



Me performing my first Hindu ritual. 1993.

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A POTHOLE FOR SAILAJA

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, looped 'A' followed by a 'R' and a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Abhijith Ravinutala

We Gods tend to let potholes occur so we can see what happens. Feel free to refer to us as a single entity if it makes you feel more correct. It should come as no surprise to the reader that a pothole can entirely alter the course of a person's life. Deep ones and shallow, wide ones and narrow, they result in any number of drops, dips, shakes, breaks, wild turns, flat tires, complications, pitfalls, and...ah, it seems I have digressed. Something of a bad habit after scribing the *Mahabharata* about 2,500 to 2,000 years ago (no one remembers exactly when). In any case, yes, potholes can be quite life-changing.

Whatever your prior thoughts were about fate and free will, you were wrong.

Today, I'm returning to writing after 2,500 to 2,000 years, because the story has some charm and it involves me directly. Also, I keep making New Millennium's Resolutions to write but I never get around to it. My name is Ganesh, or Ganesha, or Vinayaka, or Ganapati, or lots of other names that are okay too, as long as you don't pronounce them the way that Rob at Blue Flow Vinyasa in Portland does. In English, people often refer to me as the "Elephant God," but that's a little unfair because it's only my head that's elephant-related. It's not like you openly refer to someone with a hairpiece as the

toupee man. People also refer to me as the Remover of Obstacles, but I'll tell you the truth, I haven't reached inbox zero for a few centuries now. It seems many of you think we Gods don't like you to use birth control, but why would we have planted the idea in Dr. Pincus's head otherwise?

Still, I do interact personally with everyone I can fit in my calendar, and in so doing I learned a story that must be shared.

There was no moon on that winter's night in 2017, and fog descended until it just grazed the tiled rooftops of the two-story houses in suburban Dallas. Miles away from the quiet street of our story's heroine, Phil and Bill of the Two Men Moving Company, LLC, were finishing up their last load of the evening. They were tasked on that Sunday with moving the entire stock of Logan's Antique Shop from his old location to the new store in Plano. After six round trips in their pickup truck, they were both eager to finish the last load and end the night with three Bud Lights; therefore, despite the truck bed looking full, they piled on more antiques until the store was almost empty. They tightened straps around the extra material and then lifted the last antique out of the store. They placed this item, a cumbersome bronze idol of yours truly, upon all the others and tucked the bottom of it under a strap.

Phil turned on the engine as Bill climbed into the passenger seat and, sighing, turned to face his partner. "Well," he said, "one last round, boss."

"Let's get it done, kid," Phil said. "Jeez, it's almost eleven p.m. Marge'll be waitin' for us at home with pepperoni and beers."

"Meal of champions," Bill replied, looking down at his feet as the truck rolled out of Logan's old driveway.

He reached down to scrape off the caked dust from his boot soles. His mind played through all that could go wrong when he and Margaret, Phil's daughter, revealed their relationship to Phil that night. For months, Bill had been putting it off out of dread, but Margaret had declared that night would be his final chance. Bill

took what solace he could in the gentle bumpiness of Phil's Ford F-150 roaming through the service roads of Colleyville to Plano. He took extra solace in the time added to their trip when a road closure forced a detour through residential streets.

Phil, meanwhile, filled his mind with images of melting cheese and sliding pepperoni. He was glad to see his moving business pick up again with commercial contracts, a far reprieve from the state of his life during the recession. His previous company, Two Brothers Movers, had filed for bankruptcy in 2009. His partner and younger brother Ricky, who had a college degree, managed to find an accounting job in Tulsa and left without warning. Phil's wife Jenny left with Ricky, leaving Phil to care for their daughter Margaret on his own. From then on, he had decided never to work with family again. I thought poor Phil must have had some terrible karma for all that to occur, but my colleagues said it was something to do with original sin instead.

"Say, what do you think of Marge, kid?" Phil asked without warning.

"Uhh," Bill stammered, "I, uh, I dunno how you mean, Phil."

