

# **Where I Can Breathe**

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*For my sister, Buffy*



“The past is the present, isn’t it?  
It’s the future, too.  
We all try to lie out of that  
but life won’t let us”

Eugene O’Neill  
*Long Days Journey into Night*

## PROLOGUE

It's the semantics people use. That's what gets to me. When someone dies, they say you have suffered a *loss*. Loss can imply it was out of your control. Whatever you had is gone by whatever force. You lost your job, your sunglasses, your best friend in a car wreck. There was a cosmic intervention in your life. But the act of grieving? That supposedly involves *letting go* and suggests you have control like you are freeing a bird from its cage. As if letting go of your loved one is as easy as the decision to push your dinner plate away and declare you are done. You, see? To have control but do not have control, both circling back to the catastrophe that is somehow now your life. Semantics.

Death is fucked up like that, not to be crass. It's an uncontrollable virus that invades your life and says, *deal with this shit motherfucker*. It is a loss that

is so vast, huge, and ugly that we, as humans, can fail to recover. You don't rebound from death like a sports game or a movie ending. It's a cliff. There is no control over it.

So, humans opt to say they are *letting go* as some sort of therapeutic washed down version of *fuck you right back death, I have power, bitch*. But really, death just wins; death will always win. It's in the word loss; you are the loser. It's a game of roulette, and black is going to succeed whether you call it or not. I wish I knew the therapist who coined *to let go*, fucking brilliant. It's a powerful statement, but is it true? Oh, hell no, it's magic fucking beans from a carnival.

Nobody ever really let's go of someone they love. Those people are a part of them like a seam in their soul, stitch after stitch, keeping them together. Without them, the people left behind unravel and fall apart. It will take others, new loved ones, to sew them back up again, if at all possible. But to truly let go of the people they lost? That's like losing your name, losing your DNA, losing your history. That ain't ever going to happen, folks.

Many people have gone over all this before; it just happens to be my turn now. What have I learned? Death is horrific, messy, and sad. I am in awe of the whole situation. But death is just a part of my story, not the entire story. The entire story is an epic shit show.

Abby Williams O'Conner c. 2010

## ONE

The air was tighter, different once the doors shut. Ansel Williams felt his lungs adjust and cool as he walked along the corridor. *So many people*, he thought. How could there be so many people rushing past each other, nameless and determined? Looking around, he kept losing his bearings; the greeter at the front desk had said down the hall, past the coffee cart, and the elevators would be on the left. There was an immense line of people at the coffee cart, all shapes and sizes waiting quietly, too quietly. No one was impatient or rude. It was that kind of atmosphere: fellow passengers on a Titanic of sorts, staying calm and helping one another. The coffee line was the least of their worries.

What is it about doctors, nurses, people who work in hospitals? Ansel could tell them by the purpose of their gait. They were the ones in comfortable shoes, lab coats, and scrubs, relaxed and chatting at ease. Their pallor was a pale unblemished color. Their own particular hue was created by years of traversing these hallways, skin unpolished by pollution or sun. It was the sanctimonious side effect of spending a lifetime saving others. Then there were the others, visitors to this fluorescent realm, with drawn faces and jerky movements. They were unwitting guests, skin stressed by multiple tints, clothes out of order, not calm or belonging. That was Ansel.

At the elevators, a great rush of people flooded from open doors, and a tide of bodies pushed him onto one. Hospital elevators were unusually large and septic smelling. People actively avoided touching one another, fearing germs. There was no eye contact. No one was curious about one another.

Ansel sighed, thankful no stretcher appeared with someone in a gown, arm jabbed with rubber tubing. At 36, he was squeamish enough about hospitals and actively avoided them. Being a hypochondriac would've been

Ansel's worst nightmare. Just convincing himself for a checkup took months and, even then, his blood pressure soared at the sight of a doctor's office. He was going to die eventually but had no desire to know beforehand.

The elevator opened after an eternity on the eleventh floor. Ansel followed a labyrinth of doors and corridors until he found the nurse's station. It reminded him of the Starship Enterprise run by quirky people in playful scrubs. The nurses wore fleece coats and cardigans and gossiped in front of a matrix of beeping machines. Ansel, not knowing what to do, stood confused.

