

The Calibration of Love

“Into blinding darkness enter those who worship ignorance and into greater darkness those who worship knowledge alone.” Isa Upanishad

Neela assumed she missed the first ring.

But at 4:03 am there was no mistaking the second ring. She heard it getting louder as it came towards her pushing out the remaining vapors of near dead sleep. Awakening, she caught herself dreaming “phone” - her mind seeing the landline’s ugly silver plastic cradle and its finger smudged upright rod Jim insisted they buy, even though she pointlessly argued they didn’t need it since they both had cells.

The dream submitted to its reality and Neela’s trained mind fought back her unconscious forcing herself to rational thought: Ring – Phone – 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 head, her arm landed on the intrusive silver machine. 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 – came by ambulance – the retired engineering professor from NYU you talked with last month at the hospital – the one who said he had to talk to his wife.” Jamie drew a breath deep enough to ensure Neela heard her plaintive sigh: “We have maybe two hours to catch it - but you’ve got to move.”

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Eyes open now, Neela instinctively turned towards Jim to check the glowing numbers of the alarm on his side of the bed, but he blocked her view. Sitting rod upright, his rounded child's face staring blankly as she waved her non-phone hand in a plea: she would explain later it said.

“Okay, okay,” she said to the phone, staring at Jim. “I’ll be right there. Keep ‘em alive until I get there.”

Seeing from Jim's eyes that he no longer needed an explanation, she let her pleading hand gratefully drop onto the blanket edge, just missing her new fiancé's head which had by then quietly collapsed straight back on his pillow. His body shifted away from her, burrowing back to sleep.

They had been together since med school so had long ago learned to endure and forgive each other's crazy schedules. A physics major in college, Neela entered Columbia med set on neurosurgery, but disillusionment with the practical side of medicine led her to research. Most people assumed that since she was the daughter of Indian immigrant doctors, her interest in medicine was influenced by her family. She allowed, (even sometimes secretly encouraged), people to presume this about her because it was easier than justifying the real reason she got into medicine.

She didn't want to explain that since that warm afternoon when she was eight – the afternoon her parents went shopping and left her at home with her grandfather Daadaa – the afternoon Daadaa was teaching her to make tea, how not to make the water too hot – the afternoon she dropped the tea cup, hearing the crack of the fall, seeing the inky tea water, more than what seemed possible, fill almost all the white of the ceramic kitchen floor – the afternoon Daadaa murmured something she didn't understand in Hindi, then poured, just like the tea, onto the floor – the afternoon she stained forever the new white shorts she finally had convinced Maa

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were not too short to wear – the afternoon where all she could do was sit on the inky tea floor, by the collapsed body of what had been her Daadaa, but she knew was no more, until her parents returned – the afternoon when instead of drinking tea with her grandfather, Neela bore sole witness to this silent death – since that warm afternoon, Neela Joshi questioned the validity of consciousness and what we know of as life.

She preferred people thought her stereotypical rather than have them know that her pursuit of medicine was nothing more than an intellectual eruption of her 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 med school interviewers that she wanted to “save lives”, than confess her passion was studying death.

Her grandfather’s death had not unnerved the precocious eight-year-old, as her anxious and guilty parents feared; instead, it made her curious. How could it be that one is suddenly no longer “present”? Hinduism taught her that her grandfather’s soul escaped through his head to enter either the path of the sun – never to return but blessed in and with the lord, or the path of the moon – to reassemble itself in order to return to mortality until it achieved the necessary enlightenment that freed it once and for all towards the sun’s path. She knew her Hindu teachings, but even as a child, Neela didn’t buy it. She was a born rationalist who needed reason, proof and physical evidence, like the earth needed rain.

As the eight-year-old Neela stood among her mourning family encircling her grandfather’s dead body in the East Brunswick New Jersey crematorium performing the pooja, her thoughts were not on the impending fire or the chants. Oblivious to the ritual, nervous questions dazzled her mind: was her grandfather’s soul trapped, or had it already escaped even

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though she hadn't thought to place the necessary lamp by his head when he collapsed? If it had escaped, where did it go? Frustrated by these and other unanswerable questions, Neela unconsciously reached out to touch the body under the white cotton shroud her family had dressed Daadaa in after the ritual bath. Her mother immediately smacked her hand away so ferociously Neela brought it to her mouth for comfort first, then instinctively looked up to search for her beloved father's round face among the crowd.

