The Quick and the Dead

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I was looking for stray calves that wind-whipped, violently cold morning. The cattle were in the yards, but there were two missing and so I went out across the stubble fields to look for them, while my brother, who owned that farm, finished the morning work. The snow was deep in the fields; it had started to snow lightly during the afternoon of the previous day, in flurries at first, and during the night it had come heavily, with a high wind, and it was drifted and banked with an ice-hard covering.

The day was clear, with an icicle-blue clearness, and the frigid sun huddled not far above the horizon, surrounded in its rainbow of sun dogs. At the hilltop, a half-mile from the place, the wind was like frozen stilettos in my eyes and on my face and it took my breath away. The wind howled fiercely out of the northwest, carrying the snow and the cold with it. I was dressed warmly, wrapped in sheepskin to my eyes, but the cold was still vicious. The hill was long, dividing the field into two nearly equal halves, and the half I crossed to took up a quarter-section of land itself. The field had once been an entire farm, but the farmstead now lay abandoned and gray, surrounded by the thistle-like trees in one corner of the land, not far from the schoolhouse, which too had long since been boarded-up and abandoned.

Across the long hollow, beside the schoolhouse, I saw a patch of green, metallic and shiny, and there were drifts all around the gray building. It was too cold to think well, and the oddness of that bright color made no impression on me at first. I saw the two calves huddled in a hollow, under the lip of a snowbank, not far away, and I ran down there, and I pulled the calves up roughly, because I knew their lives depended on moving quickly. They were without energy and I pushed them along ahead of me to the hilltop, slapping them with my hands, and they huddled their frail backs with the wind and finally they began to scamper off towards the place.

I wondered at the greenness, and I looked across the long valley at the schoolhouse. It was difficult to see against that piercing glare of the sun on the glazed white snow and against the wind. The green metal was there, obliterated at moments by the blowing snow. It was a fallen shutter, I thought at first, but I knew there were no metal shutters there, and no signs blown in on that isolated road and by that building. I knew I would have to go down there.
It was hard going, and the hollow was drifted up, and I kept breaking through the crust of the snow. I came up from the hollow, sinking in the deep snow and struggling through it, and the wind was vicious, and the cold sank into me, like fangs. I crossed the bedraggled schoolyard fence. There had once been many trees around the schoolhouse, but only grass and weeds grew there anymore, and there were two old box elder trees, near dying, and two already dead and fallen over, and one small evergreen, and a covey of plum brush which nothing could kill. The building itself was ratty and tattered, and some of the shingles had come off and the boards hung loosely from the black windows. The snow was drifted deeply around the schoolhouse, and the roof was swept clear by the wind.

I circled the building warily, for even in my chilled mind I was a little afraid. It was as I had guessed; there was no shutter there, no sign blown down. A car was parked beside the building, out of the northwest wind, and the snow had blown in, drifting over the front of the car. It was the green metal side of the automobile that I had seen from the hilltop. I hesitated, and then I kicked through the deep snow to the car. The front of the car and the side of it near the building were covered over with hard but fragile-looking little curlicues of wind-shaped snow. The snow was as clean and brilliant white as a wedding veil. The windows of the car were frosted over from the inside, and I knew what that meant—that someone had been within the car when it was freezing out, and the moisture had condensed and frozen on the windows. I was frightened, and I slapped my mittened hands together. I knew the car had not been there the previous evening, for the snow had only begun then, and I had brought the tractor down across the stubble, herding the cattle back to the barns, and nothing had been there. The car had come in the night, when the wind was still blowing the dirt country road clear. Perhaps the people in the car had set out on foot, I thought; I hoped they had, for there was nothing that could live long in that weather.

I rubbed the glass gingerly, but the frost was inside, I remembered stupidly, and then, through the fragile, laced frost at the edges of the glass, I saw the clump on the front seat, and I knew then, even in my frozen brain, what had happened. I shouted and I beat upon the window. I tried the door but it was locked. Nothing moved.

