

PART I



before: the found child

CHAPTER I

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Long ago, when teachers were sent from Britain to teach in the grammar schools of the West Indian colonies (it was Great Britain then, not Little England, as it is now, after Brexit and the fall of empire), there lived in Jamaica, near a town called Oracabessa-on-Sea, a poor fisherman and his wife, who was a farmer and a seamstress, and one morning they found a pale child in bushes in a basket made of reeds. The man's name was Noah Fisher, and his wife's name was Rachel.

They adopted the child and named him Moshe, which is to say, Moses, which in translation means "drawn out," and they named him in this way because Rachel was a Yahwehist, and because the bushes in which they found him were a tangle of sea grapes running low as a reed bed along the ground on cliffs above the sea, and when she found him (for it was she who first saw the child) the spray from below had made a pool around the basket so that in another few moments it would have sailed. Which is to say that in a manner of speaking, the little boy was indeed drawn out of water.

The grandmother, a longheaded woman of the countryside, tells me, "Yu nuh need fi go deh so," you do not need this long explanation of watery origins, since the ancestors of every Jamaican came over the sea, most of them in the ship's cakka, and moreover are we not an island, surrounded by water? So anyone born and found here is a child of water, and no more to be said.

But this child that was found did not look like anyone who came over in the holds of ships three hundred years ago, so it is important to give all the details of his name and how he was found.

The morning on which this happened was not unusual in the pattern of Noah's and Rachel's lives. It was a Friday, the day when they joined the long lines of sick and ailing from the town and its surrounding districts, who traveled to the parish's one hospital, mostly on foot, to get treatment for their ailments and wounds. The lines included women pregnant with their first, second, third, sometimes tenth, eleventh, or even twelfth child. It included men with machete chops all over their bodies from plantation disputes, children bent in the shape of safety pins from hookworm, young ones with yaws, whooping cough, measles, or mumps—the usual maladies of childhood in those times and in that place—and many young and old suffering from heart failure, blocked tube, hernia, unresponsive male organ, underresponsive female organ, testicular edema, old fresh cold, virulent fresh cold, consumption, out-of-control blood pressure, and various disorders from the surfeit or indigestion of sugar.

The extent and variety of ailments from saccharine indigestion on the island were both miraculous and unsurprising. In case this is unknown to you, Jamaica from its infancy had been a sugarcane plantation, where people perforce ate a lot of sugar or its byproducts and leftovers. Sugar in the boiling houses made the slaves drunk, the great vats of it with its liquorish smell when it was in the making, and when it was made, the shining crystals scooped into vast kegs for shipping to England, the mother country. The grains clung to their skins and got into their eyes and ears and even their secret parts—their vulvae and their scrotums—and that was the reason some could not have children, the grandmother said.

After the long cruel hours in the canepiece, being bitten by cane rat, sugar snake, overseer whip, hot sun, and cane leaf, when they went back to their slave cabins at night there was sometimes nothing to eat but sugar, but they could not eat it without becoming sick, or rather, more sick, since they were already sick in the beginning from too much consanguinity with its sweet stickiness. This is why it became a saying in Jamaica, *Is one of two tings going tek yu—if is not*

sugar, is heart failure. (Which might boil down to the same thing, for heart failure comes from eating too much salt—salt for healing, for taste, even in your tea, salt for feeling balanced, salt for good luck, throw it behind you, salt for counteracting obeah and the ill effects of sugar. In Jamaica once upon a time and maybe still now, we ate salt like sugar. Against sugar. So it still goes back to King Sugar.)

Noah Fisher, a quiet man except when he was aggrieved, had his own views as to how this alchemy of sickness took root. “Foolish Galatians. Oonu don’t know seh sugar be di one ting black people cyaan eat wid hinpunity,” sugar is the one thing that black people cannot eat without a confrontation with destiny.

