

THE PLACE WHERE EAST BEGINS
(A bedtime story of the Search for Truth)
by
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Once upon a time there was a princess named Neela, who was everything a princess should be. She was beautiful and intelligent and much loved by everyone in the kingdom. Still, Neela was discontent, for she realized that she did not know that thing everyone else seemed know, that thing called Truth.

So she went to her father the King, and said, "Father, am I the only person who doesn't know Truth?"

Now, the King was a very wise man, and so he did not answer immediately. "My child," he said, "that is a deep question, and I must ponder it carefully. Come back tomorrow."

When Neela returned to the throne room the next day, she found that her father had cancelled all his kingly activities and had gathered around him all the wisest men of the kingdom.

"Beautiful one," the king said, "you have asked the most important question it is possible to ask. I have been waiting for this moment for many years. Princess, when you were born a strange and ragged man from the hills appeared at court and prophesied that you would be one who knew Truth. He said, and I remember it clearly, 'Her Knowing can begin only when the question arises from deep within her. This will happen in the natural course of events.' Then he sang a little song, playing

on an instrument that sounded like distant bees, and this was the song:

Some travel to the East, ho!

And some go to the West.

But the farthest Truth of all, oh!

Is neither East nor West.

The answer's in the question, ho!

The taste is in the thirst.

Which of these Truth-Seekers, oh!

Will reach Truth first?

“I'm sorry, father,” Neela said. “But I don't understand it at all, I'm afraid.”

“Don't be sorry and afraid at the same time, my child,” the King said. “Sorry is for the past and afraid is for the future. It isn't princesslike to mix them up so. But, in any case, *I* don't understand the song, either. I simply memorized it because I believed it to contain information I might need at some future time, which is Now. It is one of my better habits, I think.”

Neela nodded patiently, being used to her Father's explanations. It was his Kingly practice to take everything apart and make a judgment on it, including himself. It made him a good King and a poor conversationalist.

“Now, my child,” the King continued, “the Time has come and your Knowing has begun. Do you feel any different? No, I thought not. In any case. Now, here are the wisest men in all the kingdom. They are instructed to answer any question, no matter which or what, you may put to them.”

With that the King departed with swirling robes, carried along by that natural course of events appropriate to Kings.

Neela looked around her at the assembled wise men. She hadn't known there were so many. They were a little intimidating to Neela, so dignified in their robes of honor and golden badges of achievement. Great thinkers were there, whose names she knew with awe (though she did not know what, exactly, it was they thought). There were philosophers and astrologers, mathematicians and professors, writers of fact and fancy alike. The more she considered their learned, sombre faces, the more confused she became. She couldn't think of a question that she could ask, and finally she just blurted out what was on her mind.

“But why are there so many of you?” she cried.

At this, the wise men began to confer among themselves in low voices, ignoring Neela altogether. At last, the oldest and wisest of them stepped forward.

“Beautiful Princess,” he said. “The answer to your question is this: We are many, because Truth is many.”

“But surely,” Neela said, “if there is one among you who knows Truth, he alone is sufficient to instruct me. The rest of you can go home and quit standing around, then.”

The philosopher cleared his throat. “No, my dear, you don't understand, yet. You see, there are many, many truths, and each of these revered gentlemen is in possession of one humble part. By combining all our knowledge and wisdom, perhaps you may arrive one day at Truth. Of course,” he added, “only after many years of arduous study and calculation and correlation and confabulation.”

Neela thought about this, then shook her head sadly. “Compared to your wisdom, I am ignorant indeed, and I do not wish to be an obstinate Princess of the kind one reads about. But I know, rising from deep within me, that the Truth I seek is not many things, but only one thing. It can't be put together from a bunch of parts like a broken toy. And I do not think it can be distributed like hot buns among many men.”

This caused a stir among the wise men, and Neela caught an occasional flicker of a glance - sometimes thoughtful, sometimes admiring - as their discussion proceeded. Finally the philosopher left the group and bowed deep before Neela.

