

RED HOT & HOLY

A HERETIC'S LOVE STORY

SERA BEAK



sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

CONTENTS

Prelude . . . xv

Fire Hazards . . . xvii

PART ONE B.M. (Before Marion)

1 Divine Wild Child . . . 3

2 Mystical Misfits . . . 11

3 Trumped by the Tree of Life . . . 23

4 The Goddess Is in Da House! . . . 27

5 Kali's Child . . . 39

6 My Higher Education . . . 49

7 Caught Red Handed . . . 57

8 The Red Light District of Divinity . . . 67

9 The Sacred Sorority . . . 83

PART TWO A.M. (After Marion)

10 Rouge Awakening . . . 99

11 Red Night of the Soul . . . 105

12 Blast Off . . . 119

13 Red Alert . . . 121

14 The Red Tent . . . 131

15 Shadow Puppets . . . 143

16 Girls Just Wanna Have Fun . . . 155

16½ Roses Are Red . . . 167

17 The Red Block . . . 169

CONTENTS

18	The Red Princess . . .	179
19	Dragon Fire . . .	203
20	A Ruby in the Heart of Granite . . .	213
21	REDefining Divinity . . .	225
22	Burn Baby, Burn . . .	239
	Epilogue . . .	247
	Acknowledgments . . .	249
	Notes . . .	251

B.M.

(BEFORE MARION)

Red is the color of blood, and I will seek it:
I have sought it in the grass.
It is the color of steep sun seen through eyelids.

It is hidden under the suave flesh of women,
Flows there, quietly flows.
It mounts from the heart to the temples, the singing
mouth—
As cold sap climbs to the rose.

I am confused in webs and knots of scarlet
Spun from the darkness;
Or shuttled from the mouths of thirsty spiders.

Madness for red! I devour the leaves of autumn.
I tire of the green of the world.
I am myself a mouth for blood . . .

CONRAD AIKEN
"Red Is the Color of Blood"

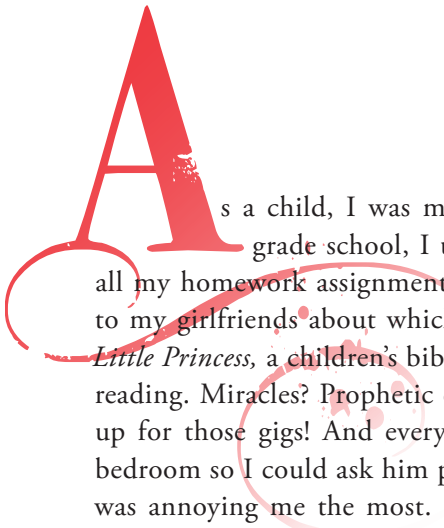
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DIVINE WILD CHILD

I want us to envision that what children go through has to do with finding a place in the world for their specific calling. They are trying to live two lives at once, the one they were born with and the one of the place and among the people they were born into. The entire image of a destiny is packed into a tiny acorn, the seed of a huge oak on small shoulders. And its call rings loud and persistent and is as demanding as any scolding voice from the surroundings. The call shows in the tantrums and obstinacies, in the shyness and retreats, that seem to set the child against our world but that may be protections of the world it comes with and comes from.

JAMES HILLMAN

The Soul's Code

As a child, I was madly in love with God. Gaga for God. In grade school, I used to write “I (heart) God” at the top of all my homework assignments and in the margins of the notes I passed to my girlfriends about which boys we thought were cute. Next to *The Little Princess*, a children’s bible was kept on my bedside table for nightly reading. Miracles? Prophetic dreams? Angels? Healing the sick? Sign me up for those gigs! And every Thursday I believed J.C. dropped by my bedroom so I could ask him personal questions and tell him which sister was annoying me the most. I was magnetized to rosaries, prayers, and pyramids the way other kids were to doughnuts, MTV, and Cabbage Patch Kids, and every time I saw a religious figure (priest, nun, Buddhist monk, Hare Krishna) out in public, it would take an enormous amount of willpower not to *stalk* them.

When Career Days at school would come around, my questionnaire would look a little something like this:

Favorite subject? God

Favorite hobby? God

What do you want to be when you grow up? God

(Okay, there was a brief time when I was six years old when the answer to that last question was “an albino.” I thought albinism would make me glow in the dark.)

When I was a child, God was not a belief or a magical Santa Claus type. He was as real as my heart. I *felt* Him (inside me). I *recognized* Him (everywhere). I *knew* Him (personally). We hung out together, and I never wanted our rendezvous to stop. I only wanted us to draw even closer. I assumed I was experiencing what many Catholics refer to as “the call” to be a priest, so I matter-of-factly informed my parish priests and Sunday school teachers of my future vocation. They laughed, patted my head, and told me I couldn’t have heard the call to be a priest because I had a vagina.