He would say this rudely in the clinic, from anger that he could not (it seemed) be rid of this history that was lodged in his flesh, and because he wanted to infuriate the nurses. These women, whom he hated for their demeanor of superiority, were among the few humans who could make Noah wax almost loquacious. In the clinic he cursed like a warner, telling strings of proverbs, but profanely—not in the holy-holy language that warners used. “Ole idiot tink dem better than people, just because dem carry out shitpan fi pay while poor people carry it out fi free. Monkey rise high, expose him raw backside. Ole ooman swear fi nyam callaloo, callaloo swear fi wuk him effing gut.” A climbing monkey exposes the secrets of his behind. You have ingested your own destruction and thought it a gift. And how could it be otherwise? Can a person eat his own flesh? Not with impunity, not scots-free. You will see this in the annals of the sugar plantations, how it was that the bright brown crystals came about, how bone and blood got mixed in the métissage, tips of fingers, sometimes knuckles, and even whole arms bitten off by the great machines. The crystals at first wine-dark in blood, then soakaway to brown when the crushers smoothed them out.

This was not a history that Noah knew in its fine details, but his spirit apprehended it, and so his signature phrase of contempt, “Foolish Galatians, fool nuh jackass arse,” was loaded with salient meaning. Their imaginations steeped in the hattaclaptic language of the King James version, even the illiterate people of those days understood that to be a Galatian was to suffer a lack of historical memory.

Noah was among the patients sick by sugar. He had on the inside of his right thigh a long-running diabetic sore that had to be hospital-dressed every Friday morning, though after many years of dressing it still had not healed. Rachel accompanied him on these trips to the hospital because he could not read or write, but she could, and sometimes there were papers that he was required to read and sign.

Some people depended on the hospital clerk to write on their behalf, *Donovan Bright, his mark*, or, *Mattie Longbridge, her mark*, or whatever their names were, their mark, and the hospital clerk would show them where to make an X on the line above this declaration. But some felt ashamed, even though many of them were in this category, illiterates who depended on others to write for them, and so, when they could, they brought their reading and writing relatives along, so that they would not have to depend on strangers to sign their names in good cursive on the correct line.

When the waiting lines were long and Rachel knew it would take some time for Noah to be attended to, or when he was misbehaving in the clinic, she went outside, around to the back of the building, to catch a breath of air. This particular morning she needed air more than ever, because she and Noah had quarreled, which meant it was one of those mornings when she hated him with a hatred that made her feel she was suffocating. Their quarrels were frequent, and grew more and more bitter as they discovered they could not have children, and Rachel felt in her heart that Noah did not renounce or protect her from the district's belief that if there was no child, it was the wife who was barren. Noah's rage, meeting her accusation, was simple: "Woman, yu tink me is God? If yu womb shet up, I can mek pickney out of the dust of the ground? Awright, mek one an call him Adam!"

She swear to God she going lef him this morning.

The hospital was perched above rocks rising three hundred feet above the sea. Boisterous waves leaped against the cliff face, scattering seaweed and stray fish. The fountains made a barking sound, like the cry of lost dogs, all along the coastline.

Rachel stood in the line of the spray and let it drench her from head to toe in a coldness that was a balm to her senses. She lifted

her face and drew the raw air deep into her lungs. The taste on her tongue was the taste of the sea's travels in places she had discovered in her imagination, places as real as if she had landed on their beaches unhindered and planted a flag.

She unwrapped her tie-head, a striped cotton cloth, and casting it on the ground shook her plaits free, letting the wind and spray wash through them. Her dress was a thin, cheap chiffon; the spray wet it through quickly and exposed all her curves: her high thick breasts that were full from never having suckled a child; her rounded buttocks, the buttocks of an African woman though Rachel was part Indian; her belly which had the slight protrusion seen in women who had given birth or women who did a lot of manual labor on a diet of heavy starches, yam, breadfruit, and cassava. She was tall and beautiful, with muscled thighs and legs. She carried water in tin buckets on her head, long distances along shale hills to water her one-acre farm after the first plantings when there was no rain, and so her neck was long and always upraised and her back straight, like royalty.

