

*I want to know what it says ... The sea, Floy, what it is that it keeps on saying.*

—CHARLES DICKENS,  
*DOMBEY AND SON* (1848)

I will call it the Chronicle of Rachel.

It will be written simply, simplistically, with the cadence of the King James Version. The story of Rachel Morrow as told by her acolyte and apostle Mary Hope.

I can hear Rachel laughing at that—a gentle, comprehending laugh with a hint of cynicism in it, but no bitterness.

I think of Rachel's laughter as I put my back to the sea, and with the cautious pace dictated by age and arthritis, I make my way east across the beach toward the bank. It's forty feet high here, with salal and clumps of mimulus clinging to its striated layers of earth and clay and the cobbled ledges of buried beaches. I'd never be able to climb that slope if it weren't for the path that winds up through the ravine cut by the Styx. Not the River Styx. The small, stubborn creek Styx.

I pause at the foot of the path, my cane and moccasin boots sinking into the snowy, dry sand where the tide hasn't reached since winter. The air is weighted with dew, and on this April day, the early-morning sun shines clear as white wine on the blue-green face of the Pacific, makes rainbows in the spindrift arching off the breakers, but it will be half a day before the sun reaches this spot. At my knee, Shadow stands panting from her sprints along the edges of the waves, black and white and russet fur sea-wet, long nose pointed into the wind. The family thinks I call her Shadow because she is so often beside me, but in fact I named her for her ancestor, the first Shadow, whose ancestors were bred to herd sheep in the Shetland Islands, a place so hopelessly far away now that I'll never know if anyone,

anything, still lives there.

I draw my brown wool shawl closer as I set off up the path.

Yes, I will call it the Chronicle of Rachel, but it will of necessity be my story. I am the viewpoint character. And I can delay it no longer. Last night I read something in Miriam's eyes that served notice to me. I must do it for Rachel, for all her hopes.

And for Stephen, that he may be emancipated, and his children and his children's children. Generation unto generation.

When at length I reach the top of the path, I stop to catch my breath, then, with Shadow at my heels, I walk into the sun across the unmowed grass, passing the house on my left. No one is there now. A covered breezeway connects the east wall to the garage. Rather, the church. I can hear voices singing in three-part harmony: "Rock of Ages, cleft for me ..."

I don't attend the family's religious services. Early on I attended a few of them and found them annoying on many counts, not the least of which is that they were boring, even the daily morning and evening services that usually last only an hour. And they all remind me too much of the Doctor's sermons and his morbid visions of hell.

Jeremiah's hellfire lacks conviction. Despite his youth, he tends to long-winded and edifying parables. Miriam is more a preacher in the evangelistic tradition. I attended, out of curiosity, the first service she conducted. That was five years ago when Jerry had pneumonia. In his absence, Miriam flowered proudly as our resident high priestess, like her namesake, the sister of Moses. When Jerry recovered from his illness, he decided that perhaps it *was* possible for a woman to serve as preacher. For morning services, at any rate.

He decided that? Let's say he *thought* it was his decision.

But I avoid the services, whoever is preaching, and on this spring morning I sympathize with the children, who have no choice but to be confined in the church. The family hasn't done much to improve the structure since it was a garage—and for a while a chicken house and rabbitry, then a storeroom—except to put in two windows, a crude altar, a pulpit, and three hard benches. They replaced the garage door with a standard door,

and on the peak of the roof mounted a wooden cross.

I hum along with the hymn as I walk on toward the barn and the labyrinth of pens and sheds and rabbit hutches around it. Cassandra, the grande dame of our goat herd, is at the watering trough. Since Shadow is with me, I don't venture too close to Cassandra, although I'm worried about her. She's pregnant and near term. At the chicken coop, I try to count the chicks, a hopeless task; they move so constantly. There are at least thirty. The rabbits are proliferating handily: two of the does have litters of seven. In the pigpen, Diana happily nurses her squealing litter of ten.

I turn and walk back toward the house and church. I can hear no music now. Miriam is probably giving one of her lessons. She has, so I've been told, made the morning service a Bible school for the children. Not only are they confined to that bleak building on this splendid morning, but they must be catechized by Miriam. But it gives them practice in memorization.

And I'll have them for three hours later this morning.

Stickeen and Diamond have joined us. They're both Agate's heirs and have his wolfish look, and they're still puppyish enough to tempt Shadow into a romp. I stop to watch their game, but a few minutes later I'm distracted by the opening of the church door.

