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# THREE STORIES FOR LOCKDOWN

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ISOLATION, RESTRICTION, AND VACCINE



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## SITA IN ISOLATION

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Once upon a time, there was a very wise and beautiful Princess who was isolated in a walled garden, in a far-off island, for a whole year.

Before that, she and her husband had been banished to a life of isolation from family and friends in a forest for 13 years. By a cruel twist of fate, or so it seemed then, he had lost his job, title, inheritance, wealth and social status overnight. She had lost all the comforts, friends and family their well-deserved and blessed life had afforded. Together they left behind their old and opulent life and embraced their new, radically altered and much reduced circumstance. But that's another story.

Now, the Princess, whose name was Sita, found herself facing a further trial of social seclusion. This time she was separated from her beloved husband, Rama, the solace and soul of her life. With him, her life in isolation in the forest had been tolerable, joyful even.

On first hearing descriptions of Sita's imprisonment in this garden you would be forgiven for thinking she did not have it so bad. Although held captive behind a high wall manned with guards, the grounds that surrounded her were astonishingly beautiful. Honey-blossom fragrance wafted on warm breezes, while tree branches bent low with fruits and flowers. Birdsong reverberated throughout the fragrant flowered groves and herds of deer wandered gracefully through woods of silver and gold. Lotus ponds teeming with flocks of waterfowl decorated the landscape while springs with crystal clear water issued from lush green earth. Pathways encrusted with jewels traversed the tranquil grounds and peacock cries echoed all around.

At the heart of this celestial grove stood a brilliant white domed palace. Surrounded by a thousand pillars, it rose high into the

clouds. It's coral stairways and golden railings dazzled the sight of all who gazed upon it.

Nearby stood a massive tree, radiant like fire. In the gentle breeze its branches tinkled with the sound of hundreds of little bells. At the foot of this great tree, Princess Sita sat on the ground, dishevelled and dirty, unmoved by her glorious and glittering surroundings. Her dark, fawn-like eyes brimmed with tears and her fragile form, gaunt from fasting, heaved with deep, sorrowful sighs. Her downcast face and dejected appearance contrasted starkly with her picture-perfect surroundings.

No earthly splendour could compensate for separation from Rama. She felt disconnected and distant from everything around her and had never felt more isolated and alone. What joy was there in life without Rama? What was the point of any life without him? In her heart however, Sita clung to the hope of being reunited with Rama once again.

Further details of the Princess 'plight reveal she was not however in complete isolation. It might have been more bearable had she been. Surrounding her on all sides were many hideous female creatures. These were night stalkers, rakshasas, a race of violent and blood-thirsty beings who took delight in harassing the virtuous souls who challenged their ghastly conduct.

They had fierce, hideous faces with enormous mouths and long nails. Some had the faces of animals, while others had feet of elephants, camels or horses. Some had donkeys 'ears, noses on their foreheads while the upper bodies of others were covered with ears. They held lances and war-hammers and were constantly fighting. They guzzled alcohol and smeared their bodies with flesh and blood and took pleasure taunting Sita in turns. They swarmed around Sita like a pestilence intent on inflicting their toxic influence over her. Held hostage beneath the tree Sita struggled to maintain social distance from their menacing presence. Like a doe beset by wolves, she clung to the memory and name of Rama and held firm to the love that bound them.

He had been away on an errand for her when the violation happened. In hindsight the whole situation was a set up by her abductor to leave her vulnerable to his attack. She had not kept to the social distancing regulation Rama's brother Lakshman had left as a protection for her. She should not have left the safety of the ashram to help the old beggar. Now she knew the truth of his disguise and lamented her fate. How could she have been so foolish? Why did she ever doubt Lakshman's motive to protect her? She should not have asked him to leave when she heard Rama's cry. Yet how could she bear to do nothing if Rama was injured? Locked up in this strange place she did not know how Rama would ever find her.

