

BREATHE

One cause of your son's seizure, the doctor says, could be syphilis. Ask what's the basis for such speculation, given that no physical exam was conducted, no blood work drawn, no urine sample taken, and that your son, who is lying on the hospital bed before you looking bewildered, is twelve. "Obviously it's not unheard of for twelve-year-olds to have this disease," she responds, which is impossible for you not to hear as, "You're black, so I shouldn't have to tell you this."

But it is possible, apparently, not to lose your temper. Be grateful for the article you read last month about the benefits of breathing exercises in times of high stress because the one you're doing now is actually working. Before speaking, take another deep breath, followed by a slow exhale, focusing, all the while, on the air passing through your lungs. There. Now tell your family it's time to leave. Marvel at the calmness of your voice and wish you'd discovered this exercise years ago, long before your high blood pressure and reputation for being angry. Pat your son's shoulder as you nudge him upright. Take him home.

Once home, in your study, do some google searches. Start with syphilis. Tell yourself you know your son doesn't have syphilis but be curious to see if the doctor was racist and dumb or only racist. Find it hard to decide; syphilis left untreated for a decade can cause meningitis which can cause seizures. Forget the doctor and just search "adolescents and seizures" but when you reach the part about brain tumors turn off the computer and work on your breathing some more. Come up with your own diagnosis; the seizure was a fluke, a random occurrence, like hiccups or warts. Try to convince yourself there's no need to worry.

There is need to worry, though, because your wife is in the kitchen screaming. Run there to find her standing next to your son, who is seizing again, his thin quivering arms bent at odd angles like a scarecrow's. Choke up tomorrow as you recall how your ten-year-old gently placed a hand on his brother's lower back to steady him but for now keep it together. You need to be strong. You need to be wise, too, which is problematic; the seizure has run its course and your son looks at you with fear in his eyes and says, "Daddy, why is this happening?" You cannot answer this. Believe a good father could. A good father, if you think about it, would not have bought a house in a small white town so that when medical emergencies arise paramedics take you to the nearby small white hospital instead of to Boston, thirty miles away, where the world's best hospitals receive black people all the time. And a good father would have just said, "We're driving him to Boston Children's," before his wife beat him to it. Agree with her, at least. At least get the phone so she can arrange a sitter.