



HOWLING AT THE MOON

by Paul D. Marks

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A coyote howled at the moon in the near distance. I had been awake for several minutes already. I listened, hearing nothing but the sounds of the desert. My eyes were open, seeing nothing in the desolate moonlit night. I lay chilly as the rocks around me. I felt something, someone. I knew I wasn't alone anymore. Maybe it was my training as a Marine. Maybe it was my two tours in Iraq. Or maybe it was the Indian in me.

That was three days ago and the desert still stuck to me. And I knew that three showers from now it would still be there. Not as thickly layered, but there. It could

be the desert of Iraq or Death Valley down here in the Mojave. Either way, it would never completely wash away.

And just like the desert sticks to you, memory is something that doesn't go away—doesn't leave you alone, even if you want it to. It hangs in the air, clinging to the buildings, the trees, and the rocks. Your skin. That might sound funny, but it's true. Some people collect knickknacks to remind them of someone or some event. But everyone collects memories, good and bad. Some people try to hold on to them. Others try to shed them—not easy. I guess I had the memory in me—some kind of shared cultural, collective memory—whether I realized it or not. A sort of mental version of the muscle memory your body learns in the service, where you don't think about your actions, you just respond.

A razor-sharp flare of sun shot in through the window of Jaf's Place. Might as well have been a shard of broken glass hitting my eyes. I had to shield them with my hand even though we were indoors. Jaf set down a jug of wine. Most places would have served it in a pitcher, but Jaf's was just an

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off-the-beaten-path joint in Death Valley, not too far from Scotty's Castle but not where the tourists would find their way. At least it had a couple of ancient window air conditioners that worked to some degree.

The wine, sangria, was his specialty. I could take it or leave it, but you drank at least a glass or two to make Jaf happy.

"I wonder sometimes if the root for sangria is *sangre*—blood."

"Same color, that's for sure."

"Darrell Wood. . . I didn't think I'd be seeing you around here anymore," Sheriff's Deputy Huck Langhorne said. He sat with his back to the wall, the way cops and outlaws do. A glint of sun was coming from his mirrored sunglasses, which I doubted he took off even at night. He got the nickname Huck so long ago I could hardly remember his real name. Besides, I think he preferred Huck.

"That makes two of us."

"Sides, I thought you was in the Marines now, chief." He looked me up and down. "You got trail dust on you. Been out in the badlands?"

"Which badlands would that be? Iraq or the Mojave?"

"Isn't that like going from the frying pan into the fire? Gotta wonder." He picked at something on that shiny badge of his.

"It's home."

"For your grandfather, maybe. You got more city boy in you than Indian."

"Might have been true before I went to Iraq. But living in the goddamn valley of the shadow of death every day makes you want to return to something familiar. Makes you think about where you been and where you're going."

"Why not go back to your wife? L.A.?"

"This place has a draw on me. Hard to explain, I guess." Especially to someone like Huck, who just ended up here one way or another, probably 'cause his grandpa came looking for gold. I hadn't seen him since we graduated high school. But he'd seen me over at the filling station where I was gassing the Wrangler. Asked me to join him at Jaf's.

I didn't really feel like explaining it to him, but the Mojave Desert occupied this country in more ways than one. Not only taking up geographical space, but filling metaphysical space with legends of ghosts and curses and lost treasures under every rock. And the old-timers will tell you that everything that survives out here either sticks, stings, or bites.

"Just need to clear my head," I said.

He sipped his sangria. "God, I hate this shit. It's such a goddamn girly drink." He scanned a piece of paper in a notebook. "You didn't happen across some Wall Street-looking guy out there, did you? Mid thirties. Brown on brown, 'bout six feet. Outfitted like he bought out the L.L. Bean catalog."

"Didn't see anyone." I hesitated before saying it. Did I hesitate too long?

"If you go back out there, keep an eye out for him. Thinks he's a prospector, like that ancient guy in the old cowboy movies, Gabby what's-his-name?"

