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The Red Tent

Written by Anita Diamant

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ANITA DIAMANT

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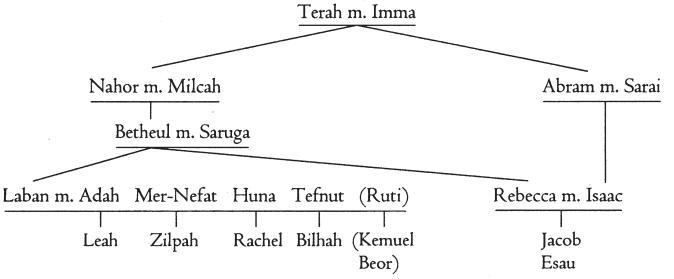
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For Emilia, my daughter

GENERATIONS

FIRST GENERATIONS



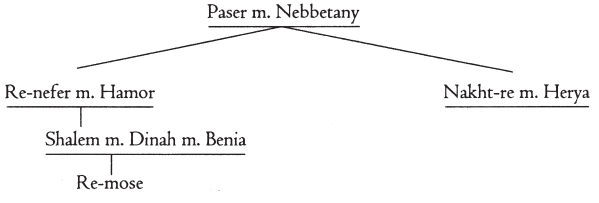
THE CHILDREN OF JACOB

Jacob m. Leah	m. Zilpah	m. Rachel	m. Bilhah
Reuben	Gad	Joseph	Dan
Simon	Asher	Benjamin	
Levi			
Judah			
Zebulun			
Naphtali			
Issachar			
Dinah			

THE CHILDREN OF ESAU

Esau m. Adath	m. Basemath	m. Oholibama
Eliphaz	Reuel	Jeush
Edva	Tabea	Jalam
Libbe		Korah
Amat		Iti

DINAH IN EGYPT



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 childbed 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 women 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, there 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. When 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.