

Meditative Story Transcript – Randall Park

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Schloooooop. That's the sound of a piece of me shriveling up and dying.

ROHAN GUNATILLAKE: Randall Park is one of those rare actors – quietly hilarious, effortlessly charming – that basically everyone loves, whether in the sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, or the miniseries *WandaVision*, or *Always Be My Maybe*, the romantic comedy he wrote with Ali Wong. But real life isn't like the movies, of course. What happens behind the scenes can be quite far from effortless.

In today's Meditative Story, Randall tells the Hollywood-friendly, meet-cute story of how he and his wife first meet. And then he tells the much realer story churning beneath the surface. We all have one.

In this series, we combine immersive first-person stories and breathtaking music with the science-backed benefits of mindfulness practice. From WaitWhat, this is Meditative Story. I'm Rohan, and I'll be your guide.

The body relaxed. The body breathing. Your senses open. Your mind open. Meeting the world.

PARK: The story of my happiness, like so many, begins with a poorly drawn rodent.

This is years ago, before I evolve into the mega star that I am today. And by "mega star" I mean "the Asian from that show." Or, that movie. The guy who's kind of everywhere. I'm

in my early thirties. And I'm just a guy, broke, depressed, single, not booking any parts. I'm barely paying rent on my lonely cold Los Angeles apartment, just sort of sucking.

One day during this period of sucking, my phone rings. A friend is holding a fundraiser for his Asian-American theater group, and he asks me to contribute a painting for this auction they're having. My mom's a painter, and I've dabbled in painting, so I say yes.

The evening of the event comes along, and I make my way over. It takes place in this little boutique on Pico Boulevard, racks of skirts and pants shoved against the wall to make space for the auction. Picture any boozy gathering from your youth – artsy types murmuring to one another in small groups over plastic cups of boxed wine. But lining the walls is all this really impressive art – abstract paintings, a few gorgeous portraits, Hopper's "Nighthawks" but with Asian people. And then there's my piece. A squirrel. A squirrel painted without arms, for some reason. Not even a good armless squirrel – it's basically a cartoon, painted on poster board. If squirrel paintings could talk, this one would mumble: I put no work into this.

I sink into a deep couch in a dark corner of the room, like I do at parties. I sit there, cocoon-style. That's where I am when it happens. Across the room this knot of people suddenly parts. Emerging from their midst, almost in slow motion, is this stunning woman. She's radiant, this perfect curtain of black hair flowing down her back. When she grins, I understand the cliché of a smile lighting up a room. Even the dark corner where I sit. The room sort of gives way to her. I recognize her – her name's Jae, she's an aspiring actor like me. I just stare, and for a split second we lock eyes. And then, also in slow motion, this tall, lanky white dude follows behind her. Of course. Oh well. I go home soon after that, back to my cold, lonely bachelor pad. Nobody bids on my terrible squirrel so my friend coughs up \$20 for it. Pity money.

Pity is very much the feeling a person should have for me at this time. I have a pitiful dreary filing job at this company that does accounting for TV shows and movies. My job is basically to Roomba my way through a maze of steel pull-out cabinets, under soul-sucking fluorescent lights, filing checks for successful people in the business. One morning I open the books, and there's this \$500 residual check that Brad Pitt is owed, from a recent movie. They can't get him to cash it, it's not worth his time. I can't even tell you what I'd do for \$500.

Don't worry, my story's about to get cute. A week after the auction, I go to an audition for a TV show. My stomach's churning, and I walk into this dark old building on Hollywood Blvd, up a flight of stairs. So many careers launched and so many more thwarted under this roof. I walk into this totally empty waiting room – chairs, bare walls, the lingering anxiety of a thousand actors before me.

There's one other person in this room, and it's Jae. I freeze. Not knowing what else to do, I just sit there quietly. Then, out of nowhere, she turns to me and goes, "So how

much did you get for the painting?" She'd noticed the squirrel! With that, we're off to the races. It's weirdly easy. And it turns out that tall, lanky white dude wasn't a boyfriend. By the time I need to go audition, I'm only thinking about her, instead of the part.

Three days later I run into Jae at another audition. See? Cute story. I even work up the nerve to invite her to my upcoming birthday party. Incredibly, she actually shows up and somehow doesn't freak out about the squalor I live in. I mean, when she walks into my apartment, we're all sitting on chairs that I find in the street. We're playing this ancient Atari on a TV I also find on the street. The ratty couch we're sitting on – it's essentially a pile of burlap. Is that a bloodstain? I couldn't tell you. She doesn't know a soul there, but she's just up for anything. We start playing this funny game we made up on the spot, where two people have to debate some random innocuous topic. She and my friend Taran get tapped to argue over skinny jeans. Jae just instantly dives in – skinny jeans flatter the legs, skinny jeans highlight the shoe, etc. She's a force.

She's like a better version of me. Bolder, freer. She can talk with anyone, getting them laughing right along with her. She's just one of those charming people. Where I'm one of those lurk-in-the-background people. By the end of the night she's friends with everyone. I sort of can't believe my luck.

