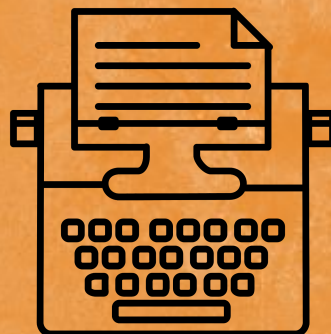


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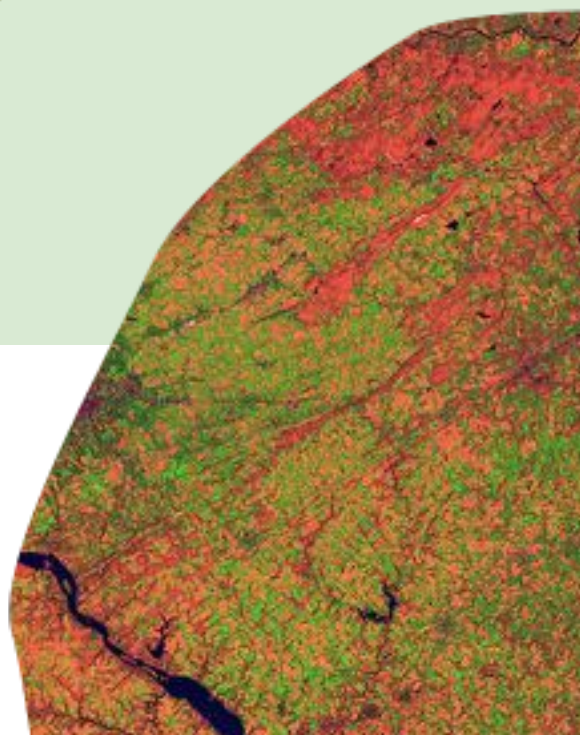
Author:

Occupy Climate Change (OCC!)

*Creative story
entry*



FORMAS



The Hope for Meaning

Saloni Sharma

Hybrid Technology offers mirroring and reprogramming of the natural gametes enabling single organism production of offsprings via external fertilization in our state-of-the-art-laboratories set in all major rehabilitation facilities. Originated at Chengdu's Science City, the technology is now adopted by all major sovereignties. In the 4th phase of restoration of the third 10-year plan (2120-2130), Hybrid technology will be implemented in animals, both human and non-human after the successful results in plant hybrids. Hybrid plants have ensured food safety for the implementation and generation of more hybrid species. The present plan aims to reinstate the ecological balance with the production of human and non-human hybrids and restore social order.

(Manual for Social Restoration, published in 2120)

Why would have they accepted me? I am not accepted here, how could I expect otherwise on the opposite side of the border? Have I not got any place in this world? What is my business really? Who am I? I'm a vagrant, a migrant, a hybrid...

These thoughts kept haunting Aasha as she lay on the floor of her facility unit. It was time for strength training and she couldn't even conjure enough strength to get up off the floor. But in an instant she erected her limbs and stood upright parallel to the wall. The thought of missing her food pills instantly charged her up with energy. Her stomach growled in anticipation as she made her way towards her meal. She swiped her card in the common pantry to dispense her pills. Today's menu included Schezwan Potatoes and Sour Cream Onions. She swallowed two pills of each. The third one — Gulab Jamun, she sneaked in her pocket to plant outside.

This is not even remotely close to the actual sichuan flavour.

Aasha couldn't help recall the first time she tasted the sichuan flavour — in wholefood rice form — at a rickety shack in Chengdu. Rice crops were banned in all tropical sectors many years ago when water was over. That is when hybrid fruit production was accelerated. In China, there's water prosperity and even the poor can eat rice. When Aasha took the first bite, she smelled and tasted multitude of fragrances in a single bite — garlic, pepper, lemongrass, ginger. She can never forget the overwhelm. Excited and hungry, she gulped down three wholefood bowls. But the food couldn't sit in her stomach for long. She experienced excruciating bowel movements that expelled the feces immediately after.

Wholefoods are unhealthy. They cause polarity in the system.

*

At the gym, she stood in the digestion position for exactly five minutes for her food to expand. She was already beginning to feel full and felt better about showing up for the strength training today. If not anything, it'd keep her guilt and shame at bay — at least for a while. She turned on the floating visual and connected with the Sportzone channel. Others were already there. She sent apologies to the e-captain and quickly began her static running.

After 5 minutes. Her sugar levels began depleting. Limbs were losing coordination. Something was wrong.

A message popped open in front of Aasha.

EC: Aside

Aasha immediately logged out of the Sportzone and connected in a Direct Meeting with the Captain.

“You called for DM, Captain?”

“Your functions aren’t optimal.”

“I’m sorry captain.”

“Psychic stability! Now!”