I wore heavy leather mittens and I hit the window once, twice, three times, and the window smashed, shattering glass and the window frost into the car, and I reached in and opened the door.

A man and a woman were on the front seat and they were in an embrace, and they were dead. A blanket was pulled up over part of them. There was a quick coldness in my belly and I was afraid I would vomit,
but I did not. I did not look again at them, then. I pulled the blanket farther over them both, hiding the heads, and then I heard the little buzzing sound. The ignition was on. I reached in carefully, over the two, not touching them, and turned the keys off. They had come there in the night, I thought, and because it was cold they had left the motor and the heater run, and the gas had been drawn in and the odorless monoxide covered and suffocated them, before the storm and the cold had penetrated the car. The engine had run until all the gasoline was gone.

I was trembling and I closed the door and took a few steps away, and I could not think of anything, and then I was driven back to the car because I could not believe it. It was as if I had fallen somewhere in that bitter cold and was freezing to death and I was dreaming it all. I opened the door once more. They were there, and I knew them. The woman was Mathilda Heron, the wife of a farmer who lived not far away, and the man was Conrad Wenzel, a young man not yet thirty, who was new in the town and who was a teacher in the junior high school.

I slammed the door hard and I ran and the wind lashed, prickly and cold, against the backs of my legs, and even though I fell several times in that deep and treacherous snow, I did not stop running. The hill was long, and the ice-air clutched at my lungs, and each breath became a cold and bitter agony, like teeth clamped into my chest, but I could not stop running.

My brother was waiting for me and he was standing in the warmth where the cattle were feeding, and I leaned, sweating and cold, against the board fence, and I told him what I had seen.

He blinked and he struck his forehead with his hand and asked me twice if I was sure, and I nodding each time. He swore and shook his head and said the sheriff would have to be called.

"The sheriff will have to come quickly," I said.
"Why?" my brother asked. "They won't move from the car."
"They don't matter," I said. "Everybody else will find out if it isn't done quietly and quickly."

My brother shrugged his shoulders, and he looked at me as if to ask what else we could do. It was not our affair, and there was nothing either of us could do about it.

"Yes, all right," I said. "Call the sheriff."

We went up to the house where it was warm, and my brother placed the call, and while he waited for the sheriff to come to the phone, we looked at each other, and we both knew what it meant in that country, with the party lines and all the men sitting at home in front of their stoves, gathering reports from their telephone listening wives. My brother tried to tell the sheriff to simply come out, but the sheriff, too, could see the
weather; and it was eighteen miles from the county seat to our place, and so finally my brother had to tell him angrily that there were two dead people in a car, and the sheriff asked him if he knew who they were, and my brother said "no," and hung up. We knew then that the whole neighborhood, the whole town, would know within a matter of hours, would hungrily feed on the details, in the way that starved cats pull at the entrails of fish until they had them all.

My brother swore shortly, surprising his wife.
We could hear the phone ringing and my brother's wife answering it before we got out the door; the neighbors were beginning to call.
We took the tractor, and axes to cut wood for a fire, and some gasoline in case the car could be moved, and two old blankets. The tractor had chains and was powerful and it did not have trouble with the drifts. We went up over the hill, the way I had come, for it was the shortest way. We pulled the fence down at the schoolhouse yard and drove the tractor up beside the car. The blowing snow was filtering in upon the two people now, and they were partly frozen; we could tell that by the strange, hardened white color of the flesh of them.
I attacked some fallen branches with the axe and chopped out some firewood, and I built a fire in a small bare spot, not far from the car. I pulled down some of the dry boards that had been used to cover the schoolhouse windows, and in a short while there was a good blaze going.
My brother looked at the bodies and he came over to the fire, and we talked about them.
When the farm a quarter-mile to the south had been operating, the road along there had been in use, and the country schoolhouse was used, too, a few years before, but with the enlarging of our farm and the other farms around there and the hard-surfacing of the county road a half-mile to the south, the country road and the school had no purpose, and both were abandoned. The road and the schoolhouse yard were used lavishly in the summer times by high school lovers. Many times, late in the evening, while at work in the fields, we had seen the cars parked in the same place where this green car stood. It was a favorite place, near enough to town, and there was no traffic, and it had opportunity and darkness. And these two had come here in the dead of winter, for their privacy, their opportunity to make love without anyone knowing, for they were both married, and each of them had children. It was a good place for lovers, and these, too, would have escaped without notice, but for the treachery of the snow and the cold.
My brother and I went to see if the car could be moved, but the drifts were packed and hard, and it was too viciously cold, and we returned to the fire.
I thought of the woman, Mathilda Heron, and of her husband, Rudy Heron, and what kind of man he was, and I said, "We should move them out of the car at least. If Rudy comes down here, if he hears about it, there will be trouble."

