

**DOMINANT  
GENES**

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# Contents

Birth Story: 1

Gods in the Surf: 2

Draupadi Walks Alone at Night: 3

Pant Hoot: 8

My Parents Crossed an Ocean and Lost Me: 10

Sun God: 11

Parental Love: 14

Girls from the Island: 15

Banana Tree Wedding: 18

To All My Suitors and the Aunties Who Send Them My Way: 20

Girl Next Door: 21

How to Survive a Pandemic: 22

Self-Help: 27

Mother: 28

Dominant Genes: 30

Acknowledgments: 35



## **Birth Story**

My mother, out of love, stitches up my heart, pulling the thread tight to make sure it won't rupture again at the same spot. My heart is defenseless, ready to come undone at the next crisis. While she's at it, my mother stitches up my mouth, too, and turns her needle and thread to my brain.

## Gods in the Surf

I envy my American city friends  
their impractical swimsuits  
made to be seen not touched by sea  
unable to stand in weak Florida surf  
I was born by the ocean an island child  
the core of me salt water and seagulls howling  
we waded into the Gulf the ocean holds us  
amniotic fluid shot with jumping mullets  
jellyfish constellations too small to see  
worming their stinging tendrils into skin  
waves spitting shark eggs and tangles of seaweed  
pelicans strafe the water we gorge on chips  
chug shitty beer under a rainbow umbrella  
my city friends tell stories innocent childhood  
beach trips Florida vacations coconut sunscreen  
back home people saw gods in the surf  
watery limbs and hair made of dirty foam  
fishermen went out to sea came back  
nets full of prawns to bombed out homes  
children tried to hide in the sand  
evading military planes only to shatter on land mines  
I never saw visions in the waves but I knew  
a boat with no motor and no lights  
could take me across a lagoon at night  
and if I heard a helicopter  
I should sink my body into the ocean  
and trust it to hold me

## Draupadi Walks Alone at Night

For years now, since I turned twenty, my parents have been trying to marry me off. Aunties cup my chin at parties, turn my head this way and that, and say things like, “she’s so fair, too bad she’s short,” and, “she could use a thicker head of hair, but she’s pretty, so it’ll balance out.” My worth measured in pigments and strands. Point: I look younger than I am. Point: I’m neither skinny nor fat. Point: I come from a dominant caste.

Someone in a Bollywood picture says that progress is when a woman decked in gold can walk alone down the street at night. Of course, a film version of civility would include 22-karat bangles and jumka earrings. In the movie, a woman tries it. Police freak out. Comedy ensues. Centuries of feminine rage unspool on celluloid.

This is a rage we’ve all inherited, folded up in the pleats of cotton sarees, transmuted from the heads of our mothers at the same time they scolded us for not knowing how to cook roti, and how will we keep a man happy? We learn our anger through osmosis, or maybe it’s in the breast milk, spreading through our veins long before we learn how to look only at the floor and walk without showing our ankles.

In rural India, women are still married off to their rapists, a practice considered both a punishment for the rapist and justice for the woman.

My own insides curdle with this anger. I cut off my hair, hoping the outrage will seep out through my scalp, but it lingers.

In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi marries five brothers and bears their children, rules as queen and eventually, ends up suffering

in exile. For all that, she is called a whore. A queen, and for all that, a man can still gamble her away, a man can still drag her out to the middle of a crowd and order her stripped, a man can still save her body from shame.

Every time I go back home, my mother tells me what to pack. *Bring shorts, but not too short, mid-thigh to knee, and for gods' sake make sure you bought them from the women's section. If you bring men's tank tops, I swear I will burn them all.* My mother has a problem with androgyny.

By the time I'm twenty, I identify as a lesbian. I've cut my hair. I've bought twice as many men's tank tops. And the boy I bring home to my mother still has the girl body he was born with. My little brother, who is eight, is not confused. My mother cries. My father is stone.

Draupadi spends the first year of her marriage with the oldest brother, the second year with the second oldest, and so on. This so that everyone will know which son belongs to which father. She is the lynchpin of the story, a victim of masculine sexuality like Sita of the *Ramayana*. The narrative revolves around her, but unlike Sita, no parents today name their daughters Draupadi. Sita the virgin and Draupadi the whore.

The questions are simple. But no one asks them. No one wants answers. No one even wants the questions. The questions are landfills that loom like mountains.

I tell my mother I'm bisexual. Bi, from the Latin *dui*, the Greek *di*, the Sanskrit *dvi*. Meaning double. Having two. Living in two. I have bifurcated: my life, brown and white; my family, my parents and me; my body, masculine and feminine. Bi, meaning two. Draupadi, the wife and the whore. Bi, meaning co-existence, meaning contradiction, meaning war.

