

A Short Conversation

Night falls fast on the mountains. Because of the trees, I guess, one minute it's almost-but-not-quite-still light, and then before you know it the shadows have lengthened and grown fat like the bears just before late fall hits. Then darkness is on you, full and lonely, without even the buttermilk face of the moon for company.

But as fast as night can come, the storms can come faster. They usually give you some warning, if you know the signs. Often the omens are there for days ahead of the event – the birds notice it first and they go to their nests and hunker down for the worst -- the bees get irritable because they know they'll have to do without foraging and they're angry – but man has forgotten much of the old signs. We're so wrapped up in setting our traps or sighting down the barrels of our rifles or whatever that we don't pay attention to the portents. Even when the clouds begin gathering, gray and tall and angry-looking like they have vengeance on their minds, we don't give enough notice to them. Then the wind picks up, sudden-like, and you can feel the electricity in the air. Everything else on the mountain goes silent and still, and at last man can see what's coming. Then you'd better find shelter, because the storm isn't far off.

That's what happened to Denver McCleary and me that bright October day in 1926. Denver was the guide I'd hired for an elk hunt, and I guess he should have seen the signs. Now, mind you, I'm no newbie in the woods – I started hunting with my daddy and Grandpappy 'bout the same time I was grown enough to say good morning. But I was new to the Colorado mountains and since Daddy and Grandpap went to their rewards I didn't have too many friends to go hunting with. Those two factors together led me to Colorado and to hire a guide who knew the unfamiliar mountains better than I did. Besides, the remote woods can be damned dangerous to the wisest of men, and only a fool would go traipsing around in them alone. Too much chance of getting lost, or falling and breaking a leg, getting snake-bit, or just taking ill (especially when you're on the downside of middle age, like me, and your ticker isn't a teenager anymore) and then you'd better have somebody around to drag your sorry tail out of Nowhere and back to Somewhere.

Denver McCleary came very highly recommended, and although it cost me a fair bit of change to hire him I figured it would be worth it. And if we played it right I might be able to bring home a beautiful elk trophy and a few hundred pounds of venison for my pennies. So it was that Denver McCleary and Nate Barclay (that'd be me, in case you weren't sure) were on the eastern side of that Colorado mountain when the coldest snowstorm that region had seen in 20 years decided to raise hell.

A mountain snowstorm can be murderous. The temperature drops like a heavy stone in a calm pond and the snow flies almost sideways with the wind whipping it into your eyes and if you open your mouth you can drown on snow before you could hollar for help. The snow is wet and thick and heavy, and when the storm is having its way you can't see twenty feet in any one direction. The snow sticks to your clothes and skin and steals your heat away, melting and wetting your clothing, then freezing the cloth to you and chilling you. A man can freeze to death in mid-stride that way. I want you to know what we were facing because it will help explain how we came to be stuck in the same cabin as Short Charlie Bohannan – who was just a little bit more than slightly dead at the time.

It was only about four in the afternoon and Denver and I were tracking a beautiful bull elk about 200 yards below the timberline on the eastern side of the mountain. We'd been following him most of the day, watching him thread through the trees like a big, brown ghost. How he kept those huge antlers from tangling in the lowest branches of the trees I couldn't say, but he moved silent and shadow-like and majestic as he led us on a chase. Every time I thought I'd get a shot at him some voice that only he could hear warned him and he'd trot away from us. I don't know if he knew we were there or not, but somehow he kept just out of my crosshairs. If I'd have been a superstitious man I'd have thought he was the devil elk the Indians talk about – the one that's really a demon spirit, too perfect and big for a hunter to ignore, and whose pleasure is to lure unsuspecting men to a lonely death in the woods or in a still, deep pond. But as I say, I wasn't a superstitious man. Didn't believe in ghoulies or ghosties, as the old prayer goes. At least not then, I didn't. But things change. Yes, things surely do change.

As the day dragged on our legs got tired and the bolt action Krag-Jorgensen rifle I was carrying got heavier and I was sure the bull would hear our stomachs growling. It had been hours that we'd been on the move, and it was wearing on Denver and me. I guess we were paying so much attention to the elk that we weren't watching the skies like we should have been. But when the wind suddenly changed and began to blow from the north Denver tapped me on the shoulder. "Forget the elk," he said. "We've got to get out of here."

"Forget him? Why? I want that bull," I replied. I was looking at Denver like he was turning green, I guess, and he pointed skyward.

"See the clouds?" he asked. "Storm's coming...fast." His voice sounded strained and worried. He squinted at the clouds and sniffed the air. "It's gonna be a bad one. Won't have time to get down the mountain. We better find us someplace to get out of the weather." I was disappointed, but I realized he knew the climate better than I did. I'd paid him for his knowledge; so I reckoned maybe I'd better listen to what I'd paid for. "Where do we go?" I asked.

He considered for a moment. “There’s a ravine about three miles from here. We can hole down in that and at least be out of the wind. If we hurry we might have time to build a fire and maybe a lean-to before it gets bad.” With that, he switched his rifle to his other shoulder and started off in a southeasterly direction with me following along behind.

The ravine was probably a good idea, but the storm didn’t wait. It was only a few minutes before the wind began to shake the trees, making their bare branches tap and clatter together, sounding like skeletal teeth chattering. Then the snow came, blasting down on us in thick, swirling, blinding sheets. Suddenly the world went white and we were being shaken like rats in the jaws of a frigid, murderous, albino beast.

The snow swirled and pelted us, bitterly cold, and driven by a banshee wind that howled in fury one minute, and the next whispered a seductive siren song and tried to lure me away into the storm-shrouded trees. “Come with me,” it would croon, “away to a quiet place of peace and sleep. Just give in to the cold and let me wrap you in my pale arms and I’ll make all your troubles go away.” It murmured in my ears like a lover would, and when I’d refuse the impulse to lie down in the deepening snow and instead force myself to take another step that lover’s whispered invitation would change again into the howling anger of a denied, demonic hunger.

“Stay close so we don’t get separated,” Denver called to me when the wind took a short breath. He huddled close with me and opened the backpack I wore; pulling out the coil of strong hemp rope I’d planned on using to drag my trophy down the mountain. He quickly looped it around his waist and tied it off, then did the same to me, linking us like two convicts in a chain gang. “C’mon, Barclay,” he shouted as the wind rose again. I saw his mouth move with more words but the banshee carried his words away like down feathers before I could catch them. Then he turned and struggled on, the snow already ankle deep around us. I glanced back for a moment and saw that our tracks were already melting away behind us as the swirling flakes filled them in. That was the first time I was really afraid. It hit me that if we didn’t keep moving and find some shelter soon that we’d be just like those footprints – covered with a blanket of snow, leaving no sign, and erased from the world of men.

Between the storm and the hour, night was full on us. I tried to make mental notes about how long we walked, calculating from our speed how long it would be until we found the haven Denver had spoken of. Three miles in good weather is only a healthy hike, taking no more than half-an-hour or so, I figured. But by now we’d been moving at least that long, and the refuge hadn’t appeared yet. On top of that, Denver had hesitated a few times, only for a moment, as though he’d just stopped to stretch a crick out of his back. Finally, I tugged on the rope, getting his attention and drawing him back until we were close enough to talk over the wind. “How much further?” I shouted through cupped hands.

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Denver suddenly looked very tired. When he spoke, his voice was almost a whisper, but somehow it cut through the noise of the storm. Maybe the banshee wanted me to hear him – wanted me to hear his words and give in to despair – when he said “Dunno, Nate. We should have been there by now. I think we’re lost.”

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