



BookBrowse

The Red Tent

by Anita Diamant

Prologue

We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged.

It's a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again. But some did. Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text. Maybe you heard it in the music of my name: the first vowel high and clear, as when a mother calls to her child at dusk; the second sound soft, for whispering secrets on pillows. Dee-nah.

No one recalled my skill as a midwife, or the songs I sang, or the bread I baked for my insatiable brothers. Nothing remained except a few mangled details about those weeks in Shechem.

There was far more to tell. Had I been asked to speak of it, I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully. Stories about food show a strong connection. Wistful silences demonstrate unfinished business. The more a daughter knows the details of her mother's life - without flinching or whining - the stronger the daughter.

Of course, this is more complicated for me because I had four mothers, each of them scolding, teaching, and cherishing something different about me, giving me different gifts, cursing me with different fears. Leah gave me birth and her splendid arrogance. Rachel showed me where to place the midwife's bricks and how to fix my hair. Zilpah made me think. Bilhah listened. No two of my mothers seasoned her stew the same way. No two of them spoke to my father in the same tone of voice - nor he to them. And you should know that my mothers were sisters as well, Laban's daughters by different wives, though my grandfather never acknowledged Zilpah and Bilhah; that would have cost him two more dowries, and he was a stingy pig.

Like any sisters who live together and share a husband, my mother and aunties spun a sticky web of loyalties and grudges. They traded secrets like bracelets, and these were handed down to me, the only surviving girl. They told me things I was too young to hear. They held my face between their hands and made me swear to remember.

My mothers were proud to give my father so many sons. Sons were a woman's pride and her

measure. But the birth of one boy after another was not an unalloyed source of joy in the women's tents. My father boasted about his noisy tribe, and the women loved my brothers, but they longed for daughters, too, and complained among themselves about the maleness of Jacob's seed.

Daughters eased their mothers' burdens - helping with the spinning, the grinding of grain, and the endless task of looking after baby boys, who were forever peeing into the corners of the tents, no matter what you told them.

But the other reason women wanted daughters was to keep their memories alive. Sons did not hear their mothers' stories after weaning. So I was the one. My mother and my mother-aunties told me endless stories about themselves. No matter what their hands were doing - holding babies, cooking, spinning, weaving - they filled my ears.

In the ruddy shade of the red tent, the menstrual tent, they ran their fingers through my curls, repeating the escapades of their youths, the sagas of their childbirths. Their stories were like offerings of hope and strength poured out before the Queen of Heaven, only these gifts were not for any god or goddess - but for me.

I can still feel how my mothers loved me. I have cherished their love always. It sustained me. It kept me alive. Even after I left them, and even now, so long after their deaths, I am comforted by their memory.

I carried my mothers' tales into the next generation, but the stories of my life were forbidden to me, and that silence nearly killed the heart in me. I did not die but lived long enough for other stories to fill up my days and nights. I watched babies open their eyes upon a new world. I found cause for laughter and gratitude. I was loved.

And now you come to me - women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in child-bed and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them.

I wish I had more to tell of my grandmothers. It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose, remembering seems a holy thing.

I am so grateful that you have come. I will pour out everything inside me so you may leave this table satisfied and fortified. Blessings on your eyes. Blessings on your children. Blessings on the ground beneath you. My heart is a ladle of sweet water, brimming over.

Selah.

Part One: My Mothers' Stories

Chapter One

Their stories began with the day that my father appeared. Rachel came running into camp, knees flying, bellowing like a calf separated from its mother. But before anyone could scold her for acting like a wild boy, she launched into a breathless yarn about a stranger at the well, her words spilling out like water into sand.

A wild man without sandals. Matted hair. Dirty face. He kissed her on the mouth, a cousin, son of their aunt, who had watered sheep and goats for her and told off the ruffians at the well.

"What are you babbling?" demanded her father, Laban. "Who is come to the well? Who attends him? How many bags does he carry?"

"He is going to marry me," said Rachel matter-of-factly, once she had caught her breath. "He says I am for him and that he would marry me tomorrow, if he could. He's coming to ask you."