From where she stood on the cliff she could see a straight line to the high school. The main building, flanked by several smaller ones, was a pile of sepia-toned brick, two-storied, raggedly torn between Georgian and neo-Gothic styles. To a fanciful viewer who knew the island's history, it would seem the architect had wavered between the construction plans given to him by the British colonial government and the desires of the French refugee who in 1776 had bequeathed his money to establish the school; a free school, he said, for the children of plantation owners in the colony that had shown him kindness so far away from home.

No such architectural struggle had taken place in actuality. The original building, housing the main classrooms, had been a barracks that served England during the colonial wars with Spain; the adjoining mess hall and armory had been converted into the school refectory and library. But the impression of architectural clash and uneasy cohabitation of styles was symbolic, in the way all colonial promiscuity is symbolic.

In the year 1958, when Rachel Fisher stood on the bluff, the school was 182 years old. Many things had changed, though more had re-

mained the same. The population of backra children had given way to brown; increasingly, brown had become variegated with black, so that the majority of the students now were the children of the aspiring poor, the posterity of slaves. The old buildings were circled by a sprawl of new ones. The tallest was the science building, its concrete and steel a sharp contrast to the anomalous brick of the older structures. Its presence marked the turn of a different age and the oddity of the school, which was coeducational, unusual for high schools in those days, and liberal, with girls permitted to study the sciences and less academic boys sent to do typing. This was because no church was attached; the school had been a secular endowment, outside the control of missionaries.

Behind the school was the eighteenth-century fort named for the consort of a mad king, Fort Charlotte, its walls pitted with portholes and crenellations from which black-mouthed cannon gaped seaward, relics of wars fought over the island by people who were not the people who lived there now, over interests that had nothing to do with the interest of the people whose country it would officially become in another four years.

The fort was joined to the school by the undersea caves above which Rachel now stood. It was these caverns that gave the waves their barking sound as they beat up against the cliff. Adventurous children exploring the coastline had found ancient skeletons in some of them, and Rachel had heard rumors of wicked acts that still took place inside their entrances, where the water was only ankle deep at certain times of day and anyone, child, man, or ghost, could go a short way inside without having to swim, levitate, or drown. Because of the terrible things that were said to happen to girl schoolchildren there, Rachel's father had refused to send her to that school, though she was bright and the head teacher beseeched him not to abandon her schooling after she finished elementary.

Her father's adamant refusal broke her spirit. All her life she had wanted to go to high school and later become a nurse or teacher or civil servant. It was what you did if you were bright and black and poor and managed against all odds to get a postelementary education. In the end she apprenticed as a seamstress and married Noah,

thinking that her children might go to this school in her stead. But that hope died too. Now, looking out toward the huddle of old and new buildings against the seascape, she remembered the stories she had heard.

A some terrible tings happen to people galpickni in dere. Dreadful tings di white man-dem do to people young girlchilts.

The echoes of such stories merged with her own bitterness.

“Sometime Ah wish di earth cooda open up an tek mi in,” Rachel found herself murmuring, her voice low yet intense against the wind. “Sometime Ah feel Ah cooda lef dis man, lef dis dutty stinkin place, jus walk out inna di sea an never come back. If di wave tek mi, it tek mi. Woulda mercy. I dwell in di midst of a dogheart dutty set, jus a-wear mi down, wear mi down. Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want, yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall not fear no evil. Only Yahweh keepeth me. But Ah nah lie yu, sometime Ah feel fi cuss a whole set a . . .” (An you know, she really cuss the badword, but she is the same one who wash out my mouth years later with soap and water for cussing blue, so even now I find it hard to put down on paper the words that come out of Rachel Fisher’s mouth that day.)