But here's the thing. At a certain point, you need to believe your luck. If you don't, the wheels start to come off the cart.

GUNATILLAKE: Two people with very different energies. Randall sinking into the background in his couch, Jae very much in the foreground: bold and free. Notice how your body is, and make some adjustments so that it's a bit more Jae. Alive, upright, open, relaxed.

PARK: Boy meets girl, girl notices boy's squirrel painting, boy and girl fall in love.

I know the cute version of this story intimately because it's the Hollywood version – the version peddled by the very industry I'm desperate to break into. Meanwhile though, in real life, this different version of our story starts unfolding.

In real life, Jae and I start dating after my birthday, and it is wonderful. She's kind, and quick. The references she makes, they're at the very edge of my knowledge base. She knows more about the world than I do, and she's so fun about it. On one of our first dates, we see the movie *Juno* at the cineplex at the Beverly Center. Afterwards we find this bench in the mall and start making up life stories for all the people walking by. This guy with the ponytail? He breeds pythons. That pale woman? Afraid of pine trees. We're cracking up, her with her big, boisterous laugh, me with my reserved chuckle that wishes it were a big, boisterous laugh.

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so it's basically got no sides. It's a giant rolling receptacle for smog and dust. Every time you take a ride in it, your clothes end up with these black smudges all over them. Anyway, Jae and I brave the filth and are driving through the city when we pull up at a light. Looming before us is this giant billboard. It's an ad for a new TV show, starring this hot muscular white dude. He's hanging off the side of a helicopter, hoisting this enormous machine gun, looking all heroic-like. Jae casually reveals that she dated this guy not long before me.

Schloooooop. That's the sound of a piece of me shriveling up and dying. In the moment, I don't exactly know why I'm feeling this way, but I am. I hit the gas, head down the street. Then there's another. Same helicopter, same hunk. I make a right on La Brea, head to Venice. Another billboard. Three ex-boyfriend billboards in the space of five minutes.

Quick update on my life at this point: I'm hanging out of zero helicopters. I'm filing checks under fluorescent lights, and because my wages are now being garnished – turns out you do have to pay those student loans – I've taken a second job at Starbucks. I'm spiraling. I begin obsessing about the man with that machine gun. He means nothing to her, but he becomes this hunky black hole of dread in my mind. I think about how obviously superior a life he must lead, while on my own I'm bringing home garbage bags full of old pastries I've rescued from the Starbucks trash. Fuel for all the auditions I'm tanking, by the way.

Meanwhile the billboards are relentless. Jae and I will go out for dinner, and there's another, right in front of our faces. If they could, they'd put the billboard in the restaurant just to make me even more miserable. And I'm so filled with anxiety that I can't even talk about it. We sit there in the filthy Jeep, engine ticking, Jae and I wordless.

The voice in my head has plenty to say. Oh c'mon man, why would she want to BE with you, as opposed to this handsome, successful, WHITE action star?? This isn't going to work...

In Hollywood, the hero needs to hang out of a helicopter with a machine gun to defeat the bad guys. In real life, the bad guy is sometimes yourself.

One night I'm lying in bed, and out of nowhere, a different voice pipes up. It's just a whisper, but it's enough. Like, why am I losing sleep over this guy? He's not better than me just because he's white and rich. He's just a basic dude, doing the same basic stuff we've been fed time and time again by this industry. Whereas I have something different to say about this world. What if things didn't have to be this way? What if I used this damn billboard as motivation? Like, maybe use it as fuel to drive myself to one day becoming the mega star that I know lives within me? What if one day it's me up there?

The next morning I wake up and pad into the bathroom. Groggily but with this new dollop of optimism, I start brushing my teeth. I spit, fill a cup, and start gargling. All of a sudden

this thin jet of water shoots out of my mouth, splashing across the bathroom mirror. I look up. One side of my face is completely drooping. I try to smile, and only half of my mouth raises. My eye seems like it's next to my nostrils, and my eyebrow is next to my cheekbone. Oh my god, what is happening?

Bell's Palsy, in case you don't know, is this crazy condition where one side of your face suddenly becomes paralyzed. Bell's Palsy is often triggered by stress, and of course it goes on to create more stress. For a guy trying to break into acting – for a guy just trying to become comfortable in his skin – it's devastating.

After running from mirror to mirror in my squalid little apartment – two mirrors, total – I begin the slow, maddening process of trying to fix myself. I drive around Los Angeles meeting with specialists. I visit an acupuncturist. No change. Only half of my face is affected but I am, like never before, fully broken. Weeks pass.

If you've seen me up on a screen, you probably noticed that my face is, well, functional. A doctor eventually prescribes me steroids, and over a couple months my face starts coming back to life.

It's tempting to say that my life starts getting back to normal – but that's not quite right. Over those months, I instead start migrating over to somewhere new, somewhere other than normal. One day I'm driving in my filthy old Jeep, down Sunset Boulevard, and I notice that the billboards are gone. Easing up to a stop sign, I take a long, slow breath. I probably inhale a pint of Los Angeles grime, but somehow it's cleansing. I'm here, I'm alive, and most of all, I'm me. For too long, I'd been just a bad impression of myself – a subpar performance in which I never really felt right in my skin. Spend too much time like that and you lose the whole plot. But if you're lucky, and if the right person with the right boisterous laugh inexplicably believes in you, sometimes that's enough to pull you through.

