



So I will tell the story I have often heard my father tell us. The tale of how Sage Valmiki, before he became a sage, was a hunter in a forest. How once when he was still a hunter, he came within reach of a deer. As he aimed his arrow, the deer begged him for mercy, saying its pregnant mate was about to give birth and it needed to be nearby. Once the deer was sure that the doe and fawn were well, he would return, and gladly offer himself to Valmiki. Valmiki was intrigued, but unsure he wanted to let his prey go. The deer asked him why he needed to take lives. Valmiki answered that he hunted to feed his family, who would partake of the animal he killed. The deer then asked:

"Will they share fully along with you in your sin of taking a life, the same way they will share joyfully in filling their bellies with the flesh of the animal?"

Valmiki believes they will, but is not completely certain. The question vexes him, and he decides to let the deer go, but not without first extracting a promise that the deer will return to Valmiki, once he ensures his family's safety.

The deer reaches the grove where his wife has just given birth to their fawn. Mother and child are at peace and revealing happily. The wife notices his sad face and asks what could be troubling him. The deer tells her about his encounter with Valmiki and his subsequent promise. The wife breaks down and says she will give up her life instead, as life without her mate will be no life at all. The newborn, hearing this, offers to give up his own life, rather than lose one or both parents.

Meanwhile, Valmiki has reached his home. The deer's final question is still buzzing in his head. He tells his family of the deer waiting to be his prey, and promises them a good feast. Then, he asks if any of them will share in the sin of killing, just as they share in the joy of the feast. He discovers much to his dismay, that sin has no takers. The sin of killing will be his and his alone.

He steps out of his cottage in complete disgust and there to his great surprise stand the three deer waiting for him; father, mother, and newborn all ready to offer themselves up. At the sight of this divine act, Valmiki chooses to give up hunting and take up spiritual pursuits. The spirit of the three deer are exalted in Hindu mythology as stars in the heavens, shining down upon us, to serve as an indelible reminder to us all of the values of unconditional love and selfless sacrifice.