

This is a heart-rending tale of how four people's lives come to intertwine in Canada's poorest neighborhood. Take two residential school survivors, add two traumatized paramedics and put them together in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. What you get is an insightful and touching portrayal of the tenacity of the human spirit.

Whispers on the Ocean

by Tracee M. Andrews

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Tracee M. Andrews

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Warning:

It is not advisable for a residential school survivor to read this book. Doing so could trigger traumatic memories. If, as a survivor, you find yourself needing emotional support, please call:

Indian Residential Schools Crisis Line - 1-866-925-4419 or your local crisis center.

Chapter 1

Spring 1965

Bella Coola, British Columbia

It had been a brutal winter. But despite the lingering chill, spring had arrived in the Bella Coola Valley, and the air was renewing itself with the sweet scent of emerging life. It also vibrated with the boisterous melody of one particular father and son's brand of singing. At least, that was what *they* called it. Walking side by side on the dirt road leading home, George hauled the fishing rods, Father lugged the fish, and they both tried to carry the tune. But with the song already slaughtered, odds were good the fish and gear weren't getting home unscathed either.

Today, like every other day, the duo teased each other mercilessly. It was just one of the reasons why Father was shrieking with laughter. And also why, after buckling at the knees from his condition, both he and the day's catch now lay sprawled in the middle of the road. You see, Father laughed with his whole body. Traditionally it was said that your spirit is the part of you that laughs, and if it's intact, it'll take your body along for the ride. Father was living proof of that adage. He could scarcely help himself. It was an affliction. And there was no mistaking when he was about to erupt because his convulsions were predictable. His joyful spasms issued forth without command or control and always began in the same way, with a delicate quiver in his belly. But within

seconds those tremors would reach critical mass and implode, sweeping through him like wildfire and reaching their crescendo when Father was altogether overcome, shaking from head to toe, and snickering like a madman. It was an impressive spectacle and nothing less than joy incarnate.

Admittedly, George could never match Father's hysterics, but he could never forget them either. How could he? After all, how often do you get to see a sane, crazy person? Besides, apart from the ocean, Father's laughter was the one thing that sounded most alive to the little boy.

On the other hand, and though it was no less memorable, George's revelry was more subdued. He giggled nonstop puffs of daisy-chained delight. Granted, he didn't possess the maniacal laughter gene, but his joy was nonetheless authentic. But what made the youngster's charm complete was his smile. It was his laughter's unrivaled counterpart. George had an easy, lighthearted countenance, which transformed his otherwise plain features into that which appeared to radiate the sublime. When George smiled, you could feel his inherent gentleness. The little boy's grin was a secret weapon because it could disarm all but the most callous of hearts. George could endear himself to anyone. And at seven-years-old, he was not only the epitome of happiness, but he was also the spring in his father's step.

Earlier that morning a light rain shower had moistened the dirt road enough so father and son could play together without kicking up dust. And rest

assured, they took full advantage of the opportunity by wrestling and tumbling over each other repeatedly, at times almost forgetting their primary purpose was to bring home dinner.

For the two would-be comedians, it was less than a mile's walk back to the humble parcel of land where they lived, the Nuxalkmc people's home. The Bella Coola Valley was located at the terminal end of a sixty-mile-long ocean estuary named Bentinck Arm. The Indian reserve itself sat on a broad peninsula of land surrounded by water, bordered by the ocean inlet on two sides and on the third by the mouth of the mighty Bella Coola River, which emptied into the sea. These waters formed the base of a horseshoe-shaped valley, ringed by the grand peaks of the Coast Mountains. Sitting opposite the reserve to the south, across the mile-wide sea channel, sat the village of Bella Coola. No roads connected the two communities and being encircled by water made the reserve an isolated place, accessible only by boat.

Even for this untouched wilderness, today was a rare beauty. Winter's chill was abdicating its grip and yielding to the sun's faint warmth, while a brilliant azure sky contrasted against the snow-capped precipices towering above the valley. Each inspiring granite giant wore thick emerald-green robes spun from the legions of magnificent fir trees encircling the bluffs. Those living vestments plunged, without impediment, down the steep slopes to kiss the ocean below. This was Nuxalk territory. This was their home. And it had been so since the beginning.

