



A Midnight Clear

By James Babbage

It was a night symbolic of December in the north. Quiet, and the air so cold you almost thought you could shatter it like a pane of glass. Of the four other cabins on the lake, mine was the only one with a welcoming light shining in the window.

Standing on the porch, I watched the slight breeze move my breath away from me in little clouds. Looking up I could see thousands brilliant gems sparkling on the black velvet drape of night. On the horizon, spirits from an ancient world reeled and cavorted in their colourful, mystical dance. The distant, lone cry of a wolf echoed across the lake. Then quiet again.

On such a clear night, the moon cast a serene glow across the fresh blanket of snow. Giant spruce, whispering to me in the breeze, carved long shadows in the snow. The frozen sheet of the lake was also covered, but I could still make out the dip between the shore and water, however slight.

A beautiful night, to be sure, but special in more ways than this.

Tomorrow would be Christmas. Beth-Anne would be arriving before lunch. Christmas in the country . . . what could be better?

And that thought jarred me from my reverie. I was out here for a reason - the woodshed. The night was not going to get any warmer, after all. I clapped my hands together – a dull thud through my wool gloves – and pulled my show shoes off their resting-place. Slapping the latches in place, I grabbed the wood sack and made my way to the side of the cabin.

Walking in *the shoes* always makes the snow seem deceptively firm as if one is walking on the ground. Reaching *down* to open the lid of the woodshed quickly dissolved that illusion, though.

As I rifled through my heating supply, I heard a thud, like someone dropping a rock on soft ground. I stood up and craned my neck, looking as best I could for the originator of the sound. Listening intently, I heard nothing more and so resumed my search for some good, 4-hour logs. *Probably just a clump of snow falling from one of the trees*, I told myself.

Satisfied with my selection, I made my way back to front door. Halfway, I stopped to shift my load from one side to the other when I heard the unmistakable *crunch!* of snow, compacting underfoot.

“Hello?” I called, somewhat nervously. No vocal response, but more footsteps could be heard. Cautiously, I made my way along the side of the cabin, and peered around the corner. There, huddled on the top step was a shivering mass of rags. Caution fading on the growing wind, I hurried to the porch. Placing my burden on the floor, I reached out to the quivering figure and lightly touched a shoulder.

A weak jerk brought me face to face with an incredibly old man. I did not recognize him as a local – and I had lived here long enough that I was no longer referred to as the City Boy – but I did know





fatigue, and saw the first stage of hypothermia in the trembling body. Without a second thought, I helped the old man to his feet and – supporting him one arm, partially carried him into the cabin.

Whipping off my gloves, I checked his clothing. Surprisingly dry. The shivering had not ceased, though, so I brought him to the big rocker near the hearth. Grabbing a poker, I adjusted the logs on the fire, forcing a bit more heat from them. I then slipped back out side to fetch the additional fuel I had dropped.

The wind was picking up, strong restless gusts forcing themselves through the trees. The sky was still clear though. I rushed back in, closing the door against the wind. The old man's trembling had subsided, and there were now moments when he was completely motionless. I put another log on the fire, wrapped a natty afghan around him, and went to the kitchen. A hot cup of tea would do us both good.

I worked at the fire while the kettle heated up. By the time the water was boiling, the hearth was roaring. A few minutes later I brought two steaming cups of Orange Pekoe to the fireside. The man, still shivering in small spasms, gratefully reached for the cup. I helped him hold it steady as he took slow sips. Not a word has escaped his lips, but I put this down to the cold. I brought him some fruit and a fresh-baked muffin from the kitchen, which he quickly devoured.

His deeply creased face exploded in a smile of gratitude, but no words were forthcoming. I tried to find out where he was from, and how he ended up here. Long Reach Lake had few camps and it was several miles into the little town of Gwentyth. But my queries were only answered with a toothy grin and a shake of his head. Maybe he was mute?

Gradually, the combination of the warmth within and without eliminated his shaking completely.

His face had taken on a healthier colour by now. His head slowly drooped and seconds later he was fast asleep. His breathing was a little bubbly, but at least it was steady. I propped a cushion behind his head and quietly cleaned up the remnants of the small meal.

