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Remote Voices: Holding My Breath

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Holding My Breath

I am not a runner, but today I run. I don't have a destination, I just want to be somewhere else, anywhere other than trapped between the walls of my apartment. I let my feet guide me, propelled forward by the strength in my legs. Even chronic pain can't stop the momentum, as my subconscious actions are powerful, an unstoppable force. My brain is in tune with the rhythm of my feet as they hit the pavement one behind the other, right foot, left foot. Remember to breathe. I hear the constant reminder in the voices of my mother, the doctors, my therapist, my friends. Breathe in the sickly sweet scent of magnolias; breathe out the pain.

It feels like the apocalypse has hit New York City, the seemingly endless motion and boundless energy paused in silent fear. The city that never sleeps entered hibernation, and although there will be no returning to normal, no one knows when we will return to anything at all. I have lived through September 11th and Hurricane Sandy, and I have never seen anything like this. Acutely aware of my surroundings, I marvel at nature still in motion, triumphantly blooming as humanity quietly resigned itself to stillness, locked away in homes. Staten Island may be the sleepest borough, suburban and slower paced, but it is unrecognizable in this eerie ghost town state. The high school across the street from my apartment building is deserted in darkness, no raucous laughter of restless teenagers screeching and fighting. The playground is silent, save the swings gently swaying in the soft breeze. Gang violence and shootings seem to have disappeared during this pandemic, but I know the real danger is for those trapped inside with an abuser. It makes my stomach churn to think about my students. I hope to God they are safe.

Restaurants, nail salons, and stores are closed or mostly deserted, desperate signs with delivery information posted in the windows. The local dive bar has written their phone number for takeout in decaying red paint, which

drips like blood down the façade uninvitingly. No one is running down the hill, hurriedly trying to make the ferry to Manhattan before the doors close and they have to wait another thirty minutes. The bodegas are the only sign of life left, a small reminder that we are not alone, and the only place that still has toilet paper in stock. The way my grandfather would stockpile paper goods in his garage doesn't seem so funny anymore: it all makes sense now. That will be my generation forty years from now—stockpiling toilet paper, Clorox wipes, and non-perishables.

I am not a runner, but running has always felt like liberation. When I'd get drunk in college, I'd run down the sidewalk towards the green, giggling joyously as the world rushed by, and I felt free—free of expectation, of obligation, free from even myself, the person who held everything so tightly inside. When I felt overwhelmed with a situation, I would pull an Irish exit, immediately vacate the premises to keep myself from exploding into tears. Years later, I have matured and developed healthier coping skills than alcohol and bailing, but I still sometimes feel that same urge to flee from conflict.

As my feet make contact with the ground beneath me, I focus on the sensation of finding my footing on the different surfaces below—uneven sidewalks, packed dirt, wobbly cobblestones, and cracks in the pavement. I turn the corner aimlessly, pausing slightly to take in the view. A large flowering tree leans over the corner of the steep hill, sloping down towards the water and the horizon. The wind produces a snowfall of white flower petals, and I'm reminded of winter walks with my father. Then, we appreciated the gentle pause in city life, as people retreated inside, and the snow blanketed the streets in snowy silence. The pause we're in the midst of now is anything but gentle; it is sudden, scary, and uncertain.

Down the hill beyond the swirling pollen snow is the Manhattan skyline in the distance, unchanging across the sparkling water. Just out of reach, unattainable for living, but the place where many of us work and sometimes play. I head downhill towards the glimmering vista, thankful for once I live in a more boring borough, less densely populated and greener. I feel the incline shift beneath me, sloping downward sharply, so I adjust my pace accordingly. I struggle to breathe through my pink bandana, which I carefully chose over the red and blue ones I own.

I try to focus on the soft breeze and the sun peeking through the clouds, to shut out the image of my father's hazel eyes above his mask as they clouded over and I caught a glimpse of something I'd never seen before, the unmistakable pain at the loss of his best friend of over sixty years. Standing six feet away in my parents' driveway, I couldn't even hug him, and I swallowed hard to keep the lump in my throat from rising any higher. My numbness melted at this first close loss, three weeks into quarantine. On my way home from their house that evening, I sat in my car and cried, not wanting to burden my

roommate. We're all dealing with the same pain, so how could we comfort one another?

