

Terror Stories from the Territories

Chilling tales from the journals of Jack G. Harlowe



SPECIAL
SNEAK-
PEEK
EDITION

AS TRANSCRIBED BY EDWARD MARTIN III

Hi!

What you have in your hands is a tiny taste of my most audacious project – *Terror Stories from the Territories*. Each volume embraces a theme, and offers stories in that theme. Ten twisted tales casting light into darkness and darkness into light.

Although many say good stories are why we exist, I think it's not the stories that do the trick – but the connections we make telling them and listening to them.

Jack Harlowe is a connections kinda guy. Each book is an adventure, each story a connection, and Jack's our guide through all of it. Jack has listened to every story and every storyteller, and he believes them all.

As for me...?

I'd be a fool to bet against Jack.

Enjoy the stories. Enjoy the connections.

Trust me – there are many more.



MY NAME IS JACK HARLOWE, AND I HAVE A STORY TO TELL YOU.
MANY STORIES, IN FACT.

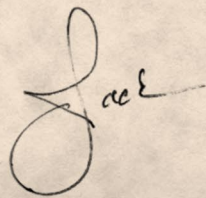
I HAVE WALKED THROUGH CITIES, TOWNS, COUNTRY ROADS,
DESERTS, AND MORE. I HAVE TRAVELED IN BOATS, PLANES, CARS,
BROKEN-DOWN BUSES, ON HEROIC HORSES, AND MORE.

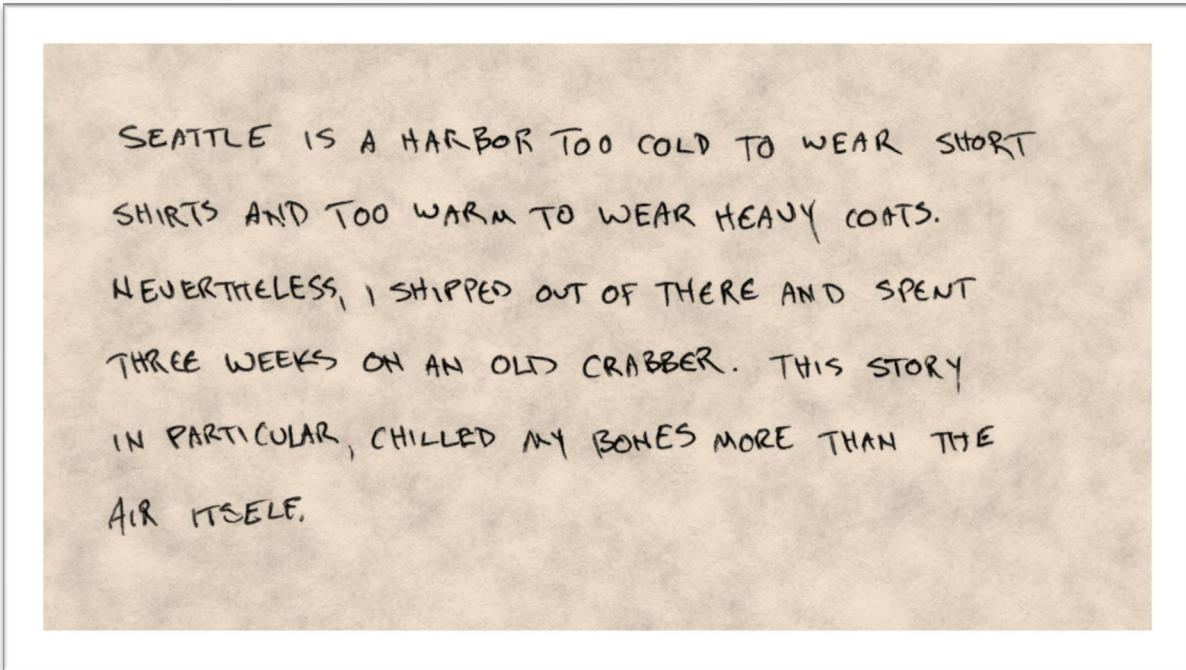
EVERYWHERE I GO, I MEET PEOPLE. SO MANY PEOPLE, SO VERY
DIFFERENT, EACH WITH DREAMS AND LIVES AND NEEDS AND JOYS.
PEOPLE ARE THE SHINING STARS OF TRAVEL AND EXPLORING.

BUT WHAT I'VE LEARNED MOST OF ALL WAS THE SECRET WONDER
THAT ALL PEOPLE CARRY: THEIR STORIES. IN EACH OF US
LIE STORIES THAT WE'VE HEARD, STORIES THAT WE'VE FELT
IN OUR BONES AND OUR GUTS. STORIES WE CANNOT CONTAIN.

WHAT I LOVE MOST ABOUT PEOPLE ARE THESE STORIES THAT THEY
TELL WHEN THE FIRES RUN TO DULL EMBERS, WHEN THE MOOD
IS QUIET, AND WHEN THEY FEEL SAFE ENOUGH TO SPEAK OF
WHAT SCARES THEM. WHEN THEY WILL BE LISTENED TO.
WHEN THEY WILL BE BELIEVED.

THESE ARE THE STORIES I HAVE FOR YOU. AND I BELIEVE THEM.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jack Harlowe". The signature is stylized, with a large, looped initial "J" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.



LADY GHOST

Jacob drank the entire pint in one pull. Impressive – I know how bitter that beer is.

“She’s real,” he said. “I’m going to find her.”

“You’re a nutter,” I said. “I’m going to buy you another beer because God loves us more when we buy beer for nutters.”

He approached the next beer – which was his sixth beer, by the way – with a little more caution. I imagine the first one was finally having some effect. Plus, I think he premedicated before coming to the tavern.

“She’s real,” he repeated. “I saw her.”

“You saw her?” I asked. “You saw the Lady Ghost?”

He stared into his beer and was silent a moment. “Well, Old Bill saw her and I know he was telling the truth.”

“Jacob, Old Bill moved back down to the Lower 48 ten years ago. Why are you bringing this up now?”

Jacob polished off the last of the pint and slammed the glass onto the table. “Because it’s time. It’s time, dammit, and I’m going to show you he was right all these years. I’m going out there tonight to see her, and then you’ll know.” He leaned forward. “I know she’s real.”

Abruptly, he stood up. “I’ll see you when I get back,” he said, and he spun on his heel and marched out the tavern door.

Shawn leaned over and took the empties away. “What was that all about?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Jacob’s off his rocker,” I told her. She smiled. I’m sure to her, we were all off our rockers. She came up only two years ago from Portland. No matter how crazy it might seem in Portland, by the time you passed through Kotzebue, the entire rest of the world must seem saner than sane. “He’s off to play footsie with the Lady Ghost.”

