

### Inhale

“It’s going to be a manual Focus,” he tells me excitedly over Skype, moving his hands as if he were steering a car.

“That’s awesome. Can you teach me how to drive stick once you learn?” I asked him.

“Yeah, of course. It’s gonna be sick. I’m so excited.” He replies, shifting closer to the screen in anticipation with a smile on his face that has been absent for months.

“How many months has it been?”

“Two. So only four to go.”

“That’s so cool, Connor. I’m so excited for you.”

“Yeah, it’s just a shame I didn’t get to drive the Mustang while we had it.”

“Maybe next time,” I respond encouragingly.

“Yeah... maybe next time,” He says with a little laugh.

That little laugh means maybe the next time we have a Mustang for the summer, he’ll be allowed to drive it. Maybe he’ll make it a full six months this time without another “episode”. Maybe the electrical activity in his brain will be under control for good. Maybe I’ll get my little brother back. Maybe.

We’re home from school, my brother and I, after getting off the bus. I’m in eighth grade and he is in fifth. We start our usual after-school routine: toss our backpacks in the corner of the mudroom, turn on the TV in the kitchen, ransack the pantry for a snack, fight over what to watch,

and inevitably settle on *Malcolm in the Middle* (a favorite of ours). I reach over him to pick up a goldfish but he snatches the bag away from me. It's on. I push his right arm away while I reach for the bag in his left hand but he resists and resists, holding the bag farther away from me. I keep pulling his other arm away until I finally reach the bag. He freezes. I grab the bag back and sit down again, eating my goldfish before looking back at him. He's still frozen.

"Connor. Connor.... Connor, hello? Connor, can you hear me? Connor. Connor," the fear in my voice elevates the more times I say his name. He turns his head in my direction but his stare is vacant. There is no light in his eyes. His mouth is drooped open, his face muscles slack. I wave a hand in front of his face a couple times. No response. I hold him by the shoulders and shake him. No response. "Connor!"

"What?" He asks in a dull voice.

"Can you hear me?" I ask him, searching for some sign of consciousness.

"What? Yeah. Of course. Don't be stupid." He blinks a couple times and looks at me like I have three heads, and I stare back at him skeptically. We both know what just happened. This occurs from time to time. Maybe once a month. Maybe twice. But they always pass.

We're sitting at the foot of our seven-foot pine tree, my brother and I, on Christmas morning each with a present poised in our laps. I'm eighteen in my first year of college and he is a sophomore in high school. We're immersed in our annual Christmas morning ritual: come downstairs, pour a glass of orange juice or coffee, turn on the fireplace, sit around the tree and take turns opening presents. To my grown-up delight I unwrap a sweater, and now it's his turn. My mom, dad and I watch as he begins to tear back the colorful paper, but suddenly he stops. I

know exactly what's going on. If I've seen that face once I've seen it a million times. Connor stares at his partially unwrapped present, immobile.

My mom and dad look at each other. "What're you doing, buddy? Huh?" My dad asks in a calm voice. Connor tilts his head up. A Celine Dion Christmas song is playing in the background aptly named "The Special Times," and he starts to sway to the song in rhythm with the music. It's as if, once again, he's trapped in his own mind. He's unable to move, speak, or look anyone in the eye.

"He's spaced out again." I say flatly.

"No, he's not." My dad pointedly warns me. "He's just thinking." He "thinks" a lot these days it seems. Now he thinks for longer periods of time. Forty seconds to a minute instead of twenty to thirty seconds. And multiple times a day.

"We're seeing the doctor again in the new year," my mom tells us. I think she's really reminding herself of that fact, affirming that this is fixable and nothing to worry about. Maybe it's normal. A few seconds later he snaps out of it: "What?"

"What were you thinking about, bud?" My dad inquires.

"Nothing, just tired," Connor says, shifting his eyes toward me. He looks at me because I'm not in denial like my dad. I never have been, and he knows it.

We're sitting on the couch, my brother and I, watching a movie on a Friday night in the summer with my mom. I'm now nineteen and he's sixteen, almost a junior. He just came up from the basement where he had been playing video games and stood near the granite countertop in our kitchen before migrating over to the family room to talk with us. My dad is off working on

our boat on Lake St. Clair as he always does on Friday evenings during the summer. Connor slumps onto the couch next to me and puts his feet up on our coffee table, mirroring my position. As I watch the TV screen, I notice him yawning out of the corner of my eye. It seems like an incredibly long yawn and I just happen to glance over at him. His entire body is rigid and tense, his head is tilted up towards the ceiling with his mouth gaping open and his eyes rolling towards the back of his head. He begins to mash his mouth open and close.

My heart sinks to the bottom of my stomach and an acute intake of air fills my lungs as I scream his name. It's happening. What has always stayed in my nightmares is finally transpiring right before my very eyes: a grand mal seizure. Not just an absence seizure like all the rest, but a real, heart-breaking seizure.