My brother nodded, but he hesitated when I opened the door of the car. The bodies were wound in the blanket, and to move them out and separate them, we would have to lift them out after the blanket was taken off. My brother looked at the woman's face, and he would not touch them, although I knew he was very tough about seeing things dead, and he was three years older than I and had had more experience. I could not move them alone, and I did not ask him again to help. The woman did something to my brother, I could see by his face.

My brother had not been married long, and he had told me a long time before, about the woman, Mathilda Heron, and how she used to get drunk sometimes in the bars in town, and how the men could talk easily to her, and she loved the attention of men, and they could take her out to the country, if the men pleased her, and most of them did. My brother had been one of these men, a year or so before, and I knew he was thinking about her. There was a gentleness in his eyes, and I knew he was thinking that even though she may have been too free, perhaps even a whore, yet she had done no harm to him, or to any of the other men.

The woman's husband, Rudy Heron, was intensely jealous of her, and he used to get drunk, and try to follow her, and he swore he would kill anybody with her, but everybody laughed at him behind his back and thought him to be a fool, because he could not adequately keep his woman. The longer it carried on, the worse his jealousy became, and the louder his talk, and the drunker he was on those hot and violent evenings, and then even he knew he could not take her home as he should, or follow her, all he could do was slump over the bar and mutter and rage to himself.

Mathilda Heron was a pretty woman, I remembered. She had a clear, clean skin, and a very large bosom, which, haltered and proper, she liked to thrust before the eyes of the men, and she had bright, very alive, brown eyes, and light brown hair, and nice enough legs, with full smooth calves, in spite of the four children she had borne. Even those four young children could not dissuade the woman, and one could see in her eyes her tigerish wants, and her husband was not her man.

The schoolteacher we knew only vaguely. I had seen Conrad Wenzel a few times in town, and he was a slender, cleanly handsome man. He was always neat and well-dressed, I remembered, as if he had come directly from a shower, and he had a ready smile, and I vaguely remembered his wife beside him on the street, and a child or two. His wife was dark-
haired and pleasant, and slender, and I did not know her further than that.

Then they started coming, the neighbors. They came over the hill on their tractors, following the tracks we had made. They had heard about it by the telephone, and now they came, like vultures, to look upon the bodies. I said what I thought to my brother, and he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Ah, we probably would be doing the same thing if somebody else found them.”

“But it’s different,” I said. “It makes it our responsibility this way, because we found them.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“The other people,” I said.

“I don’t know what we’ve got to do with them,” he said.

The farmers arrived; there was Kamrad and Heintzelman and Anderson, and the first two were big and powerful Dutchmen, and Anderson was a thin Swede, and they were all bundled thickly against the weather. They climbed off their tractors and went to the car and looked, and they were astonished, except for Anderson who had to lift the blanket to peer more closely, and he sucked between his teeth all the while he looked.

The men came to the fire, and they nodded at us.

“Does Rudy Heron know?” Heintzelman asked.

My brother and I shook our heads negatively.

“We better move them out of there,” I said. No one replied and no one moved.