"Out there looking for one of the legendary treasures, no doubt?"

"No doubt. Or looking for land on which to build a resort, is what I heard. One way or another, he thinks he's going to find his El Dorado out here."

"And where the hell does he think this El Dorado is?"

“Over by Wingate Pass. Or Devil’s Hole.”

“Good luck finding El Dorado there.”

“He claims he’s got a line on—”

“The Underground City?” I wished I hadn’t blurted it out. But hell, Langhorne probably figured I knew where the city was rumored to be.

“That’s my guess.” He sucked on his sangria. Puckered his lips in distaste. “Knew all about the mummies and gold bars supposed to be down in there. The stacks of treasure. Hidden rooms filled with jewels and other valuables. You shoulda seen his eyes light up,” he said.

“Somebody ought to tell him about the old Indian curse.”

“You don’t believe in that voodoo jazz, do you?”

“It’s all a myth,” I said.

“Is it?” He looked at me as if he wasn’t sure I believed what I was saying.

“Whatever works.” I couldn’t tell what was going on under those mirrored shades, but I had an idea.

“That and the story, maybe it’s just a good way to keep people away.”

I shook my head, drank of the evil sangria.

“Or about how Charlie Manson used to hang near there?”

“That’s curse enough.” I hoped making a joke of it was enough to diffuse the subject, even if it was true about Manson. I knew all about the curse. Knew about the treasure too. Stories my grandfather—a shaman—had told me. But somewhere, in the back of my mind, I knew more about the Underground City—maybe even its location—than I was willing to let on. And I sure as hell wasn’t about to talk about it here, or maybe anywhere.

Now that we’d had the requisite amount of his special sangria, Jaf brought our real drinks. A couple of Dos Equis. We shot the breeze for another half-hour, talking about the old neighborhood, what became of so-and-so, especially the girls we both competed for. Finally the drinks and the conversation ran dry.

Deputy Langhorne paid.

As we headed for the door, I slid my shades off my forehead to shield my eyes from the flash of sun bouncing off his badge. His were already in place. “Good to have you home, and thanks for your service.” He slapped me on the back with a hedgehog-sized palm. “Now don’t go getting in no trouble or messing with any curses.” He laughed.

We walked out to the parking lot that Jaf’s shared with a pathetic Indian curio shop that was too far from the tourist trade, kicking up dust in our wake. Langhorne and I had played football together in high school. Well, not exactly together; we were on opposing teams. In some ways, I guess we still are.

He moved across the parking lot the way footballers and deputy sheriffs do. I watched him climb into his cruiser, heard the crackle of police-radio chatter. His engine ignited, wheels turned in the dirt and gravel lot, until only the dust was left swirling behind them.

I saw a face in the swirling dust devil.

I had seen him—the man Langhorne had mentioned. He had asked for my help. I gave it. Then I killed him.

I’m a cowboy, an Indian, three-quarters Panamint Shoshone, and like the old song says, I learned to ride ’fore I learned to stand, something else my

grandfather taught me.

I thought I was assimilated. No reservations for me. But after fighting with the Marines in the latest Mideast war, I couldn't go back to my wife, the 'burbs, a nine-to-five job. Something had changed in me. I thought maybe if I went back into the canyons and salt flats of the desert where my grandfather had taken me as a boy, back to my grandfather's spirit, I could get my head straight. People who've never been here think the Mojave is like some desert in Arabia, nothing but sand and rolling dunes. They couldn't be more wrong. The high desert of the Mojave is a moonscape of canyons and mountains, salt pans, and saline lakes. And for my grandfather, a memory around every corner. But I knew you couldn't put your arms around a memory, and maybe not much else either.

He had this special spot, past the cliff dwellings, that he claimed no one else knew about, where no one ever went, not even all those gold-fever junkies. Not even most Indians. He also knew where the hidden city was—he said.