Okay, they didn’t say that last part, but believe me, it was implied.

They did tell me that only men were allowed to be priests because Jesus only had male disciples (to which Mary Magdalene juts out her left hip and slaps her round cheek with *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*). But, of course, I could always be a nun.

Every time I was told I couldn’t be a priest, it felt like a silver bullet was being shot through my Red heart, because when I told those religious authorities I was being called, I *really* meant it. God called to me not only through my Red heart but also through the trees, the stones, the birds, my parents’ Oldsmobile station wagon, grocery carts, and shiny Red apples. I remember walking all ninja-like behind my family on summer-night strolls so they wouldn’t catch me kiss the trunks of trees, lovingly caress the warm stones, and affectionately pat the dirty sidewalk. What was clear to me when I was a wee one (and probably to you when you were that young) was that I was here to Love, and that everything in this world was *aching* to Love and Be Loved in return. That’s right, *everything*. Even grocery carts.

The whole

World is secretly on fire. The stones

Burn, even the stones

They burn me. How can a [wo]man be still or

Listen to all things burning? How can [s]he dare
 To sit with them when
 All their silence
 Is on fire?¹

— *Thomas Merton*, “In Silence”

As you might’ve ascertained, despite (or because of) my unfettered giddiness for God, I wasn’t exactly a traditional Catholic. I was bored out of my mind during Mass. I openly questioned the hell out of almost everything my poor Sunday school teachers taught that did not resonate with my experience of the Big G. I wanted a pink Trans-Am as my future nun-mobile. I dramatically swiveled my young hips when I walked up and down church aisles . . . *for* God. I thought Jesus was hot. Seriously hot. And I thought we should celebrate his holy hotness each Sunday with rockin’ music and ecstatic dancing.

Before I overdose you with my spiritual sass, I should share a few of my many personal paradoxes: In my early years, I often acted like a divine wild child. But when I was ten years old, my family moved from the Red-hot clays of Georgia to the green cool plains north of Chicago, where I became painfully shy, desperate to fit in, a “good girl,” and a devout people-pleaser. Like many children, I learned to hide what was most true for me, and I became terrified of speaking publicly, especially when what I wanted to say didn’t match the spiritual or social status quos surrounding me. As Gaston Bachelard teaches, “What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us.”²

By sixth grade, I started exploring everything from astrology to reincarnation, astral dreaming to auras—basically the New Age aisle in any bookstore became my second home. I quickly found out that the Catholic Church did not readily accept these metaphysical subjects. Trusting my honest curiosity for the ever-expanding realms of “Spirit” that I was experiencing over the set beliefs of the beloved tradition I came from, I quite respectfully, but with utter certainty, left the Church.

By the time I reached high school, I was the girl you would go to if you had a peculiar dream or you thought your dead grandmother was trying to contact you or you felt a weird vibe in your basement. I wore purple Doc Martens with my school uniform, danced at all-night raves, had a serious boyfriend, was vice president of my class, laughed at the right jokes, said the right things, and continued to keep my passion for the Divine on the down

low. I stuck out just enough to be thought of as special and cool, but not enough to be thought of as weird or (gasp) *uncool*.

It was exhausting.

I remember one much-needed spring break my family spent on Kiawah Island, outside Charleston, South Carolina. Almost every night I would wander past the shifting sand dunes, plop down on the beach, play Peter Gabriel's "Mercy Street" on my CDman ("She pictures a soul, with no leak at the seam."), and bawl my eyes out. Everything in me reached out, aching to go "home." While I knew God was just as much here as elsewhere, I also knew that places and spaces existed where I felt *much* closer to the Divine than I did in high school, than I did on the north shore of Chicago, than I did on planet earth. Lying heartbroken on the still-warm sand, gazing up at the starry night, I would forward the CD to Gabriel's "Red Rain" ("Red rain is coming down all over me"), and sometimes I could feel Something indescribably loving reaching toward *me*.

My senior year in high school, I found a mentor—a wonderful religion teacher who introduced me to the fascinating work of Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung, mythologist Joseph Campbell (who coined the oh-so-popular phrase "follow your bliss"), and spiritual-lite book classics such as Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. I realized that I didn't have to drop-kick divinity every time I entered a classroom. Instead, I could actually *feed* my hunger for divinity *in* school. This was a breakthrough.

