

THE LIVES OF RACHEL



Joel Gross



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

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Designed by Kathryn Parise

I have set before you life and death, the
blessing and the curse; therefore choose
life, that you may live, you and your seed;
to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His
voice, and to cleave unto Him; for that is
your life, and the length of your days.

DEUTERONOMY 30

A thousand years in Your sight
Are but as yesterday when it is past
And as a watch in the night.

PSALMS 90

Prologue

May 1982



Rachel Kane arrived in Jerusalem after a sleepless eleven-hour flight from New York, and insisted on going directly to the Western Wall. Her husband, glowing with vitality after ten hours of dreamless sleep in the adjacent seat, insisted on first going to the hotel. "I don't like how you look," he said. "You've got hollows under your eyes, your skin is dry, and you're walking like a drunk. The doctor was very clear that you could go almost anywhere and do almost anything, as long as you don't exhaust yourself."

Rachel was about to respond with a fake clutching of her pregnant belly, but decided against it. This was their first child on the way, and this was *his* first month as much as it was hers. So she simply said to the cabdriver, "You can drop my husband at the King David Hotel, and then I'm going on to the Jewish quarter."

The cabdriver, who had spent the last forty minutes of the trip to Jerusalem from the airport explaining how this car, this road, this country, and this sunset were all the best of their kind in the world, was aghast. "You're going to let your wife go the Wall by herself?"

They effected a compromise: their luggage was deposited at the hotel, and the driver took them to the Dung Gate in the Old City's wall, from where it was a short walk to the Western Wall, the last remnant of the Second Temple, and the focal point of Jewish longing for nearly two thousand years.

The floodlights had not yet been illuminated as they hurried past the security booth to the vast plaza before the Wall. Rachel's elegant shoes raised a clatter before the approaching stillness of night. The sky was opening above them, raising its distant cap of clouds to a series of multicolored ribbons; pink and blue strands of gentle fire glowed from an unimaginable distance, from an unknowable source.

"Hold on to me, darling," said her husband, who had offered his arm, and then finally took hold of Rachel by the shoulders. It had grown suddenly cold in the absence of sunlight, and a light wind whipped about the empty spaces before the Wall. Separate groups of men and women prayed together in its shadow, their eyes shut, their bodies swaying to an interior rhythm as old as history. There were tourists too, squinting through expensive camera lenses, separating themselves from the experience by futile attempts to record their presence; electronic flashes burst in irregular beats of time from among them, shoddy reminders of the present against the blackening landscape.

"I want to touch," said Rachel, extricating herself from her husband's grasp. Close to the Wall, a partition was erected, separating the men from the women in accordance with the religious customs of Orthodox Jews. Rachel's husband watched her hurry through the knots of the devotees, women shaking and wailing and raising their shut-eyed faces from the Wall to the heavens. He didn't join the rabbis and students and soldiers on the larger, male side of the partition; he was unable to take his eyes off his wife's figure, even as it diminished in the dark and the distance.

But Rachel felt nothing of her husband's concern. At that moment she was driven by a pure impulse, simply to touch the Wall, to feel the cool ancient stone flush against her hands, to rest her hot forehead where an endless stream of pilgrims had rested theirs at the end of their journeys. She was not a religious woman, nor did she have a prayer ready to mumble through quivering lips; but she was of a family whose ancestors had been in this land, had stood in this place, and to answer some inchoate inner call she rushed for the stone like a lover reaching for her beloved.

It was at that moment that darkness fell.

Not in the sky, for all about her the setting sun still lit the tattered prayer books, the colorful costumes of Near and Middle East, the separate spectacles of ecstasy and sorrow, of joy and lamentation;

but through her wide-open eyes came no light, no shadow. The presence of the stones, of the tiny bits of paper stuffed in its cracks—prayers and wishes from the faithful—faded to black. Rachel felt her heart race, felt a fever rise up from under her skull and spill through every pore in her face. There was heat, there was fear, and her lips moved as she intoned the ancient prayer:

"Shemah Yisroel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad," she said, the words familiar to her from religious school six thousand miles and fifteen years away; but familiar beyond that. "Hear O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord is One," she said, but not in English, and not in the badly accented Hebrew of her Connecticut teachers. Rachel said the words fluently, till the syllables slipped together, till the prayer was no longer a string of words but a single incantation, till the incantation was without any other meaning than a sigh or a caress or a love beyond reason.