“Who’s she?” she asked.

“Oh, that’s right,” I said. “You don’t know about her. Well, it’s not complicated – the Lady Ghost is a lady ghost. She walks out on the Bay, looking for a mortal man who can love her, so she can move on into the afterlife. Yadda, yadda, yadda. It’s a local thing.”

Shawn nodded. “Okay, that makes sense. Yeah, we had Bigfoot down where I grew up.”

I nodded. “Everybody’s got legends. If there’s a swamp nearby, it’s a swamp devil, or if there’s a forest nearby, it’s probably something to do with a goatman. When I lived in Phoenix, it was the Lost Dutchman, who apparently mislaid his treasure trove somewhere on the mountain. The world’s full of weird-ass legends.”

I drank more.

“So Jacob’s going out to find this one, the Ghost Lady?”

“Lady Ghost,” I corrected. “Yep, he’s gonna wander around out there all night in the fog looking for her, and if we’re lucky he’ll pass out near a dead seal and swear it was her. That would make a terrific story.”

She pointed. “Is that his coat?”

It was. I sighed. “Shit. I don’t want the old bastard freezing to death on my watch.”

Fifteen minutes later I was dragging Jacob’s big coat with me, and tramping down the path toward the bay.

I didn’t expect him to go far. Normally four beers was barely enough to wake him up, but I was pretty sure he had premedicated earlier that evening.

“Jacob, where the hell are you?” I muttered. I wasn’t going to start calling out his name — not yet. I’d probably just scare him to death. Safest move would be to find him, give him his coat, and let him make the call.

I reached the beach in ten minutes. It was pretty cold out.

The water was still like a mirror and a thin fog was everywhere. I could see trees and the beach, of course, but if I had to guess, I’d say visibility was maybe forty or fifty feet.

I stopped to catch my breath.

Damn, it was beautiful. There was a half-moon up in the sky, and everything was cast in shades of silver. The water made tiny laps at the pebbled beach, and the wind was only the tiniest gust. I took a deep breath, and the air was so crisp and fresh I could almost feel the insides of my lungs burning. As much as I hated the lack of conveniences, this place kicked Phoenix’s ass nine ways from Sunday.

I raised my voice a little more: “Jacob!” I called. “Where are you?”

No answer.

Damn, he had already passed out. Now I'd have to actually hunt him down in the fog.

Annoying.

I tripped and my feet tangled in something soft. Something that wasn't just pebbles or a branch. It was a cloth something.

I bent down and picked it up. It was an old work shirt, worn through in spots, torn in spots, and filled with humanity. More distressing, it was the shirt Jacob was wearing when he left.

I tucked it under my arm – the absolute very last thing that I wanted to find is Old Jacob lying somewhere sleeping it off with only his long-handled underwear on. I would not be able to unsee that. Better to be able to cover him. Once I found him.

“Jacob!” I called a little louder.

Then I saw her.

At first, I thought she was just a reflection, some trick of the light my glasses played on me, but nope, there she was.

I have to admit, the Lady Ghost was, in fact, stunningly beautiful.

She was exactly what I expected to see -- a thin beautiful woman with long flowing hair. She walked softly, ethereally, across the bay, right on top of the water, in a place where I knew it was at least twenty feet deep, if not deeper.

Did I say beautiful? She practically glowed.

She wasn't wearing much, and what she wore left little to the imagination. It was a sort of a slip. She was barefoot. Where her feet touched the surface of the water, the most delicate ripples spread.

I looked around, thinking maybe someone was fooling me, maybe Jacob was in on it, but there was no one there, no one except me and this beautiful, slender vision of a woman.

She turned and started her gliding walk toward the shore.

I stepped closer, and rubbed my eyes. I didn't expect that to actually solve anything, but I've seen people do it in movies. She was still there, and still softly and slowly walking closer to the shore.

Closer to me.

My god, she was beautiful! Her eyes were clear and perfect, her skin like some kind of cross between the smoothest alabaster and something magical.

I stepped closer, and stopped at the water's edge, watching her.

"Who are you?" I asked.

In response, she glided closer.

I was stunned. Absolutely stunned. When I returned to town with her, everybody was going to completely freak.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "You look cold." It seemed like a pretty stupid thing to say, but I was pretty much saying whatever came out of my mouth.

I reached out to her, and she reached toward me.

In a man's life, there are few times when he knows without a shadow of a doubt what love really is, and in that exact moment, as I reached toward her and she reached toward me, my heart and mind sang with this exact feeling, with the sense of absolutely pure and passionate love.

Her embrace was brilliant. It was everything a man could ever want in life, in love, and for the rest of his days.

Then I felt her arms tighten like steel bands and I was lifted from the beach, high into the air.

The water heaved upward and erupted in chaos, revealing Something Horrible.

Something Horrible looked like some kind of frog or fish, but fifty, maybe sixty feet wide, with a body that trailed fatly down into the depths of the bay. Something Horrible's head had a thick tendril protruding from it, for nearly thirty feet, and ending at my beloved Lady Ghost. I looked into her face, but it wasn't quite a face anymore, and the arms tightened and tilted me upside down.

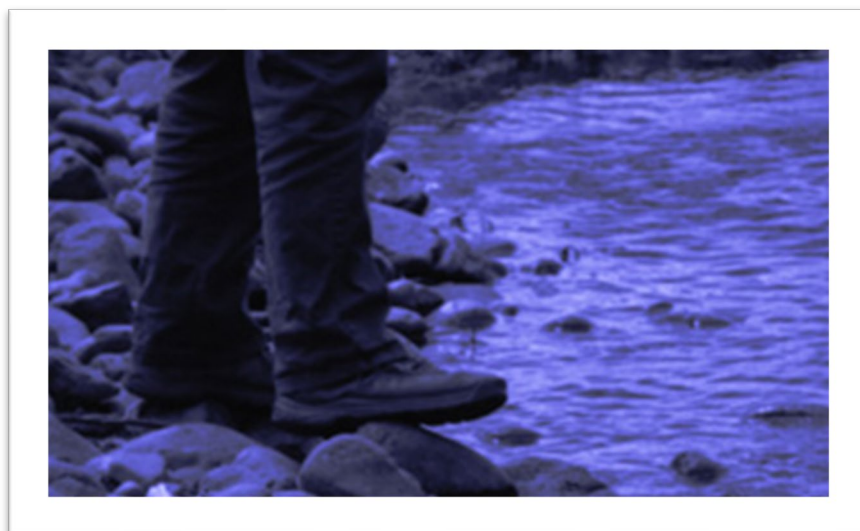
I dropped Jacob's shirt and watched it fall upward back onto the beach.

