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Before the Thaw

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Before the Thaw . . .

by L. A. Diebold

Clayt trudged heavily across the yard, bending low to shield his face from the stinging wind and hard, dry snow, and carrying a rifle under one arm while he rubbed his hands together frantically in an effort to keep the blood circulating in his already numbing fingers. It was unbearably cold. Almost too cold to snow.

How he had marveled at his grandfather's vivid description of the terrible winters in Minnesota. He would sit on the hearth and picture the huge, billowy drifts that could pile six feet up the wall of a cabin and trap a man, separating him for days from his own barn where livestock pawed the barren floors of their stalls for some hidden bit of hay. Clayt, himself, could remember winter days that were so bitter that even the snow seemed frozen fast in the sky. But the old man had seen seventy-one hard, cruel snows that began in October and continued steadily until mid-February. Sometimes the spring had come at the expected time, sending great rivers of melted snow and swirling slush down the slopes, across the plains for hundreds of miles to the Mississippi. But sometimes it was postponed by a final winter blast that threw high drifts against the cabin once more. The old man had said there was nothing worse for morale than a cold spell after the first February thaw. Made a man fit to go stomping around the house like a spooked billy-goat. Real "spirit-bustin" days he had called them. And Clayt could see why.

He felt pretty low as he kicked open the shed door and hung up his rifle before entering the kitchen of the farmhouse.

"Was he . . . was he out there, Clayt? Did you see him? Did you see your Paw, Clayt?" Mrs. Mills stood by the table, wringing her hands nervously.

"No." The young man shook his head and began brushing the snow from his boots.

As though a great sadness had been revealed to her, Mrs. Mills dropped her hands and stared first at the floor and then in the direction of the steamed window. She brought her eyes slowly back to her son, standing in the doorway, and looked unbelievably at him. "But who was it then, Clayt?"

"Weren't nobody, Ma. Dogs agin." He moved to the stove where the burning wood sent sparks snapping up the stove-pipe. "Five, maybe six of 'em," he continued. "I got one. A gray bitch. A great, big, shaggy, gray bitch—goddam her stinkin' hide!" He kicked his boots into a corner and started pulling violently at the buttons of his overcoat, mumbling something under his breath before going on. "Them filthy curs! Them nogood, thievin' bastards! They got another calf—tore her wide open! Spilled her guts right there in the snow, an' then never touched the meat! Worsen woves, by Jesus! Why, they're jist killin' to be killin'!" He peeled off his coat and tossed it into the corner with his boots.

In his shirt-sleeves, the young man appeared much slimmer. He was built well enough though, and had nice features—in spite of his stubby growth of sandy whiskers. His eyes were blue, a very deep blue and looked as though they should belong to a much older person—as though they had seen more than their share of the world's tribulations.

Mrs. Mills walked to the window above the sink and looked wistfully into the coming darkness. "If only your Paw was here, Clayt. If only your Paw was here—he'd know what to do."

"Oh dang it all, Ma. Don't start harpin' on that now! I kin take care of this thing by myself, and there ain't no use frettin' me about how Paw woulda done it cuz I got enough troubles as is! Where's Mary Jane?" Clayt stalked into the next room to avoid hearing more laments from his mother.

"She ain't got back from town yet," she called after him. "Jules Macklem's gonna fetch her home in his wagon. Says our buck board's wheels ain't big enough to make it through the drifts. Says his two horses can make it better'n any team in the county." And then in a a whisper, as if it were an important secret, "I say he's fetchin' your sister home on accounta he's sweet on her." She began making giddy little sounds and clapping her hands like a small child. "I know—your Paw was that way with me. Always goin' out of his way when he was courtin' me!" Suddenly her high-pitched voice became low and sad. "I do wish he was here now though, Clayt. I sure do wish he was with us."

"Damnation!" Clayt thought to himself. He slumped into the huge, overstuffed chair by the fireplace.

At first Clayt's mother had taken the death of her husband quite well. The shock and sorrow had passed with time, and she seemed to be herself again until, quite suddenly, she became obsessed with the idea that her husband was not dead—that he was just away and would be back soon. She had convinced herself of this and nothing could shake her belief. For more than ten years she had lived away from reality. She seemed to forget the night Clayt's father died—the moaning, the wet bed clothes, the smell of sickness that reached into every corner of the dark room. But Clayt had remembered.

He was only eight when Thomas Mills had died; and, although he remembered little else of his father, Clayt could never forget that night, twelve years ago, when he stood terrified by the bed and looked at the still form under the blanket. He would remember too; because, from that night on, he and his mother and younger sister had been left to face some pretty hard times on the isolated, little midwestern farm.