"Shema Yisroel, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad," she repeated, again and again, and the tears came to her eyes, and without realizing it, her body was swaying, even as she held on to the cool stones, even as she turned her heart into the past, through the blackness, until there was a moment, a moment whose duration was beyond measurement, big and small, round and flat, a piece of time and a thread of fancy—and then there was an end to blackness. She could see quite clearly the white stones, reflecting the brilliant sun of midday, and beyond them, and above them, the towering Temple secure and serene on the Temple Mount, and through it all was a music, familiar and sweet and gentled by the wind, and in the heart of the moment she strained to hear the words, to taste them even if they were harsher than poison, to touch them even if they were etched in flame.

"Rachel," said a voice.

But whether the voice was her own, or that of another, calling to her through time, she couldn't know.

"Rachel," said the voice, and then the name was repeated, again and again, a whisper and a memory and a promise.

Part One



Judea, 168 B.C.

Chapter

1



Rachel could barely see the Holy City through the dust. Like the Pillar of Cloud sent by the Lord to guide the Children of Israel in their flight from Egypt, this dust hovered over the road to Jerusalem like a beacon. Above the road, above the indistinct city walls, above the dust raised by ten thousand feet, above the chatter and song, above the tumult of beasts of burden, of lambs to be sacrificed and chickens to be slaughtered, above the joy and fear and sorrow in the hearts of the pilgrims rose the famous Jerusalem sky. An hour before sunset, it had already begun to fracture the diminishing light into opalescent rivers and meadows and seas. Rachel could well imagine how the pagans had peopled the sky with their silly gods: gods who drew fire through the air, who painted the canopy of heaven with lust and jealousy like the humans who'd invented them to explain the unexplainable. And certainly no sky, not in the king's capital of Antioch, not even in far-off Greece, home of the pagans' gods and seat of their faithless culture, could be more exciting to the imagination. It seemed less a sky than a dome of many colors; it seemed like gold stretched and beaten to an impossible thinness, waiting for the hammer of night, the puncture of starlight; it seemed like a head covering, blowing wildly askew from some preternatural wind, revealing glimpses of heavenly hair, lustrous lines of purple and magenta twisting below a pallid orange sun.

"You're smiling," said Saul, shouting the words at her through the din.

"Yes, my husband," said Rachel. "In spite of the pigs, in spite of the men without faith."

"In spite of the priests who said no one would come," said Saul. He was twenty-four and had been her husband for six years, marrying her on her fourteenth birthday, when the promise of her beauty had been as clear and as certain as prophecy. Saul had married her over the weak protests of his father, and the stronger protests of his uncle, both of whom had wanted a girl of more distinguished lineage for a son of the priestly line. But Saul's infatuation had been stronger than any protest, and no one in his family expected the hot-tempered young man to be a likely candidate for the intricacies of the priesthood, or its yet more delicate affiliate craft of diplomacy. He had become a trader in gold and gems, married to a childless woman goldsmith, and his family was content to ignore him.

Some of the pilgrims had been walking for a day, others for a week or more; a few had been traveling for months, making the dangerous pilgrimage from Egypt or Persia or the distant settlements along the Hyrcanian Sea. But whether they'd traveled the coastal road from Antioch, or gone overland from Alexandria, or left some nearby village nestled in the hills of Judah, all had ascended the last miles, all had begun to breathe the magic crystal-line air unique to this high place.

Jerusalem, the city of David, the center of life for the Jewish people in Judea, in Tyre, in Egypt, in Persia; even for those Jews born across the Mediterranean Sea, Greek-speakers who knew little Hebrew and no Aramaic, this city was the symbol of their home, their religion, their nation. King David, who had lived and died before the First Temple was built, had sung of it in the psalms that every boy and girl in Judea had by heart: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning," he had written. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem," he had said eight centuries before, and for all the years after that, after Solomon had built the great Temple, after Nebuchadnezzar had driven the Jews into exile in Babylon, after Cyrus had allowed the exiles to return to their city and rebuild the Temple nearly four hundred years ago, after Alexander the Great had conquered their city, after the descendants of his generals had quarreled over it like gluttons anxious for a last sweet,

David's words remained. "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people forever."

The outer walls of the city had been recently fortified, and the smooth-cut stones reflected the waning light with an unfamiliar harshness. Rachel had never seen such white stones around the city of her birth. When she'd left Jerusalem almost four years before, the walls had been in bad repair, the gates sloppily guarded, the leering mercenaries of the king too contemptuous of the men of the city to regard them with fear. That had changed, of course. The mercenaries still laughed at the shabbily dressed members of the Pious sect, still followed the city's lovely women with insolent eyes, but they were no longer casual about the walls and the gates. Only weeks before the king's appointed high priest had been deposed by a Jewish force headed by the former High Priest Jason. The mercenaries had chosen not to intervene in the local intrigue; but the choice had been based on their surprise at Jason's strength. The deposed High Priest Menelaus had been despised by most of his Jewish constituency; for the four years he'd taken charge of the Temple and the Holy City, many Jews had stayed away from Jerusalem, unable to bear his admixture of Greek rites with their own ancient rituals. More zealous members of the priestly class, like Saul's uncle and father, still stayed away from Jerusalem. Jason was better than Menelaus, but he was still another pretender to a position that was not his birthright. None of the Pietists could forget that it was under Jason's administration of Temple and city that the cursed gymnasium was built, where Jewish young men, many of them from the ranks of the priesthood, were seduced into the Greek way of life.

