CARAVAN OF NO DESPAIR

A MEMOIR OF
LOSS AND TRANSFORMATION

MIRABAI STARR

sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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BECOMING MIRABAI

I had just turned fourteen and was about to become Mirabai. A couple of teachers at Da Nahazli, our "free school" in Taos, came back from their most recent trip to India with a comic book depicting the life of the sixteenth-century Rajasthani princess who gave up everything for Krishna, Lord of Love, and became a wandering God-intoxicated poet and singer. Our eighth-grade class produced a musical play based on the legend of her life. I was cast as Mirabai. I thought it would be perfect if Phillip, my boyfriend, played Krishna, but instead the Lord of Love was being portrayed by a girl named Wendy. It wouldn't have worked out anyway. Phillip had died halfway through rehearsal season, before I had the chance to apologize for refusing to give him my virginity.

I liked Wendy, but I was not in love with her. I was in love with Phillip. Or I used to be. Now I was becoming Mirabai, and I was falling in love with Krishna.

We were getting ready backstage, an adobe room attached to the great geodesic dome at the center of the Lama Foundation, a spiritual community high up in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Sarada, our music teacher, wrapped me in her own wedding sari: yards and yards of pale, creamy silk bordered in gold. She brushed my long red hair and placed a jeweled *bindi* on my third eye. My feet were bare, and tiny silver bells encircled my ankles. There were a dozen yellow bangles riding up each arm, and filigree earrings hung halfway down my neck. My blue eyes were rimmed with kohl.

"It's time," Sarada whispered in my ear, and she gave me a gentle nudge. Surya, our drama teacher and Sarada's husband, pulled the rope to open the heavy wooden door, and I walked through.

The dome was filled with people: parents, siblings, the residents of Lama, and the extended Taos community. But I did not see them. I walked to the altar set up center stage and prostrated myself before the statue of the blue-skinned god playing his bamboo flute, just like we rehearsed. Sandalwood incense was curling up to the vaulted roof. When I lifted my head from the rough pine planks, I noticed a kind of liquid light rising up through my folded knees into my body and infusing every cell. Some dry land inside me sprang to life and burst into bloom. My little girl voice evaporated, and the ecstatic song of a long-dead singer cascaded from my mouth.

"*Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna!*" I chanted, "*Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare!*"

Mirabai stepped in, and I was gone. It was a big relief to get out of her way.

A year later, my fake spiritual teacher (who was lurking in the audience that day, watching me blossom) formally bestowed the name of Mirabai upon me in a pseudo-ceremony on a rock in the middle of a river in California. He called Ram

Dass, a genuine spiritual teacher, in New York and asked him to sanction my naming. It made sense: I was madly in love with an unavailable god, to whom I composed illustrated poems and sang songs, and I was a tragic figure. Ram Dass agreed.

Who wouldn't want to be named after Mirabai, part superhero and part saint? The legend begins when Mirabai is a small child. She is standing on the balcony with her mother, watching a wedding procession go by. The bride and groom, dressed in exquisite finery, are riding side by side upon the backs of equally bedecked elephants. Beautiful girls scatter marigold blossoms before them, and musicians and dancers follow behind. Everyone seems ecstatic. Little Mirabai is besotted. She points to the man and woman on the elephants.

"Who are they, Ma?" she asks. "What are they doing?"

"They are getting married, little one."

"I want to get married!"

"You already are," her mother says. "Your husband is Lord Krishna."

She takes her daughter by the hand and leads her inside to the family shrine, where brightly colored statues and ornately framed pictures of Krishna adorn the low carved table and the wall above it. Mirabai's mother demonstrates how to bow at the feet of the Holy One and offer your heart. With the literal inclinations of a child, Mirabai takes it all in with grave regard. She presses her forehead to the floor and calls out in silence. "Come be my love," she whispers. "And I will never leave you."

And she never does.

But Mirabai's father has other plans for her—namely, to hook her up with a prince and elevate the family's status. She is engaged by six and forced to marry by sixteen and move into the palace of her middle-aged husband. As far as Mirabai is concerned, she is already married to Lord Krishna, and she treats

her mortal marriage as a charade. She goes through the daily motions of her wifely duties like a sleepwalker. At night she wakes up and sings to her beloved till dawn, entering ecstatic trance states that initially embarrass and ultimately infuriate the prince's household.

They decide to get rid of her.

Mirabai's sister-in-law sends a bouquet of flowers as a peace offering. Nestled inside is a venomous snake. Mirabai inhales the fragrance of her beloved, and the viper slips away. Her mother-in-law offers a cup of exotic fruit juices laced with poison. Mirabai sips the essence of her beloved, and the drink becomes pure nectar. Her father-in-law arranges to have a pallet of rose petals set up in her chamber, secretly covering a bed of toxic nails. When Mirabai lies down to sleep, she embraces her beloved, and the spikes dissolve into flowers.

The prince is less crafty. Heart contorted with jealousy toward an invisible yet infinitely powerful adversary, he draws his sword and charges into Mirabai's chamber, where she is lost in love at the feet of her bronze beloved. But when he sees his wife's face radiant and transported, when he hears the clear-water ripple of her voice as she sings to God, when he enters the sphere of that burning, the locks on the doors of his own heart melt and slide off. He opens. He gets it. He becomes her devotee and offers himself to Krishna. And then he is forced to go off and fight the Moguls, where he dies in battle.

Mirabai's in-laws try to get her to commit *sati,* ritual sacrifice, in which a woman is obliged to throw her own body onto her husband's funeral pyre. But they have the wrong husband. Krishna is not dead. Krishna will never die.