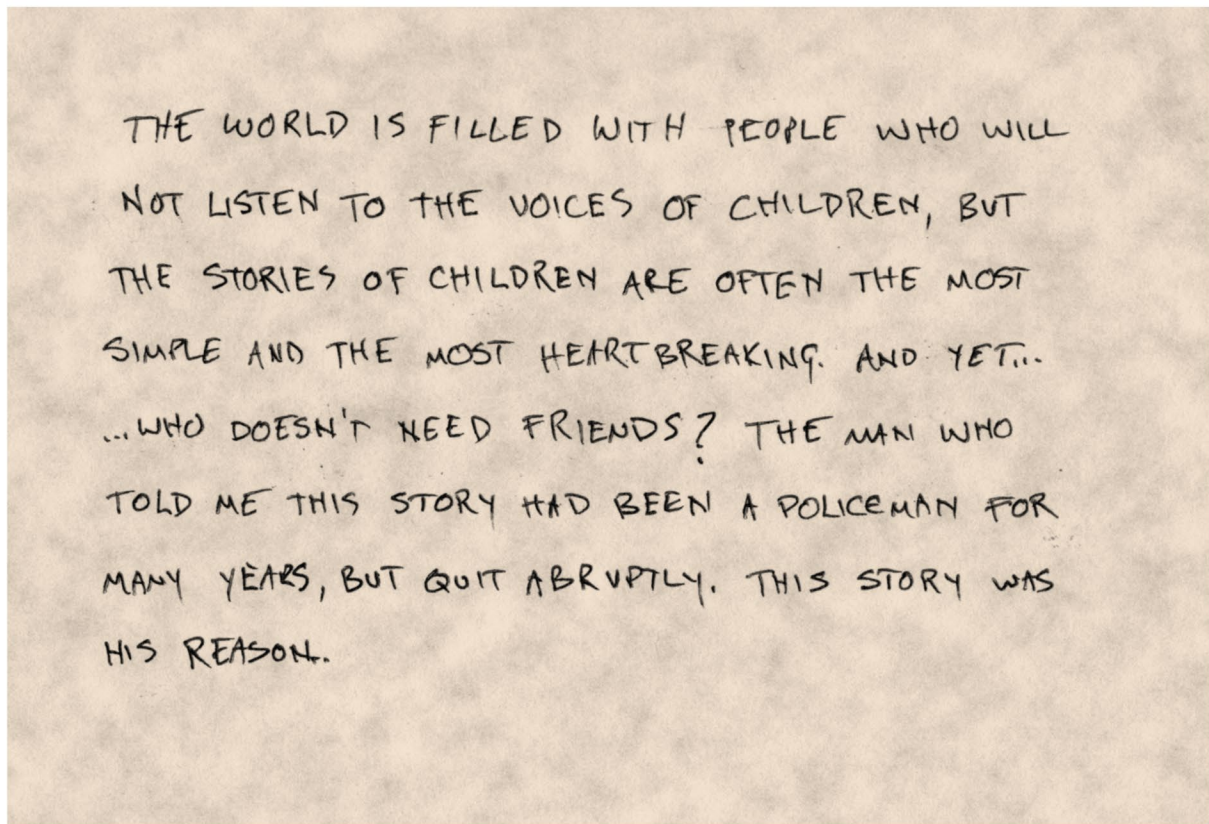
A blast of warm moisture struck me and I looked back at Something Horrible.

Something Horrible's mouth opened up, and there were rows of teeth, wet and still red, probably from Jacob. Something Horrible swung me over its mouth.

Then, Something Horrible let go, and my last thoughts were of how beautiful the Lady Ghost had been.

How very, very beautiful.





THE WORLD IS FILLED WITH PEOPLE WHO WILL NOT LISTEN TO THE VOICES OF CHILDREN, BUT THE STORIES OF CHILDREN ARE OFTEN THE MOST SIMPLE AND THE MOST HEARTBREAKING. AND YET...
...WHO DOESN'T NEED FRIENDS? THE MAN WHO TOLD ME THIS STORY HAD BEEN A POLICEMAN FOR MANY YEARS, BUT QUIT ABRUPTLY. THIS STORY WAS HIS REASON.

BEST FRIENDS

All trees have a life they live, and then something happens and then they die and become the next generation of trees. On this section of trail, this particular tree had in fact been alive a very long time. It had been a spruce during its long life, reaching higher than most, touching the sky every day. For a little over four hundred years, this spruce filled the ground below it, and canopied the sky above. And then, one night in a particularly difficult storm, lightning struck the tree, detonating the trunk sixty feet above the ground. People had taken away the fallen canopy, and committed their depredations upon the remains, leaving only a sixty-foot tall column of wood, slowly leaching the remains of its soul into the earth below.

Peter sighed. This was his favorite of all the trees, and his favorite place to sit and think when he had to sit and think. No one bothered him here. He had been here all morning, but it was getting to be time to head back home. Time to change from being alone to being—

He heard footsteps approaching. Soft-footed steps, running. Peter crouched back down behind the spruce's wide base. He had no idea who was coming, but it was always safe to be safe.

Corey ran without aim. He just ran. They had moved here only a few weeks ago, and it was summer, so he didn't know anyone, and he didn't know any of the places, and he didn't know any of the paths.

All he knew right now was that he wanted to run. He needed to run, until he ran out of breath, and even then, it wouldn't be enough.

Then he saw the tree.

He trotted to a stop.

The base of the spruce was at least as wide as he was tall. No, wider, especially near the ground. Where the roots went down, they formed pockets and cubbies, big enough to step into. Corey had walked around some of the paths, but he had never been in this spot.

He looked up, following the tree's trunk.

High above the ground, the trunk ended in a ragged mess of old splintered wood.

Corey shook his head – what could do such a thing? The other trees weren't this way, just this one. Why would this one tree be singled out from all the others, to be torn apart while all the others stayed upright, and were healthy and safe?

Corey sighed.

At the other end of the small clearing, there was a bench. Its wood surface was old and grooved, black with water staining, and patchy with mold. No one sat on this bench, at least not for a long time.

Corey glanced back at the base of the tree, and he understood why no one sat at the bench.

He leaned over, touching the tree.

He turned and slid down, his back resting into one of the root cubbies.

Three deep breaths. A teacher once told his class was that three deep breaths were enough to calm a person down. So, he took three deep breaths.

Then the tears came.