"We will make a child tonight," said Saul, reaching for Rachel's hand as they approached the gate.

"If it's the will of God," said Rachel.

"And why wouldn't it be His will?" said Saul, reaching from her arm to her neck with his smooth hand. "With the stars in our eyes, with the fruits of the harvest ready for His Temple?"

"Your mother told me that my childlessness was almost certainly due to your blasphemous tongue," said Rachel, but she couldn't help moving her tired neck more firmly into his embrace.

"I could give you back," said Saul, pulling her closer. "I could find myself an expert in the Law and get back my hard-earned bride money."

They were not the only ones kissing as they entered the gates of the city. The Holiday of the Harvest—Sukkot—had little of the solemn weight of other pilgrim festivals. In thanksgiving for the Lord's bounty, the Jews brought part of their harvest to the Temple; in memory of the Israelites' forty years wandering in the desert, they spent the week-long festival living in flimsy fruit-and-leaf-covered booths which they flung up hastily all about the city. Sukkot, being the festival of the harvest, arrived in early fall, when the sun-dried hills no longer held on to the heat of the day for the first hours of darkness. After an evening and a night of bright-burning torches, enormous candelabras blazing in the courts of the Temple, soul-stretching songs chanted above the haze of light, into the cold and overwhelming blackness, the pilgrims would look to love as a solace against the force of the unknown. With the hymns and the pomp and the majesty of the Temple rites lingering in their cold bodies, they would hurry across the windswept high places of the city, searching out their ramshackle booths, eager to huddle together beneath the low roofs, whose branches and boughs were deliberately spaced to let in the pale glow of moon and stars.

But as they passed under the gaze of the Syrian mercenaries at the gate, the reality of the city began to work away at any sense of frivolity or festivity that might have prevailed in former years. A group of spearmen with boyish faces and thick limbs stood at attention, fronting two officers in full armor: one of the officers had a metal breastplate, shot through with a gold design of poor workmanship. The other officer wore gold on his sandals, in two armlets, in a ring so large that it must have hampered his swordsmanship; but at least his breastplate was leather, and thus not for show. He could move if he had need to, and it seemed to Rachel that the deep stains in the heavy shoulder straps that held up breastplate and backplate were of blood. Antiochus, the young king who paid these soldiers and who ruled the Seleucid empire from Antioch in Syria, had not yet returned from Egypt; Jew and Gentiles alike had heard the rumors of his death. Indeed it was the possibility of this that had emboldened the followers of the new High Priest Jason to take over the Temple grounds, and drive out the king's man, the High Priest Menelaus. If King Antiochus was dead, rebellion would be sure to break out in a dozen cities; the dream to conquer Egypt and Parthia and Bactria, to bring back the glorious age of Alexander to this shaky empire would end in a

confusion of tiny wars, fought for small reasons. Even little Judea would rise up; Jerusalem would be armed by Egyptians, anxious to undermine Syrian rule. The soldiers of a dead king would be suddenly leaderless, adrift in foreign parts, destined for slaughter or slavery.

"We go left, my husband," said Rachel, taking Saul's thick wrist in her work-hardened hand. "Such a memory you have," she added. "Like a scribe who can't remember his child's name."

Rachel spoke in Hebrew, making her words more palatable to Saul. In Aramaic, the common language of the Jews of Judea—and in its various dialects, of much of their part of the world—her familiar tone might have been shocking; many of those same pilgrims who no longer understood the Hebrew of their ancestors had no sense of humor about the relationship of man and wife. The husband was the master; indeed he was most commonly called "my lord" or "my master" by a dutiful wife in both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. Directing or chiding a husband, much less mocking one's lord and master, was not only wrong, it was a sin; but of course these rules didn't apply to every level of society.

She led him swiftly away from the mob of pilgrims heading up the first of the two great hills on which the city was built. Rachel could see past the new soldiers' quarters, the crude brick huts sheltering the prostitutes and the sellers of cheap wine that came and went with each new group of conquerors, to the old quarter of merchants' homes, sheltered from the wind by thick-walled courtyards.

"What can't I remember?" said Saul, pulling at the silk mantle he'd brought her from Tyre last year, when he'd gone to buy Cyprian jaspers. The wind blew at her head covering, and now he pulled this away, letting her thick red hair fly about her face as if she were a siren.