Leah scowled at this announcement. "Marry you?" she said, crossing her arms and throwing back her shoulders. "You won't be marriageable for another year," said the older girl, who, though only a few years older than Rachel, already acted as head woman of her father's small holdings. The fourteen-year-old mistress of Laban's house liked to take a haughty, maternal tone with her sister. "What's all this? And how did he come to kiss you?" This was a terrible breach of custom - even if he was a cousin and even though Rachel was young enough to be treated as a child.

Rachel stuck out her lower lip in a pout that would have been childlike only a few hours earlier. Something had happened since she opened her eyes that morning, when the most pressing matter on her mind had been to find the place where Leah hid her honey. Leah, that donkey, would never share it with her, but hoarded it for guests, giving tastes to pathetic little Bilhah and no one else.

All Rachel could think of now was the shaggy stranger whose eyes had met hers with a shock of recognition that had rattled her to the bone.

Rachel knew what Leah meant, but the fact that she had not yet begun to bleed meant nothing to her now. And her cheeks burned.

"What's this?" said Leah, suddenly amused. "She is smitten. Look at her," she said. "Have you ever seen the girl blush before?"

"What did he do to you?" asked Laban, growling like a dog who senses an intruder near his herd. He clenched his fists and beetled his brow and turned his full attention to Rachel, the daughter he had never once hit, the daughter whom he rarely looked at full in the face. She had frightened him from her birth - a tearing, violent entry that had killed her mother. When the baby finally emerged, the women were shocked to see that it was such a small one - a girl at that - who had caused so many days of trouble, costing her mother so much blood and finally her life.

Rachel's presence was powerful as the moon, and just as beautiful. Nobody could deny her beauty. Even as a child who worshiped my own mother's face, I knew that Leah's beauty paled before her younger sister's, a knowledge that always made me feel like a traitor. Still, denying it would have been like denying the sun's warmth.

Rachel's beauty was rare and arresting. Her brown hair shaded to bronze, and her skin was golden, honeyed, perfect. In that amber setting, her eyes were surprisingly dark, not merely dark brown but black as polished obsidian or the depth of a well. Although she was small-boned and, even when she was with child, small-breasted, she had muscular hands and a husky voice that seemed to belong to a much larger woman.

I once heard two shepherds arguing over which was Rachel's best feature, a game I, too, had played. For me, the most wonderful detail of Rachel's perfection was her cheeks, which were high and tight on her face, like figs. When I was a baby, I used to reach for them, trying to pluck the fruit that appeared when she smiled. When I realized there was no having them, I licked her instead, hoping for a taste. This made my beautiful aunt laugh, from deep in her belly. She loved me better than all

her nephews put together - or so she said as she wove my hair into the elaborate braids for which my own mother's hands lacked patience or time.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the dimensions of Rachel's beauty. Even as a baby, she was a jewel upon whatever hip bore her from place to place, an ornament, a rare pleasure - the black-eyed child with golden hair. Her nickname was Tuki, which means "sweetness."

All the woman shared in Rachel's care after her mother, Huna, died. Huna was a skilled midwife known for her throaty laugh and much mourned by the women. No one grumbled about tending to Huna's motherless daughter, and even the men, for whom babies held as little fascination as cooking stones, would stoop to run a callused hand across her remarkable cheek. They would rise, smelling their fingers and shaking their heads.

Rachel smelled like water. Really! Wherever my aunt walked, here was the scent of fresh water. It was an impossible smell, green and delightful and in those dusty hills the smell of life and wealth. Indeed, for many years Laban's well was the only reason his family hadn't starved.

There were hopes, early on, that Rachel would be a water witch, one who could find hidden wells and underground streams. She did not fulfill that hope, but somehow the aroma of sweet water clung to her skin and lodged in her robes. Whenever one of the babies went missing, more often than not the little stinker would be found fast asleep on her blankets, sucking his thumb.

No wonder Jacob was enchanted at the well. The other men had grown accustomed to Rachel's looks and even to her startling perfume, but to Jacob she must have seemed an apparition. He looked directly into her eyes and was overcome. Then he kissed her, Jacob cried out with a voice of a man who lies with his wife. The sound woke Rachel out of her childhood.

There was barely time to hear Rachel describe their meeting before Jacob himself appeared. He walked up to Laban, and Rachel watched her father take his measure.

