



## Prithavi Mata

**By Aditi Nair, Senior Runner-up aged 15 from New Delhi, India**

She was a regular visitor. I could be busy planting the *bajra*<sup>1</sup> or sweeping the mud floor, when she would suddenly arrive. She never directly announced her presence; it wasn't required. Somehow, I was always able to sense her standing in front of the house. I would then open the door and let her in.

She was tall and regal, as she entered the house barefooted, smiling graciously. Her skin was dark, wonderfully dark. Tiny dandelions were braided into her long, flowing hair (the flowers differed each time she visited). She loved adorning herself; pine cone earrings hung from her ears and a necklace of woven grass sat on her chest.

She would then seat herself on the wood stump, the folds of her green gown draped gently over her legs.

Her dress had always elicited my curiosity, and I had once asked her what it was made of. I had expected lace, velvet, cashmere; rich names I could savour in my mouth. Her eyes had twinkled briefly, then she had said straight faced: it's moss. I had obviously thought it a joke, but when I ran my hands over it, I had felt the only too familiar wetness of warm moss. My hand had been tinged green for a month after that.

We would then talk, and she would bring me news. I was 14 years old, still a *ladki*<sup>2</sup>, living a secluded life in the outskirts of a nameless village. My parents had died very young and I hadn't ever met them. For me, she was the only link to the outside world.

She was called *Prithavi Mata* (Mother Earth), for she was the Earth Goddess, as was commonly believed in our culture. She suddenly appeared one day at my doorstep, and I could not refuse her. I do not know why she continued her visits, perhaps she grew fond of me since her first arrival. I have reason enough to believe so, for she let me call her *Maa* (mother), which I relished.

After our conversation, she would depart, with promises of returning soon. I would eagerly await her arrival. Waiting for her then, I am not ashamed to admit that I would feel lonely sometimes. I was quite young, after all. Still, I dearly loved my solitary life. I did not have any

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<sup>1</sup> A millet grown in India

<sup>2</sup> A young girl

worldly desires — I grew my own grain and got sufficient water from the lake nearby. It was tough labour, but I was content.

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The year I turned 16 however, everything changed. That year, a disease spread over the world, and claimed countless lives.

Death rejoiced, as did my mother.

I was astonished when I opened the door and saw her — she was radiant! How youthful she looked, how much brighter! Her gown was luxurious, her eyes shone triumphantly. She hugged me instantly, and I caught a quick whiff of the fragrance of jasmine in her hair, before she pulled apart.

What happened *Maa*, I asked.

It's the illness that's done it, she replied. It's forced everyone to remain in their homes, so my children are thriving! My creatures can return to the land they once inhabited, feast on what they wish, rather than the drivel they were given when they were caged. My saplings shall grow mightily; no longer will their roots choke on the toxins the humans feed them. Your mother is flourishing, dear girl!

Saying so, she grabbed my hands and spun me around. Her sudden playfulness, so different from her usual self, surprised me and I was amazed at her childlike joy. We spun till our heads rang, then stopped. She continued her sweet, giddy laughter, while I tried to get answers out of her about the mystery illness.

It's mostly lethal, she said. People recover, but get pains everywhere. It is afflicting thousands all over the world, except in this tiny nook of yours.

She wasn't particularly sympathetic towards the humans' woes; she was instead focused on describing the visions of the clear water and the blue sky, both untainted after a long time. The humans couldn't open their concrete buildings and pollute me with smoke and impurities, when all of them were dropping dead, she explained.

She left soon after, leaving me with unanswered questions and a few concerns. However, harvest season was arriving, and the daily wars I waged against the pests on my field took over my mind once again. Therefore, the matter lay forgotten.

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The next time I swung open the door, I gasped again. In front of me, stood an old, haggard woman — *Maa*! Her face was gaunt, lined with wrinkles, and it seemed she had aged terribly. She was silver haired and stooped. No longer did her eyes glisten or her gown sparkle. She stepped inside and could barely walk to the chair. I handed her an entire *matka* of water, and watched as she gulped it down thirstily.

What happened *Maa*, I managed to croak out.

It's them, the humans, she replied. Her voice was grating and raspy, and I winced to hear it.

They've defeated the illness and they've dirtied me once again, she continued.

I was about to reply, but decided against it when I saw her face harden. Her voice took on a crueler tone, and eyes gleaming with anger, she said: these wretched humans never learn.

I was shocked. I had never seen her like this, and the way she gritted her teeth as she spoke frightened me.

She must've noticed because her rage disappeared and she seemed apologetic. I'm sorry my daughter, she spoke softly, I did not mean that.

So she embraced me, and I did too, and I realised after that she was sobbing over my shoulder. I realised then that she was not wicked, just broken.

So, amidst her cries, I took care of her as a mother. I carried her frail form to the lake and gently bathed her, hoping to wash the bitterness away into the water. While she mourned the damage done to her, I clothed and fed her with my own two hands. When she thrashed around in her nightmares, screaming for her children, I whispered sweet lullabies into her ears.

I mothered her. Delicately, tenderly.

After about a week or so, she had recovered sufficiently and left. I did not stop her, knowing that I couldn't.

That was the last I ever saw of her, for she never returned.

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That is, until now. After 40 years, she has returned once again.

In these 40 years, I have aged greatly; my knees ache and I cannot stoop down to pull off the weeds growing around my *bajra*.

I can sense her in front of the door right now, although I haven't opened it yet. She knows I know, yet she doesn't knock or call me. She quietly waits for me, as I waited for her all these years.

I walk to the door and swing it open.

There she stands in front of me. She looks how she used to, before that cursed disease ravaged the entire world. Everything is still the same, except for her eyes. Her eyes are tinged with a soft wistfulness, a remembrance of lost days.

It's been 10 years since the illness ended, she says.

I do not say anything.

The illness became worse after I left, she continues. I could sense my health was deteriorating quickly, and I was afraid.

Afraid of what, I want to ask. But I don't.

Afraid of dying, she answers as if she has heard me. I was scared I would wither away, scared that my children would die, dirtied and poisoned. So, mad with rage, I murdered the culprits. I wrought destruction, with the last of my powers. Sometimes I willed the land to swallow them up whole, and sometimes I let the oceans and seas flood their homes.

She looks calm, serene but I know her. I can sense her terrible guilt, shaking her from within, right down to her core. Her core where flowers bloom and birds sing.  
So I tell her I forgive her. For nourishing herself with the blood of my kind.  
The flowers bloom brighter and the birds sing louder. Her eyes clear, as the remorse drips off of her slowly.

Thank you, she says.

And now, I ask.

Now I will return and create a newer, kinder, gentler humanity, she says.

What about me, I ask.

Her eyes meet mine and we both know what must be done.

She moves forward, and for an instant I know horrible, horrible fear. It grips the back of my throat and almost chokes me.

But then I feel her warm embrace, her strong arms around me. The fear leaves, as quick as it came.

*Maa*, I whisper in her ear.

I can smell the jasmine in her hair.

I can hear the flutter of bird wings somewhere.

Then, I am gone.