

## Drawing Breath

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Daniel once told Caitlin that taking his life drawing class would be a good opportunity to learn fundamental skills.

*So much for that*, Caitlin thinks, slumping in her chair. Despite her best efforts, the figure on her sketchpad is nothing but a blob: a fuzzy, overworked, impatient, smudged graphite blob with legs, hair, and fat, pendulous breasts.

In the four three-hour evening sessions she's soldiered through so far, wearing down her pencils, kneaded erasers, and the patience of everyone around her, all she's learned is that she's wasted twelve hours.

She mentally rehearses what she'll say to Daniel when he comes around. *While it was nice of you to make space for me in your class and nice of my mother to forgive last month's rent in exchange for tuition, this isn't really working out.*

Besides, she'd rather paint, covering big, blank surfaces with energetic splashes of color. She'd rather work from her imagination instead of from the lumpy, nude model the community center had provided. If Caitlin looks like that one day, she hopes someone will shoot her. She certainly wouldn't have the nerve to pose naked in front of a whole class. Even thinking about doing it fully clothed, with all those strangers staring, gives her a creepy itch.

*Yes. I'll tell Daniel it was all a mistake.*

Six easels away, he traces the lines on someone's drawing, stooping over to point out a technique to be corrected. She watches the confident sweep of his odd, beautiful hands. His fingers are long, bulbous at their tips like a giant, human tree frog. Other than Daniel, she's the only one here who knows why.

She's also the only one who knows you aren't supposed to make a fuss when he coughs or has to leave the room. She also knows that the black leather pouch at the bottom of his knapsack contains medications for his cystic fibrosis, a bunch of little vials lined up like soldiers. He'd shown them to her once, told her what each is for. There's one to prevent infections. One does something to his immune system. One helps him breathe better. She forgets the rest. Sometimes she forgets he's sick. Sometimes she looks at Daniel and forgets everything.

While she waits, Caitlin pulls her kneaded eraser into long, soft threads. He seems to be moving in slow motion tonight. Now he stands over the woman five easels away. From the nametags Daniel asked them to wear, Caitlin knows the woman's name is Bess. Bess had written the four small, tidy letters in a fine-point black marker, while Caitlin chose three different colors and could barely fit her name on one paper square.

*Bess can lose a few pounds, Caitlin thinks. A roll of fat protrudes below the belt of her skirt. Glasses years out of style slip down her nose; graying, mouse-brown hair sticks out of a messy bun.*

*And if I look like that one day, oh, my God!*

Just when Caitlin starts to feel superior about her relatively flat belly and glossy, black hair, Bess laughs at something Daniel has said. Her shoulders lift from their slump; her eyes catch fire.

Daniel smiles.

This strikes a queasy chord in Caitlin's stomach. It reminds her she is only sixteen in a class full of adults, in a world full of adults, which means she has to work twice as hard to be interesting, especially to Daniel.

By the time he gets to her, there isn't much left of the eraser. Her heart thumps wildly. She blushes hard and feels so useless and untalented that she can barely glance up at him. He's probably looking at her in his usual way, in his patient, teacher-like, upstairs-neighbor-like way.

Certainly not the way he looks at Bess.

"How's it going, Caitlin?" Daniel asks.

Sometimes when he says her name, she feels five years older. Today, it doesn't take.

Caitlin can't think of anything interesting to say on the three-mile drive home from the community center, so she steals glances at Daniel's profile, the slope of his cheekbone, the curling, honey-brown hair, and wonders what it's like to live on borrowed time. Her mother once said that most people born with his disease—at least, at the time Daniel was born—don't live to be much older than Caitlin is right now.

Daniel is thirty-four.

Sometimes Caitlin forgets that, too. She often tries to convince herself that because he's beaten the odds, he's been given a new life, like in a video game.

He pulls into the driveway beside her mother's station wagon. It's only ten-fifteen. Too bad her mother is home. If not, she'd ask Daniel if she could come up and make spaghetti and watch TV. She likes his apartment better. Even though it's messy and smells like oil paint and turpentine, it's heaven compared to the downstairs reek of cat pee, cigarettes, and damp basement.

Caitlin's mother is always home, it seems.

