
An Unlikely Goddess

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...The Hindu goddess, Sita, is said to have been born from the Earth.

King Janaka discovers the beautiful infant and in her beauty, believes in her divinity. He raises her as his own daughter.....

Prologue

Unlike her namesake, Sita's first mistake was being born.

A girl, her mother thought, eyes dark in abject terror. *What if he leaves me?* She swallowed, increasing the dryness in her post-delivery mouth, the stiches across her abdomen itching. An Unlikely Goddess No water. Only ice chips until her bowels An Unlikely Goddess passed the tests. An Unlikely Goddess Mythili pressed back against the pillows. She closed her eyes, pushing her fingers into the sockets until the darkness was punctuated by bone-white stars. She wished she could as easily tune out the gurgles of the baby in the bassinet beside her.

Yet, even premature and unwanted, Sita was obliviously happy to enter the world, beaming her infant smile at anyone or anything she saw: the nurse, her aunt, her mother's back, the noxiously-pink cement walls of the Madras hospital in which she found herself. Several pounds underweight, she was otherwise fine—a petite, brown-skinned baby with tufts of black hair crowning a smooth scalp. How could she be expected to know that from her first breath she was, and always would be, a living reminder An Unlikely Goddess of her mother's failure to produce a first-born male heir?

Though swaddled and placed in the bassinet immediately after delivery, her eyes were alive with motion. She blinked up at the faces of passersby, but they were admittedly few, An Unlikely Goddess so instead, she followed the blinking lights, the creeping shadows and the occasional appearance of a nurse. Everything An Unlikely Goddess about the world kept her busy with delight until sleep washed over her little body

“Look at that smile,” the young nurse said, cradling Sita against An Unlikely Goddess her flat bosom.

“Aamam,” Priya, the childless aunt, agreed, rubbing a forefinger across the baby’s somewhat wrinkly face.

Instead of replying, Mythili, Sita’s mother, pulled a see-through blue sheet up to her chin and turned her face away.

“Vaa ma,” Priya said, lovingly reclaiming the baby from the nurse’s professional arms. “See, see?” Priya urged Mythili, her sister-in-law. “Look at her, the sweet little one. You can’t be sad.”

But the words missed their mark; Mythili’s eyes remained An Unlikely Goddess secluded behind An Unlikely Goddess veined eyelids.

Days passed. Baby Sita’s bold smile stretched open across her toothless mouth. She laughed at everyone and everything. If she An Unlikely Goddess could have, she would have sat up, gripping the edges of her glass bassinet, and, without blinking, taken in every sight and sound of the overcrowded maternity unit she sensed beyond the swinging door of her mother’s private room. She would have craned her head to peer at the nurses in their worn cotton saris, scurrying around the male doctors whose sweat-dampened lab coats testified to the scathing Madras summer heat.

Instead, she made do—a trait she would need sooner than anyone knew — by shifting her head left, then right, straining to see what she could against the limits of her peripheral vision.

“She won’t stop looking at me,” Sita’s exhausted mother said when her sister-in-law

returned with new clothes for the baby.

Priya berated Mythili for her negligence with two clicks of her tongue. She scooped up the wiggling bundle from the bassinet.

Mythili's heart raced at the sight of her barren sister-in-law cossetting the child. *Why hadn't a girl been born to them?* She wondered. *They An Unlikely Goddess would have happily taken a daughter over no child at all.*

"Ma, come and try," Priya said, unwinding the long blanket in order to put on the silk strip of fabric, so recently wound An Unlikely Goddess around a brass idol's body during the day's *pooja* at her neighborhood temple. Mythili shook her head even as Priya forced the baby onto her slack breast. She turned away again, resenting her confinement to bed. She couldn't walk for twenty-four hours, and, the doctor had warned her, even then she would need assistance. She crossed her arms over her chest. Had anyone sent a telegram to Sita's father? Mythili wondered what her brother's message to Sundar would say. *Child born. Stop. Everyone healthy. Stop.* Never one for words, he would leave out enough detail that Sundar, walking home from his classes or on the way to have chai before a study session, would crumple the telegram in his hand and keep going.

The baby rooted, searching this way then that for her breast. Only a few drops of clear liquid had seeped from Mythili's right nipple. She wasn't going to try to squeeze out An Unlikely Goddess more. Not when she was expending all her energy to keep from crying. Priya took the baby back and placed a strip of orange silk to Sita's eyes, so the newborn could receive the blessing from the neighborhood temple within its strands. Sita squirmed, sensing another breast in her vicinity. Unused to the weight of motherhood, Priya lost her grip. Both baby and holy silk fell to the floor.

"Andava!" Priya shrieked, her hands flying to her head in habitual self-admonishment. Sita was sprawled on her back, no sound coming from her.

"Is she...?"

Mythili crouched on the floor next to her child, uncertain what to do.

Sita gurgled at the sound of her mother's voice, so near.

"Pick that baby up!"

The women were startled by the imperative of a doctor's voice. Priya scooped the baby up, fabric and all.

Mythili quivered in the loose hospital gown. The doctor's tone was so much like her absent husband's.

"Get a nurse in here before someone kills this child," the doctor shouted into the hallway. "Ignorant villagers," he An Unlikely Goddess muttered, taking in Priya, who was An Unlikely Goddess resting on her hamstrings, nervously running the short piece of silk through her hands.

"We aren't...." Mythili protested, her voice and eyes showing the first signs of life in two days. "We live in the city." Her face burned at the insult.

