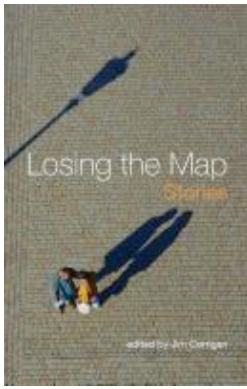


An aerial photograph of a cobblestone street. A long, dark shadow of a street lamp extends from the top left towards the center. In the lower half of the image, two people are crouching on the cobblestones, looking at a map. Their shadows are cast to the right. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Losing the Map

Stories

edited by Jim Corrigan



This anthology begins with a man wandering into a bar and ends with one wandering in space. Riding in the family car, a girl watches her parents fight, a vacation goes horribly wrong, and people looking for adventure find more than they want. This collection features stories by Cutter P. Affix, Sheila McDermott Allard, Dave Brigham, Tod Brubaker, Maria Carvalho, Beth Knaus, Aaron Klein, Deborah Liljegren, and Caroline Pomeroy.

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Jim Corrigan, Editor

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Lobster Trap

Tod Brubaker

The plan was to go back to the hotel and order room service. Have a nice quiet evening. Get a good night's sleep. Wake up in the morning without the usual crushing headache. But as we passed by a bar, I couldn't help stopping to peek in the window. It looked dark and smoky inside. I recognized the faint sound of Miles Davis's sultry horn, a siren song calling out to me.

"Quick drink?" I asked my friend Rich.

"Naw. I'm beat."

"C'mon. It's our last night together."

Rich let out a sigh. I knew that sigh. It was the sound of his willpower caving.

"Think I can handle one."

The bar was empty, except for a couple sitting at a table. At first I thought the bartender was asleep. He sat slumped on a stool behind a battered wooden counter, his head nodding up and down.

"Pardon, señor?"

The bartender's eyes opened halfway, then closed again. He appeared to be drifting in and out of consciousness.

“Christ, he's drunk.”

“Wanna get out of here?”

“Yeah. I gotta pee first though.”

In the bathroom, the walls were covered with Spanish graffiti. I noticed a belt rolled up on the floor next to the toilet.

“I think this is a junkie bar,” I told Rich when I rejoined him. Here, it was easy to imagine that an ordinary, everyday belt was a tie-off for shooting heroin. Maybe it was the jukebox playing Charlie Parker. Maybe it was the walls stained yellow from years of cigarette smoke. Maybe it was the smell of cheap beer, vomit, and something much worse.

We were about to leave, but the bartender must have sensed our presence. He slowly surfaced from the depths of his fog. “Hola,” he said, rubbing his glassy, sunken eyes.

It was hard not to stare at his hands, if you could call them that. His fingers were fused into two pincer-like stumps, a deformity that made him look like a lobster. Or a freak show performer.

“Que quieres?”

“Dos cervezas, por favor.”

“Muy bien.”

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He deftly snagged two glasses off a rack, clamping them between his pincers. Then he held them under a beer tap, pulling the lever with his other claw.

“American?” he asked, revealing an English accent.

“Yeah.”

“Where you guys from?”

I told him New York.

“City?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m from London.”

He set our beers down in front of us. His complete lack of self-consciousness was an amazing thing to behold, as was his handiness with the claws.

“What’s your name?” he asked to no one in particular.

“Jake,” I replied.

Rich sat there sipping his beer, refusing to engage with or even look at the mutant bartender.

“This is Rich,” I said, answering for him.

“I’m Ned, nice ta meetcha.” He extended a claw to me. I hesitated for the merest fraction of a second, then reached out to shake the monstrous appendage. Since his pincers were set so

wide apart, I could only grab one of them. It felt fleshy, like a large thumb.

Rich's face blanched. He got up quickly to go to the bathroom, thus avoiding having to touch the claw. If Lobster Boy was offended by the obvious slight, he didn't let on.

"You guys are traveling together, huh?"

"Yeah."

"How do you like Barcelona?"

He was a chatty guy — the first person I met all week who spoke English. I knew a little Spanish, but only what I remembered from high school.

"This place is skeevy," Rich grumbled in my ear when he came back from the bathroom. "You wouldn't believe what I saw in there."

"Smell," I said.

Rich sniffed the air. "Pot?"

I looked around. It was the couple in back.

