

## **Bakerloo, Central, Circle, District**

She was a beauty. There was no denying it. Spread out on the table, she was all contours and folds and creases. Henry felt his breath quicken, the fizz of his pulse in his ear and that thickening of saliva that accompanies the first seconds of total infatuation. He'd worn his special cotton gloves, the ones that he kept in a box that had been his grandmother's, the one with the gemstone encrusted top and the luxurious crimson velvet inside. The feel of those gloves pulling up over his fingers and settling snug around his wrists preceded these special moments of passion. Before he started to touch this beauty he cleaned his glasses, brushed his clothes with his lint roller and double-checked the temperature in the room.

He began his inspection, careful not to emit too much of his breath over the delicate map. He'd collected enough now to know by sight which ones required extra special care – no handling whatsoever – and which you could run a light hand over without causing too much bother. This specimen was one of the latter. He traced the rivers and the roads, followed the contours up to the highest peak and ingested the names of the towns and villages that made him smile. Once he had inspected it enough, he photographed it for his database, covered it in archive paper and placed it lovingly in one of the large hanging folders in his collection room, ensuring that the label he'd printed when he'd ordered the map was indeed the right one.

Filing a map away left him both bereft and full of anticipation. He knew he would choose another map soon. The delicious game of choice began immediately. A psychological activation outside of his consciousness set his brain on the path of rifling through the thousands of maps he'd seen advertised on the hundreds of websites he'd come across over the years. Some would say he was addicted, just like those women who bought clothes and put them in their wardrobes with the tags still on or the shoes still in their boxes. Those women never wore their purchases. It wasn't about the dresses or earrings or handbags or leather jackets. It was about the buying, the receiving of the booty and the bringing it home. Just like hunters who claimed

it wasn't about the kill but the hunting process, the tracking of the beast, the lowering of the rifle sight, the pulling of the trigger. It wasn't that they wanted to hang the stag head on their lounge room wall.

The next map was always on his mind. Before he could say with clarity which part of the world, which continent, which county of England, which canton of Switzerland he would choose, the need was burying itself in his mind. It would take root, spread small green shoots, open delicate leaves and then grow vigorously until the name of the map was typed into his favourite map repositories.

In the last few years – the ones in which he'd secured himself paid work (home based IT servicing), the ones in which his mother had left him alone long enough to set up his home office and his collection room (his brother Joel's old room) just as he wanted – he no longer needed to delve too deeply into the internet's quirkier depths to find people just like him. He didn't tell his mother there were other 'weirdos' out there, he kept that scrap of knowledge to himself for his own satisfaction. Her ignorance of this secret society to which he belonged gave him a certain armour, deflecting her criticism. He entered the chat room. Just as he experienced the rush of emotion when he laid eyes on a new map, so his body exhibited the same set of feelings when her user name lit up on the bottom right of the screen. Cara T O'Graphy. He always smiled to himself when he rolled the name around his mind. One of the first choices for his own user name was Carl Tografri but, after much consideration, he'd settled on FraMauro\_88 in deference to the glorious Medieval map of Europe created by the great cartographer, Fra Mauro.

Cara began to type. His eyes fixed on the little box as he waited for the words to appear. He supposed if his mother knew he was talking to a girl she'd be pleased.

"The world wide web is no substitute for a real relationship." This was her catch-cry. She was convinced his life was poorer for not having a girlfriend.

“And I don’t mind if you’re gay. Honestly, I don’t.” She said it without conviction and whilst he knew he wasn’t, he wanted to keep that to himself too.

The message was complete:

*Bidding on a 1972 AA Road Atlas of Great Britain, vgc, no markings.*

Something moved in his mind. It clicked. Like an old cassette tape stuck on the rollers, it clicked and rewound, clicked and rewound. His hands became paralysed. Lacy fronds of ice whited out his thought processes. He stared at her message, flashing over and over. He willed himself to respond. Instead he flipped down the lid of his laptop and headed back to his collection room. Somewhere at the other end of the house – where the air was warmer, the colours brighter, – his mother was sitting reading, or mixing batter for a Victoria Sponge, or sewing her kitsch cross-stitch in Crayola colours that the craft market aficionados would pay decent money for. She was living.

“Henry, it’s bad enough that I’m stuck here but you don’t have to be. You need to get out more. Live a little.” All he heard was: “I wish you were more like your brother.”

There were actually many similarities between his brother and him. Their love of travel was the greatest. Joel had spent all his adult life travelling, surfing the waves around the world, working for cash to fund the next adventure. Over the past few years, with the advent of GPS, Henry had set up an electronic map of where his brother had been. He’d collected real maps of all the places too. He imagined himself well travelled, even if his mother snorted at that idea.

“Google Earth is not the same as a holiday.”