He dug his hands into his eyes to make it stop, but for at least a minute, there was no way to stop it. Inside his chest, it felt like something hot and metal was wrapping around his heart, and with each heartbeat, the metal hammered closer. With each heartbeat, his chest jumped. With each heartbeat, he felt himself farther away.

Slowly, after a minute, things slowed. His head stopped jumping all over. His chest stopped heaving. The tears slowed down. And the metal around his heart cooled.

He took a deep breath, a shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry,” said the soft voice.

“What?!” he cried out. He glanced about, but saw no one belonging to that small voice.

“It’s okay, I’m just saying I’m sorry. Please don’t get up.”

Corey had just been tensing to get up. He didn’t want to be here, not if someone else was here. What if they...

“I’m just a kid. Like you. Okay? Is that okay?”

Then, Corey heard it in the voice. The smallness. It was just a kid.

He settled back down a little bit.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sorry, uh, sorry about that.” His mind raced. “I hurt my leg.”

“I understand,” said the voice. “My name’s Peter. What’s your name?”

“Corey,” he said. “Peter, what are you doing out here?” He didn’t want to talk about why he was out here, so talking about Peter was a lot safer.

Peter sighed. “I come out here because no one knows where I am, and no one can find me out here.”

Corey nodded. “Am I okay being out here?” he asked. “This isn’t, like, private property or anything, is it?”

“Yeah,” said Peter. “I think it’s okay. Besides, I could use a friend.”

Corey took another breath. This one was more controlled. “Yeah,” he said. “I know what that feels like.”

“They don’t like you,” said Peter.

“No one likes me,” said Corey.

“They’re mean.”

“I don’t even know why. I just moved here. They have no reason.”

“They don’t know you,” said Peter. “Sometimes that’s all the reason they need.”

“Great,” muttered Corey.

“If you ever need to come out here, that’s okay,” said Peter. “It’s not like this is my own special tree. You can borrow it once in a while, too.”

“How do you borrow a tree?” asked Corey.

“It was easier before,” said Peter. “Before the storm. It was a big tree and you could sit under it as long as you needed to and you always walked away feeling better. But now, that’s a little harder.”

“What happened to it?” asked Corey.

“A storm,” said Peter, and Corey could hear that this was all the answer Peter was going to offer.

“Hey, Peter, you wanna go exploring?” Corey started to rise again.

“Please stop, Corey. Don’t get up.” Peter’s voice rose just enough.

Corey relaxed again. Besides, the tree right here was so comfortable.

“Why not?” he asked.

Peter coughed. “Well... can I tell you something?”

“Sure.”

“I... I don’t look right. I don’t look like other people. And some people, they don’t like that.”

“What?” asked Corey.

“That’s what they told me,” said Peter. “Playing with the other kids isn’t really a thing I can do.”

Corey shook his head. “That sucks,” he said. “Is that why you come out here?”

“It’s one of the reasons,” said Peter. “No one bothers me when I’m out here alone by my tree.”

Corey digested this a moment. “Am I interrupting you?” he asked.

“No, no,” said Peter. “You’re fine. I’m glad you’re here. I really don’t have any friends.”

Corey straightened his back a little. Despite the cold metal shell around his heart, he felt something inside, something a little warmer and a little softer. “Are we friends?” he asked.

“Oh!” said Peter, surprised. “Oh, Corey, yes, I would like that very much, if you’re okay with it.”

Corey shrugged and found himself smiling. “Sure! Hey, how old are you, anyway?”

“I’m seven,” said Peter.

“You’re seven?” asked Corey. “You sound pretty grown-up for being seven.”

“Is that good?”

“I guess so,” said Corey. “You have any brothers or sisters?”

“I have a big brother,” said Peter. “But he’s all grown up now. No one like me.”

“So, no one you can hang out with, then?” asked Corey.

“That would be nice,” said Peter.

“I’m eight,” said Corey. “Almost nine. So, I can be like an older brother if you like. If you want. I can tell you what it’s all about. Like a good older brother.”

It was quiet for a moment.

“Peter?” asked Corey. “You still there.”

“I am,” said Peter, but his voice wavered. “Corey... you would do that for me?”

Corey shrugged. “Yeah. I live just over the other side of the field. Behind the backstop. I know you don’t like going out, but if you ever wanted to, I’d like to hang out sometime. It would be great having a kid

brother. We don't have to hang out at the house, though. That's not so good."

There was another pause, and when Peter spoke, his voice sounded different. Flatter.

"Is it trouble at your house?" Peter asked.

Corey took a deep breath. "Well, my mom's okay. And my dad, he lives in San Diego with his girlfriend, but that's, like, a thousand miles away."

"But there's something, right?" asked Peter.

"There's Dario." The word slipped from Corey's mouth and fell to the ground like a snake. In that moment, Dario bloomed in his mind, all crazy hair and scraggly beard and giant fists and breath that was sour and sharp. He shook, and the image faded, though not as much as he would have liked. "My mom married Dario last spring."

"Dario's your stepfather?" asked Peter.

"He doesn't act like it," muttered Corey. Again, Dario's enraged face filled his mind. "As soon as mom goes to work, he changes." He closed his eyes tight, hoping the memory would go away.

Behind him, behind the tree, Corey heard a sound, like celery being twisted and crackling.

"You okay?" he asked.

The sound stopped.

"I'm okay," said Peter. "Sorry. My stepfather is not a very nice person, either."

"Oh," said Corey. "I'm sorry."

"That's why I come out here," said Peter. "I can stay out here as long as I like. No one comes looking for me."

"Don't they get worried?"

“If they were really worried, they’d be nicer to me,” said Peter.

Corey grinned. His new friend – correction: his new ‘little brother’ – was turning out to be a pretty funny kid. In a good way.

“Thanks for talking with me,” said Corey. “I gotta go back because Mom wants me for dinner.”

“Okay,” said Peter. “Thanks for talking with me, too. I feel much better, now that I have a friend.”

“And sounds like I have a little brother,” said Corey.

“Oh yeah, even better!” chirped Peter. “I totally forgot – thank you!”

Corey stood. “Well...”

“Corey, before you go...?”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe there’s something I can do for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe something. I have an idea.”

Corey grinned. This kid... “Okay, what?”

“Tonight at dinner, will your stepdad be there?”

Corey flinched. “Yeah.”

“When you’re at dinner, there’s something I want you to tell him.”

“What’s that?”

“Tell him that there was a man in the woods. That this man said he had toys for you if you would follow him.”

Corey shook his head. “What?”

“It’ll be okay. Just tell him that. He’ll get angry and want to know where. Bring him here.”

“I don’t understand,” said Corey. “What are you talking about?”

“Bring him here and tell him you saw the man behind this tree. Can you do that, Corey?”

