Concentrated Breathing

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The back room of our long upstairs hallway is Chad’s room—my older brother by five years. It’s not set up like a typical bedroom though; right now his queen-sized bed is on its side and draped with a tarp, his wide-screen HD television is covered with our parent’s old flowered bed sheets, and cardboard boxes are stacked as high as my waist and as far back to reach the window, leaving only walking room between the boxes and the heater vents. The air is just as crowded, but is silent. It’s our last day as a family for a while.

Chad and I sit on the king and queen wicker chairs like we have so many times before growing up—sometimes the chairs were elevators while playing hotel, other times they were cars driving someplace in the living room during my pretend trips—but this time they are just chairs.

“Bud, you have to be my ears and eyes,” Chad says as he strains to make eye contact with me.

I won’t look at him but I listen.

He continues, “You have to tell me what’s really going on, always. Don’t let Mom sugarcoat things. Look after Dad, too. Take care of them, Jennifer. I’m counting on you.”

My eyes search the room for something else to talk about but everything points to this discussion. There is no escape, so I reply with, “Don’t worry, Bro. I got them.”

Go to your happy place.

I sit holding my mother’s clammy hand in a dark wooden courtroom. It feels like I’m sitting in a scene for Law and Order, with the same intimidating robed judge thumbing through papers. It’s the morning of October 12, 2006—I don’t know what time it is though because my phone’s turned off. The sun is just reaching the third floor windows, making me squint, so I assume it’s around eleven. I don’t dare ask my mom for the time; she’s probably counting the minutes left with Chad. It’s sentencing day; the day we’ve been expecting, but happily ignoring for more than two years.

I sit in silence, not moving a muscle, afraid one twitch of my arm may throw my mom over the edge—make her lose her cool. I hate seeing my mom cry, so I bare the itch on my nose. I know the tears will inevitably fall once Chad’s handcuffed and taken away. For now, I concentrate on my
breathing. *In...out...in...out...in...*

My dad sits behind us with his long-term, pretty-much-married girlfriend and pats my shoulder. It messes up my breathing, and I turn my head, risking my mother’s sanity. I secretly blame him, and he openly blames my mother for today. Chad and I would both be different if he was around. We take advantage of our mom too much; we get away with a lot. I bet Chad wouldn’t be as irresponsible if Dad was around putting his foot down. I bet he wouldn’t drink as much or even have a reason to drink if our dad was around either. That’s beside the point though. It’s over and done with. In the end it’s Chad’s fault for driving drunk. Period.

My mother enters through the adjoining hotel room door, gripping the frame for stability. “We have to leave... now,” sheblurts. My slumber is broken and my eyes peek open as she flips the light switch. *Am I dreaming?* “Why? What’s going...?” I ask throwing my feet over the edge of the bed and putting my glasses on. My eyes squint; I try to adjust to the light that has just invaded my black room.

“Chad’s been in an accident. That was Jeremy on the phone... they’re being taken to Marshalltown Hospital. What do I do?” she asks me, her 16-year-old daughter, as if I have the answer.

Jeremy is my brother’s friend he brought along to our cousin’s wedding. The reception ended not even an hour ago. I rise on my bare feet as she looks around for her purse in search of her cell phone. She’s disoriented. *Maybe I’m not dreaming.*

“Mom, calm down. Call Uncle Rick,” I order, handing her the hotel phone.

She dials his room just one floor down. I gather her purse and mine, slip flip-flops on and we’re gone. My eyes are wide but glazed. It’s not until we are speeding 70 miles per hour in a 35 zone that I realize this is bad. My head jerks up, and my chin hits my chest as the first hill smacks us into the pavement. *No, I’m definitely awake.*

Uncle Rick steers the plum van aggressively, making the landscape blur as we whiz by. I sit gripping the “oh shit” bar in the far back, no seatbelt on. He misses small hills, leaving us completely airborne until we greet the ground nose first. I decide to buckle up. I pray out loud for my irritating but only brother to be all right, and the whole van fills the silent holes with their own pleas to God. The only one who feels half my worry is my sobbing mom, sitting shotgun.
Her sobs from that night echo in my ears as Chad enters the courtroom in the hands of a uniformed cop. This reality slaps something inside me, making me tense up. My mom feels my body jerk and she turns to nod at me as if to say, “It’s OK.”

