

The Calibration of Love
(for Uncle Steve)
By G.M. Rechichi

Was there a first ring? There must have been. Neela wasn't convinced. But at 4:03 a.m. she felt what must have been a second ring pushing out the vapor of sleep. She dreamed "phone"; seeing in her awakening mind the ugly silver plastic cradle and upright rod of the bedside land line Jim insisted they get even though she argued, pointlessly, that they didn't need a home phone if they both had cells.

Ring. Then phone. Then answer. Must.

Neela's right arm shot up automatically with the lackadaisical confidence one has when swiping at a thug in a nightmare. Having freed itself from its home under her pillow next to Jim's, her arm landed on the intrusive silver machine that commanded her to attention. Still not awake, eyes shut, but coming aware.

"Hullo," Neela said into the receiver.

"We've got a live one."

"Jamie...s' that you? Whaat?"

"I said: get your ass downtown, a live one just signed up - the professor you talked with from NYU - the one who said he had to talk to his wife," Jamie drew a breath deep enough so that Neela would have to hear her sigh. "We have maybe two hours to catch it, but you've got to move."

Eyes open now, Neela turned towards Jim to check the alarm clock on his side of the bed but found him blocking her view, sitting upright staring at her. She shot her non-phone hand up in a plea - she could explain later it said.

“Okay, okay,” she answered Jaime while looking at Jim, her hand still pleading his silence. “I’ll be right there – keep ‘em alive until I get there!”

She saw from Jim’s eyes that she didn’t need to bother explaining. No longer required, her hand gratefully dropped onto the blanket edge just missing Jim’s head, which had quietly collapsed straight back on his pillow. His body shifted toward the wall, his back facing her, burrowing back to sleep.

They had been together since med school so they had long ago learned to endure each other’s crazy schedules. A physics major in college, Neela entered Columbia med school thinking of neurosurgery, but her disillusionment with the practical side of medicine led her to research. Most people assumed that since she was Indian, her interest in medicine came from her family – that they had dragged Neela down that traditional Asian educational path.

She allowed, even sometimes encouraged, this presumption because it was easier than justifying the real reason she got into medicine... That since that warm afternoon when she eight, when she was left alone with her grandfather to drink tea, but instead bore sole witness to his death, Neela questioned the validity of consciousness and what we know of as life.

That her pursuit of medicine was nothing more than the eruption of her life-long doubts about living.

It was a hell of a lot simpler to let people think medicine was a job pushed on her by her upwardly mobile immigrant family, than tell them she wanted to know what happens when life stops. Certainly it made more sense to tell the med school interviewers that she wanted to “save lives,” than confess her real interest was death.

The original plan was a Ph.D., then classroom, and ultimately her own lab where she could focus on her research so she and Jim could build a quiet life together. But shortly after her

Ph.D., Neela forsook the classroom and took a high profile job as the leading medical researcher in a privately run lab, and now her schedule had become anything but predictable. When she wasn't traveling to hound potential donors for more money, she was at the lab. The thing was, the more Jim fretted about their future, the less she found she did.

“Now?” he grumbled into the pillow.

“Go back to sleep, I gotta go. I'm sorry. It's been two months since the last one and I'm just out of data -- I gotta go.”

Jim slipped flat from his side onto his stomach in resignation, his choppy soft brown hair the only thing left visible. Neela slid her long legs out of the covers grabbing the jeans and sweatshirt she had stripped off and dumped on the floor.

That's a lucky break, she thought as she climbed into the worn jeans. Normally she hung her clothes neatly on her side of the bedroom closet before bed, but she had been too tired, and way too buzzed on the Veuve Cliquot champagne Jim had surprised her with, to even think about putting her clothes away the night before.

The third floor New York City apartment was coldly quiet.

So this is what four a.m. sounds like, thought Neela as she brushed her teeth.

