

The e-Life of Beena Patel

By Anne Gordon Perry

Beena sat at her husband's old desk holding the new phone, a gift from her son, who was almost never available by telephone. Both of her children were so far away—one on the west coast—Shalini in law school at UCLA, one on the east—Dhaval a sophomore at Boston University. As she dialed her daughter's number automatically, the pattern of the subsequent beeps keenly familiar, she adjusted the folds of her sari.

“Hello?”

“Shalini—”

“Mummy, I'm driving to class.”

“Dear God. Well, don't have an accident.”

“I won't. What do you want? We just spoke—”

“I was watching the tele—”

“And?”

“O dear God, there are floods in south India.”

“Mummy, we hardly know anyone in the south.”

“Still, our country. . . .”

“I'm almost there. I have an exam today.”

“Some buses were washed away.”

“Mummy, I'm telling you, you really should get e-mail. It would be more practical—”

“Over 40 people were killed—”

“I don't have time to talk. I could e-mail you more often.”

“It's a *disaster*. The earthquake in the north, the floods, what is happening?”

“Have to go now, Mummy. I'll talk to you tonight.”

Beena heard the dial tone and replaced the phone in its sleek holder. She looked at the clock. The digital face displayed 1:25. Automatically she calculated 11:25 in California, 3:25 in Massachusetts, 12:25 plus one half hour—12:55 am—in New Delhi. India was the only place she knew of that measured time a half an hour off.

How should she spend her afternoon? In the morning she had sorted her spices. She arranged them in alphabetical order by their English names: anise, basil, cardamom, cloves,

coriander, cumin, and so on. Guests sometimes asked about where her curry powder was, but she never bought it pre-made; she always mixed her own. But now, with no one to cook for—

A computer. Hm. Dhaval had tried to get her to use one. Even after they took her husband's old computer to the recycle place, she had saved the computer disks—floppies, they called them, even though they were hard—but now Dhaval said they were obsolete and useless, replaced by CDs. Shalini joked about using them for coasters. How could her husband's work be relegated now to antiquated, mundane objects?

Even if she had her own computer, who would teach her to use it? Her husband had offered, but at that time she was so busy with the children and the house, with carpools and Halloween costumes and adjusting to Arlington, Texas, where they had moved from New Delhi so long ago.

Heavens! It had been years since she had been back to India. Her phone bill was high just from keeping up with family gossip—another reason to go with e-mail, according to Shalini.

Beena twisted her long braid into a bun and placed a pencil in it, as she had seen Shalini do. Then she went to the bedroom to replace it with one of her hair clips from Devon Street in Chicago, where there was a whole section of Indian stores and restaurants—imagine. Here, there were just a few isolated places, though the Indian population, because of UTA, was quite high.

Her house was clean, her refrigerator well stocked, her spices organized, her afternoon free. What she would have given for such conditions a few years ago! But now she missed her husband, the traffic of her children, the daily serving of her family's dinner. Was this the life Gopal envisioned for her when he brought her here as a young bride? He was working on his MA then, and went straight into the PhD, then became a professor. As his wife, she was often invited to events on campus—she even helped with the Indian student association, sometimes making *pakor*as, *samos*as, or *chapatti* bread for bake sales, loaning artifacts from their home for International Week. But since the funeral, she felt forgotten. Now no one called from the campus. And Gopal's pension was less than he thought it would be. They had never invested money; all she had was in a small savings account. Perhaps she should go back to India. But the children were accustomed to life in America; how could she leave them here?

All right, she thought. I will go just to look at computers. Shalini will be pleased. She grabbed her purse and went out through the kitchen door into the garage. That was what her relatives from rural India had been most fascinated with when they had come—a room for the

cars with its own remote control to open the door. They thought it meant she was very rich. If only they knew. She was ashamed to tell them she had gone to work for a while in the UTA library, during her husband's graduate school years, ashamed to tell them now she had no money to hire a cook or cleaning person. Things were so different back home.

Beena pulled out of the driveway cautiously. Even though she had her own car for more than two decades, she preferred her husband to drive. It was unfair, she thought, that he died before they enjoyed his retirement, to take some trips to see the children. She always flew now.

Best Buy was crowded. A young man who looked to Beena as if he should be in high school asked how he could help her. Sammy, his nametag read.

"I am looking for computer," she said.

"What kind?"

She shrugged. The brand names held no meaning for her. Her son had offered her advice, but she had not written anything down. "For Internet."

