

Chapter Eleven

Parvati

Every time she tried to shut the thoughts out, they kept creeping in. *I know he's saying 'cuckoo cachoooo' not 'good job.' That's ridiculous.* “No, stop,” she told herself. “Focus on the mantra.” *I wonder if Dr. Singh got my notes. I told him to confirm that he did. Is he just giving me space not thinking I'll check my email? Maybe that's it. Still, it wouldn't hurt him to respond. I think it's rather rude to just assume that I would not welcome the respite if that's what he thought.* “No, Anjly, mantra.”

My hair still smells like sandalwood smoke. If my hair still smells of it, then how long is it going to take to get it out of my clothes? Do I even want it out of my clothes? It is the very last reminder of him. It does not hurt me to have a faint hint of sandalwood. It's like a small part of him is still with me. “MANTRA!”

Don't scream at yourself. You're supposed to be calming your mind. Just breathe, don't think.

With each inhalation she said to herself, *cleanse my body.* With each exhalation, *make whole my mind.*

Cleanse my body. Make whole my mind.

Cleanse my body. Make whole my mind.

Cleanse my body. Make whole my mind.

Cleanse my body. Make whole my mind.

Cleanse my body. Make whole my mind.

Then she saw it. In the distance of her closed eye vision was a faint point of fuchsia light. The point of light grew and began to swirl. Other points of light then danced and burst like fireworks in her vision as they settled into blooming petals climbing on growing vines.

She felt the yogi begin the Om chant. On each exhale those around her began the low, throaty *ommmm* for the duration of the exhale. For the first utterance of the chant her pitch was off and she could not find the right point. As the second began, her pitch was too high, but she opened her throat and then she felt it. She felt the vibration right above her navel and knew she was in sync.

The fuchsia dissipated and expanded. Her field of vision was now in two dimensions before her, but then the wall fell down and away as if it were on a hinge. The flowers that before seemed like wallpaper grew into a vast field of lavender that rippled gently in the breeze. She looked deep and could see the waves begin on one point of the field and flow throughout her field of vision into infinity. As the Om chanting ceased, in the far-left corner of her vision she thought she saw a pale red sunrise. As the light grew, it slowly brightened from red to a bright orange breaking over a peaceful village nestled at the foot of a large hill beside a gently flowing river.

The voice of the yogi now entered her mind. “Now, slowly, do not rush. Please be slow. Slowly open your eyes.”

Anjly complied and the dim light of the room soon replaced her closed eye vision with actual sight. The bright orange of the sunset became the piercing orange of Yogi Dakshinanaksatra's robes. As her mind returned from meditation the yogi placed his hands together and bowed his head saying, "namaskaram."

Anjly did not know how to feel in the moment. Was she looking for peace? Was she looking for consolation? Or, was she just trying to forget her grief for a little while? She hoped that coming to the temple would help her feel renewed, but now she just felt everything more deeply.

After politely greeting the small group that came to her to offer their condolences, she decided to walk outside. When she stepped out of the ancient doors it took her a few moments to adjust to the bright sunshine. She stopped at the top of the steps and looked out across the city. The River Ganga running through Varanasi was shrouded, as it always is, in a perpetual fog from the pyres and Anjly had to concentrate to see through the smoke.

In contrast to the business at hand, she saw a city teeming with life. There were people in every corner of her vision. Pilgrims, swamis, merchants, it was a symphony of activity, not a cacophony, and it brought her comfort. She then looked down the steps of the ghat that descended to the water held sacred by so many people.

On the water she saw a fleet of small wooden craft coming and going, some transporting passengers, but most simply carrying small items of cargo. Not far away she saw the rafts bringing more supplies to the shamshan ghat where her father was cremated the day before. Anjly's aunties tried to dissuade her from going to the shamshana, but they were unsuccessful. Dakshinanaksatra spoke with them and assured them that it was their brother's wish for her to attend. Moreover, as Ravi's only child, Anjly had the right to light the pyre.

For her part, she thought it would be a spiritual experience. Over the past two weeks in Kashi, she had been mentally preparing herself, but none of the research she did nor the introspection and visualization proved adequate when the moment arrived. She knew how important this was to her father and she would not fail him, but indeed, it was not spiritual. The gruesome image of his body, concealed as it was with care under the coverings, still writhed and contorted with the flames in her tormented mind.

Dakshinanaksatra was a comfort to her and spent a tremendous amount of time with her after they travelled to the city when the end was near. Ravi was barely conscious when they arrived and the doctors assured her that the end would come soon. Although his mind was ready to depart, his body did not cooperate. For two long weeks, Anjly waited in Kashi ruminating on her father's impending death. She tried to work remotely, but her friends only gently chided her for doing so and encouraged her to spend as much time as she could with him.

His ability to speak with her faded with his will. For the last week she did little more than pace and watch him breathe. She found herself being frustrated that the end simply would not come and then being upset at herself for having that frustration. When her mother died ten years ago it came as lightning bolt out of the blue. She suffered a heart attack without

any warning signs at all. In comparing the two, as devastating as her mother's death was, she found the manner of her departure far more preferable to the endless wait.

She dismissed friends and cousins that offered to come knowing that making the journey to Kashi was a big ask and a big commitment of finances. Given the length of time it took for her father to die, she was glad she made that choice, but it was unbearably lonely.

The yogi was the one comforting presence during this time and she wanted to come to the service today to thank him more than for any other reason. She lingered outside the temple to give the other congregants time to filter out and then made her way back toward the entrance. As she approached, she saw his bright orange robes standing next to a man in a dark purple kurta. He was not Desi, but his affect and dress down to his sandals made him look like he belonged rather than one of the many spiritual tourists of his ilk.

She did not want to interrupt their conversation and started to turn away to pace around the ghat a little longer, but Dakshinanaksatra saw her. "Anjly," he beckoned. "Come and meet my friend."

As Anjly approached, the tall man turned to face her. She immediately met his deep brown eyes and there was a familiar look on his face. She had never seen him before, but he seemed to know her. This reaction took her off guard and she was a second behind when the yogi made the namaskaram salutation.

"Anjly, I would like for you to meet my friend, Jude. Jude this is..."

"Dr. Gupta?" the man interrupted. "Yes, Doctor, I am familiar with your work. This is quite a coincidence. I had actually hoped to meet you while I was in India. In fact, Dakshinanaksatra just filled me in on your father. I am very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. He was a very spiritual man and did not ask for much. I know that passing here in Kashi brought great comfort to him in his final days. But, forgive me, you've piqued my curiosity, what... what did you want to speak with me about?" she asked.

Jude raised his hands in penitence and said, "oh, Doctor, I am terribly sorry. My timing is terrible. I could not impose on you now."

"No, please. Honestly, it would be a relief to talk about physics again. Really, the distraction would be very welcomed right now," she responded.

The yogi, sensing that three was a crowd sought to excuse himself. However, Anjly would not let him depart without first thanking him for everything he had done for her in the past week. She wanted him to know what a comfort he had been.

In response the yogi told her, "Anjly, if I can leave you with one last thought, it is this: be wary of comfort. In times like this you may even find yourself feeling guilty if you find it. The best way to remember loved ones who have died is to live. True living is discomfort, that's how we know it is real, but that is also how we find joy and purpose." With that he gave one final namaskaram and went back inside the temple.

"Doctor, can I..." Jude began.

"Please call me Anjly. I'm... well, honestly, I'm just not feeling very formal right now if it is all the same to you," Anjly replied.

Jude smiled with kindness and empathy knowing well the weariness of pretension when mourning. "I completely understand. Are you hungry or may I buy you a cup of tea?"

"Actually, the weather is so fine, I would prefer just to walk," she replied. Following her lead, they started meandering down the street outside the temple with no particular direction in mind. Anjly asked, "is this the first time you have been to Varanasi?"

Jude responded, "I was here very, very many years ago. So long ago that I barely remember it. I was not planning on having free time while I was in India. You were actually one of the professors I wanted to see and when I inquired at the University, they said you were on leave. So, it seemed like a good opportunity to catch up with some old friends. Dakshinanaksatra in particular is a very dear, very old friend, and it has been a long time since I saw him. It is quite remarkable that I should now find you here."

Anjly thought it was indeed more than remarkable. She was highly skeptical about just happening to bump into someone you were looking for fifteen hundred kilometers away in the most populous country on Earth. Still, Dakshinanaksatra was his friend and that fact purchased a lot of goodwill with her. However, she thought she would examine this man a bit first before getting into the reason he was searching for her.

"I see that you call the city Kashi, rather than Varanasi," she observed.

"Oh yes, that is what Dakshinanaksatra has always called it," he replied.

"I see. So, did he ever tell you the story of how Kashi came to be known as the City of Light?" Anjly asked.

"City of Light? No, he told me how Hindus believe that dying in Kashi is a path to moksha and, of course, the reverence for the Ganges is known, but that is the extent of my knowledge I am afraid."

Following this response Anjly began the tale, "ages and ages ago, Brahma the lord of creation and Vishnu the sustainer of the universe, got into an argument about which of them was more important. The debate became fierce and Shiva was called upon to help resolve the dispute.

Shiva then transformed himself into a giant pillar of light. The pillar rose to a height beyond reckoning into the sky and then delved deep into the earth. Brahma transformed into a goose and flew up into the sky to find the top of the pillar. Vishnu transformed into a boar and dug deep into the earth resolved to find the bottom of the pillar.

Vishnu and Brahma searched for an age looking for the top and bottom. Eventually, Vishnu gave up and, submitting to Shiva's eternal nature, said that the pillar was indeed infinite. Brahma, not wanting to admit defeat, resolved to lie. He claimed that he reached the top of the pillar and even compelled others to bear false witness to that fact.

Shiva became angered at Brahma's lie and cursed him to never receive worship which is why our tradition says that there are no temples to him in India. Vishnu was honored for his integrity and so was blessed by Shiva. We believe that Kashi is the place where this contest occurred, the City of Light."

When she finished, Jude responded, "I see. But I would imagine that there are Vaishnavites who might tell the story a little differently."

"Ah, do not think me that undiplomatic. I said, 'submitted to Shiva's eternal nature.' I did not say 'worshipped,'" she said with the smile of a much-seasoned diplomat.

"I stand corrected," Jude said, returning the smile. "However, I sense you intended more by that story than simply playing tour guide."

Anjly did not quite know what to make of Jude. He did not seem to be just another Westerner who came to India to have his picture made meditating with the closest swami with the longest beard. She needed to divine his intent and thus came straight to the point of her tale.