The service must be over. I watch, unnoticed in the shade of an alder copse perhaps thirty yards away, while the family files out of the church, Jerry leading the exodus. Jeremiah. I find it difficult to think of him as Jeremiah. I will always, I suppose, think of him as Luke's boy. He has the same narrow head, deep-set blue eyes, and long bones, although his hair and beard are a wan brown. Jerry is thirty-one years old and our Elder. Since he's the only adult male here, he holds that office by default, really. I never remind him of that.

Miriam follows him, her imperious posture making her seem nearly as tall as Jerry, and she has Luke's copper red hair. The sun fires it, a candescent cascade falling to her waist. All the other women cut their hair short for convenience—in that, they've taken my lead—but I can't blame Miriam for letting her

hair grow long. It is her glory. She'd be beautiful without it, but with it she is ravishing. Yet this Ishtar, this Astarte, this veritable Venus—and the first time I saw her she was standing on the verge of the sea—considers vanity a sin.

She takes her place at Jerry's side a few feet from the door, and as if the contrast were purposely staged, the next to emerge are Enid, Bernadette, and Grace. The three crones, so I call them, well aware that I am the fourth crone. Enid is holding Deborah's hand, and Grace is carrying three-year-old Rachel, who is crying disconsolately. Jonathan, Jerry's eldest, comes out next, with his half-brother, Isaac, at his side and Little Mary behind him. Then Esther emerges, tall and lithe, her dark skin the color of a Benin bronze. I call her our earth mother, and she is in fact five months pregnant. I see in her face none of her usual calm, and her distress, obvious even from a distance, sounds in my mind the first faint alarm. She rests one hand on her son's shoulder.

Stephen. He surprises me sometimes because I look at him expecting to see a boy and instead see a youth nearing manhood. He's thirteen now, nearly as tall as his mother, and he has her dark, curling hair, her obsidian black eyes, her supple grace. But now there is an odd rigidity in his stance.

None of the family makes a move to go to the house. They all remain near the church door, and my curiosity is piqued. Something has altered the routine.

I realize that something is not only unusual, but seriously wrong when I see Esther appealing to Jerry. I'm too far away to understand what she's saying except for her last words: "He didn't mean to. *Please*—he's only a child!"

Jerry shakes his head, and Esther slowly retreats from Stephen, who stands with his back to the closed door. When Miriam holds out her hand, Jerry—reluctantly, it seems—unbuckles his leather belt and gives it to her. She speaks to Stephen, and I watch, baffled, as he takes off his shirt, turns, reaches out to brace his palms against the door.

I don't believe what I'm seeing, and that doubt paralyzes me. Miriam folds her hands over the leather strap and bows her

head. *Her* voice carries easily to me. I hear every word. “Heavenly Father, have mercy on this our brother, who has blasphemed in Your presence ...”

*Blasphemed?*

The word impels me forward, rage rising from some capped well deep within me where memories and hatred are stored. I throw my weight onto my cane at every step, but I can’t run. Old woman, half-crippled old woman, hobbling along on aching limbs.

Miriam stands in an empty circle whose radius is the length of the belt, and now she draws back her hand, the belt snakes out with a vicious whisper, cracks against Stephen’s naked back, leaves its livid track burned into his flesh.

And over his muffled cry I shout, “*Stop it!*”

My protest goes unheard, and again the belt slashes through the air, snaps across Stephen’s back, forcing out another cry, leaving another dark welt. I stumble on, while Miriam draws the belt back again, but I’m only a few feet away now, and I reach out for the flailing leather.

It hits my hand with a burning shock as it wraps around my wrist and pulls me off balance. I fall, hard and clumsily, lie clutching green spring grass in my hands, while my heart pounds against the constriction in my chest that stops my breath. Beyond the ringing whine in my ears, I hear the dogs barking, little Rachel wailing, all the women talking at once, and finally Jerry bellowing, “Enough! That’s enough, everybody!”

At length silence prevails, except for Shadow, who stands by me, growling at Miriam. And Miriam glares at me, her ivory skin spoiled with mottled red. I manage to get enough breath to quiet Shadow, then Jerry helps me to my feet. He offers me my cane, never once looking me in the eye. The belt is still wrapped around my wrist, and when I remove it, I make no effort to hide the red weals under it. I hand the belt to Jerry, and he takes it, frowning as if he’s never seen it before.

I glance at Stephen. Esther is draping his shirt around his shoulders, but he seems unaware of her. He’s staring at me.

And I demand, “What’s going on here, Jeremiah?”