

## DAKOTA FARM CHRISTMAS

We lived in a big white house and the animals lived in a big red barn on our South Dakota farm. I was up early to help Dad with morning chores. He was using a sledgehammer to drive a steel stake into an icy mass of steer and hog innards left over from the butchering a week earlier. It was bitter cold and a light blanket of snow covered the frozen ground. Nothing could be buried until the spring thaw. He connected the stake to the tractor with a log chain and dragged the blob behind the barn, out of the sight of squeamish eyes. The clan was coming for Christmas dinner and he wanted to make a good impression.

The clan included seven uncles, eight aunts, and numerous cousins; most of them lived on nearby farms. They began arriving around noon with containers of food and armloads of brightly wrapped presents. The porch was soon filled with boots and my parents' bed was piled high with coats. The men gathered in the living room to talk about weather, crops, crime, politics, and the neighbors while the women congregated in the kitchen to talk about operations, children, clothing, and the neighbors. Grandma was enthroned on a chair in the dining room between the living room and the kitchen; everyone stopped to pay homage to her.

Shot glasses of sweet wine were served to all the adults. Gifts were unceremoniously given to the kids to be opened instantly. Dad had gifts for all my cousins. He had gotten a good deal on a case of toy steam shovels for the boys. Kids were scattered all over the house playing with new games and toys. A few boys were outside throwing snowballs at each other. Two cousins my age, Janice, a farm girl, and Sharon, a city girl, stayed inside. Although we saw Janice all the time, we rarely saw Sharon. So, Dad had bought a fuzzy pink sweater for her Christmas gift. I overheard Mom ask Dad, "Did you get anything for Janice?" He had forgotten her! "I'll give her one of those steam shovels—she won't mind." he said. However, as soon as Sharon and Janice opened their gifts, they both started crying. Janice sobbed, "But I'm a girl!" Sharon was upset too because she had already received four sweaters as Christmas gifts. My mother suggested, "Why don't we give Janice the sweater and Sharon the steam shovel?" Janice seemed pleased but Sharon, a sophisticated city girl, was not

mollified. "We'll find something else you'll like." Mom said. The girls walked away whispering, "They just don't understand!"

The adults seated themselves around the big dining room table. I had to sit at the kitchen table with the kids. After the meal the men migrated to the living room to play whist while the women cleared the tables, washed dishes, and disposed of food. Then Dad put on his parka and announced, "The sleigh ride leaves in fifteen minutes."

All the kids got bundled up for the sleigh ride. Janice and Sharon wanted to go too, but they were still dressed in fancy Christmas dresses. Mom suggested, "You could change into some of Mike's jeans." I was mortified! Mom gave each of them a pair of my jeans. Unfortunately, they fit. When we finally got outside, Dad was waiting with the big army surplus toboggan hitched to the tractor. Fifteen kids piled on the toboggan and away we went to the snow-covered pasture. Kids rolled off the toboggan on the sweeping turns but scrambled right back on again. When the ride was over, Dad headed back to the house, but we gravitated to a large patch of ice in a corner of the pasture. We skated on the ice in our boots and used dead tree branches for hockey sticks and chunks of wood for pucks. The game didn't last long and we were soon inside the house warming up and drying off.

As the afternoon light began to fade, people retrieved their coats and boots and said their goodbyes. I had the job of going outside to start the cars so that they would be warm on the trips home. When the last car pulled out of the yard, Dad and I headed for the barn. It was time for evening chores.