

Coming Through Darkness

BY GABRIEL FURSHONG

I went to sleep with a sense of foreboding and woke before the alarm. The wintry morning had crept through the walls of our one-room cabin. I could see my breath drift toward the timbered ceiling. After starting a fire in the iron stove, I pressed my nose to the window, a frosted frame of blackness yielding nothing of the world beyond. The moon had waned to a sliver, and the steep slopes of the Rocky Mountain Front were perfectly hidden.

I felt a rush of anxiety.

My wife rolled over contentedly, her brown hair barely visible beneath a goose down quilt. I almost never hunt alone, especially in the impenetrable dark of an early morning like this one, but I had promised to let her sleep.

As I considered my options, the words of Jack Turner came to mind. A Wyoming climbing guide and writer, Turner laments our modern reluctance to embrace what he sarcastically calls “the cold, scary dark.” He equates the thrill of walking in wild country at night with swimming in an ocean that has sharks, challenging his readers to be at home in places that carry some degree of danger.

I squared myself tentatively against his dare, dressed quickly, and stepped into the cold. White stars wheeled in a sky that stretched unchangeably black to its very corners. Too dark, I thought, to ever light up again. I craned my neck upward and dizzily rotated 360 degrees, trying to absorb the array from all angles while stumbling toward my frozen vehicle.

The diesel was nearly gelled at 15 below, but the engine murmured sluggishly to life after several turns of the key. A country station clicked on, the only signal that reached this far west of Choteau, into the icy truck cabs of ranchers who begin every day before dawn. The music wasn't meant for me, but I happily borrowed it.

On the main road that parallels the Teton River, I imagined a gallery of animal eyes watching as my rumble of headlights passed by. I scanned for a jag in the road that marked my parking spot, somewhere ahead in the spherical convergence of high beams. Before long, I yanked the car to the shoulder and took a shaky breath. It was still hopelessly dark, so I moved quickly to avoid second thoughts.

I stacked five 150-grain shells into my .30-06. With the aid of a

headlamp, I scurried under a barbed-wire fence and began to march with a forced confidence. But the tunnel of lamplight provided a new and unexpected discomfort, casting everything beyond its edges into further invisibility.

Just as a tall fence makes unseen neighbors more suspicious, the artificial light allowed me to exaggerate the potential movements of indiscernible animals. A grizzly bear is the local equivalent of Turner's shark, and I could easily imagine one of these 650-pound creatures, on the eve of hibernation, hungrily scavenging for food to put on more fat.

Then I thought, What would Turner say in such a moment?

Like a child at the edge of a high dive, I stood stock-still and clicked off the lamp. Slowly, my pupils expanded. Soon I could see my gloved hands and the laces of my boots. I looked up at the Milky Way, a trace of infinite light, like a game trail barely visible in dense brush.

But what of my immediate surroundings? The horizon was suddenly apparent as a black mass below the star-speckled night sky. I walked toward it. Forty minutes later, I squatted on a narrow pine ridge, panting. The inhale and exhale of freezing air seemed impossibly loud on the windless ridge, and I wondered who or what might be listening.

My watch read 6:48 a.m. I let my breath fall into a rhythm and waited, squinting into the murky void. A half hour passed grudgingly before the night's firm grasp began to weaken. The black sky turned deep blue, and a world of things began to emerge in ten-minute intervals: shapes, textures, colors.

Downslope, a copse of limber pine appeared, composed of indistinguishable individuals, like a cluster of shadows. No details yet. No branches or cones. Then, each tree divided into whorls. Next, each bough bristled with needles. Finally, each tree became unmistakably, sharply green: a deep evergreen humming with morning light.

Newly golden foothills climbed toward the mountain front, each casting a thin shadow upon the other, like cobbled steps leading to a temple. Above them, the gray face of granite cliffs standing 9,000 feet high reflected pink and orange. Their rugged spines stretched beyond sight to the north and to the south. Behind those lines, rocky ridges stacked westward in waves, each waiting its turn to crash upon the sun-drenched hills, where I rested with eyes wide open, having recently come through darkness. 🐻

Gabriel Furshong of Missoula is deputy director of the Montana Wilderness Association.