Laban noticed his empty hands first, but he also saw that the stranger's tunic and cloak were made of fine stuff, his water skin was well crafted, his knife hilt was carved of polished bone. Jacob stood directly before Laban and, dropping his head, proclaimed himself. "Uncle, I am the son of Rebecca, your sister, the daughter of Nahor and Milcah, as you are their son. My mother has sent me to you, my brother has chased me to you, my father has banished me to you. I will tell you the whole story when I am not so dirty and weary. I seek your hospitality, which is famous in the land."

Rachel opened her mouth to speak, but Leah yanked her sister's arm and shot her a warning glance; not even Rachel's youth would excuse a girl speaking out when men were addressing one another. Rachel kicked at the ground and thought poisonous thoughts about her sister, the bossy old crow, the cross-eyed goat.

Jacob's words about Laban's famous hospitality were a courteous lie, for Laban was anything but pleased by the appearance of this nephew. Not much caused the old man pleasure, and hungry strangers were unwanted surprises. Still, there was nothing to be done; he had to honor the claim of a kinsman, and there was no denying the connection between them. Jacob knew the names and Laban recognized his sister's face on the man standing before him.

"You are welcome," Laban said, without smiling or returning his nephew's salute. As he turned to walk away, Laban pointed his thumb at Leah, assigning her the task of seeing to this nuisance. My mother nodded and turned to face the first grown man who did not look away when confronted by

the sight of her eyes.

Leah's vision was perfect. According to one of the more ridiculous fables embroidered around my family's history, she ruined her eyes by crying a river of tears over the prospect of marrying my uncle Esau. If you believe that, you might also be interested in purchasing a magical toad that will make all who look upon you swoon with love.

But my mother's eyes were not weak, or sick, or rheumy. The truth is, her eyes made others weak and most people looked away rather than face them - one blue as lapis, the other green as Egyptian grass.

When she was born, the midwife cried out that a witch had been brought forth and should be drowned before she could bring a curse on the family. But my grandmother Adah slapped the stupid woman and cursed her tongue. "Show me my daughter," said Adah, in a voice so loud and proud even the men outside could hear her. Adah named her beloved last-born Leah, which means "mistress," and she wept a prayer that this child would live, for she had buried seven sons and daughters.

There were plenty who remained convinced that the baby was a devil. For some reason, Laban, who was the most superstitious soul you can imagine (spitting and bowing whenever he turned to the left, howling at every lunar eclipse), refused to hear suggestions that Leah be left outside to die in the night air. He swore some mild oath about the femaleness of this child, but apart from that, Laban ignored his daughter and never mentioned her distinction. Then again, the women suspected the old man could not see color at all.

Leah's eyes never faded in color - as some of the women predicted and hoped - but became brighter in their difference and even more pronounced in their strangeness when her lashes failed to grow. Although she blinked like everyone else, the reflex was nearly invisible, so it seemed that Leah never closed her eyes. Even her most loving glance felt a bit like the stare of a snake, and few could stand to look her straight in the eye. Those who could were rewarded with kisses and laughter and bread wet with honey.

Jacob met Leah's eyes straight on, and for this she warmed to him instantly. In fact, Leah had already taken note of Jacob on account of his height. She was half a head taller than most of the men she had ever seen, and she dismissed them all because of it. She knew this was not fair. Surely there were good men among those whose heads reached only to her nose. But the thought of lying with anyone whose legs were shorter and weaker than her own disgusted her. Not that anyone had asked for her. She knew they all called her Lizard and Evil-Eye, and worse.

Her distaste for short men had been confirmed by a dream in which a tall man had whispered to her. She couldn't recall his words, but they had warmed her thighs and woken her. When she saw Jacob, she remembered the dream and her strange eyes widened.

Jacob noticed Leah with favor, too. Although he was still ringing from his encounter with Rachel, he could not ignore the sight of Leah.

She was not only tall but shapely and strong. She was blessed with full, high breasts and muscular calves that showed to good advantage in robes that somehow never stayed closed at the hem. She had forearms like a young man's, but her walk was that of a woman with promising hips.

Leah had dreamed once of a pomegranate split open to reveal eight red seeds. Zilpah said the dream meant she would have eight healthy children, and my mother knew those words to be true the way she knew how to make bread and beer.

Leah's scent was no mystery. She smelled of the yeast she handled daily, brewing and baking. She reeked of bread and comfort, and - it seemed to Jacob - of sex. He stared at this giantess, and his mouth watered. As far as I know, he never said a word about her eyes.

