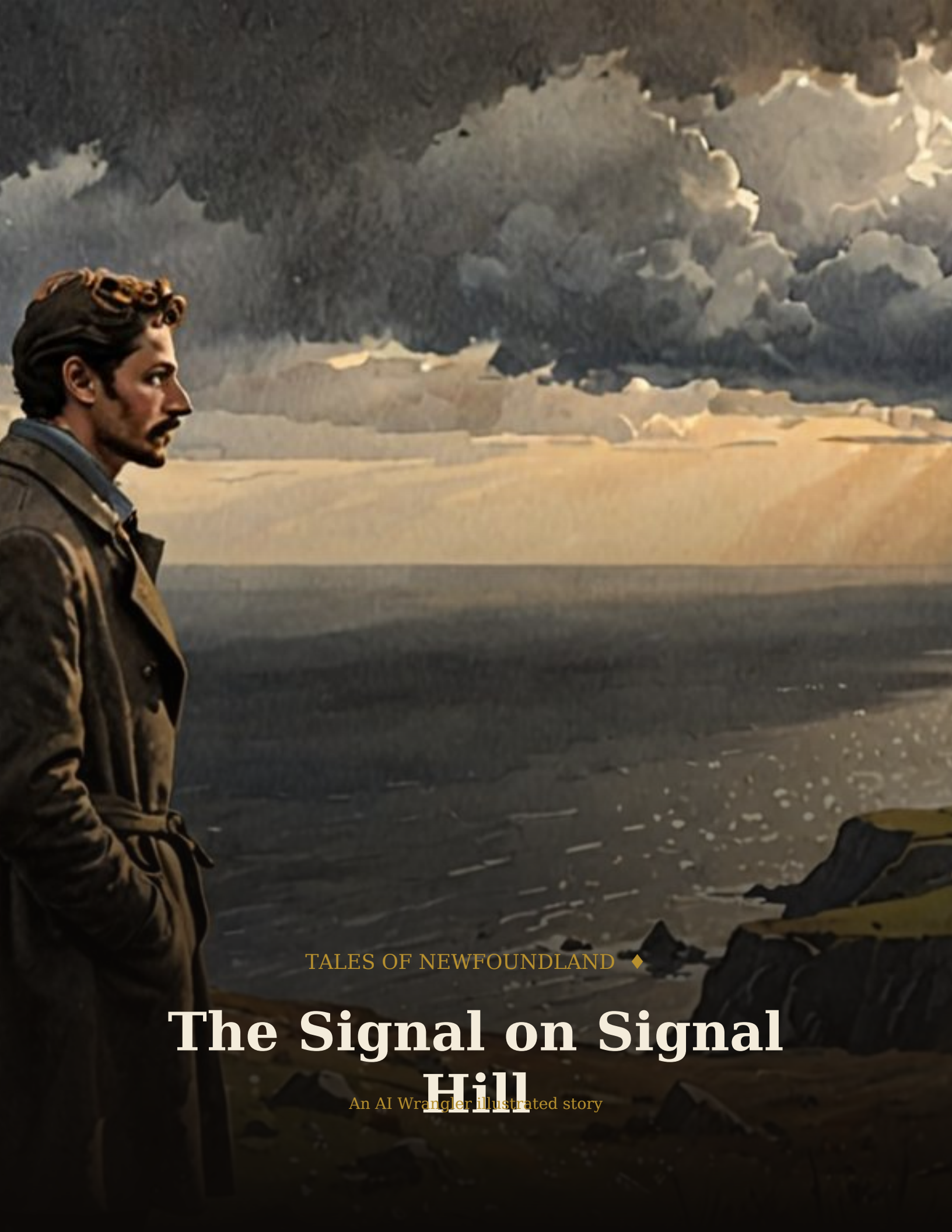




TALES OF NEWFOUNDLAND ♦

The Signal on Signal Hill

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Welcome back to the fire, friends, for the last of our tales from the Rock, and after all our nights of ice and sorrow and old ghosts, let us end on a triumph, and on a moment when Newfoundland changed the entire world. It happened on a hill above St. John's, in a howling December gale in the year 1901, when a young Italian and three faint clicks in a headphone shrank the whole Atlantic Ocean to nothing. It is the story of the first wireless signal to cross the sea, and it landed on Signal Hill.



CAROL

Signal Hill. Marty, even the name sounds like it was waiting for this story. What happened up there?



MARTY

To understand it, Carol, you have to remember how the world was in 1901. If you wanted to send a message across the Atlantic, from America to Europe, you had exactly one way to do it fast, and that was the undersea telegraph cable, a physical wire lying on the bottom of the ocean, which had been a marvel and a fortune to lay. The idea that you could send a message across three thousand miles of open ocean through the empty air, with no wire at all, was, to most sensible people, close to madness. And a young inventor named Guglielmo Marconi had bet his life and his reputation that he could do exactly that.



