

# A Map Store in Woodstock

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Originally published in *the Madison Review* Spring, 2012  
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1.

Young women—their intonations—they all sound alike. You noticed that just now? This is Paul talking. I nod in agreement even though I've heard nothing like that at all. The young woman who's just left the store, she was pretty thin, pretty plain, pretty expressionless. That's all I noticed about her. Uniformly gray, her dress, no character to it at all, just monotonous fabric hanging down. Limp. Her visual message, I think, really really loud: You won't get anything out of looking at me. That's how I want it to be. Go look at something else.

What cartoon character did they all grow up imitating? That's what Paul asks next, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. I don't get the point of his shifting around so much all the time: he's going to be in pain no matter how he sits. I'm guessing he wants me to say something. So I do. They've always sounded alike, the young women. That's what I tell him. You've never noticed it before because you were always focused on something else. And I say this too: That part of your life is dead now. So you're able to notice things that you've never noticed before. Like everyone else sounding alike. Pretty much any group of people hearing the same things all their lives end up sounding alike. It's more noticeable when you've been left out, it's more noticeable when you're not happily babbling along with everyone else. You and me sound alike too. Sort of, anyway. It's generational, I think.

Paul's stopped listening to me. He's staring down at one of my maps, at one of my imaginary-world maps. He's probably looking at the creatures along the sides of the map, in the margins, and not at the imaginary terrain the map depicts. He has no interest in geography—whether it's real or not. So he's probably looking at the horse things that have faces like elephant trunks, big round eyes where the nostrils should be. He's probably looking at the intelligent reptile things wearing fur coats. He's always really liked the intelligent reptile things wearing fur coats. And they used to be popular, all those maps of imaginary worlds. They were popular, I mean, back when people were still interested in maps, when they were still interested in purchasing maps. Not that long ago, maybe as little as ten years, maybe a little more.

I used to design a lot of the imaginary-world maps myself. Years ago, I mean. Back when my hands were steady, back when I could gaze up close and not have it all fuzz out on me. I'd spend days designing them, print them up in bright colors, and they were expensive—what I'd charge for them. And I'd do another print run after I sold all the maps from the first print run. Sometimes there'd even be a third print run.

When things go out of date they really do it fast. Like milk in a bucket.

People have always stopped listening to me. All my life. Because I must sound like a book, because I probably don't know how to put the warm feelings into my words—that's what it must be. I always sound kind of black and white, kind of just up and down with beat of the syllables, kind of all-around dull. Many people stop listening to me in mid-sentence. I keep going because it's easier that way, because it's really hard to stop in mid-sentence.

And anyway, even though the other person isn't listening, they're usually polite about it, they expect you to finish. They'll pay attention again if you stop speaking abruptly, they'll wonder what happened, but they'll stop listening again once you continue talking, once they

know nothing strange is going on. So it's always better to just finish what you're saying to begin with.

Uh-huh, they'll say. When I'm finished. Oh that's interesting, they'll say that too. No kidding is also popular. Once I'm done speaking. These are all the ways polite people indicate they realize I'm a person, and I've been speaking. They're really nice about it, all things considered. My niece for example. On Mary's side. She calls me now and again. It's nice that she does that. Oh cool, she'll say. Whenever I tell her something. Whatever I say to her. Oh cool.

And my son. Showing up with food I don't like. That's what he used to do. Without calling first. Food that I hadn't asked for and that I didn't need. We finally had a fight about it because I got tired of throwing it away. I eat very little at my age, I explained to him, and anyway I don't eat that. Pointing at several packages of lima beans. So freeze it, my son tells me. We were yelling at each other, it had gotten to that.

So now he calls. And the conversation always sounds like a checklist. A lot of questions, and I say yes. Occasionally I say no. But rarely. My son apparently can't handle a lot of no. So I space my responses carefully, sandwiching qualifications and negations among plenty of affirmation. And ums and ahs. I don't recall him being like that as a boy, having so much trouble with the word no.