My aunt Zilpah, Laban's second-born, said that she remembered everything that ever happened to her. She laid claim to memories of her own birth, and even of days in her mother's womb. She swore she could remember her mother's death in the red tent, where she sickened within days after Zilpah arrived in the world, feet first. Leah scoffed at these claims, though not to her sister's face, for Zilpah was the only one who could cause my mother to hold her tongue about anything.

Zilpah's memory of Jacob's arrival is nothing like Rachel's or Leah's, but then Zilpah had little use for men, whom she described as hairy, crude, and half human. Women needed men to make babies and to move heavy objects, but otherwise she didn't understand their purpose, much less appreciate their charms. She loved her sons passionately until they grew beards, but after that could barely bring herself to look at them.

When I was old enough to ask what it was like on the day that my father arrived, she said that the presence of El hovered over him, which is why he was worthy of notice. Zilpah told me that El was the god of thunder, high places, and awful sacrifice. El could demand that a father cut off his son-cast him out into the desert, or slaughter him outright. This was a hard, strange god, alien and cold, but, she conceded, a consort powerful enough for the Queen of Heaven, whom she loved in every shape and name.

Zilpah talked about gods and goddesses almost more than she spoke about people. I found this tiresome at times, but she used words in the most wonderful ways, and I loved her stories about Ninhursag, the great mother, and Enlil, the first father. She made up grandiose hymns in which real people met with the deities and together they danced to the sound of flutes and cymbals, singing them in a high, thin voice to the accompaniment of a small clay drum.

From the age of her first blood, Zilpah thought of herself as a kind of priestess, the keeper of the mysteries of the red tent, the daughter of Asherah, the sister-Siduri who counsels women. It was a foolish idea, as only priests served the goddesses of the great city temples, while the priestesses served gods. Besides, Zilpah had none of the oracle's gifts. She lacked the talent for herbs, and could not prophesy or conjure or read goat entrails. Leah's eight-seeded pomegranate was the only dream she ever interpreted correctly.

Zilpah was Laban's daughter by a slave named Mer-Nefat, who had been purchased from an Egyptian trader in the days when Laban still had means. According to Adah, Zilpah's mother was slender, raven-haired, and so quiet it was easy to forget she had the power of speech, a trait her daughter did not inherit.

Zilpah was only a few months younger than Leah, and after Zilpah's mother died, Adah gave them suck together. They were playmates as babies, close and loving friends as children, tending the flocks together, gathering berries, making up songs, laughing. Apart from Adah, they needed no one

else in the world.

Zilpah was almost as tall as Leah, but thinner and less robust in the chest and legs. Dark-haired and olive-skinned, Leah and Zilpah resembled their father and shared the family nose, not unlike Jacob's - a regal hawk's beak that seemed to grow longer when they smiled. Leah and Zilpah both talked with their hands, thumb and forefinger pressed together in emphatic ovals. When the sun made them squint, identical lines appeared around the corners of their eyes.

But where Leah's hair was curly, Zilpah's black mane was straight, and she wore it to her waist. It was her best feature, and my aunt hated to cover it. Headaches caused her head to pound, she said, putting a hand to her cheek with silly drama. Even as a child I was permitted to laugh at her. These headaches were the reason she gave for keeping so much inside the women's tents. She did not join the rest of us to bask in the springtime sun or find the breeze on a hot night. But when the moon was young - slender and shy, barely making herself known in the sky - Zilpah walked around the camp, swinging her long hair, clapping her hands, offering songs to encourage the moon's return.

When Jacob arrived, Bilhah was a child of eight, and she remembered nothing of the day. "She was probably up in a tree somewhere, sucking on her fingers and counting the clouds," said Leah, repeating the only thing that was remembered of Bilhah's early years.

Bilhah was the family orphan. The last daughter born of Laban's seed, she was the child of a slave named Tefnut - a tiny black woman who ran off one night when Bilhah was old enough to know she had been abandoned. "She never got over that hurt," said Zilpah with great gentleness, for Zilpah respected pain.

