to ask a question. So much noise and chaos and clutter. On base, everything had been neat and clean, the lawns manicured. There were things to do. Pools and playgrounds. Tennis and basketball courts. A movie theater. Now, her father was lost in a war and they had to live here, in this house where everything was shabby and disheveled. Even now, with a priest coming to visit, the house wasn’t clean. From her vantage point in the closet, she could see the dirty dishes that her grandmother had shoved under the sofa a few days before.

“Quick, quick!” someone shouted. “He’s coming up the steps!”

There was a flurry of activity and then the doorbell rang. Grandmother sprinted across the living room and opened the door just as a bolt of lightning lit up the sky. A loud boom of thunder followed instantly.

“That was close,” Father Gormley said.

“Oh dear, do come in, Father,” Grandmother said.

“Thank you, Elizabeth, very good to see you.”

“Let me take your umbrella,” Grandmother, said. “Would you like to take off your shoes? I see they are absolutely soaked through.”

Another flurry of activity as Father Gormley was attended to, his shoes taken away for drying and cleaning, his socks, as well. He chose iced coffee as his beverage and ate a few cucumber and watercress sandwiches and admired the cheese and fruit plate.

Zoie stayed quiet in the closet, listening to the boring chatter and exchange of information about this and that person, and then some questions about why dear Erin hadn't been attending mass or catechism, questions which Grandmother avoided by telling Father Gormley that soon it would be time for another baptism because aunt Annie was expecting again. And then Father Gormley remarked that they were looking for volunteers to help with cleaning the church and general upkeep.

“I was a wardrobe mistress once,” Grandmother said. “for a Shakespearean theater company. I can handle the vestments.”

“Now that, I say, is credentialing,” Father Gormley said.

Zoie didn't fully understand the conversation. But she knew that cleaning was not something her Grandmother would volunteer to do.

“Now Noreen,” Father Gormley was saying. “You say you want a Latin mass. Why would that be? Your husband to be is an Episcopalian. Has he an opinion on the matter? And what of his family?”

“You see? I told you, Noreen,” Joan interrupted.

“And I told you,” Grandmother said, “that this is not your wedding, Joan. You already had your wedding. And look how that turned out. Now just be quiet.”

Another bolt of lightning lit up the sky, the crack of thunder so loud Zoie could feel it. And then there was shouting all over the house.

“Oh dear,” Grandmother said. “It looks like the power is out.”

“I'll go check the fuse box,” Zoie's mother said.

“Father,” Noreen said, “I’ve been planning my wedding since I was a child. I’ve always wanted to have a Latin mass. You’ve met James. I know he’s Episcopalian, but he’s easy going. His Latin is not completely absent.”

“Young James I do know, yes,” Father Gormley said. “And I know his mother. Indeed, the few relatives he has, I know. This is a small village, Noreen. Fewer than four thousand souls. His people are on the board of Saint Stephen’s. They might find it too much, a Latin Mass. Think of others, not just yourself.”

“But I want a High Latin Mass – *missa solemnis*.” Noreen insisted.

“You mean with three priests? Are you mad?” Father Gormley said. “It’s only the Low Mass we can offer, Noreen. I’m the only Priest for three parishes. If that is what you want, well then, you’re going to have to go elsewhere. Springfield perhaps. That’s a lot of paperwork.”

“I see,” Noreen said.

“Are you sure it’s only a High Mass that’ll satisfy you, Noreen?” Father Gormley asked.

Before she could answer, another bolt of lightning lit up the room, this one brighter and more determined, and the thunder that came with it seemed to shake the whole house. All talking stopped.

Zoie inched her way towards the front of the closet, trying to get a glimpse through the crack. She could see her grandmother returning to the living room with a candle, not that the room needed it. Now the sound of sirens racing through town added to the overall sense that something was about to happen.

“Oh dear,” her grandmother said. “I hope no one is hurt.”

“The whole neighborhood is out of power,” Zoie’s mother said. “I called your office, Father. The church hasn’t been affected.”

“This rain!” grandmother said. “Oh, I do hope you are okay, Father. Is there anything I can get you?”

The adults started chattering about the weather and the rain and the rooftops and how hot it was, and how the mosquitos were so bad this year. Zoie found all this chatter boring, and fake. Everyone was talking differently, just because the priest was here. Noreen was never this polite. Joan was never this quiet. Grandmother was never this concerned about anyone else's comfort.

Zoie was bored now and wanted to leave the closet. But she couldn't just burst out. She couldn't let them see her. She couldn't be found there, hiding, either. She would get in trouble for something. That's how it was in this house. No matter which way she turned, someone was yelling at her about something. She didn't like living there, in that house. It was always messy. There was no dinner time, no bath time, no bedtime. Things just seemed to happen. Sometimes, her aunts would get into physical fights. Hair pulling. Scratching. But mostly, constant bickering and complaining were the sounds of life in the house. Sometimes, she wondered if it would be better if she just crawled out the window and disappeared like aunt Erin did.

She looked again at the book, which she still held tightly in her hand. All she wanted to do was read. But it was too dark in the closet.

"Now, Noreen," she heard Father Gormley say, "prior to any further discussions of a Latin High Mass and any dispensations, we need to discuss the Catechism for you and James. As you know, the marriage needs to start out on the right foot, all expectations clear. Including how to bring up the children."

Then Zoie heard something. A loud thumpity thump. Then laughter. Then barking and more laughter. And then the sound of feet pounding across the upstairs floors.

"What is that noise?" Grandmother asked.

"Just the boys," Zoie's mother said.

The noise got louder and louder and more frenetic. Then it came flying down the staircase. She saw baby Benny, naked and screeching, run into the living room. He was followed by three dogs, Joan's

toddler son Liam, also naked, and Zoie's brother George, who was laughing so hard all he could do was snort. Benny was screaming at the top of his lungs, "I'll get you! I'll get you!" He had something in his hand and was waving it around as he cackled with laughter.

Zoie poked her nose in the crack, almost moving the door as she tried to get a better look.

"Whose dog is that?" she heard someone say.

Then there was a loud collective gasp. That's when the adults started shouting.

"Put that thing down!" Zoie heard her mother yell. "Benny, I mean it. Put that thing down!"

"Oh my god, Mother!" Joan shouted. "Is that your vibrator?"

With a shriek of glee, baby Benny threw the vibrator into the air and the house Pekingese managed to grab it. George and baby Benny were both shrieking with laughter.

"Give it! Give it!" baby Benny shouted as he tried to wrench the thing from the dog's mouth.

Zoie pressed closer to the door, able to see aunt Joan's attempt to intervene. Benny pushed her away.

"No!" he shouted. "He likes the buzzing thing!"

"Drop it! Drop it!" Joan shouted. But the dog escaped and ran off, followed by the entire entourage.

The living room fell silent, and the sound of rain invaded the space. She heard Father Gormley clear his throat. Her Grandmother mumbled something.

"Of all the things I have seen, Mother," Joan said. "What? Do you, just, leave that thing lying around the house?"

Silence. The living room remained quiet for another moment. Zoie listened to the rain. She had never heard rain pound this hard before. And the living room had never been quieter, not with people in it. She had no idea what had happened, not really. But somehow, she knew that it was going to affect

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her. She just couldn't imagine how. At least she had a new book to look forward to, and a window to escape through.