When I got to college, I created a "self-determined major" in religious studies (my small liberal arts school did not offer a religion major at the time), which was the perfect cover for my fetish for all things spiritual. Now I could talk about God or angels or reincarnation anytime I wanted, without sounding like a total freak, 'cause I was *studying* it *for* school. That's right, I became a *religion scholar*. (You need to give that last line a badass attitude and vocal inflection or it just won't read right.)

While studying the world's religions with excellent professors in a liberal arts environment, I couldn't help but develop a genuine appreciation for the diverse beliefs that support our wisdom traditions, for the profundity of *all* the holy texts, and for the sacred splendor that *all* religions can't help but reflect at their core. So, I became a Hoover for the Holy during my first two years of college. I sucked up every religious book, practice, and teaching I could get ahold of. But alas, my passion for my studies began to wane at the end of my sophomore year of college. (I realize that was sort of soon to

become dissatisfied with my favorite academic subject, but when it comes to divinity, if I'm not feelin' It, I have a difficult time paying attention.) I started to fall asleep in my sociology/psychology/anthropology of religion lectures, rolled my eyes in my Jewish/Islamic/Hindu studies classes, and wanted to tear off my clothes and run around screaming in my Christian theology courses.

As an empathetic, open-minded, and politically correct student, I was alarmed by my spiritually *incorrect* feelings. You see, at that point in my life, I had nothing external to point to in my studies of religion—or in my personal explorations of New Age spirituality—to validate my chronic internal cravings for more *heat*, movement, aliveness, wildness, and okay, yes, sexiness when it came to spirituality. As British poet Colin Oliver moans, “What a sad thing to be part of institutions which wind up dousing the very thing that began them: Fire.”³ Thinking, or rather *hoping*, that my spiritual frustration was simply due to too much class time, I decided to go abroad.

I spent part of my junior year studying the Tibetan religion, culture, and language in Nepal, Tibet, and Dharamsala, India (the seat of the Tibetan government in exile). Vajrayana Buddhism is a vibrant mixture of the religious philosophy that originated with Siddhartha Gautama (aka the Buddha) in India around the sixth-century BCE and the animistic/shamanistic tradition, called *Bon*, that was alive in Tibet way before Buddhism crossed the Himalayas. This form of Buddhism is pretty “far out”—chock full of colorful deities, guiding oracles, unsolved mysteries, and local magic. It sounded like the perfect religious tradition to reignite my scholarly passion.

During this intensive program, my classmates and I had the privilege of learning from many well-respected *rinpoches*, monks, and nuns (all varieties of Tibetan Buddhist teachers and practitioners), including the Dalai Lama himself, whom I got to meet, auspiciously enough, on my twenty-first birthday. My classmates earnestly studied all the Buddhist texts they could get translated; bought all the sandalwood incense, *malas* (prayer beads), and *thankas* (sacred Buddhist paintings) they could fit into their dusty backpacks; meditated their asses off; hopped from one teacher to the next to receive Buddhist transmissions (sacred teachings); took the bodhisattva vow (a vow to become enlightened in order to help all beings); and started shaving their heads like the monastics (yep, even some of the girls).

And where was I during this Buddhapalooza? I was there, front row and center (with my long hair) . . . for a few months anyway. And then the all-too-familiar feelings of spiritual discontent and frustration returned. So, I started

ditching meditation practice so I could dance in my room to English trip-hop, cutting morning circumambulations around the Dalai Lama's temple in order to wander around the colorful Indian bazaars, and passing on megawatt spiritual transmissions from important teachers in order to cruise the backpackers' English book swaps.

One day, while digging through worn-out copies of *Siddhartha*, I came across Tom Robbins's *Skinny Legs and All* and devoured that fine piece of luscious literature in one long, sweaty sitting over refills of *po cha* (Tibetan yak butter tea). In case you haven't had the honor, *Skinny Legs and All* is full of charmingly chatty inanimate objects, messy intimate human relationships, frisky deities, passionate sex, rowdy humor, and Salome's dance of the seven veils. While reading this dusty book at the base of the Himalayas, something inside me started to

Come Back to *Life*.

The next day, I self-consciously raised my hand in my Buddhist studies class and, with a shaky voice, said that while I respected everything I was learning, "enlightenment" sounded (gulp) kind of *boring* to me. The class fell silent. The Buddhist teacher shrugged his shoulders. I turned a deep shade of Red.

Was I egotistical, rebellious, ignorant, and materialistic? A bit. But when I was living and studying in India, Nepal, and Tibet, even though I was around astute spiritual wisdom, time-honored sacred practices, and oceans of compassion, I began to feel like a part of me was dying, or at least drying up like some sort of creepy desert image from Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. So what gives?

