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Dark Matter

Written by Michelle Paver

Published by Orion Books

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DARK MATTER

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First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Orion Books,
an imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane,
London, WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 2378 1

ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 2379 8

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc



Embleton Grange
Cumberland

24th November 1947

Dear Dr Murchison,

Forgive me for this rather belated reply to your letter.

You will I am sure understand why I found it hard to entertain your enquiry with any pleasure. To be blunt, you evoked painful memories which I have tried for ten years to forget. The expedition crippled a friend of mine and killed another. It is not something I care to revisit.

You mentioned that you are working on a monograph on 'phobic disorders', by which I take it you mean abnormal fears. I regret that I can tell you nothing which would be of assistance. Moreover, I fail to see how the 'case' (as you put it) of Jack Miller could provide appropriate material for such a work.

MICHELLE PAVER

In your letter, you conceded that you know little of Spitsbergen, or indeed of anywhere else in what is often called the High Arctic. This is to be expected. Few people do. Forgive me, though, if I question how you would then propose to understand what it can do to a man to overwinter there. To battle the loneliness and desolation; yes, even with the many comforts that our modern age affords. Above all, to endure the endless dark. And as circumstances dictated, it was Jack's misfortune to be there alone.

I don't think we will ever learn the truth of what happened at Gruhuken. However I know enough to be convinced that something terrible took place. And whatever it was, Dr Murchison, it was real. It was not the result of some phobic disorder. And in this respect I would add that before entering politics I undertook some years of study in the sciences, and thus feel myself entitled on two counts to be considered a reasonable judge of evidence. Moreover, no one has ever doubted my sanity, or proposed to include my 'case' in a monograph.

I don't know how you came by the knowledge that Jack Miller kept a journal on the expedition, but you are right, he did. I saw him writing in it many times. We used to rag him about it, and he took this in good part, although he never showed us its contents. No doubt the journal would, as you

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suggest, explain much of what happened; but it has not survived, and I cannot ask Jack himself.

Thus I fear that I am unable to help you. I wish you well with your work. However I must ask you not to apply to me again.

Yours sincerely,
Algernon Carlisle

IO

31st October

Did I make it happen? Was I more 'open' to perceiving it because of what I'd just read? Because of the date?

It snowed in the night. When I went to take the seven o'clock readings, it was warmer, only minus nine, and a clear 'morning', thank God, the moon a brilliant crescent in an indigo sky prickling with stars. Fresh snow clothed the camp in weird grey radiance, and I could *see*: the pale curves of the whale bones on the beach, the icebergs on the sea. (The sea is mercifully unfrozen; I checked. From now on I'm going to keep an ice watch three times a day.)

I felt ashamed of my cowardice over the past few days. Those dismal circuits around the cabin, with me clinging to the walls – as if I'd be lost for ever if I didn't maintain contact. I can't let things affect me like this. Not with two more weeks to go.

So in a spirit of defiance, I took the dogs for a walk on the slopes behind camp.

To begin with it was beautiful. The dogs raced about, yelping, chasing each other. Isaak tugged on his rope – I'm training him to accompany me – but I was firm, and soon he was trotting along docilely; which was just as well, as I was wearing snowshoes and had a ski pole in either hand and a rifle over my shoulder.

As the twilight strengthened, we followed the frozen stream uphill, and I congratulated myself. See? All it takes is a bit of grit. And look how beautiful it is! The undulating white slopes, the glimmering peaks, the drooping heads of grasses poking through the snow. Even the mining ruins were transformed.

Isaak gave an excited *wuff* – and in the distance I made out black dots moving on white. Reindeer!

See? I told myself as I restrained an eager husky. There *is* life out here. You just need the guts to go and find it.

The dogs hurtled after the reindeer, which tilted back their heads and galloped off at surprising speed. The dogs quickly realised it was hopeless, and bounded back to me.

It was hard going uphill, and soon I was bathed in sweat. Climbing in snowshoes means digging in with your toes so that the spikes underneath can get a grip,

and hauling yourself up with your ski poles till your elbows ache. And after all that rain there was ice under the snow, so each step made a glassy crunch – or an alarming scrape when I hit exposed rock – or a jolting *whump* in a drift.

One snowshoe came off, and I knelt to rebuckle it.

When I rose, the land had changed. The mountains floated above long drifts of fog. A gauzy curtain veiled the bay. As I watched, the fog thickened till I could only distinguish features by contrast: the inky sea against the lighter grey shore.

‘Time we were getting home,’ I told Isaak, and we started back. He plodded ahead, glancing back at me from time to time as if to say, why so slow? I kept my eyes down, watching my footing.

When I looked again, the mountains were gone. Sea and camp had vanished, obliterated by fog. I felt its clammy chill on my face.

‘Sooner we get home the better,’ I told Isaak. My voice sounded jittery in the stillness. And it was so very still.

Defiantly, I snapped on my headlamp. Isaak’s shadow loomed: a monster dog. My light scarcely illumined a yard ahead of me, but it showed my tracks clearly enough, leading back to camp. The best thing about snowshoes is that they make such unmistakable tracks. An idiot could follow them.

