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Fall 2023

## Breathing

By Kaliyah Crouse

Breathing air is the easiest thing I have ever done. It is so easy, in fact, that my body does it all on its own. I don't have to put a single thought into the action, it's automatic, subconscious. I haven't thought about the process of breathing since I learned about it in health class. Why would I? It doesn't take any thought.

I was sitting in my room scrolling through social media. The biggest problem in my life right now is that I don't have the new iPhone I just saw an ad for or that I haven't been to Mexico like this friend group. Comparison was my biggest problem in life.

"Kaliyah, come here please."

"What do you want?"

I make my way downstairs; I hate it when mom yells for me. If it's that important, you can come upstairs to me. I'm stomping down the stairs, making it known that I did not want to get up, and definitely did not want to come downstairs. I turn the corner and see my mom is sitting with her back towards me, but I can tell. I don't know how, but I can tell something is wrong. I ran around the couch. I look at her, face-to-face.

"What!?"

"Kaliyah, sweetie..." She started. Where was this going? My stomach dropped down to my feet. I was frozen.

"You're scaring me, Mom. Spit it out!"

"Honey, it's Adrienne, she tried to kill herself."

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The planet ceased to rotate. The burning of the sun had been blown out by the whisper of that one sentence. The stars fled, the waters receded, the moon fell. My life ended. I forgot how to breathe. I have been breathing my whole life, why can I not right now? I can't remember how. How do you breathe? How do you breathe? I can't remember. I don't have time to learn. I can't remember.

My knees hit the ground. It hurt. The shocking pain went shooting up my legs, but I didn't feel it. I still ceased to breathe. I couldn't think. This isn't real. I need to wake up. Is this real? There's no way. How should I do it? How should I follow her? I'm going to follow her.

I don't know why it took my mom so long to comfort me. I lay crumpled up on the floor, not breathing, gasping for air with my eyes frantically searching the empty skies for an answer. I sat there for *years* before my mom reached out to grab me. She tried to pull me up towards her. I had no bones in my body, I had no control. I couldn't get up. I hadn't taken a breath since I don't know when. It's been 16 years since the last time I had to think about breathing. I still couldn't do it.

"I'm sorry, mom."

"What? What do you mean? Why are you apologizing? Kaliyah, stop. What are you talking about?"

"I cannot live without my best friend, we promised each other, if one did it, the other would follow. She means the whole world to me, if she is dead, so am I."

It was so easy to say all these things, but this is not what was actually going on in my mind. The thoughts going through my head included wondering what I did. I wondered why she didn't come to me this time. She came to me every other time. I supported her to the best of my ability. I am not a professional, but I was the only one she trusted. So, I kept her struggles to

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myself; I didn't tell anyone else. I kept her secrets and I let her problems become my problems.

She was my best friend. Even knowing how this story ends I would do it a million times over. I was carrying the weight of two mentally unstable best friends around on my shoulders. I was bearing the burden of lurking death, times two. I wonder how she did it? I wonder how I'll do it...

Pause.

The decade long moment was finally catching up to me. "You said she tried to kill herself, did she?" Somehow there was no emotion in my voice. To this day, I don't know how I was so calm but falling apart at the same time.

"She is in the hospital, she is in stable condition, but they're going to have to send her away."

"When... when did this happen?"

"Around 8, I'm sor- "

I checked the time, 10:38 p.m. My mom continued to talk but her voice transforms into background noise as my thoughts become audible. I was thinking, if this happened over 2 hours ago, why was I just now finding out? I spent every day with my best friend. We had just gotten home the day prior from a weeklong camping trip together. A week of bonding, a week of laughs and memories. She seemed completely fine. Or did she? Why had no one contacted me sooner? Her parents often told me I was like another daughter to them, that I'm over so often I might as well move in, all the things parents say. They said that to me, so why had no one told me yet? Why was I finding out through my mom, who found out from the church two hours after the fact?

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I immediately pulled out my phone. My message from 4 hours ago hadn't been opened yet. I was searching for just the tiniest detail to confirm my hope that this was some terrible, morbid prank. Some practical joke that no one thought through all the way. It wasn't. It was true. This was happening. I click on our messages, the last text sent from me, "I love you." I had no idea what she was feeling, no idea what she was going through, but I decided to remind her I loved her, and I'm glad I did.

That night I was unable to sleep. I was trying to get ahold of someone, anyone. I just wanted to be updated. No one would answer me. Not her parents, not her siblings, not her boyfriend. I was on my own. I just had to hope for the best. No one thought it was important to keep her best friend of 10 years up to date. I didn't matter. This isn't about me, I know. The next day her boyfriend finally returned my call. He's giving me the full story, all this information, telling me he's visited and called her, that she's doing okay but needs to go away for a little bit. Hearing all of this, I realized sometime in the past 12 hours I had started breathing, and now I couldn't again. There was a weight of immeasurable impact crushing my chest. I started crying, her boyfriend tried his best to comfort me, but then reminded me that I was not the victim. I need to stop. Crying will not undo what she tried to do to herself. He was right, harsh, but right. I thanked him, hung up, and continued to suffocate, again, alone.

It's been about 2 weeks now. Her boyfriend has given me sporadic and vague updates, meanwhile spending every minute with her family. Her family has not reached out to me yet. He told me everyone in the family has gotten to talk to her over the phone since she's been away, including her siblings' girlfriends and boyfriends. Surely, they're not valued over me, are they? Doesn't matter, I know she's okay, that is all the matters. Right?

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She's home, she responds to the multiple texts, paragraphs, novels, that I have sent her over the past two weeks. She tells me it's not my fault, she comforts me by telling me she is feeling better, that she loves me still. She wants to see me; her parents say not yet. Why? What did I do? Everyone else comes to visit, people she doesn't even care to see, but they won't let me over. My mom tries to comfort me by telling me it probably just has to do with the pandemic, and I let her think her desperate attempt at reassurance worked. *I had been over almost every day before this whole thing happened. Why, all of a sudden, would the pandemic be affecting us?*

Finally, one week after she came home, over 3 weeks since I had seen her last, I was allowed to come over. I had let myself in, as I usually did. She's sitting on the couch. I opened the door; we made eye contact. I don't know how, but in less than a second, we were holding each other. There was crying, no talking, just holding each other and breathing.

We didn't talk about what happened for a while. It was too much for her, and I respected that. We moved on with our lives. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months, months turned into years, and we grew apart. We no longer talked daily, or at all really. We were busy with our own lives, our separate lives. I still wish the best for her. I still don't know why she did it, why her parents said no to me, why they wouldn't reach out to me. Ironically, I don't even talk to her boyfriend anymore even though he and I are related. She is no longer a part of my life, but will always be a huge part of who I am. I knew who death was, but he and I had never met face-to-face, or shook hands. I now knew death. Death had been haunting me at the thought of living without her. I now live without her. And I'm okay with it. I now understand death. My biggest problem was no longer comparison, it was mortality. What now haunted me while I was scrolling through social media or spending time by myself wasn't the new iPhone. Now it was the overwhelming stream of death in the world. I was constantly being force fed more and more

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information which just continued to add to my knowledge of death. Death was real. Death was personal. And I was now on my own, in a constant battle against peace or death.

I still cannot breathe sometimes, even though I have been my whole life.