

---

FICTION | SPRING 2022

## Panic Value

By Kate Otto Chebly

“Everything is normal,” the grey-haired pediatrician told Asha, the day before her newborn child perished. Asha knew he was wrong. The night before, she noticed that Kunal had not woken for a feed in almost five hours. His lips, tiny slivers of mottled flesh, puckered as she lifted him toward her chest. She could feel her heart pounding against him through the thin cotton of her nightgown. He slowly fluttered his eyelashes. She nursed him in a plush, oversized recliner, his body cool against her bare abdomen, then kept watch under the soft glow of a small, porcelain desk lamp that illuminated his crib. Now and then she noticed his head would twist ever so slightly sideways. His tiny, chunky thigh would move rhythmically, almost vibrating, and she would again hold him close.

He would eat and yawn, appeased by their intimacy. But Asha felt unsettled.

Asha brought Kunal to the pediatrician as soon as they opened the next morning—the same bespectacled man who had cared devotedly for her first two babies, a man she had no reason to mistrust. The doctor pricked Kunal’s ankle with a tiny needle to extract a few drops of blood for routine laboratory tests. Results in hand, he reassured her. “Post-partum is a hard time, Asha. An *exhausting* time,” he offered, dismissing her with a burst of compassion.

“But—”

“Asha. Kunal looks great. He’s fine.” And he sent them home.

That evening, Asha approached Kunal’s crib for another feed. She clicked on the lamp, but he lay still. His lips, two slender, pale petals. His long lashes, dark feathers at rest. Asha shrieked and the rest was a blur: an ambulance siren blaring, two frightened toddlers crying, and a gaping, excruciating emptiness.

“A genetic condition.” they said.

“Unavoidable.” They said.

“There’s nothing you could have done.” They said.

\* \* \*

Asha mechanically shuffled a pile of papers on her small desk in the hospital’s dim basement, organizing the machine calibration reports into piles by date, then packing them into the deep drawers of an enormous file cabinet. Her small workroom had no windows and some of the overhead fluorescent bulbs had burnt out, so she had brought the porcelain desk-lamp from home to brighten the space. Even though it was a warm day outside—the sticky New York City summer lingering even as autumn began—the cellar air was chilly. She pulled her large,

stained lab coat on over her sweater, and grasped her still-hot coffee cup with both hands. A photo of Kunal was taped to the concrete wall behind her desk, and she gazed up at him. *You would be 18, this year, my love.* Colleagues always assumed Kunal was her grandchild. A year shy of fifty, her jet-black hair was now streaked with ivory, her face etched with fine wrinkles across her forehead and around her eyes.

In her job as a laboratory technician, Asha was primarily responsible for running the blood gas machine. The large contraption sat authoritatively on her desk like a bulky cash register. She fed it drops of blood and the machine spit out a long paper receipt that explained how much of the different components were in a given sample: carbon dioxide and oxygen and hydrogen. Hundreds of finger-sized tubes of blood—some glistening, ruby red, others thick and burgundy—filled up Asha’s office space every day, awaiting her evaluation. Most of her samples came from deep inside the hospital’s walls, whipping through a series of stories-tall plastic pipes, a vacuum operated chute system in which a doctor several floors away could ship Asha a neatly-packed specimen and receive results in several minutes. Some people hurried directly to her subterranean cell and delivered their tube with an urgent demand for more immediate results.

It was Asha’s job to run each sample through the machine and notify the ordering physician about any “panic values”: the results that fell outside a pre-determined range of normal. A sky-high carbon dioxide level could signal that someone was not breathing enough. Too low meant the patient was possibly hyperventilating. “Panic value on Patient 309877,” she would announce in a calm, measured tone, to a stressed-out stranger over the phone, dutifully reading off the precise results, and letting them take care of the rest.

Asha had started this job only a couple of years ago, to fill the void her children created once they stopped needing her at home. Her two daughters were grown, and lived plane rides away at their respective universities. She took a sip of her bitter coffee, recounting all the times she had prioritized their wants over her own needs, how suddenly she had limitless time, and nothing to do. An ancient clock on the wall, stuck five minutes early, ticked forward to 7:55AM. The heavy laboratory door swung open slowly and her co-technician Frank entered, greeting her with a head nod and a smile. She took another sip, and kept shuffling papers.

