

Legal Statement:

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Breathe a Little

By J-F Caro

I'm not sure how the whole thing started. Perhaps when I was walking on the bridge? Or when that girl ran into me? I guess it doesn't matter, I still got time and the day is splendid. It would be a waste to go home now. After all I kind of like this warmth inside my shoes. It almost comfortable, so that each step I take, I'm elated by this smooth, damp feel. Others didn't have this chance. It reminds me that book I read, the account of a solo expedition in the North Pole. The Norwegian explorer, amidst temperatures so low they ask for sustained efforts from the brain to appear conceivable, lost his right foot because a minuscule hole – he was almost at the very end of his journey – had dug itself through his soles, provoking terrible frostbites that eventually propagated in the poor man's veins. He tried to walk as much as he could, thinking he could still make it to the end, keeping on for a couple more days, and so he walked on the slippery, accidented geography despite the limping, the pain, and his frequent falls. He didn't go far, and had to raise his tent after a couple of miles. At that point the pain was so unbearable the explorer had to cut up his shoe to release his wounded right foot. The blood had crystallized, shrinking and wrinkling the toes, the skin was violet and bruised-up. His journey ended there. In such cases, infections can grow quickly and climb up the concerned limb as a scolopendra crawls on a rock. They rescued and amputated him. I was always terrified by that, namely losing a foot or a leg or an arm, any old limb really, and see it lying on the pavement, like a heap of meat. That's rehearsing your own death, seeing your own, now supine flesh on the cobbles. That's what I had come to – in more childish terms probably – when at five years of age I discovered, floating in a glass of water among other glasses on the kitchen sink, Grandma's teeth. The pink, fleshy matter surrounding the fake teeth came to me so real, as if the gums had been neatly and precisely cut from the jaw, that I was certain Grandma had lost her teeth, and that someone had found them on the floor and put them there, in that glass of water, to clean them. The deformed vision of Grandma's teeth through a glass of water remains engraved in my memory, even though my mother spent hours of reassuring explanations next to my bedside lamp. You could lose your teeth at every moment, and I'm–

–I'm hot...By Odéon my hands were so damp they would slide down the metallic doors of the train car. I couldn't get them open, had to wait the next stop to be released a dashing elderly lady who admirably understood my toil. As I stepped out I turned to thank her but she was looking down at her hands, frowning. I couldn't breathe on that damned packed car. But that was no better outside. My clothes are starting to stick to my skin in tiny spots. No-one around me seems to notice this terrible heat – this one has a thick scarf around his neck; that one wears a thick suede jacket all the way up. I took my coat off a long ago, and unbuttoned my shirt down to my chest. Thick sweat drops fall down my eyebrows, glide along my neck, curl up round my ribs and hands. Shapes, faces and colours turn out to be the same indistinct blur. Wiping my

brow with the palm of my hands in a painful effort, I register a bench on my way, and stagger towards it. Still, at last, I compose myself, take a deep breath, and stare blankly at the city motions around me, people coming and going with groceries and folders, other standing up talking, or sitting still inside a bus. The gravity dissipates a little, I can feel a slight, cool breeze. Now again I can breathe and relate to my surroundings, the sound of traffic, the leaves of the trees gently rocking in the wind, a slight crack, and a smell of smoke that rises from the bench—my bench! I give a start and get away from my seat: tiny flames propagate on the bench I was sitting on – right where I was sitting. But my panic soon gets obliterated by the heat wave that possesses me again, more incisive, more insidious, more...hot. This time I feel like I'm digesting a piece of ginger topped with red pepper; my breath could melt steel; my sweat now oozing down abundantly could boil all the seas in the Earth. I need a drink. Among the passers-by, still wearing those thick Winter clothes, I now cross inquisitive stares pointing at my attire: my soaked shirt is now totally open on my red-hot belly, my hair stick in compact, damp packs against my temples – people get out my way, murmuring. I thought of myself as being cold-sensitive; but now—something must be wrong with me or them, they can't just ignore such a sizzling heat. I locate a bar and step in, A glass of water please. The bartender gazes at me with a gaping mouth; and soon all the other eyes turn towards me as humongous steel balls about to roll over me. What's wrong with these people? I leave the bar and its obtuse population. I still have dignity, and I won't stay in a place where I'm not welcome for some reason or another. But as I step out, the pavement is filled with other gaping eyes pressing next to each other, and that same, sustained murmuring. As I make another step, taking on a most normal and anonymous behaviour, though shaking a little, they all scatter frantically emitting short, horrified cries. I don't know how long I will take all of this, these people and this burning crescendo now shouting in each parcel of my body. But I must be dreaming— and what about the terror I inspire? I don't have any deformity, never noticed any disgusting aspect in my appearance (some even say I have rather fine features), and for god's sake, I 'm not walking with an axe in my hands! I must be dreaming! And what about these flames that covering shoes and crawling up my legs? It is a dream! Or else— it's not. All of this, these flames especially is too real to belong to a dream. The pain I feel is real.

"Mommy, why is he burning?"

"Come here, quick! Stop looking at people. Come, let's go!"

To order this book, email modemail@moderom.com