GARY IRVING

Lonesome Lands 2013
photographic print, 36 x 40 in

URSULA K. LE GUIN

The Jackson Brothers

for Betsy Buck

I was heading to my friend Homer James's place in a lonesome part of Wyoming when my horse started favoring his left hind foot. I couldn't find what was wrong, but it wasn't getting any better, and seeing a track off the road and a roof at the end of it I took the track. Towns and ranches being few and far between, I figured we better take what offered, if it got offered. I led old Rusty, gimping along like he could barely stand to put that foot down. We got near the ranch and the dogs came out and made a noise. We got to it and a man came out to see what the noise was.

He was short and fairly stout, not young not old, bright blue eyes. He said well howdy, and I said howdy. Then he clammed up. He didn't look unfriendly. He just didn't know what to say next. Standing there at Rusty's head, I said, "He went lame kind of sudden. Like he picked something in his hoof. But I can't find it." The man didn't say anything so I went on, explaining what didn't need much explaining. "Figured I better give him a rest."

The man nodded, but still looked like he didn't know what to say, so I asked, "Okay if I water him," nodding to the little barn, "and have a look at him?"

"I guess," the homesteader said. He looked distressed. He turned half round and called out, "Will? Joe?" but not real loud.

Somebody hollered back, and presently a man came from around back of the house, and almost at the same time another man appeared from the chicken runs and sheds behind the barn. As they came up to where we were, it was like a reflection in two mirrors coming together. They were twins. Aside from one of them wore a blue shirt under his coveralls and the other one a red long john top, they were dead ringers. And then darn if still another man didn't come out of the house.

They were all short and strong-built, not big but sturdy, with snub noses and blue eyes. Brothers for sure. The last one was really short, maybe five foot, with a kind of scared look that made me think maybe not quite all there. He didn't come all the way out but hung back in the doorway, staring at me.

The twins said well howdy, and one of them said, "We're the Jacksons. Will," indicating himself, "Joe," his twin, "Bob," the one I'd met, the eldest of them, and "Jack," the shorty. "Can we be of help to you?"

I introduced myself and my problem, and the twins joined me in studying Rusty's leg and foot. We walked him around some, and looked into the hoof, and after considerable discussion agreed that the foot was fine and there was nothing serious but he had strained a tendon or a muscle and needed to lay up and give it a rest at least overnight. I took off his gear and put it in the barn and we took Rusty into a small lot behind the barn where two of their animals were. Most of their horses were in a big fenced lot farther out. This little lot was the Rest Home, Will said. The occupants were one quiet friendly old draft horse and a superannuated mule, I swear the oldest mule I ever saw, just hardly able to hold up his old bony head with sad eyes like those photographs of Indian warriors from lost wars. Rusty walked in and they all took to each other like they were family.

The Jackson brothers led on back to the house, and when they got there, I followed them in since they appeared to be expecting me to do so and I certainly had nowhere else in particular to go.

The house was well built and pretty large, and it struck my eye as notably well kept. You get four men ranching, you expect some relaxation in the housekeeping line, likely a good deal of disorder, and no surprise if worse than that and smelling foul of clothes and rancid bacon. This place looked like a front parlor and smelled of clean wood and bread rising. Bob disappeared right away into the kitchen, probably to see after the bread, with little Jack trailing him. The main room was big, with a long table at the kitchen end. At the front end was a stone fireplace with a piece of carpet in front of it and four easy chairs around that. There was plenty of light from the windows. Every chair had a little table by it with a lamp on it for the evening. The floor was so clean it shone. It beat any hotel lobby I ever saw.

Will and Joe sat down in easy chairs and one of them said, "Sit down, have a rest," to me. They all had a quiet voice and way of speaking. They were shy, and short of things to say, the way people are when they don't often see or speak to strangers, but friendly-mannered. And as the evening went on I found they had plenty to say to each other. They were a harmonious family. They talked and laughed in their low-key way. When I laughed with them it clearly pleased them and they got to feeling easier with me. They didn't use tobacco, I had noticed no spittoons, and they didn't offer a drink, but when Bob and Jack set out dinner I had no complaints whatever concerning the hospitality.

Mostly I let them talk. They didn't ask me much, and got shy again when I brought up anything that didn't have to do pretty directly with their little world. Not that it was small in size—they had 1,200 acres, they told me, and were running around 250 head of cattle, and their view was horizon for 360 degrees, with some mountains—but in human terms it was limited. There was no other house in sight. The nearest was three miles, they said. They told me their neighbors' names, but said almost nothing about them. They weren't up on current politics, or financial scandals, or the mining troubles in Colorado. But they were not ignorant men. They had a bookcase near the fireplace, with a set of Charles Dickens, the plays of Shakespeare in four volumes, a set of books by Victor Hugo with a French name but English inside, six books by Dumas including *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Sohrab and Rustum* by Matthew Arnold, books of poetry by several poets including Longfellow, Lowell, Moore, and Tennyson, and a number of paper-covered novels of Western adventure. One of their little running jokes was to call the youngest brother, Jack, the shorty, after Mr Tupman in *The Pickwick Papers.* They were gentle with him.