Follow the Red brick road . . .

One day, not long after my classroom confession, a rough-looking, long-haired Buddhist teacher I met in a tea shop told me a story about a Buddhist monk named Saraha, who lived in the eighth century in Bengal. Like all monks, Saraha was a renunciant. He lived in a monastery, shut away from work, family, sex, chocolate, and so on. He couldn't talk, touch, or even look at women, because women were seen as distractions on the path. In fact, at this time in Buddhism's history, women were thought to be incapable of achieving enlightenment; they had to wait to be reincarnated as men in order to go for the gold.

The story goes that one day, spiritually studious, always-on-time, robes-always-ironed, mind-always-clean Saraha was outside the monastery, running

some errands for his fellow monks, when suddenly a group of wild women surrounded him and started teasing him about his Buddhist practice, touching him, calling him pet names, giggling, rubbing themselves up against him, and getting all sorts of close encounters with him.

Saraha was horrified. He realized this event not only made him “impure” but also could get him kicked out of his monastery. He begged the crazy women to stop harassing him and said he would do anything if they would go away and let him go back to his monastic life in peace. The sexy troublemakers told him they would leave him alone for good *if* he spent one night with them in the jungle. Saraha agreed, probably thinking: “Hey, this can’t be so bad. One night in a jungle teaching the Buddhist dharma [path] to these strange, undisciplined, unspiritual women, and then I can go back to my life as a simple Buddhist monk.” Yeah. Uh-huh. ’Cause that’s what makes for a good story.

So, off Saraha went into the deep, dark jungle with the seductive women who were actually dakinis—female beings who manifest enlightened activity, free from conventional perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Interestingly enough, dakinis often appear to practitioners in Red. According to many Buddhist beliefs, these enlightened feminine beings usually pay a visit to a man (or someone too immersed in their masculine consciousness) when he (or she) has become too rigid with his (or her) spiritual reality.

Welcome to the Jungle

In the jungle, Saraha soon found himself drinking wine and dancing and getting it on with the ladies in a manner he never, *ever* expected of himself. He felt honey-soaked, electric, intoxicated, like he was in some sort of alternate reality where he got to participate in some very unorthodox “spiritual” practices. At one point in the hot, tangly evening, Saraha had a powerful vision of a Red Feminine Being who told him where his next spiritual teacher would be found. The following morning, Saraha left his passionate playmates and went to the place he had seen in his vision. But when he arrived, there was no temple or monastery or even house with the usual ornaments or pomp that announced a great spiritual teacher lived there. There was nuthin’ but a ramblly old hut with a lower-caste woman sitting outside, making arrows.

Saraha assumed the Red Goddess who had danced through his visions had been wrong, dead wrong, so he asked the poor, lowly woman where he could find an esteemed teacher of the dharma who lived nearby. The woman’s enlightened answer caused Saraha to fall on the floor at her feet and beg to be her disciple. The woman agreed to take him on as her student, and later

she took him on as her consort (tantric sexual partner). While these two were *quite* heretical and even considered dangerous by the Buddhist traditionalists and local wine merchants, they are known today as two of the greatest teachers of Tantric Buddhism.

I resonated with that story. A lot.

But after my studies in Tibet and subsequent travels through several other countries, studying different religions, I began to feel incredibly alone, spiritually speaking. I had left the Church because I couldn't be a priest and because they weren't open to my spiritual explorations in the "other realms." And although I learned wonderful things from my New Age adventures in high school, they didn't offer me much solid ground to stand on. I had then assumed (and desperately hoped) that by studying the world religions and traveling around the world to experience their lived reality, I would find my true Home—a tradition, community, practice, lineage, perhaps even a teacher that resonated with my heart.

But alas, I was finding that the world's religious traditions were teaching an experience and expression of the Divine that, though magnificent and wise, did not fully support *my* personal knowing, passionate feminine yearnings, and authentic self-expression. And this left me with an aching heart and some serious spiritual self-doubt.

The day I returned to the United States after my studies abroad, I spent the entire night covering every inch of my pastel bedroom walls with rich Red fabric. I didn't understand exactly *why* I was redecorating my living space with this vivid color (purple was my favorite color at this time in my life); I assumed it was simply a side effect of hanging around all those vibrant Indian bazaars. But now I know that a deeper part of me intuitively recognized that after all my exciting, but spiritually unfulfilling, studies and travels

I needed to be wrapped in Red.

I needed to be wrapped in Her.