

“Yes I will,” he whispered, serious as could be.

I called out thanks to them all and rode out of the yard, the dogs escorting me all the way.

I don’t know why it was when I got back to the main road and was jogging on west again that the picture of Papa Jackson came back into my mind, with his crazy stare and his big beard. I thought how none of the Jackson boys had any sign of a beard at all. Shaving close every single morning was hardly customary on a cattle ranch—Sunday mornings, if that. The only razor I’d seen in the house was on the bureau in the room I’d slept in, beside the basin and pitcher—Papa’s beard trimmer, beside Mama’s comb and brush. The boys must just not grow much beard. I thought of Jack’s sad face and shook my head, kind of troubled for some reason.

I did not forget my visit to the Jacksons. My friend Homer James and I were sitting up jawing the night I got there, and knowing he’d lived at some period in the country I’d just come through, I asked him if he’d ever known the Jackson brothers.

“Oh, sure,” he said, with a kind of surprise. “I grew up fifteen miles from the Jackson place.” He looked at me with his head cocked a little. “You know them?”

“They put me up two nights. My horse went lame.”

“They did, did they? Well. Well! Did you—” He started over: “Do you know who they are?”

“Jackson brothers is all I know.” He said nothing. I went on, “Nice place. They run it well. Seemed like good people to me.” I was almost defending them from the odd look he was giving me.

“The best,” he said. “Only they ain’t brothers.”

I just waited.

“Well. Old John Jackson took a double homestead with his wife Roberta out there. And they started proving it out and having kids at the same time the way people always do. And, see, old Jackson was set on having boys to help him run the place. But he didn’t get a boy. He got a girl. Roberta after her mother. And a couple years later twins, Willamine and Josephine. And a couple years more, bingo, little Jackalyn. And at that, old John lost his temper, and said by golly if God won’t give me no boys I will make them. And he dressed those little girls in boys’ clothes from then on. Burned up their dresses and their girl toys, their dollies, people say. And from then on they was Bobby,

Willy, Joe, and Jack. Nobody knows if their mother didn’t dare go against him or if she thought it was all right. The Jacksons always kept to themselves. The boys, the kids that is, went to the school, the two years there was a school out there, but it was their mother brought them up. She was an educated lady. She ordered books from Denver. Kept the house in perfect order, my mother said, but so shy she could scarcely talk. Mother used to go over there now and then for Mrs. Jackson’s chicks. She raised fine Rhodies. I only saw old Jackson a couple times. Grim old party, he was. People kept out of his way. But I knew Bob and Will and Joe a little. Like you said, they were good people. I guess we mostly just thought of them as boys, they dressed like boys and acted like them and did men’s work and...so it just worked out like that.”

I was taking all this in, and said nothing.

“There was people thought it was kind of funny. The Jackson boys! They’d snicker about it. But hell, those girls done all any four men could have done! And still doing it, from what you say.”

I nodded, still thinking about the Jacksons, seeing what I had seen and hadn’t seen.

Homer mused a while. “They could of gone back to being women once the old man died. But I guess by then they couldn’t.”

“I guess not.”

“It don’t seem fair, somehow,” Homer said.

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