“Yes, Captain”

Aasha swiped off the floating screen and wiped off her sweat. Then, she scanned her pulse and oxygen. The numbers didn’t feel accurate. She made her way back to her unit and scurried to change herself into comfortwear. She looked herself in the mirror. A pale reflection stared back at her. Their eyes were locked and tears began welling up. Aasha lowered her glance to read the tattoo on her reflection’s right arm. It read 真.

“Truth”, she muttered.

“There’s a storm approaching again. The power might be out for sometime. Let’s wrap up quickly. Tell me, Aasha. Your e-captain states FUNCTIONS NOT OPTIMAL.”

Aasha enlarged the floating screen to get a close look at Dr Shantaram. He had a black mole in the crevice between his left nostril and cheek — the size of a chickpea, Aasha estimated.

“You cannot serve the nation with an unhealthy mind, you know. Do you remember your goals?”

Aasha kept silent. She knew the drill. It wasn’t her first session in psychic stability. There had been multiple such sessions with the previous facilitator before her *relapse* over a year ago. However, this was her first encounter with Dr Shantaram.

“State your goals!” the voice was sterner this time.

Aasha surrendered, “Perform the tasks, provide for the facility, prepare for the calamity, protect the sovereignty.”

“System spots dissonance in your voice.”

Aasha was silent again.

“I see in your file that you’ve been rehabilitated thrice?”

“I relapsed, then re-registered.”

“You left the facility! Thrice?!”

Aasha did not respond.

“So I see. You were last rehabilitated on 16.07.2201. So you’ve just returned it seems. That explains why your performance isn’t so... let’s say *desirable*.”

Before Aasha could respond, the screen vanished — power cut.

*

“My parent’s name was Aasha too.”

Aasha tried to study the expression on Dr Shantaram’s face. This time he seemed more candid and relaxed. The session ran on backup power and the lights in each of their background was very dim.

“Do you know the meaning of your name?”

Aasha didn’t have to respond. Dr Shantaram would respond anyway.

“Hope. And my parent did have a lot of hope I tell you. That’s why they had me in the first place. Otherwise why subject a poor spirit to the miseries of this world by conceiving them in a beaker! Perhaps, they didn’t know that the moment I’d be born, I’d be the property of North-East Indian sovereignty. Anyway, I digress.”

He’s a hybrid!

Dr Shantaram read the expression on Aasha’s face and softly uttered, “Ya, I’m a hybrid.”

Aasha was not sure how to respond to this; she didn’t have to as Dr Shantaram continued.

“I’m a hybrid, a fortunate one at that! Fortunate to be serving this facility, the nation and inspiring young misguided hybrids like you! Do you know how I got to this position?”

Aasha was getting used to his style of communication.

“I was transferred to so many units in far off facilities... But I was determined to prove myself and be useful... So many challenges... I was tested for not just physical but mental stealth...”

Aasha zoned out and began painting her own picture of Dr Shantaram in her mind.

Perhaps, he doesn’t have any mind at all. For the mindless, it’s a smooth-sail — mindless does not resist. Head of the psychic stability — Hah!

As he was nearing the end of his soliloquy, Dr Shantaram interrupted himself to ask Aasha with a keen look, “Why did you go to China? You could go to Upper Europe, or Antarctica. Although I know UE and Antarctica haven’t taken any migrants for many

years and trafficking is also impossible via sea and air now. But why dare flee to another sovereignty? You know you wouldn't have been accepted anyway."

"There exists a history as old as 6000 years. And we don't have any history at all — we're fighting for the sovereignty of individual sectors that we don't even belong to. And I wanted to find a community of my likes."

"Community!" Dr Shantaram chuckled. "Child, you're so naïve! We hybrids do not have any community! Our community is our service. That's our survival."

Aasha felt unsettled. She could feel the rage taking over her mind, but she was determined to not let him win over. With an exhale, she lowered her blood pressure. Dr Shantaram must have noticed the shift in her mood measurements.

"Did you go via the land route?"

Aasha fixed her gaze at his image on the screen and blurted.

"I walked the path of my ancestors."

*

"These powercuts make operations so difficult! No wonder the facilities in N.E. sector are underperforming," Dr Shantaram complained.

"So tell me quickly why did you relapse and go to China? You were seeking hope too, let me guess?"

"Seeking truth!"

"Ironic, I'd say. Hope seeks truth!" sneering he continued, "Hope is living in falsehood!"

Then in an instant his eyes looked away, as if in recollection from a past life, then with a raised eyebrow questioned — as if to himself, “Or is hope in the truth?”

Aasha’s eyes lit up.

The blaring siren shook Aasha off her sleep. She checked her wrist. It read 1600 hrs SUN EXPOSURE. Dr Shantaram prescribed a two hour sleep session and she was grateful to him for that at least as she didn’t have to toil in the production today.