"You said you wanted to know about my research, Jude. If that's true, you could not pick a better place. Most of my colleagues, outside of India I should say, view the search for Zero Point Energy as nothing more than alchemy. To understand my motivations, you must understand this place, this City of Light.

I believe that all living things contain in them a microcosm of the cosmos itself. This is not a metaphysical belief, but I mean that literally. The structure of the atom is not dissimilar from the structure of a solar system or a galaxy or a cluster of galaxies. Look at the unspeakable power we discovered when we split atoms. I think a far greater power exists beyond, or I should say, between the atoms. I believe the same power that formed the universe is within all things and binds all things together.

The cosmos is like our concept of brahman and the individual is atman. In between all things is the pillar of light. We cannot see it, but it is there, and it is the greatest power in the universe. I believe the power that binds the universe together is not some enigmatic spiritual concept, but it is in fact very real."

Jude stopped and turned to face her. "So do I, Anjly." Looking around at the throng surrounding them he said, "is there some place quieter and out of the way we can go to continue this discussion?"

Anjly redirected his attention to those surroundings said, "well... no. This is India. We don't really do 'quiet out of the way places' easily, at least not in a city that is." She smiled when she said this hoping to re-center his Western concept of what constituted serenity.

Seeing his frustration she offered, "however, my hotel is right around the corner. There is a little café next door. Even if it is not very quiet, it will at least be a place where you can be assured that no one will care what we are discussing."

Jude gladly accepted the suggestion and as they walked in the direction of the café a group of hundreds of people passed by them. Some were ornately attired in flowing saris of purple, orange, and fuchsia embroidered with gold. Others wore simple everyday dress, but they all held to the same, rather tight, path and all of them were joyful.

"Is there a festival going on?" Jude asked.

"This is Kashi. When isn't there a festival going on?" she replied.

Anjly pointed to a temple that appeared to be the focus of the group. “They are pilgrims on a tirth yantra. These pilgrims are visiting the numerous temples dedicated to Ganesh in the city. They must follow a very specific path to do so though.”

“Why is that?” Jude asked.

“The ancient city of Kashi is a giant cosmogram. As such, many of the buildings are laid out in specific paths that follow the stars or the sun. A yantra is not just a pilgrimage, but we believe it is a way to channel energy, specific energy related to the goal of the pilgrimage. There are many who believe that Kashi was not only laid out as a cosmogram, but that the city itself is a yantra. The whole city is designed along specific geometries that generate energy. Well, spiritual energy I should say.”

Jude said very little as they arrived at the café. As Anjly promised, the place was humming with activity, but no one seemed to notice them as they found a small table beside the entrance and placed their order. Jude sat back in his chair and said nothing as he stroked the neatly trimmed beard around his chin deep in thought. For many people a silence like this could be uncomfortable, but not Anjly. She returned his examining gaze with one of her own. Her only movement was to periodically replace a strand of her long dark brown hair which had escaped from behind her ears.

After their tea was served Jude asked her, “how do you know my next question before I ask it?”

“Are you looking for a magical answer? Intuition, perhaps?” she said as she took a sip of her tea. “I’m sorry to disappoint you Jude, but this is simple deductive reasoning. I am a scientist, that’s what we do.”

Jude took a sip of his tea and settled in for the lecture about to be delivered by Dr. Gupta.

“You are friends with Dakshinanaksatra. He introduced you as his *friend*, not a student, not a colleague, a friend. That title is rare for him in my experience. These things I have told you about are all we have talked about for the past two weeks. He knows my father. He knows my research. He knows *me*. You do not know this, but his oldest friend from childhood, a woman who is like a sister to him, was my first teacher and has been my mentor for my whole life. Through her and my family, I have come to know him and respect him immeasurably.

Now, I may be wrong, but I do not believe they have started selling theoretical physicist trading cards just yet, so you had to learn about me from some other source. It only makes sense that if you came here looking for me and you’re friends with Dakshinanaksatra, you would first reach out to him. Am I close to the mark?”

“Close,” Jude replied after another sip.

“Also, very few people come to India on a whim. Fewer still come to Kashi without having something they are searching for. I do not think you were planning on my father dying and I do not think you sought to ambush me at the temple. But...”

“You are very right about that,” Jude interjected.

"But I believe you hoped to find me here and visit me when the time was right. Well, Jude, you have travelled a long way and handled the matter as delicately as possible and now the time is right. So, why have you come to see me?" she asked with piercing clarity.

Jude put down his cup and said directly, "I have come to talk with you about your yantra. Your plans for a zero-point energy isolator."

Anjly threw her head back and laughed. "*That?! Oh Jude, seriously, oh no my friend. That? I thought you wanted to talk about my work. That was just a fever dream. It's not real. I'm sorry, but...*"

"That was no mere fever dream, Anjly," he said with curious confidence. "What if I told you it could work?"

Anjly saw that he was absolutely serious and shifted her tone. "Jude, I'm flattered, really I am, but I deliberately overlooked some very practical considerations that simply make building it impossible. Chiefly, it requires a vacuum to operate. Look at how difficult it is to put something as comparatively simple as a telescope in space. It is simply impractical to think about trying to construct something equivalent to the size of a particle accelerator *in orbit*."

"There is another option you have not considered. That is where I come in Anjly. My job is to help people with extraordinary vision make those impossible things a reality," Jude replied. "That is why *I* am here."

"Jude, with respect, what are you talking about? Forget about the lack of capability, the cost of trying to build my, my, well yes, yantra is a good word for it. The cost of building it would make the Apollo program look like popping round the corner to pick up some groceries. Even if you could convince the entire world to donate enough money to fund it, we would have to build it first before we even knew if it worked.

Jude, this is fantasy. I will confess, it is my favorite fantasy, but I have also wasted far too much time on it already. I cannot waste anymore of my life thinking about this thing. So, I am sorry you came all this way, but I am not going to entertain any nonsense talk about ZPE."

"We are talking about something that could fundamentally change the course of human history. Think about what would be possible if people had access to limitless clean energy," Jude said as if she had not considered that prospect every day of life.

Anjly was upset now. She turned away from him. She could no longer bear to look him in the eyes. She was expecting a curious pilgrim wanting to discuss the intersection of spirit and science, not this. Not this.

Jude leaned across the table speaking to her shoulder, "Anjly, you don't need me to tell you. You *know* it works."

She paused for a moment before turning around and sharply slamming her fist on the table rattling the dishes and drawing fleeting glances from those around.

"Yes, it works dammit," she said in a hoarse whisper feeling the stares directed toward her. She trembled slightly as she continued. "It works. Of course, I know it works. How do you think it feels knowing that, but also knowing that I will never live to see it. My only

hope is that someone, someday far in the future, might find it. But since I know I will never see it, I decided to stop tormenting myself. I have finally reached a place where I could let it go and then you just skip into my life and destroy that. I will not let myself be dragged back into that delusion no matter what mutual friends we may have.”

“How long do you suppose you could keep that up?” Jude asked insistently. “Do you honestly think you would have been able to live the rest of your life just not thinking about it if you had not met me?”

Anjly teetered on the edge of anger, but it was tempered by the fact that he was right. She sat there not knowing the next thing to say when he continued.

“I have some friends you should meet, Anjly. There are many things happening right now which most would not consider possible. I just need you to believe in yourself. I...”

Just then a short, slightly portly, and breathless bespectacled man walked in the front door accompanied by a woman in her sixties wearing a saffron sari. The man frantically scanned the room until his eyes found Anjly and he rushed to their table.

“Anj, thank goodness I found you. I’ve been looking all over for you and... oh, begging your pardon,” he said when he noticed Jude sitting with her.

Anjly was surprised by the entrance. “Hemant, Prisca, what are you... wait, Prisca why are you here? I thought you could not come to Bapu’s service.”

“I am sorry, Anjly. It could not be helped. I found Hemant first and he insisted that we come to find you at once,” the woman responded.

“This is so bizarre. I was just talking about you and here you are as if you were just manifested. I...” remembering her manners, she rose as Jude came to his feet first and greeted them with namaskar.

“Jude this is my oldest friend, Hemant Choudhary, he is like a brother to me and he is also a professor of neuroscience at IIT with me,” Anjly said in introduction.

Hemant gave the slightest frown of disappointment at the fraternal descriptor then he added “*computational* neuroscience” and extended a hand to Jude whom he presumed to be a Westerner. Despite his clear distress, Hemant momentarily dropped his disquiet to put on a broad smile and pleasant demeanor until he finished shaking Jude’s hand and went straight back to deep concern.

“And this is Prisca Patel. Prisca... Jude is a friend of Dakshinanaksatra, and I was just telling him about our connection. Believe me, I am delighted to see you, but it is so very strange coming in this moment.”

Having satisfied the social formalities Anjly turned to Hemant and said, “okay, now *what* is happening? What has you so distressed?”

Jude gestured for them to join them at the table and poured two more cups of tea from the service. Hemant began an entirely unnecessary story about Prisca taking a very long train ride owing to her fear of flying and digressing into a quick defense of the commercial airline industry. He then continued into further extraneous details of how Prisca tracked him down in the hotel lobby before the matronly mentor decided to take the reins of the conversation.

“Anjly something is very wrong at home. People are losing their minds quite literally,” Prisca said.

Jude repositioned himself to Anjly’s left side to be able to look across the table at the new arrivals and took stock of Hemant and Prisca as they spoke. Prisca’s silver locks were neatly tied behind her careworn face. She was concerned, but not panicked.

Hemant wore simple frameless glasses which he frequently polished with a microfiber cloth out of anxious activity more than need. He had a full head of thick, neatly combed black hair and was clean shaven. Jude noticed his dark brown sandals as he crossed and recrossed his legs trying to get comfortable but failing given the stress of the news being delivered and the small size of the café chair.

Anjly continued to brush aside a stray hairs that had come apart from the loose braid draped over her collarbone and began to worry right along with Hemant. “What do you mean *literally*? How could people be *literally* losing their minds?”

Hemant spoke up no longer able to contain his nervous energy, “she means it. There have now been dozens of cases ranging from general malaise to complete psychosis!”

Prisca raised a hand to chide Dr. Choudhary as if he were still the little boy she taught in primary school. “I am capable of answering for myself, thank you very much.” Turning to Anjly she continued, “but, he is right. All of this started two weeks ago, and the incidents are increasing at an alarming rate. The situation has become so bad that people are starting to panic.”

“Have you reported this to the authorities?” Anjly asked.

“Yes, Anj, the Prime Minister is mobilizing the army now and convening a special session of Parliament in the morning” Prisca replied with biting sarcasm.