I offered to sleep in the hayloft but they wouldn't have it. Bob acted indignant about it. "We have a spare room," he said, stuffy-like.

Jack looked like he was going to protest.

Bob glared at him.

Jack said in a sort of whisper, "It was Mama and Papa's room." Jack looked to be forty or so, but he talked like a boy whose voice hadn't changed.

"It's all right," Bob said to him firmly. "This is a guest."

Jack didn't say anything more.

"It'll be fine," Will said to him, reassuring. I could tell Will from Joe because Joe had the red shirt and Will the blue one.

So I got put in Mama and Papa's room. It was as clean and neat as everything else there, cold as the Pole of course, but there were plenty of quilts on the saggy double bed—thick, warm quilts, new-looking. I had noticed a sewing basket near the fireplace downstairs. It looked like Mama had only just recently died. Anyhow, she hadn't left her ghost there. I slept sound.

Rusty's leg was a lot better in the morning but not enough that I would have liked to ride him, and the Jacksons wouldn't have let me. So after they'd got breakfast cleared away—and they all joined in so it went like hey presto—I went out with Will and Joe where they were doing fence repair.

They all worked hard and they all worked all day, the four of them. They were easy to work with because they knew what they were doing. The twins were by choice the range riders and Bob and Jack the farm hands, but they could all turn their hand to any job, and did so. They were running a considerable establishment and doing it well. The cattle pens and corrals were in good shape and the cattle I saw were fine animals. They had a little smithy—Bob said he was the blacksmith. They kept a cow for milk and butter—Jack looked after the dairying. There was a good flock in the chicken run, they had a considerable vegetable garden, even had some rose bushes climbing the chimney on the house front. There was a rose in a vase on the table where we ate dinner. It was a good dinner again, Irish stew, bread, and apple pie. The night before had been baked chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, fresh bread, and stewed peaches. There were shelves and shelves of preserves in the pantry, pickles and all, that their mother had left, or maybe they hired some woman to come out and put up garden stuff for them.

Though the twins weren't as shy as Bob and Jack had been to start with, they were twins, and tended to communicate to each other, cutting out other people some without meaning to. Little Jack was beginning to get used to me, but he had to have the others with him to have any courage at all. Once I chanced to set out right after him for the outhouse. When he saw me coming he spooked like a scared cat. He ran clear off to the blacksmith shed, where he hid out till I went back into the house. He was pitiable—so ugly, slow, and timid. I thought he was lucky in having the brothers he did.

Bob, the eldest, was the most interesting of them. He was smart and steady. A good conversationalist once he warmed up. He seemed to know a little more than the others about the world outside the Jackson homestead, and to want to hear about it. He asked me where I'd been. When I told them about the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, which I'd seen recently, they all listened as devoutly as if I was a lecturer with picture slides. After dinner I asked Bob about the books and we got into quite a conversation. They had been his mother's. Winter nights she would read to them. They still sat around the fire and read aloud, winter nights, Bob said.

He went to the big rolltop desk in the front room and brought out a folder from a photographer in Kansas City. In it was a pair of little oval wedding portraits: a young woman with a snub nose and light hair, and a man of forty or so with a lined forehead, a long wiry bushy beard, and that kind of wild glare in his eyes from posing for the old slow cameras.

Bob was looking only at the woman. "That's her," he said with pride and affection.

"They from KC?" I asked, to be saying something.

"He was," Bob said. He closed up the folder and put it away and shut the desk. "Mama came from Ohio. I remember when she ordered the Shakespeare plays. It was her Christmas present to all of us. She ordered them and they came from Denver with the weekly mail. We were all crazy to know what was in that box…. She read us *Romeo and Juliet* that Christmas night." His round, weathered, worn face was all lit up, thinking about that. I liked him. Bob would make a good friend, I thought.

Rusty's problem, whatever it was, seemed to have cleared up. He came trotting over to see me next morning, sound all round as far as we could see. I asked if I could help them finish up the stretch of fence I'd worked on with them the day before, and they appreciated my asking, but wouldn't keep me. So I saddled up and said goodbye. They were sorry to see me go, I could see that. I had brought some novelty into their hard, closed-off life. They were also glad to see me go, I could see that. They were wary of me, didn't quite ever let down their guard. I'm not a frightening kind of man, and it puzzled me some. But I figured that living out here, they'd just gotten unused to other humans.

Little ugly Jack looked up at me piteously when I was mounted and about to go. His face was twisted like an unhappy child's.

"Hey, Mr Tupman, you look after these rowdy fellows, now," I said. "See they don't get into no trouble."

"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.

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin was born in 1929 in Berkeley, California, and lives in Portland, Oregon. She has published twenty-one novels, eleven volumes of short stories, four collections of essays, twelve books for children, and six volumes of poetry and four of translation. She has received many honors and awards including the Hugo, the Nebula, the National Book Award, and the PEN/Malamud. Her most recent publications are *Finding My Elegy (New and Selected Poems, 1960-2010)* and *The Unreal and the Real (Selected Short Stories), 2012.*

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