"You want a basic computer that will do word processing and get you onto the Internet?"

"I think so." Beena wasn't so sure, though. What words would she be processing? She thought about how her food processor worked and how she preferred to cut up her own vegetables. She was so used to writing out things by long hand, her letters full and round from so much practice at the British school.

"How about Toshiba? It's on sale."

Her mind flashed to her favorite market in New Delhi—Palika Bazaar, which was underground. There she would bargain until the price was acceptable, and then sit down for a cup of tea with the shopkeeper.

Sammy looked at his watch. "Sure you want a computer?"

Beena laughed. "It's my children. They think if I have e-mail I won't bother them so much by telephone."

"Well, that's probably true. My mom sends me messages all the time. But a lot of it's spam she's forwarding."

"What is spam? I thought that was for sandwiches."

Sammy laughed then looked more closely at her. "Say, by chance you're related to Dr. Gopal Patel? He was my math instructor over at UTA before he—"

Beena stood straighter. "My husband."

“He was my favorite professor.”

Beena stared at Sammy, wondering if he had been in the class when her husband had collapsed from heart failure. Perhaps he recognized her from having seen the two of them walking on campus together, arm in arm or holding hands—something not publicly customary in India between a man and woman.

In the end, Beena bought a Toshiba—not because she really wanted it, but because she enjoyed talking with Sammy. It was one of the few links she had with her husband.

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The first obstacle came when Beena tried to set up the computer. She was determined not to have to wait until Christmas when Dhaval would be home. She called Sammy, who told her about the Geek Squad at Best Buy. They came that afternoon and showed her how to start it, how to open a word file and save it, how to set up her Internet account. For the first few weeks her skills could not match her interest, so she enrolled in a free computer class for seniors at the library.

Beena was sure she tested the teacher’s patience. But she brought in treats for the class members and often stayed late to have her questions answered. At last, she was ready to send her first e-mail .

Dear Shalini and Dhaval,

I hope this e-mail finds you well. I think about you both all the time. I have not called much lately because I have been busy with a computer class. I now have a computer sitting on your father’s desk and have learned to process words and send out messages. He would be quite proud, don’t you think? I have even learned to go out on the Internet to find things and to get news. Please write back when you can. I love you very much. Mum

Within minutes came a quick reply from Shalini:

omg mummy u r so hip! btw my cars falling apart gotta run

Beena winced. This wasn’t the same young woman whose English papers sparkled. And what could the strange letters mean? She hoped Shalini wasn’t taking drugs.

Dhaval was so surprised by her message that he called to find out more about the computer and how she had been able to set it up. She hummed Indian tunes for the rest of the afternoon.

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Beena discovered that most of her relatives in India had been using the Internet for some time and were prolific correspondents. Suddenly, she was getting the day's news—who was now dying her hair, who was trying to arrange a marriage—plus jokes and stories and shopping tips, pictures, recipes, gripes, and gossip. Being on-line was magical!

As soon as she woke up, she checked her e-mail . Then she spent time on the Internet—finding sites that gave her a map to the Indian Restaurants on Devon Street in Chicago, Indian names and what they meant, why tumeric was good for one's memory. She learned to understand Shalini's cryptic notes—instant messaging they called it—and felt proud to fill out her e-mail address on any form that came her way. She received discount coupons for local businesses and invitations to receive free gift cards. *This will help with Christmas*, she thought. She signed up for gift cards and waited patiently for them to arrive in the mail. She filled out forms for a free laptop for Dhaval. *If only I could get Shalini a new car*, she thought. Soon her inbox was burgeoning with messages, and she had to search through them to find the ones from people she knew.

One day the sun went down and she had never gotten out of her pajamas, had never made her bed. She discovered that her spices were out of order and there was dust on her small Hindu shrine, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. Everyone in the world wanted to communicate with her—Beena Patel. She was offered mortgage-refinancing, grants from the government, home business opportunities. *It pays to have e-mail* , she thought, *to be out in cyberspace. Now I am an established citizen, a respected person.*

One day she received a message entitled “Lonely?” from a dating service and immediately wrote back: *Thank you for your message, but there must be some mistake. While I am technically single, and sometimes a bit lonely, I will not dishonor the memory of my husband by going on dates, much less getting remarried. I appreciate your concern, but I do not know how you thought I would be interested in your service. With best regards, Mrs. Beena Patel* Oddly, they continued to send her messages, as if they had not read her response.