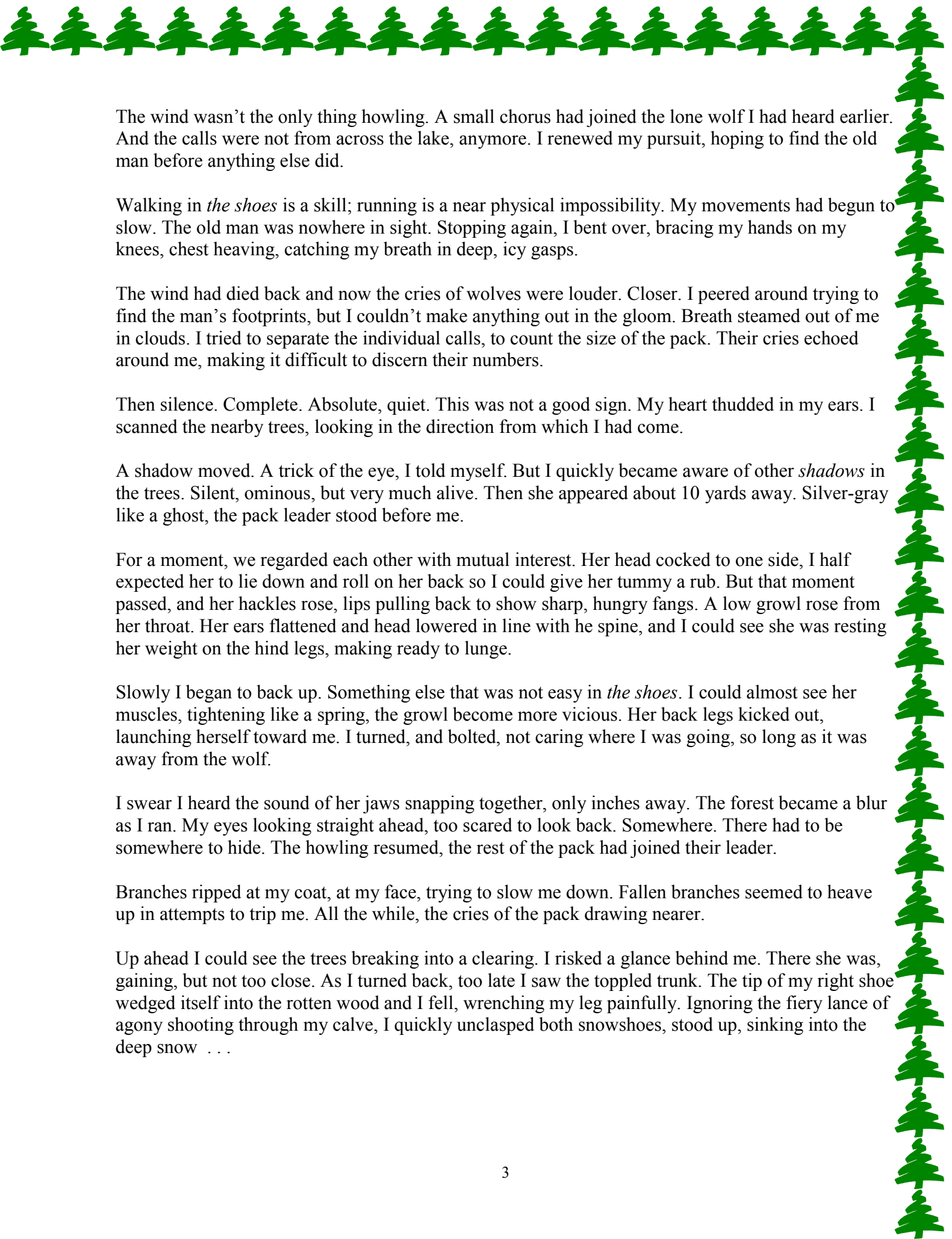
As I washed up the dishes, I felt a sharp, cold gust of wind at my back. I turned to see the cabin door swung wide open. A quick glance at the fire showed an empty chair, the afghan neatly folded and placed beneath the cushion.

I reached for my coat and ran out onto the porch.

He was nowhere to be seen. The icy wind had increased in strength. The old man couldn't last long in this weather! I grabbed my gloves and cap, and then hastily attached my snowshoes. Footprints, quickly disappearing in the whipping snow, led off into the woods, on the east side of the lake. I followed the tracks.

At first the moon was an excellent – if eerie – torch, guiding me quite well. But as I moved deeper into the forest of evergreens, I cursed myself for not having brought my own portable light source. The wind was howling through the trees, now, ripping away my shouts. I stopped briefly to catch my breath, listening for a moment.