Slipping into her hazmat suit, Aasha made her way towards EXIT A which opened in a wide landscape with hundreds of trees erected in straight lines alongside the long walking track leading to the Dietary Lab.

Rays of light disoriented Aasha’s vision. She felt the heat in her body radiating through her shining body suit. Queasy and unsure of the way, she found fellow trainees in the distance ahead. They were all teenage hybrids, like her — but younger and immature.

A dozen or so hybrids had gathered in clusters of two or three. It had only been ten days since Aasha was rehabilitated again to the N.E. facility. All the fellow inhabitants were new to Aasha. Old compatriots were already stationed in Environment Security Bureau. Some might have also joined the Protection Forces. She had very limited recollection of the past. However, this was not the cause of her present uneasiness. She was consumed by thoughts on another matter — a matter reverberating in another space and time.

Shaking herself out of the daze, she began treading forward.

Fellow inhabitants were walking ahead of her on a bricked path laid out in a

an uneven herringbone configuration. Aasha followed, looking down. She amused herself by stepping on every third intersection of the bricks below her feet. In her mind, she rewound the conversation with Dr Shantaram.

How can service be a community to anyone! Community builds on a place with people sharing the same context. And I don't have a place to call my own. I don't have people that I could say are mine. And I don't have purpose to belong anywhere. Anywhere but here, perhaps — back to NE Rehabilitation Facility.

She felt the urge to swipe open the floating screen and go through the transcript to corroborate her self-judgement about the performance she gave out at psychic stability. However, she could only do so after returning to the unit when surveillance was lower.

After continuous walking in peripheral compound for half an hour, tired, thirsty, Aasha paused to catch her breath. As she looked around to find fellow trainees, her gaze fell on a tree in some distance from the turn of the track.

Was it here before?

All the trees around the N.E. Facility were hybrid — producing artificially flavoured fruits which were harvested and sent to dietary labs for synthesising food pills. N.E. Facility was known for its sweet and spicy flavourings. Their Masala Tomatoes and Pickle Mangoes were exported to all the habitable continents left. Aasha's parent worked as a harvester and this is how she knew where her food came from. In fact, it was her parent, her *mother*, who nurtured her interest and curiosity in non-human hybrids.

This tree before Aasha however, looked different. It had a slender trunk and an unnatural, but a *natural*, bend towards the solar sky. As she walked closer, Aasha observed that its trunk was slightly grazed and charred at the edges below. She went and stood under its foliage. Then, took one step closer and reached her hand out to touch the grainy bark with her gloves. Lowering herself, she examined the charred edges and stroked them gently.

This tree was a non-hybrid non-human.

As soon as she was back in her unit cell, Aasha read the transcript of her session with Dr Shantaram. She scanned through the bottom of the page almost immediately because apart from her vital signs and goals, the entirety of the conversation was redacted.

She again rewound the conversation in her mind.

“Hope is in the truth!” She ascertained after deep thought.

It was time for supper but Aasha chose to ignore the alarm. Instead, she ducked under her bed and reached out for her bag. An olive-green vegan-leathered diary fell on the floor.

She picked it up with a deep sigh and began flipping the pages.

*

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

18.07.2200

19:37:43

City of the 22nd century — Chengdu.

I'm here in Chengdu — the city of miracles — almost here. It was a tumultuous journey but, I made it. Spirit of my parent would be so proud. I will recreate my life here, as promised.

Seeing her radiating smile next to this diary entry, Aasha couldn't help but smile back into the page. So very excited she was to learn the truth about her existence. Chengdu is the epitome of Hybrid Science and Spirit, and the genes of her ancestors were created right there.

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

23.07.2200

21:30:15

I ate Sichuan curry with rice today in whole food form! It was very hot and very heavy. I felt polarity in my body right after though. Nonetheless, it was an experience worth remembering.

Migrant hybrids are stationed outside the city at the suburban altitudes. This is where I live.

Next to this entry was the picture of Aasha's in her bedspace unit. Her neighbours came to Chengdu with the same intent as hers — to find a space for themselves. Living there was temporary until years passed and they could not get the permit to enter the city.

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

7.08.2200

23:41:03

I'm recruited as a handyman to collect twigs for fire generator. This is a temporary arrangement which will assure shelter and diet. A girl next door has got the pass to the city. I might get mine soon.

That girl's pass was stolen, Aasha recollected. There were countless migrants living in peripheries, trying to gain entry.

Moving to a new place and making adjustments in alignment with the new environment is very difficult.

So is coming back.

Aasha kept her diary aside only to pick it up right after.

*

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

31.03.2201

00:38:19

I'm here for 8+ months now. I work and sleep. My only interaction is with human-bots. They are not kind.