The hospital was her husband’s hospital. It was technically Kunal’s hospital, too, but they never talked about it as the last place she pressed her cheek to his soft, honey skin. Asha’s husband was a renowned transplant surgeon, a high-stakes, time-intensive career. Even though Asha and Varun were both doctors, having met in medical school back in Kerala, it was understood after their courtship that children would take precedence over her professional aspirations. In those early years she saw valor in deferring her dreams, and Varun was so well suited for the savior role—handsome, confident, self-assured. But it meant Asha was not to expect him to come home on time, not to rely on him to cook a single meal or change a single diaper. It was only after losing Kunal that she began to mourn other losses, too.

“But it’s Divya’s birthday, Varun,” she pleaded with him once, as he abruptly left the dinner table, his pager blaring with a patient emergency. Varun didn’t even make eye contact. “You know I can’t stay,” he replied, emotionless, as he briskly left the house. Or when he missed graduations, proms, even his own child’s case of appendicitis. “There’s a life on the line, Asha,”

he would taunt her, with his imperturbable willingness to sacrifice his family for a stranger, and to make Asha feel like the crazy one for expecting it should be any different.

Just as she finished organizing her files that morning, her eyes fixed upwards again on Kunal's—dazzling, joyful—the heavy door to her workspace swung open, quickly this time. A young woman rushed in, waving a small plastic bag, dripping wet with melting ice, a tube of blood inside. “Is this the lab? I have this...it's...it's urgent,” the woman shouted, flustered. The woman's thick, blond hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, her smooth forehead bare, her eyelids painted generously with a glittering, pastel pink, giving her a wide-eyed look. She nearly threw the sample onto the table as her hands gesticulated in panic.

“Yes, my love,” Asha said in her composed, monotonous voice. She moved softly and swiftly to pull on a new pair of blue latex gloves, take the sample from the woman, type in the sample number, and insert it into the machine. Some people stood silently by the door while Asha ran the test, texting or tapping their foot, waiting impatiently for the sixty long seconds to pass. Others talked incessantly, massaging their anxieties with senseless conversation.

“I've never even been down here,” the woman explained, examining the room.

“Well, welcome,” Asha offered.

“I'm just a social worker,” she said, as if making a confession. “I don't even think I'm qualified to be here. The patient just crashed and the doctor said the sample had to get here and the vacuum system was down and no one else was—”

“Well thank you, then,” Asha cut her off.

“Sorry. I'm Magdalena,” the woman said, her eyes scanning, nervously. “I'm just a little out of my element right now.”

Asha looked up at her, meeting her eyes for the first time.

“Asha,” she said. “And you did the right thing, helping out.”

Magdalena relaxed against the wall as the machine whirred to life, spitting out a thin paper receipt.

Asha looked it over. Mostly normal. But a lactate of 5, a few units above the normal range. It had been decades since medical school, and Asha didn't pretend to be a diagnostician. It could be anything. She beckoned to Magdalena over to her table. “Now. You see this?” Asha tapped the numbers. “Take a picture of this right now and text it to the doctor. Then run it upstairs.” Magdalena nodded and pulled out her phone.

“It's Asha, right? Thank you.” Magdalena turned to leave, then pivoted back. “Is that your grandchild, by the way?” she asked, pointing up at Kunal's photograph. “How adorable, his smile.”

Asha paused, her chest tightened. “He's mine, yes.”

\* \* \*

The rest of Asha's morning was a host of frazzled visitors—usually medical students, or junior, intern-level doctors—and sample upon sample that had been sucked up from the emergency room or the intensive care unit. She made a few calls for panic values, and then motioned over to Frank that she was going on her lunch break.

As she settled into a stiff plastic chair in the busy staff cafeteria with her cold quinoa salad, she saw a text from Varun reminding her that tomorrow was Thiruvonam. She hadn't prepared a thing. Not that they really celebrated much here. Back home, back then, she used to cherish donning elegant dresses, joining in joyful dances. She remembered sitting with her mother and arranging a stunning *pookalam* of golden marigolds, electric hibiscus, and purple butterfly peas. Those pleasures initially survived their voyage to New York as a young couple, but evaporated quickly after losing Kunal. The girls had been too young to register the trauma, her husband too preoccupied.

