

Seven Days to the Sea

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

OUTSIDE CAMP

Miryam

These are the hands that Yahveh gave me. Once they kept the cleanest home in all of Egypt. With these hands I welcomed Aharon's sons into the world. They fed my brother Moses and all our family. They baked the first bread of offering for the Tabernacle. From childhood my hands never lay idle. They always knew how to set everything right.

These are the hands that helped build a nation.

Look at them! White with the scales of tzaraat. I strove for purity with every breath, with every fiber of my being! Now I am tainted and unclean.

Foul with this dreaded disease, banished from camp into the barren wilderness what use am I?

I, who never cried, can not stop the flood of tears.

Yahveh! I tend the Children of Israel as if they are the fruit of my own womb. Make me whole again for their sake!

The prayer weeps from every pore. Does He hear?

The water in my goatskin does not refresh me. The beauty of the blue sky against the yellow sand and red rock eludes me. The midday heat glides over my garments without

penetrating. Only the horror of my punishment touches me. I have never been so alone.

I am condemned to this isolation for seven days – as long as our flight from Egypt to the sea. In those seven days we began to shed our slavery. The waters parted. We crossed into Midyan as a nation reborn. We sang and danced with joy. Tzipporah took the timbrel from me. She touched my hand. Our eyes met. In that moment, by the edge of the sea, I recognized how much we shared – I saved Moses soon after he came into this world and she saved him when he stood on the threshold of greatness. We each had our purpose, our part to play in history. In the shadows of my heart I must have known that Moses needed her as much as he needed me.

What became of my heart?

What will become of me in these seven days?

I stare into the wavering horizon. The glistening sun deceives me. A shadow flutters. The figure draws closer. The Angel of Death.

I rise in fear.



ONE

Miryam

Even as a young girl I always saw the truth before me – how my mother longed for more children, how my father loved us with quiet devotion, how my brother Aharon sought to please everyone. As I grew older, my vision grew wider. I saw my people’s weakness for the fleshpots of Egypt. I saw through falsehood and deceit. I saw good and evil struggle in the same person. Wherever I looked I saw room for improvement. If something lay amiss in my father’s household – crockery in uneven stacks, a chipped brick on the stair, a tress fallen loose from a friend’s braid – I fixed it without delay. Some things I could not repair: injustice, sloth, cowardice, the corrupting influence of the Egyptian gods.

For nineteen generations the Children of Israel prospered in Egypt. Under the tyrant Rameses we came to know oppression and hardship. Every year in Shomu – the dry season – I watched the pharaoh’s army march into Goshen. They went into our homes, our fields, and our workshops to seize men for compulsory labor. I saw them beat those who tried to escape. Once a man tried to disguise himself in his wife’s wig and dress. When the soldiers discovered his ruse they castrated him. After that, no one dared to evade the soldiers.

They sent some of the Israelites to work on temples far upstream. Most of our men remained in the Eastern

Delta – a short walk from Goshen – to build the new capital, Pi-Ramesse. Of all the pharaoh's many ambitious projects, nothing compared to the obelisks, pylons, temples, and palaces of this extravagant city surrounded by rivulets.

From a young age I understood the fate of those who labored under Rameses's foremen. Year after year I saw them return broken and weak. I heard how they spent long hours in the withering sun, how they received the whip by day and nothing more than a little bread at night. Life was short for the poorest, both Israelites and Egyptians – few lived beyond the age of twenty-five. Pharaoh's heavy burdens struck down rich and poor alike. The canals of Egypt flowed with the sweat and blood of our men.

I might have turned a blind eye to all the suffering – I counted my own family among the lucky few untouched by Pharaoh's harsh rule. My father, Amram the vintner, learned winemaking from his father who learned from his father, generation after generation all the way back to our forefather Levi son of Yaakov. Father did not rush his wine to market. He often waited as long as three or four years for a vintage to mature before he added spices and honey. Those sealings went for the highest prices and found great favor with Rameses himself. The royal household enjoyed my father's wine so much that Father and his workers, including my younger brother Aharon, remained exempt from all conscripted labor.