Time and again, Father taught that of all the gifts Creator had given them, their homeland was the most important. “Remember George, we watch over the land and sea, and in turn, they watch over us.” This was their sacred duty, as taught by the elders. Since time immemorial, the People had safeguarded these places of their ancestors and reaped from the bounty of this majestic region. Their surroundings had always sustained them, providing plants and berries throughout the year, deer in the fall, and all manner of gifts from the ocean year-round. For millennia, the People took from the land only what they needed, and they never went hungry. As a consequence, the family needed little money to survive.

Still, life was difficult as there had been scant work for Father over the past few years. There wasn’t a depression going on. There was plenty of work available—if you were white. But receiving such prejudice never upset Father because he refused to take it personally. He knew better than to respond in anger or label them as bigots or racists. Instead, he showed them compassion. “They don’t hire me because I’m me, only because I’m Nuxalkmc. They don’t hire any of the other Nuxalkmc men either. We need to take pity on them because they were never taught that Creator made us all the same color underneath our skin.”

So it was that Father never judged those who discriminated against him, just as he never judged his own people, particularly those who drank and drank too much. He understood a singular truth; that life had

given each of them an experience that had made them forget who they were.

On entering their village, Father asked George, "Will you run ahead and give this fish to Auntie?"

"Okay," George squeaked, speeding off towards a tiny shack in the near distance.

"I'll meet you back here," Father said walking up the steps of another matriarch's home to deliver one last fish. As much as today's catch was nothing to brag about, Father made certain to share it with some of the more fragile elders living on the reserve. And in doing so, he honored himself by fulfilling a sacred duty.

With their responsibilities completed and the western sky's rosy hue announcing twilight's imminent arrival, father and son began walking towards their own house. George had been waiting patiently for this moment to play his usual trick on Father, and so he launched into action. Walking on Father's left, George used his fishing rod to covertly tap Father's right shoulder from behind, making Father spin around to find no one there. Father played along flawlessly. "What! Who was that? Where did...I bet that jokester Raven's around here."

Unable to contain himself, George cackled with laughter, delighting in their close bond.

Inside their house, Mother and Mary could hear their men coming home well before they could see them. Standing next to each other at a small wooden table, mother and daughter were preparing the salmonberries they had gathered earlier in the day.

Mary eagerly helped with all Mother's tasks, though at nine years old she often needed a stool to participate fully.

Mother sang while working next to her daughter and Mary loved hearing the ancient melodies. Mother often sang while picking berries, her tender voice lilting on the clean mountain air. Mary knew all the songs she sang. They were the songs of the elders, the songs of their ancestors. Mother encouraged her to join in, but Mary's heart rejoiced more by hearing the music through Mother's voice.

With father and son drawing closer, the clamor of homespun bedlam grew louder, interrupting Mother's singing. Glancing at each other, the two women grinned, awaiting their resident clowns and the entertainment that was sure to follow. Mother peeked out the cracked kitchen window, which framed the sight of her returning men. "Looks like there's fish coming home for dinner tonight."

"And berries too!" Mary chirped.

Seeing the sky's color reminded Mother how late in the day it was. "I wonder where Grandfather has gotten to?...It's such a beautiful day...I suppose it's hard to come inside."

"I think Grandfather is up on the mountain today," Mary said.

"Yes, you might be right," Mother said, smiling at her oldest, appreciative of her young, but accurate, intuition.

Grandfather was a diminutive man with a unique and compelling presence. His hair was whiter than the

snow that crowned the surrounding mountaintops, and it cascaded down his back in a long, elegant braid. His typical attire was simple, yet practical; a denim shirt, plaid quilted jacket, blue jeans, deerskin belt and moccasins, and a red bandana knotted loosely around his neck. His face exhibited the deeply etched lines of wisdom, accompanied by an unusual expression; an intriguing grin that made you wonder what great secret he guarded and understood. Throughout his lifetime, he had shown unflinching integrity and grown in wisdom by earning an abundance of knowledge, particularly regarding spiritual matters. All of which meant that the People considered him a man of great wealth.

Grandfather was always talking about the mountains. Even at his advanced age, he would often leave for a day or more to visit the sacred places up there, though Mother worried about him when he was absent. Grandfather knew this and had tried reassuring Mother his treks were safe. "My dear, there's no reason to worry about me," he said smirking. "Because you know I'm actually part mountain goat."