"It's alright," her mother used to reassure her over a crackling phone line, "Everyone feels alone in a new place."

But the loneliness didn't seem natural to Asha. Years passed, the girls advanced their family's cultural assimilation, and Asha did little to halt old traditions from leaving their life entirely.

She swiped through a series of photos on her phone from the weekend prior; a rare family dinner that Varun had not abandoned, the girls' expressions silly and sweet. Asha did not put photos of her girls up at work. She loved her girls, deeply. But she resented them, too. They took and took—her space, her energy, her attention—and gave so little. She loved her husband only in the staged photographs she would post to the family group-chat. But she hated him, mostly. Every moment he was scrubbed in on a life-saving surgery or staying late at work to finish another paper, she was scouring stains out of the girl's school uniforms, braiding their unruly hair into neat plaits, reviewing their calculus homework for errors. He was beloved at the hospital, the model of a dedicated caregiver, and the recipient of awards in research and clinical excellence. Asha got nothing but complaints that house was not clean enough, that the girls' grades were not high enough, that the groceries were too expensive this week.

"Oh, Asha, don't make such a big deal," her childhood friend chastised her just last week. "Men are just like that." But Asha burned inside, betrayed and constricted.

\* \* \*

Asha returned back to her basement laboratory at 12:55 PM on the dot, and nodded a thank you to Frank, who then took his turn for lunch. A few moments later, as she was wiping the machine's surface down with an antiseptic cloth, another torrent of frenzied energy entered her space. A first year doctor, his badge declared. He handed a syringe of blood to Asha as he breathed heavily.

"Elevator was taking too long," he gasped, and Asha nodded, typing in the sample number.

“This guy’s looking absolutely horrible, sorry to rush you, we’re just really worried about him,” the intern said to Asha. It was always the junior people apologizing to her for taking up space, for being concerned about a patient even though they had every right to be concerned.

“It’s OK, love,” Asha said, gently.

“He seemed fine when he came in. Lifelong smoker, COPD. Here all the time for his breathing. His pulse ox was a little low but it’s usually high 80s anyway. Then he started breathing kind of fast. And hard, you know? Nebes weren’t helping. And then he breaks into some sinus tach, then chest pain...”

Asha listened as the slow minute passed, imagining the distortions that would be revealed by her machine. The receipt slid out of the printer, interrupting the intern’s monologue. He hovered over Asha’s shoulder as she tore off the slip and reviewed the results.

“It looks...normal?” the intern said, quizzically.

Asha studied the paper. Could that be right? Normal levels of hydrogen, carbon dioxide, bicarbonate. Oxygen was a little low. Maybe the sample wasn’t drawn correctly? Or maybe the patient wasn’t really as sick as the intern said? It was still early in the year for these new doctors. She released the paper from her grip and the intern heaved a sigh of relief, moving for the door.

“Wait,” Asha called out. “Just wait. Please, let me see it again.” The intern turned back to her, annoyed now for delaying his return upstairs, for over-inserting herself. “Your phone, do you have access to the medical records? Can you pull up his old labs?” she asked him.

The intern looked at Asha with an eyebrow raised in condescension. He sighed and tapped on his smartphone screen a few times, showing her results from the past year of the patient’s hospitalizations. Chronically acidic blood. Routinely high carbon dioxide. Now, suddenly all normal? Her mind ticked away: why would a man who usually retained air in his lungs suddenly appear to be breathing in an entirely normal way?

“So, today’s sample is actually better than ...?” the intern trailed off. “Oh, wait. No. *Shit.*”

“Mmmm.” Asha agreed.

“Thank you, ma’am,” the intern shouted, as he sprinted out the door and towards the stairwell. The laboratory door closed with a loud bang, and with Frank still at lunch, Asha was left alone in her small cell, staring up at Kunal’s bright eyes, his supple cheeks, his mess of black hair, hovering over the desk full of papers.

---

**Kate Otto Chebly is an American internal medicine physician working in Caracas, Venezuela. She is the author of the book *Everyday Ambassador: Make a Difference by Connecting in a Disconnected World*.**

---

© 2022 *Intima: A Journal of Narrative Medicine*