“I took a load of cobs over to Rudy’s place this morning,” Anderson said in that high-pitched, still-Swedish voice of his. He had been born in this country, but he had taken the accent from his father. “Rudy didn’t say anything about his wife not being there, at home. I did think it funny he didn’t take me in the house to get warm.”

“How could he say anything about his wife not being home?” my brother asked, slowly and mildly. “Would anybody say anything if his wife was gone, and hadn’t come home all night?”

“Rudy’s awful jealous of her,” Kamrad said.

“He had a reason to be jealous this time,” Anderson said, with his high-pitched giggle. He looked around at them, as if hoping someone else would giggle, too.

The men looked at the car, and knelt beside the fire and chipped at the wood and threw some sticks into the fire, and looked at the car again, and hoped it would not be there.

“I wish that sheriff would get here,” my brother said.

That is what they all want, I thought. They wanted the sheriff to
come, and take it all off their hands, so they could go home and not think about it anymore.

"Rudy Heron's going to come down here," I said. "He'll hear about it and he'll come down here, and it won't be good."

"What can we do about it?" Heintzelman asked.

Anderson gave his high-pitched laugh. "Ya, what can we do? We can't stop him if he wants to come and look at his wife." He looked around at the others.

"We better pull them out of the car and wrap them up separately, here on the snow," I said.

"No, you better not do that," Anderson said. "The sheriff might not like that, when he gets here. He wants to see them like they are."

I did not like Anderson. He could incense me quickly. "Nobody has to see them like that, the sheriff or Rudy Heron or anybody else."

"You could get into trouble touching them," Anderson said. "They got to make an investigation. You'd be changing things, and you might get arrested."

"We've got to do something," I said, looking first at Anderson, and then at the other men, too, for I could tell they nearly agreed with him. They looked into the fire, and not at me. "What about if Rudy Heron comes here? It's the man's wife," I went on loudly, almost shouting at them, at these married men. "The woman's dead. He can know that, but to see her this way.... We've got to do something."

"Ach, everybody knows what kind of woman she was," Anderson said.

I was suddenly angry, and I jumped up and went around the fire and put myself in front of Anderson. "Who knows?" I shouted into his face. Anderson backed away from me and pointed at the car. "You want to tell everybody, don't you?" I went on. "You don't give a damn if everybody talks, and the kids and the husband and wife of those two hear about it the rest of their lives. You want to bring Rudy Heron and the whole goddamn neighborhood down here to look at them, don't you?"

"That's the way they died," Anderson said.

I felt my shoulder move, wanting to hit him, but I did not. I dropped my hands and turned away from him. They were all afraid to do anything, afraid of any kind of action or involvement. Anderson, the men, even my brother wanted to treat it as if it did not really concern them. They did not want to protect the other people; they did not care.

"Do you have to get so mad all the time?" my brother asked. He was always the cooler one of us.

"They're dead," I said. "Let them be dead. Who gives a damn now what they were doing. But nobody else needs to know, and nobody needs
to get hurt, their kids or anybody else.” I went by the men, one by one, and looked at them. “I’ll move them myself,” I said.

“I’ll help you,” Heintzelman said finally.

Heintzelman and I went to the car, but no one else would help. The bodies were hard as steel and we had a difficult time of it. We found the underclothing of the two, but the pieces were wet and had frozen and even after holding the clothing above the fire and thawing them we could not put them on because of the positions of the bodies. We buttoned them up as well as we could. We were working quickly, but there was nothing we could do, and when we heard the sound of the tractors coming over the hill, we wrapped the bodies quickly in the blankets and laid them in the snow, between the car and the fire.

It was Mellon and Orth and Tangro, farmers in the neighborhood, who came on the tractors, and Orth had brought his fourteen-year-old son along.

“Look what they’re bringing,” I said loudly. “A boy, a kid. Next it’ll be their wives and all their kids, and then we can all sit down here and have a goddamn picnic.”

“The boy is old enough,” my brother said. “What’s wrong with him coming?”