That morning, Ansel entered his art gallery on Collins Avenue in Miami's South Beach, a happy man. Kerry, his assistant, had a double latte and Cuban cheese toast waiting for him on his desk. They were celebrating a successful show of a new artist from the night before. He had gone to bed over \$50,000 richer with the smug satisfaction of running his business extraordinarily well. It was one of the few things he had in common with his father, business sense. Now seven hours later, he was in a Connecticut hospital corridor thinking about Miami air conditioning. It felt colder here, and his linen shirt felt weightless, with no defense against the geriatric floor climate. Ansel's soft brown hair with natural sun highlights flopped over his forehead out of place with the New England crew cuts. His blue eyes dulled by the harsh lighting, and out of his element in every way, he stood, dazed, until he heard his name.

It was his older sister Abby calling him. He recognized her squat stance, hands anchored on her hips. Her messy ponytail and flannel shirt seemed as familiar as light. He thought she looked the same as in high school. At 40, Abby was still girlish and pretty. Abby was a natural beauty with broad cheekbones, a wide smile, hazel eyes, and platinum blond hair. She would have been a perfect model if she was a foot taller. The family genes stopped her short, and she was slightly rounder than most. Having two kids didn't help the situation, but regardless, he always thought she was the loveliest girl in the room.

And there was his oldest brother Arthur, hard to miss towering over Abby. At 42, Arthur, tall, broad-shouldered, loomed in any room. With kind blue eyes, dark eyebrows, and trimmed chestnut hair, Arthur looked like Robert Redford if he happened to play football. Arthur was the fastidious accountant whose clothes were impeccably tailored and ready to have lunch

with Wall Street at a moment's notice. He looked the opposite of Abby if not for their similar smiles.

The “accidental” third child, Ansel, completed their sibling trio. Each different, each the same in many ways but only when together did all three feel whole. They had their roles. Abby cared for them, Arthur protected them, and Ansel adored them. He brought commitment and nonjudgmental love they both desperately needed in the wake of their parents' chaos. They were better together.

Abby and Arthur's expressions scared him. His brother and sister looked tired, nervous, anxious, and terrified. He waited for one or the other to say something. Instead, the doctors grew silent as he neared, and Abby pointed with her eyes for Ansel to look inside the hospital room.

When he did, his heart fell. Monitors were beeping, the lines and tubes crisscrossed like an electrical nightmare. She was a limp body mass of wrinkled skin and sparse hair. Agnes Williams, their mother, the beauty, and tyrant of their lives, pooled in the middle of a generic hospital bed. Stripped of all her power and energy, her eyes were closed and her mouth rasping for breath. It was an unnatural sleep.

Agnes's stomach protruded like a basketball, out of proportion with her tiny, frail limbs. *She looks so old*, Ansel thought, reminded of that awful moment in the movie *E.T.* when they found the alien gray and swollen in the river. He always hated that scene. But his mother wasn't gray; she was tinged a vulgar yellow. This was chronic liver failure. Ansel was seeing it for the first time, and it was not some stupid hospital show. This was real life.

He thought if she was an animal, they wouldn't be doing this right now. They would put an end to this. *It was impossibly cruel*, went through his mind. *No one should be alive like this*. He searched Abby and Arthur's faces with pleading eyes. Death was here, all around them, and it made Ansel colder than he could imagine. The siblings had never done death before – lots of other life-altering events, but not death.

“They cauterized the bleeding and stabilized her,” said Arthur, in his authoritative voice. “Apparently, they can do that since she got here in time.” Their mother had vomited a tremendous amount of blood the night before. The blood vessels in her throat had erupted because her liver was unable to function from scarring and damage. The liver diverted blood to smaller ships, forcing them to burst and bleed out. It was textbook.

“What does that mean?” Ansel croaked.

“They fixed her up, and she’s okay at the moment,” said Abby, blowing hard out of her mouth.

“How is she okay?” said Ansel in disbelief. “Look at her. I mean, look at her. How is she not dying right now?!” His voice was shaking. He pointed to his mother, lifeless in bed, and turned to the doctor, who was puffed up like Superman, happy with the results.

“We’ve got your mother under control for the moment. We’ll detox her from the alcohol and go from there. We are waiting on test results right now, but we will go ahead and say it’s her liver. Lots of time, there can be some recovery from these situations. We just can’t say right now. Starting a treatment program, changing lifestyles, there are lots of options given that she is willing,” said the doctor smugly. His dainty little name tag read Dr. Adam Cooper. Ansel cringed at the doctor’s thick tan shoes. He bet Dr. Cooper had a \$4,000 mountain bike he only rode in the city. He irritated Ansel immediately.

“Oh, you have got to be shitting me,” said Ansel without masking his annoyance. “You mean this goddamn nightmare isn’t ending right now? This is going to go on?” He was near tears. The three Williams siblings looked at each other, and without saying it out loud, they all simultaneously thought *fuck*.