I'm not angry about it, how things are now. I'm kind of at peace. Mary would always say to me, you don't *know* when you're angry. Because she thought that there were times when *anyone* would be angry, and so when those times came around she was convinced I *had* to be angry too. Even if I just didn't have it in me.

2.

I've been collecting methods of suicide. Only for the last few years though. It's something some people do when they reach my stage of life. When people have stopped knocking on your door. For whatever reason.

Kids are always more dramatic about suicide, but they're not serious. It's more a cry for help or an act of spite. They spend all their time fantasizing about all the sad people at their funeral, how sorry all the mean people are going to be, and they don't put enough thought into how they're supposed to set up the suicide to begin with. You have to die first. Kids always seem to forget that.

Suicide is very different for us. For one thing, we know you have to practice. And we're not settling scores because there's no one left to settle scores with. So of course we've researched the topic thoroughly. We *know* how to do it, and so we usually do it right, we usually succeed at the first go.

Not always. My old friend Robert waited just a little too long to off himself. So he was disoriented and slit the wrong sides of his wrists. That way, not only did the police know he'd attempted suicide, they could also see how disoriented he was. And that was bad. He was moved out of his home, put in a place where well-meaning people watch over him, ones who make sure he lives as long as possible. No matter what it feels like to be alive, no matter what his opinion about it is. Even when no one else wants you around anymore, they still keep you going. He's still going. I know because I get postcards from him. Wish I was dead, that's what he writes me. I don't write back. That would be to miss the point.

I file the best methods to die on index cards. Because that way it's easier to cross-index them. Tools needed, initial costs, probability of success or failure, degree of discomfort or pain

induced, time between initiation and unconsciousness, time between initiation and death, physical repercussions in the event of survival, legal ramifications, collateral damage (if any). It's a little old-fashioned, using index cards, but after all that's why I'm collecting these methods to begin with. So why use up-to-date software? It'll give the wrong impression.

After I'm dead it doesn't matter, does it? I'm a neat man. Once I decided I was going, I started organizing the photographs, writing little blurbs under each picture in neat block letters. Trying to organize and label my belongings. And Mary's. Write short explanations for why these things had mattered to us, and how we had acquired them. That's when I realized that no one cares, that eventually no one cares. And a lot sooner than you think. My niece on my dead wife's side. The nice one. And my son. They already don't care. And Paul's too old to care. The map store. It won't survive me because who'd want such a thing?

We play a game, Paul and me. If someone comes into my store that day, buys something, I don't off myself. It just has to be one person that still wants a map for some reason. One person a day. Two persons in a day don't count for the next day. Window-shopping doesn't count either. Instructions to the highway don't count. Only purchases count.

It's only a matter of time before Paul loses this one. Because hardly anyone wants maps anymore—on paper I mean. Less and less. Even the maps of imaginary places, people are even losing interest in those.

I'm not sure I'm serious of course. If no one buys a map one of these days. It's just two old men playing a game, giving significance to the presence of one another in one another's lives. Inventing new ways to care about one another. That sort of thing.

One time Paul asked me, why do *you* want to die? You're healthy. I'm thinking, you've missed the point. You can't just be healthy all the time, you've got to be healthy for a reason. I don't say anything to him. I often don't say what I'm thinking, and not just to Paul.

### 3.

A mother and father come into the store. With a young boy. Howdy, Paul says. That's sort of a joke. Because we think people from out of town expect us to say howdy.

There's something wrong with the child, I see that right away. He's about eleven, thin blond hair, no expressions on his face, mechanical body movements. I realize after a while that he doesn't talk. Ever. Or express anything with his smooth unchanging face. He moves to one of the display cases, the one with the antique maps that I don't want anybody touching. Because the father guides the boy in front of him with his hands, pushing the boy like a cart. While at the same time speaking to the top of his son's head. Using a lot of cadence and exaggerated emotion in his voice like his audience is far, far away. These are beautiful old ones, he says joyously to the boy. Who doesn't seem to be paying attention to his father's voice, but who does bend his head directly over the maps in the display case. Look, Paul, the father says to the child, maps, this is a store that sells only maps.