Chad’s dressed in his lime-green button-up, a matching lime and gray-striped tie, gray slacks, black shoes. I struggle to think of him dressed in anything else. He’s always been a little preppy with his wardrobe; he matches everything. What will he look like in orange? I wince. Chad passes and sits with his suited lawyer in front of us. A waist-high fence separates us. The judge gives Chad an incriminating look. I immediately hate him. I want to yell something just so he’d look away from Chad’s already guilty eyes. No jury was called, but in two of its seats sit one of the victims, now recovered from his injuries, and his English interpreter.

I eye the stranger as he sits; he’s meeting eyes with his enemy--my brother--for the first time. My dad leans up to inform me of the guy--he’s surprised one of the two living victims came.

“We were hoping no one would be here,” Mom said in a hushed tone. Chad turns around and my mom leaps up as if something had launched her from her chair.

“He came,” Chad whispers to us. “I didn’t think he’d come.” His shadowed eyes never meet ours--too much on his mind.

Chad’s eyes narrow, but stay glued to the wooden floor for a good minute. He’s lost in thought; his lawyer nudges him; Chad blinks. Something’s different. Maybe this is the turning point. He finally feels bad about what he did. It’s about time.

The ER drop-off spot is empty. The nurse says the medics are “working on site,” so we take a seat in the waiting area, but Mom doesn’t sit. She’s pacing by the automatic door, making it stay open. The dewy smell of early morning lingers in the entryway. I lean forward so my head can rest on my hands. Aunt Carol, who just walked in, rubs my back, but I cringe at her fingertips. I don’t want to be touched. I stand and join my mom. No one understands our pain right now, not even us--we’re numb. We need to stick together.

I hum an Avril Lavigne song--“Who Knows”--while the chorus repeats in my head pacifying my nerves. Who knows what could happen. Do what you do, just keep on laughing. One thing’s true, there’s always a brand new daaaay. I know I’m ruining one of my favorite songs. I’ll feel this nausea and pain whenever it plays, remembering one of my worst days. I’ll gamble that
though—right now I need to breathe.

The red and blue lights we have been anticipating reflect off my glasses and my eyes shoot up to see the ambulance drive in. My mom’s crying in my uncle’s arms, and my aunt and I walk outside as they pull my brother out on a stretcher. He’s not moving. Oh my God, he’s dead.

We shout a hopeful “We’re here, Chad!” twice, hoping he moves in response. He doesn’t.

My mom and I enter the emergency room filled with doctors and nurses making my blood phobia reach its peak. I shrug off the nausea; I’ve felt like throwing up for the last hour now anyway. I walk past the curtain too soon—I didn’t prepare myself—and see my brother strapped down on the stretcher screaming for morphine. vHe’s alive. Thank you, God! My first tear of the night falls as I skim his body. His fingers are the first things I notice; all ten are there, but blood seeps out darkening his already maroon button-up and his tan suit cuff. Blood never washes out. That thought erases from my mind quickly as I move my eyes to his chest; his new tan suit and maroon button-up are cut up the center, revealing his bare chest already forming purple blotches of bruise. His chest pounds up and down every half-second and his screams of agony make my ears ring. My head spins and eyes roll back as I try to grip his bed rail. I’m going to pass out.

“Give me some fucking morphine!” he yells in a pain I pray I’ll never know. “Ahhhh, Ma! It hurts!”

I tense at the volume and quickly snap back to reality. I notice his right leg is completely laying on its side… wait, his knee is straight but his ankle and foot are resting horizontally. It has to be broken.