Meanwhile Ravana, her ten-headed captor, and immensely powerful Lord of Lanka threatened to kill her if she did not submit to his amorous overtures. He had not kidnapped her for aesthetic purposes only. Nor was his plan to maintain social distance from her. Luckily for Sita, he was forced by a curse to keep his distance from her for a year. If, after this time however she persisted in her unflinching devotion to Rama, he would have her killed and cooked for his breakfast.

Sita in turn, repeatedly rebuked his advances. She called him a pathetic, cowardly rabbit that would soon be squashed by Rama, that great Bull among Elephants. She assured Ravana that as radiance is inseparable from the sun so she was from Rama. There could be no persuading her to look upon him or his excessive offerings with anything other than contempt. Sita further warned Ravana that she could burn him to ashes instantly if she wished. Her only reason for not doing so was her desire to give that satisfaction to Rama. Ravana could not capture her otherwise.

She chose to withhold her powers. Although he deserved to be cremated immediately, she would not waste her energy on him and would wait instead for her husband to give him what he deserved. His vile behaviour and violation of all chivalrous conduct would lead only to his downfall and to the destruction of his kingdom. Like a dangerous virus he would be wiped out by the vaccine of virtue in

the form of Rama. It would not be long now before Sita regained her heart's desire and Ravana his ill-fated dessert.

After yet another failed charm offensive by Ravana, Sita was comforted by a friendly rakshasa, Trijata, who did not conform to type. Like an antidote to her kinfolk's venomous harassment, she tried to stop their hurtful taunts and lift Sita from her despair. Trijata warned her kinwomen of the consequences of their behaviour. She did this by sharing a dream she had of Rama and Sita's reunion and the destruction of the city of Lanka. She also indicated to Sita the auspicious omens in the garden heralding the arrival of good fortune. Sita was the Goddess of Fortune after all.

She must not lose sight of hope. A bird in a tree, sitting in its nest, repeatedly poured forth sweet melodies in joyful full-throated song. It seemed, Trijata said, to be singing warm comforting notes specially to encourage Sita. This lock down could not last. Rama would find her. She would be freed and they would be together again.

Uplifted by Trijata's kind words, Sita wrapped her mind in thoughts of Rama and as she did, auspicious omens increased and inspired her with courage. The confinement in Ravana's walled garden could not crush her spirit. Her tormentors' cruel jibes would not touch her. With heart and mind fixed on Rama her grief lifted and her sorrow was dispelled. Joy rose again in her heart and her face once more became radiant and bright.

These days of distance and isolation would soon pass. There could be no separation from Rama. Her trial had not weakened their bond. She was as inseparable from Rama as radiance is from the sun. The clouds, at last were beginning to clear. The dark days of her separation were coming to an end.



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## GOVARDHANA IN LOCKDOWN

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**B**efore the crisis came, everyone's life revolved happily around the hill. My mother and I grazed with our friends on the soft grassy slopes. When it was hot, we sheltered in its caves. Young cowherds and milkmaids played within its groves and we drank and swam in the cool tranquil lakes dotted amidst its rocks. Trees and flowers flourished while waterfalls and streams refreshed and rejuvenated all who lived there. Govardhana provided shelter and abundance to our whole community in Vraja. In short this was an eco-village idyll where protection, reciprocation and non-exploitation were the order of the day. It was a wonderful place to live, a thriving community where we all played our part in keeping our environment and each other safe and well.

Our main contribution to the community was milk. Everyone loved it and it was freshly churned into butter and yogurt every day. Our poop was useful too. It made paste for the walls and floors and kept the houses cool and clean. When dried in the sun, dung patties fuelled the fires and cooked the meals that fed the village. In return we were loved and cared for as part of the family, and our village thrived in the lushness of Govardhana.

To us however, Govardhana was more than a hill. We loved him as our giant and generous friend. He was the ground beneath our feet, and the heart of our lives. So wonderful was Govardhana that one day, Krishna decided to honour him with the harvest festival rather than Indra, the god of rain. This festival plan was of course made before the lockdown, before everyone's life was put on hold.