The crops had never been plentiful, but the past season's drought had hit the Mills' farm harder, it seemed, than most of the other places in the area. Nothing could be marketed, and even their own pantry looked depressingly empty. Somehow, however, they had managed to get through the long winter well enough—only to be hit by a freak arctic blizzard that promised to delay spring for at least another couple of weeks; and, with their scant herd snowbound in

a long ravine a half-mile from the house, hopes for a coming season were also dimmed. The last bit of bad luck had occurred earlier in the week, shortly after the snow set in. A pack of wild dogs was roaming through the neighborhood, killing livestock—even boldly attacking a lone man.

Clayt took all these things hard. He cursed his luck and angered easily during those terrible months—the days of sitting while the snow piled higher, and the nights of waiting—waiting for another day to come and go. Waiting and listening—listening to the shrieking wind and crackling fire—listening to his mother bemoaning their fortune—listening to her carry on for hours about the tasks that were too much for Clayt—listening to her cry, then seeing her lapse into hours of staring silence only to begin babbling like a child—wondering where Clayt's father was—why hadn't he come home for supper? Where was he? He should have been home by dark. And shouldn't Clayt go looking for him?

And often times he had gone—gone looking into the treacherous night when his mother's raving grew too unbearable or when he just wanted to be away. He didn't know why he looked or what he was looking for, but he looked. Surely searching couldn't bring back his father. Or maybe—maybe, if his father was the man his mother thought him, he would come back alone—plodding triumphantly through the snow-filled ditches, stomping magnificently through the door into the kitchen to his sick wife. Clayt wished it would happen like that so he could leave he place forever.

"Clayt, here comes your sister and Jules. Be nice to Jules, Clayt. Your Paw likes Jules. Clayt! Oh, Clayt! See if your Paw rode home with Jules!"

His mother's voice drew Clayt's eyes from the fire, across the room to the window. Then, hearing Macklem's team in the yard outside, he got slowly up and went into the kitchen.

Mary Jane tittered happily as she and her escort stepped carefully from the wagon, through a huge drift, to the back door where they stopped. Then they were quiet and Clayt knew that damned idiot, Jules, was kissing Mary Jane. He felt sick every time he thought of that fat, greasy-looking blowhard touching his sister. Kissing was bad enough, but he knew they weren't always looking for eggs when they went into the barn, and he would have told his sister so if he weren't so embarrassed about the whole matter.

"Where's Jules goin' so fast?" he asked as Mary Jane opened the kitchen door.

She blushed, partly from the sudden warmth of the room and partly from hearing Jules's name mentioned. "He had to hurry and do chores at home. But he told me to say evenin' to Ma—er, you too, Clayt." And then quickly, "I'll fix some supper now. Will you build up the fire, Clayt?" She cut short her brother's piercing glance and began rushing about, banging pots and pans and talking idly about a dress she had seen in the window and about what Jules said concerning the weather.

Mary Jane was a pretty girl, short and slender with her brother's

blue eyes and sandy hair; and her cheeks dimpled when she smiled, which was generally when Jules was around. Clayt could never figure out what it was his sister saw in Jules Macklem. He had never liked the man, and Mary Jane sensed it from the beginning. The meal was eaten without conversation.

That night, as he lay in bed listening to the cold stillness outside, Clayt was momentarily relieved at the faraway howling of dogs. It was easier to think about this kind of thing. It felt good to be able to forget his secret family problems for awhile. A man hadn't ought to get weighted down too much by one thing. Yes, tomorrow he would be busy. Tomorrow there were the dogs.

Gradually the wind came up and snow began sifting through tiny cracks in the attic roof onto Clayt's bedding. Somewhere in the distance, a hungry animal bayed mournfully, and the herd shifted uneasily into a tighter huddle.

* * * * *

Clayt rose much earlier than usual. It would still be dark for two hours, but he wanted to leave before his mother was up. She was always worse in the morning—crying and wandering about from room to room, peering under beds and into closets. He just couldn't stand it day after day. A man's got his breaking point. Sometimes he just plain runs out of patience. Clayt felt all the tensions and anger welled up inside himself. Each day they throbbed more and more, trying to pry open his tight lips, and upset the whole household. He knew he had to let off steam—kind of ease the pressure. Maybe, he thought, he could even scream good and loud and long when he got far enough away from the house, from Ma and Mary Jane. That always helped. He stole silently down the ladder to the room below.

The house was cold and quiet. Square patches of gray revealed snow-caked windows that hid a white world from view. The kitchen floor made his feet ache with cold, and he went quickly to the stove where his boots and heavy stockings had been placed to dry. The stove gave off a slight glow where one last chunk of wood lay burning feebly in the great bed of ashes. Carefully he lifted the lid and shoved a few small sticks of kindling wood into the center of the tiny flame. He waited until the faint crackling grew louder and then proceeded to fill the belly of the stove with larger pieces. When he was satisfied with the result, he finished dressing, laced his boots and stood for several moments warming his whole body and listening for a sound from the quiet fields outside. Faintly, at first, then much louder and nearer, came the unmistakable wail of a dog from across the Mills' property.