"You can't touch Neela – you will spoil the body – then Daadaa won't be able to travel," said her father sensing her need for understanding and reminding.

His eyes were wells, deep, and black wet, which in her later years she learned to distinguish as a sign of grief in her own patients.

Neela's original plan was a Ph.D., then the classroom, and ultimately her own lab. She and Jim planned a quiet life – he in pediatrics, she in medical research. 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, and their life anything but quiet. When she wasn't traveling to hound potential donors for more money or subjects, she was at the lab. The thing was, the more Jim fretted about their future, the less she did.

"Now?" she heard Jim grumble 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 out of data -- I gotta go."

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

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That's a lucky break, she thought climbing into the worn jeans.

Normally she hung her clothes neatly on her side of the closet before bed, but she was too tired, and way too buzzed on the Veuve Cliquot Jim 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 brushing her teeth.

She noticed the bathroom's energy efficient lights that Jim proudly installed their first day in the place three years earlier hummed as they warmed up to full radiance. The advancing brightness found the ring on the white sink's porcelain apron where she drunkenly laid it after they had made celebratory 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 diamond tipped towards her pinky. She instinctively straightened the rock with her thumb, but it stubbornly kept tipping over. She would have to have it sized to fit.

From the moment they met, Neela and Jim knew their relationship was a steady march towards marriage. Though Jim was not Indian, Neela's parents grudgingly agreed with Neela that the sweet-natured young American man was good to her, and good for her. Jim treated Neela like they wanted their eldest and most accomplished daughter to be treated: "Like a princess, ta, ta, ta," as Granny Dadi tittered.

Each time Neela's mother told 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 -- Granny Dadi would impishly scold her favorite granddaughter. Wagging her wrinkled

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finger, Granny would chortle: “Neela, did you maybe lie to Jim and tell him you are a Maharani? 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 had to be love.

What she did know was that few men would put up with her hours, and her ambition. They were a good match, everyone agreed; in their mid-thirties, successful professionals, 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 her finger.

Don’t have time for this, she reprimanded herself. Quickly rinsing her face, slipping on her flats, 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 in and tell him to rush to 10th street and Broadway. 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, oddballs, and garbage trucks.

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 housing Neela’s lab was new and new-agey, built by a wealthy well-meaning Fifth Avenue widow who found Eastern spirituality “enlightening” following her husband’s particularly grisly slow death by throat cancer. (By the end, Neela was told, the husband had no mouth, just a gaping hole which he allowed only his wife to wipe. *Like Freud*, was Neela’s only thought upon hearing the story, remembering her medical school psych round

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and Sigmund Freud's gruesome death.) When her husband died, 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 called 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 meditation habit. Then she began to slowly, steadily, fill the hole left by her husband's death with a mission to quantify life. Neela's lab was the culmination of Dee's efforts – a manifestation of a Westerner's need for proof, and, perhaps, for 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.

Your Christianity has as much mysticism – if not more – than any Eastern philosophy, Neela would tell Jim when she felt like letting off 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 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.*

But Neela knew no matter how gifted a scientist she was, no university had Dee's money, nor Dee's willingness to invest in Neela's work, no questions asked. So every time Neela entered the Jonathan Dodd Memorial Foundation, as her lab and hospice was named, she overlooked Dee's strategically placed “warmth” lamps illuminating the “moss-like” green walls featuring Asian art and “inspirational” messages. The only thing Neela could not do was tune out the

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constant soundtrack of meditational music in the lobby, which, farcically, only reminded her of spa manicure treatments.

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

Finally at the guard's desk, Neela automatically plucked her ID necklace from her bag with her left hand to dangle towards Shareese, the overnight clerk.

“Hey, hey, hey – nice rock! Where'd you pick that up?” Shareese asked playfully grabbing Neela's hand and theatrically twisting it around for a better look. “Don't tell me that cute man of yours finally did the right thing and put-a-ring-on-it!” she sing-songed.

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

“Jamie here?” she responded brusquely, retrieving her hand.

“Yeah, sure,” snapped Shareese. “She's already in 103A waiting for you.”

