

## THE WICKEDEST THING THEY EVER SAW

The first weekend of October in western South Dakota is usually sunny and still, with temperatures in the low 60s by 3 p.m. The grass sparkles with morning frost that melts by the time the school buses come. Dust lingers over the gravel roads behind trucks carrying wheat and corn to the elevator. Sometimes a daytime moon, what the ranchers' wives call a child's moon, hangs translucent white in the east. The sky is cloudless and the blue so bright that looking into it is like squinting into the sun. On the morning of Friday, October 4, 2013, the people of western South Dakota stepped outside—to hayfields to gather bales, to clinics to administer flu shots, to high schools and to farm stores—and the sun warmed their backs under their jackets. A cold front was pushing down from Canada, promising a bit of snow and cold. Just a bit, right after nightfall. The ranchers said some early snow would be nice, would settle the corral dust in time for weaning the calves that were still out to pasture with their mothers.

As it happened, most ranchers did not have to worry about dust that fall, or even about their livestock, because half of their animals were dead by Sunday.

A rancher south of Midland, Gary Engelbretson, hadn't seen an October blizzard since 1990, when he'd driven 60 miles on snow-packed roads with less than a quarter-mile visibility to get his wife, in labor, to the hospital. On Thursday morning, a mass of gray clouds swooped down like a flock of geese on a dam as Gary pounded steel posts into the sod and stretched barbed wire between them. A fat, heavy raindrop splattered on his leather work glove, and then another, and another, until Gary tossed the fencing pliers and steel post driver into the back of the pickup and jumped in the cab, wet to his button-down plaid shirt. When he reached the white ranch house, a chicken coop that he and his wife had remodeled years ago, it was 20 degrees colder.

Rain fell for 6 hours at 34 degrees with 15 mile-per-hour winds. Cattle, sheep, and horses from South Dakota to Nebraska to Wyoming became soaked and chilled. They still had their summer coats. Gary's herd of 200 Red Angus cows and calves clustered tight against a hillside, their heads hanging. When the temperature dropped to 30, 4 inches of ice hardened on their backs and sides, over their ears and foreheads. Two hours later the cold core of the storm slid over the prairie. The temperature plunged to 10 below, the wind strengthened to 40, and 4 feet of snow fell in 3 days. The wind pushed the cows across the 1,000-acre summer pasture until a creek stopped them.

The region's power lines, sagging with ice, tipped like dominoes. Gary and his wife, recent empty nesters, dragged their mattress into the living room and hung blankets over the doorways to keep the warmth in. They dug the Christmas candles out of storage because there were no others in the house. They ate pork and beans out of the can and played Crazy 8s, each wearing 2 sweaters and 2 pairs of socks. They drank the water his wife had collected in the bathtub, and they made love under 4 wool blankets. They stopped looking out of the windows because they couldn't even see Gary's pickup less than 10 feet from the front door.

On Monday, Gary crawled out of an upstairs window, intending to feed the cows. A 7-foot drift entombed the tractor, which he freed with an hour's digging. He used the tractor's bucket to bulldoze a path across the pasture. After 2 days of dozing, he found several cow heads and necks poking out of the flat edge of a long, deep drift. The cows bawled weakly. With a scoop shovel, he hacked at the drift; it was like striking a cement wall. A calf broke free and fell down, panting. A cow lurched out, her legs shaking, then

PREVIOUS



NEXT



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she sank to the ground with a moan. Gary struck the drift harder, chunks of snow and ice shooting into the air. He ran his hand across the back of each animal that staggered past, horrified at the blanket of ice.

After the first 20 were freed, Gary realized how they had survived. When the herd stopped at the creek, the cows in the back crowded the leaders into the water, probably slowly, probably one hoof at a time. The leaders drowned, and the cows behind them stepped onto their bodies. The ones at the creek's edge fared no better; they churned the ground into mud, sinking to their knees, then their bellies, then their noses as their herdmates climbed on top of them, drowning them in the mud. The snow drifted higher, suffocating the cows at the top. Fifty-six died in that muddy grave. A month later, when the muck and snow had thawed enough to drag out the dead, Gary found stacks of cows 3 deep.

The steeple blew off the country church along Bakke Road and impaled a woman whose car was stuck in the ditch. A very drunk man in Wall stumbled across the street for beer and ran into a light pole; he passed out and froze to death. A broken water heater on a livestock tank electrocuted a woman who was attempting to fix it. Her son uncovered her body a week later; her hands clutched a pair of pliers. A teenager struck an ice-covered horse on the interstate with his car and the animal landed in the front seat, killing him. An elderly man simply froze in his bed when the power quit and neighbors couldn't reach him.

