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The Dark Sky Where Orion Sleeps

On a high trail, alone with the night

Ken R. Martin



A NEW SNOW BLANKETS THE MOUNTAINS AND A PALE AURA HOVERS OVER the ridgeline. It is late September, a few hours past midnight. The ice field and the summit are a long way off.

The lemon beam of headlamp bounces along the trail while the forest glows faintly with fox fire. The air is crisp and sharp, and the aspens are jittery in the night wind. I settle in at a steady pace and soon the aspen give way to fir and ponderosa pine.

Ahead, the trees fall away in a grassy clearing. The sky opens up, the stars bright and steady. Shining from the crown of the pines is Orion the Hunter. The night caught Orion napping in the soft boughs; soon he will rise and thrust club and shield into the sky. Orion is one of the few constellations that looks like its namesake. Bright stars define limbs, while three stars of equal magnitude form a distinctive belt. A fainter triad dangles as a sword.

The wind carries the chill of higher elevations and the bugling of a bull elk. The rut is upon them, and the bull is calling his herd. I look in the direction of the sound. The mountains are purple hulks with a cloak of white, massive silhouettes against a starry sky.

I follow the trail into the night. Beyond the clearing, the forest is numinous with falling starlight. The trees gather the night wind, limbs rubbing in rhythms and wailing sounds, eerie and otherworldly. Alone, in the dark in the forest, fanciful thoughts become the coin of the realm. I feel like Odysseus entering a strange land of lovers or demons. Looking up, Orion guides me past the siren songs.

As the upper treeline approaches, the forest devolves into shrubby brush. Battered by severe wind and cold, the only growth is a stunted tangle called krummholz, a German word for twisted (krumm) wood (holz). Freed of the forest, the sky displays a promenade of winter constellations: Taurus the Bull, Auriga the Charioteer, brave Perseus who slew Medusa. The Pleiades (Seven Sisters) beckon, a brilliant patch of jewels. Arching across the sky is the Milky Way, a river of pale dew upon the black of the firmament. I say silent thanks for dark skies and the sense of wonder the darkness brings.

Reaching a high pass, I listen for the elk. The bull is just above me at 12,000 feet; he must be silently listening, too. I set off across the tundra, the celestial bowl paling, fading to indigo. The trail is gone. The ground is a hard-scrabble scree with occasional blond tufts of grass. My footsteps crunch as I reach the snow. Summits abound, and the sky is above and below.

The night sky. KEN R. MARTIN

In the half-light of morning, I make out Skull Point, an ominous clump of black rock. Higher up is the spectral wall of Icefield Pass. The summer warmth has rounded its edges, whittled its cornices, but the ice field remains, a thick stale crust of battle-hardened snow and ice.

The slope steepens, the sky awakes. The sun paints the peaks in crimson. It has been nine miles since I left the trailhead, and my progress is much slower. I reach the ice field by midmorning and rest in the shadows, the ice wall hanging overhead like a cool cloud. Above is a ramping upslope that culminates in the jagged peak I hoped to climb.

As I gauge my chances of reaching the peak, a gang of dark clouds boils over the edge. The forecast called for clear skies, but the mountains had a different plan. Caught in the open before, I will not repeat that mistake. The summit will remain for another day, another night. I have what I came for: the high tundra, the magic of dark sky, the renewal of dawn, the changing light upon the mountains.

A bruised sky hastens my step as I make for the trailhead. Dwarfed by the landscape, I must appear a solitary figure. I have seen no one, but I am not lonely. The first raindrops fall. I will arrive tired but refreshed.

KEN R. MARTIN is a writer and retired attorney who lives in Estes Park, Colorado.

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