The wind wasn't the only thing howling. A small chorus had joined the lone wolf I had heard earlier. And the calls were not from across the lake, anymore. I renewed my pursuit, hoping to find the old man before anything else did.

Walking in *the shoes* is a skill; running is a near physical impossibility. My movements had begun to slow. The old man was nowhere in sight. Stopping again, I bent over, bracing my hands on my knees, chest heaving, catching my breath in deep, icy gasps.

The wind had died back and now the cries of wolves were louder. Closer. I peered around trying to find the man's footprints, but I couldn't make anything out in the gloom. Breath steamed out of me in clouds. I tried to separate the individual calls, to count the size of the pack. Their cries echoed around me, making it difficult to discern their numbers.

Then silence. Complete. Absolute, quiet. This was not a good sign. My heart thudded in my ears. I scanned the nearby trees, looking in the direction from which I had come.

A shadow moved. A trick of the eye, I told myself. But I quickly became aware of other *shadows* in the trees. Silent, ominous, but very much alive. Then she appeared about 10 yards away. Silver-gray like a ghost, the pack leader stood before me.

For a moment, we regarded each other with mutual interest. Her head cocked to one side, I half expected her to lie down and roll on her back so I could give her tummy a rub. But that moment passed, and her hackles rose, lips pulling back to show sharp, hungry fangs. A low growl rose from her throat. Her ears flattened and head lowered in line with her spine, and I could see she was resting her weight on the hind legs, making ready to lunge.

Slowly I began to back up. Something else that was not easy in *the shoes*. I could almost see her muscles, tightening like a spring, the growl become more vicious. Her back legs kicked out, launching herself toward me. I turned, and bolted, not caring where I was going, so long as it was away from the wolf.

I swear I heard the sound of her jaws snapping together, only inches away. The forest became a blur as I ran. My eyes looking straight ahead, too scared to look back. Somewhere. There had to be somewhere to hide. The howling resumed, the rest of the pack had joined their leader.

Branches ripped at my coat, at my face, trying to slow me down. Fallen branches seemed to heave up in attempts to trip me. All the while, the cries of the pack drawing nearer.

Up ahead I could see the trees breaking into a clearing. I risked a glance behind me. There she was, gaining, but not too close. As I turned back, too late I saw the toppled trunk. The tip of my right shoe wedged itself into the rotten wood and I fell, wrenching my leg painfully. Ignoring the fiery lance of agony shooting through my calve, I quickly unclasped both snowshoes, stood up, sinking into the deep snow . . .



And fell back, screaming. My leg. Although not broken, it was in severe distress. The pack was nearly on me. I looked around frantically for some kind of weapon. Almost within arms reach was a branch from that fallen tree. I lurched sideways. My fingers gripped the branch and I pulled it to me, just as the lead wolf leapt onto me.

With both arms, I brought the makeshift club up, just barely stopping the wolf from ripping at my throat. It was on me, though, and I didn't have the strength to push it off. I was pinned down.

The wolf tried again to latch onto my throat, but the club kept those deadly fangs back. I could smell its fetid breath, and could see the hunger – the bloodlust - in its eyes. Its forepaws raked at my clothing, shredding it like so much paper. Saliva dripped on me. I tried to push the wolf back, but my arms were almost numb from running. I managed to lock my elbows, keeping those merciless jaws at bay.

Hot fire ripped through my chest. Those forepaws had ripped away my over-garments and the claws had broken the skin, in long jagged lines. The pain was excruciating. It felt as if someone had poured acid on my chest.

Blood flowed, and the rest of the pack picked up its scent. I had seen documentaries on shark feeding-frenzies. I knew without a doubt that this was the land-based equivalent. Visions of the old man, lying helpless in the forest, being mauled by these animals, would not leave my mind.

Suddenly, the wolf relented. My arms, locked though they were, felt like rubber as the pressure let up on them. The adrenaline in my body was spent. The weight of the branch forced my arms down.

Too late, I realized the wolf was waiting for this. It lunged at me again, landing full square on my abdomen, knocking the wind out of me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't move. I looked up, hearing the menacing growl. It seemed to be laughing at me, knowing it had won. Its lips pulled back, more saliva dripped onto me. I felt its body tense, and I clenched my eyes shut.

Instead of the sound of jaws snapping onto my throat, I heard the wolf yelp, not in pain, but surprise. The weight of the animal seemed to vanish. I opened my eyes to see the entire pack backing up, melting into the night. They were looking past me. I craned my neck to see what had intimidated this fierce group. My chest protested this movement, but I had to look.