Bilhah was alone among them. It's not just that she was the youngest and that there were three other sisters to share the work. Bilhah was a sad child and it was easier to leave her alone. She rarely smiled and hardly spoke. Not even my grandmother Adah, who adored little girls and gathered motherless Zilpah to her inner circle and doted upon Rachel, could warm to this strange, lonely bird, who never grew taller than a boy of ten years, and whose skin was the color of dark amber.

Bilhah was not beautiful like Rachel, or capable like Leah, or quick like Zilpah. She was tiny, dark, and silent. Adah was exasperated by her hair, which was springy as moss and refused to obey her hands. Compared to the two other motherless girls, Bilhah was neglected dreadfully.

Left to herself, she climbed trees and seemed to dream. From her perch, she studied the world, the patterns in the sky, the habits of animals and birds. She came to know the flocks as individuals, giving each animal a secret name to match its personality. One evening, she came in from the fields and whispered to Adah that a black dwarf she-goat was ready to give birth to twins. It was nowhere near the season for goats to bear, and that particular animal had been barren for four seasons. Adah shook her head at Bilhah's nonsense and shooed her away.

The next day, Laban brought news of a strange event in the flocks, with a precise retelling of the little girl's prediction. Adah turned to the girl and apologized. "Bilhah sees clearly," said Adah to the other daughters, who turned to stare at this unseen sister and noticed, for the first time, the kindness in her black eyes.

If you took the time to look, you could see right away that Bilhah was good. She was good the way milk is good, the way rain is good. Bilhah watched the skies and the animals, and she watched her

family, too. From the dark corners of the tents, she saw Leah hide her mortification when people stared. Bilhah noticed Rachel's fear of the dark and Zilpah's insomnia. Bilhah knew that Laban was every bit as mean-spirited as he was stupid.

Bilhah says her first clear memory of Jacob is from the day his first child was born. It was a boy - Reuben - and of course Jacob was delighted. He took his new son in his arms and danced the baby around and around outside the red tent.

"He was so gentle with the boy," Bilhah said. "He would not let Adah take Reuben away from him, even when the little one began to wail.

"He called his son perfect and a miracle in the world. I stood beside him and together Jacob and I worshiped the baby. We counted his fingers and stroked the soft crown of his head. We delighted in him and in each other's joy," Bilhah said. "That is when I met Jacob, your father."

Jacob arrived late in the afternoon in the week of a full moon, ate a simple meal of barley bread and olives, and fell into an exhausted sleep that lasted through most of the next day. Leah was mortified by the simplicity of the food they had offered him at first, so the next day she set out to produce a feast seen only at the great festivals.

"I suffered over that meal like nothing else I had ever cooked," said Leah, telling me the story during dull, hot afternoons while we rocked the narrow-necked jars, straining the water from goat curd.

"The father of my children was in the house, I was sure of it. I could see he was smitten by Rachel, whose beauty I saw as if for the first time. Still, he looked at me without flinching, and so I hoped.

"I slaughtered a kid, an unblemished male, as though it were a sacrifice to the gods. I beat the millet until it was as soft as a cloud. I reached deep into the pouches where I kept my most precious spices and used the last of my dried pomegranate. I pounded, chopped, and scraped in a frenzy, believing that he would understand what I was offering him.

"Nobody helped me with the cooking, not that I would have permitted anyone else to touch the lamb or the bread, or even the barley water. I wouldn't let my own mother pour water into a pot," she said and giggled.

I loved this story and asked to hear it again and again. Leah was always reliable and deliberate, and far too steady to be giddy. And yet as she recounted her first meal for Jacob, she was a foolish, weepy girl.

"I was an idiot," she said. "I burned the first bread and burst into tears. I even sacrificed a bit of the next loaf so that Jacob might fancy me. Just as we do when we bake the cakes for the Queen of Heaven on the seventh day, I broke off a piece of dough, kissed it, and offered it to the fire as an offering of hope that the man would claim me.

"Don't ever tell Zilpah about this or I'll never hear the end of it," said Leah, in a mock-conspiratorial whisper. "And of course, if Laban, your grandfather, had any idea of how much food I put together for a beggar who showed up without so much as a jug of oil as a gift, he would have flogged me. But I gave the old man enough strong beer that he made no comment.

"Or maybe he made no mention of my extravagance because he knew he'd be lucky with this kinsman. Maybe he guessed he had discovered a son-in-law who would require little by way of a dowry. It was hard to know what the old man knew or didn't know. He was like an ox, your grandfather."