Neela saw confusion and injury reflected in Shareese's eyes but ignored it as she walked through the half door Shareese buzzed her through. Dumping her bag on the desk in the office she shared with Jamie, her assistant, Neela sprinted down the hall to 103A.

Of course, Dee had to have the lab located furthest from the entrance – feng shui my foot! She thought as she ran.

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 a doctor, nurse, two lab techs and Jamie, whose tall

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angular 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, protectively holding the patient's hand 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 un-exasperated as she could. "I'm Dr. Joshi. Is there anything I can do to help?"

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

"Dr. Joshi, this is Dr. Jamison – Matt Jamison – and his wife, Bessie. Matt just checked himself into the study. I was explaining to Bessie what was going to happen. 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 was an issue. No more so than now, when Neela was desperate for another willing study participant. The Foundation had given her two years to amass data worthy enough of 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.

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“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 from the body. 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 machine, what we call the PHE, you see in the corner over there,” Neela gestured towards the lonely plastic bubble in the corner and everyone in the room, including the lab techs who knew the machine intimately, turned towards it as if in veneration.

“The PHE machine was developed through the kind generosity and intellectual curiosity of the philanthropist 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 Matt’s participation as a study subject in this research and assure you and your family that Matt 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, 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

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computerized nanotechnology designed to read the most sensitive energy fluctuations, allowing us to compile an extensive database from which we scientists hope to draw our conclusions.”

Looking at the bewildered couple, Neela finished with: “Any questions?”

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

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

Jamie just looked on uncomfortably.

I'm a lunatic, thought Neela as she read their faces, letting her arms slump down at her sides.

As her hands slipped down, so did the loose ring off her finger. Clinking loudly on the shinny laminate lab floor, it ended up in the corner by the PHE machine.

Everyone's stare was now diverted towards 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, ah, it's loose,” Neela said as she met Jaime's eyes with a look of don't-ask-me-now. Bending down to pick up the ring, Neela slipped it back on, choosing her left hand index finger, which was larger, rather than the marital ring finger.

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

“Bessie,” whispered Matt to his wife, who looking surprised, could not help but draw even nearer to him. “Bessie, I want to do this, let them, 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 pooled in Bessie's eyes, so to avoid them, everyone's gaze turned instead towards the old woman's hand. Two narrow gold wedding bands peaked through the intertwined fingers.

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Matt smiled the smile Bessie had found so irresistible a half-century earlier. Their eyes locked with unspoken affection. It was a habit of theirs – the frankness of their devotion tending to make even their closest friends uncomfortable, especially those who were ambivalent towards their own loved ones.

Good Lord – what do they think they are – sixteen? thought Neela 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.

Scanning Matt's stats on the file next to his bed, Neela realized he 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.

Stepping over to Bessie's side, Neela softly put her hand 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 Neela's 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 her Bessie's hand.

"Jamie, why don't you take Bessie out 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 to the door. There seemed to be no Bessie left as Jamie's tall body enveloped the old woman's.

Bessie allowed herself to be escorted out into the hallway as Neela quietly followed shutting the door behind them. As soon as that was done, Neela motioned to the techs to quickly

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roll the bubble bed over. Matt bent his hand motioning to get Neela's attention, so now she too found herself prostrate over the old man.

"Listen," Matt said slowly and with all the breath he had left to muster. "I'm a scientist, 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, you have to take care of my Bessie, OK?"

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

She helped the techs wheel the PHE into the correct position next to the hospital bed as the nurse got the gurney in place and the doctor monitored his vitals.

"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 flaccid 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 rolled back towards the ceiling to silently await the next subject.

Neela sat at the PHE's control panel, spoke quietly to the doctor, 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.

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“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 to study. According to the machines, Matt had expired. His energy dissipated into the bubble and the PHE’s monitors read every joule and calorie of possible energy conversion.

Neela stared at the bubble, astonished at the beauty, desperate to find meaning in each hue and pattern. As the colors faded, 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 clomping footsteps outside in the hallway and her mind remembered Bessie.

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

Neela heard Bessie try to enter the room while Jamie urged her back. The doctor had already approached the body by then. Neela hurriedly reminded the techs to ensure proper handling of the data, then headed to the door to block Bessie's view. Touching the door knob she heard Jamie uncharacteristically scream "Oh, no!", then a thump against the door frame.

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