One day, a strange message appeared, under the subject line “UPSET BCOZ OF UR SHORT DICK?”

*S-ensational revolution in medicine! Inlarge your penis up to 10 cm or up to 4 inches!
It's herbal solution what hasn't side effect, but has 100% guaranteed results! Don't loose your
chance and but know wihtout doubts, you will be impresed with results!*

At first she couldn't believe it. How could anyone post such a message? And how could they possibly think that Beena was a male's name and address her in this way?

*Dear Sir, she wrote back, after some reflection and a great degree of embarrassment.
In the first place, I am a woman, and thus have no need of your product. But even if I were a
man, I would not try such a thing. My motherly advice to you is to be a little more discreet about
what you are offering. And you need a bit of help with your spelling and grammar. Please let
me know if I can be of assistance. With warmest best regards, Mrs. Beena Patel*

But she received no response to her letter; it did not seem to matter whether she wrote back to such people or not; her inbox became gorged with offers to enlarge or shrink body parts and offer her things she could not possibly want. *Create your offspring with Spermamax, one message read. Cum like a superman. WIth Spermamax you wiIl have more sperm than there is water in the ocean. Spermamax will make your sperm as tasty as a cake.*

Disgusted, she stopped by Best Buy to ask Sammy about it, thinking it was perhaps the kind of computer she had bought that attracted the undesirable messages.

“Oh, no, ma'am.” He laughed. “That's just spam—every computer can potentially get it.” He gave her a lesson on spam and how to prevent it.

“Spam. Not for sandwiches.” This time she laughed with him.



Beena worked hard every day learning to sort and delete. She even made a game of correcting the spelling in messages that came to her, sure that the senders would be grateful.

On December 1st she received a heartbreaking message:

Greetings, Madam. I am Alhaji Mohammed Abacha, the only child of a father who was a very rich cocoa merchant, based in Abidjan, the economic capital of Ivory Coast, before he was poisoned to death by his business associates on one of their outings to discuss on a business deal.

Beena began twisting her braid around the pencil that held it up in its bun.

When my mother died on October 24, 2000 in a terrible car accident, my father took me so special since I am motherless.

“Dear God, poor boy,” Beena exclaimed aloud, thinking of Dhaval.

Before the death of my father on June 26, 2001 in a private hospital where he was admitted after the poisoning, he called me to his bedside and told me that he kept a sum of \$38,000,000 dollars (thirty eight million United States dollars)—

Beena gasped aloud.

--in a security and finance company in Abidjan that he used my name as the next of kin in deposit of the fund. He said it was because of this money he was poisoned by his business associate and that I should seek a foreign partner in a country of my choice where I would transfer this money and use it for an investment purpose.

Beena’s heart raced.

Madam, I am honourably soliciting your kind assistance as follows. : 1) to provide a bank account where this money will be transferred to. 2) to serve as the guardian of these funds, since I am a boy of 19 years old, till the time that I will get to the age that I can be able to control the money by myself. 3) to make arrangement for me in your country to continue my educational career and to procure me a residential permit in your country. I am inclined to offer you 25% of the total sum as a mode of compensation for your efforts after the transferring of these funds to your nominated account overseas and 5% for any expenses you may incur.

Her mind whirled. Yes, she could house the boy and arrange for him to go to UTA. She knew how to get a residence permit. He was Muslim, but she had always been respectful of other religions and was impressed with Gandhi’s injunction to raise another child according to his or her own religious background. She would have to buy more blankets, as she had given all of the extras away in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She would need to learn something about African cooking and customs.

Please, madam I will be very happy if this transaction will be concluded with in seven working days to enable me to be completely out of sight from my father's enemies. Please help me for God's sake. I am expecting hearing from you as soon as possible. Madam, this transaction demands absolute confidentiality. On no condition must you disclose it to anybody. There is a saying in my country, Loose lips sinks ship. I am looking forward to your urgent and positive response via my e-mail or my telephone number below. May Almighty god bless you amen. Best regards, Alhaji Mohammed Abacha

PS I got your contact through my personal research and out of desperation decided to reach you through this medium. After prayer, I had the revelation that you will successfully assist me.

Beena stood. How and why this had come to her was a mystery—but then, mysteries abounded in life and perhaps this offered the solution to her problems. If she could only get the money to buy a car for Shalini before Christmas. But how could she keep this news from Shalini and Dhaval? She would convince Alhaji that they were completely trustworthy. Their home would be a safe haven for him when he came.

