

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

A WORD TO THE WISE



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Did I always hate my sister Rachel? Looking back, I don't think I did. But I hate her now, God forgive me. I don't think I've ever hated anyone as much as I hate her. Not even my father.

My name is Leah, and I'm the firstborn daughter of Laban, the Syrian. I suppose you've heard of him? He owned a few acres, kept a few sheep and thought he was God Almighty. I was just a possession as far as he was concerned, and so was Rachel. He never loved us. The only thing that brought a smile to his thin-lipped, rather cruel-looking mouth was the sight of gold pieces. He wasn't a nice man, as I expect you've gathered.

I don't intend to write a lot, so I'll tell you at once that the trouble between Rachel and I really began when our cousin Jacob, whom we had never clapped eyes on before, turned up at our house in Haran and asked my father for work. He had been involved in some scrape or other back home, which was more than four hundred miles away, and had been sent to his uncle for a while to get him out of the way until it hopefully blew over. He was so handsome, his face clean shaven and not too tanned, his hair black and his eyes dark, and I wanted him immediately. As for Rachel herself, well, I saw her push her breasts forward in the way she always does in the presence of a handsome man. She liked him, yes, but I don't believe she set her heart upon him until she perceived that I was taken with him. That's always been the way of it, now I recall, whether it be a man, a robe or a bracelet at stake.

Jacob desired Rachel before you could snap your fingers, and could think of nought else but lying with her, may a plague disfigure the woman. My father promised Jacob faithfully that he could have Rachel as his wife. When the wedding day came the old devil hustled my sister out of sight and told me that it was I who was to marry Jacob. Was he, Laban, going to incur censure by flouting the tradition that an older daughter should be married first? No!

Was I worried about this switch from one bride to another? Well, what do you think? I donned Rachel's bridal clothes with alacrity, thankful for the heavy veil that concealed my face very effectively.

A bride's complete silence on her wedding night is a tradition, of course, and this too assisted me in concealing my identity. As I lay in the shadows awaiting Jacob, I caught a glimpse or two of him in the poor light from the oil lamp. How adorable he was. I realized suddenly that I didn't just desire him – I actually loved him. He extinguished the light and I heard him approaching the bed. As he made love to me, so gently and considerately, I was tortured by the depressing thought that this might be the only time he did so willingly, for what would be his reaction the next day?

Now, I'm very pleased to say, I know better than to give way to such passion. These days, I concentrate upon baking a good loaf, keeping a clean back yard and attending prayer meetings regularly. In fact, having produced my six boys, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar

and Zebulun, and my daughter Dinah, I made it clear to Jacob that I was no longer interested in that side of married life. It is, after all, a sin, and excusable only because children result from it. Jacob told me - can you believe it? - that I had betrayed our relationship and tossed it aside without a second thought! Surely our marriage is the purer now for the absence of such indulgence? No, I feel in my bones that I'm not at fault. If the gulf between us has widened, the blame belongs at the door of that sister of mine, damn her! Yes, I know you want to know about the day after my wedding. I'm coming to that. I was only trying to make my position clear!

Well, when the morning light came Jacob looked at me as if I were a piece of mule dung. He cursed me, cursed my father, and stormed off in search of the latter. I lay there, crushed and quite unable to stir myself, my joy of the night before utterly dissipated. Would Jacob abandon me and disappear into the sunset before we had been married for a full day? If he did, I thought, it would be ten times worse than if I had never wed him at all.

But Jacob stayed, and at the end of my bridal week I found out why. My father, may Satan pick his bones, had offered his permission for Jacob to take Rachel to wife as well. In exchange, Jacob was to work like a donkey on the land, and tend those wretched sheep, for no payment. Jacob, blinded by the prospect of conjugal delights with Rachel to all else, had foolishly accepted the proposition.