I'd like to say I rode my wild mustang through the crags and ridges of the steep canyons. It would certainly be more romantic than driving my Jeep Wrangler up there. But hey, this is the twenty-first century.

Eventually I found it, a small box canyon that you really had to be looking for. Heat waves shimmered off the floor as the sun baked the rough-hewn walls to a golden hue.

I looked up to the sky, wondering what was really up there.

I unloaded my gear, put some water in the Jeep's radiator—and left the Jeep at the bottom of the canyon. I hiked up, set out my sleeping bag, and built a fire. When my grandfather had taken me here I'm sure it wasn't a big deal to build a fire. Today you probably needed eighteen permits. I didn't have any. This was my land and I had served my country; I figured I didn't need permission.

As a boy, I had two heroes: my grandfather, who seemed to know everything about everything, especially the old ways, and Ira Hayes, a Pima from Arizona, one of the flag raisers on Iwo Jima in World War II. I wanted to do something heroic like he did. So I joined the Marines and went to war. I didn't do anything particularly *heroic*, but I did receive a Bronze Star with V for Valor. But then I just wanted to go home, not to the 'burbs, but *home*.

And here I was, under the stars, listening to that coyote cry, remembering Grandfather and his legends, until sleep won out. At least I didn't have to worry about incoming artillery fire like in Iraq.

That damn coyote kept howling as the barest knife edge of sun streamed over the mountain peaks, just enough to be able to see a figure moving in on me. I wanted to reach for my rifle, then remembered I wasn't in the Marines anymore and I hadn't brought a gun with me, only a knife. An old Ka-Bar with a razor-sharp edge, the kind leathernecks used in World War II and even Vietnam. It wasn't standard issue anymore, but a lot of guys had 'em.

My eyes closed to slits as the shadow moved closer. He bent down, staring at me. My hands, already outside the sleeping bag, shot toward him, grabbed his collar, and yanked him down. Still in the bag, I rolled him over—had him good.

"What the f—" he gasped.

I slammed him over on his stomach, pushing his face into the rocky ground. "Eat dirt."

Holding him down with one hand, I slid out of the bag. With my knee square

in the middle of his back, I frisked him. Glock 9mm. I tucked it in my belt. Backed off and told him to get up.

He stood, and in the blossoming daylight I could see his anxious eyes. Scared eyes, darting back and forth. Langhorne was right; he looked like he'd been outfitted by L.L. Bean in their special goldminer 99-pocket cargo pants. I didn't know if the term *yuppie* was still in vogue, but he looked like what a yuppie gold digger would have looked like.

"Hey, man, I wasn't doing anything," he said.

"You can't sneak up on someone like that."

"I just wanted to see if you were okay."

I wasn't sure about that. But for the moment I had to go with it. "What're you doing here?"

"What's everyone doing here? I'm looking for an escape from the city. Isn't that what you're doing here too?" He introduced himself as Bud Traven.

"Don't you know you're not supposed to come out here alone? It's dangerous."

"They just say that to scare away the tourists."

"I've been hiking these mountains all my life. Since I was three, four, with my grandfather. And, believe me, it's dangerous."

He seemed relatively harmless so I invited him to join me for a breakfast of cowboy coffee, powdered eggs, and bacon cooked on an open fire. But I held onto his gun.

The coffee and bacon were good, like all those memories of campfire food. But the powdered eggs left something to be desired. They sure as hell couldn't compete with Jaf's real eggs, cooked in bacon grease.

He told me about his life in the dot-com world, where riches were just around every corner, but not for him. His new dream was to become rich and famous by discovering the Underground City.

"You sure know a hell of a lot about something that might not even exist and is probably a waste of time since nobody's ever found it." I picked up a handful of sand, let it run through my fingers.

"Someone did, some decades ago. And hell, it's better than vacationing in Cancun and lying on the beach, getting sand- and sunburned."

I didn't comment that the desert was a lot of sand and sunburn too.