Anjly, acknowledging the rebuke rolled her eyes at her naivete as she picked up her tea for another sip.

“No child,” Prisca continued in earnest, “people getting sick in a rural village in Gujarat is something that gets covered up, not dealt with. That is why I need you and Hemant to come home with me to Bandhaka.”

“Prisca, I understand why you need a neuroscientist, but what can I do? This is nowhere close to my field,” Anjly replied.

“I need you Anjly,” Hemant said. “You know me. I walk into trees when I am looking for the forest. I need your ability to look past a problem. You can see the third dimension of every situation and that skill is beyond me. If we are going to figure out what is happening, you *must* help.”

Anjly sighed deeply as she rested her forehead on her hand and leaned on the table. She had not been home in over a year and the prospect of going back there now, without her father, was daunting.

“Of course, I want to do everything I can to help, but this is not a good time right now. I have been away from Mumbai for weeks and with Bapu gone I need some time to... to adjust.”

Hemant sat back in his seat frustrated, but not willing to push Anjly on this. Prisca, however, was undaunted. She took Anjly's right hand in her own and caressed it softly for a moment. She stopped and straightened the small golden filigreed band on Anjly's ring finger. She knew Ravi made that for her when she graduated from university and she knew why.

"Anjly," she said in a soft, but direct tone pausing until she lifted her head and met Prisca's eyes. "You can stay here ringing every bell in Kashi for the next two weeks, but that will not bring you peace. You know I am not a believer in fate and would not presume that what is happening is occurring for some cosmic reason, but I do know this... Ravi would want you to help. Coming home now and helping your people will do you far more good than ruminating here ever could."

Anjly clasped her left hand over Prisca's and tears rolled from her eyes. Prisca dabbed them away with the napkin and held her hands until she met Anjly's now slightly dryer eyes with a kind smile.

Having a moment of realization, Anjly made an exasperated groan and said, "oh Prisca, I forgot about your fear of flying. We better inquire about some train tickets, but it might take us a week to get to Bandhaka."

"I can help," Jude said as the three now turned their attention to him having quite forgotten he was there.

"I have a car service. Well, actually, it is a modified Sprinter van. It should be quite comfortable for the four of us and I have an excellent driver. Aside from comfort, I believe we will make better time than on the trains."

Hemant enthusiastically accepted the offer. He too had forgotten Prisca's fear of flying and the prospect of turning in his plane ticket for what would surely be a miserable train and coach voyage was not appealing. However, Anjly was not so inclined.

"Oh Jude, that is a tremendous imposition. I could not ask that of you," she said.

"Anjly, if you'll have me, I would love to help. Plus, what better way to see India than by driving across it?" he said with a smile.

"You have air conditioning in the van, right?" Prisca interjected.

"Uh, why yes," Jude replied.

"That settles it then. We'll take the van and we will be very glad for your help," Prisca declared resolving the matter.

Even though the pronouncement had been made, Jude looked to Anjly for approval. She just nodded knowingly and smiled.

An hour later, Anjly and Hemant checked out of their hotel and waited for the promised van to arrive. Prisca remained inside the café enjoying her tea and a small amount of leisure. While the situation in Bandhaka was undoubtedly urgent, the minutes saved by a frantic rush were hardly worth the consternation.

When the van made its way through the throng of people and parked on the street outside of the hotel, Anjly was a little taken aback. This tall and brand new camper van with

heavily tinted windows looked very much out of place on the streets of Varanasi. After the driver came to a stop, Jude emerged from the side door of the passenger area.

“Hello everyone. Well, here we go. Take a look around inside and make yourselves comfortable. I’ll put your luggage in the rooftop cargo area.”

Anjly and Hemant lingered for a moment to keep up the polite appearance of helping while the luggage was loaded. As they tarried, Prisca emerged from the café and immediately stepped inside the open doors. She only carried with her a small canvass bag which she hung from a hook on the partition between the driving compartment and the passenger area as she settled in right away.

Anjly was a bit more timid. She lingered outside, but poked a head in to investigate the accommodations. The interior was arranged with two large and very deep bench seats facing each other. Between them was a small table. One bench abutted the partition wall such that they would have been practically back-to-back with the driver. Anjly decided this design was the reason why the driver’s compartment was partitioned, but she still felt a little patrician guilt at the arrangement. Being chauffeured through India where most people dealt with travel arrangements that were a bit more spartan to say the least was not to her liking, but she put it out of her mind given the necessity.

In between the seats were two large windows on either side of the passenger compartment. Behind the opposite seat was a small kitchen area and toilet abutting the rear wall of the van. Anjly thought this vehicle would certainly be comfortable for their long journey across the country. Luxurious even.

While Jude was on the ladder at the rear of the van loading Anjly’s bag into the rooftop cargo area Hemant said to her, “sum tame a vise cekkasa cho? Apane a manasane olakhata pana nathi. Te pagala vykati ho’i sake che.”

As Jude approached to grab Hemant’s bag, Hemant concluded his comments about Jude’s questionable sanity with a smile and nod toward him. Jude raised both hands and said, “hum Gujarati bolum chum” and smiled. Hemant’s eyes grew wide and he was mortified.

“I’m sorry Hemant. Please do not be embarrassed. It was a prudent question and one I would ask too if our places were exchanged,” Jude said as he put a reassuring hand on Hemant’s shoulder. He was very grateful for the gracious pardon and hopped inside the van to join Prisca.

Anjly still had some doubts but was intrigued to begin this journey and more interested in continuing the conversation she was having with Jude when Hemant and Prisca found them. She took a seat across from her friends and Jude entered shortly after and the door closed behind him. Anjly assumed the driver must be monitoring them because the door closed without Jude activating any switch. When the door closed behind him, Jude turned to an intercom on the partition wall and told the driver that they were all set. The van jerked away before he could be seated causing him to plop down hard on the bench beside Anjly.

As the van inched through the crowded streets of Varanasi the passengers said very little to each other. Anjly and Hemant both pretended to be looking out the windows while

they took stock of this stranger. Prisca seemed to be fighting off sleep and was indeed fighting extreme disinterest. That was her way. Even in childhood, Anjly was a people-pleaser much to Prisca's chagrin. She was kind, polite, quick witted without being vulgar, utterly brilliant, and quite beautiful. Anjly was a marvel to everyone else in the village, but she hardly seemed to draw Prisca's attention.

For a solid year after Prisca became her teacher, Anjly outshone every student in the class whether in academics, civics, or athletics. However, no matter how far she excelled, she never received the slightest note of praise from her teacher. At the end of the term, young Anjly reached her limit after handing in a three-dimensional model of DNA that barely received a nod.

"Ms. Patel, what have I done to offend you? Why don't you like me?" she asked.

"Offend?" Prisca queried. "Why do you think you offend me?"

"Well, at least you do not like me, that much is clear, and I do not understand why. If you will just tell me what I have done wrong, I know I can amend it," young Anjly said with maximum passive aggressivity.

Clearly annoyed with the histrionics, Prisca took off her reading glasses and actually looked up at the child. Pointing to the model she said, "why did you do that?"

"Why? Well, because it was the assignment," Anjly replied.

"The assignment was to make a model of DNA. All the rest of your classmates used pipe cleaners and cardboard. I see that you have put together a complex double helix structure using dowels and branching colored and professionally labeled balls showing far more of the structure than was assigned. Why did you do that?" Ms. Patel responded.

Anjly thought about the question and responded, "because I wanted my project to be the best in the class."

"Precisely, you spent months on something that should have only taken you days at most.

Let me ask you, do you have any particular passion for DNA?" The young woman shook her head. Her teacher then continued, "so what are you passionate about? What do you actually like to do?"

Anjly mulled it over in her head but could only reply, "I... I don't know."

"That is why I do not give you any praise, Anjly, because none of the things you have done in my class had your heart in them. You are exceptionally intelligent. You know that without me affirming it for you yet again. But your only motivation for study is competition. In that respect you are common. If all that motivates you is vanquishing those who do not possess an equivalent level of intellect, then you will never truly achieve anything and you do not interest me.

However, if you decide you want to focus your talents on something that you actually care about, I will help you. I do not care if you are passionate about calculus or twirling a baton, whatever it is, I will do everything I can to help you. That is so long as you are doing it because it is what you want to do," her teacher said.

Prisca was true to her word. No matter what Anjly showed an interest in, a genuine interest in, Prisca seemed to have a deep knowledge she could share. Moreover, she supported her with her parents. When Anjly wanted to quit the flute to play football, Prisca brought samosas to her father to help him come around. When she wanted to build a telescope, Prisca did laundry with her mother for a month to convince her to give up space in her meager garden for the assembly area. And, when Anjly wanted to study theoretical physics instead of pursuing a career in medicine, it was Prisca who convinced her parents that she was indeed making the right choice and not merely embarking on a folly of academic claptrap that would leave her dying in the gutter from want of a marketable skill.

She did no less for Hemant. When his parents could not afford the substantial cost of a computer, Prisca purchased component after component for months while Hemant constructed it in her drawing room. When he was older and decided to give up his studies to move back to the farm in Bandhaka because the woman he loved since he was six spurned his marriage proposal, Prisca practically kicked him all the way back to Mumbai. When his mother died from complications of early onset Alzheimer's, it was Prisca who helped him channel his grief into his life's greatest calling. Prisca was always there for both of them when they needed her most.

As Anjly's reverie concluded she looked at this woman now softly snoring across the table from her. Her dark hair was now silver, her stern face now had many lines marking the years, and her body was bent, but she was still the same strong woman helping her find her way.

"So, Jude, tell me about yourself. What do you do for a living?" Hemant now asked having reached his maximum comfort level with silence.

Jude was lost in his own thoughts and was taken a little off guard by the question.

"You know, Hemant, I really haven't thought about how to describe what I do. Mostly I travel. I travel as much as I can. I am always looking for new people and new experiences. That is a large part of what brought me to India," Jude replied.

Hemant struggled for a moment for a follow up when Prisca, whom they all assumed to be deep in sleep chimed in, "that means he's unemployed. So, ask something different before you embarrass him." With that she turned over in her seat to face the opposite direction and seemed to fall right back into her snoring.

Jude could only chuckle. Anjly then interjected in the conversation. She was always the one gifted with diplomacy and could tell that Hemant was struggling to cope with Prisca's bluntness.

"Jude, we talked a little bit about my work, but wait until Hemant tells you the breakthrough he has made. I think it's absolutely remarkable. He's quite brilliant and I am certain he will be collecting a Nobel Prize for it soon" Anjly remarked with supportively insincere flattery.