Daniel clicks off the ignition. The engine of his old car, older than her mother's, rattles, wheezes, and exhales a series of pings and pops before finally cutting out. Never wanting to be the first to leave, she waits for him to open his door, but he doesn't. He just sits there, facing forward, eyes taking a soft measure of something in the distance. Then he turns to her. "You did good work tonight."

Caitlin sinks deeper into her seat. She hasn't earned a compliment. She has merely taken up space and played with her kneaded eraser. Served as an amusement to the other students.

He turns on the overhead light and gestures to her sketchpad. "Let me see it again."

His hand breaks her heart: the long bones, the wide tips with broad, smooth nails, translucent as the inside of a seashell. No one knows exactly why cystic fibrosis makes his fingers look like that; it's just one of the results. She wants to touch his fingers, but does not dare. She gives him the pad. If he'd asked for her body, her perfect, pink, sixteen-year-old lungs, she'd have given him that, too.

"It sucks," she says to her evening's efforts, as if it's the sketchpad's fault, or the model's.

"But you're just starting. If you keep at it, if you keep showing up, you'll get better. I promise."

She'd shown up because Daniel was teaching. That was before she'd turned out to be the worst student in his class. "If I want to paint abstracts, why do I have to take stupid life drawing?"

"You don't *have* to do anything. Life drawing is something that's good for you as an artist. Like broccoli."

"I hate broccoli. So do you! Last time Mom made it for supper, you only had one bite."

He smiles. "Warhol took life drawing."

This gets her attention. Caitlin has an Andy Warhol print—neon-bright panels of Marilyn Monroe—tacked up on the ceiling over her bed. "Really?"

"Sure. Warhol, Pollock, Picasso..."

"Pollock?"

"For years."

“Yeah, but I bet *he* wasn’t the worst one in his class,” Caitlin says. “I bet it wasn’t at some grubby old community center that smelled like old coffee and pea soup where his mother used to make him sort people’s old crap for ladies auxiliary rummage sales. I bet he was really good at focusing and didn’t get distracted looking at what everyone else was doing.”

This is probably the most she’s ever said to him at once. The words hover over the front seat of his car, blending into the chirps of the spring peepers and the softness of the evening air. She wishes she could reel the words back in and make them sound more clever. She wishes he would stop looking at her and say something. He doesn’t. Heat rises into Caitlin’s cheeks. “Maybe, I mean, maybe I’d do better if sometime you taught a class with fewer people? Or maybe...” She swallows the dryness from her throat, daring herself to say the words. “Private lessons? Do you ever do anything like that?”

She feels suddenly stupid and too young. Private lessons? What had she been thinking? He is so talented, his time so valuable, his borrowed time. She can’t even imagine how many months of rent that would be in exchange. It was a foolish whim, and her mother would be furious. Probably she’s furious right now, smoking a cigarette, peeking out from behind the curtain and wondering why Caitlin is still sitting in Daniel’s car, bothering him.

“Oh, forget it,” she says. “We could never afford to pay you.”

He’s still looking at her. His long-lashed, brown eyes seem to measure her instead of the night, calculating if she’s an adequate investment of his borrowed time. “Let me talk to your mother,” he says. “Maybe we can work something out.”

Daniel Benedetto sits upright on the edge of the bed, hands braced atop his thighs, ten pounds of electrified torture secured to his chest.

*For what we are about to endure, may the Lord make us truly thankful.*

The straps are tight. The nebulizer is plugged in and so is he. He reaches for the mouthpiece and pulls in a breath of atomized albuterol, slowly, evenly. It passes no further than his collarbones. His ribs and his diaphragm ache. His lungs feel thick and soggy.

Fifty percent capacity when he was nineteen.

Thirty-three the last time he went up to Albany Med.

He closes his eyes, hits the switch, and the daily pummeling begins. This is what it must be like, he imagines, to experience an earthquake. Except he's the only one moving, the organic epicenter. His teeth chatter; the headache he's had since he woke up intensifies as his brain sloshes against the inside of his skull.