Many of my friends and acquaintances envied our good fortune. I took care never to speak of it. I did not allow myself to rest content in the shadow of my people's

suffering. I learned to be solicitous and helpful. I brought baked goods and words of comfort to our neighbors. In the marketplace the women of Goshen welcomed my sympathetic ear.

I took my place among these women earlier than most. My mother, Yoheved – who loved her family with a sweet and generous heart – had little skill for house-keeping. By my eleventh birthday she filled my eager hands with work. A servant helped me with the cleaning, but I did all the cooking and shopping. I always looked forward to seeing my market friends. We exchanged gossip. We shared recipes and remedies. We advised each other on the day's best stalls for fresh produce or meat. Despite my young age, many sought my company. I took a lively interest in everyone.

My friends could always count on me to know the palace news, the weather predictions, and the match-makers' latest triumphs. In return for everything I told them, they often teased me about Nunn, son of the jug maker.

I was a girl of eight and Nunn a young man of thirteen when he began to deliver jugs to the vineyard for his father. I liked him from the first. He spoke to me as an equal. He never tired of my questions. He seemed patient and kind with everyone. Once he gave me a little jug no bigger than my fist. I liked it so much he made several more for my next birthday. I filled them with oil and fruit juices. I smiled every time I saw them on my kitchen shelf.

As the years passed, Nunn matured into a handsome and energetic man. To some women he might have

looked like any Israelite, with his dark hair shaved close to the head and his body dressed in a linen loincloth with a linen apron over the front. But I saw how his passionate brown eyes opened wide whenever he spoke with fervor, as he often did. I found myself drawn to his exuberance.

Nunn tended to forget details or overlook them altogether. He did not seem much aware of his surroundings. In this we stood as opposites. Yet he admired my neat and orderly ways. He did not object when I suggested a better method for stacking the wine jugs in the storage cellar. He never complained when I straightened his cloak or retied his sandals. He seemed to enjoy my hands fussing over him. He responded with good humor when I advised him to clean his nails with more care. We laughed at each other as brothers and sisters do.

Nunn and I often discussed the injustices around us. We scorned the Egyptian nobility who spent their wealth building magnificent tombs for the hour they rose from the dead. We mocked the pharaoh who imagined himself a god.

Nunn's fury with the pharaoh grew even greater after his first season on a labor gang. He returned thin and weak. I vowed to secure his release. He shook his head with disbelief.

'What can a twelve-year-old girl do? What can anyone do? Even the God of Father Yaakov can not save us.'

Like all our people, I prayed to the gods that our ancestors brought with them out of Canaan into Egypt – El and his consort, Lady Atirat of the Sea. But I put more faith in the power of deeds. I wanted to save Nunn. I would find a way to do so.

The task proved easier than either Nunn or I anticipated. On the very evening of my promise, as Father and Aharon returned from the vineyard, I realized that Father had the means to release my friend from servitude.

I pleaded with Father to take Nunn into the winery during the dry months as an apprentice alongside Aharon. Nunn did nothing to advance his own father's business while he labored for Pharaoh's glory. Why not ask him to work for us instead?

'It is for your benefit as much as his,' I argued. 'Aharon is yet young. You need more help in those months when you are moving heavy jugs. Nunn can haul the wine to market. He will take more care than hired help.'

Father saw the wisdom in my words. He declared that no more sensible or persuasive girl lived in all of Egypt.

The next morning my father arranged matters with Nunn's father. From that day forward Nunn looked at me with different eyes. He grew more tender and attentive. He brought me pretty flowers and sweet, ripe fruit. My height – even at twelve I stood taller than most men – had always embarrassed me. Now I began to feel conscious of my physical self in other ways. When I sat near his strong, broad body, my flesh tingled. I grew shy in his presence. I came to anticipate our meetings with both excitement and apprehension.