There are a lot of other things for sale besides maps. Unusual writing implements, for example. Genuine fountain pens. Quill and ink sets. Stationary too, pieces of parchment decorated with pastoral scenes for example. And globe-maps of Earth, bright copper navigational instruments mounted on glass pedestals. Paperweight dragons and knights. Made from a heavy new plastic manufactured in Quebec to look and feel like gray carved stone. It's impressive what they can do with plastic these days, give it such weight and presence.

I've let the father's exaggeration pass. As far as I can tell, the boy never reacts to what his parents say, and he never looks at either of them. Instead he stares down at the maps in the display case and then he starts to rub his finger over the glass top.

Paul's a popular name, Paul says. Out of the blue. No one says anything to that. Paul is sitting on a tall stool near the counter, leaning forward on his cane—on his *ashplant* he sometimes calls it—looking as if he works in the store or even owns it. Instead of just being someone who shows up nearly every day at about eleven because he's got nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. Paul has long white hair and an impressive white beard. He'd look the way Gandalf does in the movies if he wasn't so short. Even so he fits into the atmosphere of the store in a way that I really never have. I look like a farmer, or what people who don't know think a farmer looks like. Even my name. Earl. It's not the name of a guy who owns a map store. Paul on the other hand looks like a dwarf or a wizard, a leprechaun or something. And the limp helps a lot, it really does.

The boy continues to run his finger over the top of the display case, like he's tracing the lines on the maps. Those are genuine antiques, I say to break the silence, English maps from a century ago. No one else speaks. The boy keeps running his finger over the top of the display case. I recognize that his movements are obsessive. Repetitive.

The mother has come over to where I'm sitting. He likes maps, she explains to me. She's nervous. I nod and smile. We heard about this place from the Buddhists, that's what she says next. Her remark isn't entirely opaque to me because there are a lot of Buddhists who live in the area, they've got a number of retreats nearby—half-hour drive at most to the closest one. So maybe there's a Buddhist who likes maps.

She's making me uncomfortable. Because of the nervous way that she keeps darting her eyes while she talks to me, as if she's uneasy or scared or something. Defensive maybe because she thinks strangers are going to say something about her boy, because she thinks they'll be thoughtless or insensitive or worse if she doesn't control the conversation. I feel sorry for her, but oddly not for the boy and his father. They seem fine, actually. The boy is what he is, and the father accepts him. Or he accepts his role in the boy's life. It's the mother's personality that's not designed to handle this. But then I think I'm reading too much into a couple of words.

Paul tells me that it's clear that the couple changed their lives drastically because of the boy. This is after the family leaves, after the father buys a map for the boy. Maybe for financial reasons, Paul muses, maybe because it's quieter up here away from the city, maybe because they're more comfortable among people they don't know. People react in different ways when they have children like that. This is Paul speaking in a meditative frame of mind. Some people reach out for all the public services they can grab, he says, while others withdraw into themselves, run from the world.

The father doesn't shave, he adds, did you notice that? And not because it's fashionable not to, his beard doesn't look like a fashionable three-day beard. You have to work at fashionable three-day beards, trim them so the hair is even, rub shit into them to make them reflect light the right way. He's just getting around to shaving every once in a while, that's all. And did you notice that shirt? Her too, Paul adds, those might as well be pajamas she's wearing. The two of them, they've given up.

I say the kind of thing I always say after Paul goes on this way about customers. That's a lot of detail to infer from a couple of days of hair growth and some shoddy clothing. It could be



something else like pajama-like pantsuits being in right now. I guess, Paul says, not listening to me.