Loren Juelfs sent a semi-load of calves to the sale barn just before the rain started that Thursday, and 2 hours later the driver could feel the tires slipping when he climbed hills. At the curve through the Slim Buttes the back end wavered, then jack-knifed, and the whole thing tumbled into a rocky ravine, killing the driver and all but 29 of the calves, most of which had to be shot in the forehead by Loren because of catastrophic injuries.

Nancy Kelly leased pasture north of Oelrichs, where she ran 400 Black Angus yearlings. Foolish as yearlings are, they attempted to out-walk the storm, drifting 20 miles south into Nebraska until, one by one, they sank down and suffocated under the snow. Nancy couldn't find them for 2 weeks, until the 100-odd survivors wandered into the cemetery in Chadron, which is next to the Walmart.

Dave and Karen Vandenberg's 15-year-old son, Brody, trudged to the barn to feed his 4-H steers, which he had put inside due to his inexhaustible and, to his father, sometimes annoying overprotectiveness. Brody filled 2 troughs with hay and corn and brought a bucket of snow for them to eat since the waterlines were frozen. As Brody was scratching the back of Bruiser, his favorite, the rafters split and the tin roof folded in and several tons of snow buried the boy and his 6 calves. Dave and Karen couldn't get the tractor started to dig away the snow, were afraid of hitting Brody's body anyway, couldn't shovel fast enough to keep up with the snow falling, couldn't hear any response when they screamed the boy's name at the pile of snow, wood, and tin.

Henry Lensegrav used to wonder why no one had a grazing setup like his. He had attended a rancher's workshop in 2002, during the drought, where he learned about rotational grazing. Moving cattle often between small pastures was better for the grass than using a couple of big pastures. But how to divide his pastures so he had water in every cell? He ranched outside of Buffalo, in dry country where only horses could negotiate the steep draws and rocky hillsides. Sagebrush, sandy cutbanks, narrow creeks that dried up by July. This was the land he had inherited. Water came from tanks, and Henry couldn't afford to dig a dozen new wells.

Henry was cleaning the barn a few days later and pulled out an old wooden wagon wheel. Probably from the homesteading days, when his grandparents had immigrated from Norway and built a sod house. The foundation was still visible in the pasture, an impression in the grass surrounded by a scattered square of rocks. He thought of how rough the ride would have been on a wheel like this, and as he looked at it the best idea of

his life came to him.

In 2 summers it was done: the wagon wheel grazing setup. A well and water tanks inside a 10-acre square lot, with triangle pastures surrounding it like spokes. Of course it wasn't a perfect wheel—the borders of his land were not circular and the triangles were rough interpretations of the shape—but the concept was the same: rotate the cattle from pasture to pasture, but water them at one central source.

The only problem, though, was that water lot. On hot days, the cattle would crowd the tanks, straining the barbed wire until it snapped. The herd had scattered into 4 different pastures before Henry even realized they escaped. He upgraded to a fence made of steel pipes and anchored with railroad ties. Six feet high, rods 2 inches in diameter, corner posts with cement foundations. People said he overdid it. People said a lot of things about his wagon wheel. Henry thought that if he was going to do something, he had better do it right.

Because that's how Henry did everything. He greased the bearings on the swather daily. He never tossed wrenches into the toolbox, but arranged them according to size. Metric never mixed with standard. He scoured, not washed, the skillet he browned ground beef in almost every night. Henry was 56, had lived alone since leaving his parents' house at 21. He wanted a family—yearned for a wife, sometimes talked to an imaginary son while working—but he was also bound to the ranch, couldn't leave it longer than an overnight stay without feeling a stiffness in his neck. Many things induced a neck ache, like rain when he had hay drying in the field or when drinking more than one beer, but nothing brought on the ache like leaving. He worried about cow-related disasters—the well could quit and they would die of thirst. One can't woo a woman at home, Henry knew, but he also knew he would never venture far enough to find one.

Henry's cows came for water on Thursday evening, just as the rain was turning to snow. As usual, the 350 cow-calf pairs funneled in and jostled for space at the tanks. The wind rattled the steel gate that led back to the pasture until the chain Henry had used to keep it open broke. He had not noticed the single rusty link. The gate slammed shut against a railroad tie and the wind pressed it against that post for 3 days straight. Henry would cry later, thinking the cows could have just pushed the gate open and escaped.