“Beautiful Princess,” he said. “You are more wise than any of us, for your search begins where ours ends. We only ask that, if you should succeed, you will return and instruct us.”

With this, each of the wise men bowed deeply before Neela and left the room in ceremonious single file, in order of eminence. When they had gone, Neela sat down at the foot of the throne, and tears came to her eyes.

However, in the natural course of events her sadness disappeared completely. It was a beautiful day at the palace, as always, and she thought she might take a walk in the garden before trying to figure out what to do next. From that direction she heard a faint humming sound, like the sound of bees seeking nectar.

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Neela's own garden was a very special place, with special treats all about, things to see, and hear and touch and smell and taste and think about. It was full of flowers with names like Perfumed Delight, and Fragrant Hour. It was the most pleasant of places, and Neela spent many happy hours there throughout her whole life.

Neela was idly following the sound of bees, when she suddenly realized

that she was hearing music instead, the barely heard music of the finest of strings. As she rounded a hedge, Neela suddenly caught sight of the musician. He was a kindly looking man from the hills, dressed in a patched cloak, and he was sitting cross-legged under a banyan tree, facing south, playing a little stringed instrument that he held in his lap. His eyes were closed, and Neela thought he must be absorbed in the fragile humming sounds he played.

Though he looked a little rough and unconventional, Neela had no fear, even at finding him in her private garden. For she knew that you could hear a man's soul in the music he played, and his music was gentle and fine.

In fact, remembering the story of the prophecy, Neela thought she had a pretty good idea of who this ragged man might be. Discarding her normal impulse to be polite, Neela walked straight up to him and sat down facing him. He neither opened his eyes, nor stopped his fingers moving on the strings, which Neela thought a little rude.

“Sir,” she said politely. “Do you know Truth?”

The ragged musician opened his eyes and looked at Neela. For a moment Neela thought he had mistaken her for someone else, because he looked at her with all the love of a father for a daughter. The strings shimmered beneath his fingers.

“Yes,” he said.

“Can you tell it to me, please?”

“No.”

The singing bees continued unbroken, as though the conversation were of no import whatever. As Neela pondered, she suddenly thought of the line of the song that said “The answer's in the question, ho!” She didn't know quite what that meant, but she said,

“Sir, am I asking the right questions to learn what I wish to

know?”

“No,” said the musician, and his instrument hummed. “But now your Knowing has begun, for you know it requires a proper question to get a proper answer.”

For a moment Neela felt a little flash of pride that her Knowing had begun. But as she reflected, she realized she was no closer than before to knowing what a proper question was. The more she thought about it the more her mind spun around and around with all the thousands of questions she could think of to ask. Finally, in the natural course of events she just simply ran out of thinking and said with all her heart,

“Please, sir, I have thought and thought and *thought* and I don't know what a proper question might be. Will you help me, please?”

“That is the proper question,” the musician said, smiling. Though his fingers ceased to move on the strings, it seemed that his music continued.

“Princess,” he went on, “you are beautiful beyond your beauty and wise beyond your intelligence. Indeed, your wisdom surpasses that of scholars, for you now know that the answer you get is contained in the question you ask. I cannot tell you Truth because Truth cannot be told. It can only be experienced.”

“I see, I think,” said Neela. Her head felt a little strange.

“The rule is, you only answer the question I ask, so if the question is wrong, the answer is wrong, too.”

“Not I alone,” said the musician. “It is the whole world that answers thus. There is a more secret meaning as well, which you will realize in the natural course of events.”

“Thank you,” said Neela. “What are the other rules of my search?”

“There are no rules to your search, beautiful Princess.”
Neela was sure she heard a twinkle of laughter from his strings.

“You confuse me, sir,” Neela said, “and I think you are joking with me. You just said a rule of my search was 'The answer's in the question.' But now you say there are no rules. Which is true?”

