

breathe.

The American Psychological Association defines a panic attack as “a sudden surge of overwhelming fear that comes without warning and without any obvious reason.”

Even under the amber streetlight, it is difficult to see our shadows. Is tonight an especially dark night or the streetlight particularly dim? The blue glow of the moon is obscured by brooding clouds overhead. I no longer recall where we are precisely – perhaps Transit Street. The frigid air caresses my cheeks, and I feel the sting piercing my nostrils and lungs with every breath. Well, at least I did. A dulling numbness has taken its place. We are still several blocks away. We aren't in a rush, though. The small rabbit scurrying by distracts us. Hop. Hop. “Where is the house?” “On Governor.” “Oh, okay.” I forgot my glasses, so street signs mean nothing to me. Eight of us are on our way. His house-warming party, and everyone is invited.

The feeling in my face is immediately returned by a wave of unbearable heat. Sweat from the bodies mixes with a puddle on the floor. Vodka, I assume. Did someone turn the heat on? A broken lamp twitches in the corner. No one pays it any attention. A stolen flood light provides the only meaningful illumination; it blinds me as I turn towards it. I keep my focus on the other side of the room. Cracked Solo cups are scattered about. I brush a few into a pile with my feet. A hand waves at me. I maneuver through the indistinguishable blob of bodies. I don't say excuse me; no one could hear me anyways. The music, what song is this? The bass overpowers the lyrics, although I'm not sure it has any. Thump, thump. Thump, thump. The stale scent of alcohol strikes me as my slow progress is further impeded by a sea of elbows.

“Hey, Erika!”

Who said that?

“How’s it going?”

It’s him.

“You look gorgeous. When did you get here?”

I can’t hear. What did he say?

“It’s kinda loud. Let’s go upstairs.”

I feel my feet moving and my mouth saying okay, even though I want neither. Step. Step.

“Oh, be careful. It’s steep.”

Step. Step. The bedroom door is open. Inside. The noise from downstairs is muffled and difficult to hear. He gestures for me to sit. A chill runs down my spine, but it might just be the draft from the window. The door is closing. Closed.

Nothing happened. I can’t – not that I want to – say that anything even came close to happening. This time. But it transports me: A different guy. A basement. On an unfamiliar campus. At a party. A compliment. A kiss. An invitation. A no that somehow contorted itself into a yes by the time it reached his ears.

They come upstairs. “Erika, where are you? We are heading back. What’s going on?” “Nothing”, we both say, although his answer doesn’t reassure me. We were just talking about our classes. He and I say goodbye. Nothing happened.

We shuffle our way through the musty heat of the foyer. Back outside we go. On Waterman – or maybe Angel – a sprinkler throws water into the sky. I run to it. It drenches me. Back and forth. Laughter. I am soaking. I don't worry. We make it back. The swing! Let's swing. We swing. It creaks; we move. Faster. Louder; it creaks. Faster. Faster. Louder. Water beads down. It is not from the sprinkler. My face. Tears. Louder. Faster. Tears blur into the water. Shaking. Faster. Louder. Curl up. Knees to chest. Faster. Shake. Faster. Louder. Faster. I need to go inside. I stumble. I am crying. Squeeze. What am I squeezing? Cry. Louder. Faster. What? A staircase. The railing. "Are you okay?" Am I okay? Am I? Faster. Cry. Louder. Squeeze. Harder. Cry. "Rebecca. Can you get Rebecca?" She comes. Cry. Release. Upstairs. To my room. "Bill, can you give us a minute?"

I need to find it. "What?" I don't answer. "Erika, what are you looking for?" I rip open drawers and rummage. Not there. I pull apart folders, tear open notebooks. Still lost. I toss everything on my desk to the floor. It's not here. I need it. "What?" Rebecca pleads as her voice quivers. "Erika, what do you need?" My closet. I yank out storage boxes. Dump them on the ground. Rebecca maintains her composure – tears restrained – but pained by her friend's state. I can't find it.

"Please. Erika. Breathe. Take a deep breath." Breathe. "What are you looking for?" I breathe. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. A poem. That night. I wrote a poem. I wanted solace, comfort. I wrote a poem: my past understanding of what happened, a reassurance of something that I could not make sense of. Safety for now provided by the reclaimed power of then. I never did find the poem.

I slump against the wall, sobbing and weak. “It’s okay. It’s going to be okay. You are safe. I am here.” Breathe. We lie on my bed. The florescent light traps everything in its soft hum. I am held; I am secure. The tears fall more slowly. Cry. Shorter. Softer. I take a deep breath. Breathe. Softer. My eyes droop; my thoughts float away. Softer. Shorter. Rebecca holds me. Comfort. Safety. Breathe. Inhale. Exhale. Sleep. I drift asleep. Breathe.