"You know, we was having that discussion the other day about whether she should get a degree instead of helping out with the business."

"Of course, we were talking about that, yep. Yep. Well, y'all make a—"

Bang!

It was at that moment that their calming ride was disturbed by a large pothole on Sequoia Drive. The Ganesha idol, which had all this time been slipping out of the strap that secured it to the truck, flew into the air and landed on its side on the grass of our heroine's yard. Because of the darkness of that night, and because Bill was nervous about Phil's line of questioning, he found nothing amiss when he leaned out of the truck window. But Sailaja Reddy heard the noise.

Sailaja was dreaming a recurring dream that night. She walked through the halls of a grand palace, more Mysore than Versailles, with vaulted ceilings and gargantuan portraits adorning the walls.

Elephant statues were strewn throughout the banisters on her way to a large, ornamented velvet throne. As she approached the chair, an ocean breeze whistled through the halls, touching upon dozens of silver chimes that came to crescendo as she sat. A servant, who looked just like one of her sons, brought her a scepter while another fanned her. As she smoothed out the folds of her blue robe with a gloved hand, a gruff servant resembling her husband held up a plate of cheesecake, topped with Indian jilebi, in one hand. In the other hand he held up a phone for her. Feeling ravenous, she tossed aside her scepter and pointed at the cheesecake, but she was awoken by a loud bang. Sailaja sat upright in bed and scanned the room while her husband snored so loudly that it was a wonder she heard anything else. Thinking it had been a part of her dream, she disregarded the disturbance and drifted back to sleep, unaware she would never have that dream in the same way again.

In the morning, Sailaja awoke before her husband and children and put on her usual outfit of an Indian (usually paisley-decorated) top and high-waisted Levi's jeans. She decided that morning to sign up for Zumba classes so the denim wouldn't squeeze her thighs. She slipped into sandals to begin her morning walk, and was greeted outside by the sight of my idol. The Ganesha's bronze side loomed over the grass of her front yard. She approached the idol, looked left, looked right, and finally looked up with hands cupped in prayer. Gently, she turned the heavy Ganesha idol to an upright position and looked it straight in the eyes. She decided this was a sign from heaven.

An aside: Sailaja did not admit to being a particularly religious person, as she took pride in her computer engineering degree and equated it with a necessary suspension in superstitious beliefs. When asked about her beliefs, she would say, "I'm culturally Hindu, but..." and here she would pause for a bashful smile before continuing, "I'm not really religious." That being said, a quick search of my inbox does show a handful of prayers from her even after her degree was conferred. Half of these I had opened and half of those I had

answered. Thus, I was not so surprised that after the recent suicide of her brother, she found divinity in the fallen antique.

She had tried to discuss her tempestuous grief with several Indian neighbors, but Sailaja found that the mention of her brother was enough to silence the most incessant talkers. Tired of the awkward silences accentuated by white porcelain cups of chai tapping white porcelain saucers, she thought to herself, *I must go outside my community*. After many seconds of strict meditation on the all-knowing Google, Sailaja came upon a Christian women's support group for grief and loss. She had been attending that group at church for about three months, with no real decrease in her level of guilt, but a marked increase in her vocabulary. The women in her group gradually got her interested in words like *baptism*, *consecration*, and *testament*.

"It's a miracle!" Sailaja yelled upon entering her house, but sleeping ears heard no revelations. She hastened to the prayer room she'd had rebuilt last month, lifted a garland of fake flowers off the Ganesha idol within, and rushed it to my new idol on the yard. Thereupon, she started praying for forgiveness and felt ashamed of her time spent saying Amen in church. I'm not the jealous type, so I had written off that infraction earlier.

"Where's breakfast?" her husband Raja shouted from the doorway. His squinty eyes smaller still behind thick spectacles, he peered at Sailaja and the idol as he stepped out of the house and approached her. "What's this?" he asked.

"Yemandi," she said, referring to him in the way Telugu wives reserve for their husbands, "it's a miracle! This God has fallen here in our front yard!"