“Both,” said the ragged man. “And neither. In calling it a rule, you brought the rule into being. But as for me - I know no rules, except -” and here his fingers brushed the strings, setting the air to shimmering - “the rule of Perfect Harmony.”

“Please, sir,” Neela said. “Don't confuse me any more. My head is just swimming.”

“My child,” the musician said softly. “It is you who confuse yourself. Please do not look outside yourself for something that lies only within.”

“I *am* sorry,” Neela said. “I didn't mean to blame you, or anything. It's just that you make everything turn into its opposite. Questions are answers and rules are no-rules and I don't know what all.” Neela, frankly, was beginning to pout just a bit. They sat quietly for a bit, the musician absorbed in his music, Neela in her thoughts.

“In my country,” the musician said, “there are no opposites. No up and down, no hot and cold, no left and right, no black and white, no good and bad, no out and in, no coming and no going.”

“Well, good heavens,” said Neela. “How do you get around and tell what things *are*, then?”

“Oh, it just comes in the natural course of events,” the musician said. “In the country I come from.”

“Well,” said Neela, “I wish you could tell me something that doesn't just twist around on itself like that.”

“I have already told you all you need to know,” the ragged musician said. “But for your beauty and wisdom, I will tell you one more thing. I will tell you precisely where Truth is located, though you must search it out for yourself.”

“Please do,” said Neela, clapping her hands. “I do so much prefer travelling to thinking, and I *am* tired of riddles and opposites.”

“Truth,” he said, brushing the strings with his fingertips, “is concealed in the very place where East begins.”

“Then I shall go and find it!” Neela cried happily. She ran quickly from the garden to begin preparing her journey. When she realized she had not thanked the ragged musician for his instructions, she ran back as quickly as she could to the great tree. But he was gone. In the high branches there was only the remembrance of a sound, the sound of bees seeking nectar.

3

Neela knew exactly the place where East began. In fact, every morning of her life she had seen the red sun rise over the Enchanted Hills, and she knew that where the sun rose was the East. Though she had never before travelled away from the palace, she knew from reports that the Enchanted Hills were less than a day's journey on foot. She would go to the place where East began, find Truth, spend the night and return to her accustomed life the next day. (Now you should know that there was nothing at all hazardous in Neela's kingdom. It never even occurred to her that she might become cold, or hungry, or threatened in any way. It was a very nice kingdom indeed.)

She set out on her journey the very next morning before dawn. The streets of the city were freshly dewed, and the fruit and flower markets were just setting out their day's wares. It was a happy and cheerful time, and Neela's spirits were high as she watched the spires of the city dwindle behind her. She marked her direction by the rising sun in front and her

shadow behind. At noon, when there was neither rising sun nor shadow for direction, she stopped to refresh herself at the riverbank. She sat on a warm boulder and watched the flashing golden shapes of fish beneath the surface. For her lunch she picked a luscious mango from a nearby tree and drank the clear water of the river. Then she curled up for a nap in the shade, wrapping herself in a beautiful cloak of iridescent bird's feathers.

For a few moments, she watched the sunlight darting through the leaves into the little glade. *It's looking for the shade*, she thought dreamily, and giggled. How silly. Because where the sunshine *is*, the shade is *not*! She giggled again, but this time it was in her sleep.

She did not sleep long - just a 'proper little nap' her Father used to say - and when she woke she found there was a little skiff moored to the bank right in front of her.

How lovely, she thought, *someone has left me this boat to ferry myself across the river. How kind the people are in my kingdom.*

As she poled the little skiff across the gently flowing water she noticed a roughly written note pinned to a seat. It said:

WHEN YOU'VE CROSSED THE RIVER LEAVE THE BOAT BEHIND

"Well, now," she said aloud. "How foolish do they think I am? I certainly wouldn't try to carry it *with* me." She laughed at the thought of it, and just then she reached the other shore.

Neela moored the little skiff securely for the next traveller, and went on her way in the pleasant afternoon. She watched her shadow lengthen ahead of her, pointing to the place where East began. She found it both amusing and exciting to know that just by following her own shadow she would eventually arrive at Truth. When the sun was in front of her, it was just the opposite, of course.

