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627 words

Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*

Dark Night in a Dark Cabin

I liked living at the cabins close to the mountain reservoir, that summer after classes at the college in the valley.

Vandals had damaged two cabins, and I repaired them to pay my rent. I replaced broken windows, and I replaced boards in the deck where fire had burned the wood. I borrowed a pickup and hauled trash from the yard and the cabins. I repaired leaking roofs. The owners used the white cabin some weekends, and I lived in the unpainted cabin.

The ridges that cradled the reservoir, water for Paradise, a town in the foothills of the Sierras in northern California, had been logged thirty years before. Loggers had left some older trees. I dug a twenty gallon metal drum into the long-ago bulldozed cut bank near the cabin, fired it with wood, and baked sourdough bread.

Steller's jays and magpies checked with me for food scraps. Eagles and hawks circled above the mountain, hunting. Coyotes serenaded me every night.

I liked living without electricity, running water, or plumbing during my three-month break from high speed civilization. I didn't own an automobile. I walked out to the highway and hitchhiked to town when I needed to buy anything, but baking my own bread and keeping large sacks of rice and beans meant I didn't have to go for supplies often. My cat and dog loved our mountain break from city living.

I had kerosene lamps, but summer's long days and my desire to be outdoors meant I didn't use them much. On moonless nights, my cabin was dark inside. Nearby trees reduced starlight. One night, I had nearly achieved sleep. Wings fluttering in the dark startled me, and I reached for the flashlight I kept by my bed. Something hit me chest high, clawed me, and knocked me back. I yelled, grabbed something furry, and threw it from me. I grabbed

the flashlight and headed for the door, turned, and shone my flashlight back, ready to run from a monster.

My Siamese tomcat, Simon, knew I'd gone nuts. He pinned a huge moth to the floor and waited to see what I would do next. I had thrown him across the room and nearly cost him his prey.

I turned the flashlight off and put it on the table near the door. I said, "I'm sorry. I just reacted. I didn't take time to figure anything out. Are you sorry you scared me out of my skin and scratched me? I'm going outside. There's a little more light out there."

I stepped out into the dark night and onto my dog, Edward, stretched out asleep and too black to see on the front step. Edward ki-yied full speed away while I flailed wild armed and wild legged for balance through the dark night. Before I landed flat in front of the front step, I offered gratitude to the dark night that I was barefoot, less painful to a stepped-on dog than shoes, I'm sure.

Two animals knew their human had gone wild and broken rules that govern beings living together in peace. As I sat under the star-filled sky, I thought I saw my black dog, dark shadow in a dark night, waiting to see what I'd do next. I apologized to him. I tried to explain to my dog and cat about the differences in our ability to see at night.

They might not have understood what I said, but they readily forgave my unpredictable actions and settled happily with me back into our quiet mountain summer. I screened my cabin windows against flying creatures. And after that night, I always checked my animals' whereabouts, then shut off my flashlight and moved around, at peace with my dog and cat in the mountain night.