He buttoned the heavy coat, took his cap and gloves from the hook behind the stove and opened the door leading to the shed. A footstep sounded behind him; and, startled, he turned to see a shadow move toward him from the far side of the kitchen.

"Where you off to, son?"

He felt the hysterical eyes searching for his face, the frail body, clothed in a night gown as it shuddered in the open doorway.

"Where you off to, Clayt?" Her voice trembled and she moved closer to the door.

"I'm goin' out, Ma. Maybe get me another bitch. Heerd 'em last night and again jist now." He twisted the doorknob nervously for a brief moment and then spoke again to the small figure in front of him. "You ought'n be standin' in this draft, Ma. You'll take cold. Now you git yourself back to bed—it's early yet. I'll be back before afternoon."

"Clayt! Oh, Clayt! Fetch your Paw home, will you please? Please, son! He's out there for sure! I know he is! I heard him during the night callin'! He was callin' us, Clayt—callin' all our names—yours an' Mary Jane's—all of us!" She was heaving breathlessly and rocking to and fro as she spoke. "Clayt, oh, son! He's comin' home at last—your Paw's comin' home." Then, as if she had been thinking aloud, she changed her tone and spoke incoherently about fixing hot soup for Clayt's father and getting some dry stockings ready because his feet would be wet and cold—and chattering lightly about how pleased Mary Jane would be—and scolding—telling her son to hurry along.

He led the pitiful little woman to her bedroom, placed her under the covers and listened as the broken snores already sounded in the room. Sometimes he envied the ability of his sick mother to fall so rapidly into a deep sleep.

The buildings around the farmhouse were black against the vast stretch of snow, broken here and there only by fences and lone trees. Passing between the tool shed and chicken coop, he headed for the narrow trail that wound three miles across the Mills' place to the Macklem farm. Jules always traveled the same route when he called on Mary Jane.

The snow had failed to cover completely wagon tracks during the night, and Clayt could easily follow their ruts as they zig-zagged across snowy plane toward the ravine where they would cut sharply to the right and go on to the Macklem place. Midway between the ravine and the farm house Clayt stopped.

Four, five, six. Six sets of dog tracks led from the left side of the trail and fell in behind the wheel ruts. He gripped his rifle tightly and peered vainly into the white darkness ahead. He hesitated for several minutes, wondering if it wouldn't be better to wait for daylight before continuing. He looked back and saw a light in the kitchen window, glanced once more at the dog tracks, and went on. A hundred yards further he again stopped, staring horrified at the trail before him.

How could he tell her? How could he explain to Mary Jane the way he had stood and stared at the snow around the wagon—spattered with gore, with the blood of a mangled man? How could he paint anything gentle or consoling into that scene? The horses, hamstrung and stiff where they had dropped. The look of terror on a dead man's face—a face ripped by savage fangs until the cheek bones were bared of flesh—a face he hadn't liked but could do nothing but pity as it lay watching, unseeing, in the gray light. The lips,

bloated and parted wide—the lips that he had sent desperate, agonizing pleas—heard, mistaken and unheeded into the night. His head ached and his knees felt wobbly as a terrible nausea crept into his stomach. High over his head, a great, white snow-owl glided silently, looking down with unblinking eye upon the dark objects below.

For several moments, Clayt stood trembling in the frosty air—unable to draw his eyes from the gruesome sight. He waited—as though the whole terrible thing might disappear. The rifle dropped from his hand, and he just stared dumbly at the print it made in the crusted snow. He passed a mittened hand across his dry, cracked lips and turned toward the house. Without thinking he began to move—machine-like. Back along the trail, across the yard and into the kitchen.

Pale and helpless, he stood in the doorway, looking dully at the tear-streaked face.

“Where is she, Clayt? Where’s Ma? Didn’t you see her? You got to find her! Clayt, she’s gone lookin’ for Paw and her eyes, Clayt! Her eyes—they was awful—just awful!” She shook him roughly, screaming his name between each sob.

Slowly, his eyes lost their haziness. He became aware of the bright room and the frightened girl standing in front of him. Turning he staggered stiffly back through the kitchen door to the open doorway leading out of the shed. “No!” he whispered hoarsely. Then gradually louder until his wild screams were filling the air. “NO! NO! NO!”

A tall, barren tree stood against the gray dawn. One last flake of snow drifted lazily past the young man’s uplifted face, and a faint breath of warmth came out of the southwest and touched his brow. The horizon cast a red hue over the country side, and along the eaves, small droplets of water formed and sent hundreds of miniature cascades down the side of the building.

He followed the tiny footprints with his eyes. Out, across the fields toward the ravine where he lost them from view in the dazzling whiteness of sun on snow. Where he looked and could not see, he heard—the hideous, piercing sound. Then—silence. Shadows formed, lengthened and faded, undisturbed by the day that had borne them.