

Can

by

Charlie Melrose (Year 9)

The corner shop found where one would expect, and on a cold early morning street. I walked the street. I was the only one there. Early morning traffic on this street consisted of foot traffic, and it was a scarcity even then. So it was a lonely street for now. I didn't mind. My priority wasn't the street. My goal stood a few steps away at the intersection of this street and another. I just needed one thing, and I was sure to find it in there. I crossed yet another street comfortably waddling along before descending on the shop door. I crossed the little lit-up room and picked out my one item then proceeded to the counter. A little man with big arms waited for me there.

"Just that then"

"Yes," I nodded holding up my can of Coca-Cola.

"Isn't it just delicious?", He spoke Punjabi, like me, but with a Malawi accent, he must have been from India originally. "I guess you could say that," I said, "it's more of a guilty pleasure though, I wonder what these big companies are doing for our country and if their impact here is worth losing some parts of our culture".

"Look at my shop," the little man said, "I have all kinds of products from all over the world, they bring me good business and I get to provide the spoils of the world to all my customers. I would say it is worth it."

"Yes, for the businessman it is, but I'm unsure whether our culture can coexist with such things." I paid fifty rupees for the bottle of black sweetness, then left the shop.

Outside the street was beginning to gather its visitors, and people covered in coloured cloth dotted the white-grey of the buildings. I began to wander down the street to a steaming Halwa Puri stand that had opened in the lightning moments I had been in the shop. Now that I had secured the cola I felt that the fluffy morish bread would pair nicely with the tarry sweet drink. I managed just a few steps before a stranger remarked "Don't you think it's a bit early for that sugary stuff?"

"Maybe," I replied, "But the cravings don't seem to stop when you're this far along" I gestured vaguely to my inflated lower torso. "Ah yes. I hadn't wanted to say anything in case it would offend you," said the woman, who was roughly my age and height, "how far along are you?"

"Five months now," I replied, "At this point, I'm starting to wonder about the future of my child. I know I sound paranoid but I worry there will be nothing left for them."

"We do have to be careful," the woman said, "there may be a bright future for the next generation but it will be hard for them to continue our culture in such a quickly evolving world."

"Yes, exactly what I have been thinking"

"Yes, it will be hard but they will find their way, they will know what to do" she assured me.

"I certainly do hope so," I glanced down at myself for a moment, then back to the woman, "thank you"

"My pleasure mam"

With that, I continued toward my serving of Halwa Puri. I again wandered along the side of the road following the warm steam radiating from the cooking treats until my face got close to being lost in it. With the shimmering screen between us, the vendor greeted me, "hello there madam would you be in the mood for my delicious creations today?"

"Yes sir just one please."

“Wonderful, you will just have to wait a moment,” he bared a respectful smile. While I waited I noticed the setting behind the sheet of steam. There was an elderly man behind the vendor sat on a pile of woven plastic sacks. He looked unwavering at me before uttering viciously, “I hope you’re not drinking that filth,” he uttered from his resting place, a bony finger raised toward me. I paused for a moment, then acknowledged the cola can. “I’m afraid I do sir, you see...”

“No excuses,” he cut me off rudely, “that stuff is poison, that will go right to your head and rot it from the inside,” his finger jabbed at me through the air, “it’s those unnatural sugars that do it to you. They cook all sorts of evil things with those.”

“But surely just one won’t hurt sir.”

“One is enough, it’s always enough for them to get to you.”

Suddenly the vendor asymmetrically placed between us announced my food was ready.

“That will be 20 rupees,” he said as he handed me my breakfast “don’t listen to the old man he’s from a different time, enjoy your treat”

“Thank you, sir, but would you mind if I did go and listen, I would like to hear his opinion”

“Be our guest” said the man and extended a welcoming arm.

I walked past the steaming pan and over to the man and his pile of white plastic.

“Hello again sir, I was hoping to talk longer about what you said about the poison.”

He rested feebly on the sacks and turned his head “all right then. sit now, a woman in your condition should not be kept standing” I sat opposite him and he began to talk “these businessmen and their mixtures,” he began, rigidly gestured to the cola, “do nothing for this country. They poison us with their sugars all their sweet-smelling concoctions.” this man also had an accent, I had never heard anything quite like it.

“But why would they do this to us, shouldn’t they protect their investments?”

“These people are greedy and stupid, they get their money and run far away. I saw it happen many years ago.”

“How did we stop them then?”

“These people cannot be stopped. Many died the first time, they turned us against our neighbours, and then they left us. They did their business, then they left us divided, broken and lost.”

“What did they want?”

“Our land and our people, with no thought as to who we are.”

“Do you believe these things happen again?”

The man stared at my Cola before answering, “they come slowly, this is how they destroy. Always.”

“What about our children?”

“The children are young and different, they are our hope. I believe they will find us again, even when we are long gone.”

At that moment, on that street, hope stirred within me.



Inspiration: Alia Haider’s ‘*Ttooqrein*’ (*Debris*)