When it rains, it pours – and when it stops raining, sometimes it stops pouring. I start auditioning again. The guy who disappears into couches at parties – he sits these auditions out. This other Randall shows up, channeling a little of Jae's charisma. Amazingly, it works. I start booking jobs. So many, in fact, that I'm able to quit my filing job. Brad, I'm pretty sure your 500 bucks are still waiting for you.

GUNATILLAKE: Now let's be more Randall. Able to notice and appreciate what is here, without getting fixated on what is not. Let's take a moment together and tune into something that is here and that is lovely. A sensation, a vibe, a thought of someone who helps us be as open as we can.

PARK: That March I start planning another birthday party, a year after the one Jae came to. I rent the back room of this old-timey LA steakhouse I'm fond of – bad food, stiff drinks. It's a true '50s relic, all red leather and dark wood. At the center of the room is

this wooden podium. A lot of my friends and Jae's are meeting for the first time, and I've asked everyone to go up and tell a story.

So we're drinking and laughing and hearing these funny old anecdotes we've heard a million times. Then it's my turn. I step up to the podium. I'm wearing this Western shirt, and I'm sweating bullets. I look at Jae. She's got a brown leather jacket on, and she's looking back up at me. I start talking, nervously, telling the story of how we met. It's the same story I've told you just now, starting with the armless squirrel. But then I step back from the podium.

Suddenly my friend's drunk girlfriend blurts out, "He's gonna propose!"

And I do. I get down on my knee and pull out this ring I've been carrying around all day. A year after we start dating, Jae agrees to marry me. She's laughing and crying, her beautiful face buried in her hands.

That was a dozen years ago. It's funny, our careers were so urgently important then. Now Ruby, our daughter, is the center of our universe. Instead of fixating on auditions, I'll think about the song she was singing earlier that day. We laugh a lot. The ratty couch has been replaced with a tasteful gray sectional, and the filthy Jeep is gone, too – I'm a grownup! It's been a minute since I lugged home a garbage bag bulging with stale Starbucks pastries.

Working in Hollywood, I get this up-close look at how that world works. I know how the movie version of my life would go. In the film, I stare searchingly out at the ocean, and suddenly everything becomes clear. But that's not how change actually happens. In real life, learning happiness is a slog. At the end, you're still you and some days still suck. There's no cure for that. But if you're lucky you learn what to do with those days, and what to do with you. And if you're really lucky, you meet someone who helps you with that project, and stands by you when that project occasionally stalls out. I am here to tell you a person like that is absolutely worth painting an armless squirrel for.

GUNATILLAKE: There's so much bundled into Randall's story, but for our short meditation together what I'd like to do is take two fragments and connect them together.

The first is the feeling that Randall had of self-doubt. Seeing all those billboards of his now-wife's ex-boyfriend fill him with thoughts of whether he was good enough, Which, in time, he realizes he can jujitsu into motivation and energy.

And the second fragment is when driving through LA traffic now recovering from his palsy, he breathes, feeling alive, and entirely comfortable in himself. Despite the air around him being so grimy.

So inspired by Randall and the LA roads, let's have some fun with that and do a little cleansing meditation with the breath and some visualization mixed in. It's hopefully nice and simple and goes a little something like this...

First we notice that we're breathing. This process that enables our aliveness. This process that is happening all the time. And to help us connect with it let's take two deeper breaths than normal.

One. Two.

And if you want to do a bit of a sigh that's cool, do that.

Ok now that we've remembered that the breath exists and where it is. Staying tuned into it. Letting it just be here. And your awareness gently tagging along with the rhythm.

And now that we're a bit more settled what we'll do is on the in-breath we'll feel the energy and aliveness of the breath. And on the out-breath, imagine any grime going out, being released.

In – alive. Out – grime.

In – alive. Out – grime.

If it helps and you've got that sort of mind, you can add a visualization element. Seeing power on the inbreath. And letting go on the outbreath. Whatever that looks like for you.

In – power. Out – letting go.

In – power. Out – letting go.

In – steadiness. Out – Doubt.

In – steadiness. Out – Doubt.

In – growth. Out – holding back.

In – growth. Out – holding back.

If you like you can choose your own words, mini-mantras to tie to the inbreath and outbreath, adding an extra layer of meaning and perhaps visualization to your mindfulness. Choosing a word, a quality you want to bring and tagging it to the in breath.

In. In.

And then a word that you want to let go of, that you want to release.

Out. Out.

For me it's: In – energy. Out – tightness.

In – energy. Out – tightness.

What is it for you?

You know this is a practice you can do at any time. Even if it's for just one breath. Connecting with the breath. And intentionally letting go what you want to let go. And intentionally inviting the quality we want to cultivate in ourselves. Give it a go, it can be quite fun. And is especially good in those moments of self-doubt that Randall shared so generously.

So thank you Randall, and Jae. And thank you.