Later that night, I composed myself and reached out to the man who is not my man. He calls me a runner, but I haven't run from him after three and a half years, the longest romantic connection I've had. Without the physical nuances of close proximity, our long distance relationship wasn't easy. I had run to other men, ones who were closer, physically present, and ready to dive in. Those relationships never lasted. He has my whole heart, and no amount of running away can change the fact that I still run back to him. We rarely see each other in person, so our relationship in quarantine hasn't changed, as we continue to communicate through video chats, postcards, letters, and voice recordings. When I called that night, he was just beginning his day, finishing up meditation, and getting ready for work. His calming, gentle energy always puts me at ease, and he immediately sensed that I was off. He listened and somehow made me laugh, still present even as he had to log onto his computer to begin teaching English to his students in China. I told him how pleased he would be that my therapist was working on breathing techniques with me. I rolled my eyes and he laughed, nodded approvingly. Although time zones divide us, lately I feel closer to him. He appreciates the increased video calls, possible because I have more unstructured time on my hands than normal. This urgent and isolating time has forced our conversations deeper, into a vulnerability neither of us has ever known.

Breathe in emotion: it's okay to feel; breathe out the burden: you're not in this alone. As a social worker, I recognize my own trauma responses, but that doesn't make them any easier to deal with. Although my parents are only ten minutes away, I can't be with them. I worry constantly. So, I keep on running, letting my lungs fill with fresh air while I can. I know I'm one of the lucky ones. I'm healthy, young, and financially stable. I live and work in this community, and I know all too well that the color of someone's skin can determine their health outcomes. I cannot control the devastation this virus is unleashing on our most vulnerable communities, and I feel helpless. I signed up to volunteer for food delivery, to provide mental health support via phone, and to lead virtual therapeutic art classes. This ability to be useful gives me a sense of control, something much needed in this uncertain time.

I'd been planning to run from this place, to quit my job after my grant ended in several months, and move to Central America, where I could work on my writing and immerse myself in Spanish language learning. Now, there is nowhere safe to run. I have to face whatever it is I'm running from. I've recently hit my goal of traveling to twenty countries before turning thirty, and I was making moves to leave everything behind and just go, unusual for my Type A self. I had been following my 2020 intention of leaning into risk, and letting go of fear-based decisions. Now I'm stuck and unsure of what will

come next, and my plan to travel is null. I focus on the here and now. Breathe in, left foot forward; breathe out, right foot forward.

As I approach the busy intersection of bus stops, I map out a pathway around the familiar group of people hanging out on the corner, undeterred by the virus. Various substances cloud their judgment, and they likely do not have a safe home to shelter in place. I round the corner and pick up the pace to a sprint, following my feet as they lead me away. I know I'm privileged to have a job where I can work from home for the time being, and I'm thankful for the paycheck and purpose of my work. I wonder if this virus will cause people to finally listen to the health equity issues my students have been voicing all along.

I feel unsteady, but glide smoothly along the sidewalk. My path is no longer planned. I'm just focusing on one step at a time, as I move forward into the unknown. I stumble upon one of the many secret staircases in my hilly neighborhood and delight at the break in the monotony and added challenge to my run. At the top of the staircase is a path to several driveways, leading to large old houses, homes with turreted towers and leisurely porches and intricate gardens. There are hand drawn rainbows in some windows, clumsy colorful stripes drawn by children, a sign of hope after the storm.

The silence in the air is punctuated by sirens, even more frequently than we used to hear the cop cars rolling through the neighborhood to the precinct down the block. This feels different, a soundtrack of fear. The ambulances don't discriminate, they head down the hill towards the housing projects and up the hill towards the old Victorians; no one is immune from this virus. Living with the unknown has never been a strength of mine. My anxiety makes everything difficult. I live in a constant state of rumination, dwelling in the future and obsessing over the past. I am rarely fully present. Now, I'm forced to live in the moment, and I'm strangely calm. The stress that everyone else is feeling now is my normal, and I feel equipped to help others through this.