It was true that the rain Indra frequently showered on us was important. Yet it was Govardhana and not him who was the real life and soul of the community. This year things would be different and

for the first time since anyone could remember, Indra would not be the centre of attention. That honour would be given to Govardhana.

The festival went ahead. Mountains of food offerings were made. I got a bit excited and jumped into some pumpkins. Two boys gently pulled me out and cleaned off the squashed yellow pulp from my hoofs and face. Then everyone gathered around Govardhana and together we celebrated and honoured him. I mooed and pranced along with the herd as the praises and thanksgivings gathered pace. Families, friends and animals shared a sumptuous feast. I got neck tickles and ear scratches from the cowherd boys and the girls hung bells around our necks and painted our backs with handprints. I was so happy I could have burst. Instead I bounced. Little did any of us know at that time that this decision to change tradition would bring about a catastrophe the likes of which had never been seen before.

It all happened very quickly. When Indra heard his long-awaited offerings had been sent to Govardhana, a hill of all things, pride erupted within him. I couldn't understand what he said, but it must have been something like:

‘Don’t you know who I am!  
How dare you not honour ME!  
I’ll show you ungrateful nobodies who's in charge!

I guessed this because he got very red in the face and all puffed up and his teeth showed a lot.

My mother, who understood everything, told me later that Indra said we would all pay for listening to that little pip squeak, Krishna, who talked too much. He was furious about the change in tradition and being undermined publicly by a seven-year-old child.

Then all hell broke loose. Indra's pride and pent up resentment exploded into a violent storm. If ever there was an overreaction, this was it. He sent his wrath in enormous clouds of destruction and battered the village of Vrindavan with hailstorms, fearsome winds and torrents of rain. As the water rose and submerged the fields, the villagers ran for their lives. I panicked and broke free of my tether. The winds whipped up everything in their path and the darkness



was frightening. My mother, terrified and shivering in the pelting rain and blasting wind urged me to follow the herd as everyone ran to Krishna. 'Save us! ' the villagers cried. 'Moooooooooooooooooooo ! ' we called.

Krishna at this point smiled. He always sees what no-one else can, has a plan and never simply accomplishes one thing by what he does. What followed the mayhem was no exception. How it all happened we'll never know, but so wondrous was it that we still retell it today.

When Krishna saw the chaos Indra caused, he did not confront him with his superior might. Instead he used his power to shelter us all, with love. As lightning flashed and thunder roared, he lifted up the hill of Govardhana with his left hand, just as a child picks a mushroom from the ground. He then invited all of us who were terrified and panic-stricken to shelter under the enormous mountain umbrella he had just created. I stared wide-eyed at the uprooted underbelly of Govardhana and must have looked worried because Krishna then reassured us not to be afraid that he might drop it on top of us.

Amazingly there was room for everyone, including all of us cows and other animals. It helped that there was no social distancing order at that time. Everyone huddled up under the hill marvelling at the child, Krishna, at the centre of it all, smiling, enjoying the loving glances of his friends. Some of the villagers tried to help Krishna hold up the hill with their farm tools, or by stretching their arms above their heads.

This made Krishna smile even more. Even though he didn't need any help, he was happy to see how much his friends loved him. As far as I know there were no food supplies ordered and no one went out to get any. It seems that all semblance of everyday life was on hold and somehow or other everybody was nourished and sustained by drinking in the beauty of Krishna. Snuggling up close to him helped too. Everyone felt happy, safe, protected and loved while the storm raged for seven days and seven nights.

Meanwhile Indra's puff finally went flat. The storm abated, the clouds cleared and the sun came out. It was over. We were all now free to go home, back to our lives free from lockdown. Krishna replaced the hill back where it had stood before. We were overwhelmed with gratitude and love for him and showered him with blessings, offerings, cowlicks and hugs. This was the best adventure ever! My mother and our herd bellowed and mooed with unbridled joy. Everyone else accompanied us with laughter and jubilant singing. We all returned home replaying in our minds and retelling over and over the incredible experience with Krishna and how deeply he had touched our hearts.

