

# Spirits

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“I can’t breathe!”

I sat up rigid, arms and hands propped behind me pressing into the Castro convertible sofa that served as my bed. My back arched, I thrust my head up and forward, wheezing, sucking air. I was sweaty, fearful and tearful when Dr. Sileo arrived.

I trembled as he sat at my side. As I squeezed his thumb, he stroked my cheek with his other hand. “In,” he said. “Out. In. Out.” His voice soft and steady, he coached me, one breath at a time.

Taking the stethoscope from his black leather bag, he raised up

inhale. The faces of nurses are close and their voices loud with question after question after question. I gulp and try to answer. Treatment. My hands are saying I need treatment.

They point to a chair. I sit and I wait. When a nurse appears, clipboard in hand she asks, “Do you have your medication with you?” I shake my head. She walks away.

She returns and hands me a peak flow meter. “Blow,” she urges. Gadget in hand, I wrap quivering lips against the mouthpiece and blow. Light headed, I feel the meter taken from my hands.

Another nurse instructs me to follow him. We walk through a maze of gurneys separated by curtains. Peeking, I walk past a woman with blood-soaked clothes on her chest, moaning. Amid background voices and alarms from medical equipment,

# I CAN'T BREATHE!

my undershirt and pressed the cold silver disc on my chest. He asked my mother to bring him a glass of water, some whiskey and a shot glass. My mother gave Dr. Sileo the bottle of Seagram’s 7 that my father brought down from the top shelf of the china cabinet to make highballs at Christmas. Dr. Sileo poured several drops of water into a half-filled shot glass of whiskey. He gently cradled the back of my head. Lifting my chin with his fingers, he placed the glass against my lips and tipped the liquid forward. “Drink,” he said. One sip and my eyes stung. My tongue burned. It smelled like Sugar Smacks. I gulped the light brown liquid, then coughed. My neck went soft; my head fell into the pillow. I slept.

Years later, I awake in confused darkness, and reach into my bedside table drawer, fingers tripping on pens, lip balm, moisturizer and mini flashlight till they feel the L-shape of the rescue inhaler. Two hungry puffs, but no relief. Two puffs more. Nothing. I leap from bed and wrestle on jeans, sandals, a tee shirt. I rush from the house to the garage. Ten minutes later, I’m in the emergency room. I’m struggling to breathe. Trying to

I’m directed to sit on the gurney. I watch the nurse prepare a nebulizer. Talking with the unit clerk, he distractedly hands the inhaler to me. I know the drill and wrap my mouth around it and breathe. Dust-like particles coat my tongue. Firmly holding the hard-plastic mouthpiece with my lips, I breathe easier from quick-acting medication.

Twenty minutes later I walk, calm and reassured, to the nurses’ station. I receive post discharge instructions, slip behind the wheel and drive myself home. Back in my room, I crumple into bed and sleep. I dream of Dr. Sileo, the touch of his hand and the shot of whiskey. ■

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