But, should she call him or send him an e-mail in response?

Beena went into the kitchen to prepare a cup of chai, boiling the spices longer than usual. She wondered what the boy would study in college, how her relatives in India would react when they heard she had adopted a young man from Africa—a Muslim. Well, it was her business, and it would mean she could travel, back and forth to India, to California, to Massachusetts. She could buy some new clothes, perhaps even offer her children some security in life.

Beena went to her computer, leaving the chai in the kitchen.

Dear Alhaji, she wrote. I am sorry you've had to suffer so much. But God indeed is merciful. What was the Muslim phrase that started every verse in the Qur'an? "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." *And compassionate,* she added. What next?

I am glad you have contacted me. I have a spare room for you here, and the university is not far away. Though we are Hindu we will respect your Muslim beliefs. I can help you with your residence visa. My Indian cooking will not poison you—she went back and deleted the last phrase, in deference to his father's sad fate. My Indian cooking is good, but I can learn something of African cooking as well.

She paused. Was this the time to describe her son and daughter, who would surely meet him if he were here in time for Christmas? But the boy was too traumatized to receive everything now. That could wait, along with the spelling and capitalization lesson he needed.

I will give you my number, below. Please arrange to be here in time for Christmas, if you can. I will not betray your trust in me.

With the loving regards of a surrogate mother, Mrs. Beena Patel

She paused only briefly before clicking the send button with her mouse. Her message was gone; now she only had to wait.

The call came sometime in the night. She hadn't been able to sleep anyway—thinking about the things she would need to do to fix up his room.

“Mrs. Patel?”

“Yes?”

“This is Alhaji.” He sounded older than she imagined. “I am happy you can help me.”

“Yes. God must have led you to me.”

“Ah—yes.”

“Are you out of danger?”

“I will be—if you can just give me your account number, so I can transfer these funds.”

“Of course.” She wanted to talk to him about what it would be like to be here—about Shalini and Dhaval and how he would fit into the household. But instead, she went to get her savings passbook and read all the numbers to him. He repeated them back, slowly.

“When do you think the money will be in the bank?” She did not want to seem too eager. After all, this was a mutual service they were providing to each other, and he was the one who was in greater need.

“Tomorrow, I hope.”

“Will you have the funds then to get your ticket to Arlington?”

“Where?”

“Arlington, Texas. Oh, you will have to fly into DFW.”

“I will e-mail you about that.”

“Your room will be all ready.”

“Thank you. Goodbye, Mrs. Patel.”

She heard a laugh and then a click. Why would he laugh? Perhaps because it was strange for him to think about having a room prepared for him, after so much hardship.

Beena lay back on her bed, but still could not sleep. In the morning she sent him particulars about Arlington: its location, its climate, a profile of the student population at UTA. She was adept enough now to cut and paste web addresses into the body of an e-mail, so she did this to provide material he could study and take his mind off of his fears. She spent some time researching airfares to alert him to the best possibilities. *Alhaji will be pleased*, she thought, then practiced his name aloud: *Alhaji, Alhaji, Alhaji*.

Mid morning she put on her best sari, orange with a gold border, along with some of the jewelry she had brought from India. She carefully coiffed her hair. *A rich person must dress*

accordingly, she told herself, then reminded herself that she was not rich yet. Her old worn coat was not suitable to wear with the sari, but she put it on humbly.

She stopped at the bank on her way to buy more blankets. “Has there been a deposit for me today, ma’am?” She held out her savings passbook.

“Let’s see. . . . No. Are you expecting something from Shalini or Dhaval?” Mary, the teller, had been there since Gopal had opened their account years ago.

“I *cannot* divulge the source.” Beena’s eyes were bright, her head high, her manner charged.

“Well, it will come in handy for the holidays.”

“Yes. I will check with you later.”

“*Namaste.*” Mary smiled. She had learned one word to conclude transactions with her many Indian clients.

“*Namaste.*” Beena sang out.

On the way to the mall she passed two car lots. Soon, she thought, I will bring Dhaval to pick out a new car for Shalini. They would arrange to have it in the driveway on Christmas morning with a bright red bow.

She bought several blankets then went to see Sammy at Best Buy. She wanted to ask his advice about what to buy Dhaval for Christmas.

“What is your budget, Mrs. Patel? By the way, you look nice today.”