But the cattle did not even try. They were weak from hours of ice, snow, and wind, and the old cows and young calves lay down. They died first, their bodies becoming giant black stepping-stones. Those that stood churned the sod into mud as thick and heavy as wet cement. The urine and feces made the pool warm, inviting. The cows descended into it, thighs and briskets disappearing until they were stuck, thrashing and mooing. They finally died when other cows pushed their faces into the sludge. Snow drifted against the edges of the lot, slowly smothering the cows that leaned, tired, against the iron fence.

Henry cleaned up the lot alone, refusing his neighbors' offers of help. He hooked a log chain around legs, necks, any parts he could find, and dragged the cows out with a tractor. He made a pile next to the old homestead foundation. He hired a man with a backhoe to turn the depression into a hole. The man took one look at the pile and threw up. Henry ended up digging the thing; a backhoe wasn't much different than a tractor bucket. Then he dozed the bodies into the hole, covered them up, and went home.

When the police questioned the backhoe man, he said Henry hadn't seemed all there. He'd been drinking, the man said, and he stared a long time at that pile. Wouldn't say a word. After he paid me I don't know what he did, the man said. I never saw no gun. I loaded up my backhoe and got the hell out of there.

On Monday 2 sisters, Anna and Josephine Englehart, spent the afternoon sailing down drifts on runner sleds. A Mud Butte man, Stirling Jorgenson, dozed a path to his barn with a skid loader and found his milk cows alive but so anxious to be milked that they charged at the sight of him, sending him scampering for the fence. Ruth Vandenberg received a call that the package of homemade lefse she had mailed to relatives in Texas had been recovered, frozen and likely preserved. Did she want it returned or sent on? A California

woman who had been stranded at an interstate motel in Kadoka, living off vending machine food, took a picture of herself standing on the drift over her car and decided western South Dakota was the most merciless place in the world.

The dead kept emerging—beneath trees in swales, by the spillways of dams, inside culverts, from under snow banks that did not melt until Halloween. For months, livestock that had survived grew thin and died of illnesses that baffled veterinarians. But there was something else about the storm's survivors. When corralled, sheep threw themselves into fences, catching their heads between the planks and asphyxiating. Cattle walked back and forth across pastures as if they were being pursued. The horses aren't right anymore, their owners complained. They spook at everything. They see a tree and they try to throw you off.

People didn't know what to do with it all: the cattle tangled in barbed wire along the highways, the snow bloody around them from the hungry people who came in the night and carved out ribs and loins. The tunnel-like underpasses of I-90 jammed with sheep. The camp for disabled children near Hill City, where a barn collapsed on 25 therapy horses. When the people sought help—from the Red Cross, the National Guard, someone, anyone—no one came. That month the U.S. government shut down, locked in a political battle that froze spending. All they got were a few national news reports that mentioned “some early winter weather over the Great Plains.”

For the next year, bankers processed bankruptcy paperwork. Ranchers turned into Schwann's truck drivers, clerks at farm stores, tire-changers at Tires Plus. Men who had relished bacon and cream and potatoes stopped eating. Mothers went silently into the Salvation Army store hours away in Rapid City where they were anonymous. The families with enough livestock to keep ranching devised elaborate budgets, wouldn't buy an unplanned candy bar at the gas station. They sold trunks and tea sets and doily collections, all brought from Germany or Sweden or Poland and carried in covered wagons, on eBay.

When pheasant season arrived in November, the out-of-state hunters were upset that the storm had reduced the bird population by 80 percent. Caught with only a portion of their winter grass storage gathered, prairie dogs starved in their network of tunnels. The badgers invaded the tunnels and feasted. Most jackrabbits had frozen in their burrows, so coyotes set their sights on barn cats. The antelope, which seem so hardy and smart, died by the hundreds, as did the whitetail deer. Only the mule deer seemed unaffected.

When Sharon Sorenson turned north on Highway 73 on the Thursday evening of the storm, her windshield wipers skimmed away paper-thin sheets of ice. She was 50 miles from her parents' ranch, coming for her mother's birthday from Sioux Falls, where she was a third-year art major at the Lutheran college. The rain became snow. When she reached the village of Usta, nothing but a post office and 2 houses, she had to stick her head out of the red Grand Am to see the white lines.

Sharon was only going 20 miles per hour when she hit the deer. They appeared like white ghosts, their eyes yellow in her headlights. She saw them collectively turn their heads, and then she plowed into the herd. She screamed at the suddenness of it. Deer thumped against the front bumper and flopped over the hood, kicking their skinny legs. One rolled up the windshield, over the sunroof, and landed behind the car. Heads and butts whacked hollow against the doors like someone was hitting the car with a rubber mallet. Sharon gripped the wheel in both hands, took her foot off the gas, and drifted until the car came to a stop.