I spend years meeting potential suitors who are arranged by my parents. I don't think they'll work out, but I want to keep my parents from the breaking point. My mother calls to say that I'm not trying hard enough, and why can't I just be a good daughter and make them happy?

One suitor asks me to cook for him, watches me as I make curried beets, assures me that he can handle the spice I dump in. He can't.

Later, in a bar, a drunk white man asks us when we are getting married. *You both have good teeth*, he says, *and you're both from the Hindu Kush, so why wouldn't you marry each other?* Because I like women. Because my white boyfriend is holding empty my space in his bed, wondering when I'll come home. I can tell the drunk man that I will marry this suitor and make my parents happy, but that would be a lie.

Before Draupadi is a mother, she is a wife, and before she is a wife, she is a daughter, begotten through prayer from the fire god Agni. A princess so otherworldly that only a man who can shoot a fish in the eye can have her. But she is still a woman, and so she is an object, a prize to be won and a prize to be shared.

As I near thirty, my parents grow more desperate. They consult astrologists, cross-check with priests and mystics expert in past lives. They learn that I was a landowner named Indrani who treated her workers poorly and was doomed to pay for it in the next life. She didn't allow her female workers to take time off to be with their husbands, and so my married life will be rocky.

My mother prays for me, fasts for me, chants the Lord's 108 names every day for me. She says the chanting is supposed to help with her own anger, too. All I can tell is that my rebellion has numbed her, and I've inherited her anger.

Some say Draupadi got what was coming to her, because she had insulted kings and scoffed at their bids for her hand. She laughed at one king when he fell, *the blind son of blind parents*, she had said. Of another king, she had said, *I will not marry a man of unknown parentage*. So they called her a whore. They wanted her bared naked in front of her court. They wanted her fallen. And still some say they loved her.

*You're going to end up alone, my mother tells me. It's because of your anger. Your anger pushes men away.*

When Draupadi's mother-in-law mistakenly orders her sons to share the prize they've won, Draupadi becomes angry and tries to leave. What if she *had* left? She could have married one man and been happy. She could have married many men. She could have still been queen. At least it would have been her choice.

I come out to my mother three times. Each time she consoles me, sits by me while I cry, strokes my hair and tells me that I can still marry a man and have children, that I don't have to be different. Bi, meaning two paths. One path lets me stay in their lives. The other sees me cast out. My mother tells me to choose.

Lord Krishna explains to Draupadi that in her past life, she asked for a husband with five qualities. And since no perfect man exists, she got five husbands. In the end, it's all still her fault, and still not her choice. In the end, she gets no choices. In the end, she swallows her anger, marries the men and becomes a devoted wife, which my mother would say is a good choice.

At my cousin's wedding, everyone tells me I'm next. *The stars are lining up*, they say. *You'll be married within the year*, they say. No one seems to be worried that I'm still single. They're hoping the next suitor will work out.

At a coffee shop after the bar, I tell the next suitor about my

bisexuality, my polyamory, my plans to not have children. He blinks, sips at his latte, avoids eye contact. *You didn't have to tell me that*, he says. *You could have hidden that from me. You'll have to hide it from everyone if we get married.* I drink my coffee to keep the anger down.

My therapist is worried about my health. *Have you had suicidal ideation? This world needs you.* My boyfriend is tiring of my anger. This rage sits between us, grates against our skins like sand pressed too hard. I contemplate being alone. If Draupadi had given in to her anger and walked away, she might have died alone. That's the kind of story my mother would use to scare me into obedience.

Progress—like a woman's worth—is not measured in gold. It's not measured in gossip, eyelashes, or honor. Progress is the ways in which our gendered roles have blended and blurred. My mother went to grad school. My father cooks half the nights. My brother grew up in day care. But my mother says that we've had enough. She says, *further progress will unravel us.*

Draupadi, I want to rewrite your story. I want you to walk away. I want you to get world-shakingly mad. I want your rage to cut through everything and spin the world into new string. I want to use that string to bind my mother's idea of progress to mine, to weave my own rage into an armor, to wrap up tired old gender ideas and burn them in effigy. Draupadi, I want to inherit your anger and use your string to stitch my two selves back together.



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**SJ SINDU** is a Tamil diaspora author of two literary novels, two hybrid chapbooks, and a forthcoming graphic novel. Her first novel, *Marriage of a Thousand Lies*, won the Publishing Triangle Edmund White Award and was a Stonewall Honor Book and a finalist for a Lambda Literary Award. Sindu's second novel, *Blue-Skinned Gods*, was published in November 2021 by Soho Press, and her graphic novel, *Shakti*, is forthcoming from Harper Collins. Sindu's hybrid fiction and nonfiction chapbook, *I Once Met You But You Were Dead*, won the Turnbuckle Chapbook contest and was published by Split/Lip Press. A 2013 Lambda Literary Fellow, Sindu holds an MA in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and a PhD in