“Old enough?” I said. “Is that why you and everybody else here turned pale when you saw what was in the car? Sure, let the boy come. That’s fine. Let’s have a big exhibition because we’re all so pure, and somebody else got caught. Let’s invite everybody down here to look at somebody else’s exposed sin.” I looked directly into my brother’s eyes. “We’re all pretty pure, aren’t we?” I said.

He rubbed his forehead and almost wearily turned away from me.

“Why did you bring the boy?” my brother asked Orth, when the tractors came up.

Orth was taken aback. His mouth opened to speak, but he said nothing, and then he laughed, tittering and confused, for he was surprised at my brother talking like that. “The boy’s old enough,” he said finally.

“Send him home,” my brother said sharply. The boy looked open-mouthed at my brother and then at his father.

“What is it?” the father asked. “Who’s dead?”

“Send the kid home,” I said.

“Ya, ya,” Heintzelman said slowly. “Send him home.”

Orth told the unwilling boy to take the tractor and leave.

When the boy was gone, the men came up and looked at the bodies and one of the men whistled and they came to the fire, sober-faced.

Mellon stood shivering and rubbing his hands. “It’s cold down here,”
he said, and I knew he wanted to talk about something other than the two dead people.

It was bitter cold, and the wind hurtled in across the treeless fields to the west, and the tiny ice-crystals of snow were like sand.

"They're pretty warm, I bet, shoveling coal in hell," Anderson said, and he gave a short laugh, like a stuttering cough. He nudged Mellon and said, "Ach, they died happy," in his sniggering, rotten voice.

"Snicker, you dumb son of a bitch," I said. I wanted to put my hands on his scrawny rooster's neck and strangle him.

"What you say to me?" he said. "I hit you if you say that to me."

I stood up from the place where I'd been squatting beside the fire, and I stepped in front of Anderson, and I put my face an inch from his. "Hit me then, and I'll break your neck and send you straight to hell, too, you dumb Swede Lutheran bastard." We went to the same church, so I knew I could talk to him that way with impunity.

Anderson was frightened and he stood back. He shrugged his shoulders to the others, as if it was I that had gone mad.

"What's wrong with you?" my brother asked me.

"He thinks this is all funny," I said, "the way we all sit around here not doing anything, knowing that somebody will get hurt from it. He thinks it's a joke if people have to suffer. Look at his face. You can see what the simple fool is thinking in his dumb face."

"You better calm down," my brother said.

"I'd like to," I said. "Two people are dead, but that isn't enough. Everybody has to know about it, and they have to get hurt, because a stupid dumb hypocrite like that stands around and snickers. He can hardly wait to get out of here so he can tell about it. He wants to see the other people hurt and in trouble." I was shouting, and I went around the fire from the men and wouldn't talk to them.

We heard the tractor coming a little later, and the sound of it was from a different direction, and we all stood to look, and the tractor came from the south, up from the cleared, hard-surface road. The tractor plowed and bucked against the hard, heavy drifts, but still it came on, furiously. There was a little wagon, more nearly a cart, only a sawed-off box over four tiny wheels, trailing the tractor, and the cart bounced and slid from side to side on that rough road. It was Rudy Heron.

We could see the wrapped, small heads moving with the hard movements of the cart.

"He brought the kids along," my brother and I said together, with the same thought and in the same astounded and awful voice. Heintzelman groaned, and suddenly it was as if all the men there knew of our relationship to the two dead people; even Anderson was silent. We all
moved together then, and made a half-circle around the bodies and waited for Heron.

The tractor had chains and even then it was difficult to steer, we could see that, and Rudy was holding the wheel of the tractor with savage concentration, and the cart behind lurched and swayed. The heads of the children kept bobbing up and down and they tried to hold on to the board sides.

The tractor was there, and Rudy Heron left it running wide-open, very loudly, and he jumped down and walked over to us, and in the cart the children peeped over the edge at their father and us.