"Fell here? From where?" he asked, using an index finger to push his glasses higher up on his nose. He bent down to further scrutinize the idol.

"From heaven! Don't you see? We've been chosen!" she exclaimed.

"Are you being serious, Sailu? If it fell from heaven why does it look...used?" He reached out a hand to touch a smudge on the idol's ear.

“Yemandi!” she raised her voice. “Don’t talk like that. It just means we have to serve it and clean it.”

“Okay, okay,” said Raja, more interested in securing his breakfast than his secularism. “Should I move it to the new prayer room?”

“No, no, it landed right here! We cannot move it. We’ll have to get some materials and build a small shrine right here. Until then, I’ll make sure it’s taken care of. Maybe, maybe it’s my little brother sending a sign from above!”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re probably right,” Raja said, while he thought, *No chance he made it to heaven.* “So, uhh, upma for breakfast? I have to go see patients at ten a.m.”

“Yes, yes, I’ll make upma and prasada for the god!” said Sailaja.

“Ohh, wonderful, I’m going to get the coffee started then,” Raja stated, shuffling inside to begin his day.

She followed him to get cleaning supplies and saw her teenaged boys, glasses slightly thicker than their father’s, bounding down the stairs in Dragonball Z pajamas. Before their legs could hit the bottom step, Sailaja yelled out to them.

“Boys! Quick, come outside, there’s been a miracle,” she cried. She grabbed hold of one’s hand and led him outside to my garlanded idol reposing on the well-kept grass. “See, Pavan, Venkat?” she asked. “This idol dropped here from heaven!”

“Mother,” said Pavan, older by two years, “such an occurrence is highly unlikely.”

“I agree,” stated Venkat. “Perhaps if we were to lift the idol and investigate the surface of its bottom, we might ascertain more.” He bent down to lift the idol when Sailaja slapped his forearm.

“No!” she yelled. “It landed here and we cannot move it, it *is* a sign.”

Pavan and Venkat turned to face each other, pursed their lips, and then Pavan spoke up: “As you say, Mom. Venkat and I have a robotics fair meeting before school starts. So, uhh, upma for breakfast?”

“Yeah, yeah, go get ready, I’m making upma,” Sailaja muttered. *Are they making robots or becoming them?* Sailaja thought.

Despite lacking help from her family, Sailaja cleaned and wor-

shipped the idol with care as the days went on. Her Indian neighbors snooped on her performing rituals out in the front yard when they left or returned to their driveways. Curiosity got the better of them as they trickled in one by one and asked what was going on. Sailaja invited them inside for tea and brought up her brother again, but this time claimed that his spirit had sent the idol for their religious betterment. They were enraptured by the miracle. The other neighbors who worked as housewives started to gather with Sailaja in the mornings and evenings to sing my praises in the yard. Sailaja noticed that the blinds of the living room window across the street opened just before the start of each chanting session. There, the last remaining white couple in the neighborhood, Jim and Kim, stood side by side like *American Gothic*, glaring at the procession of sari-clad women approaching Sailaja's yard.

An aside: if you couldn't tell, it's hard for me to remember all these monosyllabic American names, so I put them to rhyme, and please don't judge that a crime. I'm not sure how the other Gods manage it, but in India we just kept adding syllables as more people took birth. It's similar to when we first allowed telephones to be made, and people had four-digit phone numbers, but eventually we grew it to ten, didn't we?

As I've seen happen with works of the Gods that require no toil for devotees, news of Sailaja's miracle spread fast. First, Hindus that were complete strangers came to pray to the idol and listen to Sailaja's story. She told them she had received wisdom from her brother's spirit and shared these lessons with her visitors. On Saturday mornings, large groups of devotees started to show up to pray to the idol and listen to her discourses. Her husband and sons started going to Chick-Fil-A for breakfast.