My mom looks over at us as I leap off the couch and hold my own head in panic. She practically jumps on him to hold his head and arms down as the jerking starts. The convulsions that I thought we would never see begin. I pace back and forth: "Should I call 9-1-1?"

"Uh... um... Connor, honey, are you ok? Connor? Yes, call an ambulance," my ghost of a mother frantically mutters.

I run back and forth across the family room in search of my one link to control over the situation. "He never hangs up the damn phone! I can't find it!" After what seems like a lifetime I find it and press the unimaginable numbers. The call is a blur of information. I tell the stoic operator what she needs to know and stand over my mom and brother. Only this is not my brother. This is a shell of my brother.

He's in the postictal phase of the seizure now, characterized by a general loss of cognitive function. He's drooling and breathing heavily underneath my mother, answering our questions

with mumbles and grunts. It takes the two of us to lay him on his side per instructions of the 9-1-1 operator.

After another eternity an ambulance, fire truck and police car pull up in front of our house. Finally, a little control. I swing the front door wide open so they can wheel the foreign stretcher inside. Immediately they begin taking his vitals with my mother there to worry over the situation, while I brief one of the paramedics with his information separately in the kitchen.

“Does your brother have a history with seizures?” the paramedic asks.

“Yes. He was diagnosed with mild epilepsy about nine months ago... last September... but he’s only ever had absence seizures. This is the first real seizure he’s... he’s,” tears stream down my face as the gravity of his seizure finally smacks me in the face. The paramedic tries to comfort me but it’s no use. I explain all about how he switched medications recently because the Trileptal wasn’t working, so we had moved to 500 mg of Keppra per day. When he was finished with me I placed myself back in the room with three other paramedics, my mother and a husk of my brother. He’s coming back to earth as the paramedics question him about the year, the name of the current president and his age. We lock eyes again and his face turns red, his chin starts to quiver and tears fill his eyes as he too realizes what’s going on. Again, the paramedics try to comfort him but it’s to no avail. They load him up in the stretcher and strap him down like a mental patient before wheeling him into the back of the ambulance. He keeps crying and I know my brother is back.

An hour later in the emergency room at Providence Park hospital, I sit in a rigid chair while my mother makes phone calls outside to his primary neurologist. Connor’s face is tear-stained. He grasps a cup of water in the hand opposite from the side of the bed where the IV

stands, cold and sterile. My dad walks in the room after speeding back from St. Clair Shores to the hospital.

“Hi, Buddy. How you doing?” My dad gently asks him as Connor’s eyes fill again with tears. My dad hugs him and then sits down at his side. I’ve cried on and off since we left the house. The heart monitor isn’t being used and shows a flat line, giving off a constant buzz. “I guess not so good. Looks like you’re dead,” he jokes. My brother laughs through his tears. It’s just what we need to relieve some of the tension. My dad may still be in denial but he’s always good for a laugh.

My mom reappears with the emergency room doctor. He has an unusually cheery disposition, given it’s past midnight on a Friday night and he’s spending his time in a hospital. He tells us the seizure is most likely due to the fact that he recently switched medications and took Nyquil for a cold that evening, and promptly discharged us. But as I look around at my family, something’s wrong. All is not well with my brother, all is not well with the four of us. Maybe I’ll find a way to fix it. I have to because my job is to be the controlled one. I’ll fix us.

We’re in the kitchen, my dad and I, brainstorming what to make for dinner. It’s been a month since our night in the hospital. Things are tense, but we’ve had tense months before. We decide on what to make so my dad goes to sit down and watch TV while I call my mom and give her the grocery list. The doorbell rings so I stop what I’m doing to go answer it, but as I approach the door and see it’s the kid from next door waving frantically I can’t quite figure out what’s going on.

“JJ, what’s up?” I ask casually.

“Come quick, get your dad! It’s Connor, he’s having another seizure!” He yells before running back down our front lawn.

The adrenaline in my body kicks in yet again as I grab a pill of Ativan and race to get my dad and follow JJ back across the street and behind their house. We find my brother lying on his side on their patio bench, already in the postictal phase again. My dad holds him up as he slowly regains consciousness. Spotting one of his best friend’s, Teddy, Connor can’t figure out where he is: “Ted... Ted? Wha’re you doin here? Hi, Ted,” he slurs through the drool. He reminds me of my grandmother after her second stroke: unable to move, unable to form words, helpless. After about ten minutes of us staring at him, my neighbor’s dad and my dad help him back across the street and onto our family room couch where he drifts into sleep.

We’re in the family room again, my brother and I, with our dad on the couch. It’s been two weeks since his last seizure. I’m mulling over investment options with my dad to figure out what to do with my savings at the end of the summer. We have a family friend over named Jenny, a former nanny of mine and my brother’s actually, in the den with my mom looking at pictures. I rise up from my couch to go visit my mom and Jenny but pause first to look at my brother. I have a tendency to check on him a lot lately. We all do.