This second marriage was, I discovered, imminent, and in fact took place exactly two weeks after mine. I was compelled to attend. My false smile, which I'm sure looked ghastly, was nailed firmly to the mast. I had lost my husband to my sister, who was now my successful rival as a wife, for I knew very well that it was she whom Jacob would love and cherish. To make it even worse, she looked so beautiful on her wedding day, her black hair glossy and shining, her expressive eyes so appealing. God rot her.

As it turned out, I did have one important advantage over that sly-eyed strumpet, where the bearing of children was concerned, for Rachel was seemingly barren, which made her deeply jealous of my fertility.

"You begin to look old, sister, and your body is thickening," she said to me once.

I looked at her, my face full of concern. "I mind not your words, Rachel," I told her gently, resisting a wild urge to lay my hands on her. "Rather, you have my pity, and my prayers that your barren womb may yet bear fruit."

She stalked away, and later I heard her lashing Jacob with that vicious tongue of hers, telling him that I had insulted her and urging him to take me to task. But he said nothing to me, then or ever. I was the mother of his four sons, after all, and was carrying again. Yet I know I meant nothing to him, not in the way she did.

At one time, perhaps because he had no real desire for me and because Rachel was berating him more than usual in her frustration over not bearing a child, Jacob lay with first one whore, and then another, who both bore him sons. I didn't mind (well, yes, all right, I did really), especially when I saw Rachel's reaction. Jacob introduced the whores into our household, calling them maids, but their real role was obvious. They were sluts through and through, anyone could see that. I certainly knew their sort well enough. They would have opened their bedcovers to a monkey if the creature had had a coin or two about it.

Rachel and I both dutifully agreed, eventually, to care for the whores' offspring. Jacob now had ten sons by three women, but still none by Rachel.

Yet she remained the only one he truly loved.

Rachel. Always Rachel.

My eyes are getting tired. They are rather weak and tend to do so easily. But perhaps you already know that? Is it one of the things about me that are recorded in this Bible the Doctor spoke of? Oh, I'm forgetting that I haven't mentioned the Doctor yet. Never mind. Soon he will make his appearance in my story. But I must persevere with the writing. The Doctor assured me that certain events I shall cover here will not appear in the official version, and I want to get them down, and unburden myself. Will my manuscript survive, though? That's a question I shall never know the answer to.

The years have gone by, and my father has long since gone to his reward, whatever that may be. We are now making our way to Bethel, covering a few miles a day, in the company of a large group, including a guide who knows the best directions, and of course where water is to be found. In order to avoid the debilitating heat as much as possible, the greater part of our travelling is done at night, with the guide navigating with the aid of the stars.

It was during this journey, just a few days ago, that I made first a discovery and then, following a certain event that occurred which sent my fury almost out of control, a bold plan to resolve the exasperating situation with my infuriating sister once and for all.

Rachel still hoped for children, and I had continued to pray that she should be denied them. She had begun, I discovered by way of maids' gossip, to take a concoction prepared from the roots of mandrake plants as a fertility draught. I laughed scornfully at this news and thought no more of it. Not then.

Two days later, just as the sun was dropping below the horizon and we had begun to move again, some merchants travelling in the opposite direction to our group warned us that a large band of thieves roamed nearby. The merchants had only narrowly succeeded in evading them. Our company had proceeded only another mile before we saw, in the distance, a contingent of riders. Jacob was foremost in helping to organize us all to resist an attack as best we could. In the event, the robbers, if it was they whom we had seen, passed on without coming very close to us at all. I breathed a sigh of relief and offered up a prayer of thanks. Then I saw her, at the very rear of the company, where Jacob had placed her for safety. Yet my children and I were, if not at the very front, then certainly nowhere near the back. I watched as Jacob approached her and put an arm around her. Suddenly her eye caught mine, and she smiled. Yes, the bitch couldn't resist it. She tilted her face towards him for his kiss.

Am I a bitch, too? Yes, a bitter, jealous, resentful, unwanted one. You would have been, too, I assure you.

Soon we were under way again. Gradually, my anger, which had never before burned quite so fiercely, subsided to some extent, and a new determination rose up in me, which soon hardened into absolute resolve.