Jude lifted his eyebrows in interest while Hemant blushed terribly. “Really, she’s just being nice. It is just a very small project I have been working on and it’s a very small thing really in the grand scheme of things.”

“Do not diminish yourself, Hemant,” Anjly chided. “Your breakthrough is going to help countless people struggling with memory loss. Go on, tell Jude about it.”

Hemant now felt the pressure of having to maintain humility while simultaneously living up the buildup Anjly created. He began haltingly, “like I said, it’s really a very small thing, but I have been trying to create a computerized biofeedback that interfaces directly with a person’s memories. It sounds more impressive than it is, but we have had a little success. My idea was to try to create something that would help preserve long-term memories for patients suffering with Alzheimer’s so that those memories could be reloaded into their minds for as long as possible. All we can do now really is have the patient spend time in our system looking at faces and names of people that are already in her long-term memory solidly like spouses and children. Our research has shown that we have been successful in reloading those names and faces when they have been wiped out of the patient’s mind by the disease.”

“So, you have been able to store a person’s thoughts on computer and then reintroduce those thoughts to a person’s brain?” Jude asked.

“On a very, very, very rudimentary level, yes,” Hemant said.

“Anjly is right. That may be perhaps the most remarkable achievement I have ever heard of,” Jude replied.

Hemant just shrugged and turned away flattered by the compliment but not wanting to seem arrogant. “Oh really, it’s not all that big of a deal now. If I can help people with memory loss hang on to their really important memories for as long as possible that is all I want.”

At that moment Prisca stirred. “Well, seeing as I am not going to be able to nap,” she said with a disapproving glare at the three of them, “we might as well talk about what is happening in Bandhaka.”

Without rising she reached for the canvas bag hanging on a peg on the partition wall behind her. She struggled to be able to reach it, so much so that it would have been more productive to simply stand up but, being committed, she nearly toppled out of the seat rather than admitting defeat. Jude fought an impulse to rise and fetch it for her and his decision was meet.

When she sat upright again, she fished several Polaroid photos out of her bag and laid them on the table. Each photo was of a child with a name and date. Upon first examination most photos showed nothing amiss, just several smiling children. As the dates advanced, the faces of the children morphed into catatonic stares or looks of panic.

“It began a little over two weeks ago. At first, I noticed subtle stereotypic movements that were easy to miss when the children were at play.” She then pointed to a photograph of a little girl with a broad white smile and bright eyes. “I noticed little Priya here first. She’s a

social butterfly, always flirting with the boys and gossiping with the girls, but one day I saw her just running around in a circle by herself.

Then this one, Jamshed, started clicking his tongue in class. He is a shy little boy and it was very out of character for him. After he ignored the first correction, I stopped the lecture to put the fire upon him, but when I approached there was a look of terror in his eyes far exceeding fear of my wrath. As I examined him, he continued the clicking, clearly involuntarily.

The behaviors progressed, worsened, and spread to the entire class. Several children started speaking gibberish or outright screaming incessantly. Many have violent spasmodic movements and hallucinate. Twenty-one out of thirty children have some sort of serious neurological symptom. Six children are now in dire condition.

Of course, I need not tell the two of you that Bandhaka is a rural farming village. The people there cling to superstition. The village elders believe the children have become possessed by demons or some other nonsense and are only looking for supernatural solutions as, in their minds, there can only be a supernatural cause.

In my mind it seems like the only logical cause is some sort of contaminant. The men have mostly ignored me of course, but the mothers have helped me investigate. Unfortunately, I am at a total loss."

Prisca then produced a hydrological map of Bandhaka demonstrating the detail of her inquiry. In the creek running through the center of the village Prisca had marked four points with red X's. "The water source seemed like the best place to start looking because it is communal. The villagers draw their drinking, cooking, and bathing water from these four points. Three days ago, I finally browbeat enough bureaucrats into sending someone out to test the water. Nothing, not a thing. Or at least that is what they told me.

I thought it must be the chemical plant that opened earlier this year dumping into the water supply. I was so sure of it but the man who came to test the stream gave me this map and showed me that the plant is five miles *downstream*. There have been no changes in the food source. No one has reported any chemicals being spread on crops. I cannot find a single source."

As she spoke, Prisca referred to notes in a little red hardcover book which she slammed on the table. "It's maddening! I have reached the limits of my knowledge and the government and elders gave up long ago. But there is one more thing," her three-member audience moved in closer, "only the children have been affected. Only these children, *my* children. I did not know where else to turn so I came to find you," she said pointing at Hemant and Anjly. Now gesturing to Jude, "you're a bonus if you can do anything to help."

The three of them were silent as they sat back and pondered how any of them would be able to do more than Prisca. They sat like that for a long while and then began to quiz Prisca with different options for contaminants. She had considered and investigated every single one. As the van pulled into Lucknow, the four of them were anxious to find beds and give their brains a rest, but no amount of rest would quiet their minds.

The following morning, they were up and on the road early. They were making good progress and Anjly hoped to make it to Jaipur where they would stop for the night and make a final long push to Gujarat the following day. The company found new things to discuss, mostly all the news from Bandhaka and Mumbai, and watched the green landscape of Uttar Pradesh dissolve slowly into the arid hills of Rajasthan.

Anjly spent most of the day on her phone trying to find lodging. As she searched and called, she grew increasingly agitated. When they were about an hour outside of Jaipur, they stopped at a petrol station to fill up and stretch their legs. As Hemant, Prisca, and Jude sat on a bench in the green space next to the station they watched Anjly in the distance practically screaming into her phone. After she ended the call, they watched her give out an exasperated yell before marching back to them.

"I give up. I give up! There is nothing and I mean nothing in the entire city of Jaipur. I couldn't find a box to sleep in if we had to." She then picked up Hemant's almost empty can of soda and flung it forcefully, but awaywardly at a nearby trashcan.

Jude slapped his lap and excused himself as he went over to speak with the driver in the van as it was filling up. Anjly then realized she had not even laid eyes on the poor man this entire trip. She felt horrible that she had only inquired about lodging for four. *He must have slept in the van last night!*

When Jude returned, he said, "well, I know it's not a luxurious option, but it appears there could be some scenic places to camp tonight. I have tents for all that want them and, Prisca, the seats convert into a pretty comfortable bed in a pinch."

"A pinch? A pinch?!?", she laughed. "My dear boy, that thing has air conditioning, a refrigerator, and a bloody toilet. I am not accustomed to complaining if my Beaujolais is served at fifteen degrees instead of thirteen. We will be just fine."

With that the company set off and shortly the van left the city roads and worked its way into the countryside. They jostled through the gullies and endless bumps when finally the van came to a stop beside a river running past tall, flat-topped peaks in the distance. The westering sun made the colors in the striations of the hillside come alive. Amber hues interposed with rich honey of the layered clay soils rose above them. Deep fissures caused by the erosion of millennia ran down the cliffside as lines of age on the face of India. The chorus of insects greeted the coming of evening while white cranes stalked the riverside.

As the four of them surveyed the landscape Jude said, "does this look like a good place to make camp or should we keep going?"

Prisca turned to him sharply and said, "would you stop doing that? You know there are not many more scenic spots in the whole of India," she then pointed at them and said, "now get to work, the three of you. Get your camp set up and let's get a fire going. I am starving and I want a properly cooked meal. No more microwave. Get to it."

Without thinking the three of them snapped into action.

Hemant immediately set about looking for the best spot to build a campfire while Jude then ascended the ladder at the rear of the van to access the roof-top storage. Anjly stood at

the foot of the ladder to receive the tents, air mattresses, camp chairs, and a few other accoutrements Jude tossed down. He then stepped down to hand her the cast iron Dutch oven.

When all the gear was distributed, Jude finally brought down two large bundles of metal rods neatly wrapped by coils of coated wires. Hemant and Anjly were debating the best layout for tents when he set to work. Each rod was telescoping and extended to about two meters in length. The end of each was in a scooped point to make it easier to drive into the ground and Jude set each rod approximately two and a half meters apart from one another to create a perimeter around the campsite. He then ran the coated wires through connection points at three levels that were half a meter apart. When he completed the task, the stake closest to the rear of the van had a chord to feed into a power outlet on the side.

After about thirty minutes the doctors holding teaching positions at one of the most prestigious technical schools in the world finished setting up the first tent. Anjly and Hemant were both dripping with sweat but were determined to finish the last two quickly having worked out the mechanics.

When Jude turned on the power to the perimeter fence he constructed, Hemant took notice of the faint hum that emanated from it. "Excuse me, Jude, is this an electrical fence you put up?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed," Jude responded. "I'm sorry. I should have warned you before I activated it. It also puts out a strong EM field. Just a prudent precaution given that our camp will likely attract attention, particularly once we get dinner started."

"Ah, monkeys, yes that was good thinking," Hemant said in accord with the wise planning.

"Sure, yeah, monkeys too," Jude said as he left the campsite with a large empty bag slung over his shoulder to forage for firewood. When he returned, his companions had completed setting up. The setting sun revealed that the perimeter Jude erected also gave off a faint blue light, just enough to make a pleasant glow without being overpowering.

Prisca emerged from arranging her space inside the van and testing out the convertible bed inside. When she did, she found the fire pit was in place along with the tripod to hold the Dutch oven over the flames. All of her implements were ready and Prisca stood impatiently waiting to begin cooking. Sensing her frustration as he approached, Jude began removing the wood he just finished processing and prepared to light it.

"I know how to start a fire. Shoo! You can get this lantern going to give us more light. Off you go now," and she made a dismissing gesture with both hands. Her well-honed empathy led her to regret being so dismissive when she saw the look of disappointment on Jude's face.

As he rose to his feet, Prisca reached up with the hands that had dismissed him seconds ago and took both sides of his face. "I am sorry Jude. I have been too gruff. I am very thankful for you. For everything you are doing."

With that, all hurts were forgiven and Jude slumped down in his camp chair next to Anjly for a hard-earned moment's respite and she patted him on the knee consolingly.

Hemant was engrossed in study on the computer sitting on his lap.

"Arsenic. It must be arsenic. That is the only plausible contaminant that could be causing the children's symptoms," he said mostly to himself.

"I know Prisca said the chemical plant was downstream, but I have to believe it has something to do with this," Anjly said.

"I think you're right, Anj," Hemant responded. "But that is what has me stumped. According to my research, the plant does produce chemicals for mining, of which arsenic is chief, but arsenic is not aerosolized or at least I cannot see any reason why this plant would be doing that. Perhaps... Prisca?" he said loudly to get her attention.

