

# (UN)COMFORTABLE SILENCE

By DJ Sanders

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## **(UN)COMFORTABLE SILENCE**

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**CHARACTERS: PAPER and BOOK.**

**TIME: The present**

**PLACE: Anywhere**

**PAPER and BOOK sit in chairs. PAPER is reading the newspaper and BOOK is reading a book. BOOK looks up from the book and looks over at PAPER who continues to read. BOOK begins to speak but does not. BOOK tries to read again but puts the book down. BOOK becomes frustrated trying to find a way to begin a conversation. Finally, BOOK breaks the silence.**

BOOK: Was this a comfortable silence?

PAPER: Pardon?

BOOK: Or was it an uncomfortable silence?

PAPER: What do you mean?

BOOK: We just had a period of silence, where neither of us was speaking.

PAPER: I was reading.

BOOK: But before that, before the silence, we were talking.

PAPER: Were we?

BOOK: I believe so.

PAPER: I don't remember talking to you.

BOOK: I'm certain of it.

PAPER: I only remember sitting here and reading the paper.

BOOK: But before that. What were you doing?

PAPER: Nothing.

BOOK: You had to be doing something. Don't tell me you've spent your whole existence reading the paper.

PAPER: I simply mean that what I was doing before reading the paper is of no consequence.

BOOK: Of no consequence?! How can you say that?! What if we were having a delightful conversation and all of a sudden you said something offensive, or I said something offensive? Then what just happened could best be described as an uncomfortable silence. But if we had been sharing some of our favorite childhood memories or recounting a funny story from the television, we may have reached the natural end of the conversation--both satisfied with having shared in a special communicative moment that neither of us knew how to best continue the topic. In that case, our conversation lull would best be called a comfortable silence.

PAPER: This is the first conversation that we have ever had. Any objective observer would have to agree. You can't recall the topic of any prior conversation.

BOOK: We may not have textual evidence, but it seems reasonable enough to assume that two people sitting in a room together, both reading, would have had, at some point, a conversation prior to the present exchange. We could be long lost friends, or family members, or top secret agents spying on unsuspecting passer-bys.

PAPER: Or we could be two randomly chosen people with no special connection and no particular history just placed in an arbitrary place for a fixed period of time.

BOOK: Even if that were the case--but I'm not saying it is--wouldn't it be more interesting if there was some kind of history between us, perhaps a shared tragedy, or a major conflict, or one of us had a secret? Then we could surely figure out whether that silence was comfortable or uncomfortable.

PAPER: Why does it matter? Before any conversation there needs to be an absence of speaking, ergo silence, otherwise it wouldn't be the beginning of the conversation it would be a midpoint.

BOOK: Do you mean to say that pre-conversational periods of silence are neither comfortable nor uncomfortable silences?

PAPER: Basically, yes.

BOOK: But what if one person wants to speak but it seems like the other person is not in the mood to speak? They may have never communicated with words before that moment, but through their body language there is an obvious discomfort.

PAPER: But from the other person's point of view, that person may have simply wanted to sit still in silence and enjoy the daily newspaper and, through reading the paper, not even notice that another person was signaling to strike up a conversation.

BOOK: Fascinating. So in other words, a conflict has grown from the situation. Two random people placed in the same situation independently develop contradictory wants and needs from their environment. There in lies the conflict. Right?

PAPER: I suppose so.

BOOK: But can conflict develop from nothing, that is, without a back-story? Wouldn't it make more sense to say that each of these two people had their own motivations and desires firmly outlined and at least partially developed before the onset of the interaction?

PAPER: Do you mind if I just read the paper and not think about this?

BOOK: Don't you think that this is important? Your whole existence, my existence, right now in this moment is all dependent on this question: what is my motivation? Is it even possible to have an interaction without a motivation? We are interacting right now as we speak, therefore we must have some kind of motivation.

PAPER: (**getting angry**) Will you just be quiet and let me read the paper!?

BOOK: But you know what? Motivation isn't enough now that I think of it. Your motivation is to read the paper and my motivation is to hold a friendly conversation. This makes me the friendly type and you--well, not as friendly. But then we also have to analyze; to what degree do you want to read that paper and why is it important to me that we have a conversation? But more importantly, what will happen if you don't get the opportunity to read your newspaper? And if I am unable to hold an intelligent and friendly conversation with you, what might I do?

PAPER: (**still angry**) I don't care!!

BOOK: Because now we see that what is at stake is more important than what motivates us. You want to read your paper, it's a normal thing that thousands of people a day do. Read the paper. (**sits down and mimes reading a paper**)

See? I'm reading the paper. So I wonder, how is the stock market these days? What will the weather be like on Thursday? Didn't I hear there was another earthquake somewhere in the world? **(breaking the pose)** I can completely understand your motivation, even respect it. It's a respectable decision to read the daily paper. And possibly a more socially conscience decision than reading a book. You'll be better equipped to vote in any upcoming elections, have a better knowledge of major and even minor world events, and you will be able to spout off random statistics and facts in casual conversation. Yes, one's motivation to read the daily paper is well established in society and need no explanation. But now the question needs to be asked: what are the stakes? What will happen if you do not get the opportunity to read your newspaper? Huh? What will happen? Hello?

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