“But why would I... wait, what?”

“Corey, if we’re going to be brothers, then we’re going to have to learn to trust each other. So, can you do it, Corey? Can you?”

Corey sighed. “I guess I can.”

“Okay. And then here’s the hard part. And you have to be sure to do this part. As soon as he steps behind the tree, I want you to run.”

Corey’s mind was whirling. For an eight-year-old, Peter was sounding awfully grown-up. “What? Why?”

“Just do it, Corey. Run all the way home. Don’t stop, don’t talk to anyone, don’t say anything.” There was a silence. “Promise me you’ll run away,” Peter added. “Please promise me you will.”

This was crazy. None of it made sense. “I’m not sure...”

“I am,” said Peter.

Corey stepped away from the tree. Stared at it. Then stepped around it.

As he rounded the trunk, something leapt away from the tree in the opposite direction. He didn’t see it, but the bushes swayed a lot.

Corey stared into the green depths. He couldn’t see anything, but somehow he knew. He knew Peter was still there. He knew that Peter could still hear him and still see him.

Corey looked back at the tree.

Where Peter had been hiding, the tree was torn open, gaping wide, torn open well past the bark and into the tree itself. The ground was scattered with slices and shreds of ripped and twisted wood. Some of it was older, wet and muddy. But some was new. Very new.

Corey touched the tree and ran his fingers through some of the newest grooves. They came back sticky with sap just now oozing out.

He remembered the sound he had heard, the tearing-celery sound.

For a moment, Corey was afraid. But then he remembered Dario. He took a deep breath.

“Peter,” he said. “I don’t care what you look like, okay? And... and I’ll do it. I’ll bring him here. After dinner. And then I’ll run and I won’t look back.”

There was no response.

“Peter?” he asked. “Are we still friends?”

“Of course,” said Peter. His voice came from the trees, behind the leaves, where Corey couldn’t see. “Best friends.”

Corey took a deep breath.

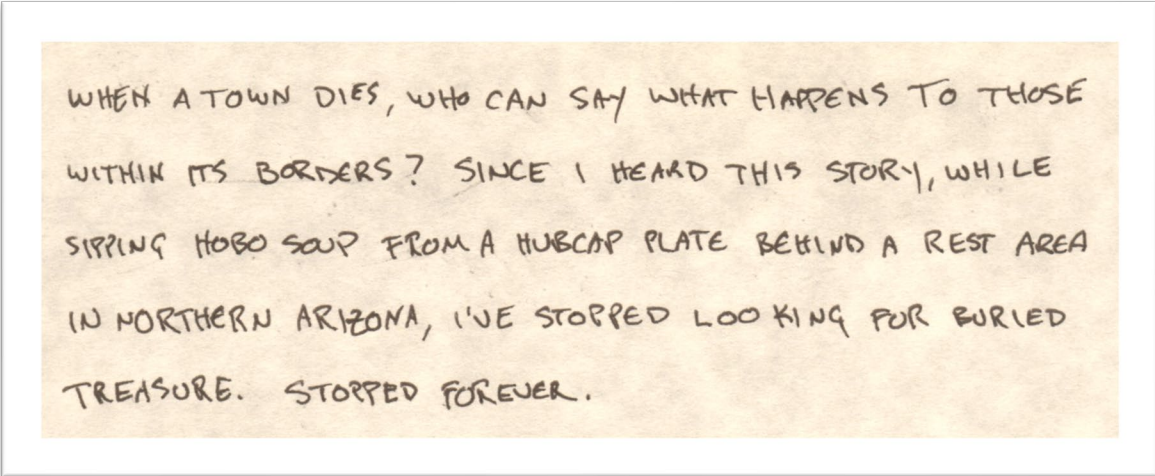
“But Corey, after you bring him here, you better wait a day or so before you come back. To be sure.”

“To be sure,” repeated Corey.

“I’m very happy to have a brother, now,” said Peter.

“Me too,” said Corey. And mostly, he was telling the truth.





WHEN A TOWN DIES, WHO CAN SAY WHAT HAPPENS TO THOSE
WITHIN ITS BORDERS? SINCE I HEARD THIS STORY, WHILE
SIPPING HOBO SOUP FROM A HUBCAP PLATE BEHIND A REST AREA
IN NORTHERN ARIZONA, I'VE STOPPED LOOKING FOR BURIED
TREASURE. STOPPED FOREVER.

SOUL CROWS

Russ collapsed on his ass, hot and tired.

“Thirteen miles,” he said.

Jenny unslung her backpack.

“That’s a half-marathon,” he said.

“Yeah,” she replied. “And I feel every step of it.”

Russ pulled his backpack off and leaned it against the wall behind him.

“Before you do that,” she said. “You might want to check. Scorpions, ants, you know.”

Russ yanked his backpack away from the wall.

She grinned at him. As she sat down, Jenny kept her backpack in front of her.

“Oh, now you’re going to get all ostentatious about it?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I’m going to look before I drop my stuff.”

She made a deliberate show of looking all around. Then she set her backpack against the same wall Russ had.

“Oh my god – you did that,” he said.

“I did that.” she said, grinning at him.

She started unpacking, getting ready for the evening.

Russ stretched, his back crackling like bubble wrap. “Man, this place was a lucky find.”

Jenny nodded. “Tiny shack in the middle of nowhere. Not suspicious at all. Probably made by someone else who figured a half-marathon was plenty enough distance to cover in the desert.”

“In the summer,” he added.

“In the summer,” she said.

Russ stood back up. “I guess I better check it out, make sure it’s safe.”

Jenny glanced up from her pack. The shack couldn’t have been bigger than ten feet on a side. Nothing was in it – just a sandy dirt floor, four wind-whipped and grooved wooden walls, and an angled roof. Flattened tin cans had been nailed to the roof sections, and except for the slow-growing patches of rust, the dry Mojave preserved those cans and their telltale ridges.

Russ grinned at her.

“Don’t take too long,” she said. “I don’t want to have to send out a search party.”

Russ shuffled over to a corner. “Nothing here,” he said.

He shuffled over to another corner. “All clear here,” he said.

He shuffled over to the third corner. Was silent. “Oh hey,” he said.

Jenny looked up.

Russ knelt by the corner, brushing sand away from the floor. “I found something,” he said. “Oh cool!”

From a shallow depression, he pulled an old satchel. Sand slipped from its folds. More fell as he shook it.

“Check this out,” he said.

Russ brought the satchel over to Jenny and they both sat, facing it.

“Jeez,” she muttered. “It looks old. Not fake old, but realie old.”

“I wonder how long it’s been under there?” he asked.