"Man. I wouldn't mind some of that."

Ned scooped up our empties with a nimble flick of his claw. "Two more?"

Rich and I looked at each other.

"Oh why not," I shrugged.

The sigh again. “One more.”

“Hey ... do you know where I can buy some of that?” I asked Ned, jerking my head towards the piquant cloud.

“No idea. But if I were you, I’d try asking those folks.” He gave me a little wink.

I turned to Rich. “Go ask ’em.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Okay, I’ll ask.”

“I don’t need to smoke tonight, Bro. We don’t know those people.”

I took a sip of beer and walked over to where the two were sitting — a black guy with dreads and a woman who looked Spanish. They were leaning in close to one another, talking in low tones.

“Perdóneme,” I interrupted. “Hablas a Inglés?”

“Yes, a little,” answered the man. He had red, droopy eyes that reminded me of a bloodhound. The woman seemed annoyed at the intrusion.

“Sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if I could buy some ... ” I held an imaginary joint to my lips.

“Qué diche?” the woman asked Droopy.

“Que quiere comprar hachís,” he replied.

“Fucking estúpido Americano.”

“I can’t sell you anything,” he said to me, “but I can give you this.” He plopped something soft and moist in the palm of my hand.

“Really?”

“Take it.”

“Thank you!” I said. “Gracias!”

I didn’t open my hand until I got back to my seat. “Look at that,” I marveled. It was a black, glittering lump. I had never seen hash with such a dark, rich color before.

“We’re gonna wind up in a Spanish jail,” complained Rich, shaking his head.

“You don’t want any?”

The sigh, bigger this time. “One hit maybe.”

Ned demonstrated his mastery of the pincers once again. He picked tobacco out of the end of a cigarette, leaving about a centimeter of space. Then he pinched off a chunk of hash and carefully packed it into the empty cavity.

“Now you can smoke like a Spaniard,” he said, taking the first hit.

We passed the loaded cigarette back and forth among us. It wasn’t long before I was enveloped by a profound sense of wellbeing. No longer did I ache from the recent collapse of my disastrous marriage. Or feel the sting of losing my dog, condo,

and half my life savings. I didn't even mind having to give up my sports club membership.

Indeed, at that moment, I had all the comfort, peace, and meaning I needed right there in that bar. And the person I felt most connected to in the whole world was this pasty, hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed junky with the hands of a crustacean. Like a tour guide to the underbelly of Barcelona, Ned told me about how drugs came in through Afghanistan and Turkey, where to find the classiest brothels, and what clubs to go to in Las Ramblas for deviant sex. I hung on every word, utterly entranced.

At some point, I became aware of a gulf that had opened up between Rich and me. While I was getting more and more stoned, I sensed him pulling back from the brink. And why not? In the morning, he was heading to Madrid to meet up with his fiancée. Me? I had no special other, no plans, nothing to keep me from hurtling over the edge.

"I gotta leave, man, I gotta leave now," Rich announced, glancing at his watch. "Comin'?"

I told him to go on ahead, I wouldn't be far behind.

"Okay, see you in the morning." He gave me an awkward, drunken bear hug. "You gonna be okay, man?"

"Yeah, I'll be okay."

"Sure?"

"Yup."

He drained his glass and staggered out the front door.

By now, the place was filling up with an assortment of oddballs — alcoholics, eccentrics, lunatics. Sitting next to me was the woman who had called me a “fucking estúpido Americano.” She was reading a newspaper and puffing on a cigarette. She blew the smoke in my face. Every once in a while she said something aloud in Spanish, reacting to a news story. It was easy to recognize swearing, no matter what language it was spoken in.

“Hey hola,” I said to her. “I want to thank you for that little gift earlier.”

“Eh?” she said, looking confused.

“El hachís.”

“You like?”

“Sí.”

I hadn’t noticed before how beautiful she was. Her movements were slinky, sensual. She was one of those women who made even small gestures alluring—the crossing of a leg, the flicking of a cigarette, the turning of a page.

“I’d like to buy that woman a drink,” I told Ned the next time he came around.

“Who? Claudia? You don’t have to do that, mate. She’s my wife. Her drinks are on the house.”

I let a chuckle slip out, thinking he was joking. But then I realized he wasn’t. He told her something in Spanish, a grin on his face. She gazed at me with cool, amused eyes.