Neela soon arrived at the foot of the Enchanted Hills, and began to climb toward the crest. She spent a pleasant time smelling the wild flowers

and watching the meadow butterflies as she climbed, and so it was late in the afternoon when she reached the top.

Now, the ragged musician had said Truth was 'concealed' here, and that meant she would have to look very, very carefully. But Neela, as has been said, was very wise, and to tell the truth, she prided herself on her logical mind. Just now her logic told her that the place where East began was the very crest of the hill. From the palace window that was the very exact furthest East there was.

At the exact crest, Neela's heart leaped with anticipation, for there was a natural fountain, springing up of itself at the very highest point. Around it had been created a tiny, exquisite grove of perfumed trees. A perfect, soft breeze whispered along the hillcrest, bringing the gurgling of the fountain and the afternoon scent of full-blown flowers. And mixed with these, a distant humming, as of bees seeking nectar.

4

“Oh, how fortunate,” Neela thought. “Just when I am so thirsty - and perhaps Truth is concealed in this very fountain as well. How marvellously things work out in the natural course of events!”

As she knelt by the little fountain, a golden glint caught her eye. She saw that the flat stone where she knelt was set with tiny letters of gold:

THE TASTE OF THE WATER IS IN THE THIRST

It's from the song, she thought. The taste is in the thirst.

Neela contemplated this, but it still seemed to her it was quite wrong-headed. Everyone knew the taste of water was exactly the opposite of thirst. That's why they went together so nicely.

“And anyway,” she said aloud. “The taste of the water is in the *water* and the thirst is in *me*.” So saying, she scooped

up a delicate handful of sparkling water and drank small sips, like a cat.

She savored each drop in her mouth, feeling her thirst magically disappear and be replaced with pure satisfaction and joy. When she was fully content, she sat back on her heels and looked down again at the fountain's golden motto. Suddenly she realized there was another line below the first, and it now read:

THE TASTE OF THE WATER IS IN THE THIRST

AND HAPPINESS IN THE VANISHING OF DESIRE

“Well,” she said. “*That* at least makes sense. What makes me happy is when my thirst goes away. Perhaps - if this *is* the fountain of Truth - I shall never be thirsty again.”

By now the sun was setting far to the West, beyond the city, beyond the palace and her special garden, beyond - everything. She watched the play of light on the clouds, perfectly content. Just before full dark, she lay down to sleep in the perfumed garden, her coverlet of bird's feathers almost floating above her body. The night breeze was as soft as her own skin, and the stars above twinkled like the ragged musician's eyes.

Neela woke when the sky was barely alight, as was her custom. She bathed herself with little handful of the fountain's pure water. Her skin tingled and the warm wind caressed her, making her feel as light as the clouds.

Just then the sun rose over the Eastern horizon, and washed her with warmth as the fountain had washed her with coolness. She stretched her arms out to it, glorying in its radiance...

“Oh, no!” she said suddenly, dropping her arms like a rag doll. “I haven't reached the place where East begins, after all. The sun still rises in the East, and *it's* rising way over *there!*” She sat down with her chin in her hand.

“I must reason this out logically,” she said to herself. “I went as far East as I could see from the palace. So, logically,

I have reached the place where East begins. But East still goes on as far as I can see - oh, what can be wrong?"

Just then a flight of bees must have passed her flower-rich grove, for she heard their sound in her head. Even fainter than that was something that was almost words, or the meaning of words without their sound. It whispered, "Don't look outside yourself for something that lies only within."

"I understand, I understand," Neela said. "I have not reached the place where East begins - I have only reached the place where my eyesight ended. How strange! And now I am Here, and there is a new eyesight and a new East, and - but, when will it ever end? Oh, I just don't know what to think."

"Well," said a deep voice, so near to her as to make her start. "If you *must* think, then think this: 'The logic of the palace is not the logic of the fountain.'"