Prisca did not look up from her labors, but Hemant assumed he was heard and continued in a raised voice, "did you talk to the technician about the possibility the farmers could be drawing water for irrigation from past the factory?"

"No-oh!" she said in a sing-songy reply as she continued with her efforts without pause.

Hemant sat up in his chair and looked over his laptop to Jude and Anjly, "that is an option we should explore. I do not think they considered it."

Prisca then approached bearing piping hot bowls of chana masala and naan for each of them. "Of course, we did not consider it." Hemant opened his mouth to respond, but before he could Prisca interrupted, "they do not irrigate crops uphill from a water source five miles away."

Undaunted Hemant responded, "Prisca, I am looking into that and I see that they now make irrigation equipment that can do just that. It's really quite impressive and something that is needed due to reduced fresh water sources with climate change. You see..."

Prisca chuckled in between bites. "Yes, well *you* see as soon as we figure out plumbing and electricity for everyone in the village, I am sure the next priority will be cutting edge irrigation technology."

Duly chastened Hemant put his laptop down and focused on his food. The topic of conversation turned to other less important matters and the four of them ate their hot meal and felt the unexpectedly cool breeze coming intermittently from the river flowing nearby.

Hemant looked up at a large troop of macaques that had gathered in the great banyan tree next to their camp. He ate with delight as he saw them held at bay by Jude's fence, pacing and hopping through the great twisting trunks of the tree with frustration. A small victory after a lifetime of being plagued by the clever little thieves.

The next day the group were up at first light, had a quick breakfast, and broke the camp down quickly. It was a full day's journey to Bandhaka and the company needed to get on the road if they were to still have daylight to investigate. As they settled in and the van pulled away from the campsite, Anjly slapped a palm to her forehead.

"I've done it again," she cried. "I cannot believe I keep forgetting the poor fellow. We did not even make a tent for him last night. I must at least see that he has had some breakfast," and sat up with the intention of calling to him at the intercom panel on the partition wall.

Before she rose, Jude put a hand on her arm to stay her gently. "Anjly, I spoke with him before we left and he is quite well provisioned. Don't worry, I will introduce you to the man behind the curtain before our journey is over."

Anjly was less than satisfied with this assurance but she was pleased the man was not wholly forgotten about. She resolved to make it up to him when they got to Bandhaka. This stout man will have made his way across the entire country in just three days and that dedication deserved some recognition. Even short journeys on Indian roads are not for the faint of heart.

The group now settled into silence as the van trundled along the dirt road. This state was soon broken when Hemant suddenly gave out a cry and rushed to the window.

"Anjly! Look, look quickly. Oh, my word!" Hemant exclaimed as he practically pulled her to the window. "It's a tiger. Look, just there."

Anjly and Hemant were like kids clambering to get a look at this wonder of nature. As Anjly pointed out the tiger to Jude she explained, "I suppose seeing a wild tiger in India is a bit like an American seeing a buffalo on the plains. It is such an iconic part of our history, but seldom does it actually happen."

As they continued to watch the tiger straining to see its orange and black stripes for as long as possible, another one came into view. Then another. *Then another.* As Anjly and Hemant sat back in their seats, they looked at each other and a sudden realization came over both their faces. Prisca started to laugh in a low and increasingly boisterous tone.

"We're in Ranthambore you nitwits!" and she positively cackled with delight. Every child in India knows that Ranthambore is the national park which contains the largest wild tiger reserve in the country. Then the two of them glared at Jude.

Sheepishly, he said, "well, yes, I guess I left that part out, but indeed, that was the main reason for the fence last night. But, I promise, it works really well. I have camped in brown bear country with it. I have camped near saltwater crocodiles. I have even camped in Indonesia and it kept Komodo dragons out.

"A tiger could have jumped over that fence! A tiger absolutely could have jumped over that fence if he had a mind to. A crocodile cannot jump that high. I doubt a bear could. We could have been eaten last night," Hemant said desperately.

By this point, Prisca was nearly on the floor rolling with laughter. "Oh stop! That thing gave off such a buzz that the mosquitos did not even brave it. Besides why would a tiger bother us when he had a tree full of macaques to munch on?" she said in the gasps for breath in between laughs.

"You were inside the van!" Anjly retorted. "Plus, you sleep so heavily I doubt even the screams from our tiger evisceration would wake you."

The debate continued for quite some time until Jude produced specs on the fence and explained how the technology worked to the satisfaction of Anjly and Hemant until they, begrudgingly, concluded that Jude had not placed them in mortal danger. But for the moment, the détente was tenuous.

Yet time and travel have a way of erasing immediate traumas and the Ranthambore incident was soon forgotten. As they continued their journey, India displayed the dichotomies of its nature. Sacred temples shared space with the profanity of unimaginable depths of poverty. Natural wonders of mountain and forest would then give way to the rape of industry on a scale only humans driven by the lust of wealthy colonizers could achieve.

Slowly the landscape became more and more familiar to Anjly and Hemant and as they drew closer to their home their anxiety rose. They were summoned home and the returning intellectuals of Bandhaka felt the weight of their village's expectations, but they had no answers.

By midday they reached the massive white marble Palace of Udaipur. The edifice seemed like a hidden kingdom on the southern border of Rajasthan. Hemant traveled here frequently as a child when his family took trips to visit a wealthy uncle and he gave Jude a full account of its history and ancients. He noted how the European history thrust upon them as children loved to tout the Renaissance but ignored the fact that this magnificent palace was built at the same time.

"Well, at least now I know we are not far away from home," and as he said these words the anxiety he postponed playing tour guide engulfed him fully. He looked at Anjly longing to see reassurance in her eyes but found only stoic contemplation.

In the rush of the last few days, she completely forgot her grief and was silently berating herself for her callousness. Her life was far, far away from Bandhaka now and its provincial ways and regressive thought. She knew her father was far above that place and resented that he stayed there out of some antiquated sense of duty rather than joining her in Mumbai where he could have lived his last years with people and experiences that would have enriched him in ways he would not have even imagined.

She knew she would have to make appearances there sparingly for the funerals of aunts or marriages of her younger cousins, but no more. Secretly she relished the thought of those future occasions where all those who scorned her ambitions would envy the glimpse of the graceful cosmopolitan goddess that walked among them for a short time then was gone again returning to her metropolitan palace. Now being presented with the chance to prove her beneficence by action rather than cowering her former friends and relations with supercilious condescension, she found herself wholly fraudulent. She cursed the cruel tutelage of karma but tried to remain hopeful that observing her shortcomings in this regard might help her find a path to a solution.

The company made their final comfort stop at petrol station in Udaipur before crossing the state line into Gujarat and beginning the final leg of their journey to Bandhaka. When Jude and Hemant returned to the van with snacks in hand, they found that Anjly had taken the

opportunity to change from her simple linen traveling clothes into a saree of emerald green and bright pink with pallu draped with great care over her neatly combed hair. Prisca made similar preparations, but with far less care and far more efficiency born from daily ritual.

As Hemant entered, he said, “goodness, that brings me back.”

“You know no one will speak with us if I showed up wearing slacks with a bare head. We have far more important matters to attend to,” she said with words conveying a finality to Hemant. She had no interest in analyzing the matter further, not even in jest.

The inhale/exhale of India continued. As she inhaled, they found themselves in places where there seemed to be humans in every square inch of space in their vision. Then just as quickly on the exhalation they were areas so remote that the road itself was the only sign of human intrusion. After a few more hours crawling along narrow, rough, and often nearly washed-out roads, it seemed the last mite of breath was leaving the lungs of humanity.

As they entered the village, they saw a modest central complex of shops with hand hewn signs next to the cinderblock homes of their proprietors. A group of boys were in the midst of a cricket match set in the middle of the main thoroughfare with stacks of old tin cans for wickets. The organizers of the match were frustrated with these unheralded intruders forcing them to temporarily dismantle the pitch yet sat bemused at the sight of this exotic vehicle making its way up the thoroughfare.

Prisca was standing now at the intercom giving the driver directions. She had to fish around in her bag for her reading glasses as the responses came in text on the small screen before her. She grew annoyed that they were just brief confirmations of her commands with no communication of understanding.

However, her instructions were followed to the letter and the company soon came to a very modest rustic dwelling a half a mile away from the village center. As the van pulled up to the house, they saw a woman in a bright yellow saree sitting on the floor of the outdoor kitchen on the backside of the structure. A small wood fire was already smoking in the simple ring of bricks rising only a few centimeters off the floor behind her. As they approached, they saw her rise to greet them.

Before they exited the van Prisca said to them, “this is Alpana. You two may not know her as she is a few years younger than you. Her little girl was the first I noticed with problems and now all four of her children are in bad shape. I told her that we would come and see her first.”

With that Prisca opened the van door and set up the hill to the house. After a kind greeting and brief words of appreciation, Alpana bade them to sit. They observed that she had laid out her finest ground covering for their visit. Such an item would be reserved for only the most special of occasions or honored guests. Given the care she took with the crockery and even the indestructible karahis she now busily implemented to quickly prepare the meal, they realized these items must have been borrowed, likely from several people.

The fare was similarly far in excess of her normal meals. She prepared saag paneer, undhiyu, and kadhi with naan kneaded by hand in front of them. She also provided them with

fruits and several other smaller dainties, none selected in accordance with an overall meal plan, but rather gathered to present the most magnificent meal within Alpana's power to procure.

The company ate heartily and with great thanks. When they finished, Alpana reluctantly accepted Prisca's offer to clean up while she showed the others inside. As they entered, Anjly repressed a gasp and put her hand to her mouth. The children were all laid on pallets side by side. The oldest rocked back and forth while the three younger children barely moved as they stared straight up at the ceiling in catatonic states with mouths agape.

Hemant immediately sprang into action checking the vital signs of the children and testing their visual acuity with his penlight. Alpana followed beside him cleaning the faces of her children and making other similarly futile actions all in a helpless desire to find some comfort for those who were more precious to her than all the rare gems in any museum or treasury throughout the entire world.

Jude and Anjly were of little use in this endeavor and kept a respectful distance. Jude then made his way to a corner of the dwelling apart from the children. On the wall was a small, framed picture mounted over a small shelf. The frame held a picture depicting a mother holding an infant with the head of an elephant. On the shelf before it was a strand of small flowers, a couple of small ladoos, and some gently smoking incense.

"Parvati," Anjly said as she came and stood beside him. "She holds her infant, Ganesh." She continued, "the story goes that Parvati longed to take a simple bath in peace, so she asked her husband's faithful companion, the bull, Nandi, to stand guard. Of course, Nandi did as he was asked for all comers except for his master, her husband, Lord Shiva.