He cherished Mother and would never mock her concerns. He had taken her hand in his. "Remember, if I don't return it's because I've met Creator in the way that was intended." Nonetheless, Mother remained skeptical, still not satisfied the old man's adventures were acts of sanity. So she had petitioned Father to intervene. "Can't you talk some sense into him?"

Father had one firm, but loving, response. "Grandfather knows who he is."

Without warning, a raucous giggle fest fell through the front door of their unpretentious home with Father and George stumbling over each other, their bellies sore from laughter. Vaulting off her stool, Mary bounded over to greet them.

"Father!" she yelled, leaping into his muscular arms and all but disappearing into his hug.

Sprinting into the kitchen, George pounced on Mother, grabbing her around the waist and squeezing her from behind like a vise. Mother gasped, having been knocked off balance by her youngest's enthusiastic greeting. "How are you, my son?"

George answered by snuggling her.

Father walked towards his wife swinging Mary back and forth while collecting giggles as a fee for the trip. Lowering Mary to the floor, he kissed her cheek and asked, "Would you please go and get the fish from outside?"

"Okay!" she cried taking off like a hawk after prey.

Father bowed to George. "Excuse me, sir, may I hug my wife now?"

George contemplated Father's request by wadding up his face for a moment. "Well...okay!" he yelled, dashing off to help his sister.

Mother merged into her husband's arms. "Hey! What're you doing chasing away my boyfriend like that?"

Chapter 6

Meanwhile...

What remained in his heart was Her voice, the ocean's gentle song. But it was not the only soothing and delightful thing Father dearly missed. Prison was the antithesis of his former life, and was not, by any measure, agreeable to his nature. He found himself thrust into the midst of a brutal climate whose cruelty was self-perpetuating. Unaccustomed to the smells, the sounds, and the savagery, he struggled to adapt to the feral habitat. But it was the unbridled and ferocious racism that became his real nemesis. Unlike the reserve, here there was nowhere to hide from it, or from the other inmates and the guards. As time wore on, Father wondered if he would survive to finish his sentence. For this gentle-natured man, poverty was one thing, brutality quite another.

Father often stared through the three-inch crack that served as the window of his cell, in his unending search for some trace of beauty with which to counteract his harsh surroundings. Save for a few distant cedar trees, he saw little that was comforting, or familiar and he spent his daylight hours of confinement staring out the sliver of a window and praying.

Creator, Grandmothers and Grandfathers, I ask for the strength to be in this place. I ask for this not to be in vain. I ask for protection for George and Mary, for my beautiful wife, and for Grandfather. Help them

to keep my children safe. Help them to grow up healthy and happy. I ask you to help the children who have been taken away. I ask you to send kindness into the hearts of the people here...

As Father languished in his prison cell, hundreds of miles away from his loved ones, Mother and Grandfather cautioned the children repeatedly to be extra vigilant now they had one less protector.

Regardless of those explicit warnings, a month later the inevitable happened—the sound returned. The People knew the sound. It echoed like thunder across the water and struck the village with a devastating intensity that lightning could never match. It was the sound of stolen children.

That fateful day, George and Mary were playing on the beach and in their delight had not paid as close attention as they should have. Before the siblings realized, the sound was right on top of them. At the last moment, the boat's tenor sliced through Mary's joy and awoke her to action. She gasped, "The boat!"

Grabbing her little brother's arm, she shoved him to the ground. With strength beyond the capacity of her small frame, she deftly rolled a hollow piece of driftwood on top of George before bolting up the beach in search of concealment for herself.

By this time, Sergeant had alighted the shore and begun pursuit. "You! Stop! Come back here!"

Sprinting from panic, Mary clambered over the maze of logs lying scattered between her and the safety of the woods. Without looking behind, she heard her pursuer narrowing the gap.

“Stop you fucking little squaw!”

Mary needed to get to the cover of the forest trail where she could disappear. Sergeant was closing in. With her heart pounding and lungs burning, she scrambled madly to reach her escape route; just a few more yards; she was almost safe. This life and death race was about to end. Mary was within two strides of the forest trail, with only one log separating her from freedom. *I can make it*, she thought. So she jumped—and lost her footing, falling hard and headfirst into a large rock.