Lost inside her quiet scream, it was a while before Rachel was able to discern the sound of the child’s crying above the tumult. A high wail, and then an insistent shrieking in short sharp bursts, it broke through the surface of her mind and pushed her toward the clump of sea grape trees that lay tangled among the macca. Strange-looking trees. Instead of standing tall against the wind as sea grapes normally do, they lay low hugging the ground. They were several yards from the hospital building. The knotty trail they made among the macca was difficult to walk through. Nobody walked there. If a person wanted to urinate or make quick furtive love they stayed close against the side of the clinic, where the ground was smooth and baked. Only children hankering to eat the rich purple fruit that covered the branches in August ever went among the sea grapes.

But that was where the sound was coming from.

Rachel followed the cries until she caught sight of bright red cloth among the tangle. With sea spray in her eyes she thought at first

there was a woman crouched on the ground. The woman, in a blue cambric dress, was shushing her baby as she struggled with one hand to release her breast to put in the baby's mouth, while with the other she hoisted up her skirt to piss.

Then Rachel's vision cleared and she saw that no woman except herself was there. She saw the basket with the baby's tiny legs kicking above the piece of scarlet cotton that had been tucked around him on both sides. She saw the milk-blue skin exposing the tracery of veins; the wisps of snow hair that later resolved itself into the famous two-toned bush, wild blond in front and jet black behind; the old man's wrinkled cheek that all newborns have, red with pain and rage as he screamed.

The left side of his face was hidden against the padding in the basket, which was in danger of stifling him. From his size and the timbre of his crying, Rachel, who had helped her mother raise eight children, could tell at once that the child was newborn. The basket had been padded with great care, it seemed in a pitiful effort to make him comfortable; it even had a bonnet-shaped canopy to shield him from the sun. But it had not shielded him from the line of black ants that were crawling over him and causing his cries.

Rachel ran the last few steps. Frantically she began brushing off the ants in the same motion with which she lifted the child out of the makeshift cradle. With savage instinct the baby snuffled against her breast, searching for the promise of comfort he was programmed to recognize before he even left the womb. He had been dressed in a small girl's bloomers and what looked like torn-off pieces of a red sheet, as though no preparation had been made for his birth. Swaddling cloths, Rachel thought, as the wide waistband of the panties shifted and she saw he was a boy.

The ants had begun to eat his foot, but even that pain had faded in the greater pain of his hunger as he snuffled for food. Not finding where to suckle, he began screaming again. Rachel rocked her body to and fro to quiet him, while turning the little face toward her, to see further what manner of child this could be.

What she saw of the rest of the face made her hide it in pity in her shawl.

There are moments in life when something, some object or vision or encounter, moves a person in the heart with such force that the future, that is to say one's way of looking at it, is changed forever. No course of action presents itself, and so, without condition, the heart surrenders; something irrevocable gives over. Such is the irresistible arrest. In the unique recognition of helplessness, the knowledge that there is nothing in the universe that could ever be done, no sphere of influence within which one has the power to act, we reach blindly for the familiar. For Rachel, the Yahwehist, when she saw the child's indescribable face, this was such a moment. (This she told me many years later, when she saw I finally understood that I had no power over him.)

And Rachel Fisher, a cursing woman in whom faith had the force of superstition, kneeled down on the ground there with the found child in her arms, and prayed.

The baby fell quiet. When she got up off her knees and looked at his face again, she smiled, a slow, astounded, beatific smile, and decided to say nothing to anyone about what had happened in that translucent moment when it became clear that she and the found child had been lifted, for an uncountable moment, out of time.

"Moses," she whispered. "Moshe." And again, "Moshe."

Then she added, as if in defiance of some objecting voice that only she heard, "Yu name Moshe, because I draw yu out of di water." As you can see, this account of how she found him was not accurate, but it was Rachel's account, the one that was told throughout Moshe's early life.

Rachel went back inside the hospital, entering from the front, an erect young woman with her hair demurely wrapped in a tie-head and her nylon dress that had got soaked through in the flying spray now chip-dry, floating softly around her hips. With the child cradled in the crook of her left arm, the basket in which she had found him hanging from the other, she was what she seemed: a decent woman, a real woman now, carrying her newborn child.