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

05.04.2201

01:06:45

I collect twigs from the trees for my food. I give my water to them in return — in secrecy, of course. Water is gold and hybrid trees are efficient. They do not require water, they say. But I know that they do. The human-bot doesn't understand that this earth is depleted of water.

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

06.04.2201

00:55:19

A human bot came and said, I cannot plant my seed here. I cannot water the trees. It's their trees. The earth is theirs. The sky is theirs. I do not belong here.

Was it the human-bot or a huMan who said this?

Guanghan, Deyang, CN

07.05.2201

02:14:57

I was placed in detention camp for planting my seed. I'm back now. I came here to find my truth and realise my potential — to trace back the footsteps of my ancestors. I think, they were not real. Nothing is real.

A bright moon hangs on moonless nights. This moon does remind me of my family when I look up in the face of this moon — and long for my family that doesn't exist.

The trees are artificial, the moon is artificial, the earth is artificial. And if it is so, huMan made it. It belongs to them. Not me. So where do I belong? What belongs to me?

Am I artificial too?

Chenghua, Chengdu, CN

10.05.2201

01:45:43

I got the tourist pass today to enter the city. My tokens are over but I'm going back. I went to the Panda Retreat instead of the Science City. Something in me said, that I wouldn't belong there. So, I chose to visit pandas.

I looked at many. All of them had traces of life — preserved and survived by huMan. We cannot survive without our body suit. Countless non-humans died. Panda lives — victory of culture.

Aasha could relate to the panda, she too lived in a cage, closely monitored. She too was preserved for her gene. Looking at the panda, she felt a desperate urge to return back to the cage she'd come from.

A yellow-white leaf fell out in Aasha's lap as she closed the flap of her hard bound diary. A buddhist monk had handed this leaf on her journey in the silk

route tunnel at Jibin. It was a brief encounter, but she remembered it vividly.

She stared at the leaf and saw in it the dingy tunnel that she spent twelve days walking in.

The journey was tiring and Aasha did not have the strength to go on, yet she persisted. There were hundreds of others moving along on foot with her. Without proper sources of hydration and sun exposure everyone just kept walking like zombies. There were people from all corners of the subcontinent — trafficking themselves collectively in small groups to avoid any kind of suspicion or threat. Some had lost their lands and livelihood to the sea, some were hybrids or other lesser minorities hoping to rebuild their identity, some were fleeing the new strain of viruses, but all were migrating with the same hope.

At a junction which branched out in all directions, her group was made to stop at a threat signal. Some were panicking and some were too exhausted to resist. Amidst the congestion, they decided to climb out into a connecting village that was on the border of Tibet and Sichuan — to rest and refuel their spirits.

The place was alive and everyone in Aasha's group suddenly felt alive themselves as they walked past it. Aasha was walking on a street unknown, towards an unknown destination with people she barely knew. She was nervous but excited with anticipation.

Then, Aasha spotted a tattoo parlour on the way. She was determined to go inside and commemorate this moment on her body. A renewed Aasha who will rebuild a new life henceforth, she ended up spending all her tokens to get a permanent imprint that would remind her to keep going.

As she came out of the parlour, everyone in her group turned to look at the hybrid's tattoo. At that moment, Aasha met the eyes of a buddhist monk who was travelling in the preceding group — that had to cross the tunnel a day

earlier; however, because of a landslide, the exit was blocked and they were stuck with the same lot as Aasha's.

The monk walked over to Aasha and expressed admiration for her spirit. He gave her the leaf as a symbol of luck and said — remember who you are.

Soon after, they parted ways to go in separate tunnels.

There was nothing on the leaf, nothing written. It was an old dried leaf of a rare non-hybrid tree or plant.

Aasha looked at the leaf and recalled his words “Remember who you are...”

Then she repeated the same words in a question to herself.

It was the middle of the night. She needed to oxygenate her mind. Aasha climbed out of her bed and slipped into her body suit.

She had escaped the facility check countless times, although in the records, she had only absconded thrice, which couldn't have been left undetected as they were longer than simple overnight escapes. Aasha was masterful at cracking the security checks of the facility — a useful skill passed down by her hybrid parent. And tonight was yet another night to flee into the open sky.

*

Aasha ran out of the facility from EXIT C and circled her way around the periphery towards EXIT A.

It was dark, but she had worn her night glasses to navigate her way forward. She was going back to meet the tree she had discovered in the afternoon.

When she got there, she took the Gulab Jamun pill she had dispensed for breakfast and in a small hole in the earth that she made with the heel of her shoe, carefully sowed it. This would become a hybrid tree of a rose flavoured *jamun*. Hopefully.

She looked up at the non-hybrid tree from where she was still squatting. She rose and walked up closer. In an impulse she hugged the tree, feeling the uneven bark touch against her chest through her body suit. She took off her gloves, and once again caressed the charred edges of the tree. And as she did, she whispered, “You are my hope.”

And I am yours.
