

PUBLIC SPEAKING: Round 2 (Story)

Source: Looking for Smoke by K. A. Cobell, Published 2024

Excerpt used with educational purpose.

The rumbling of Grandma's truck is almost deafening, in a good way. It makes a nest of sound I can get lost in and helps numb the pain -- for now. The feathered dream catcher hanging from the rearview mirror sways as she turns out of the nearby neighborhood where she'd parked. I hold my hands in front of the vents, warming them after the long, silent walk from the arbor.

The skin at the base of my skull is buzzing like it holds a beehive of incoherent thoughts. They're dormant now, but there's no telling when they'll burst out in violent chaos.

We dip in and out of pools of streetlight until we pull out of town, where only our headlights cut into the dark night over this empty road. The moonlight gives the slight hill crests in the plains beside us a faint glow, almost like we're riding black ocean waves.

After a few minutes of silence and nothing but prairie grass and rotting fence posts whizzing by, Grandma runs a hand through her messy braid. The twists are barely hanging on after the night we've had.

"I hate that I even have to ask," she says
My cheeks yank into a grimace. "So don't."

"I have to!"

"You have to, Grandma? You have to ask if I killed my friend?"

My heart is still broken, my throat constantly burning from being a hair away from tears, but sometimes I'm angry instead, like now. It grinds out in my voice.

She glances at me and clutches the fabric over her chest. "You were the *last* one to see her. And if I'm going to... defend you, yes, I need to ask first. That's standard procedure."

Hot anger blooms in my limbs and explodes before I can stop it. I swing forward and swipe at the dream catcher dangling from the mirror, twisting my fingers into the leather strands like claws. Beads pop off it and soar through the air and skitter across the dashboard. A single feather flutters through the air streaming out of the vent and lands on the vein bulging in my arm as I squeeze the torn leather straps still caught in my fist. "No. I did *not* strangle my best friend." I scream it, but it tangles in my raw throat and brings tears to my eyes.

She doesn't yell back. "I know." Her voice cracks and the new wrinkles around her mouth deepen. All the stress of the last few months is finally making her look like a grandma. The rest of her damaged dream catcher falls from the mirror into the empty cup holder with a dull thud. "I just had to hear you say it..."

I know why she has to ask -- why she worries about me. She's seen how my fuse has gotten shorter and shorter these past few months. Rage blinks in and out when I should be sad, sparking in my muscles and making me break things. I open my hand, letting the destroyed leather strands roll off my fingers to my feet and trying to make the shame from my temper roll with them.

We fall into silence as she massages between her collarbones, a steady motion I've grown used to. It's her way of keeping the tears at bay. "We're starting all over," she whispers.

Tears leak down my face, my hot rage fading with them. It's like I'm melding into the seat, slipping away from this moment. This place. We've already done this. We answered the questions, defended ourselves. I've already carried this guilt of being the last person. The last witness. Already wondered if there was anything I could've done in the final moments to change what happened.

The familiar regret is threading into my thoughts. We've already lost someone we love and have the bleeding hearts to prove it, and we're still searching for closure. We seem to be the only people who are.