"Is my wife here?" Rudy asked, striding towards us. He was a slightly-built man, dark-faced, and his jaw and face were long and narrow, and he had not shaved, and the thin sliver of a scar on the tip of his chin was very white against his blue-black face. His eyes were small and yellowish and glittering, unalive, like the eyes I had seen in dead animals.

"Is my wife here?" he asked loudly, again, and he came on into our midst.

"She's here," my brother said, holding his arm out and stopping Heron. Heron struck at my brother's arm, but my brother turned with him, stepping back, but still between him and the bodies.

Heron looked at my brother's face, and then he seemed to get control of himself, and he said, "I want to see my wife. Which one is she?"

"Here," my brother said. He backed away from Heron, and he knelt and pulled the blanket down an inch or two to expose the upper part of the dead woman's face.

Heron looked at her, and he rubbed his beard and his eyes, and we thought he might be crying, but then he asked, "Who was she with?"

He turned to look at the ashen-faced and sober men. "Who?" No one said anything.

Heron's eyes burned us one by one.

"Who?"

"Conrad Wenzel," Heintzelman said, coughing out the name. "He must have been bringing her home, and they made a wrong turn, got lost, and thought this was a farm or something. Probably got stuck."

Heintzelman was speaking rapidly, but his voice gradually became less and less firm. "It was easy for Wenzel to get lost. He's not from around here, you know." His voice trailed off.

"I know," Heron shouted. "I know Wenzel. Come mooning around my wife. I seen what was going on." He looked at the woman's face.

"Who found them?" he asked.

"I did," I said.

"And how was they? What was they doing?"
"Sitting," I said. "Sitting in the front seat, dead. It was the gas from the engine..."

"Sitting! Hah! Sitting!" Heron leapt suddenly at the blanket-covered body of the woman and he tore the blanket back, out of my brother's hands, and Heron began to howl, and he laughed and howled, and he fairly leaped around the body, and he turned and bellowed for the children to come there and look at their dead mother. "Come," he bellowed, in his strangely deepened and rasping voice. "Look at her, look what she was doing when she died. She's a whore. Look, your mother's a whore. Come look, see what she is." Suddenly he flung the blanket away, and the wind picked it and rolled it, and Heron plunged at the other body, while we stood there, frozen, watching him, and none of us could move. Heron tore that blanket off too. He began to kick the body, hard, with his heavy boots, and he kicked at the groin of the dead man, as if all of the dead man and all of Heron's hate were concentrated there, and Heron was howling and his face was wild and he was frothing at the mouth and the froth froze on his face, like white scars.

My brother caught Heron's arms and pulled him away, but Heron lunged at my brother and shoved him backwards, over the body of the woman, into the snow. Heron seized one of the sticks I had cut for the fire, and he began to beat on the face and body of the dead man, and the body rolled onto its back and the frozen hands were at its shoulders, supplicating, and the eyes and the mouth were open, and the dead man seemed to be screaming, bleating in agony, but the only sound was the other agony of Heron in his shrieking. Heron slashed and beat with the stick upon the dead body, and the stick made terrible, coldly-white, everlasting marks on the frozen flesh, making the peculiar gritting sound like the sound a spoon inserted into a half-frozen box of berries makes, and the marks of the stick would never be erased.

The men stood back in a cluster, horrified, afraid of Heron. Only my brother knew what to do. He came up again, and he spun Heron around and tried to hold him away from the mutilation, but Heron struck my brother on the shoulder with the stick. I moved behind Heron and I jerked his arm behind his back and twisted at the claws of his hand until the stick came free, and I kicked it away, into the fire. Heron twisted loose, and he came towards me, howling everything and nothing. I hit him on the mouth, and his eyes didn't change at all, in spite of the blood in his mouth, and he kept howling and spitting blood. I pulled my arm back quickly and I hit him hard, back-handing him with the hard leather mitten across his face, and the blow made him groan and blink and turn, and I went in quickly and I brought my arm beneath his and twisted him over, and my brother was helping me, and we swung Heron
down, crashing him hard against the frozen ground and snow, and his face drove into the packed snow.