Indra, his conceit now gone, like the clouds that had blocked the sun, was able to see clearly again. My mother heard him apologise for being so foolish and said he praised Krishna for being so kind to restore his vision. What a wonderful way to do it. You couldn't make it up! This little boy truly was the Lord of the Mountain, Giriraj, and the Lord of Indra too.

With one awesome act he not only locked down the world of Vraja and thereby saved us from destruction; he rescued Indra from his pride; allowed us all an extended group hug; intensified our love for him; let me lick his toes; put Govardhana centre stage again; and reminded us once more that a crisis is a chance to run to Krishna who always has a plan.

The story ends with another smile. Krishna was happy to have released this great ruler of the heavens from the intoxication of power. It took a lockdown under a mountain and seven days of venting for Indra to come to his senses. Govardhana Hill still stands. May I always shelter under his slopes and may Indra's pride never puff up again.



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## A VACCINE OF LOVE

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**M**y husband was a snake. I don't mean that as an insult because we had a bad relationship. I mean biologically speaking, he was a snake - with a thousand heads. His name was Kaliya and we lived in a lake on Ramanaka Island. It was hard for him to accept he was not the lord of this lake and instead had to pay homage to a bird. It didn't matter that it was no ordinary bird - but the great eagle Garuda, King of the Birds, and carrier of Lord Vishnu himself. Kaliya was also resentful of the protection fee requested from our snake community. In return for a monthly offering Garuda left us in peace and became the guardian of Ramanaka Island.

Seeing the offerings handed over to the bird however, was too much for Kaliya. Resentment and envy ate away at him and his poison grew more venomous. I tried to make him see sense and to calm his anger. I begged him not to rock the boat for our family's sake. I knew it would not end well for him, for us. My advice fell on deaf ears. He didn't want to hear from anyone. Perhaps that's why we snakes do not have ears. One day he could restrain himself no longer, and without warning he seized the offerings for himself.

Garuda did not react kindly to this deliberate provocation. With lightning speed, he swooped upon my husband who raised his hoods and struck him with his fangs. Garuda countered by beating him with his huge golden wing. The force of the blow, threw my husband across the water like a leaf on the wind. He was no match for the mighty bird.

Kaliya fled. We fled with him, blindly at first, desperate to escape the eagle's sight. Eventually my husband took us to a lake within the river Yamuna where Garuda could not go. A sage named Saubhari had cursed him once for feeding on fish from the lake. If Garuda ever returned, he would die from the curse. Now my husband yearned once more to be the great lord of the lake.

Kaliya was out of place in the Yamuna. He didn't think so but this place belonged to Krishna and we should not have settled there. His angry and envious nature didn't suit the tranquil climate. The once clear, calm lake, a source of refreshment and enjoyment for all, now appeared like a dark low-lying cloud. Along its banks snake holes appeared, blazing with fire from the mouths of Kaliya's servants. Toxic fumes spewed everywhere.

Birds passing overhead dropped dead from the sky. Droplets of poison carried on the breeze, spread out from the water across the land, killing animals and vegetation far and wide. Kaliya's anger was a force unchecked and caused a crisis unprecedented in the land of gentle cowherd people living near the lake. No one expected this. No one was ready for it. Such pollution had never before entered the disease-free land of Vrindavan. But such contamination could not endure.

One morning a beautiful boy appeared next to the lake. Undaunted by the threatening scene before him, the child climbed to the top of a huge Kadamba tree towering over the lethal water.

'Dear God, the boy's dead', I thought. Resigned, I watched his face - radiant against the darkness, looking out across the water. Any moment now the fumes would overcome him and he would fall from the tree. Instead, I saw him smile, slap his arms and tighten his belt. Then to my horror, he jumped right into the lake. Huge waves flooded the banks as he entered the water. Such a gigantic splash for such a small boy. I knew then this must be the famous Krishna I had heard so much about.

