

Joseph's New Coat

Going up the mountain had not brought Abraham the favour he'd been expecting, and not many people believed he had actually spoken to God. He would grab one of the twins and make them testify on his behalf, but he could never be sure of which one he had and they would protest, "You've got the wrong twin. I was asleep".

One farmer noticed the marks of God's favour in the success of Abraham's farm, and not knowing what ruin it would bring him, began to encourage a friendship. People said that Abraham had his own motivations, for his neighbour had a beautiful daughter who Abraham wanted to make his wife. At first their wrangling about this was pleasant and bantering, but it turned ugly when Abraham's desire made itself more evident.

The farmer protested, "She's too young, and besides you know our customs. I can't let her wed until the oldest girl is married. Marry Ruth. She will bear you many sons, not twins either." Everyone knew about Abraham's problems with the twins and no one could resist making light of it.

That the custom should be obeyed Abraham could not argue against, but Ruth wasn't his type. She was a strong and beautiful woman, but when he compared her with the younger sister, Rachel, with whom he had never spoken, she seemed awkward and unlovely. Abraham conceived of a plan. He told the farmer he would marry Ruth and secretly decided he'd wait until his true love was old enough to marry as well. Ruth would give him entrance to the household and he could continue to watch Rachel, and in a few years . . .

Ruth became Abraham's wife and although she suspected his true intent, seeing the way he looked when her sister came to visit, she made the best of her life by using his money to set up a women's shelter at a local nunnery. When Abraham found out what she was doing, he soon had her busy giving birth to sons, farm workers, who inherited her build and caring disposition.

The years passed and finally Rachel was marrying age. Abraham approached the farmer, now deep in debt to Abraham, to give him his daughter. Abraham was beside himself in joy, so much so he never noticed that Rachel's superior attitude extended to her new, and ancient, husband. She started calling him January around the house and insisted he call her May.

When she bore a son, a slight boy with her features, Abraham was delighted. He doted on the boy and moved them to a neighbouring house where Ruth's sons wouldn't corrupt his pride and joy. He dressed him better than them, who he began to view as rough farmhands, and as he saw them so they became. Their hands coarsened and shoulders hunched to bring in the heavy loads of grain from the fields. As they passed, Joseph looked on with the mildly contemptuous interest of the slave owner or businessman. Hatred began to divide the brothers, or cousins as they began to call each other.

Soon every mark of Abraham's favour of Joseph was discussed and condemned. Ruth tried to patch things up by inviting Joseph to play in their games but even when he infrequently appeared, he held a handkerchief to his nose and went home early complaining of exhaustion. Rachel refused to work on the problem, saying that Joseph wasn't like the other boys, although when confronted, she wouldn't say what the differences were.

The entire neighbourhood was excited by the inevitable conflict and looked on eagerly to see how Abraham, who had put on such airs since God told him to kill people, would handle his mixed family. As well, Rachel had made herself unpopular by refusing to shop in the village. She took trips into the city, coming back with packages and a satisfied look on her face, like she'd found money in borrowed pants.

Joseph refused to play with the other children and thought he was above them. He spent his time alone or with his parents, and, on the ladder of their pampering, he climbed to where he looked down upon others.

The feud finally came to a head when Joseph was sent out to buy a coat from the Gypsy peddler. Amongst the Gypsy's goods, Rachel had seen a fantastic coat that would finally suit his splendour. Joseph returned strutting in his new coat, which shone as he moved with a bewildering array of colours. The soft earth tones of the other's clothing paled beside this mix of textures and shades and she clapped as he pranced around the house. Joseph was so enamoured with his coat that he missed the resentful looks when he passed his brothers labouring in the fields. He thought all others would share his perspective.

Joseph went out to trumpet his wardrobe only to find a crowd outside the door. At the front were his ten brothers—ør cousins, he had to remind himself. They seemed so many when they were together.

His brothers were men of few words; they grabbed him from the doorway, pulled his coat over his head, and dragged him behind the train yard. There they took away his coat, beat him enough to make themselves feel better, and wiped his blood away with the rags that remained of his splendid coat. The middle brother had heard of slave buyers coming from England and suggested they sell Joseph to them. They embraced his idea and sold Joseph for just over a hundred dollars, enough to pay for a night's drinks. Unfortunately, the drinks loosened their tongues and they bragged of what they'd done.

Joseph never realized the depth of his brothers' hatred and jealousy. He knew he was favoured but thought it was because he was an only child. Rachel had encouraged this thought and had even hinted, one Christmas, that his father had been a very successful foreign businessman. Joseph kept his mouth shut and learned the ways of European slavery, its cruel arbitrariness and impossibility of advancement.

While waiting in harbour with the other slaves, Joseph humbled himself to tell stories to his colleagues, while they learned the trade of ships and sailing. The harbour was rough but soon Joseph earned a place for himself and was even acclimatizing to his lot when the call came for his release. His brothers had repented, it appeared. Abraham had threatened them with an eternal damnation he very probably could not perform, and they told of Joseph's sale.

A very different Joseph came back to his family farm some months later. His hands were coarsened and his raiment was that of slaves. He greeted his brothers with deference and took his place beside them in the fields, although his father objected and claimed God's will was against it. Joseph lived for many years and even became a successful farmer in his own right, and only God, Satan and Jesus knew he kept a small piece of his famous coat and would pore over it at night, its shimmer just visible in the moonlight.