

## Breathe

By Jessica Sun

Coffee slowly drips into the pot. Each drop makes a small *plop* sound as it strikes the dark liquid covering the bottom of the pot. Steam rises as she pours some of the scorching, delicious coffee into her mug. She adds a dash of soymilk and stirs. The coffee becomes the color of caramel and smells inviting. As she has done every day for the past eighteen months, she squeezes a bit of the syrup from the bottle labeled ‘Hope’ into the coffee. She is on her third bottle of ‘Hope,’ more commonly known as chocolate syrup, and this bottle is almost empty. She stirs her ‘hope’ into her bitter coffee, blows on the surface of the liquid, and takes a sip.

He comes in and sits down next to her at the table. She is looking mindlessly out the window into the back yard. Outside, the leaves are turning from green to yellows and reds. A squirrel darts along the edge of the deck railing. It peers into the house, almost looking at her. She sips her coffee; it twitches its tail and scampers away. He puts his hand on her shoulder and she lackadaisically turns her head to look at him. His bright orange hair needs a haircut. He looks very tired. She doubts he sleeps very well, listening to her coughing and wheezing all night long. Their eyes briefly meet, her sad and feeble, his bright and full of concern.

“Today may be the day,” he says with a fake note of optimism in his voice. He says this for both their benefit. Every day she gets worse. When she was first diagnosed, the doctor said she would live for five years without a transplant. Now, she only has six months unless she gets a new set of lungs. She had been on the donor registry for eighteen months. They were both getting desperate.

“I have a fibrosis foundation meeting at noon,” she says. She speaks slowly now so she can catch her breath between words. He looks at the clock; it is already 9:30.

“Would you like me to come with you?” he asks, knowing the answer.

“Could you please drive me,” she asks reluctantly. He knows she does not like being so dependent on him. It seems like he tells her twenty times a day that he does not mind spending all his time with her. Deep inside, he knows he is trying to make these last months count. He does not want to lose her without spending every possible minute by her side.

They are both already preparing for the end. Her parents do not know but she has already picked out her coffin. She wrote her will the day after her diagnosis. He knows her wishes. She is to be buried under an old, gnarled tree and instead of sending flowers, those wishing to express their condolences are to donate to the pulmonary fibrosis foundation to help find a cure for others like her. They do not talk very much about what will happen when she is gone. It is not exactly something that just be discussed at the dinner table.

She slowly rises from the table. He reaches to help her but she shakes her head no. “I’m going to get dressed,” she says. He watches her as she moves toward her bedroom. She shuffles her feet and her shoulders slump. Every day she seems to get thinner. Even walking the short distance down the hallway makes her gasp for breath. She has not been able to run or even walk up stairs in years. It hurts him to watch her struggle. She always insists on doing things for herself, even in her feeble state. He always loved her independence. Now, she is wasting precious energy doing tasks he could help her with.

His cell phone vibrates. He wrenches it from his pocket, praying he sees her doctor's number. Instead, he sees a little envelope icon, alerting him that he has a new text message from Jamie. Jamie is her best friend. 'Hey Drew, how is she this morning,' Jamie asked. The clicking of the keys of his phone breaks the still silence. 'She's about the same today,' he tells Jamie. Her door creaks open and he turns his head.

"Who are you texting so early in the morning?" she asks him.

"Jamie," he replies.

She lets out a small snicker and sighs. Jamie means well, she knows that, but she gets tired of her checking with him every morning, making sure she did not pass away in her sleep the night before.

"Which scarf matches this shirt better," she asks him, draping one scarf across each shoulder.

"The blue and white one," he replies. She smiles at him, her way of saying thank you without having to gasp.

Their coffee mugs sit side by side on the table. He looks at them and immediately picks them up and takes them to the sink. The cups are perfect representations of the two of them. Hers is small, white with cracks in the rim, and is empty and cold. His is much larger, terra cotta colored, like his hair, and is still warm from the coffee is contained only minutes before. He rinses them and puts them in the dishwasher. Then he rinses the coffee pot.

He walks to the couch and sits down to read this week's TIME magazine. She shuffles into the living room and sits down next to him. "Thank you for coming with me this morning," she tells him.

“It’s not problem. I’m always happy to support the cause. What’s on the agenda for this meeting?”

“We’re supposed to be talking about our charity walk. That’s the one I’m organizing in May. Since it’s only two months away we’re looking for volunteers to sign up to help with things like t-shirt sales and serving lunch.”

“I remember you talking about the walk after the last meeting. Which committee do you want me to help with?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you wanted to join the planning committee. You can help me organize the music and speakers. The rest of the committee wants me to have an assistant, just in case.”

“Of course. I’ll help with whatever you want me to,” he says, trying to hide the horror and pain in his voice. He knows that by ‘just in case’ she means ‘in case I die before the walk.’

She sees the sorrow in his eyes and puts her hand on top of his. “I fully intend on being around to organize the walk. The committee just wants to be safe. I can’t very well hire musicians if I’m six feet under or recovering from surgery.”

He smiles. “Let’s go with the second option. I’ll be your assistant so the committee has someone to hire a band when you’re in rehab with your new lungs.”

“Thank you,” she says, her smile the widest he has seen in a while. Seeing that smile makes him think of when he first met her. Her smile was the first thing he noticed. It has been a long time since he has seen that brilliant, joy-filled smile. She leans against him and he instinctively drapes his arm around her shoulder. For a minute, he pretends she is not sick.

“Thank you, for everything,” she said looking up at him. He looks down at her and kisses her chilled, pale forehead.

“I love you. I’ll always be here,” he says making her smile that magical smile again. He surveys the living room, his eyes pausing on the photos on the mantle, the magnets on the freezer from all the places they have been, and the welcoming easy chair in the corner. Again, he looks at the clock. It is 11:11, a time with magical properties. Though he has not made an 11:11 wish since middle school, he looks at her, closes his eyes and wishes. *I wish she gets some strength back so I can see that smile again; and I wish she gets a new pair of lungs so I can see it every day for the rest of our very long lives.*

“Oh, we’re late, it’s already after 11. Are you ready to go?” she asks.

“Yeah I just need to grab my coat,” he replies. He hesitates, she is still leaning against him and he does not want to give up the heat she radiates or the chill she sends down his spine. Slowly he removes his arm from around her shoulder and she sits up straight. He goes to the hall closet and grabs both of their coats. He puts on his and lays her on the arm of the couch. She grabs his arm for support as she pulls herself up from the couch. He holds out her coat and she slips her arms into the sleeves. *It looks so bulky on her now*, he thinks. *That coat used to look perfect on her, now it swallows her.*

He grabs his keys as they walk out the door. He presses the remote unlock button so she can get in the car while he locks their townhouse door. The lock makes a satisfactory click and walks to close the passenger side door for her before walking around the back of the car to get to his own door. He reads the bumper sticker for the millionth time. ‘Be and organ donor, pass it on,’ it reads and he hopes that today that

someone's tragedy will save her life. He slips into his seat, still lost in thoughts of the day he rushes her to the hospital and waits for their lives to begin again. He puts the key into the ignition and feels his phone vibrate.

“We don't have time for you to take a call. We're already running late and I can't be late to another meeting,” she says with an irritated tone. He pulls the phone from his pocket, looks at the number, and allows a huge, relieved grin to spread across his face. He looks at her and says, “Change of plans.”