CAROL

Through the empty air, no wire. Marty, in 1901 that must have sounded like sorcery. Why Newfoundland?



MARTY

Because Newfoundland, Carol, is the piece of North America that reaches furthest out into the Atlantic, closest to Europe. If a signal was going to make the great leap across the ocean, the shortest jump was from Cornwall, in the far southwest of England, to the far eastern edge of Newfoundland. So Marconi's people built a powerful transmitting station at Poldhu, in Cornwall, and set it sending, over and over, the simplest possible signal, the letter S, three little dots in Morse code, dot dot dot, out into the air toward the west. And Marconi himself sailed to St. John's, and climbed Signal Hill, that high rocky headland over the harbour, to listen for it.



CAROL

Three dots. Dot dot dot. Sent out over the ocean, hoping. Marty, and how do you even listen for something like that?



MARTY

With enormous difficulty, Carol, and no small amount of desperation. Marconi needed to hang an antenna, a receiving wire, up high in the air, and the December weather on Signal Hill was atrocious, a full Newfoundland gale, screaming wind and freezing rain. He tried lifting the antenna with a balloon, and the wind tore it away and carried it off. So he tried a kite, Carol. A great kite, flown up into that howling storm, dragging the antenna wire up into the sky above Signal Hill, plunging and bucking in the wind, while Marconi sat below in a cold, bare room in an old fever hospital with a telephone receiver pressed to his ear, straining to hear three faint clicks come three thousand miles across the raging Atlantic.



CAROL

A kite in a gale, and a man with a receiver to his ear, listening across an ocean.
Marty, I am on the edge of my seat. Did he hear it?



MARTY

On the twelfth of December, 1901, Carol, in the early afternoon, with the wind screaming and the kite bucking overhead, Guglielmo Marconi heard, faint and unmistakable in the receiver, dot dot dot. Three little clicks. The letter S. Sent from a hilltop in Cornwall, flung out across three thousand miles of open ocean, through the empty air, with no wire at all, and caught on a kite string above St. John's. He handed the receiver to his assistant to be sure he was not imagining it, and his assistant heard it too. Three dots. And in that instant, Carol, on a windswept rock above Newfoundland, the world got smaller forever.



CAROL

Three dots, and the world changed. Marty, that gives me goosebumps of the very best kind. Just the letter S, and yet it was everything.

MARTY

It was everything, Carol, because it was proof. Proof that a signal could leap the ocean without a wire, that the very air itself could carry human messages around the curve of the earth. Now, I will be honest with you, because at this fire we always are. There were doubters, Carol, and for a while some serious people wondered whether Marconi had truly heard the signal or only wished it out of the crackle and hiss of the atmosphere, for it was very faint and there was no recording. But Marconi went on, and proved it beyond all doubt in the years that followed, and the whole world came to agree on what had happened that December day on Signal Hill. It was the birth of transatlantic wireless. It was the first breath of the connected world we all live in now.

CAROL

The first breath of the connected world. Marty, everything, the radio, the telephone across the sea, all the way down to the little device in my pocket, it all traces back to three dots on a kite string over Newfoundland?

MARTY

All the way back, Carol, to that cold room on Signal Hill and a young man listening in a gale. Every wireless signal that has ever crossed the ocean since, every radio broadcast, every transatlantic call, every message flying invisibly around the world this very moment, is a descendant of Marconi's three faint dots. And it is a wonderful thing, I think, that it happened where it did. Because Newfoundland, Carol, for all its history of being remote, at the far edge of everything, cut off by the cruel ocean, was the exact place where humanity first reached across that ocean through the empty air. The Rock, so long defined by its distance from the world, became the place where distance itself was defeated.

CAROL

The place where distance was defeated. Oh, Marty, what a way to end our nights in Newfoundland. After all the ice and the loss and the old ghosts, a triumph, and a kind one, that brought the whole world closer together.

MARTY

A kind one, Carol, and I saved it for the end on purpose. Because Newfoundland's story, as we have told it these nights, is so often a hard one, a story of a brave people at the edge of the world, battered by the sea and the war and the sorrow. But on Signal Hill, that same edge of the world, that same distance, became the doorway through which we all reached out to one another for the first time. So the next time you send a message flying across an ocean without a thought, remember a kite in a December gale, and three faint dots, and a young man on a rock above St. John's who heard them, and shrank the whole world to the size of a fire like this one, where we can all sit together, no matter how far apart. Thank you for sitting with us, friends, all through Newfoundland. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol. From the ice to the fairies to three dots on Signal Hill, it has been an honour to share the Rock with you. Hold your people close, near or far, for the distance is smaller than it looks. And come back to the fire. There are always more stories.