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Breathe

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Breathe

Cover Page Footnote

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Breathe

Sūrina Archey

Breathe, I reminded myself.

As I walked through the entrance of Central Park on a quiet Fifth Avenue, I placed my hand upon my chest.

Just breathe.

On this sunless afternoon, a weight had taken hold of my limbs. As rain fell gently around me from an unforgiving grey sky, I walked completely alone down a dimly lit paved path. The intimate scent of damp elm trees fused with the sweetness of a nearby tulip garden repressed the chaos in my mind.

Familiarity is a scent more powerful than the strength of memory itself; and so, ever so subtly, I sank into memory. Standing there, I sank into a time when the elm trees first became my guardians, looking down tenderly as my 48-inch-tall, elementary school self grew with the seasons.

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There was a time in my life when I found unparalleled comfort in the rhythm of the trees and the smiling faces I discerned within the intricacies of their bark. Within fields nestled covertly from the concrete jungle

beyond, I became a part of their world. I made homes out of their branches, where the robins and bluebirds were my neighbors and the squirrels my friends. I studied their leaves ruthlessly, enthralled by the way their blue-green veins resembled my own.

I had identified a likeness—that perhaps, these precious, towering beings could breathe and feel as I could. I imagined that in the quiet, fairies roamed freely in the crevices of their roots—and so, with every step I took, I placed my feet mindfully, treading lightly so as not to disturb the potential life below my own.

Central Park became the means through which I connected with the world around me—an experience that simultaneously developed a deeply rooted sense of empathy that follows me through every step of my life. As a child, I felt emotions—my own and others—to a degree so acute and exceptional that I thought, maybe, my ability to feel was my superpower.

The park became a place where I could feel freely—a place where I got lost in my own

stories and watched them come to fruition before my eyes. Alongside my schoolmates, I stepped inside the lives of my favorite book characters. I took over their grievances and joys as my own and embodied them wholly. I imagined new worlds—worlds that, soon, would serve as an escape from the chaos and intensity of my own mind.

Years progressed, and young girlhood transitioned to growing older. Suddenly a new feeling arose more frequently within me. It was sharp. It was suffocating. It was shrouded in discomfort and rooted in a struggle to accept change and uncertainty.

I grew to name this sensation *anxiety*.

• • •

One fall morning, as I walked through the park on my way to the C train, I decided to stop to buy ice cream from a nearby stand. I remember turning around to see my best friend. I remember staring into her eyes—eyes that had no emotion, no sense of enthusiasm to see me. Her eyes quickly beamed towards the pavement floor. She kept her gaze steady, head bent towards the ground as I watched her disappear into the distance.

Will she just give it up? Would we ever be the same again?

A pain in my chest overcame me. Feverish chills shot through my body, and my breath grew sharp and heavy.

This was my first panic attack.

As tears gathered in my eyes, I darted towards the green field that lay before me.

Sitting beneath the trees, equipped with a notebook and pen, I continued to do what I had always been best at. I wrote down the stories that lived inside my mind—with the flowers and the leaves and the squirrels and

the blue jays all serving as my creative muses.

This passion had grown into a form of healing. As the anxieties that came with growing older were thrust upon my conscience, I turned to the natural world to center myself. In times when I felt I could not breathe, this became the place where I felt grounded and safe. A place where I could be with myself and my thoughts and work through anxieties that sprung up with no real root or origin. A place where my creativity flourished, and where I learned that storytelling was more than just an escape.

It was a *remedy*.

• • •

Breathe.

That sunless afternoon in May, the world felt suffocating. Yet, as I exited the park, the weight in my chest dissipated. The chaos of my mind faded because I was reminded of where I came from.

I remembered the girl who found comfort in the rhythm of the trees during a time when anxiety did not yet have a name. I remembered the girl whose first love of storytelling had sprung from a fascination with the world around her—a girl who is now on the path to pursuing a lifelong career in storytelling, earning a degree at her dream communications school.

I am a product of Central Park—a place where the beauty and delicacy of nature inform my humanity. It was my curiosity about the world around me that unlocked my creativity—just as it was my inextinguishable imagination that, even now, provides solace when my mind is in disarray.

My anxiety does not define me, but how I cope with it is integral to who I am. *A storyteller.*