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I was momentarily knocked off my cloud. By what miracle could he have snagged such a beauty? With a pang of jealousy, I wondered if Ned was more gifted with those claws than I ever could have imagined.

Claudia put an unlit cigarette in her mouth and waited. As if on cue, Ned was there with a lighter. She cupped her hands around his, letting them linger for a moment — a casual touch that managed to be a caress.

The hash, the booze, and the glimpse into the lives of unusual people carried me through the night on a warm, fluffy cloud. Pretty soon it was almost dawn. Claudia and Ned were having a heated discussion about something. I got the sense they were talking about me.

“Pregúntale! Pregúntale!” she kept demanding of Ned.

“Where are you staying?” he asked me.

I told him the name of my hotel.

He looked at his wife conspiratorially, then back at me. “We live right upstairs. You could crash at our place.”

“Oh thanks, but my hotel isn’t very far.”

I assumed they were just trying to be friendly, given how buzzed I was. Still, I was taken aback by the presumed intimacy. Ned translated my response to Claudia. She seemed impatient.

“Pregúntale!” Claudia demanded once again.

Ned turned back to me. “No, I mean ... you can stay at our place ... if you know what I mean.”

He didn't exactly wink at me, but the suggestive — almost leering — look on his face was unmistakable. Slowly, my drug-addled brain began to grasp his meaning.

“You mean ... ” The words stalled on my lips. What if I had misread the situation?

Ned gave me an encouraging look, as if to say, “Yes, please go on.”

“You're suggesting a threesome?” I managed to say. “You, me, and her?”

“Why not?” replied Ned, cocking an eyebrow. “When in Barcelona ... ”

I looked at Claudia. She was an astoundingly sexy girl. A little crazy perhaps, but that only added to her dark appeal.

“I'm not into guys,” I told him. “Her, on the other hand ... ”

I didn't know what I was hoping for. Did I really think he would just let me traipse on upstairs with his wife? While he stayed down here washing bar glasses?

Ned looked either surprised or disappointed or both. He translated my response to his wife.

“Monstruo!” she shouted at him, practically leaping off her stool. “Todos le repulse!” She parted her fingers on both hands, in a kind of Vulcan salute, mimicking her husband's deformity. “LOBSTER CLAW!” she screamed, her eyes flashing. “REPUGNANTE!”

The bizarre outburst shocked me. It occurred to me that I had been misunderstood. Claudia thought I had rejected Ned because of his deformity, not because I was straight. I tried to make it clear that Ned wasn't the problem.

"You're not gay?" Ned looked surprised.

"No."

"But you and your friend. We thought you were lovers."

"No! He's a friend. Travel buddy."

Ned and Claudia discussed this new revelation. They started giggling, at my expense I was pretty sure. Claudia pulled something out of her purse. She thrust it in my face. It was a smooth, orb-shaped object that tapered off at the end, attached to a key chain.

"You know thees?" she asked me.

I had no idea what it was. I touched it briefly, prompting more laughter. All of a sudden, I got the joke. My hand burned. Here was a woman who carried a butt plug around in her purse. I was appalled. I was aroused.

"We have pictures upstairs," Ned said to me, the leering look back on his face. "Lots of pictures."

"Y películas."

"Yes. And movies."

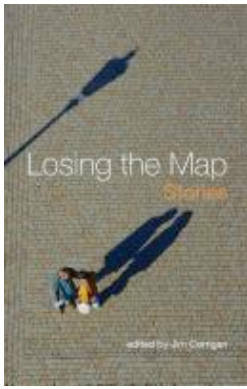
"Thanks anyway."

Ned's face fell. "Él no quiere," he translated.

Claudia lept out of her chair. "Horrible criatura!" she shrieked at Ned. She shaped her hands into claws again, waving them through the air. "Lobster claw!!! LOBSTER MONSTRUO!!!!!!!"

I looked around the bar. It was empty now. I made an excuse to go to the bathroom. On the floor next to the toilet was a blackened spoon, several used condoms, and something I couldn't identify. Yes, it was definitely time to go. It was time to go hours ago.

When I returned to the bar, I was surprised to see a security gate pulled more than halfway down over the front door, leaving a little space underneath. Claudia sat alone at the bar smoking a cigarette. My beer glass had been refilled. It seemed to glow from a light within.



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