There, in the middle of the clearing, was the old man.

He was not shivering. He did not look weak, or even winded. And looking at him brought a strange calmness over me.

He made his way to me. I tried to speak, but he brought a finger to his lips to hush me. As he came closer, I could see he was smiling. It was a paternal, comforting smile, and it made me feel safe, despite my injuries and my ordeal.





He knelt down beside me and I could see he was taking in my condition. He smiled again, seeming to reassure me that all would be fine. In an almost musical voice he said, “Fear not. You shall not be forsaken.” And with that, he touched my face.

Warmth spread through me, surging from my head to my feet. It seemed to *move* down my body, and as it did so, the pain from my wounds diminished, and then vanished. No dull echo of pain. Nothing. I sat up and looked at my chest. The gouges from the wolf’s claws were gone. There was not even a scratch! My clothes were still in tatters, so I knew that I had not imagined the attack.

Slowly, I tried to stand, making sure to favor my injured leg. I encountered no discomfort. Gradually I put weight on the leg. No twinges, no aches . . . nothing. It was as good as new!

I looked at the old man, my face a mixture of gratitude, awe, and fear. A single word escaped my lips, almost in a whisper, “How . . .?”

Again, that smile.

“Questions, questions . . . always so many questions.”

He patted my shoulder and I must have flinched because the smile deepened, and if possible, became more reassuring. He turned, walked a short distance away, and then moved to face me.

“Be not afraid, for I bring you good tidings of great Joy, which shall be to all people. “

As he spoke, he became *brighter*, almost seeming to glow. My knees – suddenly weak – gave out, and I sank to the ground.

“For on this day, in the City of David, a child is born, a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.” Higher and higher the old man – who no longer looked like an old man – rose into the night sky, his ragged old clothes replaced by flowing fabric that shimmered with its own inner light.

“This is the way you will know Him. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a box in a manger.”

The man whom I had befriended and who in turn had saved my life was all but gone, now, enveloped in a light so intense that the clearing shined as bright as day. The stars twinkled merrily in the ink black sky, some seeming to pulse with life. And as I watched dumbstruck, several of these *stars* grew larger, as if they were coming *closer*.

These bright lights seemed to join with my heavenly benefactor, growing as bright as he had become. I suddenly wished I had brought along my sunglasses.

Funny, the things you think about when the inexplicable occurs right in front of you.

The most beautiful . . . *sound* . . . filled my ears, my mind, my soul. The word *music* just was not an adequate description of what I was experiencing. It moved through my whole body, making my





heart beat faster and my eyes well up with tears of unbelievable euphoria. Then, the angel spoke one last time. Although he was only a beacon of light and I could not see his face, I knew it was the old man.

“Now go, and take this message with you and share it with all whom you know and love. On this day of days, spread the message of peace on Earth, and good will to all men!”

And with that there was a flash of light so brilliant, that I my eyes shut tight involuntarily. The *sound* faded, replaced by the whisper of tall pines, calling to me on the breeze. Slowly I opened my eyes to a familiar scene . . .

It was a crystal clear night, the moon casting a serene glow across the fresh blanket of snow. Giant spruce, whispering to me in the breeze, carved long shadows in the snow. The frozen sheet of the lake was also covered, but I could still make out the dip between the shore and water, however slight.

Sitting on the porch steps of my cabin, I watched the slight breeze move my breath away from me in little clouds. Looking up I could see thousands brilliant gems sparkling on the black velvet drape of night. The stars were back in their rightful places.

All but one, which was intent on competing with the moon for my attention. I shook my head. I tried to convince myself that I had merely nodded off, my mind had taking me on a fanciful little dream. This possibility was far less bizarre than admitting that the dream *was not* a dream, after all.

Moments later, I was on the verge of winning my mental litigation, when a sharp breeze blew off the lake. So icy cold was this wind that it seemed to blow right through me. I reached down to pull my coat tighter around me, and my gloved hands came away with the tattered remnants of my down parka. My eyes widened in realization of the truth and I looked up at that distant glowing ember of heaven . . . that one star.

For a brief moment, that *sound* filled my mind again. Suffused with joy, I smiled openly at the star, and made my way back into the warmth of my cabin. I had so much to do!

Tomorrow would be Christmas. Beth-Anne would be arriving before lunch. Christmas in the country . . . what could be better?

The End
Merry Christmas to All!