"Like a post," I said.

"Like a cooking stone," said my mother.

"Like a goat turd," I said.

My mother shook her finger at me as though I were a naughty child, but then she laughed out loud, for raking Laban over the coals was great sport among his daughters.

I can still recite her menu. Lamb flavored with coriander, marinated in sour goat milk and a pomegranate sauce for dipping. Two kinds of bread: flat barley and raised wheat. Quince compote, and figs stewed with mulberries, fresh dates. Olives, of course. And to drink, a choice of sweet wine, three different beers, and barley water.

Jacob was so exhausted he nearly missed the meal that Leah brought forth with so much passion. Zilpah had a terrible time waking him and finally had to pour water on his neck, which startled him so badly that he swung out with his arms and knocked her to the ground, where she hissed like a cat.

Zilpah was not at all happy about this Jacob. She could see that his presence had changed things between the sisters and would weaken her bond to Leah. He offended her because he was so much more attractive than the other men they saw, foul-mouthed shepherds and the occasional trader who looked at the sisters as though they were a pack of ewes.

Jacob was well spoken and fair of face. And when he met Leah's gaze, Zilpah understood that their lives would never be the same. She was heartsick and angry and helpless to stop the change, though she tried.

When Jacob finally awoke and came to sit at Laban's right outside his tent, he ate well. Leah remembered his every bite. "He dipped into the lamb stew over and over again, and had three helpings of bread. I saw that he liked sweets, and that he preferred the honeyed brew to the bitter-flavored drink that Laban gulped down. I knew how to please his mouth, I thought. I will know how to please the rest of him."

This line would always get my other mothers shrieking and slapping their thighs, for although she was a practical woman, Leah was also the lewdest of her sisters.

"And then, after all that work, after all that eating, what do you think happened?" Leah asked, as though I didn't know the answer as well as I knew the little crescent-shaped scar above the Joint on her right thumb.

"Jacob grew ill, that's what happened. He vomited every morsel. He threw up until he was weak and whimpering. He cried out to El, and Ishtar, and Marduk, and his blessed mother, to save him from his agonies or let him die.

"Zilpah, the brat, she sneaked into his tent to see how he fared and reported back to me, making it sound even worse than it was. She told me that he was whiter than the full moon, that he barked like

a dog and spewed up frogs and snakes.

"I was mortified - and terrified, too. What if he died from my cooking? Or, just as bad, what if he recovered and blamed me for his misery?"

"When no one else showed any ill effect from the meal, I knew it wasn't the food. But then, fool that I was, I started worrying that my touch was hateful to him. Or maybe I had done wrong with the bread offering, given not in homage to a god or goddess, but as an attempt at magic.

"I got religious again and poured the last of the good wine out in the name of Anath the healer. That was on the third night of his suffering, and he was healed by the next morning." At this she always shook her head and sighed. "Not a very auspicious beginning for such fruitful lovers, was it?"

Jacob made a quick recovery and stayed on, week after week, until it seemed he had always been there. He took charge of the scrawny herds so Rachel no longer had to follow the animals, a job that had fallen to her in the absence of brothers.

My grandfather laid the blame for the state of his herds and his dwindling wealth upon the fact that all his sons had died at birth or in infancy, leaving him nothing but daughters. He gave no thought to his own sloth, believing that only a son would turn his luck around. He consulted the local priests, who told him to sacrifice his best rams and a bull so that the gods might give him a boy-child. He had lain with his wives and concubines in the fields, as an old midwife suggested, and all he had gotten for that effort was an itchy backside and bruises on his knees. By the time Jacob arrived, Laban had given up his hope of a son - or of any improvement in his life.

He expected nothing from Adah, who was past childbearing and sick. His other three women had died or run off, and he couldn't afford the few coins for a homely slave girl, much less the price of a new bride. So he slept alone, except for the nights he found his way up the hills to bother the flocks, like some horny little boy. Rachel said that among the shepherds, my grandfather's lust was legendary. "The ewes run like gazelles when Laban walks up the hill," they hooted.

His daughters despised him for a hundred reasons, and I knew them all. Zilpah told me that when she was a few months away from her first blood and the task fell to her of taking my grandfather his midday meal, he reached up and put his thumb and forefinger around her nipple, squeezing it as though she were a she-goat.