This time the seizure doesn’t phase me as much as the first two. I recognize the situation immediately. His arms are bent and tense, his legs and feet flexed. I yell out his name once before the convulsions start but it’s too late. This is an unstoppable force within his brain that I can’t control. No one can really. Not even the Keppra. My dad rushes over to hold his arms down while I run for my mom and another pill of Ativan. This one lasts a minute or two.

We're texting, my brother and I, I'm at work and he's at the house. It's been a week since his last seizure. "skipped ACT class. I had another seizure," I read on my phone while sitting at my cubicle. When I return home later that day, my mom tells me that he was standing near the edge of our counter when she saw him grow stiff and tilt his head back, and warning sign we all know now indicates an oncoming seizure.

This is the fourth of the summer, and each one has taken a toll on our family. My dad doesn't want the doctor's help because he seems to think that they don't know what they're doing. He would prefer to ignore Connor's epilepsy altogether. As someone who always wants the situation under control, if not under mine then under someone's, I can't comprehend my dad's reasoning at all. The doctor has offered us the option of putting Connor in an epilepsy unit for a week to monitor the seizures to see if they're coming from one part of his brain. Being a normal sixteen-year-old boy, Connor can't fathom spending a whole week at the end of summer cooped up in a hospital bed. He can only think about getting his license and how his epilepsy is preventing him from getting it. I've tried reasoning with him but he's just as irrational about the situation as my dad. All I can think about is that if I could take his epilepsy away and have it instead myself, I would. My mother, on the other hand, tries and fails miserably to keep the peace. She's aged at least five years over this summer. The tension throughout the summer has worn all of us down and we're buckling under the weight of what we can't control.

But after this final seizure, my mom finally takes over the situation and makes the decision for my little brother. She calls the doctor that day to schedule a week's stay in the



epilepsy unit at Henry Ford Medical Center in Detroit. The appointment is one week following that seizure. Needless to say, my mother and I watch over Connor like hawks during that week.

We're sitting in the hospital room, my brother and I, with our mom and dad seated on either side of his hospital bed. I feel like I'm thirty and look at him like he's eight. The room looks like a shrine devoted to my little brother with cookie baskets, muffin baskets, bouquets of balloons and flowers surrounding his bed, while he wears a crown of electrodes glued to his scalp. Fifteen feet of rope separate the top of his head and the EEG, allowing him to go as far as the bathroom but no further. My mom has stayed with him for three days, except for the two hours she took to come home, shower, pick me up and grab take-out on the way back to the hospital. Each time he has a seizure, grand mal or absence, the EEG starts beeping and nurses run in to check on him. They say "Purple dinosaur!" or "Green ninja!" on their way in so they can ask him if he remembers what they've said when he regains consciousness. The last time I was in a hospital was when my grandmother had her strokes, and it looks the same now.

The doctor believes she has found the right dosage for Connor's epilepsy. He should be discharged in a day. "I'm sorry you had to go through this, buddy. I know this hasn't been a fun summer for you," my dad tells my brother.

"I've still got me spirits, I do," Connor exclaims in a chipper British accent. And he's back. This is the resilient, humorous, awesome person I've missed. He might have an IV stuck in his arm and glue and tape all over his head, but my little brother is back. We'll deal with the uncertainty of another seizure, we have to because that's how epilepsy works. But after all of this struggle, all the tears and all the intensity of this summer, he's back. Maybe he never left. But as

I look around the other three people in this tiny hospital room with a baseball game on the TV and take-out Olga's in the mini-fridge, I realize this is our new normal. We're not out of the woods yet and we may never be completely, but we're surviving. We're under a different kind of control.

We're talking on the phone, my brother and I, and it's been three months since his last seizure. With the exception of taking six to eight pills per day Connor is healthy and, more importantly, happy. He's going through his growth spurt, which means that I have to be much nicer to him to avoid getting a black eye (which I probably deserve after years of beating up on my little brother).

"Yeah, Homecoming was pretty good," Connor tells me over the phone. "I danced with like a million girls. No big deal."

"Oh, really? How'd you pull that off," I retort.

"The ladies love me. What can I say?" I roll my eyes on the opposite end of the line because I'm well aware of his lady-killer persona; he had his first "girlfriend" in fifth grade. But what I notice more about him is how much he has changed. He's grown but not like his other friends have. He has a new understanding of his situation which has made him more careful. Every morning and night he takes his pills exactly on time, and he will never drink a drop of alcohol in his life because he is well aware of the consequences. We've all grown with him, as well. My mom has learned to stop worrying as much. My dad has learned that it's ok for things to go wrong, because we're still here and we're stronger. I've learned to let go.

Exhale.