Second, the Christians came. The women from Sailaja's support group amassed to investigate her absence at the last few biweekly support circles. When they questioned her, Sailaja thought, *My God is real!* She said out loud that the divine had shown itself in her life and she needed to tend to her spiritual practice. She included other

pseudo-Christian lingo and the ladies nodded along. Altogether, they put down the plates of Indian snacks (that had been too crunchy anyway) and rose to leave. The Christian regiment marched onto her lawn and Sailaja observed from the window as Jim and Kim dashed out of their house to ask what they had learned. Sailaja saw many heads shaking and crosses being made in the air until they finally parted ways. After Sailaja too had left the window, one of the ladies who had lingered in her car snuck up to my idol and touched its head gingerly, not knowing how to pray to it. I saw that, Linda.

Third, the priests came. They had had enough of losing temple devotees to Sailaja's home on Saturday mornings. With ornery expressions they looked her up and down, wondering how a non-Brahmin and a woman had been awarded such an honor. The first priest wanted to raise the idol off the ground and place it on a small stone pedestal that he brought. Sailaja acquiesced and volunteered to move it, but the priest asked her first if she was on her period, because he wouldn't let her be around God in that case. Sailaja lied and said no.

Another aside: when we Gods saw evolution creating a menstrual cycle, maybe we should've had a meeting about it, but I think everyone decided not to mess with the process. After all, no one expected the priests to keep women out and keep little boys in.

"Oh my God," Sailaja spoke as she lifted the idol to place on the pedestal. She stopped midway. Only visible to her, on the smoothed bottom side of my bronze image, was a price tag from Logan's Antique Shop: \$19.99. Depending on how you view it, either the cheapest or most expensive price for salvation.

Sailaja's mind raced through a dozen conflicts. As it was before the idol landed on her lawn, the gap between what she wanted to believe and what she expected to be true became an impassable valley.

"Devi? What is wrong?" asked the priest, inching closer to her.

He had referred to her as a Goddess. She promptly put the idol onto the pedestal and turned to him. "Nothing! Just overwhelmed

by holding the God in my arms.” She clapped her hands together as if dusting off fragments of divinity, and then placed them on her hips. “What else must be done?”

The priest, feeling unsure of her, couldn't find the words to doubt her devotion. He asked her to rotate the idol to the right to face the house instead of the neighboring yard. Days later, another priest came and balked at the idol, saying it was all wrong, and demanded Sailaja rotate it once more to the right. Then a third priest came and reacted in the same way, and she ended up rotating it again, such that it was at last positioned in the same way it had landed in the first place.

Finally, the media came. Sailaja dressed in a golden sari on the day of the interview, instead of Levi's jeans, and wore a prominent red bottu on her forehead. The local news interviewed her on the yard next to the idol. In front of the cameras, Sailaja said, “God has chosen me, I am only here to serve Him! It is truly a miracle and I am the receiver!” She raised her head and hands to the sky upon saying the last word, and because of the way the sari draped on her, the way the sun glinted off its fine maroon trim, the news anchors (who'd never gone farther east than New York and were easily impressed by saris) made that image the headline news story. She didn't mention her brother.

The local news also interviewed Raja, who only said, “I don't have the luxury of believing in miracles,” before leaving for his oncology rounds. Pavan and Venkat did a tag team interview, but because most of what they said was too obsequious in vocabulary, the news only showed a snippet of them talking about scientific principles of cause and effect in robotics.

Jim and Kim were interviewed too. Jim wore his own small red bottu and professed his newfound interest in Hinduism, which made Kim scowl. “It's a religion of freedom,” he said. “I love to sway along from my window and clap when Sailaja and her friends sing bhajans.” With the cameras on, the news reporters asked Jim and Sailaja to hug while Kim jeered off-screen.

While the local news showed all of these viewpoints, the national news only picked up the clip of Sailaja raising her hands in the air and shouting *miracle*. When her video went viral, people started to believe she had a direct connection to God. After that, Sailaja started to receive more and more visitors that prayed to the idol, but now they also came to seek her blessings. They offered money for the idol and in exchange for her blessings, and she started to collect this money in a box so she could one day build a proper shrine around the idol. People also started to call her Uma Devi, which is my mother's name, and she quite liked this. She even told her old friends to call her Uma Devi from then on.

