

Map of Unmade Moons

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Introduction

I drew a small circle in the top right of the page, a thumbnail of silver I meant only as atmosphere, a borrowed coin to tint the water of a scene—and somewhere, someone I did not know woke to a tide they could not explain. The ocean stepped over a familiar threshold with new authority. Streetlights trembled. A child's clock skipped a beat. I did not hear their gasp, but I felt the pull: a tug at my wrist as the pencil hovered, as if the paper had acquired gravity. The first lesson arrived wordless, and late. Anything

you raise into the sky will cast a shadow.

This is a story about one such shadow, and many small circles. It is also a manual written from inside the experiment, a set of techniques disguised as confessions. I am the author who found that imagined moons behave like promises, that a plot can be an ethical instrument, that characters are not furniture but neighbors whose windows face yours. When I changed a name, someone's weather changed. When I invented an eclipse to heighten a chapter's dread, a city learned to fear noon. When I outlined a character to keep them "useful," they stepped out of the outline and asked me who had signed the contract on their behalf.

You may be here because you make things—worlds, rules, families of laws that fit together like toys until they start to sound like legislation. Perhaps you have felt the small heat that comes from being the first to write a word on a blank geography, the thrill of drawing a coastline that does not argue back. Perhaps you have already met resistance: a character that refuses the ending, a landscape that will not permit a convenient shortcut. Consider this book a conversation with that resistance. Consider it a map that includes the unmade as a kind of necessary white space, an honest ledger of what creation demands and what it will not quietly allow.

The craft is in here, yes. You will find ways to think about gravity as a moral rather than an effect; about names as treaties rather than labels; about canon as compost—alive, fermenting, and unpredictable. You will see how to build a moon not only for light but for consequence, to design constraints that keep wonder from becoming an extractive industry. Each technique is presented as a scene, because technique without story is scaffolding without a house. Each scene is also an argument, because stories without questions become monuments to their makers, and monuments have no doors.

But this is not a neutral workbook. It is a haunted parable about responsibility. Once I learned that my fictions had externalities, I tried to unwrite what I had written. That went poorly. Deletions leave craters. Retcons generate weather. I convened a council of eclipses and was outvoted by the night. I opened my atlas to file an erratum, and the pages multiplied under my hands. The characters, emboldened by the light I had hung over them, organized. They asked for better sunrises, fuller names, the right to refuse narrative harm. They were, to my surprise and eventual relief, very good editors.

If you are a creator, you are implicated. That is not an accusation; it is the admission ticket to wonder. Implication means your choices count, and so you get to count them. We will inventory the tools that honor agency—yours and theirs. We will practice writing from the inside out, so that a place can defend itself even from its author. We will learn to accept that some doors remain closed because the world behind them asked for privacy. We will look for ways to let readers become co-cartographers

without turning them into unpaid surveyors of your ego.

There is, finally, a promise. If you proceed with care, the moons you raise will not have to be liabilities. They will be invitations: to intimacy with what you make, to a discipline that feels like love, to the delicious surprise of being answered by your own invention. You will still make mistakes; art is an error-prone technology. But you can build a practice of repair into the architecture of your worlds, so that when the tide misbehaves, there are hands already trained to lift the furniture.

“Map of Unmade Moons” begins where most manuals end: with a refusal to pretend that the map is the territory or that the maker is sovereign. We will draw and erase and redraw, learning as we go which emptinesses are sacred, which shadows keep us honest, and which bright bodies deserve to be left alone. If you are ready, turn the page. The first moon is already rising.

CHAPTER ONE: The Moon in the Margin

I meant the little silver circle only as a tone, a way to cool a sentence that had grown too warm under its own drama. It sat in the top right corner of the page like a button waiting to be fastened, a thumbnail of atmosphere, a borrowed coin to tint the water in a scene I was not yet sure I would keep. I drew it lightly so the graphite would sit on the surface rather than bite in, a polite guest in the margin, ready to leave if the paragraph objected. I did not give it a name, only a function: reflect, soften, suggest distance. I had no intention of shipping it anywhere, least of all into the sky over someone else’s life, but that is the problem with small decisions: they feel light enough to carry until they grow heavy on another’s shoulders.

The ocean stepped over a familiar threshold with new authority that afternoon, or so I learned later from a letter I should not have read. Streetlights trembled not from wind but from a revised ratio between silver and salt. A child’s clock skipped a beat, the kind of hiccup that registers in the chest before it registers in the mind. I did not hear the gasp, but I felt the pull an hour earlier, a tug at my wrist as the pencil hovered, as if the paper had acquired gravity and decided to use it. The moon in the margin had gone to work, and I had not yet learned to clock out.

This is where the reckoning begins, not with a bang but with a border that would not stay decorative. I was the author who drew the circle, but I was also the first to notice the circle drawing back. That symmetry felt like courtesy until I understood the invoice. Anything you raise into the sky will cast a shadow, and shadows are patient. They do not arrive with trumpets; they arrive with tides. They arrive with the sense that your tools have grown opinions about how they should be held. By the time I tried

to erase the moon, it had already taken up residence in a language more stubborn than mine.

I had been drafting a story about a city built on pilings, a place that lived one flood away from becoming archipelago. The moon was meant to give the water a mood, a silvery gossip that could pass for warning. I had not yet decided whether the pilings would rot or hold, so I left the moon soft, a question rather than a fact. In hindsight, I see how that softness was a form of negligence. I had not specified phase, distance, or intent. I had not considered gravity as a moral variable. I had only wanted texture, and texture, when you are careless, can become territory.

