

TRANS IN THE CHAPEL: ATTENDING CHURCH AS A NEWLY OUT TRANSGENDER WOMAN

Emily English

The ratchet tightened in my chest pulling into the parking lot. Four of our five children in tow and one serving a mission. Fifteen minutes early in the hopes that we could settle in before anyone noticed. My children insist we sit in our usual pew to the right side, six rows back on the bleached knotty pine and speckled blue-green padded benches that were clean of goldfish and Cheerios. Dressed in a freshly pressed Foxcroft white oxford women's button-up blouse and black pleated polyester women's dress slacks, I slid into the bench and practiced my breathing exercises while trying to look away from anyone who might look over. My eyelashes were subtly coated in matte black mascara, on my cheeks a light dusting of dusty rose-colored blush powder, just enough that I could feel comfortable and almost myself.

"Nice to see you back where you belong, Brother English."

Look down, don't make eye contact, and breathe.

"Thank you."

Breathe in and hold for three seconds, breathe out and hold for three seconds. Breathe in and hold for three seconds, and again, breathe out and hold for three seconds.

"Well, hello, young man . . . nice to see you, it has been a while. Are you sticking around for priesthood this time?"

It will be okay. Three, two, one . . . let the breath out.

"Hello, it has been a while."

I forced a smile then looked back down at the polished, almond-shaped tips of my shiny black Naturalizer flats, remembering that my toes were painted the color of lilacs somewhere underneath. I hoped I didn't scuff them on the way in.

I watched peripherally as the Relief Society president came in the room and moved from sister to sister, greeting them as they came in with their families. Her navy, floor-length chevron maxi dress moved gracefully with her from Sister Tanner to Sister Johnston to Sister Brown. A stiff and highly appropriate handshake with the second counselor, then on to Sister Hansen. As she came toward the English family pew, she sat down beside me and softly took my hand.

"I'm so glad you made the extra effort to be here. You look beautiful and full of grace."

I took a deep breath, and we wept together until the meeting was about to start.

She moved her family over to sit in front of my little family, pulling a small pack of tissues out of her purse and handing them to me with a subtle look of reassurance.

Forty-seven minutes of breathing exercises and making small origami frogs out of the program to distract myself from the anxiety of the meeting. Someone said a closing prayer. The Relief Society president returned to my side, held my hand again, tears again.

"Would it be okay if I stay here with you for a minute?"

"No, thank you, I need to go outside if I am going to be okay."

"Okay, is it okay if I check on you?"

"Yes, I will be out in the car until the kids are done with their meetings."

Standing up, adjusting the blouse, careful to not scuff my toes. Taking a breath as two hands extend in front of me.

"Nice to see you, Brother English. Glad you are back where you belong."

Breathe, correct my posture after the aggressive grab and shake of my clamped-down left shoulder.

“Would you consider coming early to help the young men pass the sacrament next week?”

“Maybe.”

Moving to the car, I reach into my pocket, pull out one of the tissues, dab the corner of my eye, careful to not disturb the long black lashes. Grateful to have worn waterproof mascara this time.

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