I put my knee on him, and I leaned over him and I said, “Come to yourself, man.”

It was all out of him then. He lay there, gargling and spitting saliva and blood, and he made biting motions in the snow, and even when I stood up he just lay there, and he was crying, and making noises as a hungry animal makes when it is eating ravenously, and his jaws worked on the snow. It was terrible, listening to him, and all the men were frightened and ashamed, and they wouldn’t look at him. We all knew that in a way Heron truly loved the woman, in spite of everything, he did love her, and he was a victim of that, and he hated her, too, and it was something none of us could help him with.

My brother went around Heron and he carefully wrapped the bodies again.

The children had come from the cart and I did not know how long they had been standing there. They had been watching, and their eyes were seared with it all, and they were terrified. There were four children and the oldest was about seven and the youngest about two, and both the oldest and the youngest were girls, and the middle two were boys.

“Why did he bring them?” I said, and I looked again at the man groveling in the snow, and I wanted to drive my boot into his groaning side.

I went around to the children and I brought them up to the fire to warm them and I carefully turned them away so they could not see their father. The children were frightened and quiet, but they kept turning their heads to see the man.

They were terribly cold in that bitter wind, and they had been dressed hurriedly and badly, and the little girl had lost a mitten and her overshoes were on the wrong feet. I rubbed her frigid cheeks and I gave her my large mitten to put on and I tried to play with her, to have her smile, but she would not. She said some words that children say very early and I felt my jaw trembling, and I could not speak at all, and I set her gently on a little log and I took off her overshoes and put them on the right way. I buttoned the other children up properly, and gave my scarf to the older boy, who did not have one. I took the children to the cart again, after they were a little warm, and the oldest girl was crying and looking back at her father, and I could tell in her eyes that she had seen too much, and she would never forget any of it now, none of them would ever forget. It was terrible, that understanding look, that recognition in a child’s eyes. When the other children saw their sister crying, they
too began to cry. And I thought, we have done this to them, all of this; it was as much our fault as the fault of their father.

I put them on the cart, one by one, and I tried to comfort them, but it was no use. Even in my arms they remembered too well, and they looked past me to see their father and mother. I motioned to my brother, for I couldn’t speak, and he brought some blankets from the car, the ones they, the mother and the man, had used to cover themselves, and I wrapped the children warmly. Kamrad came over to drive the children to our place. My brother stood beside me and watched Kamrad and the tractor and the children go, but I could not see them, for my eyes were blinded by that glaring sun and the vivid, hurting snow, and my nose was running, and wetness froze on my cheeks.

I had tried, I thought; feebly and without hope I had tried, and it was not good enough, and I was angry. I slapped my bare hand and my mitten together and I went back to the fire.

“Did you have to bring the children?” I shouted at Heron. “I don’t care what happens to you. You can go to hell. But did you have to bring them?”

Heron still lay stretched on the ground, his face in the snow, and the snow around him was pinked by his blood. I beat my hands together, and I remembered it all, especially the children, and I looked at Heron, and I could not contain that feeling any longer. I went over to him and I swore loudly at him and I kicked him hard, very hard, in the side, at the place where the ribs end. His breath came out of him in a contorted gasp, a kind of bark. I was glad. I wanted to hurt him.

“Get up,” I shouted at him. I took his collar and jerked him, when he did not move quickly. Heron braced himself on his hands, and he groaned, and lifted himself painfully. He clutched his side and he stood up and walked feebly and slowly, as if he had become aged and senile in that moment. I followed him, threatening him, and he looked at my coat collar and not into my eyes, and he did not even care then. He would not have cared if I had killed him. He slumped down upon the log where the little girl had sat, and he bent himself at the waist, holding his side and rocking back and forth against the pain, and moaning.

My brother took my arm and pulled me away from Heron. “Let him alone,” he said. “He has lost his wife. Let him alone.”