The letter that taught me this was brief and damp at the edges, as if it had been carried between hands that were not entirely dry. It came from a woman who lived in a town whose name I had not invented, a town that certainly did not appear in my notes. She wrote that the sea had changed its hours, that the moon had become a landlord, that her son now timed his breathing to a schedule no almanac recognized. She did not accuse me, which was generous. She only asked what I intended to do about the lease. The question sat on my desk like a stray cat that had learned to read. I realized I had been drafting contracts without witnesses, and now someone was asking me to honor the fine print.

I told myself I could fix it with a revision. I told myself I could adjust the angle, pull the moon farther back, make it polite again. I opened the manuscript and found that the margin had changed. The circle I had drawn was still there, but it had acquired weight, a density that pressed against the edge of the page like a thumbprint on glass. When I tried to sketch a new orbit, the line refused to obey, curling instead into a comma, as if the sentence wanted to pause and consider its ethics. I felt a flush of embarrassment. I had been taught to treat setting as a stage, and stages are supposed to be silent, but this stage was humming.

That night I walked to the river in the city where I lived, a city with its own unruly history, and I watched the water behave as if it had been given instructions. The moon overhead was not mine, not yet, but I could feel the tug of my thumbnail in the sky, a faint itch inside my sternum. I wondered how many other circles I had drawn without knowing, how many borrowed coins I had left in circulation. I wondered who was paying the interest. The river did not answer, but it did not have to. It only needed to keep moving, which is what it had always done, only now it moved with a new sense of accountability.

The next morning I went to the library to study the anatomy of an unintended miracle. I found a book on tides that had been checked out so often its spine had learned to slouch. I found a pamphlet on lighthouse etiquette that warned against signaling without consent. I found nothing that explained how to apologize to a body of water, so I sat with my notebook and wrote a list of questions instead. What is the radius of

responsibility? How far does a gesture travel before it becomes a promise? Can a metaphor be recalled, or does it keep the address where it was first sent?

I took the list to a café that smelled of roasted beans and mild panic, the kind of place where people revise their lives between sips. I ordered a tea that cooled too fast and watched a man sketch a map on a napkin, only to crumple it when the lines fought back. He looked up and caught me watching, and we nodded as if we had agreed on something without saying it. I told him about the moon in the margin. He said he knew the feeling. He said he had once drawn a door that opened onto a hallway that belonged to his sister, and she had not spoken to him for a month. I asked him how he fixed it. He said he had not. He said he had learned to knock.

I went home and tried to knock on the manuscript, though I was not sure what etiquette required. I tapped the page with a fingernail, and the paper gave a soft thud that sounded like a lung. I apologized to the moon, though I was not sure it was listening. I apologized to the woman by the sea, though I did not know her name. I apologized to the pilings, which had done nothing to deserve my indecision. Then I drew a second moon, lower this time, a pale echo that could share the load. It felt like a temporary solution, but temporary solutions have a way of becoming architecture.

The library returned the book on tides with a slip inside that read, "Please handle with care. Contents subject to change." I laughed, then stopped, then laughed again. I realized I had been treating worldbuilding as a solo act, a private geometry in which I was the only audience. I had not considered that the act of making is a form of address, that every line you draw is a letter sent to the future with postage due. The moon in the margin had taught me that the postage is collected at the point of delivery, not at the point of writing, and that some deliveries come with responsibilities you did not sign up for but cannot refuse.

I began to keep a ledger, not of what I made but of what my making displaced. I recorded the tides that shifted after each small change, the way the woman's son began to sleep through the night after I nudged the moon a fraction closer to polite. I recorded the silence that fell over my pilings when I finally decided whether they would rot or hold. I recorded the conversations I had with my own characters, who started to show up in the margins of my notebook, offering suggestions, asking for clarification, demanding better lighting. They were not furniture, as I had once assumed. They were neighbors whose windows faced mine, and some of them were not shy about complaining about the view.

The city by the river continued to behave as if it knew something I did not. I watched a bridge flex under the weight of a question that had not yet been asked. I watched a streetlamp flicker at the same moment I crossed out a sentence that had felt too bright. I did not know if I was causing these things or merely noticing them, but the distinction felt less important than it once had. What mattered was that the world had

become conversational, and I was learning to speak its dialect, which included hums and hesitations and the occasional well-placed silence.

By the time I reached the end of the month, I had drafted a new set of rules for myself, not commandments but courtesies. I would specify phase before I assigned mood. I would ask permission before I changed a name. I would treat constraints as allies rather than obstacles, because constraints are what keep wonder from becoming an extractive industry. I would leave some doors closed because the world behind them had asked for privacy. I would remember that a map is not the territory, and that the maker is not sovereign, even when it feels good to pretend otherwise.

The moon in the margin remained, though it had moved to the bottom of the page, where it could watch the pilings without crowding them. It had acquired a name, though I did not give it one. It had become a presence rather than a prop, a small bright body that deserved to be left alone, though I still checked on it, because checking is a form of care. I did not know what would happen next, but I had stopped trying to control the horizon. I had learned that responsibility is not a cage but a lens, and that the craft is in learning how to focus it without blinding yourself or anyone else.

On the night I finished the ledger, the river ran smoother, as if it had been edited by a careful hand. I sat on a bench and watched the city's lights tremble, not from wind but from a revised ratio between silver and salt. I felt the tug at my wrist again, but this time I let it guide my hand rather than fight it. I sketched a small circle in the air, a gesture more than a drawing, a promise to be precise without being cruel. The circle hovered, then dissolved into the night, as if it had been accepted, or at least deferred.

I went home and opened the manuscript to the first page. The moon in the margin looked back at me, patient and polished, as if to say we have work to do. I did not feel the old panic. I felt the delicious surprise of being answered by my own invention, and I understood that this was only the beginning. The tide was not something to be managed but something to be spoken to, and I was finally learning the vocabulary. I took a deep breath, set the pencil down, and listened. The paper listened back, and the conversation, I knew, would continue.

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