I squint, looking to see if neighbors are smiling through their masks. Is that a wrinkle around the eyes or a slight upward movement of a mask? I see the suspicion in people's faces, but I search their eyes for kindness. I remember how kind people were to each other after 9/11. The air was heavy with loss then, too, but it was one fell swoop. Now, the air looms with the uncertainty of an impending storm. We don't know when the downpour will start or who it will hit the hardest, but we know we can't avoid the raindrops.

As I run back downhill past my old high school and the "dirty deli" across the street from it, I'm amused to think the deli owners essentially imposed social distancing ten years ago. They limited access to a few students at a time, with a large employee posted in the doorway like a bodyguard, looking disapprovingly at the diverse group of kids hanging outside, all of us potential thieves. We waited patiently just to buy a twenty-five-cent cosmic brownie or

a bag of chips. We'd brush off a layer of dust from the packaging and the faint smell of mildew.

I keep running. Tune out the news, the numbers rising, a steady death toll quietly marching on. Breathe. How can I exhale when we are collectively holding our breath, waiting for the inevitable crash of the tidal wave that hovers just above us? How can I breathe when we are suffocating behind masks, between four walls, behind a computer screen? I need to breathe for those who cannot, as they cling desperately to life through ventilators.

As I run, I feel my shoulder pain sharpening, but I'm used to it. I remind myself to breathe and ease up instead of ignoring the pain and continuing. The one good thing about escalating pain these past few years is that it has taught me to slow down and be gentle with myself, to really listen to my body, and stop pushing through the pain. I decrease my speed as I pass the empty office buildings, eerily silent on a street usually bustling with city workers. There is no line outside the courthouse, no security guards by the Family Justice Center, no one getting married at Borough Hall.

Getting closer to home, I run faster, following my feet as they lead me away. I feel light raindrops on my exposed arms and eyelids. I've never enjoyed wet droplets on my skin or damp clothes clinging to my body, but I smile. The touch of rain grounds me in the moment, and it has never felt so good. I breathe in deeply, not knowing when I'll be out in the rain again. I know not to take this for granted.

I try to think of the little moments of joy like the sidewalk birthday party formed from a parade of cars as I joined with strangers and sang along from my window to a neighbor I had never met, the sand drawings and messages of hope along the shoreline as I watched the sunset over the bay. My roommate and I have shared many impromptu dance parties and joyous moments despite the pain, as humor has always been my go-to coping mechanism. We reminisce about our freshman year of college when we met, where we shared one small room and many big dreams. There was a time when we imagined our future selves as starving artists in Manhattan or Brooklyn, sharing a tiny apartment and eating ramen noodles. We laugh at the fact that the almost dystopian reality we had pictured had come true. We have upgraded our cooking skills slightly, and our apartment is blissfully sunny and spacious, thanks to settling in an outer, unpopular borough. Staten Island was more affordable, and we were thankful to have room to work and to dance in our old and open apartment.

The raincloud seems to dissipate, as the sun emerges from behind the gray. Shining beams of light illuminate the path. I'm glad I didn't let the rain deter me, or I wouldn't feel the warmth of sunbeams kiss my shoulders. I slow to a walk near my building, not yet ready to go inside. I see a familiar figure, a silhouette of a cowboy hat and a cane. It's an older neighbor, sitting outside on

the wall by the entrance under the awning just like always. He has his usual friendly demeanor, stately moustache, and clear appreciation for the day before us. I've never been so happy to see him. Usually I run out the door past him, late to work. He'd call after me to slow down, and I'd laugh and wave. Today, I slow down completely, stopping to smile at him as we acknowledge each other like old friends. Breathe in the wet rain on the pavement; breathe out hopelessness. I carefully create an arc around him, as I head back inside into the stifling air of my apartment. Taking one final deep breath, I remind myself of all the things I have to be grateful for, even the rain.