

Cool Shades by Matthew Hanson-Kahn

It is difficult to pinpoint when it started. Rohit was a younger man, much younger, he worked on his father's farm, growing beautiful fields of corn. The light green stems long, fibrous, growing taller than he, pushing up to the sun. The candle bulb fruits protruding at an angle, swaddled in layer upon layer of green sheeting. At its tip the old man beard, white in youth, yellowing through age, tobacco brown and crispy in maturity. Pull back the sheath to find a glorious, jewelled cob, each section of the fruit swollen to bursting. A damaged cell oozes sweet white blood tasting of fields, water, life. That was a distant memory. Soon the small stream used for irrigation dried, the corn stunted, barely chest high, the fruits brown husks brittle to the touch. Then he would fetch and carry water by the cart load from the river, that while shrunken still watered the land. It was back breaking endless work, back and forth with plastic containers, four times a day. It was unsustainable, and soon two fields became one, then the far end of the field became less visited, the searing heat making the carrying of water pointless, so much energy for so little reward. Half a field became a quarter, then a corner, and for what? Dessicated husks of corn, little rows of old men's teeth, shrunken, discoloured, wobbly; now only useful as animal feed. As the earth dried up, so did the cash flow, no corn meant no roti. No surplus meant no income from the market, and no food for the cattle. Rather than making money, they were now expending money on scarce and more expensive cattle feed. When that became unsustainable, four cows became three, then two, and the final one died of disease and malnutrition.

That was all a long time ago, distant memories of abundant times. The work had been tough, but rewarding, the extended family large and supported. Grandparents, children, aunts and uncles, all worked hard, everyone nourished. Work, rest and party, every excuse was a party. Weddings, birthdays, celebrating gods, the birth of Neelu, Tapsi's first tooth, Vijay passing exams, a party if it rained, another to the gods if it didn't. This was the meaning of life and was sustained by the rains, the rivers and finally the lake. As the waters dwindled so did his family; when the stream died so did his grandfather, as the river became a malnourished trickle, his parents also turned to dust, and as the lake shrank his children left for the city. A reprieve came courtesy of an aid agency. Saplings were distributed to cash strapped farmers, who tended and watered small forests. As the trees grew the trunks were cut and sold for poles. This cash was a onetime bonus which enabled him to mend the roof, buy supplies, and a new pair of sandals. The coppiced trees would forever be useful as firewood, so easing the burden.

Now it was just him and his wife Duriya, named after the ocean. His life companion, the bearer of his children, the rock that had held the family together. But now she was old, shrivelled, barely skin and bones, unlike the ocean of her youth. She used to walk with him to the lake, to bring back what water they could carry, six miles there, another six back, twice a day, until arthritis prevented her. Now he was the sole water carrier, managing one journey, bamboo pole across his shoulders, plastic container securely tied at each end. The lake was now a puddle, where all life teemed, animals and humans wary of each other, dragonflies skimming, lizards darting. Beware of the snakes, it seemed as if every reptile in the district had descended upon this pool, to nestle in the only moisture for mile upon dusty mile. Increasingly, Rohit wondered if

he would outlive the pool, who would shrink first, him or the life-giving quagmire of sludge. They were in tandem, once it was gone, then his end would not be far off.

So it is difficult to know when it began, was it back then when things were so abundant, was it when the stream dried, the river failed? Or now, as the lake receded year upon year. That drought came is doubtless, that the beneficial waters that had meant their existence disappeared, is clear. As the vegetation died, so his sandals wore thin, and mending them became a waste of thread. Now barefoot the hard skin on his feet became half an inch thick, he could even distinguish embers by treading on them. Then the skin cracked forming deep fissures, as the earth cracked, jigsaw lines, forming across its surface, the soil compacting into hard lumps.

Now struggling to stand, he shook, like the time he had ridden on the back of the village doctor's motorbike. His bones jiggled St Vitus leading a merry dance. It was exhausting growing a few vegetables, close to their home, enough to augment a meagre living. The house built when there was abundance was falling into disrepair, the tiled roof more holes than tiles, the doors and window frames, worn and flimsy. Without the money regularly sent by his eldest son in the city, he would have had to leave many years before. Thank goodness they had paid for Vijay their first son to go to university, and now he was an engineer, always talking about bridges, buildings, projects. The others had not fared so well, education and opportunity being thin once the money was spent on the eldest. Some of the children had swapped the increasing harshness of rural life for the brutality of urban poverty. Tapsi said that she missed the countryside, her home and that she longed to come back. Let her keep her

dreams, there is nothing to return to, at least in the city she can eke a living. She says that she is surrounded by people, lots of people, but few of them good. At least she has that, for Rohit and Duriya days pass without conversation. Sometimes he felt that he was on the surface of the moon, with just dust for company.

It might have been difficult to pinpoint when it began, but there was little point, there was no turning back the clock, what was certain was that it progressed, possibly without end. Rohit spent more time idling, he had all the time in what was left of his world, to reflect, and wish that things had been different. But he was a pragmatist, he understood that things changed and that to survive humans adapt and change. First it was the stream, then the river, now the lake and soon that would be gone. So what next? The only solution was to stop the life draining heat, and how do you do that?

Despite his lack of education Rohit spent his days and evenings thinking about the solution. While tinkering he had rediscovered his sunglasses which he never wore any more. He had been given them by his grandfather in his teens. He had loved to go into town on market day dressed in his best shirt and trousers, wearing his cool shades. Not only did he look good, but he felt good, a young man with opportunity at his feet, his friends called him Amitabh, after the movie icon. You believe that opportunity will always exist, but it fades as the water fades. It evaporates, with your advancing years. Until all you are left with is the dust and those cool shades, which are pushed to the back of a drawer of rags that will never bind water leaks, tools that will never dig, and seeds that will never be planted.

