

About 2500 words

## **Black Mountain**

The curtains were drawn. The room was dark, quiet. Each morning he hoped the clock would say that it was six, or at least five o'clock, that he had rested, that the day would be tolerable. Reluctantly he turned to look: 2:30 AM. Random thoughts, memories, came to him. He didn't want them, but they came. Past offenses and short-comings. Cutting remarks, hurtful things he had said or done. And failures. The list was long. He struggled against it, like the boy who stuck his finger in the dike. Not wanting to be alone he reached for her in the bed. Not to wake her, just to know she was there. He felt for her warmth. The thoughts kept coming, and then the vision. Wanting to escape it he sat up, swung his feet into the slippers by the bed. His clothes were on the chair next to the bureau. He gathered them, pants and shirt, socks.

The house was cold. He knelt before the stove, opened the door. A few embers glowed red, enough to light kindling. He had split some the day before, laid it by the stove. He placed the sticks carefully over the embers, inhaled deeply, then blew on the embers. Soon the fire was flickering and he put two small logs over the kindling. He turned the dial and the burner clicked. A blue flame circled the grille. He welcomed the noise, the warmth; it made him feel less alone. And the sound of water pouring into the kettle. The eggs sattered until the yolks began to harden. The toaster popped up, the kettle whistled. He had been thinking about this day for some time. Now it had come. It felt right.

When he had eaten his eggs and toast he walked to the back room. He sat on the bench and pulled the snow pants over his jeans, the down jacket over his shirt. The pack she had given him last Christmas was there on the hook. He filled a water bottle and put it in the pack. The gun he always took into the woods stayed in the cupboard. His snowshoes hung in the garage above the snow blower. He took them out the back door to the patio, sat in the moonlight and put them on. The snow was deep, deep enough so that he could walk over the fence into the meadow.

Across the meadow began the hills. Beyond the hills lay Black Mountain, but he wasn't going as far as the peak. Even in summer it was too far to go and back in a day. The climb was too steep, too difficult. Still, it was good to hike in the moonlight with the high rock face in the distance. At the crest of each hill it was there, black crags softened by chutes of snow. In the mountain's cirque lay a lake. It would be frozen over now. The elk and deer would have come down from there to the meadows on a shelf of land above the valley. A creek wound through the meadows feeding wetlands and ponds. It was there he hoped to go. It would be a difficult climb, through the snow. There was a time when it would have been easy for him, but that time was long ago, and the snow was deep.

The air was crisp and cold on his face, his breath a cloud. The snowshoes crunched in the quiet. His muscles began to warm with the effort. He crossed the meadow to the beginning of the climb. Three miles up. Two hours if his strength held. Too far on any other day. At the edge of the meadow straight silver streaks of leafless aspen painted over the dense green of lodgepole and fir beyond. He reminded himself that the many trees were really one, their joining hidden beneath the soil. They, it, grew

on the edge of the meadow, at the bottom of the hill. There the ground was moist with the run off from Black Mountain. Everything came from the mountain. It blocked the clouds that dropped rain on the meadows above that fed the springs where the water flowed, hidden in the earth, down into the valley. Where the aspens grow. He began the climb.

When he had gone no more than fifty yards he had the impulse to quit. His body ached. Every injury he had ever sustained became inflamed. His knee, his back, the knuckles of his fingers. Pangs of arthritic fire. But it was good to feel something, even pain. He moved on. Occasionally he would stop to get his bearings. It had been years since he had climbed this way. He remembered the rock cliffs ahead, farther up the mountain. If he went the wrong way he would end up trapped by them. He remembered the false opening that led nowhere. An enticing path to a dead end. He brushed the snow off a fallen spruce tree, sat and contemplated. Should he go left or right? He tried to remember. But it had been summer the last time he climbed the mountain, a warm sunny day. Now it was winter and only the shadowy light of the moon to guide him.

She had been with him, carrying the cloth sacks into which they would put the berries. The bushes are thicker and the berries are fuller, richer in flavor, in the high meadows, she had said. No one goes there, she had said, to pick the berries. We will have it to ourselves. They were full of excitement then. They had so much in front of them. He tried to think which way they had gone. They had first followed the false path and had to turn around, go the other way. That much he knew. They were young then and it was summer. It was not so difficult for them, it made the challenge of the high meadows more exciting. Now it was winter and he was no longer young. The snow covered rocks would be slippery,

dangerous. He went to the left. The woods thickened.

He became disoriented, forgot for a moment if he had gone left or right. If he kept the slope of the mountain on his right, he reckoned, he was going to the left. Many of the trees were young, their silhouettes not more than twenty feet in height. The path must have been clearer then. Nothing was clear now. Fog settled over the woods. He came into an opening, felt a sheer basalt face that rose above him, angular columns reaching into the mist. As he went on he realized he was on a ledge, just a few feet wide, that sloped toward a drop off to the thick woods below. The ledge turned up into an opening between two walls of rock. He remembered the false path, thought he must have taken the wrong direction, should have gone right. But he went on.

He came to a place where the ground rose steeply, the path narrowing between the two walls. He kicked at the snow, hardened by the frozen run off of the rock face, carved steps into the steep incline. Going up is easier than down on such steep ground he thought. It is a place where one's snowshoes could slip out from under him on the icy slope. There was nothing to break the fall, just the trees below the cliff. He climbed one step at a time, rested between each advance. He felt the pounding in his chest, heard the blood rushing in his ears. Not here, he said. Not yet.

