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Breathing Exercises

Hannah Herkert

1 This afternoon I'm going to this workshop to learn how to slow my breathing down. It's inconvenient, the way I breathe when I'm nervous; in quick flurries, I can't control it. Then my fingers curl like buzzard feet around a dead tree branch, I lose control of my lips and I can feel them contracting and then BAM! I'm on the ground and someone is saying, "Miss. Miss! Are you O.K.?" I'm always O.K. But it is quite inconvenient.

It started when I left home and moved into this basement apartment. Alone which is just the way I like it. The woman who lives above me tap dances all night. And she's fat, so we are very different. She comes over frequently because she likes to talk. Not to me, but just to talk. I have never said one word to her. I mean that. She just comes over and talks and talks and talks and I just breathe and sometimes I make up a sign with my hand to show that I'm listening. She thinks I speak sign language. You would probably think that I wouldn't want her to come over if all she does is talk about things that I don't care about, but you're wrong because I do. I do want her to come over because when she leaves, I draw her. That's the only reason I want to see her because she has this tiny, dainty little chin that floats on top of her enormous and round wattle. Her chin moves in a circle when she talks, pinching in and out of her neck. Like a ground hog? (I drew that image once.) Like an olive in jello? (made that). So you see, it's not that I need someone to talk to. It's that I need a chin to draw.

Ever since I've lived here my breathing has quickened as they say. My heart pumps with a little more enthusiasm and sends me to my knees, and when I fall I bruise because my skin stretches over my bones too tight because I need to eat more. Because Oh my, look at the poor girl. She must be 80lbs, if that! So this afternoon, I'm going to this workshop to learn how to breathe In. Out. In. Out. and hopefully my episode at Quik Mart was the last. Episode.

I want quarters, I had said.

Well, I can't just give you all my quarters, sweetheart. Hear? I don't even have eighteen dollars in quarters. Oh no. In. Out. In. out. InoutInoutInout. BAM!

Miss? Hun? You O.K.? He smiled at me crookedly. Everyone's smile is crooked when they think you're nuts.

2 The bus got me to the workshop twenty minutes early so I watched people come in from the second story window of the community center. Thirteen in all, and they all talked to each other or to someone on a cell phone so I eventually concluded that no one else in the world was like me.

I saw the instructor arrive. Dr. Do. Interesting. I knew it was him because his hair was very well ordered, all in place. Good breathers tend to have nice hair.

I walked in to the back of the room. I am good at being in the back of rooms. I was there in high school, I probably would be in the back of some college classroom right now if I hadn't been too nervous to go. If I hadn't paid tuition and never showed up.

Get comfortable. O.K. Sit up straight and EXHALE. Yes, exhale... ahhhh...

Do we need to say that? I ask. I'm getting hot and I can feel my fingertips going a little numb. I don't think I'm ready yet.

Excuse me? What? Please concentrate. O.K. Everyone, Ah-hhh....

No. Wait. But do we have to make that noise? That ahhhh noise? Uh oh. In, out. In, out.

Please, what was your name? Janice? (No) Try to relax, and if it feels good to ahhhh... when you exhale, do it. Just let the breathing come naturally. Remember everybody, this action goes on all day without your conscious effort. Why are we here? To learn to relax so that we can let our bodies do their job. O.K. Sit up straight and Ahhhh....

Right. I can do it, so exhale Ah.... But here is my issue. Now I am conscious of every one else's Ahhhhing and mine may be too loud. Ahhhh. Yes. Someone is looking at me. Oh god, exhale. Ahhh. Out. Outoutout. BAM!

Dr. Do told me that what I needed first was a psychiatrist and then I could come back. He gave me the number of this man who is good with anxiety. Which must mean that I have anxiety. Interesting. I am not going to call him, because I'm tired of always being sent somewhere else because Dr. Bentley the hypnotist; who had been recommended by Dr. Pokes the acupuncturist, who I had been sent to by Dr. Strong the massage therapist, had sent me to this Dr. Do fellow and now I was being sent away again, but I will do something. Look, before when I used to talk to people everyone accused me of not doing anything for myself but this time I will. I will shut myself up in my apartment until I figure it out to. No jiggling chins, No Dr.'s, just me. And I won't come out. Not for anything

But I've been in here all evening and now I'm missing the fat tap dancer, and not because I need her to talk to me but because I need something to do with my hands and I would like to draw her chin. I need her inspiration so I start to pace. I see the broom in the kitchen and feel like doing something with it so I start to tap it against the ceiling and nothing happens. I do it louder and you know what she does? She starts tap dancing! I can hear her! And she's tapping, tap, tap, tapping so I start thrusting the broomstick harder against the ceiling and white chalk begins to fall and it's more wonderful than any winter snow I have ever seen.

Tap. Tap tap tap. Stop tapping! I scream at her and the ceiling dust gets in my throat and I can't breathe and I start choking. Oh no. In. Out. In, out. InoutInout. And then my front door opens and there she is! My fat, tap dancing neighbor. Her skin is shining with sweat and the aftershock of the tapping is still reverberating on her beautiful gobble. Oh, I am so happy to see her. She comes when every one else sends me away. So I tell her, I say, You are the most beautiful dancer I've ever heard. I am so alone and your tapping is like joy beating it's way back in to life. Your tapping is like me, fast and nervous but that's just the way it is and I accept it! Your tapping is strong and forceful, like I want to be. Like I aspire to be!

And she says, You can talk?