News of the find spread like wildfire and people came to look and marvel. For a town like Ora (the short name for Oracabessa-on-Sea) and a district like Tumela Gut, where the Fishers lived, the baby's parentage was never in question.

No one doubted that he was the product of serial fornications between one or other of the nubile black girlchildren who attended the high school, and one or other of the white man-teachers from Britain, married or unmarried, who did the "bad things" (tek wife from the barely fill-out girlchilids) in the undersea caves and hotel rooms on school trips for which certain girls were selected. Nobody ever claimed the child, and no girl was discovered to have been recently pregnant, though police investigations were carried out. After a while rumor went underground, though people did not forget, and so Moshe Fisher might have grown up in a normal way if his lineage had been the only abnormality about him.

But it wasn't. For one thing, there was the fact that he didn't look like his adopted parents. Rachel was part Indian, and fair, while Noah was pure African and very black of skin. For another, even in a society bred in mixture and anomaly, the child was not any color or physiognomy that allowed anyone to say what he was.

Moreover, his mother was Rachel Fisher, who was a staunch Yahwehist, a true believer. There was no Yahweh church in Jamaica at the time and there probably isn't now, but Rachel got her religion the way many poor people at the time got their reading material (*Reader's Digest*) and overseas education (Durham College correspondence courses)—by cutting out coupons from the *Daily Gleaner*

and mailing them to addresses in England or Scotland or America, receiving in return unconscionable masses of pamphlets and other small literature.

According to Rachel's understanding, an understanding which like all understandings of foreign goods in Jamaica was only a version of the original (the meaning change always began in the passage across the sea), the essence of Yahweh (the religion, not the god) was that the Christian Bible had distorted the truths of God by translation. The force of Yahweh consisted in returning to the Hebrew pronunciations of words.

As a retranslation, young Moshe was a virtual cache of symbols.

To begin with, Rachel and Noah's childlessness took after Noah's family, not Rachel's: the Fishers were known to be a mainly barren family who never produced in any of their branches more than two offspring, more often one, and sometimes none at all. In the district of Tumela Gut, this was the sign of a curse. So, quite apart from his prophetic name, his advent as a gift to the desperate couple who had no child of their own made Moshe not only the fulfillment of a hope and a dream, but a hope and dream that would break the curse of the father's line.

With characteristic superstition, his mother insisted on inscribing in his name the mark of fertility—the maternal line. He was Rachel's talisman of the future, a future in which her name would never be wiped out. So, above the objections of his father, she named him, in full, Moshe Gid'on Rachel-Fisher. "Gid'on" was the Hebrew spelling of Giddion, her family surname on her mother's side; the apostrophe was to be pronounced like a short *i* to produce the same sound as the family name. "Rachel," the first part of Moshe's hyphenated surname, was to be pronounced with a short *a* instead of the long *a* with which her own name was pronounced. That way it sounded less feminine. She did not want him to be teased at school. She had thought of including her father's last name, her maiden surname, Sharma, but could find no way of slotting it in without destroying the rhythm of the sentence which the name was becoming, unless she placed it before Gid'on, her mother's surname, which she was not prepared to do. In the end, her son's name was a whole sentence,

of which the meaning was, *Drawn out of water, he was a small axe, ready to cut you down, but in the end he brought the comfort of fish for the hungry*, 2 Kings 6: 5–6.

This you must understand, if you are to understand how Moshe grew up, and how he died: a strong believer in signs, kabbalah, and cryptograms, forms of meaning that traditional Yahwehists regard with suspicion because such meanings begin in folk talk, not written holy words, Rachel was the kind of person who studied the license plates of vehicles to discern patterns of meanings in the arrangement of the numbers. A license plate with *AM 5439*, for example, to her mind was meant to show the sequential relationship among 3, 4, and 5, the fact that 9 is a multiple of 3, that 5 plus 4 equals 9, and that 5 plus 3 equals 8, which immediately precedes 9. In other words, although the creator of the license number thought he or she was choosing the numbers at random, there was always an occult logic at work that caused them to fall into predestined patterns, a logic beyond human control or comprehension, and it was this same logic of the universe (which Rachel called faith) that had caused her to find this child when she thought she would have no daughter or son, and at the precise moment when she had determined in her heart to leave her husband.