She started receiving visitors from all over the U.S. and even outside its borders. Lots of Germans especially, who still seemed desperate to adopt any belief system that had no hand in their country's history. Eventually, her house couldn't support all the visitors, and her devotees started to book out conference rooms instead. They visited her in large lines while a picture of my idol was projected on the wall behind her. To all these people, she was only Uma Devi, so much so that she started to question the existence of a woman known as Sailaja Reddy.

Plano became inadequate for Uma Devi's following. Within two months, her devotees started paying for her to fly and stay in hotel rooms (ones with a jacuzzi) so she could bless many more people. She no longer projected the picture of my idol behind her or returned to her husband every night. She had become divine herself. Every other week, Uma Devi flew to meet new devotees and give out blessings. People asked her all sorts of questions like they send to my inbox, and she said what seemed right at first.

People do not let new saints be poor. In exchange for her blessings, Uma Devi received a plethora of jewelry, cash-stuffed envelopes (only containing auspicious sums), and various articles of décor that occupied every corner of her house. With all the money, they could've moved into a bigger house, but they couldn't move the idol, so Uma Devi started to sell what she received. On the morn-

ing her bank account passed \$1 million, she was sipping chai on the new patio of her front lawn. She saw Jim, wearing his bottu, open his blinds across the street and fold his hands in prayer to the Ganesha idol. A nude mahogany-skinned woman appeared next to him and copied the gesture before throwing herself onto him. Uma Devi almost spit out her tea, and then went inside with an urgent need to see her husband, but he was already gone. Annoyed by her increased absences from home, Raja met her with silence each day and flashed sidelong glances at the increasing pile of take-out containers from Punjab Palace.

A last aside: At the 2004 Olympus Conference, we Gods had a women, gender, and sexuality session where we noticed that Indians keep using Hinduism as an excuse to be prudish, while whites use it as an excuse to sleep with whomever they want. Meanwhile, the most repressed peoples seem to be having the most babies. A few of the millions of Chinese ancestor spirits said that people don't need religion to repress sexuality, while Dionysus slurred that Mary was to blame for being such a virgin. Allah and Jesus weren't present for that session because they had no time between their pilgrimage-land panel and queer-worship panel. Therefore, we made no final decisions. Until 2404, we decided to take the conversation offline and observe whether people realize they're not so different from rabbits.

Uma Devi continued to serve what she deemed a higher purpose. She had the money to hire a maid, so she started to travel full time, not coming home for two or three weeks at a time. She flew to different countries on first-class tickets bought by her devotees, and spoke to crowds from a soft velvet throne, wearing a blue robe over saris that grew in cost as her stomach grew in size. When a devotee who paid for post-event VIP access seemed especially pure in face and deed, she invited him to join her in the room's jacuzzi. She grew in confidence.

At the peak of her confidence, which was also the peak of her forgetting she even had a brother, there was a month when she did not come home for a single day. At the end of that month she

was giving a sermon in London about miracles and faith when an angry cry rang out in the crowd. From her velvet throne, she saw an undulating mass of phones being raised into the air as the yell snowballed into a riot.

News had reached London that my idol was an antique store commodity. Devotees now clamored to become attackers. Seven of her purest male devotees (that had accepted her jacuzzi invitations) circled around Uma Devi to block the mob, and shuffled her toward the emergency exit. She chartered a plane back to Plano while one of her confidantes showed her the exposé video that had gone viral twice as fast as her miracle video. Sailaja glanced at the comments, only to see dozens of expletive-filled rants from devotees whose names she didn't recognize. No matter the amount of hope that a person provides to others, the doubt they provide is what is remembered.

Uma Devi flew home alone. As the plane tunneled through the clouds over London Bridge, her body went rigid squeezing the armrest. Each time she fidgeted to get comfortable, she felt her sari was tightening around her as a snake constricts around its struggling prey. The skin on her soft face seemed to crack into a million wrinkles, as if rainclouds had come and gone with no reprieve upon dry land.