They're back the next day, of course, the boy almost immediately tracing lines again on the surface of the display case with his finger, the father approving, the mother trying to have another conversation with me. He really likes it here, she tells me, he wanted to come back. Maybe because it's cool and damp, she adds, maybe because it's sort of like a dungeon. And then she giggles nervously. Like she's a lot younger than she is.

I realize that the mother is trying her best to charm me. I decide that she doesn't understand how she insults people regularly, and that she doesn't see why she gets into fights with people so often, people she doesn't even know—at check-out counters for example. Because she's so clumsy with words, that's all it is. And then I'm thinking: I'm like Paul now, reading too much into nothing.

Paul speaks up suddenly. There are some maps the boy can touch if he wants to, that's what Paul tells the mother. And the father. He can sit at the desk over there with the lamp while he touches a map. Both parents are looking at him, trying to tell whether he's sincere or making fun of them and their child. Paul gets up, limps over to one of my shelves, pulls out a binder of maps. FROM 1600 TO NOW. Each time the world shifts, there's a new map, that's what Paul explains to the parents, turning from one to the other deftly as he speaks. Since they're not standing near each other, since they're not even close to one another.

Then he limps over to the desk he was speaking about, it's an old-style Victorian roll-up. I restored it years ago even though it's too small for anyone but children, really. Paul opens the binder and folds it flat. He turns on the light mounted on the wall above the desk, and centers the

map under the circle of light the lamp casts. Everyone but the boy is watching him. Hey Paul, he says.

The boy hasn't responded. The father puts his hands on the boy's shoulders and pulls him gently away from the display case. The boy resists, at least I think I detect some resistance in the boy's shoulders as he moves. He stares at the ground as if he doesn't need to see where he's going. I'm surprised that he doesn't protest more about being pulled away from the display case. The father stops him beside the chair, and he sits down automatically. See? the father says, moving the chair closer to the desk, it's a map, a new map. The boy immediately starts to run his finger over the map that Paul has displayed, his finger movements identical to the ones he was making before on the glass.

He likes this map a lot better, the father says to Paul. Thank you.

#### 4.

A pattern has started. Every day they come here. Always before Paul, and sometimes before me. When that happens, they apologize. It says you open at nine, the mother explained the first time, pointing at my hours list on the door. Next to the closed sign. He got upset, that's what the father tells me. I wonder what that means, what the child does that they interpret as being upset.

And they stand outside or take a walk. While their boy sits at the desk running his finger over a map. They asked me if I wanted coffee before they left the first time. No, I said, I make coffee in the back. Would you like some? No, they said, we like Starbucks coffee if that's alright. I said sure. Fine.

Now they just leave after ten or fifteen minutes. Sometimes less. See you later, they say to me. And then I realize they've been gone for over an hour. Or more. Or Paul tells me they've

been gone for a while. Paul seems to like to time how long they're gone. They're talking about what to do with the boy, that's what Paul tells me. What do you mean? I ask. Divorce settlement, Paul says. Who gets the boy. Or something. You're really guessing now, I say. I look involuntarily towards the boy, but he's never indicated that he understands English. Or any other language for that matter.

Every day they buy a map. One map. You don't have to buy a map, I tell them once or twice. The kid's no bother, no bother at all. We want to, the mother tells me. We like maps too, she adds. It doesn't annoy me that they buy maps on days when someone else has bought a map too, some other stranger that's wandered in. But there are at least two or three days that put me to the test, make me wonder if I'm serious. Because I'm thinking they don't count. The parents. Sure they count, Paul tells me, why shouldn't they count? They don't know what you're planning.

One time when they're gone, and Paul isn't around, I stoop over the boy as he sits at the desk running his finger in a pattern on the map. He doesn't seem to notice me. I reach down slowly, rub my finger along a different path on the map. I throw in a couple of zigzags like I've been taken in by the scenery momentarily or because my feet have suddenly been gripped by wanderlust. The path I sketch is intricate and bountiful. You cover a lot of territory my way. The boy pauses a moment, his finger stationary in the air. I almost feel like I've broken something, a promise maybe. I move my hand away from the map. And then the boy starts running his finger exactly over the path I've just sketched—like I've burned a new path through the map with my finger.