According to Denise, he should be grateful to be shaken like a can of paint every morning. Okay, it was fun, once, when they were kids, when their parents pretended the torture chamber—*pardon me, vibration apparatus*—was something else. A life preserver, a bulletproof vest. Daniel's doctor had found Denise a matching, non-functional version. When he did his therapy, she strapped herself in, too, and suddenly, they were parachute jumpers. That had been fun for about ten minutes, watching his colt-legged older sister leaping about pulling an imaginary ripcord.

It isn't fun anymore: the noise, the restraints, plugging himself into the wall like a kitchen appliance, all to loosen the gunk from his lungs between visits to Albany Med, where instead of a machine-pummeling, he gets wailed on by a respiratory therapist with Popeye forearms. He should go up soon; in fact, he's overdue for his normal maintenance. The nurses have been calling, but he blew the last of his sick leave back in February and can't afford to take any more time off. He'll deal with it when school lets out. Kick off his vacation with a stay in the CF ward and get down to some serious painting for the rest of the summer. He'll miss the kids, the routine of the school day, but mostly, it will be a relief. Two months without pretending he feels great all the time. Two months without stopping conversations whenever he walks by.

Ten minutes until he can unplug, unstrap, and hack his guts out into the sink, hack until his ribs are sore and stars dance in front of his eyes.

But to be able to draw a breath down one, two, three more rungs of his rib cage?

It's worth a few minutes of his time.

Beneath the pulse of his hardware, he hears Denise's Jeep pull into the driveway, a sound he's heard every Saturday morning for the last six years. Under his breath he utters the same curse. Except now, in vibrato.

She doesn't even knock anymore. Too many years have gone by for him to put up a fuss about it now. So she doesn't have to disturb Maureen and Caitlin (or probably to avoid them), she uses her copy of his key to let herself through the front door. "Danny," her nasal voice calls out as she barges up the stairs and into his second-floor apartment.

"Innnnnn heeeeeerrrrreeeee."

His sister appears in the bedroom doorway, but even fuzzy around the edges, he knows the stare, the look of exasperation, of disapproval, that once again he's done something wrong. Balanced on each hip is a paper shopping bag. He guesses what they contain: groceries on the left and clothes from Goodwill (or castoffs from her husband) on the right. Pete is the same height as Daniel but at least a half a person wider.

"Albany Med's been calling," she says. "You canceled again?"

He forms his tremulous tones into the monotonic voice that he teased her with when they were children, when she leaped about in her matching vest pretending she could fly, when he got aggravated with her bossiness and wanted to be a robot instead of a parachute jumper. "I'lllllll goooooo whennnnn schoooooo'lll's outttttt....."

She isn't amused. She'd never wanted to be a robot. "That's two weeks! You were supposed to go last month! You're not supposed to wait this long!"

His therapy isn't finished yet, but he switches the apparatus off and vibrates to a stop. If he ends five minutes early, what will it do, kill him? "Drop it, Denise."

She softens her tone. "Pete's working again. I can cover your rent, the phone bill—if you need to take more time off, you shouldn't have to worry about—"

"I said—" His lungs convulse with the effort to free the frustratingly small amount of phlegm the vest had loosened. Throwing off the straps, he races to the sink, flinging the bathroom door shut behind him. Sister or not, there are some things no one needs to see.

She's standing on the other side; he can feel her there. He can almost see her squinty brown eyes, her teased-up hair, and her self-righteous posture through the swollen wood of the door.

"Danny?" Her voice is child-small. "Can I get you anything?"

She gets away with saying that because their parents are dead and she's the only family he has left. She gets away with saying that because his sides are heaving and stars pop in the bathroom mirror. His cheeks are two slashes of flame. He clutches the edge of the sink. Breath is only going out, out, and not in.

This is not good.

"Got a razor blade?" he gasps, pawing through the medicine cabinet for a rescue inhaler that still has some juice. "Cyanide? A gun so I can blow my brains out?" He reminds himself to get out this afternoon and refill his prescriptions and not tell Denise he's let them get so low. There's so much he doesn't tell Denise.

Silence from the other side of the door. Perhaps she thinks he'd been serious and is now fretting that one Saturday she'll pull up in her blue Jeep, pound up his stairs and find him hanging from the shower rod, overdosed on medication, or bleeding on the bathroom floor.

"How about a cup of coffee?" she says.

