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Personal Essay

Personal Cartography

As I rummage through my desk drawer, running lazy hands over dull scissors, used condom wrappers and old chewing gum, I still can't find what I'm looking for. It's not an HB #2 pencil with a sewing needle attached to the eraser. That's for when Wes comes over and we tattoo ourselves. We listen to Johnny Cash and wince in pain at the hundreds of tiny bee stings that pump venom into our iron skin.

It sure as hell isn't the five-year-old playbill from that date I went on years ago. I can't remember her name, but I recall the way dim theatre lights got trapped in her dirty blonde hair. I tripped over a snowbank on the walk home after the show. She didn't laugh.

I know what this piece of paper is from the first sensation. An old forgotten city map weighs down my hands. I don't feel like it's only a piece of paper, waterstained and tattered through neglect. It smells of what I imagine an archaic, papyrus scroll would smell like. It smells richer and deeper than Orient spices.

For me, it isn't about the splashes of colour or beautiful street names. As I look at Winnipeg's crusty layout I see the street where I live. *Lilac St.* I'd expect houses painted vibrant purple with playful front gardens. Instead, I find the opposite. The grey, snowy roads and bleak homes follow the same grid pattern and dreariness. I don't feel unique as I sit in the basement of an unnamed corner bedroom. My roommates upstairs sound like they're busy puttering around organizing desk drawers, doing nothing; just like me. I hear the wind lash our winter windows.

As I run my hands over the tears in the seams of this map I hear Townes Van Zandt softly singing “Poncho and Lefty” out of the stereo. It’s my favourite part of the song. The portion with perfect timing where Van Zandt says out of turn “pick it, and it won’t ever heal.” His voice is so inundated with sorrow it could drown this entire city. The map is my scab. It’s a relic of pain and healing.

I kept this old city map as a reminder of a teenage me. It’s a reminder of the city’s humid summers. The map was a tool for my friends and I to guide our late-night bike rides to every corner of our illuminated town. Sometimes we would ride until the last street light. Only then could we see the flat, unlit prairies on the horizon. The sweat glued our shirts to our backs as a statement, a badge of honor that we were warriors. Our working class parents didn’t have the money for cottages. My dad worked his summers in the sweltering factory heat for a road trip west once every few years. We knew we were stuck in the city otherwise, but we had a purpose. We had to make up for the other kids. The kids whistling, dancing down sun-lit cottage lanes holding trophy fish at the end of their lines. Hundreds of kilometers apart, we were all watching the same starry sky but we were relegated to the competing light of the city. We’d sit up on an apartment roof until the morning. We would talk about nothing important. Things like girls, or music, wondering what sleeping in a hammock felt like.

Now I’m on a mission. There must be other maps lying around. I feel like I’m surrounded by countless memories. The ruffle of an unfolding map sounds nostalgic like the squeaking of a dusty photo album’s laminate pages. Let me unfold this next one. I can tell from its ridges that it’s more weathered, more experienced in nature’s elements. It’s a hiking map, steeped in solitude and stoicism. It’s a symbol of meditation, of oneness with an ever-changing set of circumstances.

This map guided me through three days of Ontario's backcountry swamps so deep that my feet would swell to bursting, then shrivel like a neglected jack-o-lantern in the early November air. This is the campsite where I spent my first night alone in the silence of autumn. It was in a small clearing. My tent was surrounded by leaves stitched together in a blanket of auburn, gold and copper. It was there I felt my true size. As the silence became more profound in the waning sunlight, dark thoughts began to race across my mind. What if a bear or a group of wolves crossed my path while I slept? There would be no time for last rites, just a few seconds of rabid frenzy. I could hear the howls and feel my jugular rip. Warm, velvet blood would stain the inside of my tent. My face would be torn up and shredded like an old dog toy, unrecognizable to the ranger or hiker who would eventually enter that clearing next spring. Would they know from the heaviness in the air what they were about to discover? That night my dreams were filled with torment. It was like the spirits of the woods were reconciling my existence, curious of what my purpose was in their lands. However, I survived the night. The next day I woke up to a clear, crisp autumn sky. I had triumphed over the forest's lonely and sinister witching hour.

There's one more spot on this map that I remember distinctly, where I felt the jugged rock face clutching and tearing my clothes as its sharp edges guided me unevenly downstream. It was just after this stream I approached a father and son doing the through hike together. We stopped and chatted without saying much. As we went our separate ways I thought about my own dad. He's not much of a hiker. We only went camping a few times and these memories are far too distant to feel anymore. I imagine those working summers took a lot out of him and I can see it more than ever these days. On the trail I thought of his own lonely basement and his days spent sleeping on the couch in the dark. I sit with him sometimes and stare at the light of the television flicker over a table of scattered fast food wrappers and empty cigarette cartons. What happened?

How did his sun set so deeply into despair and depression. If he's lost, what kind of map will help me find him? Who knows, maybe I can make a hiker out of him yet. We could always start with a walk around the park. Small steps.

This last map is confusing at first. I read the title aloud in my head: *Wanderkarten im Nationalpark Berchtesgaden*. I'm no expert in German but I notice that the word *wandern* translates to travel or to wander. When I used this map in Austria's Berchtesgaden National Park I would certainly say I was wandering. There was an aimless hungover bliss about me while I swayed between sheltering pine trees. As I moved out of the tree line and towards the summit of Grünstein Mountain, the rawness of the stones and rocks was palpable. Cliff edges became alarmingly steep and without trees to keep my thoughts occupied I couldn't help looking down in panic from time to time. Once the steepness guided me up to the aerie of a summit, I perched and basked in the eagle-eyed view over the snow-covered Austrian village.

It took two years for the apprehension of that moment to grow into what I can only describe through the German word *fernweh*. Even its literal translation *wanderlust* doesn't do it justice. I've heard people compare it to homesickness and as I sit in the basement of what I now call a home I'd give anything to be back on top of that mountain. That speck on the map, no larger than a pinpoint was my home in that moment. I felt so grounded and attached to everything around me but recently I find myself loose, floating away like a silk scarf in the breeze.

I have an idea. I found some tape lying around the basement and I'm going to put these maps up as decorative reminder. They're useful guides not only for hiking, cycling, or wandering but for other, larger things. I've realized they're a guide to who I am, what I am, and what I'll be. I've decided that they don't deserve the cobwebs and neglect I've given them over the years.

They've suffered too long in their folded solitude. As I tear the tape off and pat the torn corners of my soul to the basement wall, I have a feeling these maps lead to the beginning of another journey.

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