

Rachel and Rebekah – Kate Day

An imaginative retelling of their stories

Rachel lies comfortably in the darkness and smiles as she remembers outwitting her father. Outside the tent she can hear the gentle murmur of the Jabbok River. Her beloved husband, Jacob, is somewhere out there. Maybe he will come to her tent tonight.

Maybe not.

Maybe he is communing with this mysterious God that he talks about sometimes.

On second thoughts – might be best if he doesn't come to her tent tonight. Not until she's had chance to dispose of the household gods she stole from her father. She has a feeling Jacob won't approve of her bringing them into his God's territory. She's proved her point now anyway. To herself at any rate.

Who knows what tomorrow may bring? Heading south, with the prospect of meeting Jacob's vengeful older brother, Esau. It's over twenty years since their last encounter – when Jacob stole Esau's birthright and his blessing and had to run for it. Aided and abetted by his adored mother, Rebekah, whilst his elderly and ailing father had trembled in fear.

Pretty much the first time she had met him, Jacob had made it clear that he had little time for his father. Rachel has never heard the word 'respectable' uttered with such contempt as when Jacob uses it of his father. "Tedious." "Pusillanimous". Rachel hadn't even known what the word meant. "Scared. Unmanly," Jacob had replied scornfully. "Do you know he took my mother to another country to escape a famine and pretended she was his sister to protect himself. Just like his father before him."

"She must have felt such shame," Rachel had agreed. It is the lot of wives to be treated as belongings, to be picked up or cast aside as their lord and master sees fit. It doesn't mean they are impervious to the loss of status and self-respect this brings. Rachel cannot see this would have sat well with what she has heard of Rebekah.

Rachel has never met her mother-in-law, but she feels as if she has spent her entire life under the shadow of this ambitious and determined woman. For Rebekah is not only Rachel's husband's mother, she is Rachel's father's sister. Her aunt as well as her mother-in-law, their lives inextricably entwined.

And whilst Rachel was growing up – long before she even knew that Jacob existed – she had heard many times the story of how the servant had come from Abraham to find a wife for Isaac, and how their God (yes, him again) had directed him to Rebekah. And how Rebekah had seen the gold and jewels and riches that he brought, and, having heard her father's agreement to the marriage, had insisted on setting off there and then to start her new life. Rachel wonders how this dynamic woman coped with dreary Isaac during the 20 years they had to wait until she finally fell pregnant. And how she felt when the second-born twin was clearly the one who had inherited her family's gift of knowing what he wanted and going out to get it. Whilst the first born was evidently straight out of the Isaac mould. No wonder she had used all her intelligence and cunning to “arrange” things so that Jacob obtained the birthright and the blessing – the inheritance promised by their God.

Strange, here He is again, cropping up in her thoughts. She has never really given him much credence before tonight, but here, in the dark, by the Jabbok, suddenly He feels very close. She will definitely dump those household gods first thing in the morning. She has a sense that Jacob's God is not to be trifled with.

The baby stirs in his crib. Her baby. Her Joseph. Like Rebekah she has had to wait many years to become a mother. Like Rebekah she has had to endure disgrace. Unbidden, her own pain seeps into the tent. Every time Jacob chose to spend the night with his other wife (her sister, Leah) or one of their maidservants, she had felt so unworthy. Every time they fell pregnant and were delivered of yet another strong and healthy son for her beloved husband, she had felt such a failure.

She, who had inherited every ounce of her family's desire to get ahead, and the intelligence and wit to do so....

She, who brought both beauty and brains, who sat and planned with Jacob how he would increase their flocks, their herds and their wealth....

She, who Jacob loved so much that he worked for her father for 14 years in order to marry her....

She.... could not do the one simple thing that was required of a wife, the thing her dull and placid sister, and even their handmaids, achieved with boring regularity – produce male children.

But now, she has. Finally. And just to look at Joseph is to see that he has a great future ahead of him. Her heart swells with pride.

And today she has done something else. Today, she has finally repaid her father for the deception he played on her husband all those years ago. When Leah wore the bridal veil which should have been hers, and became Jacob's first wife.

When Rachel had been powerless against his paternal scheming.

She smiles again in the darkness. Today it had been so simple. The stolen household gods had been hidden in the saddle of her camel. And when her father came to search for them, all she needed to do was to follow convention and decline to stand in his presence because of her womanly bleeding. So the stolen goods remained hidden and a daughter who had once been powerless had outwitted her hapless father.

Rachel begins to laugh. If she ever gets to meet Rebekah, she will feel that she can hold her head high.

But suddenly the laughter rings hollow, there in the tent by the Jabbok. The baby stirs again. Does she really want a life of twisting and turning for him? Of always having to struggle to stay one step ahead? Does she want his life to be defined by those gods of her father's household?

A breeze stirs the heavy flap of the tent. A shaft of light illuminates the saddle and its hidden cargo. She could throw them out now. Make a new start. Follow Jacob's God. Set aside her personal ambition and follow a different path. She feels she will be welcomed by this God, if only she could let go of the past. She wrestles with the thought in the still of the tent, as the Jabbok flows endlessly by, and a promise of peace crystallises in the soft, dark air.

In a moment of decision she stands. She retrieves the tiny idols from the saddle and creeps out into the moonlight. One by one she drops the worthless gods into the fast-moving water.

They are gone. She will worship Jacob's God now.

A movement on the opposite bank catches her eye. Is Jacob there? Or is the mysterious movement just the play of moonlight on the branches as they move in the breeze? She blinks and looks more closely, but can see nothing more. She will ask Jacob in the morning.

She returns to her tent, to sleep. The night, with its promise of peace, enfolds her. Who knows what tomorrow may bring?