More than an hour had passed before Mary began to stir from unconsciousness. Torrential rain poured from a dark gray sky, pelting her, stinging her face and arousing her further. Opening her eyes, she found herself lying sprawled face down on the boat deck, her head encircled by a puddle of coagulated blood. She groaned. Reaching up to her pounding head, she discovered thick, warm ooze flowing from a gaping wound. Slowly, her awareness grew. She felt the small craft swaying back and forth as it sliced through the rough ocean waves. Shivering from the wet and cold, and through the haze of her injury, Mary found it daunting to distinguish between reality and dream. Holding her bloody hand up in front of her eyes, she stared at it insensibly, watching the raindrops slowly dilute the gore. Inside, she waged a psychic battle of denial against this living nightmare. *This isn't real...This must be...I must be dreaming...I'm not really here...This can't be happening...* Mary refused to accept the veracity of her situation; until she

remembered the chase. In that flash of nauseating lucidity, she grasped her predicament. The dire implications wrapped a stranglehold around her belly and she vomited.

Still hidden away, George lay paralyzed, afraid to make even the slightest noise; never before had he been this close to the boat. His ears had soaked in every dreadful sound. The vessel landing almost on top of him, Sergeant jumping ashore on the dry seaweed, and every surreal moment of the chase that had ensued. He listened to the officer's clumsy, frenzied footsteps as he yelled at Mary, swearing, and cursing. And the little boy had borne silent witness to Sergeant's depraved laughter when he had captured his prey lying injured and unconscious behind the nearby logs. All of it left his young mind creating pictures to match. Several hours had passed since that horrible event, yet George remained frozen under the makeshift ramparts, which his sister had lovingly provided. Still fighting back his urge to vomit, he dared not move.

I have to go home. I have to tell Mother. With those distressing thoughts, George began digging himself out from under the log with the woeful echoes still reverberating in his head. Tentatively emerging from his refuge, he stepped into a shroud of dismal silence along the shoreline. Chilled to the bone, his limbs numb, and engulfed by a traumatic fog, he cried out weakly for his sister. "Mary...Mary..."

The call of a lone gull overhead was his only reply. It was a bleak affirmation of his worst fears.

Chapter 18

Autumn 1990

Vancouver, British Columbia

Tonight especially, it felt like there was a drop of cold sweat for every terrifying memory. Wendy's sheets lapped it up while she fitfully tossed and turned, caught up in an uneasy blend of dream and recent reality. It had only been a couple of hours since she fell asleep and now the nightmares had started up again. It was two a.m.

There wasn't anything Wendy could do to shake the images out of her mind, the little white T-shirt dripping with crimson, and the small blue sneaker clinging to the lifeless foot. Kiddie calls were the worst. But murdered children? Well, that is an evil so perverse it shatters your faith that goodness even exists in the world. Calls like those were like a snakebite whose slow-acting venom poisons your entire being. And its pernicious toxin doesn't diminish with time. Instead, it grows more potent, especially if its host already pulsates with the catalyst of preexisting bitterness. It had been weeks since that heinous call, and since then, the ferocious poison had sought out a foothold in Wendy's psyche.

Tonight, momentarily trapped between asleep and awake, she tried jolting herself out of her slumber's purgatory. Slapping her own face and forcing her eyes wide open, Wendy stared out the window, focusing intently on the torrential rain, her eyes locked onto the

streetlamp which illuminated the drops falling fierce and hard. Listening keenly to the water spattering against the asphalt, with every inch of consciousness at her disposal, Wendy willed herself into the moment. She needed solid anchoring to the present if she had any hope of escaping tonight's tormenting onslaught of memories.

