

We Need to Breathe

by Ajay Nair

She told me this story when we were walking by a lake. It was not a special lake - just a lot of dull water in a hole. We were not holding hands and I thought that made the walk more intimate. If I had taken her hand in mine, it'd have had a sweaty, pulpy texture because we'd been walking for a long time and it was hot.

She said: "When I was younger, I once stepped on a crab while hiking. We were walking through a forest - it was one of those forests within the city, you know, a protected park thing, but really once you were inside it, it was a forest and the city didn't matter. We'd been walking for a while and it was raining - a thin, fine rain that cleans you but doesn't soak you. I had a blue rain-jacket on and when I bit into its collar, it tasted of tired plastic. We were climbing up a small pathway and there were these crabs scuttling along the ground in front of us. They were small and brown and had a polished look about them. I took great care not to step on them.

Then this spider-web that was stretched across two trees, smeared across my face. Sticky silk but felt like hard nails. I must have screamed or something. I knew that I was going to step on that crab a moment before I actually did. You know? It was one of those things. Then I heard the shell crack. It was such a sad sound. We walked on and I didn't look back to see what I'd done."

I looked at her profile. She was not crying but her silence after telling me the story was a mask that troubled me.

I said: "You know, we step on small insects and stuff all the time. And microbes. They have life too. We inhale them every time we breathe. That's why the Jains wrap a cloth around their mouth and walk slowly. But, you know, we can't do that. We need to breathe."

She turned and looked at me as if she had just discovered me. A weak smile looped around the edges of her mouth but she didn't mean it. It was as if her brain had relayed a signal to her mouth to smile but the mouth didn't want to, not really.

What could I do? I don't know the words to console someone who has killed a crab.

Without warning, she doubled up in laughter. I could see her slip peeking out at her shoulder, below the collar of her green blouse. She laughed and laughed. I stopped walking. Finally, she stopped laughing and stood up straight.

She said: "Yes, we need to breathe. That is correct. So true."

A few giggles tumbled out of her, chasing her earlier laughter. She turned to face me.

She said: "Your face is small and brown and has a polished look about it." She laughed some more.

I didn't know what to do but I knew I wanted to push her into the lake. I knew she couldn't swim. Instead, I started walking again.

When she caught up with me, she took my hand in hers but I knew she didn't mean it, not really.