The doctor eyed the two of them, leaning forward on his toes as if he intended to take the baby back. "Where's the father?" he asked.

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"Finishing his degree in Chandigarh," Priya answered.

"See, we are educated," An Unlikely Goddess Mythili said eagerly. Her husband would be mortified if he could see the disdain in An Unlikely Goddess the man's eyes. Barred from his chosen profession by low scores on the entrance exam, hospitals reminded Sundar of his aspirations. And his intellectual shortcomings.

The doctor shook his head and turned away as the nurse entered the room.

“Make sure they take that baby home alive,” he ordered, loud enough to cause all three women to blush.

Sita had not made a sound since her descent to the colorless concrete floor. She sensed something amiss. This was her second mistake, to try to make sense of the world around her instead of simply being in it—to question, assess and insist on interpreting things for herself. Even in infancy there was little sign of the reticent Hindu goddess wife she was named after. This was her one moment of latent submissiveness that echoed the existence of the first Sita — she, the Hindu "Holy Mother," exemplary in her patience and willingness to serve God's whims.

Sita would repeat her second mistake until it became a lifelong impulse to seek. Perhaps, as she often heard, it was a choice re-offering itself, again and An Unlikely Goddess again. Perhaps she could soften the consequences for herself by simply choosing to stop making that mistake.

But, as she would later point out to her parents during her turbulent teenage years in Florida, it was the first mistake that was by far the more serious. She had absolutely no part in the decisions or actions that led to her birth. Of that one, she was innocent.

If he leaves me, Mythili thought staring at the ceiling, how will I ever face anyone ever again? The neighborhood gossips had probably started already, paying her mother snide congratulatory wishes, clucking and suggesting they could try again for a boy soon. A shudder went through Mythili, starting in the pit of her stomach, from the angry throbbing of her scars, radiating outward. Priya was cooing to the baby, whispering how she would buy her niece the finest of silk saris. *How can she stand it, Mythili wondered. Being judged by everyone and found wanting?* Tears came hot and quick, but as her mother had taught her, Mythili clenched her teeth until her breathing returned to normal. There was a tremor along her jawline, on the side of the molar that often ached in the middle of the night, untended by an annual visit to the dentist. In the years of her marriage, the pain had grown from stinging nettles into a persistent throbbing. Tonight she was grateful for the pain because it kept her tears at bay. Mythili's teeth chattered as Priya launched into An Unlikely Goddess a Tamil lullaby, half signing, half An Unlikely Goddess speaking the story of Sita, the perfect Hindu woman, who, of course, gave

birth to twin sons. Even then her husband was not satisfied.

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Chapter One

Mythili jostled the infant, but three-month-old Sita wouldn't stop crying, despite having been fed. She gritted her teeth, a sound her husband hated. He was still thousands of kilometers away, pursuing his dream of becoming a doctor despite advice from others given his placement scores. She continued gnashing her teeth in unabated frustration. Sita's lean fingers reached to grasp something, anything, and she latched onto the sacred gold thread from which Mythili's thali hung around her neck.

"Chee," An Unlikely Goddess she said, swatting away the curious fingers. As with millions of other Hindu housewives, the gold, locket-sized proof of her wifeness was tucked inside her blouse, far from prying eyes.

Sita countered with a wail that stirred her grandmother who slept a few meters away. Mythili juggled the baby in the crook of one arm. The wailing continued. Priya rose from her mat. In the kitchen's open archway, she nudged Divya, the housemaid, with her toe. Like the rest of the household, the young girl was asleep in the heat of the afternoon, the corner of a black dupatta in her mouth. Priya nudged again. Divya rubbed An Unlikely Goddess her eyes open.

"Tea," Priya said.

The girl squatted over An Unlikely Goddess the kerosene stove and boiled the milk, still bleary-eyed.

Mythili walked up and down with Sita on her shoulder through the outer room. She didn't

go into the foyer, from which daylight spilled onto the staircase leading to the roof. As a young girl, she hadn't been allowed on the stairs. Not for fears for her safety, but of passersby looking up and seeing her, the merchant's daughter, like any other common person. Her father had been very strict about this.

The baby found the movement somewhat comforting and gummed her shoulder.

"Let me take her," Priya said.

Mythili surrendered her bundle without any resistance. She stretched out the kink in her back, ignoring the growing soreness in her right shoulder and neck. Priya cooed at the swaddled baby, who even now was fighting to get An Unlikely Goddess her hands free of the cotton blanket wrapped around her. Everything she did made her proud aunt smile.

Weeks and weeks went by with no word from Mythili's husband. He hadn't responded that he would send for them. The telegram announcing the baby's birth went unanswered. Mythili wandered back toward the sitting room—a concrete square with plastic chairs and a table—which had openings on either side to help airflow. Divya served her tea in a stainless steel cup and rimmed saucer. She began aerating the hot liquid by pouring it from the cup to the saucer and back and forth in increasingly long streams, steam rising in the air. Mythili indicated Divya could stop. The girl left the tea on the table. Mythili tilted her head back to send the tea into her mouth without her lips touching the edge of the cup. Another remnant from life with her traditionalist father; he had staunchly observed the principles of avoiding contamination by other people's saliva. She replaced the cup on the table and looked up at his image, the last portrait they had of him. He was standing, resplendent in a gold-edged silk veshti and white shirt. A marigold garland hung from one corner of the frame to the other, the traditional way to honor deceased ancestors.

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