It took him half an hour of climbing to scale the escarpment. Sweat trickled into the creases on his face. His dampened shirt clung to him. His gloves were soggy. He removed his coat, folded it into the pack. On top of the coat he placed his hat and gloves. He took a drink of water. It fed his muscles. There was another mile of snow before the first meadow, and a half mile beyond that to the first of the ponds. That is where he will be, if he is here at all, he thought. I will have to walk carefully; it is the hour of

first light, the hour of hunting.

The climb became gentle, the forest thinned. He had risen above the fog. Occasionally he could get a glimpse of Black Mountain, the morning light glimmering on the obsidian peak. The People had camped in the meadow below the mountain, gathered the glassy rock, fashioned tools, weapons. They had felt the spirit of them, he and her, gathering berries that summer day, just as they had been gathered for thousands of years. They imagined a village of willow tepees and lodges, the voices of women and children, smoke drifting from fire rings. When they had come to the first clearing, where the ground was soft, he'd taken her by the hand, held her close to him. He'd undressed her slowly in the warmth of the sun, spread their clothes to make a bed on the spongy grass. He saw the earth, she the sky.

Cold came with the dawn. He opened his pack and put on the coat, hat and gloves. The air was sharp in his lungs, the snow crunched under his feet. As he walked he looked for tracks, hoping for deer or elk. But there were only rabbits and squirrels, occasionally signs of fox. Once he saw tufts of fur in blood reddened snow, a scramble of tracks; life's sustenance and ending written in the crisp cold. A chill overtook him, looking at the story. It was not the story of that summer when she had lain naked beneath him.

Strength came to him, a second wind. His stride lengthened. Their meadow lay over the next rise, he was almost there. The hoarfrost covered trees sparkled in the morning light. Crystals floated in the air. He followed the trickle of a stream. It will lead me to the meadow and the pond beyond, he thought. It had appeared suddenly where the woods thinned and the ground dropped to mounds of moss. It was where the water

dropped back into the earth, flowed beneath the soil to the valley below, feeding the aspens that he viewed from his window, starkly silver in the winter, shimmering green in the summer. Following the brook he saw deer tracks and then elk. And then he came into the meadow. He tried to remember the spot where they had lain, but it had been so long ago. There were a few spruce trees sprouting in the meadow and encroaching the edges of the glade. Nothing was as he remembered it. He must have come the wrong way, found the wrong meadow. Then he saw the tip of Black Mountain peeking above the spruce and fir. He knelt on the ground, tried to clear the snow, to clutch the earth, inhale the richness of it. But it was futile; their passion was buried in the chaste snow.

At the far end of the meadow he saw what he had seen in the darkened room. Cloven tracks, long and delicately shaped like a pair of eggplants embracing, crossed the brook. They were broad and deep from the weight, half a ton or more. He followed them into the woods. It would be vulnerable up here, high above the valley in the deep snow, unable to run, to twirl and kick. He wondered why it had come, what promise the high meadows held for it. It must be alone, here in the dark cold of winter. Perhaps that was their connection, why it had appeared in the room. It must hold great power, he thought, like a planet attracting a moon.

He came to the pond, distinguishable from the snow covered meadow only by its flatness. The tracks led across the frozen pond. As he entered the woods he saw another set of footprints join the cloven tracks, follow alongside them. He thought at first that they were made by a wolf. Odd, he thought, that there would be only one; wolves travel in packs. He noticed that there were no claw marks in the tracks, and then he understood.

Not far into the woods a rivulet joined the brook. Looking up the rivulet

he saw a darkened hollow, an opening in the woods where a warm spring bubbled out of the earth, feeding giant ferns. Sunlight filtered through the tree limbs heavy with lichen and mistletoe. He felt the power of this place, the power that had attracted the animal that had attracted him. He looked carefully into the hollow, searched the ferns and willows, the fallen logs and stumps, but saw nothing. Until he saw a stump move, bob up and down. Then he made out the broad, flat antlers, the dark brown muzzle, steam spurting from nostrils, the bell swinging like a giant goiter. Its fierce pained eyes pierced his like an opponent in the ring ready to charge. It rocked on its haunches, lunged forward and collapsed backward. Rocking and collapsing again it let out a tortured, grunting nasal moan. Over and over it struggled to get to its feet until it collapsed a last time, sat defeated on the edge of the hollow. Carefully he circled around toward the animal, thinking its leg must be caught in a root, or broken. He felt a kinship with it. They had been drawn to this place, a place which was foreign to them both. Slowly he inched forward, close enough to see the blood and the open gash in the beast's flank, the long slashing claw marks. A shiver of fear ran through him.

He hadn't expected it, it wasn't what he had planned, but the fear came, flooded his being, and for the first time in a long time he felt that he was going to be all right.

The dark early hour thoughts that had brought him here he now put behind him, retraced his steps as quickly as he could, not pausing in the high pasture of his past, anxious now for the warmth and protection of home. He longed for the bed they had shared, for the pillow that held the scent of her. As he hurried down the mountain a sudden piercing screech erupted from the hollow behind him followed by a last roaring, anguished

moan that rose to an eerie crescendo. And then silence. The weather closed in. Thick broad flakes began to fall, filled the air with their drifting, and a dense wet quiet, as if shrouded in the womb, settled over the mountain.