Undisturbed by the noxious gases, Krishna splashed and swirled in the water stirring up clouds of fumes and poison. Sensing the disturbance from the depths of the lake, my husband's anger rose and with it his monstrous form emerged like a volcanic mountain. His gigantic body, trembling with rage and blazing with energy, seemed to make the whole lake boil and bubble. The next thing I saw was a flash of yellow silk, the white of Krishna's smile, and black massive waves, as Kaliya lunged and bit him, then wrapped him in his coils like a helpless fawn.

Crowds gathered on the shoreline; their faces frozen in horrified disbelief. I watched from nearby, tears of sadness and shame rolling down my cheeks. My husband had reached a new low. Everyone was distraught. Even the cows, their hearts breaking, bellowed and lowed across the water. Bad omens appeared in the sky, on the earth and in creatures all around. A couple who could only be Krishna's parents came rushing towards the shore beside themselves with anxiety. Seeing Krishna

entwined in my husband's coils the man, the father, ran towards the water but was held back by a young boy. Later I learned this was Balaram, Krishna's brother, who seemed completely calm about all that was happening.

The girls, who were gopis, the milkmaids, on the other hand looked close to fainting. I had heard talk of their love for Krishna and how they stole out at night just to be near him. What cherished memories must have replayed within their minds as his end seemed near. Their world would be empty without him. This was all hard to watch. Helpless and heartbroken from the shoreline we witnessed together my furious husband thrash and flail in the water. Fiery spumes and noxious gases blackened the air until all sight of Krishna and all hope seemed lost.

But Kaliya could not hold Krishna. The little boy began to grow, expanding his body and forcing the giant coils to release him. This enraged my husband further. His red scorching eyes burned and his huge nostrils, like cauldrons of poison, flared with fury. He lunged at Krishna who easily dodged his strike, circled him and teased him, fearless of his thousand heads. Keeping just out of reach, he played with Kaliya who angrily thrashed and wheeled around after him. My husband soon tired, worn out by the boy and his heads wilted briefly. Krishna then leapt up. Using Kaliya's necks as steps he made his way right up onto the top of the fearsome, fuming hoods. As Kaliya raised each fiery head to seize him, Krishna pushed it down by striking it with his feet. He danced nimbly from head to head, forcing each stubborn face to bow down. He didn't tire, just continued until my husband looked trampled and broken. Death stared him in the face. My husband's fury had all burned out and his venom was spent.

He looked different, defeated, yes, but also changed. His anger was gone, yet something else stirred. Something I had not seen before. Was it humility, defeat or relief? Perhaps all three. Cautiously the children and I approached. My husband was still alive and I begged Krishna to spare him, for my sake, for the children's sake.

Looking back now, it's clear my husband was never in danger from anyone but himself. Krishna is very kind and had a plan from the start to rescue him from his own venomous nature. While Kaliya was trying so hard to kill Krishna, Krishna was kindly killing Kaliya's real enemies - the envy, resentment and anger burning him up from within.

I should have known my husband could never contaminate a place like Vrindavan, wherein this lake sits like a jewel. This was Krishna's land where love is churned like milk to butter and spread lavishly around. No toxic thought or act could ever threaten this protected environment.

Kaliya did change after that and remained changed. We returned home to Ramanaka island with a guarantee of safety from Garuda. Krishna knew his eagle carrier would never touch a snake marked with his footprints on his head.

The whole story seems like a dream now, as though we never left this Island. I am so grateful we did. Many happy outcomes were achieved by Krishna drawing us all into his awesome play. Now we have something worth remembering and retelling forever.

Some say this story of Kaliya unfolded to protect the residents of Vrindavan from pollution by way of a vaccine of love. Fear of losing Krishna, their heart's best friend, certainly churned up waves of loving feelings for him within all who watched the drama in the lake. Absorbed in thoughts of him, nothing else could touch them.

Others say it was all about the dance at the end. Krishna wanted to impress the cowherd girls, already in love with him, with his skilful dance moves. Who knows? We do know however, there has never been a more marvellous sight than a smiling Krishna poised and balanced atop a writhing serpent's head, setting the whole world to rights with the tap of his dancing feet.

