

THE WINTER
ROOM

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In the spring everything is soft.

Wayne is my older brother by two years and so he thinks he knows more than I can ever know. He said Miss Halverson, who teaches eighth grade, told him spring was a time of awakening, but I think she's wrong. And Wayne is wrong too.

Or maybe it's just that Miss Halverson wants it to be that way. But she has never seen spring at our farm and if she did, if she would come out and see it, she would know it's not a time of awakening at all. Unless she means awakening of smells.

It's a time for everything to get soft. And melty. And when it all starts to melt and get soft the

smells come out. In northern Minnesota where we live, the deep cold of winter keeps things from smelling. When we clean the barn and throw the manure out back it just freezes in a pile. When chickens die or sheep die or even if a cow dies it is left out back on the manure pile because like Uncle David says we're all fertilizer in the end.

Uncle David is old. So old we don't even know for sure how old he is. He says when he dies he wants to be thrown on the manure pile just like the dead animals, but he might be kidding.

The main thing is that no matter what Miss Halverson tells Wayne, in the spring everything gets soft and it's an awful mess. When the dead animals on the pile thaw out they bring early flies and that means maggots and that means stink that stops even my father, or Uncle David, or Nels when they open the back door of the barn to let the cows out.

"Shooosh," Father says when he opens the door of the barn on a spring morning to let the cows out after milking. The smell from the pile makes him sneeze.

Just outside the door the cows sink in until

their bellies are hung up in manure and slop and they have to skid and lunge to get to solid ground.

Sometimes my father and Wayne and I have to get in the muck in back of the barn and heave on the cows to help them through. There's not a part of it that can be called fun. I'm small for eleven, and the goop comes up to my crotch. When I bear down and push on some old cow's leg and she comes loose I almost always fall on my face.

That makes Wayne laugh. He's always ready to laugh when I do something dumb. And when he laughs I get mad and take after him. Then Father has to grab me by the back of my coat and hold me until I cool down—hanging there dripping manure like some old sick cat—and I can't think of any part of it that makes me come up with an awakening.

It's just soft. And stinky.

We live on a farm on the edge of a forest that reaches from our door in Minnesota all the way up to Hudson's Bay. Uncle David says the trees there are stunted and small, the people are short and round, and the polar bears have a taste for

human flesh. That's how Uncle David says it when he goes into his stories. He says he's seen such things . . . but that's for later.

The farm has eighty-seven cleared acres. My father says each tree pulled to clear it was like pulling a tooth. I saw him use the team once to take out a popple stump that wasn't too big and he had the veins sticking out on the horses' necks so they looked like ropey cords before that stump let go.

The woods are tight all around the farm, come right down to the edge of it, but the fields are clean and my father says the soil is good, as good as any dirt in the world, and we get corn and oats and barley and flax and some wheat.

There are six of us in the family. My mother and father and my brother Wayne and my uncle David, who isn't really my uncle but sort of my great-uncle who is very old, and Nels, who is old like David.

We all live in a wooden house with white board siding. Downstairs are four rooms. The kitchen, which is big and has a plank table in it and a wood stove with a shiny nickel top, is my favorite. It smells all the time of fresh baked bread because Mother always has rolls rising or

cooking or cooling and the smell makes my mouth water.

Next to the kitchen is a room with a table and a piano and four chairs around the table. In all my life and in all of Wayne's life, and as near as we can figure in all my parents' lives, nobody has ever sat at the table or played the old piano. Once a month, when the *Farm Gazette* comes with the pictures of Holsteins or work horses painted on the cover, my mother puts the magazine in the middle of the table in the dining room—that's what she calls it—and the magazine stays there until the next month when the new one comes. Once I asked her why. "For color and decoration," she said.

Only one time did I ever see anybody take the magazine up. Father came in one morning after chores and picked the magazine off the table and made a comment about the cow on the cover. Mother took it from him, as if he were a kid. She put it back on the table, positioned it just so, the way she always does, and I never saw anybody move the magazine again.

Next to the room with the piano and table—we have never once dined in the room so I don't know why Mother calls it the dining room—is

the winter room. Wayne says Miss Halverson showed him a picture of a house in a city and they had a room called a living room, and that's what our winter room is—the living room. But that sounds stupid to me. We live everywhere in the house, except for the room with the table and piano, so why have any one place called the living room?

We call it the winter room because we spend the winter there. In one corner is a wood stove with mica windows so you can see the flame. There are two chairs by the stove, wooden chairs with carved flowers on the back boards. They belong to Uncle David and Nels. Next to each chair is a coffee can for spitting snoose when they chew inside the house. Across from the stove is a large easy chair only a little worn, where Father sits in the winter. Next to the chair is an old horsehide couch with large, soft cushions where Mother sits and Wayne and I sometimes sit, though we usually sit on the floor in front of the stove where the heat can hit our faces and we can see the flames.

Next to the winter room is the downstairs bedroom where Mother and Father sleep on an old iron bed with a feather mattress.