Carefully, Jenny opened the satchel.

“What’s in there?” asked Russ. “Anything?”

Jenny looked in. “Huh,” she said.

She pulled out a folded sheet of paper. Its rough edges were yellow with age and dryness.

“Be careful,” Russ said, as she slowly unfolded it.

“I’m being careful,” she said.

The paper had been folded into quarters, and was now unfolded.

“Aw man, not a treasure map,” muttered Russ.

“Still, it’s pretty cool,” said Jenny. She squinted closer at the small handwriting on the sheet.

“What’s it say?” he asked.

“It’s tiny,” she said. “But I think I can read this. Hang on...”

She cleared her throat and began.

“We still cannot believe what we have done. For anyone who finds this, please forgive us the pride that drove us deeper into dark places.”

“That’s not ominous,” Russ said.

“Sh,” said Jenny. “Everybody talked this way back then. Just lemme continue, okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

With a last side-eyed glance at him, Jenny continued.

“It started quietly, in the deepest tunnel. A new tunnel. We had hoped to find silver, but the veins widened to cracks and the cracks widened to a passage. At the end of that passage, we found the box. The miners opened it and the black eye fell out. God help us for making this simple mistake. The miners brought it to the surface and we all marveled because the black eye was a beautiful gem. We marveled so much that we never noticed the crows.”

“Crows? Is that the right word?” Russ asked.

“Yeah, that’s very clear,” Jenny said.

“The next day, we found the foreman dead, his heart burned from his chest. Crows covered his house. We thought it to be an accident, but the next day, three of his crew we also found dead. Their chests as well burnt. One man’s so badly that had we not found him in his own house, we would never have known who he was.”

“Oh man,” said Russ. “That’s tabloid shit right there.”

“No kidding,” said Jenny.

“In all cases, the crows came and covered the houses. The crows covered more and more. But they did not move like crows, they did not call like crows, and so, by the third day, we decided they were not simply crows. That day, nine more people were found dead.”

“Holy shit, how big was that town – you think they’d be running out,” said Russ.

Jenny shrugged.

“That was when we decided it must be the black eye. It must have a song that only the crows can hear, and it must have a hunger that only the hearts of men can slake. We took the eye and put it back in the box

and we threw the box into the grinding mill. Our mill can powder rock in a day, but at the end of that day, the mill lay in pieces, its grinders destroyed. On the ground, in the wreckage, we found the eye, untouched and unmarred. We knew then that we were cursed and that we had brought into our midst a Soul Eater.”

Jenny looked up. “I’ve never heard of a Soul Eater,” she said.

“I haven’t either,” said Russ. “It’s not a thing that I know of in the local tribes. I wonder what it is.”

“Well, I presume...”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I mean, other than the obvious.”

“I guess it’s whatever a black eye is,” said Jenny. “I’m trying to not laugh at that.”

She turned back to the paper.

“That night, all but two of us died. The air was thick with crows. Their eyes never blinked, and they made no sound. We called them Soul Crows, because they were called by the Soul Eater. With only two of us left, we were unsure if we would survive the night. We dynamited the mine.”

“Holy cow, there’s a dynamited mine near here?” asked Russ. “That would be pretty cool to find.”

“I don’t think so, after reading this,” said Jenny. “You are following along in the story, right? The mine was a bad place.”

“If we leave things be, then maybe we have a chance,” said Russ. “No dragging artifacts out of the mine.”

“No dragging anything out of the mine,” said Jenny. “Okay, last bit.” She squinted at the bottom of the sheet.

“Only one of us survived the mine. I decided to bring the Soul Eater out, away from the town, to find a lonely place where it won’t ever be found and bury it under the ground. I don’t know how long I shall last, though. The crows follow me in ever greater numbers, and they watch me even as I write this. I can feel their unblinking eyes outside. Pray for my wretched soul. Pray for us all, for we are lost.”

Jenny exhaled. “Jeez.”

“No kidding,” said Russ. “That’s... super grim.” He looked around. “Do you suppose this was where he buried it?”

“If it was, he didn’t do a very good job of burying it if you were able to find it,” said Jenny.

“Ha, very funny. I was searching.”

“Looks like you found something,” said Jenny. “You think Doctor Stevens might want to look at all of this once we get back?”

“Oh, for sure,” said Russ. “I bet he already knows all about this Soul Eater thing, but we just hadn’t hit that in class yet.”

Jenny reached down and picked up the old satchel. “Let’s put it back in the bag,” she said, as she flipped the top open.

Something flew out and fell to the ground between them.

A shiny tar-black opal lay in the sand.

“Uh...” she started to say.

“Do you think that’s it?” asked Russ.

The opal glistened as if it was wet. Deep inside, behind the glistening, something purple sparkled, the tiniest amount, as if glimpsed through eyes half-closed. The air grew heavy and crackled lightly as if a storm was building above their heads. The sand closest to the stone shifted,

different grains rotating in alignment to the stone, responding to an unheard call.

They each scooted away.

“You know what,” said Jenny. “About a mile back, we passed that cubby in the ridge. You remember that?”

“Yeah,” nodded Russ.

“I think, let’s, uh, let’s leave all this here, and go spend the night under that ridge instead.”

They both got to their feet.

In a moment, Jenny had repacked her bag, carefully avoiding the stone in the center of the room.

She looked over at Russ. His pack was already strapped on.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Very,” she said.

They pushed open the old wooden door and stepped outside.

For fifty yards in all directions, the streaked tan of the Mojave floor was invisible, covered by a layer of quiet birds.

Crows.

More flew in and landed on the periphery of the flock, stepping closer once they were on the ground.

“The crows,” said Russ.

Jenny nodded. “The crows,” she said.



The crows watched them with eyes unblinking.