I don't know how I lost the trail, but I did. In disbelief I looked about me. Gone. I took the torch from my pocket and tried that. No good. Like the headlamp, the beam scarcely lit a yard in front. And 'beam' is too strong a word. It was more of a diffuse glow, dissolving into the grey.

Downhill, I told myself. That's the ticket.

But around me I saw only grey, and with all contrast gone, it was impossible to make out the lie of the land. I swayed. I couldn't tell up from down. I headed off again. My snowshoes slid on an icy patch. At the same moment, Isaak caught a scent and lunged forwards. I fell. The rope slipped out of my hand. He was gone.

'Isaak!' I shouted. My voice sounded muffled. He didn't come back.

Cursing, I groped for my ski poles and struggled to my feet. The fog pressed on me from all sides.

'Svarten! Upik! Anadark! Jens! *Isaak!*'

Nothing. I stumbled on.

No, Jack, this is the wrong way, you're going uphill.

I backtracked. But there were no recognisable features to backtrack *to*. By now my trail was a mess of churned snow, no use following that. I thought of the storm lantern hanging from the antlers above the porch, where I couldn't see it. I wished I'd had the sense to hang one behind the cabin, too.

Yanking off my headlamp and throwing back my

hood, I strained for some sound to guide me. The sea was too far off, and the stream was frozen. I heard nothing but my own urgent breath.

Lost. Lost.

Inside my waterproofs, my sweat-soaked clothes chilled me to the bone. I willed myself to keep calm. Think logically. How do you tell up from down?

Answer: you kick the snow ahead. If you can see where it goes, there's level ground in front. If not, there's a drop.

Pulling up my hood, I refixed the headlamp. Which isn't as easy as it sounds when you're wearing mittens and your hands are shaking.

My mind darted in panic. I saw myself stumbling further and further from camp, heading blindly for the icecap, falling down some forgotten mineshaft.

I thought, when two days go by without any transmissions from me, Bear Island will raise the alarm. They'll send a search party from Longyearbyen. Two days later – ice permitting – they'll arrive. They'll find a deserted camp and desperate dogs. Next summer, maybe someone will find my bones. All this flashed through my mind in an instant.

Then I remembered the compass in my pocket. *Idiot*. All you've got to do is head north-east and you'll reach the sea.

I dropped the bloody thing in the snow. I scabbled

for it. Whipped off my mittens. Couldn't find it. Shit.
Shit.

Found it. The arrow didn't move. Not broken, surely not broken?

I jiggled it. The arrow swung wildly. My hand was trembling, I couldn't hold the compass steady. I set it on a rock.

The arrow – the blessed little arrow – swung round – wavered – and went still. There. That way.

Gasping, I stumbled downhill. I passed a patch of snow dotted with tufts of light-brown hair where a reindeer had rested, and this sign of life heartened me immensely. A few paces on, my headlamp caught the bright yellow spots of a dog's frozen urine. Then I heard the distant yowls of huskies.

Thirty paces more took me to the beach.

'Jesus,' I whispered. '*Jesus.*'

In my wanderings I'd strayed a long way off course, and had fetched up at the eastern end of the bay, under the cliffs. Sagging with relief and ashamed of my panic, I turned my back on the cliffs and started along the shore, keeping close to the water for fear of losing myself again.

The humped bulk of the emergency storehouse loomed out of the fog. Then the whale bones, glittering in the beam of my headlamp. At last I made out

the bear post – and beyond it the miraculous glimmer of the lantern over the porch.

I shouted for the dogs. ‘Upik! Pakomi! Anardark! Eli! Isaak!’

No response. But that was OK; they’d come back when they were hungry. Eagerly, I hurried on.

As I approached the bear post, my headlamp lit the cairn of rocks at its base, where a tuft of dead grass poked through the snow. The light touched the weathered grey wood of the post. Fog had darkened the blotchy stains to black.

The dread came from nowhere. Without warning, my flesh began to crawl. I felt the hairs on my scalp prickle and rise. I couldn’t see anything except the bear post and its cairn of stones, but my body braced itself. It knew.

Then, through the fog on the other side of the post, came an odd, muffled scraping. A sound as of metal dragged over rock.

Jerkily I turned, the beam of my headlamp sweeping the fog. I saw nothing. And yet that sound was louder, more distinct. Clink. Clink. Coming closer. Towards me.

My heart hammered in my throat. I tried to run. My legs wouldn’t move.

It was in front of me now, the sound only a few feet

away – and still I saw nothing. This can't be. But I hear it.

Clink. Clink.

Silence.

It had reached the post. It was so close that if I could have moved, I might have reached out my hand and touched – what? A presence. Unseen. Unbearably close.

I stood helpless, not breathing, my arms clamped to my sides. Dread rising within me, a black tide drowning . . .

Behind me, the patter of paws.

With a moan I broke free. I staggered back. My snowshoes crossed. I fell.

Isaak ran into the beam of my headlamp and stopped, ears pricked, tail tautly raised. His eyes gleamed silver, throwing back my light.

As I got to my knees, he came towards me, lashing his tail. In his silvered eyes I saw the twin reflections of a dark round head.

It took a moment to recognise myself.