There was no idol on the lawn when Sailaja arrived at her house in the evening.

"Devi!" her husband shouted when he opened the door. His face was flush from whiskey, his lips ashy from a cigarette.

"Don't call me that," Sailaja declared while ripping the cigarette out of his mouth. His brows slanted.

"Hey! That was my cigarette." His speech slurred as he staggered inside toward the dining table.

"Where is the idol?" she asked, sitting across from him.

He laughed. "Back where it belongs."

"What is that supposed to mean, Raja?!"

"Hm, you never dared to raise your voice at me before, eh? Never called me by my name. Is that Devi or my wife speaking, huh?" He grabbed his whiskey glass and gulped it down.

Raja thought himself too stoic to tell her that her absence had devastated him, too manly to admit that he couldn't imagine dealing with children and chores without the panacea of alcohol and menthol lights (which he would claim were Marlboro Reds). Two nights prior, he had kicked the idol over in a fit of rage and embarrassment over these feelings. When he saw the price tag on its bottom, he turned and walked back into the house. The devotees who came the next day woke him up with the sounds of their quarrels, and Raja expected Sailaja would be back before long.

Sailaja seethed and muttered. "Answer my damn question."

"Logan's Antique Shop," he stated. He poured himself another glass as Sailaja sat with her eyes bulging. She snatched the glass from him and attempted to chug it, but spit out the last half onto the table. Lips burning from spilt alcohol, she chucked the glass against the tile floor and her body slid to the ground as she emitted a scream from deep in her belly. Shards of the shattered glass cut into her palms and knees and blood trickled onto the kitchen floor where so much of her sweat had fallen in the decade past. As Raja sat thinking, *The line between saint and demon is exceedingly thin*, Sailaja leapt up and ran out the front door, still screaming. She opened her car door and then felt her torso collapse onto the hood, her body heaving out silent tears as she whispered again and again, "Ganesha, Ganesha."

She realized then that \$19.99 was an insurmountable truth. Even if people suspect a hoax, as long as faith has an infinitesimal chance of being true, none will build the rickety bridge across the valley separating belief from bleak reality. When there is damning proof, however, those same people will climb over each other to ridicule any who believed as they once did. People today are fighting at the same time to believe in something that evidences a greater design for their existence, and to prove to others how indifferent they are.

As I provided these realizations to Sailaja, I also brought down a light rain. The meteorologists predicted as much. She stood up straight, raising her palms to receive the gift of the clouds. She felt the sweat, blood, and withered Devi makeup flush away as her sari

started to cling to her. From the corner of her eye she noticed the blinds open across the street and turned to see that Jim and the new woman Nadia were dressed in robes, staring at her. Jim still had his bottu.

People moved on to the next guru or swami. All the rich people who gave her money just made more money, and the poor people didn't know to retaliate. Sailaja settled into the daily rhythms and sayings of her housewife life as the news forgot about her:

“Lunch is ready!”

“Second place is pretty great for the robotics fair.”

“Why didn't you bring tomatoes from the grocery store?”

“Yemandi, not tonight, I'm too tired.”

One night, however, she found herself in a familiar dream. The velvet throne was present as before, the scepter and gentle swaying of the chimes. The gruff servant resembling her husband held up a tray of cake with both hands, but when she removed the lid it contained only a phone. Sailaja's phone. She picked it up and tried to open it with her thumbprint, but it wouldn't unlock. Frustrated, she rose from her throne and pressed hard on the phone—at which point it opened to show a text message conversation with her brother. She saw the last thing she had typed to him:

“Shravan, I'm tired of you messaging with all these empty threats. We all know you're just scaring me, Amma, and Nana to get attention. They're telling you to get married for a good reason, so grow up and get over your little experimental phase. You had your fun.”

No, Sailaja thought, *I didn't want to see this ever again, I deleted it from my phone*. She shook her head violently in the dream and tried to drop the phone, but her hand wouldn't let go. Three little dots popped up to show that Shravan was typing. They went away, and she exhaled. Then they came back and a message appeared:

“Was that grown-up enough, big sis?”