We were encamped once more, with the sun beating down upon our tents, and I, in spite of the heat, had walked quite a way from the group, scouring the ground in pursuit of my resolution, when, glancing up, I saw it.

At first I was able to see right through the box, then it became solid. It was tall, with a strange sort of lamp on the top of it, and stood in the midst of a few withered bushes. A narrow door opened and three people came out. The old man had long, flowing silver locks and a sharp stare, which I found a little unnerving as he walked the few paces across the dusty ground to where I stood. The boy had curly, red-gold hair and well-cut features, and will one day be quite a good-looking young man, if I'm any judge. He reminded me a bit of my son Zebulun. The girl was small and dark, and most unsuitably and outlandishly garbed. Why, her legs were quite bare! A measure of maidenly modesty would, I thought, give her a much better chance of securing in

due course a husband of decent character. Mind you, the raiment of the old man and the boy, though not immodest, was some of the most extraordinary I have ever seen as well.

Yes, I know. You want me to get on with the actual tale. But just have patience, will you? All good storytellers put in some description and a modicum of comment, don't they? I'm only doing my best to make it more interesting, aren't I? I'd like to see you do better, if you suffered as I do with my eyes!

Where was I? Ah, yes...

"My good woman, would you be kind enough to enlighten us as to our exact whereabouts, hmm?"

The old man's countenance had undergone a complete transformation. His eyes were kind now, and he was smiling in an engaging manner. He could have charmed birds from a tree.

"You are lost?" It was obvious that they were, of course, but their manner of arrival had been unusual, to say the least, and I thought a question from me might encourage him to expand upon it.

I was mistaken. "I'm afraid so, my dear." His smile had waned a little.

I shrugged, and then enlightened him to the best of my own knowledge. "I am Leah," I added, thinking that I might as well introduce myself.

"Leah?" Was that recognition of my name I detected in his voice? I was all but certain that it was.

"I am wife to Jacob," I told him, watching him closely. But he had recovered himself, and waved towards his two companions. "My grandchildren, John and Gillian," he explained.

"A pretty girl and a fine boy," I responded politely.

The old fellow's eyes were on the plants I held in one hand. "Mandrake," I informed him, moving the assortment behind my back and thus out of his sight. "I would brew a fertility potion as a gift for my barren sister. I was always mightily better at preparing herbs and suchlike than she is."

"A kind thought, indeed."

Was that a touch of sarcasm there? As I wondered exactly what this old sage could possibly know about my sister and I, he beamed at me. "Might I prevail upon you to offer us the merest refreshment?" he enquired. "I wouldn't presume to ask, except that my grandchildren and I are already somewhat parched."

They stared at him, as if surprised, I thought. But I couldn't refuse, and anyway my curiosity was quite aroused.

"The sun will soon bake such pale skin as theirs and yours. Come, we shall hasten to my tent."

"My dear lady, you are consideration itself."

Jacob was with Rachel, naturally, and my children were playing somewhere, so just the four of us shared freshly baked bread and a drop of the wine I make myself (I'm rather pleased with the last batch, incidentally - a goblet or two and nothing matters much to you any more). I watered the wine down for the two children. At one stage I made a point of excusing myself to fetch something or other, then stood slightly to one side of the tent entrance and listened intently. They didn't talk very loudly for most of the time I was absent; in fact I'm fairly sure that the old man told the children to lower their voices quite early on. A wily old bird, the Doctor. Oh yes, indeed. I caught something about Kleptons, whatever they are, and some mention of a queen who was dominated by her favourites. A little later, the girl did exclaim once: "I can hardly believe she's really a relative of Jesus, Grandfather!" This was in a tone so awestruck that I wondered

who this Jesus could possibly be. I had certainly never heard of anyone of that name, well known or otherwise. Was the child referring to me as being related to this person? Perhaps, or perhaps not. It was only an isolated remark I had heard, after all. But there had been something in the way she had said it...