"You look like you know this desert," he said. "Maybe you can be my guide. Besides, I've been out here four days and it's getting kind of lonely. Would be good to have someone to talk to."

I wasn't sure I'd do it. But I did. He offered to pay me well and I needed the money. And I knew we wouldn't find the Underground City—no one else had, leastways not since the old days, though a lot of people had died trying. Why should we? Besides, I'd make sure it didn't happen.

"If prostitution is the oldest profession," he said, as we headed out, "and spying number two, then treasure-hunting must be number three. And this desert is filled with tales of buried treasure and hidden gold."

His excitement filled the air.

"They're just myths," I said. "Stories told by old men around dying campfires."

"They have to have started for some reason. Plenty of legends in the desert, from the Lost Gunsight Mine to Breyfogle's treasure. Hell, some say that Death Valley Scotty himself stashed away a fortune out here."

“Don’t believe everything you hear. Nobody’s ever found it. In fact, nobody’s found any of those *lost* treasures. And then there’s the cursed treasures. It’s like those old black-and-white Universal horror movies they play around Halloween every year, where if you break into the mummy’s tomb you’ll be cursed.”

“The most intriguing treasure tale of them all is of the Underground City,” he said, almost breathless.

“Just another old legend.” But some of my earliest memories are of sitting around a campfire—yeah, a campfire, clichéd as that might sound—with my grandfather and some of the other elders, hearing tales of the old days. One of the most romantic—and scary—was of the Underground City, filled with gold and treasure—and mummies. For a little boy, who’d just recently watched *The Mummy* with Boris Karloff on the Saturday Chiller Movie, this tale had a spell-binding effect. To hear the old men talk was like being transported to another era, of ghosts and the Ghost Dance. As if the old days had never ended. Like a living thing, these memories were part of the old men’s collective consciousness.

“After talking with a Cahroc Indian guide named Tom Wilson,” he went on, “Charles Manson believed the entrance to the tunnels and the secret city was at Devil’s Hole—an appropriate name, don’t you think?”

“And nothing out here has a bigger curse on it than the Underground City, if it even exists,” I said. “Legend says that the Indians have put a curse on anyone who desecrates their sanctuary in search of it.”

“If you believe in curses. I don’t.”

“Nonetheless, more than twenty people—that we know of—have died trying to find it. Some accidentally. Some by murder.”

“Well, no damn curses are going to put me off my search.”

And I believed him.

Bud’s excitement was conspicuous, as we trekked on. “I’ve read that if you look at the signs carved by Mexican miners around Wingate Pass, you’ll find the entrance to the hidden city.”

“And hope the curse doesn’t land on you.”

“Like those hokey old movies? I told you, I don’t believe in curses. It’s all just a bunch of superstition,” he said, glancing down at his dedicated GPS. “Most people have GPS on their phones these days—I do too. But this one is more sophisticated. Tied in with the military’s satellites.”

I wondered how he managed that. He had printouts of Internet searches and articles. He said he had searched the Net over and over and thought he knew where the Underground City was. But if he could figure it out why not someone else, why not a hundred someone elses? And why not before now? His conversation meandered more than the circular trails I led him on, without his seeming to notice. Mostly he talked about what he would do with the money when he struck it rich. Cars, houses. Women. Power.

He wanted to head to Devil’s Hole. And Wingate Pass. I told him that wasn’t a good idea. The first was dangerous. And the second was now on the China Lake Naval Weapons Station’s base. He wouldn’t be deterred.

We climbed the trails up into the canyon. I constantly felt a shadow at my shoulder—and not Bud’s. More like in those old cowboy movies where the cavalry is riding through some deep gorge. They can feel the Indians’ eyes on them, but they see no one. Hear no one. Say some cliché like “It’s too quiet out

here.” It was like that in Iraq too. Then out of nowhere tracers would start to fly. I didn’t expect tracers here—I didn’t know what to expect.