Ten years previously Vijay had taken him for a long, long journey. They had travelled by bus, not to see a temple, or a film, but out into the countryside, somewhere much like where he lived. It had seemed puzzling and pointless, but Vijay wanted to show him what development looked like, what engineering could do. He had taken him to see the construction of a giant dam. He had explained that the whole valley, as far as they could see would become one vast lake. Yes, all the villages and farmland would be underwater, but there would be water for as long as they all lived, and enough water to quench the thirst of the fields, the cities, the animals and the industries. Rohit was gobsmacked, such advancement would mean water for years to come, but it didn't solve the problem, only delayed it. He felt it, every day he felt the heat of the sun, burning his already mahogany skin.

As they travelled back to town, the bus passed through a strange valley. He remembered fields of rice, cotton and chillies, but these were gone replaced by fields of dark grey marble he had once witnessed in a raja's palace. As far as the hills in the distance, uniform grey, all tilted towards the sun. "Son what is it?"

"That? You haven't seen it before?"

"No, what is it?"

"Solar panels, yes they are coming everywhere." Then to answer the inevitable question, "they collect the energy from the sun, so that we can use it in our homes, and factories. That way we won't have to cut down any more trees." Rohit's jaw fell, further than the height of the half-built dam, what amazing things, humans could do.

"Did an engineer make them?"

"Yes, they probably did bapu." Rohit thought, "they look like my cool shades."

“Yes I suppose they do, but rather than reflect, they collect the sun’s rays, and use its energy. Clever eh?”

“Reflect not collect...” the old man’s brain was ticking.

Rohit couldn’t write, but he had always been very good at drawing, pictures of cows, the hills, the forest before it had been cut for fuel, workers in fields tops off, so hot that their perspiration, simply vanished. He had drawn in books and on scraps, it was a visual history, a memoir of his life. Now he had an exercise book with a bright orange cover, that his daughter had given him on his birthday, and he knew what he wanted to draw. Neelu came home once a month, and always brought something sweet, maybe jalebi or his favourite rasmalai. Today it was barfi, the village doctor had told him that too many sweets would kill him and rot his teeth. “Tooth you mean, I only have this one left.” It was true, he had one rotten tooth at the front of his mouth and a few odd ones further back. He wouldn’t mind if they all fell out, as latterly they had only caused him pain. Neelu helped in the kitchen, and then came to sit with him, her relative youth giving him the energy to stay awake, “what have you been drawing?” Rohit reached for his exercise book, and opened the pages, flicking past the animals, trees, flowers, and women with pots on their heads. He stopped at a complex page of strange shapes. “What is this bapuji?”

“They are my cool shades.”

“What are you talking about father?” her tone was kindly, knowing that there wouldn’t be many more of these moments. Rohit paused, and gathered himself, a sadu ready to launch into a religious preaching. “When I went to visit Vijay, we passed a field of

these solar things, he said that they collect the sun's rays, not reflect. And that they give power to run the lights and engines."

"I know the things, we have some near my village too."

"Well these ones are for the sun, and they can reflect like my cool shades. The ones I saw in the field can tilt at an angle to always face the sun, so these ones can tilt...like the blinds in Vijay's office, you pull the strings to open and close, letting more or less light in. He had drawn strings and successive pictures of blinds some open, some half closed, others completely shut. So we place giant cool shades, somewhere up there between us and the sun."

"You mean in space?" she had learned about space in school. "Yes, in space. And we open and close them, to let in just the right amount of sun, so that the rivers stop disappearing, and so that I can walk in the midday heat." Neelu studied the series of pictures. "It would need to be very big."

"I have seen the work on the dam, and I have seen these panels in fields all the way to the horizon. Engineers can make big things, Vijay could make this. He could make it stretch all the way around the earth. But for now we could make a much smaller one, just to cover us." Neelu nodded, then furrowed her forehead, a question creeping up on her brow, "but the sun moves, it goes up there and down over there," she traced an arc across the sky with a finger covered in rusty henna swirls. "Yes, I have thought of this too, my shades move along with the sun," he pointed to one side of the page, where he had tried to draw arrows, and what looked like springs and smoke. "What is this?" The old man frowned, "yes, this bit is a little muddled, I was trying to draw an engine, moving the whole thing to always be between us and the sun...something like

the village generator. Vijay will understand. Neelu considered this, “but it will need a lot of petrol, how will you keep feeding it?”

“Ahh, this bit is clever, it will not only reflect, but will also collect. Like the panels in the fields it will collect all the sun’s energy and use this to run the engines, lots of engines, like in the buses. These will move the panels across the sky to always be where the sun is.” Neelu looked at her father and kissed him on the forehead. “Daddy, you are too clever for these fields; you should have been a scientist.”

“Me, a scientist,” he chuckled, “I can barely walk to the lake anymore, my eyes are blurring and I always have pain in my fingers. I think these might be my last pictures, I shake like the wings of a locust. I want you to take these daughter and give them to Vijay,” he held out the exercise book. She took it as if offered something holy, these were her fathers’ thoughts, and memories of a landscape that had changed in his lifetime. “And you must explain to him what I have told you about the sun’s cool shades.”

“I will father.”

“I know that Vijay will build them and save the world.”