She never noticed before that the bathroom's energy efficient lights Jim proudly installed their first day in the place hummed as they warmed up to full radiance. The advancing brightness found the ring where she had drunkenly laid it on the white sink's porcelain apron after they had made love.

I can't leave it; he'll wake up and think that was weird.

So she slipped it onto her left ring finger feeling its weight for the first time.

As if too heavy for its load, the solitaire's round faceted diamond tipped towards her pinky. She instinctively straightened the rock with her thumb so it sat squarely in the middle of her finger, but it stubbornly kept tipping over which she found annoying. She would have to have it sized to fit.

From the moment they met, Neela and Jim both knew their relationship was a steady march towards marriage. Though Jim was not Indian, Neela's parents had grudgingly agreed with Neela that the sweet-natured young American man was good to her, as well as good for her. Jim treated Neela like they wanted their eldest and most accomplished daughter to be treated: "Like a princess, ta, ta, ta," tittered Granny Patel. Each time Neela's mother told her the latest "You-know-what-Jim-did-for-Neela" story -- whether it was spoon feeding Neela hot soup when she was ill, or preparing a gourmet vegetarian meal after a hard work day -- granny Patel would impishly scold her favorite granddaughter.

Wagging her wrinkled finger at her granddaughter, Granny would chortle: "Neela, did you maybe lie to Jim and tell him you are a Punjab princess? Is that why he treats you so well! Like a princess! Ha! Ha! Ta, ta, ta!"

But Neela didn't feel like a princess. She didn't know what Jim made her feel, and so, she concluded it was love.

What she did know was that no one else but Jim would put up with her hours, and her ambition. They were a good match, everyone agreed; both in their mid-thirties, both successful professionals, both ready for the promise of that shared life. Somehow, though, Jim's actually sliding the ring on her finger the night before had inserted too much reality into the fairytale.

Neela found herself absent mindedly turning the loose ring around on her finger.

Don't have time for this, she reprimanded herself, realizing she had wasted valuable minutes.

Quickly rinsing her face, she nimbly padded to the door, grabbed her coat and bag from its hook, and headed out.

Incredibly, the doorman had a cab waiting so all she had to do was get into it and tell him to rush to 10th street and Broadway as quickly as he could. Their apartment faced Riverside Drive which was desolate at that time of day save for the city's regular mix of dire dog walkers, incurable insomniacs, and oddballs.

I guess I should be thankful it's before five – no traffic.

The taxi made it downtown in a flat 15 minutes. She checked her watch, 4:41 a.m.

Shit.

The hospice that housed Neela's lab was new and new-agey. It was built by a wealthy well-meaning Fifth Avenue widow who had found Eastern spirituality "enlightening" following her husband's particularly grisly slow death by throat cancer. (At the end, Neela was told, the husband had no mouth, just a gaping hole which he would allow only his wife to wipe. *Like Freud*, was Neela's only thought upon hearing this, remembering her medical school psych round and Freud's death.) When he died, the widow, Mrs. Eunice Dodd – "Dee" to those she liked, including Neela – was left with a hole of her own, and a very substantial fortune, even by New York City standards.

After embarking on what she told her friends was her "widow's walk" touring the world for a year, Dee returned to her city with orange Himalayan prayer beads made out of bone, and a habit of meditation. Then she began to slowly, steadily, fill the hole left by her husband's death with a mission to quantify life; to learn where the essence of a soul's nature goes once the body

expires. Neela's lab was the culmination of Dee's efforts – a physical manifestation of a Westerner's need for proof, and hope.

Neela never questioned Dee's generosity, especially since it allowed her to continue her post doctorate study of energy conservation in the human body. She did, however, question the pseudo-Asian aesthetics of the facility. Neela considered Dee just another star-struck foreigner who adopted Eastern ways just because they seemed so different.