In a few short weeks my steady, sisterly affection for Nunn grew into the fluttering, hope-filled love of a young woman for a man. I prayed that Nunn also wanted our friendship to become something else. I knew my parents would approve. Nunn was a good man from a good family. He respected his elders. He cared about our

people. He worked hard. He would never sit idle with his cup of beer if I needed help. Nor would I linger in the market if I could be of service to him. Our partnership would be joyful and productive.

But as the weeks passed without a word from him, I grew worried and skittish. I began to fear that he did not share my desire.

Even under Pharaoh's oppression our people multiplied. We looked forward to a better time when once again our people could dwell in the land with honor and dignity. We told each other that our situation could only improve.

We soon learned otherwise.

One morning in the twenty-eighth year of Rameses's rule – my thirteenth year of life – I stood in the marketplace hot with embarrassment as once again my friends teased me about Nunn.

'He has shoulders broader than an ox!' one girl announced.

'Have you seen his massive hands?'

'But such a slender waist!'

'He should wrap his loincloth tighter!'

'The way he stares at Miryam!'

'Like a hungry young dog.'

'Stop it!' I laughed. 'I have known him since I was a little girl. We are friends.'

'Good friends,' another tormentor said as she tilted her head toward a woman with an enormous pregnant belly.

'You are all cruel,' I complained as I burst into laughter again. I stopped short when I noticed a palace messenger

mounting the box in the center of the marketplace. I welcomed the distraction.

‘Look!’ I pointed to the man. ‘Let us listen to the announcement.’

We drew closer. He opened a scroll and began to read.

‘The Pharaoh Rameses II, ruler of the two Egypts, beloved of Amun-Re, Seth, and Thoth, declares that all male children born to the Israelites between today and two years hence will be put to death. Any who seek exemption will themselves be put to death. He further declares that midwives are ordered to carry out this edict as soon as a child emerges from the womb!’

As the terrible words entered my ears, all other sound ceased. I scanned the crowd in disbelief. Their contorted faces matched the horror in my heart.

The messenger stepped down. Cries of mourning rose from the crowd. I ran from person to person to see if I could learn the reason for this gruesome edict. A cloth dyer told me he had heard that Pharaoh’s horoskop – a priest who read the stars – had predicted that a male child born among the Israelites in the next twenty-four months would rise up one day to overthrow the dynasty.

‘May the slaughter of innocent children seal his fate,’ the man said under his breath.

‘Let it be so,’ I whispered.

I ran home to tell my parents of the decree. My own mother, barren since Aharon’s birth ten years before, had nothing to fear. That did not relieve our family from suffering. We loved our people. Their grief and ours were one.

*

The midwives refused to act on the order of death. They claimed that Israelite women, strong and quick in labor, did not require their services. I admired the courage of these defiant women. But I could not rejoice as others did. I knew that Pharaoh would not permit a few midwives to thwart his purpose.

A week after I heard the edict in the marketplace, Pharaoh's soldiers marched into Goshen. I watched as they invaded our homes. They snatched every newborn boy from his mother's breast. They did not bother to check the child's age. Sometimes they did not even determine the sex. Later I heard that mothers had offered all their jewels and gold in exchange for their children's lives. Some had even offered themselves. All proved futile. The soldiers took the bribes and the babies too.

I stood on the edge of the River Nile as soldiers emerged from several homes with wailing infants tucked under their arms. Mothers chased after the men with wild fury. Their anguished pleas filled the air. Other soldiers beat back the desperate women with the blunt ends of their spears. Some of the mothers managed to follow their children into the water. I too plunged into the river. I did not stop to tell myself what I already knew – the effort would be hopeless. It did not matter. I could not stand by while the infants drowned.

I clung to a half-dead baby – whose child I did not know – with all my strength. I pulled myself onto the riverbank. I lifted my feet to run but, a soldier caught sight of me. He held his spear across the road. I did not notice it fast enough. As I fell onto my face, he forced my arms apart.

I closed my eyes. I covered my ears. When I looked up again, soldiers lined the river to prevent further rescue attempts. Many other Israelites sat on the ground beside me, wet and defeated.