"You've missed me then?" said Rachel, looking at her bare shoulder, and then slowly, teasingly pulling up the silk over her flesh and tightening the gold-clasped girdle at her waist, she added: "How many girls did you have in Egypt then?"

"No girls," said Saul. "Only camels and baby elephants, and once a little black boy from the Nubian mines. Such a wife. Your father won't be happy to have you back!"

They had brought two slaves and a single donkey, and now this trio ground to a halt behind them in the alleyway that had taken

them away from the noise and the confusion of the masses. Slaves and donkey stood silently as husband and wife embraced. They saw nothing as Saul pulled away at the silk mantle, exposing his young wife's shoulder, and brought his lips to shoulder and neck. "A little present," said Saul, and the slaves heard nothing, did not dwell on the fact that their master had been absent from his home for more than four months, and that on the day of his return he had been forced to join the pilgrimage to the Holy City, a distance of eight hours on foot—no young pilgrims, no matter how rich, could disgrace themselves with a litter among the foot-weary climbers to Jerusalem—without even taking an hour to lie down with his wife.

In the diminishing light Rachel saw the gleam of gold against ivory, felt her husband's smooth hands pull away the hair at the back of her neck, and then he brought his lips to hers gently, briefly, and pulled away, still holding on to her thick hair and holding up the jewelry in front of her green eyes.

It was a hair jewel, flat and elegantly simple, its gold clasp twisted into a Herakles knot, its only jarring note the large ruby inlaid into the center of the gold.

"For your hair," he said unnecessarily as he opened the clasp and closed it over the hair he had gathered in his fist.

"The ruby is for my tribe, I suppose?" said Rachel.

"Even a little girl knows to say, 'Thank you, my Lord.' "

"Thank you, my unfaithful husband—with the smooth hands," and Rachel kissed these hands now, and then unceremoniously pulled open the clasp of the jewel and fixed her hair quickly in the gathering dark. Beyond the slaves came the sounds of hurrying feet, and Rachel thanked Saul more properly, and then urged him to come along. It seemed absurd to her that they were discussing the merits of inlaying precious stones in gold when all about them was the impending majesty of the festival rites, the threatening currents of repression and rebellion. But she was a goldsmith, in spite of being rich and above manual work, in spite of being a woman, and a married one besides. Saul's smooth hands came from a life of business and trade, and his trade was in gems, and he thought less in terms of the dangers to his priestly caste if the Romans grew into the new power in the region than he did about the change in taste it would bring in the marketplace. The Romans loved gems inlaid in gold; the Greeks—and nearly the entire civilized world called themselves Greeks or Hellenes—thought it ter-

ribly gauche to ruin the purity of gold with a gaudy addition. It was only the well-known fact that the tribe of Judah's representative gemstones in the Temple treasures were rubies that prompted Saul to bring home such an unsophisticated bauble for Rachel. For in spite of her love of Greek craftsmanship, she was devoted to her people—to their Temple, their sacred Scrolls of Law, their history.

Coming out of the alleyway, they entered a brick-paved street, where some of the pilgrims had begun to set up their booths. Torches had already been lit, and the wind whipped the flames dangerously close to the roofs of branches and boughs. Long before the Temple rites would be over that night, the street would be lined with the booths, the smooth brick of the walled courtyards serving as a common fourth side to the makeshift structures.

"You're very beautiful," said Saul, as he prevented his wife from covering her head.

"I must cover my head," she said. "Do you want to be kicked by a Pietist?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Rachel. Jerusalem is far more sacrilegious than sacred, even with Jason as high priest. You have every right to uncover your beautiful hair."

"As it pleases my master," said Rachel smiling. They were close enough to the home of her father and brother, neither of whom had much use for the God of their ancestors. Shimon, Rachel's brother, had been one of the first of the young men of the city to take exercise in the Greek gymnasium, and he was planning to take part in the Greek games at Tyre later that year as both runner and wrestler. When the pressure of Saul's family forced the young couple to leave Jerusalem at the beginning of Menelaus's administration as high priest, Shimon refused to believe that their move was based on anything other than political expediency. Saul's family was powerful, and had connections from Alexandria to Babylon: Shimon simply could not conceive that his lovely and intelligently educated sister could have left Jerusalem sharing a futile protest over the importation of civilization.

In the few times that he'd made the sixteen-mile journey to Mod-ein from Jerusalem, he had been more upset at seeing his sister working at goldsmithing without the proper complement of trained slaves than he had been at the benighted opinions of Saul's family. Shimon knew that Rachel had married into the Judean aristocracy, and that for all the comforts of his own Jerusalem home—and all