She was in the middle of the herd. A buck to the left, young with 3 points on his antlers. Another looking in the rear window, grander, like the ones mounted at her boyfriend's house. The rest were does of various sizes. All mule deer, so named because of their gray hair and mule-like ears. Thirty pairs of eyes peered at her, black now because the headlights were shattered. They reminded Sharon of zombies in the movies; they hadn't scattered when she smashed into them, just stood there. She felt the hot blush on her chest that happened whenever she felt nervous.

Sharon figured the car was badly dented but drivable. She honked the horn, but the deer only took one step back before moving forward again. The heat of the car was too attractive; they pressed against it, jostled to be near it, laid their faces on it. Twelve degrees, the dashboard glowed in blue numbers. She inched ahead, the deer trotting along like cattle with a feed truck. But there was only shapeless snow. She felt the right tire fall off the shoulder and corrected left, but soon the car drifted off the other edge. She couldn't find the pavement again and the Grand Am was stuck.

The first night wasn't hard. The car had plenty of gas, and Sharon remembered to clear the tailpipe and run the engine only enough to stay warm, which turned out to be most of the night. She had a bottle of water and a package of Sour Punch candy straws. At midnight she screamed profanities at the deer until they scuttled aside and she could grab the quilt from the trunk that had been there since a summer trip to the lake. By Friday afternoon, she had a quarter tank of gas and had learned via radio that the storm would continue until Sunday.

If it had been winter, Sharon would have travelled with a parka, boots, coveralls, gloves, a hat, food, water, and those tiny hand warmers that heat up when shaken. Instead she had a wool fall jacket, warm but nothing against the cold that began in her toes and fingers and slunk up her arms and legs until her whole body shivered. She put on 4 pairs of socks, 3 t-shirts, 3 long-sleeved shirts, and a sweatshirt. She wrapped herself in the quilt, then layered everything else in her bag on top, even her underwear. She stuffed snow into the water bottle and breathed against the plastic until it melted enough to drink. Her mother always told her heat escaped from the head, so she made a turban out of a sweatshirt. She found 5 McDonald's french fries under the front seat and thanked God for whatever preservative had kept them free of mold. Snow covered the windshield, and the deer were pressed so close that all she could see out of every window was gray hair. When she touched the glass, it felt faintly warm.

Sharon did not feel fear until the third morning when the deer were gone. Until then she had believed someone would rescue her. It was 2013, couldn't they track her cell phone (it had to be emitting a signal despite the lack of service)? The deer left because they knew they couldn't survive, Sharon thought. On the ranch there was the fear of rattlesnake bites, of a bull's horn spearing her stomach, of a horse throwing her, of a PTO shaft grabbing her shirt and whipping her body in tight, dismembering circles, of a swather overturning on a hillside—but Sharon had never been afraid of those things. Maybe because she had been a kid and then a teenager on the ranch and fear wasn't real. Now she was 21 and knew it was entirely possible to die in a car buried under snow.

In her art history notebook, Sharon wrote letters to her sisters, her brother, her father. She wrote 10 pages to her boyfriend and 20 to her mother. It isn't your fault, she wrote. You didn't know it was coming. Between her tears, the shivering, and the socks she had put over her hands, the words looked childish and broken. She drew pictures of photos she remembered, like the one of her palomino Shetland pony, Shadow, and the one of her father standing in waist-high wheat. She drew the 1996 Christmas picture, her sister in a ruffled dress, her brother with a toddler tuxedo and a bald head, her newborn sister asleep in her lap. Sharon was the oldest, and in the protective and arrogant way only oldest children do, she felt that if she died her siblings would be lost. Then she sketched the deer faces until her fingers were too cold to hold the pencil.

On Monday morning, Sharon wiggled through a window and the world was divided in 2 halves, white below blue. The snow was hard as tile under her sneakers. Nothing stirred. She turned in a circle and realized the road could be anywhere. Sharon felt the warmth of the sun and wanted to feel hope, but instead she felt numb. Suddenly her legs felt so weak and her body so heavy that she lay down, her cheek against the snow. She fell asleep and dreamed of a herd of deer wandering over the snowdrifts as if across desert sand dunes, searching for water and food but collapsing and dying one by one. She woke to the sound of a diesel engine and saw the yellow-orange of a snowplow on the horizon.

At school, Sharon took a 6-foot-by-8-foot canvas, the largest she'd ever used, and painted deer heads with oversized black eyes and a white haze in the background. She painted 5 more of the same and arranged them in a circle around herself. When she submitted the paintings to a competition, they won; the judge wrote that "they are haunting beyond words, evoking the feeling of being trapped in the belly of something hateful, something that wants to kill you. They are utterly terrifying."

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