“Charlie Manson was infatuated with the desert. With Devil’s Hole,” he said.

“*Charlie?* You talk as if you know him personally.”

“Well, he was before my time, wasn’t he? But he wasn’t all bad—nobody’s all bad.”

“Maybe he was infatuated by Devil’s Hole because he is the Devil.”

“He thought the desert was a place where the rivers ran upside down.”

I couldn’t understand his fascination with Manson. If ever there was a piece of scum. But before I could finish my thought he went on.

“Sort of mystical,” he chattered, enjoying the sound of his own voice. “He thought that Devil’s Hole was the door to the Underworld. That the water there was blocking the entrance.”

“The Underworld?”

“The Underground City.”

“You’re obsessed.”

“I’ve done my research. I know all about Manson and Tom Wilson. Everybody who claimed to know about the Underground City. And I’m going to be the one to find it.”

“What if there’s nothing there?” I said.

“Nothing?”

“Like I said before, it could all just be a myth.”

He scanned the horizon. Endless miles of pristine desert below us. “Doesn’t matter. Even if there’s no gold, this place will make a gorgeous—and expensive—resort. You can expand for miles in every direction. Hotels. Spas. And it’s close to L.A. Phoenix. Frisco.”

“People from up north never call it Frisco.”

“I can put the mummies on display—charge plenty. Like they did for King Tut. People lining up around the block to see them. Besides,” he said, “the real gold is in the land—the land is everything.”

“My people thought the same thing—until it was taken away from them.”

He smiled thinly. We trekked on.

I looked out to miles of *nothing* in every direction. At least it was nothing to him, unless he could build on it or find treasure in it.

Between labored breaths and slipping on the scree, I thought of Borges’s story about the two kings and their two labyrinths. A Babylonian king humiliates a visiting Arab king by having him try to get out of an elaborate labyrinth of walls, stairways, and doors that he’s had built. Later, the Arab king brings the Babylonian king to his “labyrinth.” But there is no maze of walls. No doors. The Arab king sets the Babylonian king free in his labyrinth—nothing but sand for miles and miles in every direction. The Desert of Arabia, where the Babylonian king dies of hunger and thirst.

I thought about setting Bud off into the labyrinth of the Mojave. But we hadn’t found the Underground City and probably wouldn’t. So far, we were just Boy Scouts on a trek and I let the thought pass.

We kept forging ahead.

I really never thought we’d find the hidden city.

But then it happened.



It wasn't at Devil's Hole or on the naval base, but close. And how we stumbled across the entryway I'm still not sure. Luck, I suppose, as it was definitely off the beaten path. And his gold-plated GPS sure as hell didn't do it. Death Valley is filled with caves and borax mines and superstition. But when the sun had gone halfway down the sky and a beam of light threaded through two craggy peaks it shone on what looked like a door. Yes, a *door* in the side of a hidden box canyon. Was it the entrance to the Underground City or another lost mine? Whatever it was, it brought a sense of exhilaration and dread at the same time.

A heart was carved in the stone door—an old Spanish code. The beveled edges of the carving had worn down with time. It was old. I remembered my grandfather's voice telling me that the shape of the heart said it was genuine. Somehow, even though I'd tried to divert him, Bud had found the entrance to the City.

"Let's go inside," Bud said.

"We can't go in there."

"But a heart—doesn't a heart mean gold?"

I looked at the carved heart with a jagged line through it. "That's a broken heart."

"So?"

It was clear he didn't know as much about the signs as he'd let on. I tried to talk him out of it. "It's too late. It's too dark. And it's dangerous."

"What're you talking about? Another of your Indian superstitions?"

I wondered what my grandfather would think about desecrating the Underground City and even about more tourists trampling through his mountains and desert. About putting our ancestors' remains on display—"like King Tut." I finally talked Bud out of breaking into the portal that night. In the morning I would try to talk him out of it altogether and get him down the mountain, though I was sure it would be futile.