I step back, a little surprised. Whoa, I think to myself, don't make too much of this. Don't try to mind-read where there probably isn't even a mind there to read. Don't be like Paul is,

that's what I'm really thinking. Don't fool yourself into thinking there's a whole world in his head that's unfolding around him as he runs his finger over a map, that in his head he's like a child staring delightedly out of a car window as his parents drive across the country for a belated honeymoon. He's not seeing *anything* most likely. He's not seeing the world I created when I designed that map, that's for sure. He never gazes at any of the marginalia, the story of the doomed dragon's lover that I sketched up and down this particular map.

Another time, I think the boy is suddenly talking in a weird way that's impossible to understand. Then I realize no, that he's hiccupping.

Hiccupping. I move to help, to pound him on the back, and then I'm thinking, what's the point? Wouldn't it be better for his parents, even if they'd never admit it to themselves? And then I'm wondering what on earth my mind is going on about. He's hiccupping, not choking, and I realize that now he's not even doing that. He's stopped hiccupping. What's just gone through my mind has bewildered me, scared me even.

Another time, I try an experiment, put a blank piece of paper in front of the boy, and a pencil in his hand, and I move his hand over the paper to get him started, sketch a line or two. And then I let go, see what he does. He doesn't do anything. He sits there as if he's waiting. I give him a couple of minutes before I give up, put the map back in front of him, let him go back to tracing imaginary lines over the map with his finger.

One thing I've noticed about the boy is that he's willing to explore a new map if I place it on the desk before he arrives. He'll just start running his finger over it after his father has sat him down. If I try to replace one map with another map once he's already begun to run his finger over the first map, he'll stop, wait until I put the first map back. Under certain circumstances he's

willing to explore a new map. Explore. I remind myself that's the wrong thought, that's not what's going on here.

**5.**

Paul dies before I do. Something I didn't expect, something he didn't expect either. It was sudden, a heart attack. While he was asleep apparently. Because that's where they found him. After I called, after he hadn't shown up for two days. Because he'd never skipped more than one day before.

The store was closed yesterday, the mother tells me. Paul was upset. I can't help wondering again what that could mean, what the boy does to represent that he's upset. I was busy, I say, fumbling with the keys. And then I say something else which surprises me. A friend died, I say. The man who always sat in your store, she says. Yes, I say. I'm sorry, she says, this is never easy to get through. I don't say anything. Get through, she's talking about getting through it. Like getting through something makes sense at my age. Or any age really. I've never gotten through anything. I've never been the way I was before. Never again. And I'm sure the same thing is true about her. And that she doesn't realize it.

It's just her and the boy waiting for me. Which worries me because I'm thinking the wrong parent has gotten custody. I don't say anything. Right after she sits the boy down at the desk, right after he starts tracing his finger over a map, she fumbles with something in her purse for a moment, and then asks me if it's alright if she runs some errands. Sure, I say. This could become a pattern, she tells me. And laughs. It is a pattern, it's been a pattern, that's what I think, haven't you noticed? She's even picked out a map to purchase. Before she runs the errand. Does her laundry. Whatever she does.

I'm alone with the boy. I say to him, I'm supposed to die about now. By my own hand. He doesn't react. And then I wonder: Are you enough of a reason not to? The answer would be obvious if a miracle happened about now, if the boy spoke up for the first time. If he said something about a map, that would be even nicer, but just speaking some words would be plenty. That doesn't happen. And then like I'm trying to make a deal with some transcendent being who happens to be listening in on my thoughts, I think: I'd even make do with something pretty subtle, a sudden expression in the boy's face for example, or an acknowledgement that I'm in the room by a shift in his shoulders or a slow movement of his hands into the air.