They finally release Chad’s head from the brace, and he jerks his head up to meet my eyes. The whole world stops for a second… I don’t breathe. He sees me here. I close my eyes, making it a bad dream. Bad dream, bad dream. I open them again. He copies my gesture; his eyes pinch close leaving his slits wrinkled. After holding his breath for five seconds, they flip open and bulge with desperation for relief.

Morphine is injected; Chad calms down. He drifts in and out of consciousness. His eyes are open and jumbled-gibberish spits out of his mouth as well as random ticks as the doctors attempt to reset his foot. I walk out just as he yelps. My stomach turns.

Remorse is something Chad should have felt right after he found out he was charged with vehicular homicide—one death and two serious injury counts. From the time the accident happened to the two-year gap of
surgeries, random police arrests, trials, and false court dates, Chad hadn’t changed his ways—still drinking, still disrespectful, still expecting to be served on a silver platter.

He walked into the courtroom a scared but still cocky boy, but as he rises to make his remarks to the judge, he instantly matures while turning his attention to the present victim. As he clears his throat—now caught with tears—to begin his apology, his voice cracks to resemble a pubescent teenage boy’s. The moment he cries, there’s nothing holding my mom, dad, and me back from doing the same. I finally get my hand back from Mom as she reaches for one of the zillion travel tissues we packed. I hate crying. Crying shows weakness, and I am anything but weak.

“I know I can’t bring your friend back, and I know I can’t take back your injuries and memories, but please believe me when I say I’m truly sorry,” Chad barely projects toward the two seats in the jury stand, his tears now unstoppable. “I made the dumbest decision that night, and I’m so sorry for your hurt. I’m really, very sorry…” His hands are intertwined together shaking like a patient of Parkinson’s, his eyes leak tears probably blurring his unbroken stare with one of his three victims. The victim talks with his interpreter, while she repeats Chad’s words in Vietnamese. The victim slowly smiles and nods in understanding.

Chad nods back before turning counterclockwise to the judge. Chad sits.

The family in the waiting room has grown by five, and a policeman is standing by the door. He looks just like every other officer in small-town Iowa working the late night shift—it’s 3:30 a.m.—tired…but this one’s nervous. Why? Uncle Rick is talking to him; I join, introduce myself as “the sister,” and ask what’s going on. Hopefully it’s just regular procedure. Wrong.

“There’s been a fatality in the other vehicle.” My family gasps behind me, and I turn to catch the women collapse into each other. Wait a second, slow down. OK, that means someone died.

“There were three people in the vehicle, two were taken by ambulance.”

OK, that means two people survived. One death plus two others equals three people involved. What does that mean for Chad? Is it his fault? What happened?

“….head-on collision…crossed the centerline…”

Head-on. Someone crossed the centerline? Who? The big question is who did it. Who screwed up?
I catch bits of the officer’s sentences, but some of it flies over my head.

The room discusses the next task; telling Mom. I’m the only one allowed into the emergency room, but I’m sixteen. *I can handle it.*

Uncle Rick claims he’ll handle it, but announces it’s going to take a family-wide effort. My aunts nod in sad approval. My head is still spinning and I have to pee again. *Damn nerves.* I enter the bathroom, sit, and sing quietly, “Who knows what could happen, do what you do just keep on laughing. One things true, there’s always a brand new daaay.” *Breathe.*

I wash my hands and peer at my blotchy face in the mirror. My nose wrinkles from the orangey hand soap… I hate oranges. I wipe my hands with the brown paper bag towels then swipe my face so the mascara lines only circle my eyes and not stain my cheeks. I reenter the waiting room. Mom’s weeping into Uncle Rick’s chest. *Beat me to it, I guess.*

Marshalltown, Iowa, is not big enough to continue Chad’s care, so in the morning he’s ambulanced to Mercy Medical Center in Des Moines. Mom follows in her car, Grandpa behind the wheel. After blood tests, chest x-rays, brain scans, and interrogations from the police, Chad lays in a bed asleep with one concussion, multiple fractures in both feet, one shattered heel, one collapsed lung, and various cuts and bruises. I feel like I’m in a drive-through window having a high school dropout repeat my order. *Would you like anything else ma’am? Nope, that’s it.* His injuries keep adding up; we added the collapsed lung overnight.

