The Storm
Theodore Doty*

*Iowa State College

Copyright ©1956 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
The Storm

Theodore Doty

Abstract

JIM pushed his way out of the back door as the cold March wind slammed against the North side of the house and tried to hold him in. Immediately the driving snowflakes began to find little gaps around the collar of his blanket-lined denim jacket. He hunched his shoulders, flipped up the collar, and gave a little tug at his snug lumberjack’s cap as he struggled to pull on his fivebuckle overshoes...
A young boy learns responsibility early in life, in

The Storm

Jim pushed his way out of the back door as the cold March wind slammed against the North side of the house and tried to hold him in. Immediately the driving snowflakes began to find little gaps around the collar of his blanket-lined denim jacket. He hunched his shoulders, flipped up the collar, and gave a little tug at his snug lumberjack’s cap as he struggled to pull on his five-buckle overshoes. It had been snowing harder and harder since noon, and now at eight o’clock he was sure that his Dad and his older brother Dick weren’t going to make it home with the new truck.

Jim leaned into the wind and headed toward the barn. He felt a warm glow of pride inside as he started this last check to see that everything was all right for the night. His dad and brother had gone, early in the morning, to get the new truck at Sioux City, and had left him to take care of things at home. Now they were stranded in the blizzard, and the responsibility for his mother and little sister, and all of the livestock was his until they got back. And when you’ve just turned fifteen that’s a lot of responsibility.

In the back end of the barn the cattle were quietly chewing at their bunk of hay. They were completely oblivious to the storm that raged outside. Behind the barn, in the large straw shed, all of the sheep had crowded back into the warm depths under the straw that had been threshed out on-
Sketch

to the framework of railroad ties. Jim straightened up a little in the shed as he breathed the warm sheep smell. He had driven the sheep in from the field shortly after lunch when it had begun to snow hard. Dad always said that you should not leave sheep out in a snow storm because the snow would blind them and they’d get lost and freeze. Jim had brought them in the way his dad would have. They were all OK.

The last check point was the hog house. As he came close, Jim heard the “bang-clank” of the lids on the self feeder in the fat hog lot on the south side of the house. It took more than a late March blizzard to stop a hog from eating.

Steam billowed out into the wind as Jim slid the door open to go in. Once inside he automatically lifted his cap until his ears were free to enjoy the warmth generated by the many hogs. In the darkness he hesitated a moment and listened to the chorus of deep measured breathing and the occasional jerky grunting as one hog shifted position or as a newcomer tried to settle down between two already comfortable companions.

Jim slipped off his mitten and felt his way over to the panel to get his bearings. Then he groped for the string on the electric light which he knew was there somewhere. Suddenly, just across the panel, he heard a little squeak that wasn’t one of the old sows. Again he heard it as his searching fingers finally found the string. “Holy Cats, no!” he said out loud as he jerked the string. “They’ve started to farrow. Creepers, they weren’t supposed to begin for a week yet.” He headed for the door, but stopped short as he remembered that his dad wasn’t home—and wouldn’t be.

Jim went back and gazed over the panel. There in the corner, in a nest of stale bedding, lay a huge sow in labor. At her belly two pink pigs fumbled to suck their first meal. Two feet behind her lay a third pig, lost in the straw and vainly struggling, between little convulsions of shivers, to get back to his mother. The pig squeaked weakly as he fell after each attempt, and each squeak roused the sow to see what was wrong. The pigs at her belly narrowly missed getting squashed each time she moved. Jim leaned over the panel, grabbed the stray by one ear, and lifted him gingerly to the rest of the family. The poor
little pig was cold as the dickens and needed warming up, fast. Jim chaffed his hands over the pig's sides for a moment while he thought. He looked around the house. This sow was the only one farrowing. All of the rest were sleeping quietly and wouldn't bother for a while. "What would Dad do in a case like this?" He couldn't let the pig just freeze to death. "The heat lamps, that was it, the heat lamps!"

He ran to the house, lifting his feet to get through the drifting snow. 'I won't be in for a while. Old sow's started to farrow," he shouted up to his mother as he banged through the door and down the basement stairs. "Have you got an extra extension cord I could use? I'm going to fix a heat lamp for her. A couple of the pigs are pretty cold already." He fumbled in the catch-all corner until he found the box with the infra-red heat lamps. He grabbed one and headed up the stairs. His mother met him at the landing with the cord.

"Is there anything that I can do?" She looked concerned. "I guess not," he returned as he smiled at her. Again that little feeling of pride and importance welled up in him as he forced his way out into the storm.

Back in the hog house, Jim rigged the lamp over the old sow with an old baling wire and a piece of twine. "Low enough to give the pigs some warmth, but high enough so the sow won't touch it when she stands up. That's the way Dad would fix it," he thought. When he plugged it in, the lamp made a circle of red warmth around the sow. She seemed to stretch out and enjoy the heat immediately. And the pigs stopped shivering, except the one that had been so cold before. Jim took off his mittens, picked the cold one up, and held it close to the lamp. The pig quivered and squirmed in his hands for a moment, but soon the warmth quieted him and he fell asleep.

Jim laid the pig down with the others. There were two more now, one that had come while he was at the house and one that had come spurting out into this cold world while he had warmed the other pig. He sat on his heels now, and leaned back against the panel for a moment as he watched the laboring sow.

The labor was rhythmic. The sow strained for several seconds, and then relaxed about four times as long. Strain
again, relax - - -, strain, relax - - -, strain, relax. Finally she reached a climax with a longer strain which generally resulted in the delivery of another membrane-covered, steaming pig. But this time, no pig came. The sow groaned and started the cycle over again. Once more the climax came and no pig, but Jim could see a part of the pig that should have come. It was huge, almost twice as big as the pigs that nursed comfortably at her belly. Jim had seen such pigs before, but Dad had always been there to pull them from the sow. If you didn't pull them you'd lose the sow as well as her pigs.

Jim waited. He prayed that the pig would come by itself. Time dragged and the storm howled outside. Five minutes passed into what seemed an eternity and still there was no pig. He killed time by wrestling another panel down from the loft to pen off the sow. Fifteen minutes and still no pig. He would have to pull it.

The sow's moist warm flesh seemed almost to scald Jim's cold, stiff fingers as they searched for something on the pig to pull on. It's head was foremost and the ears were too fine and slippery to get hold of. Finally, one of his fingers hooked the pig's doubled-back front leg. He wriggled his finger for a better grip, and waited for the exhausted sow to strain again. As she did, he pulled with all his might. His finger ached and seemed almost ready to slip loose when the pig finally started to give. With a final effort he tugged and the giant pig came popping out. The sow heaved a sigh, and Jim just stared at the giant pig before him. It was dead. The wait had been too long.

The pigs came as regular as clock-work now. Jim worked around the sow. He forked out all of the stale bedding and replaced it with bright, fresh straw.

It was twelve o'clock when Jim finally turned away from the red glow of the farrowing pen. The sow was resting peacefully with ten pigs nursing at her belly. Everything was now all right in the hog house, too. Outside, Jim walked slowly, breathing deeply of the sharp, fresh air as he waded through the drifts to the house. Dad would be pleased with the way he had handled things.

—Theodore Doty, Ag. Soph.