Bud took a small bottle of champagne out of his pack, the kind you might get on an airplane. "Didn't have room for a full-sized bottle, but we can each have a swallow," he said.

He poured half his bottle in my cup, clinked on it. "To us, man. We're rich."

He talked on and on about hotels and golf courses—making the desert bloom, and the like. I let him enjoy his fantasy for an hour.

"I'll split it with you," he said. "Of course, I get the lion's share, say three-quarters, but hell, you'll still be rich."

I looked at him, silently, then to the entrance. To the sky, wondering if my grandfather was up there watching.

"You can't publicize it," I said.

"What're you talking about? That's what we came here for."

"That's what you came here for."

"You helped me find it."

"I never really thought we would."

"Fine, then I'll take it all." He laughed.

"If you take the gold you'll die—the City is cursed. The whole desert is cursed."

"Who cursed it?"

"The Indians. The Spanish."

"I don't believe in curses, and I don't believe in your superstitions." But his voice shook when he said it, only slightly, but I could hear it. "That's bullshit."

"Let's sleep on it," I said, and set about cooking freeze-dried sausages for

dinner. Better than MREs, I figured. Neither of us spoke during the meal. He retired as soon as we were done. He knew it would do no good talking to me. I was an Indian, this was sacred Indian land.

I slipped into my sleeping bag soon afterward. A drift of clouds bisected the full moon.

Sleep with one eye open, my grandfather had said. It was a lesson learned. It had served me well in Iraq and Afghanistan. It would serve me well here or anywhere else.

A shadow cut the silver disk of the moon—it wasn't a cloud this time.

Bud stood over me, holding a huge boulder over his head. I rolled out of the way just as the rock flew past me and landed where my head had been a split second before. I lurched for his legs. Grabbed them and rolled. He tumbled down on me.

He put up a good fight. He didn't really know how to fight, but half of being a good fighter is having the heart to fuel your aggression. Greed was his fuel. And it was a powerful one. Still, I could have broken his neck as easily as you'd snap a wishbone. I left him gasping for air on the ground, packed my things, took his phone, laptop, and GPS, and hiked out down the canyon—just walked away, Bud no worse for wear. We might be living in a high-tech, twenty-first century world, but I had sent him back to another time, a time before GPS. A time when instinct and memory held sway.

I thought about killing Bud, but I wanted to see for myself if the old tales were real. And I had a fair idea as to what Bud would do. Figured I'd let him do it.

I returned the next morning, knowing where Bud would be. He was at the Underground City's entrance, crushed under a pile of rocks. The jagged line through the carved stone heart meant danger. More than danger, it meant a death trap. I might not have pulled the trigger on Bud, but it amounted to the same thing. He had tried to kill me. If I showed him how to get into the City he probably would have killed me anyway. And he would have ruined my grandfather's land. No good would have come of it, so I had let him walk into the trap.

Now the mummies and their spirits and the gold in the sacred city, if they were really there, could rest in peace, at least for a while longer.

It took all day, but I reset the trap and left him as he was. It wouldn't take long for the vultures and other scavengers to feast on him and for the hot desert sun to parch his bones. And soon he'd be just another casualty of the desert and its unbelievable curses, another mystery for Deputy Langhorne to ponder.

I had gone up the mountain alone. I came down the mountain alone. I felt a little guilt, not much. I could have told Bud that a heart with a lightning bolt through it was a major warning—a death trap. But I didn't. I guess that makes me an accessory, maybe to murder, maybe to the curse of Death Valley. But hey, nobody's all bad, right—that's what Bud had said. Still, I wonder what my grandfather would have thought.

Memory is something more than just ephemeral thought. Maybe you can put your arms around it; maybe you can't. My memory is filled with visions of my grandfather and the stories he told, the collective memory of my people. Memories Bud would have exploited. Maybe that's the modern way, but it's not my way.

I have my memories and I sleep just fine. ●