Sailaja awoke with a yelp, her skin moist from a blanket of sweat and guilt. Raja was snoring too loud for her to think. She went back to bed and woke up with a decision to track down the idol.

Even if it had a price tag and landed on her lawn through explicable means, must coincidence be any less than divine? I won't spoil the mystery with an answer.

In the morning, after the men left the house, Sailaja bounded to the car and drove for Logan's Antique Shop. Instead of calling ahead she prayed that the idol would still be there. When the GPS announced that she had arrived, she couldn't remember the drive, as her mind had clouded the road with images of Shraavan's funeral. Some types of guilt cannot be erased, they can only be relocated.

Sailaja strode out of the breezy sunlight and into the dusty musty dim of the antique shop, wondering if she'd be recognized. The few customers in the store didn't turn to look, and the cashier was busy wondering whether the ginger chicken from last night's takeout was causing his current discomfiture. Sailaja reacquainted herself with her anonymity as she zigzagged through aisles of worn-out European chairs, chesterfields, and chiffoniers. When she reached the Asia section, she paused to observe the layout of the store. In between the idols with two arms from China and the idols with eighteen arms from Nepal, she located a gathering of Indian idols. None of the idols of me matched her memory. Her shoulders drooped and she took an extended breath. Antiquated dust swirling around from antiquated gods found its way into her lungs and she coughed hard. Hard enough for her eyes to water and for the other customers to turn and look, but not hard enough for them to check on her. When she finished she wiped her eyes and looked up, sniffing, to see a sign pointing to clearance items. She followed it.

There, as a centerpiece surrounded by some dancing images of my father Shiva, was the idol she sought. The owner's son, a good Christian with no respect for other religions, had slapped a big red clearance sticker over my idol's eyes: \$9.99.

One truly last aside: Before that idol of mine had been sold to antiquity in Houston by a Tamil man dying of HIV, before his landlord father had ransacked it from the British magistrate and placed it in his home shrine in Madurai, before it was flooded out

of a seaside temple in Chennai by the tidal wave of 1883, Sriram Spathy had ceremoniously chiseled in its eyes as the last step of the creation process in his idol factory. It was through the eyes, according to Sriram's teacher, that people would see and be seen by God. Who am I to disagree?

Sailaja ripped the clearance sticker off my idol's eyes and stared into them. What she saw therein, whether it was emptiness, or the twinkle of her brother's gray pupils, or the reflection of her guilt, or something beyond this list, is not for me to say. If I did say, this extended game of telephone that you've all termed religion would just restart.

Sailaja hoisted my idol to the checkout counter and waited in line to pay \$9.99. A young woman named Marge in front of her took her sweet time, laughing with the cashier and handing him a wedding invitation. She told him that her father wanted the wedding done while she was on winter break from college, so that his business partner Bill wouldn't be distracted in the new fiscal year. The cashier wished Marge and Two Men Moving Company, LLC the best before finally ringing up Sailaja's purchase. She told the cashier she did not want a receipt.

At home she took care to clean and place the idol in her prayer room, a few inches in front of the other gods and the other Ganesha idol she had. She took special care in swabbing the dust from its eyes.

When she started to have her dream again, there were two things different about it. Behind her throne was a Ganesha idol the size of her house, and there was a smaller throne placed to the front and left of hers. On some nights, as she sat on her throne, she could see the face of her brother turn around from behind the seat and smile at her. She smiled back in her sleep as Raja's snores resounded in the bedroom.

Just that much, for now, is the story of Sailaja, Uma Devi, a dream, and a conveniently located pothole. Whatever your new thoughts are about fate and free will and reconciliation, you are still wrong.

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But by reading this auspicious tale, you have surely earned merit, because it will take me a few millennia to find writing time again. I've already received hundreds more prayers in my inbox. Alas, I really must get back to answering a few so you all sustain hope. 