Despairing that she had no one as loyal to her as Nandi was to Shiva, one day when her husband left on one of his many journeys, Parvati created her child, Ganesh. He was completely loyal to her and, as it turned out, was a fierce warrior when any intruder sought to disturb his mother's peace.

When Lord Shiva returned he found this young child barring his entrance to his own home. Slightly amused at this development, Shiva dispatched his soldiers to remove the boy. To his great surprise, Ganesh dispatched them all with ease and ferocity. Eventually, Shiva reached his limit with the situation and confronted Ganesh himself. In the ensuing conflict he cut Ganesh's head off with his sword and entered his home.

When Parvati discovered what had occurred, she was filled with torment and sorrow beyond comprehension. In her grief she resolved to save her son, but because of the tremendous hurt done to him, she could not make him wholly as he was before his injury. So, she replaced the missing head with one of an elephant and life was breathed back into him.

As you know Ganesh is revered as the deva of purity, knowledge, and, more importantly, wisdom. It is said that he brings good fortune and good cheer and that is why he is revered throughout India. For her part, in Parvati is great power yes, but when we think of her, we do not think of her having the power over the cosmos. Instead, she has that great power that all women have in some measure. The power to create, preserve, and nurture

life is more formidable than commanding the seas, the skies, or the mountains themselves. I see why Alpana keeps this reverence for her.”

Anjly then joined her hands as did Jude following her cue and they both bowed slightly, not only to Parvati and what she represents, but to Alpana and her love and quiet hope bent upon finding healing for her children.

At this point, Hemant returned to them to report what he had seen. “Beyond any doubt they have been exposed to a toxin and it’s most likely arsenic. But, whatever it is, it must be *highly* toxic. We must start searching now. I do not know why these children are affected so acutely while the rest of the village was spared, but that may not last. Everyone is at risk and these children do not have long.”

“Let’s get to work,” Jude said and with that the company thanked Alpana for her hospitality and promised to return to her as soon as they had more information. As they left the dwelling, they found Prisca who had just completed putting the meal away.

Jude gathered them together and from the messenger bag he carried on his shoulder he produced several small metal phials of chrome. Each phial was approximately four centimeters long and had a hinged cap on one end.

“These are to collect samples. Soil, water, grain, feces, anything can be collected. Even if you think there is a gas or vapor, a pass through the air can reveal evidence of methane or some other invisible contaminant. I texted you all a link to an app that goes with them.” Jude then took out his own phone and demonstrated how it worked. They simply tapped the phial on the phone before using it and the app recorded a precise location for where the sample was being taken.

He continued, “let’s use the remaining daylight to take as many samples as we possibly can. Prisca, will you please show me where the family draws its drinking water? Let’s go and take samples from all the water sources we can. Anjly and Hemant, would you mind interrupting the test match one more time to see if the boys can help you find all the places the children play? When we lose the light, let’s all meet back together here and I will get these tested. Maybe we can get a lead, it’s not much to go on, but it’s the best way to start that I can think of.”

Jude then handed them each small bags containing dozens of phials and Anjly and Hemant’s spirits rose now feeling like they had a place to start.

“You have no end of very useful toys, Jude,” Hemant said.

“Toys? Yes. Useful? That remains to be seen my friend,” he replied.

The company then parted. Prisca and Jude set off to test the community’s water sources and Anjly and Hemant set about talking to children and gathering as many details as possible about the places where Alpana’s children played and how they spent their days in Bandhaka. Over the next several hours the four of them fanned out and took samples from every conceivable inch of the village from trash dumps, storm pipes, playgrounds, and grain storage. As agreed in the very last throws of the gloaming light the four met back at the van and then took the small trip to Prisca’s house.

They were exhausted and covered in all manner of grime, but none favored stopping their efforts. Nonetheless Jude prevailed on them to take rest as there was nothing they could now do in the utter darkness that now consumed this rural Gujarati village. Anjly was in no humor to suffer the interrogation of even her most congenial aunties so she decided to remain with Prisca for the evening. Hemant's father still lived only a stone's throw away, so he gathered his bag and started for home.

"How will we get the samples to the lab," he asked, "and how long do you think it will take to get them back, Jude?"

"It should be very quick, Hemant. Leave that to me. I'm going to see to it now," Jude replied and then in parting said, "Rest well. You've all earned it. I will meet you back here first thing in the morning."

Anjly had dozens of questions in her head but was too exhausted to broach them. For her part, Prisca was practically snoring on her feet as she made her way up the path. However, Anjly did manage some quick parting words of thanks and, rather uncharacteristically, optimism before the company disbanded for the night.

The next morning just as Anjly and Prisca sat down to tea and breakfast, they heard the rumble of tires shaking loose rocks from the red clay road outside the house. As the by now familiar tan van came to a stop outside, Anjly watched from the window of the front room. Prisca was by now familiar with how Jude took his tea and set about fixing him a plate as they waited on his entrance. However, the expected knock on the front door was delayed. Anjly watched as Jude paced a bit outside the van, not agitated, but clearly distressed before he finally plucked up the courage to come to the front door.

When Anjly answered it, she went straight to the matter, "what's wrong? Come inside. Come. Prisca has breakfast for you. Let us know what is happening?"

Jude entered in uncommon silence and walked grave faced into the kitchen behind Anjly.

As he entered, Prisca looked up from her labors long enough to lay eyes on his darkened face. "It can't be as bad as all that now, can it?" and she motioned for him to have a seat as she brought him a cup and a plate.

"I got the results back," was all he could muster. He then pulled a tablet computer out of his bag and handed it to Anjly before sullenly picking up his tea.

"Wait? How? How did you get dozens... there must have been at least a hundred samples. How did you all of those samples tested in one night?" Anjly said too amazed to be disappointed.

"My toys," he replied. "That's all they are right now. Take a look at the results. Not a thing was present in all the samples we gathered. Nothing. Not a single thing that should not be there. That is until we get to the samples from the children that Hemant gathered."

As Anjly held the tablet Jude swiped to the next screen.

"Arsenic," she said as she shook her head. "Hemant was right."

Just then Hemant walked in. “Hello. Hello. Good morning. What am I right about?” Anjly handed him the tablet as Jude sat silently eating his breakfast. “Wait, what am I looking at?”

“The results from the samples. Jude already has them back,” Anjly replied.

Hemant had grown accustomed to Jude’s surprises and rather than belaboring the point got straight to analyzing the data. After quite a long time pouring over a large sample of results looking for any potential toxin, he spoke up. “Well, at least now we know what we’re looking for. Don’t be downhearted, Jude. This is a good beginning.”

Jude looked up and realized that his sulking was completely unhelpful but knew reality must be checked. “You’re right Hemant, but I still feel like we have hit a dead end. Arsenic does not simply fall out of the sky. Even if it did, why are only the children getting sick? Moreover, from what I have seen this is spreading. Did you see the batsman yesterday when we rode up? As the others were dismantling the pitch to let us pass, he just kept pacing back and forth. All over the village yesterday I saw more and more signs, but only the children.

I have been up all night trying to think of any source of contaminants that we missed. I am at a loss. We took samples from every conceivable source and all of them, *all* are negative. I have no answers.”

Jude then put his weary face in his hands and sat there looking down at the ground.

“Maybe if you had slept you could have thought of something,” Prisca said churlishly in between bites. Jude was in no mood to even acknowledge her well-intentioned jest. “Fortunately,” she continued, “the three of us are fresh as daisies, so we’ll have to figure it out for you. Come on now. Finish up. We need to get going.”

She then began to clear items away and snatched Jude’s mug before he could finish his last sip.

“Well, it won’t do us any good to walk around town aimlessly, first we need to think...” he said before being cut off.

“We are not going to be aimless,” Prisca interrupted. “Our first order of business is to tell Alpana that her children have been poisoned with arsenic. I know we spent a lot of time with her yesterday and you are going to tell me that you have already asked her to give an account of how they might have come into contact with toxins, and it will do no good. But we are going to go over there, nonetheless. Buck up. Now, buck up. You are insufferable like this, Jude. Buck up now.”

As she spoke, Prisca patted him on the shoulders and practically lifted him out of his seat as she shuffled the three of them out of her front door. As they instinctively walked to the side of the van she said, “oh no you don’t. I have had enough of that thing bouncing all over the road, kicking up dust, and disturbing everyone,” she then patted the side of the van and said hushed words only to it. “Don’t worry girl. I mean no disrespect, you are a fine little coach, don’t mind me.” Then lifting up and returning to her little flock she said, “Alpana lives less than a mile away. Come now. The walk will do you all good. The morning is fresh and it is time we all took some fresh air.”

Prisca was right of course. As they walked, their spirits rose. The village was stirring now, and everyone was going about their daily chores. They all stopped to politely greet the visitors, but none invited a further chat as they had chores to attend to. The ever-present monkeys stopped to gawk at the three of them before resuming their labors as well. The cattle, however, paid them no heed. Having already performed their daily job, they were off to pasture and a well-earned breakfast.

As the group approached Alpana's house they saw her waiting expectantly by the door. She pretended to be busying herself with chores, but it was clear she had been waiting for them to arrive with news for some time. The sight of her bright eyes suddenly dying upon reading the daunted faces of the group struck Anjly deeply and it was her turn to fall into despondency.

Despite her disappointment, Alpana did not show a moment of discourtesy and ushered the group inside for tea and discussion. She reported to them that the children did not seem to worsen overnight, but that did little to raise Anjly's spirits. She stayed back while the others entered, lingering in the kitchen outside rather than risking tears in front of Alpana and the children.

She sat cross legged on the ground holding her face in her hands and struggled to hold back tears of rage and despondency. As she sat taking deep breaths and repeating her mantra trying to calm herself, she looked at a young calf standing nearby next to her mother.

Anjly smiled as she saw the baby frolicking as only spring calves can do. She was seemingly joyous at now getting the chance for her breakfast and was spinning around in circles. Around and around, she spun. She then grasped with her tongue for her mother's teat and, not quite reaching it, stumbled and started spinning again.

At first Anjly's heart was lifted, but then her expression changed. Soon she realized that what she presumed to be excitement on the part of the calf was actually desperation. The calf continued to spin around and around in circles, clearly not of its own will. For a moment she would grab hold of the teat long enough to latch for a second, but then quickly lost its balance again.

"The calf! *The calf!*" Anjly cried loudly at the house. "Come quickly! The calf!"

Prisca, Jude, Hemant, and Alpana all rushed outside in response to the clamor, but Anjly did not wait for them to arrive. She immediately went to the calf and cradled it holding it steady so she could latch on to her mother and actually take milk. All calves take the teat lustily, but this one ate ravenously.