“Yes,” I said.

I needed to do something, and I got an axe and I chopped a considerable pile of firewood, and I threw all the wood on the fire at once, until there was a very large blaze. I didn’t care if the bodies melted and the schoolhouse burned.

We waited forty-five minutes more for the sheriff to arrive and no one
said a word in all that time. The only sounds were of my axe and of the snapping fire, and of the wind driving its bitter coldness over us.

The sheriff came in a truck with chains, up the track that Rudy Heron and his tractor had made. He sprang out of the truck before it stopped and he came over to us. He was a spry old man who looked like an insurance salesman, with his smooth and dimpled face and his gold-rimmed spectacles. His face was high-colored in the cold, and it was round and pink, like a pale and fat and spuashy tomato. He knelt to examine the bodies, and he murmured things to himself and made notes in a pad, and his face remained rosy and calm.

"About the newspapers . . ." my brother said.
"It has to be reported," the sheriff said.
"Just that they were sitting there and they died of monoxide poisoning, and nothing about night," I said. "It happened in broad daylight."
"They've been dead quite a while," the sheriff said. "Late last night, probably." He sucked between his gold teeth. "What is your interest in all this?" he asked me.
"It's not in them; it's the other people," I said.
The sheriff looked at me a moment and then he nodded. "All right," he said. "That's how you found them then?"
"Yes. Just sitting," I said.
"In broad daylight, sitting on a country road, stranded in a blizzard, and the engine was running to keep them warm," the sheriff murmured. He pursed his lips and made some notes in the pad.
"Just like that," I said. It was a foolish attempt, I thought, and hopeless, and everyone would know and talk and snicker, but it made me feel a little better.

The sheriff tried to talk to Heron, but Heron would not say anything at all. He groaned in that steady hurting sing-song way, as he had been for nearly an hour, and his eyes rolled strangely, and he held his side.

Someone told the sheriff that Heron had a sister in Charleston, and the sheriff said that was good, they could take him there, since he was in a bad way.

They loaded the bodies onto the truck, and with the bodies out of sight, and with Heron in the cab with the sheriff, the coldness came on all of us again. We felt the hard wind, and some of the farmers looked at the sun and talked of getting home for dinnertime.

My brother asked me if I wanted to go along to town in the truck, to the undertaker, but I said no.
"We made a mistake," I said. "We should have taken them in by ourselves, before anyone knew about them."
"We might have got into trouble," my brother said. "The sheriff had to be here."

"It was a mistake," I said. "No one should have known about it, especially the children. We did it badly; it was our fault."

"You know how it is in this country. Everyone would have found out and talked about it anyway. We did everything we could do."

"We didn't protect the others," I said. "It was a mistake."

My brother looked at me, and he spread his hands, and I knew that he understood what I was saying. He turned and went to the truck.

"If you see Conrad Wenzel's wife, be careful with her," I said after him. "Don't tell her how it was."

"She will know all about it already," he said. "It will be all right with her anyway. Women are tougher about these things than men."

My brother got into the truck and it turned around and went back up the road. The farmers watched the truck go, and then they got on their tractors and drove up the long hill, to go to their warm houses and their dinners and their talk.

The wind was fierce and the fire had died, and I let the last few logs sizzle against the blowing snow. The car stood beside the building, and the open door was swinging in the wind. The snow drifted into the car, whitely and cleanly. I thought of closing the door, but the window was broken anyway, and the snow could not be kept out. It did not make any difference. The snow and the cold and the wind had killed them, and now it would cover everything, coldly and cleanly and treacherously, and only the cold and falsely-clean and treacherous minds of the people would remember it all.

I was alone down there, and I felt the chill of the place, and I wanted to get away. I started the tractor and drove over the fence-line and across the hollow. Behind me, the tracks were filling up with the fine hard crystals, and the fire was out, and the schoolyard was twisted and reshaped and very white. It was as if there had never been anyone there, but the wind and the winter snow.