As I limped home I vowed revenge on Pharaoh and all his army.

The soldiers returned every fourteen days to search from house to house. Our council of elders advised all the Children of Israel to refrain from marital relations until Pharaoh lifted the edict. Some did not heed the warnings. Those who gave birth to girls knew the joy of a newborn at the breast. Those who had male children were not so lucky. None of the newborn sons survived.

In these dark months I found comfort in the company of my family and Nunn. One afternoon, several months after the pharaoh's death decree, Nunn and I sat under the shelter of an olive tree in the grove near the vineyard. We often stole a few minutes together while his father and mine settled their business.

'Is my face fresh enough to kiss today?' he asked. He pointed to his smooth-shaven cheek.

'No!' I laughed. I gave his shoulder a gentle push.

He snatched my hands. I had neither my mother's beauty nor her skill at grooming. I had no patience for the trouble of long hair, cosmetics, or elegant clothing. Jewelry interfered with my household duties. I did not take the time to rub rhinoceros fat into my chafed skin or stain my fingernails with henna. When I caught a glimpse of myself in Mother's copper mirror, I saw Miryam as

she was inside and out – a clean, plain, practical young woman. I marveled that Nunn seemed to find me as pleasing as I found him.

Nunn began to stroke my arm. I liked the way his fingers felt on my skin. They made my body throb with a strange and pleasant yearning.

‘I have spoken to my father.’ The words rushed out of him as if he had held them inside for too long. ‘I know you are young, but I want to settle things between us before someone tries to take you away from me.’

I loved him. Now I knew that he loved me. We belonged together. My heart grew so full I could not speak. He read my answer on my glowing face, in my joy-filled eyes.

For a moment I almost forgot the decree, the infants in the river, the pall of mourning that hovered over our land. All of it came rushing back to me.

‘It is a dark time for our people,’ I murmured. ‘Not the time for a union.’

‘We should not make a formal arrangement now,’ he agreed. ‘But we can look forward to sweeter days. My father will propose a betrothal to take place next year when the decree is lifted, and a marriage to follow no later than your fifteenth birthday.’

I nodded. My heart pounded. My lips parted.

He leaned closer. He took me in his arms. I liked the smell of him. I let him kiss my mouth. His lips lingered. I pulled away with reluctance.

‘I must return to the house.’

‘And I to my father.’

We rose to our feet. We stood for a moment in

awkward silence. In days past I had always embraced him at parting. Now every fiber of my being longed to feel his arms around me once again. But I knew how one thing would lead to another. I would not allow myself to give in. I did not want to shame my parents or his.

‘The air has turned cool,’ I said. ‘Wear your cloak tomorrow.’

He smiled. ‘What would I do without you to look after me?’

I took the long route back to the house, through the olive grove rather than along the canal. My feet grew so light I feared I might float away. I forced myself to count off all the tasks I had yet to accomplish that day: clothes to wash, bedding to air out, an evening meal to prepare. I added the chore of cleaning the stable – my least favorite – in hope that the prospect would bring me back to my familiar, practical self.

Nothing could distract me from the excitement of Nunn’s declaration. I began to run.

After a few minutes I stopped to catch my breath. I closed my eyes for a moment to calm myself. A wind came up. It rattled the olive branches just coming into full leaf. Whispering filled my ears.

‘Miryam! Miryam!’

I opened my eyes. Ahead of me in the olive grove stood a single ancient tree that shone like the sun itself. I shielded my eyes.

‘Miryam, Miryam!’

I fell down in fear. The light lifted me. It wrapped me in its loving hands. Its warmth and brilliance penetrated

my skin, my muscle, my bones. It filled every crevice of my being. It lifted my heart away from my flesh, as if on eagle's wings. As I left my body behind, I soared above the world of men to a still, silent place. The small voice echoed everywhere – in the olive branches, in the sky, on the ground, in my heart. It told me of a mission far greater than that of daughter, wife, or mother. It told me of my true destiny.