

Very

by Elizabeth Lloyd

The bright colours of the party swirl and churn, the silks and satins blurring into a mass of lurid light. The high-pitched laughs and deep murmurs of the guests echo and bounce off the marble walls and steps and windows and glasses and platters and floor and ceiling and there is just so much and you can't breathe and your clothes are too tight and your throat is too dry and everything is spinning, even though your brain is screaming at you that your feet are safe, flat on the ground, but watch out for that unknown danger that could jump out at you from behind that velvet curtain or the microphone on that stage or the railing of the balcony that leads out into the fresh air.

Air. You need to breathe.

Hurrying along, you jostle someone's arm and hear their exclamation of despair at their newest item of clothing (from the most recent range of a *very* high-class designer, they'd point out) being ruined by the cheap, vinegary wine that *almost* tastes like it's worth the price they paid. Your heart pounds at the mere thought of a confrontation. Shaking, you turn around. No one is looking at you. It's okay. Leave.

Move. Faster. Carefully.

You stumble through the doorway, even though there's nothing there. A little girl, no taller than your waist, asks if you're okay as you gasp for air, the cold night burning your lungs. As you look up to the sky, the stars start coming back into focus and the moon no longer looks like a hole in a black t-shirt, but the familiar moon with its worried face. You know how it feels.

You realise you're on your knees, just over the doorway to the balcony. If you don't move, they'll all see you. If you don't move, they'll laugh at you. If you don't move, they'll be angry. If you don't move, they'll see your weakness. Shaking, you force yourself to your feet,

tripping a little as you stagger to the bench on the edge of the balcony, not far enough from the party, but far enough that you don't feel choked by the perfumes and the cologne and the cheap wine and the food that's been left out far too long and the –

No. Breathe.

'Are you okay?' The girl expects you to reply.

You gulp and nod briefly, your throat still too dry to speak.

'You don't look okay.' She frowns. 'You look scared. I felt scared too. That's why I came out here. Mummy told me to count whenever I'm scared.'

She hoists herself up onto the bench next to you, looking much too young to be forced into a room full of boring adults who have nothing better to discuss than politics and money and investments. Then again, why are you in a room full of people who discuss politics and money and investments?

'Three... Four... Five six... Seven... Eight nine ten...' She's counting the stars. That must be what her mother told her to count, to stop her being scared. What can she be scared of, this confident little girl?

One last shuddering breath and you can talk – you hope. 'What is it you're scared of?' The words catch in your throat as you blurt them out, and she ceases her counting to look at you curiously. You repeat the question.

'It's a big massive huge room with lots and lots of tall people and they all pinch my cheek and smell of vinegar. It's very... Very...' She doesn't know the word but you know what she means.

Very loud, very smelly, very bright, very hot, very small and cramped and too many people and everything is just too much. It's the same as the bus. And the classroom whenever the teacher called on you. And the house whenever you fought with your parents. The office you were called into when you were thirteen because you threw a paper plane. Everywhere you go is too much, and there is nothing you can do to stop it.

You've forgotten to answer her. She's still trying to think of the word. 'I know,' you finally tell her, and she blinks up at you, understanding even at her young age that you both share the same plight.

She nods, and thrusts a hand under your nose. You shake it gingerly. 'I'm Katherine,' she declares. 'I'm six and a half and I like maths and drawing, but only with the pretty colours.'

'I hate maths,' you tell her. 'My maths teacher shouted at me and I cried a lot.'

She nods at you, exactly understanding your fear. 'My teacher shouted at me one time and I nearly cried, but my best friend shouted back and she got in trouble with her mummy and daddy and the teacher.' Her lip trembles. You know she must have cried that day.

'She was sad she upset her mummy and daddy, but she didn't like the teach-' Although she goes to carry on, at this precise moment a short, thin man with an expensive suit from the most recent range of a *very* high-class designer with a *very* prominent red wine stain on the sleeve peeks around the door. You prepare yourself to be berated, clenching your fists and steeling yourself.

'Katherine? Come on, we're going home now. I'll read you a story before you go to sleep, okay?'

Katherine nods and pushes herself off the bench, waving goodbye to you absentmindedly. Her dress disappears around the corner and she's gone.

Feeling oddly bereft, you cast your eyes upwards and stare at the stars.

'One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Seven...' She was right. It stops the overwhelming fear. Just a little, and just for a moment. But it's enough for now.