Beside the fountain sat a large green frog, rather pleasant looking (for a frog), and it had been his voice that had startled the princess.

"But - logic is logic, isn't it?" Neela said.

"Not at all," said the frog. He took an enormous leap right over Neela's head, landing behind her. "You see," he continued complacently, "it all depends on where you hop from, doesn't it? And what direction you're facing."

"That doesn't make *any* sense," Neela said. "Are you a handsome prince under a spell?"

"Yes, of course," said the frog. "But if you don't mind, miss, could we forget about the kissing thing and all that, please? Frankly, in my present condition I rather much prefer female frogs to beautiful princesses. Nothing at all personal, you understand."

"But don't you want to be a handsome prince again?" Neela

asked, mystified. "They always do in the stories."

"Not particularly," said the frog. "The prince's prison is the frog's freedom, if you catch my drift. Anyhow, frogging is not the worst experience I've ever had, you know. The work is not demanding and your time is your own."

"But - what kind of work does a frog do?" Neela asked.

"Just frogging," said the enchanted prince. "It's the natural course of events, when you're a frog. Don't look outside yourself for something that lies only within."

"I wish everybody would quit saying that," Neela said, stamping her little foot.

"No doubt," said the frog. "However."

"However - what?" Neela said.

"Nothing. Just 'however'. Frogs don't *mean* anything by 'however'. Frogs don't mean anything by anything, you know. Frogs just mean frogs."

"I guess I don't really know very much about frogs," Neela said humbly.

"No, nor logic neither, I fear," said the frog. "Well, no matter." He took another great leap and landed in the spot he had first been. Neela turned around. "Goodbye," he said. "Nice talking to you. Thanks about not kissing and all that. It's kind of a bore."

"But wait!" Neela cried. "Can't you help me in my search? I'm looking for the place where East begins."

"I've already helped you," said the frog. "I told you and I showed you. What do you expect from a frog?"

“But can't you even give me a clue?” Neela pleaded. “I'm sorry I don't understand, truly I am. But everything here confuses me, and I don't think I should be so confused at the fountain of Truth.”

“Fountain of Truth? Fountain of Truth?” the frog exclaimed. “This is just *The Fountain*. Where *I* live, you know. I call it Frog Fountain. You drink its water and your thirst is quenched. That's the only Truth to be found here.”

“But what do you mean?” Neela asked. “Please, Sir Frog
-”

“Frogs just mean frogs, Princess. Has anyone ever told you you have a very short memory?” And with a great PLOP! he leaped into the fountain. Instantly his green skin disappeared in the green water and Neela could no longer see where was frog and where was water.

“Well,” thought Neela. “He wasn't much help, for a magic frog.” Her reading had led her to expect quite a lot from magic frogs, and she was a little disappointed.

She sighed, and looked Eastward at the rising sun, still close to the horizon. There had to be *someplace* over there where East began, but she couldn't guess how terribly far it might be. The edge of the world, probably, and she wasn't truly sure she wanted to walk that far. It seemed such a *long* way.

The sun's warmth was bringing out the scent of flowers, and she heard the faint sound of bees seeking nectar.

Imagine Neela's surprise when she returned to the grove where she had slept to find a handsome young prince there! And furthermore, he had wrapped about his shoulders Neela's own rainbow cloak of bird's feathers. He seemed quite embarrassed when Neela appeared.

“Hello,” she said. “Are you cold?”

Hastily the Prince took the cloak from around his shoulders.

“Oh, no,” he said. “I was just admiring your beautiful cloak. I was imagining it belonged to a beautiful princess.”

“Yes, it does,” Neela said politely. “Me. But you're quite welcome to use it if you're chilly.”

“No, no,” said the Prince. “It is so much more beautiful on you.” He clasped the clasp about her white throat, and stepped back admiringly.

“Well, now,” he said. “My name is Aleen. What's yours? You truly are beautiful, you know.”

