

The Rabbit's Heart

There was a winter afternoon when the sky hung over the whole farm like a leaden curtain. At five the boy went as usual for the milk cows, making long scuffs with the fat toes of his overshoes in the wetness of a light fall of new snow that lay unmarred across the barn lot. When he unlatched the wooden gate beside the cow barn, the dog Tippie dashed through the narrow opening, her coat bright and dry from hours spent curled in a nest somewhere under the Old House. A moment later she caught scent of a young rabbit perched immobile in the snow, and in a flash the two were caught up in a furious zig-zagging chase before the boy's appreciative gaze. Frantically the rabbit doubled and redoubled upon short twisting dashes while the dog ploughed the wet snow in a frenzied effort to keep the advantage surprise had given it. Part of a yip escaped the dog's teeth now and then as it seemed to hurl its body sideways to change direction in the new snow. The boy smiled faintly at the excitement and waited. The rabbit would escape, he knew. They always did, and the futile efforts of the dog were the source of an amused tolerance on his part.

In a flash of snow and scuffle the dog suddenly overtook and seized the rabbit, and, more startled even than the boy, flung it quickly from one violent shake that left gray fur wafting in the winter air and clinging to the dog's teeth. There was redness in the new snow, and the rabbit had become, in one instant, an inert lump of gray. The boy walked close to stare a moment, incredulous at the glazing open eyes, and the dog crept forward too, uncertain now, to give a tentative sniff. She withdrew when the boy turned away, bending her eyes up as if to catch his mood.

As the boy left, there was in his path, suddenly, a tiny red object that moved, and he knelt, puzzled. After a moment he knew it was the rabbit's heart, flung clear, and now lying alone, beating steadily against the coldness of the snow. While he watched, the heart faltered and stopped.

Afterward he followed the rabbit's tracks backward, down the long lot until they disappeared through the fence and over the slope into tufts of heavy dry grass that poked above the snow beneath the oak trees behind the corn crib.

As they moved silently out into the stubble field toward the distant, watching cattle, the dog stopped once and stared backward along their tracks for a moment, its nose high and horizontal, then turned and trotted after the boy.