He finds gold: a spare epinephrine canister, tucked behind the antacid and a spent can of shaving cream. He sucks the mist into his lungs. Finally, he feels his bronchial tubes relaxing. "The way you make it? That'll work, too."

When he comes out, Denise is putting away groceries. She's brought coffee, bread, pasta, eggs, packages of pre-formed hamburger patties, and frozen dinners. Her south end hangs out of the refrigerator. She's long-limbed and tall like him, like their mother. Over the years, he's noticed spurts of aging: gray hairs, lines on her face. Three tough pregnancies and a chronically unemployed husband can do that, he guesses. *She shouldn't be buying me food, for Christ's sake.* Sure, Pete's working again, but they'll be catching up on old debts for months. Who knows how long this job will last?

He takes a Salisbury steak dinner out of her hands. "You don't have to be doing all this."

"It's no trouble!"

"Neese. You've got a husband, and three kids—"

She spins toward the pantry and points at him with a box of spaghetti. "And a brother!"

"Who's thirty-four years old and can take care of himself?"

She lets out a long breath. "Oh, Danny. Can't we please just have coffee for once without fighting?"

He softens, shoulders sagging. “Yeah. Yeah, sure.” Mentally, he slaps his forehead. How does she make him believe that every argument is his fault? How does she make him believe that being sick is his fault and, again, his fault that he won’t let her take care of him? “Except the milk went bad.”

Her eyes narrow. “Already? It’s only been a week! One of these days you’re going to get food poisoning. Tell Lolita’s mother to buy a new refrigerator for this place.”

“They have names, Denise.”

She sniffs at various perishables and reaches for the suspect milk. “All right. Maureen and Courtney, whatever.”

“It’s Caitlin. Her name is Caitlin. And you’re all wrong about her. She’s a good kid.”

Making a face, Denise pours the entire half-gallon down the sink. The sour stench almost overtakes the smell of turpentine. “Hah,” she says. “Trouble waiting to happen, is more like it. Daddy would have dragged me back into the house by my hair if I went out wearing one of those little outfits she prances around in.”

Daniel raises an eyebrow. Obviously, she hasn’t seen the girls in the junior high lately. Jeans to their hipbones, low-cut tops like second skins, reveling in the power of their budding figures to stop boys—and some male teachers—in their tracks. Even with her sometimes too-short skirts and sometimes too-high shoes, Caitlin dresses like a nun in comparison.

He might also tell Denise how, after years of Caitlin’s tuning out his suggestions that if she wants to be a serious, working artist, she should learn the fundamentals of drawing, that *she* asked *him* if there was room in his life drawing class. That *she* concluded the classroom setting wasn’t an effective learning tool for her and asked for private instruction. Flattery aside, doesn’t this show maturation? Doesn’t this set her apart from other young women her age?

He might say those things, but it won’t matter. Denise has already made up her mind.

Pointing another box of pasta at him, she says, “See, *that’s* what happens when you raise a child without a father. God knows Pete isn’t perfect, but he’s there. Here’s there for our kids. My girls are going to have some self-respect.”

Daniel shakes his head. *Too easy to knock that one out of the park.* He still remembers getting a black eye because he took a swing at some asshole in high school who’d told him Denise puts out. The thing is, the guy had been right. Still, he’s had enough of her hypocrisy. “You don’t know a damned thing about Maureen. She didn’t ask to be a single mother. She didn’t ask her husband to abandon her with a three-month-old baby and a heap of bills. Caitlin’s doing well in school, doesn’t do drugs, doesn’t do—a lot of things girls her age are doing. She’s generous, good-hearted,



serious about her future...and their situation is no more a choice than...well, than having a crappy set of lungs.”

Unable or unwilling to look at him, she fusses around with the groceries. “Well...there’s just *something* about that girl. Something I don’t trust. Call it a feeling.”

He doesn’t trust Denise’s feelings. She sees trouble waiting for Daniel everywhere: germs, unscrupulous clients, incompetent doctors, love-struck middle-school students. Around every corner lurk adulterated medications, litigious parents, and food poisoning. If she had her way, he’d be entombed in a plastic bubble in the middle of her dining room. If she calls that living, he’d rather be dead.