“I'm Princess Neela. I'm very wise, too, at least everybody at home says so. But I don't feel very wise at the moment.” She sighed. “I'm searching for Truth, you see.”

“That's interesting,” said the Prince Aleen. “So am I. Since we have both come Here, it must be very near.”

“Perhaps,” said Neela, just a little sadly. She was beginning to realize that things were not always as they seemed to be.

“But it must be near,” said Aleen. “You see, I've had all the right adventures. There was the old witch with her strange magic, and a prophecy when I was born, and a dreadful dragon -”

“For me it was a ragged musician and a flippant frog,” Neela said.

“Oh,” said the Prince. “To tell you the truth, I don't feel any closer to Truth than when I started out. You wouldn't have a bite to eat about, would you?”

“There's some very nice fruit here in the grove,” Neela said, “and the water from the fountain.”

“It's a magic fountain, I imagine,” said the Prince.

“Why, yes,” said Neela. “But how did you know?”

“It figures,” Aleen muttered to himself. “It had to be.”

He said no more about it. They ate the fruit of the grove, laughing as the luscious juice trickled down their fingers, and drank the sweet water of the fountain. They were very content. It was very pleasant to forget about searching for a while, just to eat, and drink and enjoy each other's company in the natural course of events. They bantered with each other, and all the jokes meant “You are beautiful to me.” They sang all the songs they knew, and each song meant “You are beautiful to me.” They chatted about their lives, and compared notes on Kings and palaces and gardens and logic and adventures on the search for Truth.

“But you see,” said the Prince. “Everything seems to come out just the way you thought it would. To tell you the truth, I was even sort of expecting to run into a beautiful princess right about now. Do you suppose - I hope you won't take offense - do you suppose you might be a figment of my own imagination?”

“I don't think so,” Neela said. “But it would be all right, anyway, because I rather like the person I am in your imagination. And that would mean I create you in my imagination, too, you know. Perhaps we make each other in our waking dreams.”

“Well, it all certainly *seems* real enough,” Aleen said. “And I guess the only thing we've got to go on is how things *seem*.”

“Yes, yes,” Neela laughed. “I know what you mean. From the palace it *seemed* as though the place where East began was right Here, because it was as far East as I could see.”

“Seeming and being are two different things. And anyway,” Aleen said, “you’ve got the wrong directions. The Old Witch said Truth was concealed at the place where *West* begins.”

“It was East, I’m sure,” said Neela. “So I’ve been travelling toward the rising sun.”

“No,” the Prince answered. “It was West, and I’ve been travelling toward the setting sun. I follow my shadow in the morning and the sun in the afternoon.”

“And I do just the opposite,” Neela said wonderingly. “Which of us is right, then?”

Instinctively, both looked up for their faithful guide. But they had played away the morning together, and the sun was motionless above in the bright sky, neither rising nor setting. It was Perfect Noon, and they cast no shadows outside themselves.

“But - is there still an East and West, or not?” Neela said wonderingly.

“Yes, of course,” said Aleen excitedly. “Look, Neela, look! Don’t you see? *You* are the place where East begins. In front of you is East, behind you is West. *You* are the very place between, that is neither East nor West!”

Then Neela understood that East and West were not in the outside world at all. Inside herself was the beginning and the end of both East and West. And she seemed to hear the echo of many voices saying, “Don’t look outside yourself for something that lies only within.” And looking within, she found the very place where East begins, and the thirst-quenching fountain that was there, and she was happy, happy, happy.

It was a long time later, or perhaps no time at all, when the Prince Aleen and the Princess Neela began to wend their way down from the Enchanted Hills. They walked very close together, as one, under the shining cloak

of bird's feathers. Behind them on the flower-jewelled slopes there was the faint humming of a million invisible bees seeking nectar.

The answer's in the question, ho!

The taste is in the thirst.

Which Truth-Seeker, oh!

Will reach Truth first?"

Some travel to the East, ho!

And some go to the West.

But the farthest Truth of all, oh!

Is neither East nor West.

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