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Cross-Country Skiing in Moonlight

The full moon rose high into the sky. My brothers and I and some of our wives drove to the meadow below Sumpter, parked beside the road, clamped on our cross-country skis, and rocketed down the gently-sloping meadow.

We didn't mean to go so fast, but a firm crust on two feet of snow gave little resistance to our skis, so even the gentlest slope sent us racing like downhill skiers through bright moonlight. Normal braking maneuvers, like snowplowing, with the tips of the skis close together, had little effect. Frozen crust on snow made it as if we skied on ice. Falling was not kind to us, because the crust didn't give way beneath us when we landed.

We became more and more cautious. We spent more time in philosophical discussion and in looking at the beautiful, bright night of moonlight reflected from snow, the pine trees at the edge of the meadow, and their dark shadows, and less time skiing. By midnight, it was 10 below zero, and some of us were bruised, so we packed up and headed for home.

The day before the night of the next full moon, new snow lay deep and soft on our mountain. I borrowed a snowmobile and roared up Bourne Road, then up and over the ridge west of the road and down onto the highway, leaving a trail behind me perfectly packed for skiing.

The full moon rose high enough to light up the country that night. Ash and I clamped on our skis, picked up our poles, and headed up the road. The skiing was good up the gentle slope of the road. We climbed the ridge. The cold, soft snow gave us a good bite going up the ridge, so we glided up the slope and only had to sidestep up the steepest part, near the top.

Then we had a long, smooth run down the other side, clear to the highway, except in the shadows of the trees, where a log buried deep beneath the snow made a bump on the surface. Ash hit the bump and fell backward, rolled, and came up onto his skis and was gone before I hit the bump, fell backward, rolled in the snow, came up onto my skis, and glided smoothly on

down the hill.

“Pretty good bump there in the shadows.”

“Now we know where it is.”

We skied up and down that side of the ridge many times. Ash made several runs without falling, but I never did. I knew almost exactly where the bump was, but in the dark shadow of the trees on the snow, I couldn't see it, and I couldn't see my skis, so I never adjusted for it at the necessary time.

Ash quit and went home, and I tried it at least a dozen times more. The snow, deep and soft, was forgiving of my high-speed falls. I went back in daylight, and I had no trouble at all.

When we moved to Whitney Valley, Warren and Jan came out New Year's Eve a while before midnight. Jan said, “Let's ski up the meadow in moonlight for our New Year's Eve celebration.”

I said, “That sounds crazy to me. It's 18 degrees below zero.”

Jan said, “Dress for it.”

“Eighteen below zero feels much colder at night, you know, because the sky is so dark, you radiate a lot more heat to it than in the daytime,” I said, as I put on my wool socks, laced up my ski shoes, and zipped and snapped my gaiters. Laura chose to stay at home with our daughters, who were tucked warmly into their beds, sleeping.

Less than half a moon hung in the cold sky, but it was New Year's Eve, and we skied more than a mile up the meadow by midnight, one of the few places where almost complete silence ushered in the new year. Then the slip, slip sound of skis glided away the first hour of the new year.

Our midnight New Year's ski became our ritual, moon or no. The last time we did it, a freezing mist hung over the meadow at twenty below zero. The meadow slopes gently, and there aren't many totally free glides, but the snow at that temperature makes very good gain for every kick and for every push with the poles. We skied more than two miles up the meadow that dark, foggy, nearly silent night.

An owl asked who these humans were who would ski on the meadow past midnight, and coyotes sang us a song about what it was like to be out and wild every night all night. The sounds faded again to the slip-slip sound of skis, the sound of

breathing, the sound of frost forming heavily in my mustache and beard.

Busyness and human concerns have kept me indoors too many moonlit nights and New Year's Eves. Last winter, we didn't have enough snow for good skiing where we live now.

But the snow lies two feet deep here, this winter. We just came through a warm spell, followed by colder weather that is freezing a hard crust on the snow. Clouds hang above the mountains and promise to drop a layer of soft snow on the crust, and snow on crust usually creates ideal skiing conditions.

My skis are ready. My shoes are newly waterproofed. My gaiters have seen many years of service, but they are patched and ready. When the snow and moon are right, when the owl up the hill asks "Who?" I'll glide to a stop, look at the moon, the moonlight brilliant from snow, and the black shadows.

We live now where a fire burned the forest nine years ago. Though the replanted forest is growing back well, the coyotes usually stay in the old timber, where cover is denser.

Sometimes we hear them, way up the mountain, just at the edge of hearing. If the night is perfect, when I stop and listen, I will hear them singing.

When the owl asks again, "Who?" I'll say, "It's me, skiing at midnight again deeper into the wilderness again, and I'm so glad to be here."