Leah, too, said Laban had put his hand under her robes, but when she told Adah, my grandmother had beaten Laban with a pestle until he bled. She broke the horns off his favorite household god, and when she threatened to curse him with boils and impotence, he swore never to touch his daughters again and made restitution. He bought gold bangles for Adah and all of his daughters - even Zilpah and Bilhah, which was the only time he acknowledged them as kin. And he brought home a beautiful asherah - a tall pillar, nearly as big as Bilhah - made by the finest potter he could find. The women placed her up on the barnah, the high place, where sacrifices were offered. The goddess's face was especially lovely, with almond eyes and an open smile. When we poured wine over her in the dark of each new moon, it seemed to us her mouth broadened even farther in pleasure.

But that was some years before Jacob came, when Laban still had a few bondsmen working for him, and their wives and children filled the camp with cooking smells and laughter. By the time my father arrived, there was only one sick wife and four daughters.

While Laban was glad enough of Jacob's presence, the two men disliked each other heartily. Although different as a raven and a donkey, they were bound by blood and soon by business.

Jacob, it turned out, was a willing worker with a talent for animals - especially dogs. He turned Laban's three useless mongrels into fine shepherds. He whistled and the dogs raced to his side. He clapped and they would run in circles and get the sheep to move after him. He yodeled and they stood guard with such ferocity that Laban's flocks never again saw harm from a fox or jackal. And if there were poachers, they ran off rather than face the bared teeth of that fierce little pack.

Jacob's dogs were soon the envy of other men, who offered to buy them. Instead, he traded a day's work for the stud of the male cur with cunning wolfish eyes. When the smallest of our bitches bore the wolf-dog's litter, Jacob trained her puppies and traded four of the five for what seemed a mountain of treasure, which he quickly converted to gifts that proved how well he had come to understand Laban's daughters.

He took Rachel to the well where they had met and gave her the blue lapis ring she wore until her death. He sought out Leah where she was combing wool and, without a word, handed her three finely hammered gold bangles. To Zilpah he gave a small votive vessel in the shape of Anath, which poured libations through the nipples. He laid a bag of salt at Adah's swollen feet. He even remembered Bilhah with a tiny amphora of honey.

Laban complained that his nephew should have turned over the profit from the puppies directly to him., since the mother was his goods. But the old man was mollified by a bag of coins, with which he ran to the village and brought back Ruti. Poor thing.

Within a year, Jacob became the overseer of Laban's domain. With his dogs, Jacob led the flocks so the lambs fed on the gentle grass, the sheep grazed on patches of juicy herbs, and the full-grown rams rummaged through the tough weeds. The flocks did so well that at the next shearing Jacob had to hire two boys to finish the work before the rains came. Rachel joined Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah in the garden, where they enlarged the wheat patch.

Jacob made Laban agree to sacrifice two fat lambs and a kid to the god of his father, as thanks for the bounty. Leah baked raised cakes from the precious stock of wheat for the sacrifice, too, which was carried out as Jacob directed. In the manner of his fathers, he burned entire loaves and all the choice parts of the animals rather than a few portions. The women muttered among themselves at the waste.

It was a year of change for my family. The flocks multiplied, and the grain flourished, and there was a marriage in the offing. For within a month of his arrival, Jacob asked Laban about Rachel's bride price, as she had said he would that very first day. Since it was clear that his nephew had no means or property, Laban thought he could get the man cheap, and made a magnanimous show of offering his daughter for a mere seven years' service.

Jacob laughed at the idea. "Seven years? We are talking about a girl here, not a throne. In seven years' time, she might be dead. I might be dead. And most likely of all, you could be dead, old man.

"I will give you seven months," Jacob said. "And for the dowry, I'll take half your miserable herd."

Laban jumped to his feet and called Jacob a thief. "You are your mother's son, all right," he raged. "You think the world owes you anything? Don't get too proud with me, you afterbirth, or I'll send you back to your brother's long knife."

Zilpah, the best spy among them, reported on the argument, telling how they haggled back and forth over my aunt's value, about how Laban stormed out and Jacob spat. Finally, they agreed on a year's service for a bride price. As to dowry, Laban pleaded poverty. "I have so little, my son," he said, suddenly the loving patriarch. "And she is such a treasure."