Your Christianity has as much mysticism – if not more – than any Eastern philosophy, Neela would tell Jim when she felt like letting off some steam about the lab. *Dee is no different from those delusional tourists who think that if they walk around wearing saris, they suddenly acquire millennia of accumulated wisdom! She comes into the lab asking me metaphysical questions – like I should know the answer just because I'm Indian – when all I'm trying to do is calibrate the instruments so I can get reliable, publishable data. Sometimes I think I would be better off at the university where all I have to deal with is nitwits who want to protect their academic turf, instead of having to pretend all the time that I actually believe this stuff.*

But Neela knew, no matter how gifted a scientist she was, no university had Dee's money, nor her willingness to invest in Neela's work. So every time Neela entered the Jonathan Dodd Memorial Foundation – as her lab and the hospice was named – she tried to ignore Dee Dodd's strategically placed “warmth” lamps illuminating the “moss-like” green walls featuring exotic art and “inspirational” messages Dee thought necessary. Neela just wished she could tune out the barely audible – yet constant – Dee's specially chosen soundtrack of Eastern-inspired meditational music, which only reminded Neela of her spa manicure treatments.

This is what happens when white people go ga-ga over Eastern philosophies, Neela thought. *It ends up a cliché.*

Now at the guard's desk, Neela automatically dangled her ID necklance out for Shareese, the overnight clerk.

"Hey, hey, hey – nice rock! Where'd you pick that up?" Shareese asked grabbing for Neela's left hand that held up the ID. "Don't tell me that cute man of yours finally did the right thing and put a ring-on-it!"

Neela silently cursed, *I don't have time for this chit-chat.*

"Jamie here?" she responded brusquely, retrieving her hand an ID.

"Yeah, sure," Neela saw confusion in Shareese's eyes, "She's already in 103A waiting for you."

Dumping her bag on the desk in the office she shared with Jamie, her assistant, Neela sprinted down the hall to 103A. *Of course, the lab had to located furthest from the entrance – feng shui my foot!*

Entering the one-of-a-kind lab room she herself designed, Neela already sensed a problem. The "bubble bed," as they had affectionately dubbed the million-plus-dollar energy measuring machine, was not hooked up and, indeed, was despairingly shoved in the corner. Instead, in the middle of the softly lit room stood a hospital bed with an overhead gurney surrounded by a small group including two lab techs and Jamie, whose tall slim body was bent in a perfect right angle so her ear almost touched the mouth of the male patient lying in the bed.

He seemed ancient and unearthly thin.

Next to Jamie, holding the patient's hand protectively in both of hers, was an impossibly petite woman who, though not quite ancient yet herself, had the look of becoming so soon enough.

“Excuse me,” announced Neela as she entered the room, trying to sound as unexasperated as she could. “I’m Dr. Pardava. Is there anything I can do to help?”

Jamie looked up from her prostate position to give her boss a thankful and relieved nod.

“Dr. Pardava, this is Matt and his wife Bessie. Matt just checked himself into the study. I was explaining what was going to happen to Bessie. Maybe you can answer some of her questions?”

Jamie had her positive qualities – no one could match her biomedical engineering know-how – but her bedside manner had always been an issue. No more so than now, when Neela was so desperate to have another willing study participant. The Foundation had given her two years to amass data worthy enough for publication and she was nearing this deadline. All her life, Neela had never missed the goals she set for herself, she wasn’t going to start now.

“Sure,” responded Neela with a bright reassuring smile, “Bessie, Matt, as I’m sure Jamie explained, the Jonathan Dodd Memorial Foundation is conducting a multi-million, multi-year, study of human energy at the time of death measuring what kind, and how much, energy is released – and where it goes.”

Neela had said this spiel so many times in the last three years at so many medical conferences, donor cocktail receptions, and study recruitment drives, the words didn’t have any meaning for her any more. They just ran out of her mouth like water from an open faucet.

“Your participation in this study is essential to building knowledge within the scientific community about what we at the Foundation like to refer to as ‘after-death’,” continued Neela unperturbed by her audience’s situation.