She could tell he enjoyed her visits, though she had not bought anything since the computer. “Oh—well, no problem with the budget.” She felt radiant. “Perhaps I can buy something for you, too.” He showed her all of the latest items—the nano ipod and other things he thought Dhaval would like. “I will be back in a few days,” she promised. Walking out, she remembered how it felt when she was first in love with her husband.

A second stop by the bank revealed no change in her account. She went home to wade through messages on the computer, but there was no response from Alhaji. Stunned, she thought that he would have at least thanked her for the information. *But he is still in danger*, she reminded herself. *Perhaps he is occupied with buying his airline ticket.*

She lay down, exhausted from the excitement of the last 24 hours. As she slept, she dreamed of her wedding day, of a pile of coins she sorted with henna-painted hands.

Darkness greeted her when she awoke. Her beautiful sari was rumpled. With the bank now closed, there was no point in driving there since she didn't know how to use the automatic teller machine. She took the tags off of the new blankets and put them in the closet of the spare bedroom. She made herself some toast and chai, heated up some leftover *dal*, checked the e-mail one more time, then fell into a pensive state. *What if he were unable to transfer the funds? What if he were shot and killed?* There was nothing she could do; no one she could talk to. She went for a walk in the cold night air, praying as she walked.

In the morning, she donned an everyday sari, put on her worn coat, barely combed her hair, checked again for a message from Alhaji, and then drove slowly to the bank.

“Good morning, ma'am. Any deposit for me today?” She handed her passbook to Mary.

“I'll look again.”

“Thank you.” She glanced out the window; the branches on the trees looked especially bare.

“Beena—Mrs. Patel—there is nothing in this account.”

“What do you mean?”

“The account is empty. It looks like there was a withdrawal yesterday afternoon for . . . \$36, 592.67—the total amount in the account.”

Beena clutched the counter. “That is impossible. He was going to put money *into* the account.”

“Who?”

Beena's head swirled. *Loose lips sink ships*, he had said. She shook her head.

“You can't tell me?”

Beena dropped her purse on the floor. Her face turned ashen. She felt hot, and her hands shook. She bent down to get the purse, a wail coming through her throat.

“Does this have anything to do with the Internet?” Mary studied Beena's demeanor.

“I think I'd better have you talk with Mr. Fernandez. You may be the victim of a scam.”

Mary walked back to get the bank officer.

“Alhaji,” Beena whispered. “How could you do this?” Out the window on one of the bare branches a crow echoed a plaintive cry.

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At home, Beena leaned numbly against her kitchen wall. She sorted her spices. She dusted off her shrine and prayed before it for Alhaji, for the world. *Dear God, help me, help us all*, she said aloud. She lit candles and called upon Krishna, Radha, Ganesh, and Saraswati. Then she invoked Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus, Bahá'u'lláh, and even her dear husband, Gopal. Finally, she turned to Allah and to Muhammad. *Forgive your son*, she said. *He could have been anyone's son*—and then the tears fell.

When she could face her computer, she deleted her spam, then sent out a single message: *Dear Alhaji, I am sorry to realize that you will not be coming to my home to pursue your education, your dreams. Your place will be empty here. Perhaps with the money you have now, you will find other opportunities. I have prayed to Allah and Muhammad for forgiveness for you. Surely they are the same Gods who watch over us all. Sincere regards, Beena Patel*

No reply came from Alhaji. But she received other messages.

My dear, I wish to solicit for your urgent assistance in what will be of great benefit to both of us. I am Mr. Jonathan Fisher, an Accounts Manager with Shanghai Commercial Bank in London. My late customer died in an unknown circumstance in the Netherlands, leaving unclaimed treasury bills totaling 8.2 million pound sterling with accrued dividends. . . .

Beena gritted her teeth and deleted the message. The next message was from a Madam Rita Smyth: *Here writes Madam Rita Smyth, suffering from cancerous ailment. I am married to Sir David Smyth who was in privat practise before his unfortunit death. Our life together lasted for three decades with out child. We made a vow to uplift down-trodden and less-priviledged individuels. When my late husband was alive he deposited the sum of 20 Million Pounds Sterling with his bank here in UK. Recently, my Doctor told me that I have limited days to live. I have decided to donate this fund to you and want you to use this gift which comes from my husbands effert to fund the upkeep of widows, orphens, destitute, the down-trodden, and persons who prove to be genuwinely handicaped financially. . . .*

Beena laughed out loud. She felt no instinct to respond, not even to correct the spelling.