Defenseless, and without recourse, she bolted upright in bed with her heart racing and shirt soaked through. Throwing off the covers, she sat motionless on the edge of the mattress for several minutes, sitting on the brink of overwhelm and frozen from the barrage of mixed emotions springing forth from within; anger, disgust, horror—and grief. Tonight's images were especially vivid, and as a result, Wendy felt uncommonly shaky. Her tremors must have beckoned to their kin because just then an uncharacteristic thought perforated her tortured awareness. An outlandish idea so unsettling she became instantly appalled. *I need a drink.*

Ordinarily, the slightest smell of alcohol nauseated Wendy. Yet here she was actually suggesting to herself she have one to calm down. The fact she offered herself such offensive advice was what rattled her most. *Oh, my God! I must be really fucked up for that to have come out of my brain. Jesus!*

And so began the mental tailspin, Wendy was getting anxious about being anxious. On the verge of panicking, she grumbled, "Fuck it." And reached for her running shoes. Maybe she could outrun the

flashbacks and the crazy-making anxiety. Maybe she couldn't. But she was damn well going to try.

Maybe it was enough that running helped her keep a firm grasp on her humanity. It definitely helped dissipate the anger she regularly amassed from seeing people at their worst, from watching them do brutal and vicious things to each other. It would have been all too easy for her just to say, "Fuck them. People are assholes. And if you fuckers get yourselves beat up or murdered you probably deserved it." Without a doubt, there had been enough occasions when the cult of misanthropy had come close to convincing her to join. But Wendy kept rejecting the convenient, repulsive invitations, choosing to die rather than betray her own humanity. She was at war with cynicism and wasn't about to give up the coveted ground of her compassion. So to keep from despising her own kind and to lessen tonight's torrents of anxiety, grief, and rage, Wendy fought back the only way she knew how. She went for a run—at two thirty a.m.—in the pouring rain. It was her way of trying to negotiate a truce within herself. And she would run until there was a ceasefire, regardless of how tenuous it felt.

Cynicism was the uniform of hatred's foot soldiers, and thus far, in the battle for her soul, Wendy had refused to wear it.

Chapter 30

Meanwhile...

It was one o'clock. Time to go get coffee. That modest objective at the start of each shift ranked as priority number one for Wendy and Trevor, though it was grounded in a great deal more than a shallow desire for caffeine. The mere act of it represented something much more profound; a predictable, regimented routine. It was a welcome, and all too often necessary counterweight to the inevitable chaos to follow. By its nature, the job was unpredictable, so it cried out for as many dependable patterns as possible. Getting coffee was their ritual. It was their way of bringing order to disorder, control to the uncontrollable, even if it was only briefly. If a call interrupted that simple quest, the two felt unsteady, as if knocked off their centers. And they would both feel that way for the rest of the shift.

Trevor stood at the coffee counter stirring in his fifth sugar packet. "Never underestimate the power of caffeine and sugar."

"Amen," Wendy sang.

They had barely put the lids on the fresh brew when a call came in. "Forty-Eight Charlie, code three for the overdose, fifth floor, one fifty-nine East Hastings, the Balmoral Hotel."

Wendy paid for the coffee, Trevor acknowledged his dispatcher, and the two headed back to the car, cups in hand, ritual fulfilled, grounded and ready to

work. Climbing into the front of the ambulance Wendy groaned as she grabbed the crew report. "I'm doomed to drink cold coffee aren't I?"

Trevor lit up the car and accelerated while rolling his eyes at her. "Like you weren't expecting to work today?"

"Maybe I should just switch to iced coffee. Then I wouldn't be constantly disappointed."

Weaving the ambulance through the dense traffic, Trevor didn't miss a beat. "Nah, you'd just bitch that it got warm."

Wendy smirked while lamenting over the siren's blare. "Okay, so why can't they just make coffee that tastes good at room temperature?"

Edging his way through a red light, he countered, "Don't you know the definition of insanity?"

Putting on her gloves, Wendy followed the script. "And that would be?...Oh, wait. I think you've said this before."

Trevor laughed at the irony before answering, "Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. Remember?"

Lightly smacking her forehead with her gloved hand, Wendy concluded the ritual. "Oh, now I get it! Like expecting my partner not to spill my room temperature coffee while I'm actually working in the back of the car."

Predictable, regimented routine.

That short conversation was as long as it took to arrive at the Balmoral Hotel, a rather infamous

rooming house in the area. If drug addiction were an earthquake, this place was the epicenter.

As the partners had done a thousand times before, grabbing their gear they entered the decrepit lobby and began the strenuous trek up the creaky wooden staircase. Even loaded down with their equipment, they still made it up to the fifth floor in less than three minutes. Making their way down the long, narrow hall that separated the dozen or so cramped rooms lining it, they assumed their patient belonged to the vertical foot they saw protruding from around the corner at the far end of the passageway.