“As you know, an empirical law in physics, the law of conservation of energy, tells us that the total amount of energy in an isolated system remains constant over time. This means

energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it can be transformed from one state to another state. Energy goes somewhere, we just want to know where human energy – whether obtained through food or sunlight, or stored in brain waves – goes once it's spent. We at the Foundation are committed to acquiring an understanding of the physical nature of life – the energy stored in every cell in the body including memory and other brain matter. The Positive Human Energy Expenditure, what we call the PHE machine, you see in the corner over there, was developed through the kind generosity and intellectual curiosity of Mrs. Jonathan Dodd, to not only analyze electrical thermal, oxygen, and chemical energy fluctuations at death, but also to 'capture' this energy, if you will. We are of course most grateful for your participation as a study subject in this research and assure you and your family that you will be remembered in a special way as we continue our quest to answer that which all mankind yearns to know: what happens to life?"

Taking a much needed breath and pause, Neela concluded: "Matt will enter the PHE – which, as you see looks reassuringly like a cozy bed – and will be enveloped into a comforting glass bubble. No wires, no probes; the bubble's glass surface is impregnated with the latest in computerized nanotechnology designed to read the most sensitive every fluctuations, allowing us to compile an extensive database from which we scientists hope to draw our conclusions."

Looking at the bewildered couple, Neela concluded: "Any questions?"

The ancient man spat out a weak attempt at a laugh.

Bessie merely stared at Neela, as fragile as a wounded deer.

Jamie just stared at the wall uncomfortably.

I'm a lunatic, thought Neela, finally letting her arms slump down at her sides.

As her arms slipped down, so did the loose ring off her finger. Clanking loudly on the shiny laminate lab floor and ending up in the corner by the PHE machine.

Everyone's stare, including the two nurses, was now fixed on the spinning glowing diamond.

"How pretty," exclaimed Bessie, seemingly in a reverie.

"Sorry – it's Jim's – I mean it's mine – Jim gave it to me last night – an engagement – you know – well, ahh, it's loose," Nella said as she bent down to pick up the ring and slip it back onto her finger. She chose the left hand index finger this time, which was larger, rather than the marital ring finger, so the ring would be more secure.

Matt coughed weakly, shaking them out of the ring incident and bringing them back to the reality in front of them.

"Bessie," Matt whispered to his wife, who, upon hearing his voice, could not help but draw nearer to him. "Bessie, I told you I want to do this, let them do their job."

"But I won't be able to hold your hand through that thing," she said, simply, just to him.

Tears welled in Bessie's eyes, but everyone's gaze had already turned towards her hand, a gold wedding ring barely visible as she protectively clutched her husband's hand.

Matt smiled the smile Bessie had found so irresistible and reassuring a half-century earlier. Their eyes locked with unspoken affection. It was a habit of theirs – staring only at each other without bothering to acknowledge those around them. Their obvious devotion tended to make even their closest friends uncomfortable after a while, especially those who felt ambivalence towards their own loved ones.

Good Lord – what do they think they are – sixteen? thought Nella as she sneaked a peak at her watch - 5:15 a.m. In doing so she noticed the ring had made her index finger swell slightly.

Briefly scanning Matt's stats on the file next to his bed, Neela knew Matt didn't have much time left. She had to get him into the bubble to catch the phenomena of energy conservation and expenditure pre and post death. Time was running out, and Neela knew she had to intervene or lose her subject.

Stepping over to Bessie's side, Neela put her hand kindly over the old woman's, which still cupped her husband's. Slowly, gently, but deliberately, Neela pried open Bessie's fingers one by one as she soothingly told her Matt would be very well taken care of and in good hands. Helpless against the gentle manipulation, Bessie started whimpering, at which point she lost whatever strength she had that kept her fingers entwined with his.

"There, there, Bessie. You know you're doing a good thing, it's OK," chanted Neela once the old woman's hand was alone.