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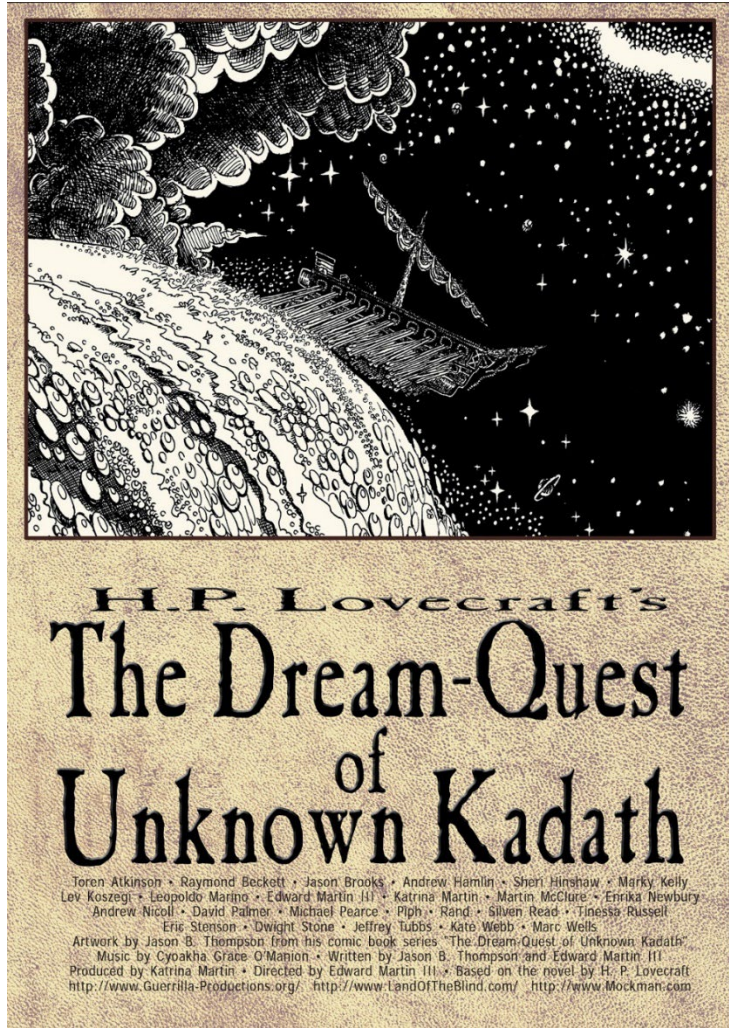
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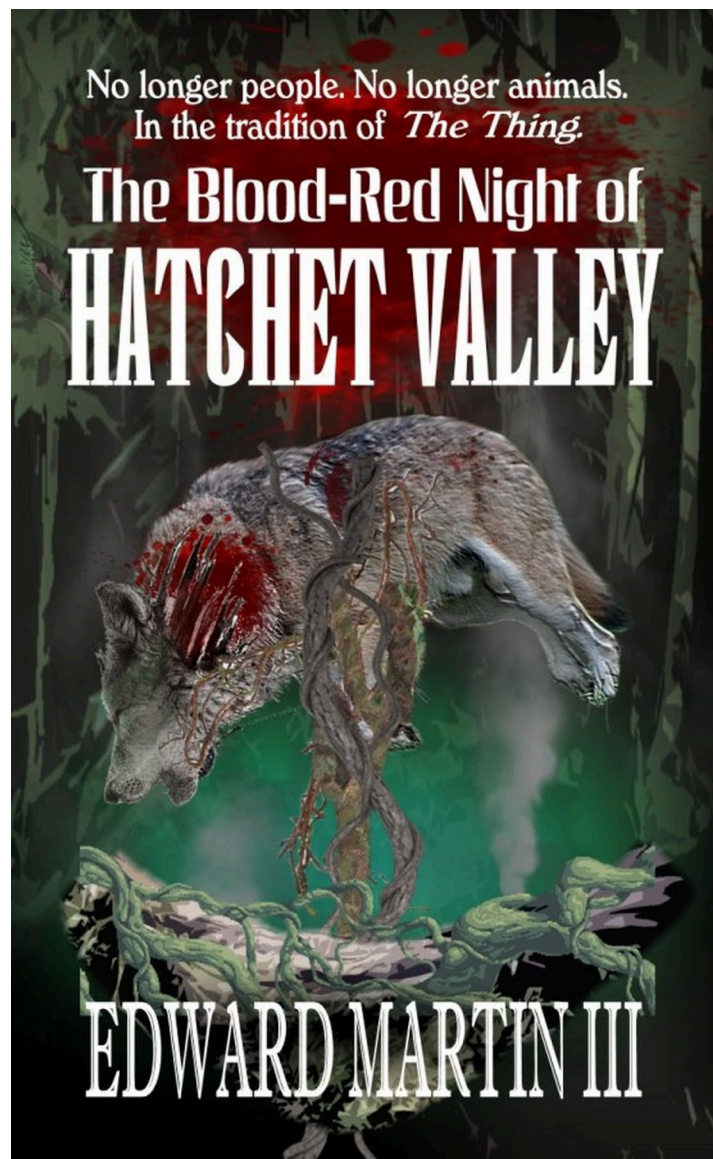
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2023 • 240 pages