One glance at the foot's owner was all it took to know, with almost one hundred percent certainty, what they were dealing with—heroin—and too much of it. Lying on the floor at their feet was a woman in her mid-thirties who was not breathing. Safe to say, from the sight of her plum-purple face, she had not been breathing for quite some time. Both her arms were brimming with track marks and her pupils were so constricted they were little more than pencil dots. Luckily, her heart hadn't stopped—but that could change at any second.

The two paramedics plunged to the floor. Trevor got to work by establishing an airway and ventilating the woman. With every squeeze of the bag he used to breathe for her, her color improved, the purple transforming into pink. As Trevor took charge of the immediate life threat, Wendy ruled out any obvious trauma, gathered baseline vital signs, tested her blood sugar and began the challenging task of looking for a

vein to use for an intravenous medication route. Just as she picked up the patient's left arm, Wendy startled, jumping backward. "Shit!"

Trevor giggled as Wendy stood there cursing a cockroach that had scurried out from underneath their patient. "Fuck me!"

"You know, the sooner you get a line, the sooner we can get outta here," he said.

Wendy was still flinching. "God damn, fucking bugs!"

"I'd love to give ya a hand, but I'm kinda busy right now."

Of course, that kind of drollery deserved "the look." So, she flashed it, returned to the infested floor and continued hunting for a useable intravenous route. "Man, she's got nothing left for veins. How she's managed to fix with is beyond me."

Several more minutes of fruitless searching passed. The only thing standing between this woman and a tray in the morgue was Trevor and an Ambu bag.

"Gettin' kinda tired of bagging her," he teased.

"Gettin' kinda tired of a partner without any stamina," she replied.

As a last resort, Wendy checked the woman's feet, but those veins were just as scarred and useless. "Well, it's the emergency vein or nothing."

Wendy was referring to a tiny vein on the back of the thumb that most people possessed, and most junkies would never use. Less than ninety seconds later, the capable paramedic had established a tiny IV

line, and their patient had received her first dose of Naloxone, known on the street as Narcan or the heroin antidote. The next forty-five seconds were critical. The drug needed only a short time to work. If the woman did not respond, this likely was not a narcotic overdose.

Within half a minute, her eyes started to flicker. Her gag reflex would return rapidly, so Trevor removed the tube from his patient's throat just as she began taking breaths on her own. She woke up fast, startled and disoriented. Trevor was ready. "It's all right. It's all right. You overdosed, and we're here to help you. You're okay now. Can you take some nice deep breaths through this oxygen mask for me?"

Mary complied.

"Let's get you off the floor and sitting up," said Trevor, helping his patient to lean against the plaster wall.

"Your name's Mary, right hon?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You remember us? I'm Trevor, that's Wendy."

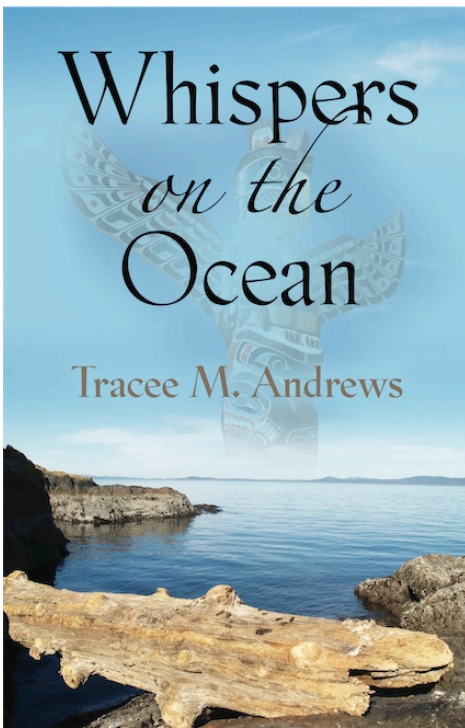
"Oh yeah, sure."

"We need to ask you some questions, okay? Just keep that oxygen mask on your face for a while yet," he said

A rattled Mary said, "Okay."

Noticing Mary was starting to shiver, Wendy wrapped a blanket around her shoulders. "There you go."

"Thanks."



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