As the others gathered around, Anjly said to them, "watch." She then whispered to the calf through her tears, "I am so sorry my dear one. I promise I will catch you up again in just a moment." She then kissed the calf's head and let it go.

The others watched as the baby instantly lost her footing and stumbled to her right. She then began to spin in circles again desperately grasping toward the teat with each pass and missing. Having demonstrated her point, Anjly caught the baby up again and guided her to her mother as the calf gratefully resumed her meal.

“I do not see any effects in her mother, but the baby has clearly been affected by the arsenic too,” Anjly said mastering her tears now with the others gathered around her.

“Well done, Anj,” Jude replied. “What should we do now?”

At that moment, the calf finished her breakfast and her mother started walking toward one of her own.

“Follow them,” Anjly replied. As she did the baby calf took a moment to thank Anjly with the deep loving eyes of her blessed race and then bounded off as best she could behind her mother.

Alpana walked with the four of them as they slowly made their way behind the cow giving her the space she needed to go about her daily routine. After a short while they came to a field where the other cows had gathered around great, yellow, industrial containers positioned just next to the tall grasses.

The containers were hexagonal in shape and hinged so that when they were fully opened laying on the ground, they made the perfect height to feed the animals. One side of the containers was filled with feed, the other with water. As Jude approached this repurposed manger, his attention was drawn to the labels on the end of the containers, which were in English, and upside down.

“Look,” he said and drew the others’ attention. Next to some indecipherable warning symbols were the words, “DANGER: Arsenic content. Highly Toxic.”

Before words could be exchanged, a group of children in short trunks bounded into the field chatting merrily with each other. When they caught sight of Prisca and their truancy was made known, they immediately fell silent and half the group started to bolt.

“Wait!” Prisca cried in a loud and commanding voice. The children immediately halted and returned, standing at attention and gave report. They confessed that this was their secret swimming place. They came here because the water in the large plastic containers was just deep enough for them to play in but did not get too hot in the afternoon sun.

Unknown to Alpana, it was her children who had discovered this delight and the word spread through the class. Alpana then said that her husband found these containers in a recent foraging trip to a nearby dump and brought them back because they were the perfect size to feed the livestock.

She was filled with incredible self-loathing as Hemant explained to her what these containers were and how the toxins were transferred to the children. The adult cows were not yet affected by the levels of arsenic due to their size and metabolism, but it was spread to their susceptible calves through their mother’s milk. The children got a double dose from playing in the water and drinking that same milk. Alpana fell into a deep self-loathing to match her despair.

But Jude then spoke to her softly in Gujarati, “do not be troubled Alpana. You could not have known the danger. These containers should never have been left where they were. I promise you. Now that we know what is happening, we will do everything we can to help your children recover. Have faith.”

Alpana said nothing but took both of Jude's hands and held them to her forehead as she started to convulse with tears. Prisca then stepped forward and took Alpana in her arms just as her knees began to buckle. Holding her upright, Prisca started to walk her back to her home gently caressing her face as Alpana struggled to master herself enough to make the walk.

Hemant and Anjly watched her silently, their elation at solving the mystery was immediately obliterated when they realized they had no way to help her. Anjly crossed her arms and stood dumbfounded, too numb to contemplate what to say, much less what to do. However, after a moment a fire inside of Hemant began to grow. His breathing became shallow and his pulse quickened. He quivered with rage, but dared not release it, at least not in the way he wanted to. Slowly, he convinced himself that he should be able to confront the situation without losing his temper and wheeled to face Jude.

"Jude, I beg your pardon and I do truly ask you to pardon me for what I am about to say as I do not want to appear ungrateful for everything you have done, but you should not have told Alpana that we would help her children recover. Even if we do get them all to hospital, we may be able to help the ones with much milder symptoms, but her children clearly had the most exposure and are in a dire situation. Jude, even if we had a way to remove the toxins from their systems, these children likely suffered substantial trauma to their organs and, undoubtedly, their central nervous system.

There is nothing I can do, or anyone can do for CNS damage. Can they improve, yes, but recover? We should be managing her expectations now, not giving her false hope. I really very much disagree with your decision to tell her that."

When Hemant finished, his heart raced preparing for the returning salvo. He was exceedingly poor at confrontations and now his anxiety was overwhelming his anger. Jude looked down and said nothing for a few moments and Hemant's fear grew. He then raised a hand and in the instant Hemant feared that he did so to strike a blow, but felt immediate relief when the hand was laid softly on his shoulder.

Looking up Jude said, "I know my friend. You would be right, but there are things that you should know. There are things that I should have shared with you and Anjly before now, but I was too consumed in trying to solve a puzzle that I did not do that. Let me remedy that situation now."

When he finished speaking the tall tan van came bonding over the nearby hill. It stopped under a tall neem tree with wide bows on the other side of the grazing meadow. As the dust cloud began to settle around it, Jude beckoned the two of them to follow him.

When they reached the van he turned and said, "it is time you met our driver."

He then walked to the driver's door and opened it. Anjly and Hemant expected someone to step out, but seeing no one they assumed Jude meant for them to greet the man as he sat behind the wheel and walked forward. As they reached the edge of the door and looked inside, they noticed that the van was totally empty. Completely empty. The vehicle looked as if it had just been delivered from the factory. There was no refuse, no crumbs or

moisture from overflowing cups, no crease on the seats. They only detected new car smell emanating from a vehicle that had driven across India in just three days.

Jude said in a soft voice as if he were speaking to a shy child, "it's alright. You can come out now."

With that six metallic orbs emerged from underneath the dashboard of the vehicle and began to encircle the three of them. Hemant's reaction was fear. Fear of an unexplained and unlooked for phenomenon suddenly replacing his fear of confrontation and that fear overwhelmed his senses such that he could do nothing but stand there with mouth open.

Anjly was undaunted. "What kind of drones are these? I have never heard of anything like this before."

She then reached out and touched an orb hovering close to her eye level. Both of them recoiled. The orb appeared to reflexively retreat like an animal startled by an initial encounter with a person trying to feed it from her hands. Anjly recoiled because the orb was unexpectedly cold to the touch.

They both recovered from their initial reflexes and Anjly slowly extended her hand, palm up, in a gesture of kindness. The orb then moved closer and gently alighted on her palm permitting her to run her fingers over its surface. Anjly was looking for an input port, a camera, a sensor, anything to reveal something about its construction and operation, but could detect nothing. It was a totally smooth, cold, chrome, floating metal ball.

"There is nothing like them in this world," Jude said in response to her question. "Drones are controlled by a remote operator. These are autonomous, but respond to commands, and they have far, far more applications that are of great assistance."

Hemant's curiosity now surpassed his fear and he reached out to touch one as Anjly was doing. He even removed his glasses to put his near sight to work in inspection. Finding no sign or marking of manufacture he then began his questions.

"How on earth do you have autonomous technology capable of driving across India? India! We were not exactly taking a pleasure drive on an American interstate," he asked.

Before Jude could answer Anjly started asking questions of her own, too stricken with wonder to realize she was interrupting Hemant. "What do they use for propulsion? What is their power source? They just seem to be floating in the air. Clearly, they have sensors because it immediately reacted to my touch, but only one reacted. Do you have people sitting in a bunker somewhere controlling them?"

Jude raised his hands shaking them slightly and said, "I will answer all of your questions, but in time. That is something we do not have an abundance of right now and it is of the essence."

He then walked to the backdoor of the van and opened it wide. Yet another surprise. The entire rear storage compartment was filled with a black solid metal panel.

Jude approached and laid his left hand on the panel's side. A faint glow was seen for a split second under Jude's palm and a compartment located at the height of Jude's waist opened

from the main panel to the surprise of Hemant and Anjly. To their eyes, what stood before them was just a solid face of brushed black metal.

Then writing appeared at Jude's eyelevel as if the panel itself were some sort of viewscreen but the words vanished before either of them could decipher what was written. Jude then removed something from the compartment and it closed again and it completely disappeared into the main panel face. Jude then showed the two of them a long metallic cylinder with a flat bottom. The device was about ten centimeters long but when Jude pressed a button, the bottom twisted and expanded out from the main body by a few more centimeters.

Jude then said, "come with me" and started walking back to the grazing area and approached the affected calf still walking in loops as it followed its mother. He gently caressed the top of her head, stooped down to one knee, and asked Anjly to hold her again.

When Anjly took hold of her, Jude held up the cylinder. As he was doing at this very moment in the living room of Mrs. Song, he then inserted the device into the calf's nostril and activated it. Jude then placed his hand on the side of the calf's face and his hand began to glow. Hemant and Anjly looked on in amazement as he passed his hand from the calf's face, slowly down her neck to her chest, along her back, and finally her flank.

Jude then removed his hand and paused for a moment. The calf struggled loose from Anjly's grasp and began gasping for air. Panic struck Anjly and Hemant for a moment as the calf convulsed then opened its mouth to cough out a fine, dark red mist. They assumed something went terribly wrong and the calf was coughing up blood.

If Hemant and Anjly were startled, so too was a spy lurking in the nearby tall grass laying on his belly with his friends nearby. He gave out a quick high-pitched scream before his friend slapped a hand over his mouth, but it was too late. Their cover blown, the boys who were thought to have returned home when commanded, arose and began to bolt away.

"Stop!" shouted Hemant in a deep commanding tone, more surprised with himself for doing so than the boys because they stopped in their tracks in terror.

"Come back," Hemant commanded and they instantly complied.

Jude laughed and still on his knees motioned for the children to come over to him. Speaking in their tongue he said, "it's alright kids. Look, she's all better."

The boys were taken aback by this Westerner who not only spoke their language but spoke it as if he was one of them and stared at him in disbelief. Then the boy who gave out a scream when he saw the calf in distress did so again, but this shout was one of amazement and joy. As they looked, the calf was bouncing up and down and prancing around Anjly in full control of limbs. Anjly remained on her knees crying tears of joy, a deep consuming joy she no longer thought was possible.

She did not even mind when the little calf extended her long rough tongue and curled it around her face in a gesture of deep love and appreciation. The children then dropped to their knees beside her and took turns petting the calf as it bounced from person to person this time wheeling around in delight at being freed of her burden.

Jude had risen sometime earlier and now turned to Hemant to make plans for their next steps. As he did, he noticed the little boy who gave the cries standing there in the morning sun staring at him.

He stopped and turned to the boy saying, "hello there. What is your name?"

"Naveen, sir."