Jacob could not accept a bride without a dowry. That would have made Rachel a concubine and him a fool for paying with a year of his life for a girl who had only a grindstone, a spindle, and the clothes on her back to her name. So Laban threw Bilhah into the bargain, giving Rachel status as a dowered wife, and Jacob the possibility of a concubine in time.

"Also you must give me a tenth of the lambs and kids born to the flocks while I stand guard over them for you during my year of service," Jacob said.

At that, Laban cursed Jacob's seed and stormed away. It was a week before the men finished their negotiations, a week in which Rachel wept and carried on like a baby, while Leah said little and served nothing but cold millet porridge, food for mourners.

When they worked out the final terms, Laban went to Adah, so she could start planning the wedding. But Adah said no "We are not barbarians who give children to wed."

Rachel could not even be promised, she told her husband. The girl might look ready to marry, but she was still unripe, having not yet bled. My grandmother claimed that Anath would curse the garden if Laban dared break this law and that she herself would find the strength to take a pestle to her husband's head again.

But threats were unnecessary. Laban saw the advantage in this delay and went immediately to Jacob with the news he would have to wait until the girl was ready before they could plan a date for the marriage.

Jacob accepted the situation. What else could he do? Furious, Rachel yelled at Adah, who cuffed her and told her to take her temper elsewhere. Rachel, in turn, slapped Bilhah, cursed at Zilpah, and snarled at Leah. She even kicked dust at Jacob's feet, calling him a liar and a coward before bursting into pretty tears on his neck.

She began to nurse dark fears about the future. She would never bleed, never marry Jacob, never bear sons. Suddenly, the small, high breasts of which she had been so proud seemed puny to her. Perhaps she was a freak, a hermaphrodite like the gross idol in her father's tent, the one with a tree stalk between its legs and teats like a cow.

So Rachel tried to rush her season. Before the next new moon, she baked cakes of offering to the Queen of Heaven, something she had never done before, and slept a whole night with her belly pressed up against the base of the asherah. But the moon waned and grew round again, while Rachel's thighs remained dry. She walked into the village by herself to ask the midwife, Inna, for help and was given an infusion of ugly nettles that grew in a nearby wadi. But again the new moon came and again Rachel remained a child.

As the following moon waned, Rachel crushed bitter berries and called her older sisters to see the

stain on her blanket. But the juice was purple, and Leah and Zilpah laughed at the seeds on her thighs.

The next month, Rachel hid in her tent, and did not even slip away once to find Jacob.

Finally, in the ninth month after Jacob's arrival, Rachel bled her first blood, and cried with relief. Adah, Leah, and Zilpah sang the piercing, throaty song that announces births, deaths, and women's ripening. As the sun set on the new moon when all the women commenced bleeding, they rubbed henna on Rachel's fingernails and on the soles of her feet. Her eyelids were painted yellow, and they slid every bangle, gem, and jewel that could be found onto her fingers, toes, ankles, and wrists. They covered her head with the finest embroidery and led her into the red tent. They sang songs for the goddesses; for Innana and the Lady Asherah of the Sea. They spoke of Elath, the mother of the seventy gods, including Anath in that number, Anath the nursemaid, defender of mothers.

They sang:

"Whose fairness is like Anath's fairness

Whose beauty like Astarte's beauty?

"Astarte is now in your womb,

You bear the power of Elati. "

The women sang all the welcoming songs to her while Rachel ate date honey and fine wheat-flour cake, made in the three-cornered shape of woman's sex. She drank as much sweet wine as she could hold. Adah rubbed Rachel's arms and legs, back and abdomen with aromatic oils until she was nearly asleep. By the time they carried her out into the field where she married the earth, Rachel was stupid with pleasure and wine. She did not remember how her legs came to be caked with earth and crusted with blood and smiled in her sleep.

She was full of Joy and anticipation, lazing in the tent for the three days, collecting the precious fluid in a bronze bowl-for the first-moon blood of a virgin was a powerful libation for the garden. During those hours, she was more relaxed and generous than anyone could remember her.

As soon as the women rose from their monthly rites, Rachel demanded that the wedding date be set. None of her foot-stamping could move Adah to change the custom of waiting seven months from first blood. So it was arranged, and although Jacob had already worked a year for Laban, the contract was sealed and the next seven months were Laban's too.

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