Consumed even more by curiosity now, I picked up a pot I had left outside the tent and went back inside. I was followed in almost straight away by my sons Issachar and Zebulun, already two strapping young lads, and I immediately suggested that they take the Doctor's grandchildren off with them to play a game. When the four had gone I glanced at the Doctor, to find him already regarding me with a shrewd look that made me feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"I suppose you'll want to begin preparing that potion for your sister, hmm? Don't let me delay you any further, my dear. Indeed, I shall help you with it. It's the very least I can do in return for your hospitality. I should tell you that I, too, have some knowledge of herbs and plants, and their use in beneficial - and other - concoctions. My parsnip elixir was much praised once upon a time. Oh, yes, I assure you."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly allow a guest to undertake, or share, such a task," I told him hastily.

"Nonsense, my good woman. Nonsense." Even as he spoke, he was sifting through the plants, mandrake and others, which I had earlier laid inconspicuously to one side. I had been certain that he hadn't seen me place them there. He held one of them up and gazed at it keenly. "Ah, now that is a most unusual ingredient. Most unusual. Are you working to a recipe of your own devising?"

I looked at him directly. "Nothing is too much trouble when your sister is as dear to you as Rachel is to me," I replied, ambiguously.

"I'm sure that's very true." His smile was unwavering.

"Who are you?" I demanded. "As I recall, you introduced your grandchildren, but not yourself."

"I do believe you're right."

"Well?"

"I am the Doctor. A traveler. A wanderer."

"From where?"

"No time, or place," he replied, enigmatically.

"When we met, you recognized my name."

"Yes."

"But you had never seen me before."

"I had not."

"You knew of me. My sister also."

The Doctor nodded. His expression was utterly serious now.

"How?" I felt strangely certain that the answer would be no ordinary one.

"Come and sit by me, my dear. No, wait. Perhaps you'd better pour us both another measure of that rather impudent little wine first."

I did so, feeling deeply apprehensive suddenly.

The Doctor's explanation did not waste words, and when he had finished speaking I stared at him, partly disbelieving, but also remembering that strange blue box fading up from thin air. If that was possible, then...

"You say that the tales to be found within this...Bible...will be read for countless years to come, and that the events described and commandments conveyed therein will influence the way in which many people of future generations live their own lives?" I said, to make quite sure.

"Indeed."

"But much of what is written will be open to interpretation by individuals, whose views will vary according to the kind of people they are and the circumstances they find themselves in?"

The Doctor nodded in confirmation.

It sounded a terrible idea to me, and it still does. A lot of trouble could come from all those different opinions, if you want to know what I think. There's nothing like an absolutely clear set of instructions to keep things well organized, after all. My mother always said so, God rest the old crone, and she was right in that, if not in very much else.

"You, my dear, through your sons, who will be the progenitors of six of Israel's twelve tribes, will become the ancestor of many of the people who play such prominent roles in those inspirational tales." The Doctor's manner became faraway. I think he had almost forgotten that I was there. "Of Moses, of course. King David. John the Baptist. Even, through his mother Mary, of Jesus Christ himself."

Jesus. The name I had heard the Doctor's granddaughter mention with such awe.

"It would distress me greatly to think that you might be remembered for committing a deed that you yourself would soon come to regret. Do you follow my drift, hmm?"

I did. Of course I did.

But my purpose remained unchanged.

Yes, it's true.

My feelings were too strong to be swept aside by any concern over how future generations might perceive me.

"I haven't convinced you to abandon your course, have I?" The Doctor was looking away from me as he spoke again, his chin jutting forward, his eyes stony now.

I stared down at my hands. "You must leave me to dig, in a manner of speaking, my own grave," I said quietly.

Silence. For some time.

The Doctor rose and paced about the tent. He seemed to be trying to come to a decision, and it was obviously proving a difficult task. Finally, he stopped dead, grasped the edges of his black coat very firmly, darted a penetrating glance at me, then resumed his seat at my side.

"Your sister will bear Jacob a son," he said bluntly.

It was like a knife in my heart. I looked at him angrily. "I wonder at your words, for they can only strengthen my resolve."