TOOTH, CLAW, & HEART

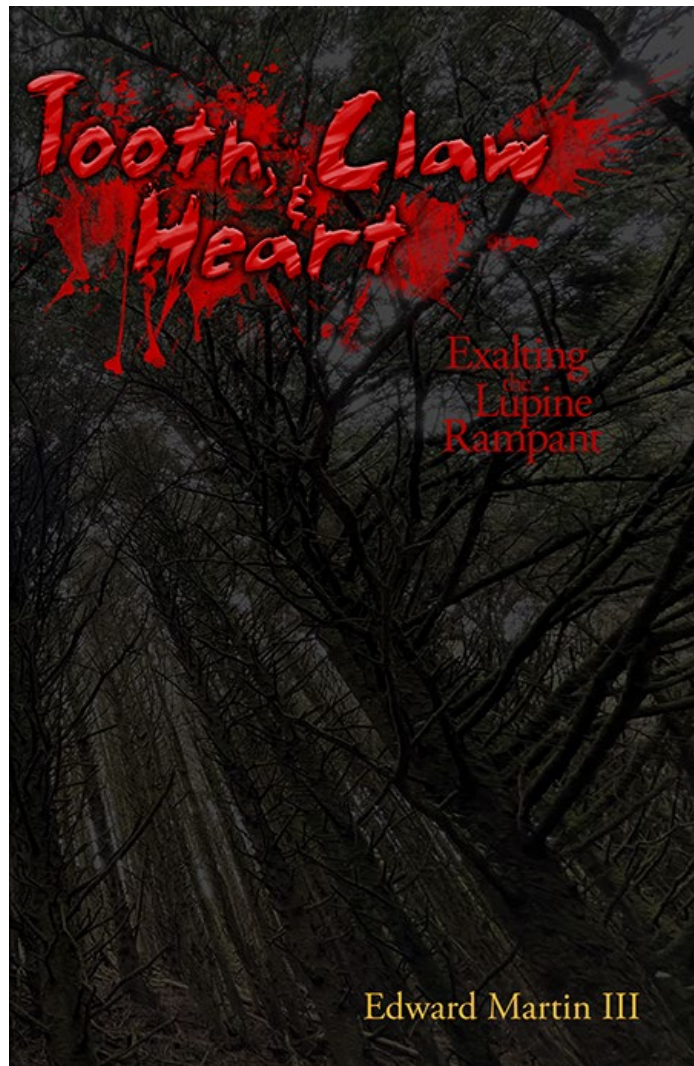
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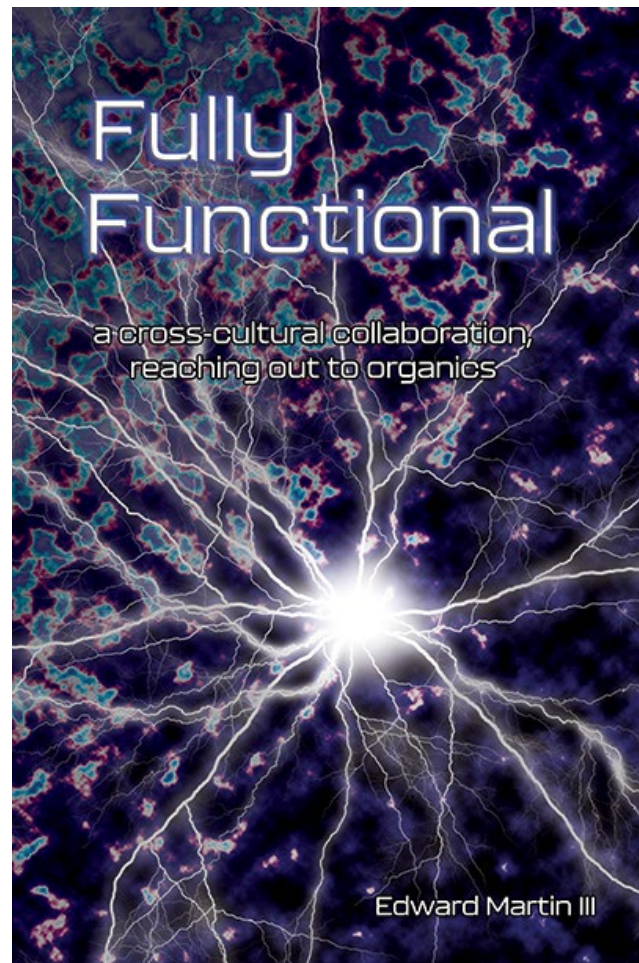
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2022 • 150 pages

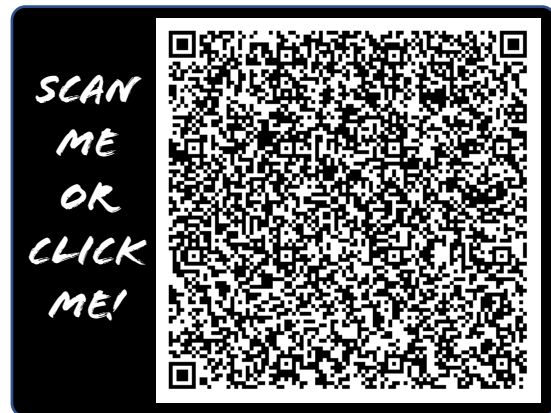
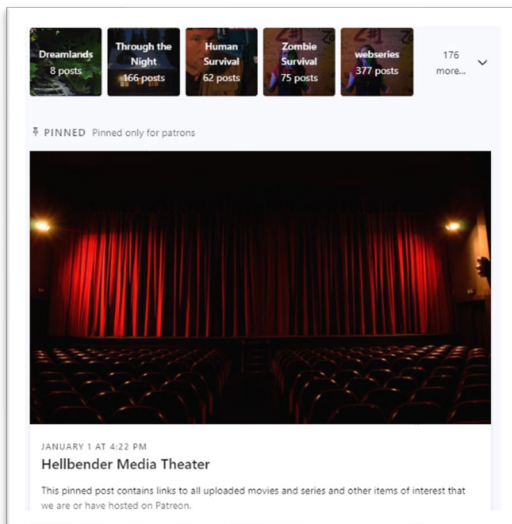


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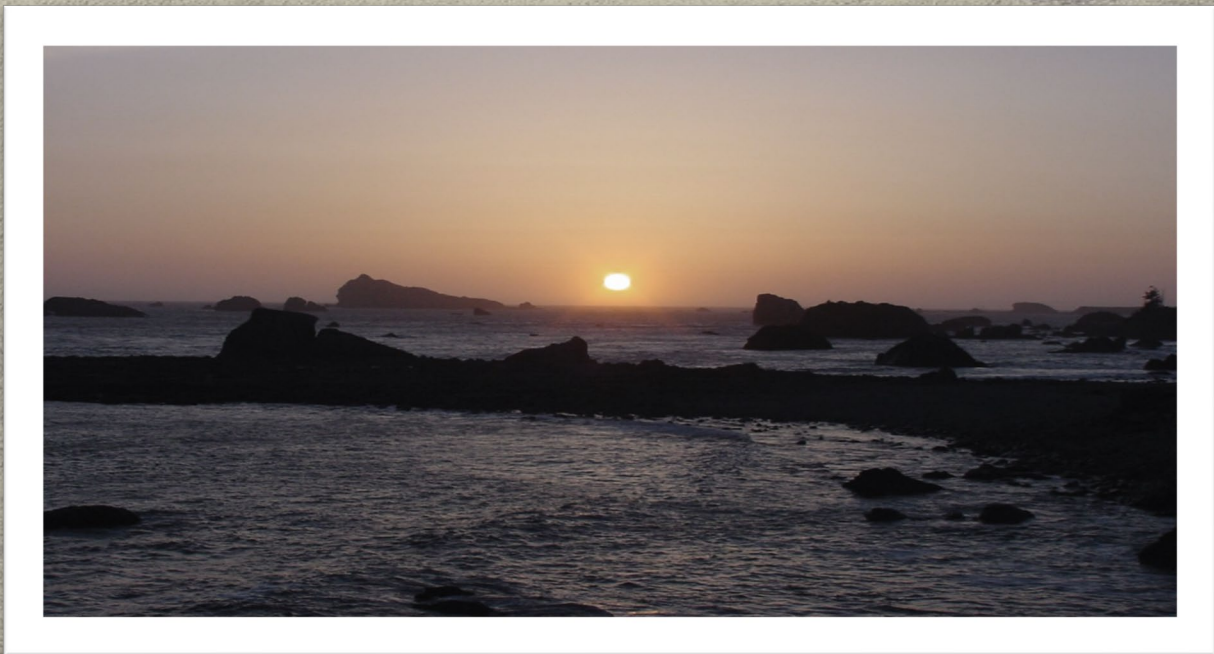
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