

Breathe

By Melia Tessel

I need to breathe. I rush into the washroom. It's empty. I go to the mirror and stare at myself. My eyes are blotchy and my face is breaking out. Great. I close my eyes, I need to breathe. Every breath I take, I count to 8, then let it out. Breathe, breathe, breathe. My mind starts slowing down. It's finally quiet.

As I walk over to a stall to get some paper for my eyes, a group of girls walks in. I don't know them but they're talking loudly. They seem happy. I quickly duck my head and close the stall door. Breathe René, breathe.

I stare at the floor. A spider is crawling across the tiles. I inch closer and watch it crawl. If only I could be that small. I glance around. The washroom is quiet.

I look up through the crack in the stall to see that the girls have left. All of them except one. I stare at her. She looks about my age, I've seen her in the halls before, but never in class. Maybe she's a year older than me. I shake my head, I'll just wait for her to leave then I'll go out. I close my eyes, breathe, breathe, breathe.

My eyes dart open at the sound of a shout. It came from the halls. I look at the girl. She's still sitting on the counter, yet she's alarmed. I hear another scream followed by a loud noise, like fireworks or a balloon being popped. I hear it again. It's a gun.

My breathing gets faster as my arms begin to shake. I hoist myself onto the toilet so I'm crouching with my feet on the seat. No one will be able to see me that way. I stare at the girl. She's still frozen. What is she doing? There are so many empty stalls. She has to move, I have to tell her. I open my mouth.

The door opens. I close my eyes as I hear the footsteps of someone walking in. Breathe, breathe... the girl starts to scream. I need to help her. A shot fires. It echoes throughout the washroom as the girl hits the floor. The sound of footsteps follow the shooter as they leave.

I have to do something. I rush out of the stall to help the girl. She's lying on the ground, her eyes staring at nothing. Her chest is rising and falling ever so slightly. She's breathing. I crouch down and attempt to cover her wound. She winces as I press my sweater onto her stomach.

The bleeding isn't stopping and blood is getting everywhere. "Breathe, just keep breathing," I whisper. Her eyes move to mine. Someone needs to help her. I need to help her. I want to scream but no words come out. Instead, the shouts from the hallway get louder and louder.

"I'm here. We'll get out of this, just try to keep breathing." The ghost of a smile appears on her face. I should have told her to get in the stall. She would have been safe. Why don't I know her name? We go to school together. She walks past me in the halls every day. She should be safe.

Her eyes move away from me as she stares at the ceiling. Breathe, breathe, breathe. She needs to breathe. Her eyes flutter. I grab her hand. It's cold and covered in blood. She seemed so warm a few minutes ago. She was so happy with her friends. I squeeze tighter. She clutches back. I could've helped her. I should've helped her.

"Breathe," I whisper. "I'm right here." Her eyes close. I grasp her hand tighter as her grip releases. She isn't breathing. It's my fault. Tears stream from my eyes. She came to school today thinking that she would be safe. I should have told her to hide. She would have been safe. I don't even know her name.