"Naveen, my friend, Dr. Choudhary, and I want to help out the kids in the village who are sick like the calf. Do you know all the children who got sick?" Jude asked.

"Yes sir," Naveen replied. "That's how we knew about the swimming place. Samir told me I could not swim here. You see, when Jagdish got sick, Samir said that this place was his now. But now since Samir got sick, I thought it was unclaimed, so I took it."

"Well, you're going to need to find a new swimming hole," Hemant said, and the boy's face darkened and again he began to fear that he was in trouble. Seeing his distress, Hemant continued, "these feed boxes are why all the kids were getting sick, Naveen."

Jude then came down to a knee so he could look the boy in the eye. "Naveen, would it be okay with you if I put this device in your nose like I did with the calf?"

Remembering how the calf convulsed and seemed to cough up blood, he recoiled from Jude's suggestion. Jude then held up his hand and said to him, "do not be afraid. You were not exposed to the bad things in these containers as long as the calf. So, you will not be in as much distress as the calf, plus if you have got any of the bad stuff inside you this will get it out before you get sick. We need to see how bad it is. Will you help me?"

Without saying another word, Naveen plucked up his courage and stood stiff, tall, and straight as he could pitching his head back to open his nostril for Jude. Jude then inserted the cylinder and repeated the process with the boy. True to his word, Naveen gave out only a quick light cough when the procedure was over and produced only a very light pink mist.

Jude then began explaining the process to Hemant, "this actuator contains nanoverions of our van driver. Using an interface between receptors my hand and the central computer it creates a precise map of the entire circulatory system, organs, musculature, nerves, everything. The computer then gives feedback to remove the toxins from the blood, coats them, and moves them to the lungs to be expelled. The darker the mist that is coughed up, the more severe the contamination. As they are doing the removal, other units repair the damage left behind, even to the central nervous system."

With that Hemant's eyes grew wide with excitement and seeing this Jude said, "I cannot wait to show you how it works in greater detail, but first we must treat all of the children." Turning back to Naveen he said to him, "will you please tell all the kids that have been swimming here to come and get their spray to keep them from getting sick?"

Naveen nodded quickly and then tore off running toward the village determined to carry out his mission as quickly as possible. Within a few minutes, the young man had a whole troop of kids in tow and lined them all up. Jude then administered the spray to each of them and each gave out coughs of varying degrees of redness.

When all the children had been treated, Jude asked Naveen to come with them as they went house to house giving sprays to all the kids. He asked the boy to explain what was going to happen to his friends so they would not be scared. As they moved around the village, the children following Jude swelled and started to include exuberant adults, the parents of the affected children at first, then increasing to extended family and neighbors. Anjly and Hemant walked among them answering questions and trying their best to explain what was happening.

As they walked, Hemant turned to Anjly and said, "Anj, I could not have even imagined these things happening in my wildest dreams. This is all so very much to take in. Are we... are we witnessing a miracle?"

"No. No, I do not think we are," Anjly said quietly with a tone of assuredness. "There is a purpose and explanation for all of this, Hemant. Jude could have told us he was performing magic and we would have believed him, but he did not do that. I believe he wants to teach us how to do these things and he would not do that if this was miraculous."

Hemant nodded with assent, but despite all his long years of study and achievement he felt like a caveman suddenly confronted with a jet airplane and being told he was to learn how to fly it. He feared that what Jude wanted to teach was beyond his ability to learn.

By the time the group returned to Alpana's house, nearly the entire village was in tow. Word of these events had now reached the village elders and when Jude reached the home, the entire panchayat was assembled outside of her door. For a moment, many members of the group thought they had come there to bar Jude's entrance.

The group of ten men stood there in their matching white pagris and white shirts with stern faces. The sarpanch then stepped forward. He had deep lines across his face and his beard and bushy eyebrows were white. He stood, slightly stooped at the shoulders and neck from age and long years of labor, but after a moment he and Jude exchanged namaskarm and he stepped aside gesturing for Jude to enter.

When Jude walked in, he found Alpana sitting on the ground holding little Priya and gently swaying back and forth. The child experienced a rapid decline since their last visit and was clearly not far away from death. The elder men of the panchayat stayed outside but looked through the doorway intently. Behind them the crowd jostled with each other trying to get a view of the events over the men's shoulders or between their legs for those willing to sit on the ground.

Jude then got down next to Alpana and asked for permission to hold Priya. Quietly nodding with assent, she passed the rigid child into his arms, but she did so reluctantly, terrified this would be the last time she would hold her baby while the child yet lived. She stood and walked over to Prisca who put an arm around her and held her hand. Into her ears, the wise old woman whispered calm words of assurance and they all watched Jude with expectation.

Jude then spoke to Priya softly. Even in her catatonic state he wanted to explain to her what was going to happen. He then positioned the child in a way to try to hide the illumination from his hand from the view of observers but he knew he could not hide the

actuator. He inserted the device into Priya's nose and activated it. They watched for what seemed like an interminable amount of time for something to happen. The child made no movement nor any sign that the treatment was working. Alpana put her hands to her mouth and gave a muffled moan as tears flowed forth in her assumption that her child had died.

The sarpanch then too believed the worst and bowed his head. Despondent he tried to think of what he would say to the assembled crowd outside waiting for news of the miracle. But then, at that moment, the little girl stirred in Jude's arms. No longer able to contain themselves, the elders walked inside the door and the rest struggled for a better view.

Priya then began to convulse for a few moments and against all hope she sat up in Jude's arms. She began heaving, taking in rapid, shallow breaths. Then she began violently coughing. Not the dry cough of one exposed to an allergen, but the gulping, vomiting cough of one saved from drowning at the last moment trying to expel water from deep within her lungs.

As she coughed, a deep, dark, thick cloud of vapor came out of her mouth. The vapor was far darker than what the calf expelled and in the dim light of the dwelling it appeared pitch black. After a minute or two of coughing everything was expelled from her body and floated through the air to oblivion.

Priya then began crying, suddenly she became aware of her surroundings and knowing only that she was in distress and pain, she wanted her mother. Alpana took her in her arms and caressed the frightened child. As she did so, her eyes she thought could produce no more tears flowed forth in an ecstasy of pure joy.

Jude repeated the process with the other children and each and turn were brought by Prisca to their mother's arms. With each child returned to her from the darkness, Alpana's joy doubled, then redoubled, then redoubled again. She collapsed on the ground holding her bewildered children and her tears gave way to laughter, pure laughter that came from the lightest depths of her soul.

His task completed, Jude moved to the door and approached the assembled panchayat and gestured to them to let Alpana have some space and air inside her crowded home. As Jude moved past him, the sarpanch stood in silent amazement, but then mastered himself and took Jude by the arm kindly.

The man then stood in front of the crowd and declared, "the children are healed!"

As he did so, the crowd erupted in cheers and all manner of prayers and shouts of exultation. He then continued, "this man has performed miraculous works. He has cast the demons from our children and they are now healed!"

The sarpanch then asked Hemant to translate his words to Jude, but to his continuing wonder Jude spoke to him in Gujarati, "thank you sir, but there is no need. I understand your words."

The sarpanch was now fully convinced they were in the presence of a messenger of god, if not god himself come among them.

Jude then said to the man and the assembled village, "friends, please, I beg you. Do not believe these events are magical. They are not. They are *not*. I have just given them

medicine. This device is just a tool. Your children were not afflicted by anything magical either. No demons or anything like that caused their illness. They were poisoned by something created by people.”

He saw bewildered looks on the faces of the crowd, but many were listening intently waiting for an explanation. Jude continued, “Dr. Choudhary will explain to you all what we found and how we treated the children. Dr. Choudhary, if you please...”

Jude then gestured to Hemant to come forward and whispered in his ear, “you can do this my friend.” Hemant nodded confidently and Jude stepped aside and joined the crowd listening to Hemant explain how they searched for toxins and where they found them. However, before Hemant got much further, Jude silently slipped away while the attention of the crowd was fixed on his friend.

His going was unmarked by all save one.

As he reached the door of the van Jude heard a voice calling behind him, “please do not leave,” and he turned to find Anjly standing there behind him.

“I am sorry, Anjly. I cannot stay any longer. My friends are waiting and now it is time to go.”

Anjly then reached out and took his hand. “You said to me when we met that you needed my help. I will help you, Jude. Though I do not know what I can do. But if you still want my help... I... may I go with you?”

Jude smiled and now clasped her hand in return, “absolutely, Anj. Absolutely. I could not imagine facing the task in front of me without you, but there is one other thing we need.” Meeting Anjly’s confused expression, Jude then gestured over her shoulder.

She turned and saw a breathless Hemant standing behind her gasping for air. He then spoke as he desperately tried to catch his breath, “Prisca took over. I saw you both leave and I knew you were going.” He looked between the two of them and said, “Jude, I do not know where you are going or what you intend to do, and I know you came for Anjly, but, please, may I go with you too? I am not afraid. I want to learn. Please. Please take me with you.”

Still holding Anjly’s hand in his left hand, he reached out with his right to put it on Hemant’s shoulder and said, “my friend, I was waiting for you. But, come now. Time is short.” The two of them then started toward the van door, but Jude stopped them.

“No. Not that way.” He then slapped the side of the van twice and it drove away from them. “Our path lies over there.” Jude then pointed to a formation of rocks sitting on top of a nearby hill and started walking in that direction at a great pace.

The two of them struggled to keep up with him. Anjly was out of breath when they arrived at the rocks, but Hemant was nearly spent. To their great surprise, Jude stopped and stooped next to what appeared to be a weather worn, carved, and ancient rock. Upon closer inspection they realized it was indeed a lingam and yoni.

“How? How have we never known about this sculpture? Right here on the edge of our own home. How?” Anjly asked.

“Such is the nature of many very powerful things hiding in plain sight, Anjly. You know that better than anyone,” Jude replied. He then reached into his messenger bag and produced two necklaces. The necklaces bore the same symbol he was now giving to Auri, Agnes, and Daiyu at this moment as well.

“As I said my friends, time is too short to explain everything now, but I will make it all clear when I bring you to the meeting of my friends. Take my hand now.”

Jude extended his left hand and they both held on to it as he moved his right toward the lingam. On it was carved a symbol that matched the symbol around their necks. Neither of them recognized it and it did not appear to be any symbol of Sanskrit, but they had no time to put thought to the matter. As Jude’s hand approached the symbol it began glowing.

As he then placed his palm upon the lingam fully, the light filled his hand and escaped from it. They watched as the light consumed the world around them. Anjly and Hemant looked into each other’s eyes and held each other until their field of vision was engulfed in light and they were gone.