Mirabai manages to escape the palace and flee to Brindaban, where she spends the rest of her life singing, dancing, and composing ecstatic love poems to God. In the end, Krishna

reciprocates her devotion when he appears to her on the banks of the Yamuna River and calls her to himself, and they merge into one.

Soon after my naming, I followed the lead of my namesake and left home to track the footprints of my beloved. But I got all mixed up and drank the poison. I lay down on the bed of nails and embraced the snake.

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MATTY

Phillip was not the first boy I loved who never grew up. When I was six and my brother Matty was nine, he was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. A year later he was gone. My sister, Amy, had just turned four when Matty died, and Roy was newborn. Mom was in her second trimester with her youngest child when her oldest became sick, and her pregnancy was shrouded in despair. Matty, a baseball fanatic, had named Roy after his favorite player, and Roy has carried his name like a treasure map left to him by his invisible big brother, which never quite led him to the gold of connection.

Matty died on December 28, 1968. Although he was only a child at that time, he had a well-developed political conscience. He plastered the walls of his room with pictures of Martin Luther King Jr., including a photo of Dr. King in his casket from the cover of *TIME* magazine. At night he listened to the "I Have a Dream" speech over and over again on his portable phonograph until he could recite the words along with his hero, with all the inflection

of a black Baptist preacher. He grew out his sideburns so that he would resemble his other idol, Bobby Kennedy. He wrote to President Johnson and expressed his conviction that the Vietnam War was a big mistake and that the commander in chief should end it immediately. Johnson wrote back thanking the young citizen for his social engagement, and Matty taped the letter to his closet door.

Of course, Matty wasn't politicized in a vacuum. Our parents, liberal Jews, were already active in the antiwar movement. After Matty's death, as the war ramped up, so did our mother's activism. Mom had taught herself to play the guitar so that she could sing protest songs. Now she convened hootenannies at our suburban Long Island home, and folk singers from all over New York gathered in our living room to drink wine, smoke cigarettes, and launch their complaints against the Establishment through music—Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger ("We Shall Overcome," "Blowin' in the Wind"), Irish folk songs ("Roddy McCorley," "Danny Boy"), and old American ballads ("She Walks These Hills in a Long Black Veil")—sung in three-part harmony, accompanied by banjo and harmonica. Mom sang us antiwar songs as lullabies every night when she put us to bed ("Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream," "If I Had a Hammer," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?").

My parents came from opposite sides of the Jewish tracks. My father grew up in an upscale neighborhood in Brooklyn, the son of a wealthy doctor and a socialite who had divorced her first husband (Dad's birth father, a business tycoon) because he bored her. My father had a prep school education and a degree in English literature from New York University. My mother's parents were working-class people from the Bronx. My maternal grandfather always had a longing for country life, so when my mother was small, he moved his family out to Long Island, where he planted honeysuckle hedges and cultivated raspberries.

At first my paternal grandparents were not thrilled by their son's choice of a wife, but they came to adore my smart and lively mother as their own daughter.

"She's a firecracker, that one," Grandma would say of our mom. Grandpa, pipe clenched between his teeth, eyes twinkling, would nod in agreement.

Amy, Roy, and I were staying with our grandparents in Brooklyn when Matty lay dying in the children's hospital in Manhattan. It was his third and final hospitalization, at the end of a long year of near deaths and false hopes. Christmas had passed a few days earlier, Hanukkah a week before that. Amy had just turned four on December 20, which also happened to be our father's thirty-ninth birthday.

My parents spent every hour of those final days at Matty's bedside, watching him slip between their fingers like a wave rising, then falling, then surging inexorably back to the sea. It wasn't until two days before the death of their son that Mom and Dad finally surrendered and drove out to the end of the island to choose his gravesite at a historic Jewish cemetery.

After Matty took his last breaths, my father must have called from the hospital to tell his parents it was over, because by the time Mom and Dad walked through the door of the stately brownstone, Grandma and Grandpa had gathered us in their living room. Amy and I sat side by side on the uncomfortable damask love seat, and Roy lay in his bassinette. Mom picked up my little sister and sat down with her in a chair, pressing her face into Amy's soft blond hair. Dad sat down next to me on the sofa and pulled me into his lap.

"Matty died today," he said.

"I know," I said, but I didn't.

I have no idea why I said that, except that I must have wanted to prove that I knew everything and could handle anything. I

was a big girl, and now I would be even bigger. I had gone from being the youngest child before my sister was born to the middle child after Amy's birth, and now, in a flash, I'd become the oldest with Matty's death.

But I knew nothing. I didn't know why my grandfather crying made me feel like laughing. I didn't know how I would explain to my third-grade teacher that my brother died over Christmas vacation. I didn't know why I never saw Matty again after the ambulance came to get him that last time.

It must have been early November when they took him away. His second remission had come and gone like lightening, and he was sick again, puffed up with cortisone, slow and sluggish. I was used to my slim, athletic big brother and neither recognized nor appreciated this imposter. That Halloween, I raced out the door in my tiger costume, whiskers quivering with glee.

"Come on, slow poke!" I yelled at the limping pirate lagging behind me. I looked both ways and then sped across the cul-de-sac, swinging my plastic pumpkin basket.

Suddenly I heard Mom calling from the doorway, her voice uncharacteristically shrill: "No running!" I stopped in my tracks as if struck by a stun gun. Something was very wrong here.

Soon afterward, Matty took his last ride to the hospital.

"Can we have the siren on?" he asked our mother, who sat with him in the back, stroking his hair. Mom leaned forward and whispered in the ear of the EMT, who had been trying to keep things quiet so they wouldn't scare their young patient. He tapped the driver on the shoulder, who smiled and flipped the switch. The siren wailed as they careened down the Long Island Expressway.