"Two sons, in fact."

I rose. "I think it is time you were on your way, old man."

"Your family will be travelling once more, this time to Bethlehem, when Rachel gives birth, with great difficulty, to the second child. She will name him Benjamin with her last breath."

I sat down again abruptly. "Her last?"

"In his grief, Jacob will raise an impressive memorial to mark her grave," the Doctor said somberly.

A few moments of silence. Then, "What about me?" I asked.

"My good woman," he replied testily, "I have said quite enough already."

"Please. I want to know. Whatever is to happen."

"You will assume the care of Rachel's children," the Doctor told me, reluctantly, "and will survive your sister by some years before Jacob buries you as well, in the cave of Machpelah, in Hebron, where, in accordance with his dying wish, he will eventually join you. Are you satisfied now, hmm?"

Jacob to be interred near me, at his own request! I turned this surprising yet touching information over in my mind. Strange, how it never occurred to me to disbelieve the Doctor.

"So Jacob survives both of us," I murmured.

"To become a very old man, though his sons will bring him much grief. Now that, my dear, is absolutely all I intend to say." He looked me straight in the eyes, almost fiercely. "So tell me, please, that the indiscretions I have just committed are to do some good."

Issachar and Zebulun chose that moment to return with the Doctor's grandchildren.

"Ah, children," said the Doctor, with a benign smile at John and Gillian. "I rather think it's time we were on our way."

I didn't want the old sage to go. I was fascinated by his words now. I wanted to hear more, to know more. The thought of resuming my everyday life depressed me unutterably.

But I had to resume it. Had he not told me how my story was to continue? I had not the slightest doubt that the events he had told me of would come to pass.

Rachel was destined to die young.

Now that I knew her fate, I even began to feel sorry for it.

That was when I pulled myself together.

The Doctor turned to look at me as he ushered John and Gillian from the tent. The question was in his eyes. An appeal, too.

I smiled, just faintly, and nodded, almost imperceptibly.

They were gone.

The last words I ever heard from them were Gillian's. She had a high, clear voice that penetrated my tent.

Something about a coat. A coat of many different colours.

I shrugged to myself. Such a garment would surely look somewhat garish?

There's no accounting for taste, is there?

We've been on our way again for a few days since then, and I've thought over the Doctor's words many times, as you might expect.

But it was only this morning, when I pictured Jacob standing by Rachel's grave marker, that I understood, and for the very first time, an inescapable truth.

The real Rachel, that jealous, malicious, frustrated, grasping sister of mine, would vanish with her death. Rachel the lost, the mourned, the unattainable, would assume her place. Jacob would love this angel, this elusive goddess, even more than my sister.

My place in his heart, such as it was, would become even smaller.

You, whoever you are, who read my words, remember this: love as you will, but if you receive nothing in return, never believe, for a single moment, that any effort you may make, any guile you choose to employ, can penetrate a wall of pure, and total, indifference.

Enough of this. My eyes begin to sting, and I have much else to do. I must lay down my pen. I feel, indeed, no urge to write more.

But I do feel some satisfaction in the hope that I, Leah, if my manuscript survives, might be seen, in the far future the Doctor spoke of, as a real woman, and not just as a character from a

volume of religious homilies that will, I firmly believe, do as much to divide people as it does to unite them.

Now, my unknown friends, whom I shall never meet on this earth, I really must bid you farewell.



In the long-ago days of the Old Testament, a group of travellers are journeying to Bethel.
Amongst them are the sisters Leah and Rachel, wives of Jacob.

The TARDIS arrives in the wilderness, bringing the Doctor and his grandchildren John and Gillian.
The time travellers encounter Leah and are invited to take refreshment in her tent.
The Doctor seems to know who she is.

Leah has dark intentions towards her attractive sister,
who has long been a thorn in her side, and the Doctor is not long in perceiving them.

How much of the future is he willing to reveal in order to turn this bitter woman from her sinister purpose?

This story features the First Doctor as played by William Hartnell

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