By this logic, Moshe was predestined to become a superstitious man, following in the footsteps of his mother. Moreover, he was destined to remain so, because he traveled and lived in many places all over the world.

(I cannot say what Rachel made of the fact that she found Moshe four years before Jamaica's independence. The number 4 was not significant in any system of signs that she espoused.)

In addition to carrying the weight of new translations on his birth certificate, Moshe carried in his body outlandish signs of illegitimacy, the peculiar transgressions from which rumor had it he was made. Please understand. In that country illegitimate did not mean what it means to you, not born out of wedlock, which most of the people were, but born from terrible occasions that placed their mark on you. If you were born out of wedlock you were simply a bastard. Nearly everyone there was a bastard. Illegitimate was something else altogether. A curse.

With his pale skin, one sky-blue and one dark-brown eye, his hair long, wavy, and bleached blond in front, and short, black, and pepper-grainy in back, the kind of pepper-grainy that people called “bad hair,” or “nayga head,” the child seemed to represent some kind of perverse alchemy that had taken place in the deep earth, between tectonic plates, where he was fashioned. People said the boy just looked like sin. Big sin at work when he was made.

For why else had the crossing come out in him not as a judicious mixture of yellow-gold skin, in-between hair (“pretty hair”), and a singular eye color either black or brown or the two blended for hazel (“puss eye”), or even sea-green blue, which sometimes happened even in children with black skin, as it did in the boy Brendan, the Wells’s son from Tumela?

Furthermore, what a skin! The color of milk that had been watered, so pale and thin it gave off a sheen of translucent blue, like certain types of coral or small swimming fish, the kind we called gray angelfish, though they were not gray but grayish blue.

Only one of the male teachers from Britain who worked at the school had hair the color of Moshe’s bleached blond. His was the name that call, meaning that people whispered the child was his. He was a married man and had brought his wife to Jamaica with him, but he fooled around with the black little girls in the school. The pepper-grain hair was more commonly distributed—it could have come from any one of many of the schoolgirls, except that the owners of that type of hair were not in the group that frolicked with the white man-teachers. The white man-teachers preferred brown girls with long hair and black women’s bodies (breast, buttock, and hip), or very black girls who had hot-combed their hair to straight.

The mayor of Ora’s daughter was black as sin but with beautiful long tresses, almost as if she had been high brown. At first her name call too, as the mother who was unable to throw away the belly before the baby came and had thrown away the baby instead. (Some babies are stubborn, resisting all boil-bush, guzzu, enema, heavy load, jump-up, exorbitant exercise, beat-belly-wid-bat, and other efforts to dislodge them from the womb.) But rumor stuttered somewhat on that score because of the mayor’s daughter’s hair, which had nothing

pepper-grain about it, and then rumor zipped its mouth, *prrrrrrrps!*, because the noise of it came to the mayor's ears just as he was about to give out Christmas work on the roads, and Christmas work came by favors. You didn't badmouth the mayor's daughter and hope to get on the list for Christmas work.

But as you can imagine, rumor didn't die, it only went underground for a while. Stumped momentarily by the problem of hair and the advent of Christmas, rumor would surface again in the coming years and go on its way, loquacious, malicious, and unrelenting, without any sense of trespass, and without any self-doubt at all. The clairvoyance of the poor regarding the secrets of their betters is fundamentally secure, and confident. But it (rumor) would start to kill Moshe, though it also started to set him free.

Skin. Hair. Eyes. Enigmas. Only in Moshe's infant face was there no equivocation. It was, uncompromisingly, a nigger face.

But what people did not know, even the most clairvoyant, was the face that Rachel saw the first time she picked up her son. This was something that she pondered in her heart, and kept secret, even from her own husband, until the day of her death.

It had not been a nigger face.