Chad’s morphine button dangles from one of the ten tubes somehow connected into him and, although he pushes it over and over again, the morphine is controlled so he won’t overdose. He pushes it once more before cussing in frustration and throwing it down. The chest tube leaking pink fluid into a pouch makes me feel, from what Mom says, sympathy pains. It’s hard for me to breathe.

I’m sent back to the hotel to “get some rest.” I’m mentally exhausted but physically sick, ready to purge my empty stomach. I choke down a handful of Cheerios and sit on my cousin’s hotel bed hunched over. My eyes are red from crying; my hair is aggressively pulled back with bobby pins from the wedding last night; my Hello Kitty pajama pants are still on… so are my glasses. My tie-dye shirtsleeves are stained with wiped eyeliner and mascara marks from my tears. I reek of orange hospital hand soap. My eyes close and my head automatically spins so I force them back open. *I hope no one saw that.*

“You should get some sleep, Jennifer,” my family members say in
five-minute intervals.  
“I’ll be fine.” *I sound like a broken record. I couldn’t sleep right now anyway. Closing my eyes makes me nauseous.*

The gavel rams down, throwing me back to the courtroom. My eyes widen, and the echoes settle in my head as well as the courtroom as everyone—even the county attorney—listens for the verdict.

“We find the defendant, Chad Stephen Dryden, guilty of vehicular homicide by driving while intoxicated and two counts of serious injury. He is hereby sentenced to 25 years in state prison with no minimum time and no bail. Please take him into custody.”

No, not yet. *Please don’t take him away yet.* I want to scream or hand over my savings or tell them I’m at fault or ask for an appeal or give our lawyer secret key evidence to free my brother or… do something, anything. I turn to my dad in desperation. *You can fix things, right?* But when I turn around his face is blank, completely drained of emotion, his hands drooped gently at his sides in defeat. He has money; the one thing that always saved my brother before, but it’s different now. Everything is different.

We’re given five minutes to say goodbye in a meeting room just outside the courtroom. There are chairs, but no one sits.

*Who knows what could happen. Do what you do just keep on laughing. One things true there’s always a brand new daaaay. Breathe.* This is it. My eyes are dry and my strong 19-year-old big girl face is on. *I’m in college now; I can handle it. I’ll be fine.* I’m standing next to my grandpa, who’s keeping my mother from collapsing in grief, by the door where the guards are standing… I want the last hug. It’s selfish maybe, but he’s my brother, my only sibling, my suit of armor, my bodyguard from jerks, monsters, and Santa Claus, my number two fan—following my mom—and I want his last hug.

Four minutes and 30 seconds later he stands in front of me. I try to breathe; I try to smile in sympathy; I try to crack a lame joke. I try to wrap my arms around his slim 24-year-old body while holding my shorter version together. My head reaches his chest and I break. Sobs yelp from my mouth, tears darken his green button-up, and for thirty seconds I don’t let go. I don’t let go because I know the moment I do he’ll be gone. The second hand reaches the twelve and a guard reaches for Chad’s hand still wrapped around me.

Before he lets go he whispers strict instructions in my ear, which echo last night’s conversation. “You have to be my ears and eyes, Bud. Always tell me what’s really going on. I can’t be there, so you have to be.
Take care of Mom and Dad.”
     My head is still against his chest.
     “Hey,” he says lifting my chin for eye contact. “I love you, Bud.”
     “Love you too, Bro. I got them, don’t worry.” One last squeeze and we release.
     I concentrate on my breathing. *In…out…in…out…in…*

Jennifer Dryden is a senior in journalism and mass communication from Carroll, Iowa. She found her calling in writing creative non-fiction after endless nights of pounding at the keyboard. After graduation in May 2010, she hopes to land a career in a publishing house eventually editing manuscripts for publication. In the coming years, she’d like to have her own manuscript ready to submit for publication.