Pointedly staring at Jamie, Neela handed Bessie's hand over. "Jamie, why don't you take Bessie for a glass of water while I talk to Matt for a bit?"

Putting her lanky arm around the tiny woman's shoulders, Jamie turned Bessie away from the hospital bed and led her towards the door.

Bessie allowed herself to be escorted out into the hallway as Neela quietly followed only to shut the door behind Jamie and Bessie. As soon as that was done, Neela motioned to the lab techs to quickly roll the bubble bed over to Matt. Matt bent his hand to get Neela's attention, so now she too found herself prostrate over the old man.

"Listen," said Matt with all the breath he had left to muster. "I'm a scientist myself, and I'm dying by my principles as a scientist by letting you do this. I believe in research as much as you do, heck I built my life around it, but you have to take care of my Bessie, OK?"

"I promise," was Neela's simple reply.

She helped wheel the PHE into the correct position, next to the hospital bed as the lab techs got the gurney in place.

“Matt, do you hear me?” Neela asked Matt who had closed his eyes but was still audibly breathing. “I’m sorry, this may hurt you a bit, we’re going to push this button which will hoist you off this bed and onto the PHE.”

They managed to slip the gurney under him and pushed the button to lift him from the comfort of the steel bed. The sound of the pulleys lifting the gurney was sweet and high pitched.

Matt groaned. Eyes still shut.

Neela then pressed the unlock button and the bubble’s windows spread open like a flower to receive Matt’s limp body.

The hoist slowly lowered him into the molded bed inside the bubble until he was clearly positioned. Neela told the techs to unhook the gurney, which slipped easily away from Matt and back on the ceiling to await the next subject.

Neela sat at the PHE’s control panel and pressed the “close” button. The bubble shut itself up with a pneumatic swoosh. Matt looked like a stick inside a large clear egg.

He opened, then shut his eyes.

“Not bad,” Neela thought she heard him say.

“I’m going to activate the monitors now, OK Matt? They will make some noise, don’t let it bother you,” said Neela loudly so that Matt would hear her.

Matt nodded slowly, eyes still shut.

The PHE hummed, reminding Neela of her bathroom light earlier that morning.

The cursors on the computer screen monitor hungrily watched over by the doting lab techs started their rapid-fire movement. The temperature inside the bubble was artificially

lowered past Matt's internal body temp so that thermal energy leaks could be detected and measured against time. Oxygen levels were checked, along with brain waves, and overall electrical activity against normalcy. The techs gave Neela the 'thumbs up.'

It took ten minutes.

She saw Matt shudder, then the oxygen monitor register that he was no longer breathing.

The bubble suddenly blossomed into a kaleidoscope of colors – mainly purples, deep and weirdly electric in hue.

Neela stood mesmerized. She could not look away.

She had used the PHE twelve times before, and each time was different. She still didn't know how to explain this difference. It was one of the reasons she needed more subjects for her study.

According to the machines, Matt had expired. His energy dissipated into the bubble and the PHE's monitors read each and every micron of possible energy conversion.

Neela remained staring at the bubble, astonished at the beauty in the colors, trying desperately to find meaning in each hue and pattern.

As the colors began to fade, the readings declined, the bubble went clear, and Neela saw Matt's body through the glass. He was skinny, frail, old, and dead.

As Neela approached the bubble, she heard the clomping of footsteps outside in the hallway and her mind remembered Bessie and returned to the present.

I've got to handle her now, she thought – not unkindly -- remembering her promise to Matt.

Neela heard Bessie trying to enter the room and Jamie trying to stop her. She quickly reminded the techs of the procedure ensuring proper handling of the body and the data as she herself headed towards the door to block Bessie's view.

As she touched the door knob she heard Jamie uncharacteristically scream out "Oh, no!", then a thump against the door frame.

No one needed to tell Neela – somehow she already knew Bessie had died.