He had tried to show her how he could be where Joel was. Virtually. But she just laughed and picked up one of his maps of Killarney Beach near Warrnambool. She opened it out, roughly pulling it from its neat folds. He winced as he watched her holding it open, stretching it so the delicate areas of the paper began to thin.

“You can’t say you’ve been there just because you know the names of all the restaurants nearby.” She nodded to the advertisements that outlined

the map. "You actually need to go outside, get in a car and drive to these places, Henry." She slammed the map on his table, took one of his pens and drew a circle around the name of a local surf retailer. "And when you're there, you can get yourself a board and remember to have some fun."

When she left, he picked up the map and screwed it into a ball. You couldn't have a marked map in your file. You just couldn't.

He selected a hanging file that contained his favourite map. It was a map of the London Underground, a system of colours and simple lines and curves that had always fascinated him. He had bought a large-scale copy some time ago; in fact it was his third purchase, behind a full map of Australia and one of the British Isles. At that stage his mother just thought he was going to do 'something with geography' so she allowed him to spend his bankbook money on this hobby of his.

He used to recite the names of the lines to himself at night and it helped him to sleep. "Bakerloo, Central, Circle, District..." But his favourite was the Jubilee Line. Silver. Celebratory. It was the newest line on the Tube system and its lines were curvaceous. From Stanmore in the northwest to Stratford in the east, it dipped and swooped through Wembley Park, St John's Wood, Bermondsey, North Greenwich.

He stared hard at the map until his heart slowed and his breathing evened and his skin stopped tingling. He unclenched his hands, his jaw. The smell of sweet baking filtered through his nostrils, reminding him he was alive and he was hungry. He hadn't forgotten about the AA Road Atlas of Great Britain. VGC. But he could eat some scones and file the bad feelings at the back of his mind for now.

In the night he dreamt of photographs. Shot upon shot of people, scenery and buildings piled up on top of each other. The pictures fused together to create new images of fantastical beings. Distorted faces assumed the sides of tower blocks, family pets morphed into shorelines, until they became him. He was in the back of a car, his legs so short that they ended just past the edge of the seat, neat grey socks rolled over above his ankles and chunky black velcro-strapped shoes on his feet. He was wearing shorts, a school uniform perhaps.

The smell of nicotine and stale beer filled his sleep. Something about the dream left him uneasy, like he'd stopped at the end of an episode that was to be revisited, a muted cliffhanger with no spoilers. He held onto some of it vividly, but the rest blurred over between rolling back the covers and taking a morning piss.

His mother was out. Grocery shopping Wednesday. And she called him a creature of habit. He poured cornflakes into his bowl, slopped the milk out in a rush, liked several posts from Joel on Facebook, checked out his favourite pages and put his dishes in the sink. He knew he had to go back online to face Cara. His stomach lurched at the thought. He went to the lounge room and saw his mother's sewing box filled with threads the colour of the London Underground, saw the lines of framed photos on every surface, faces smiling out at him, pairs of eyes meeting his gaze, scrutinising him, yet keeping their thoughts secret. Some of the faces terrified him. He turned to leave the room and felt the mysteries of the past cloak him and weigh him down.

He opened the lid of his laptop and entered the chat room. Cara's unanswered message had been added to.

*Are you there?*

*Fra\_Mauro88 what's wrong?*

*I'm closing down now. I've won the bid.*

She'd attached a photograph of the item. Its mustard yellow cover was clean except for a few dull patches; nothing that a dust over with a Document Cleaning Pad wouldn't remove. She'd taken pictures of the pages inside, slightly yellowed but in remarkable condition. The map colours were intact, and he let his eyes linger over the detail of churches with steeples and churches with towers and humpback bridges and level crossings.

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He held his fingers over the keys, poised to type, but she wasn't online. Relief made his fingers tremble.

In his mind he saw himself in the same shoes and socks as in his dream, the heavy weight of an atlas on his lap. He could see his young self flicking through those hundreds of pages so they made a thrumping noise. He could see himself stopping at certain sections, the pages that showed figures demonstrating mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, or the legend page that listed the names of common birds of the British Isles, with an artists' impression of each of them.

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He could see the profile of his father in the drivers' seat. He could see Joel sitting next to him, he could see his mother in the passenger seat. He had his prized packet of Derwent pencils in the gap between him and Joel. He could see the yellow stained ceiling of the old car, he could feel its texture like the short fur on a dog's snout, stubby but soft. He could see the dashboard dials, buttons and knobs. He could feel the car speeding up, skidding around the corners, hear his mother's voice rising in pitch as she pleaded with his father to slow down.

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The car tilted onto two wheels so that his head and shoulder thudded along the glass of the window. He felt Joel's longer, heavier body crush against his and he felt the window winder dig into his arm. When the car lurched back down, the beer bottle that his father had been swigging from flew up and struck him on the forehead. He landed on Joel's leg and his brother screamed, a terrible sound that clamped around his ears along with the noise of the exploding tyres and shattering glass.

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As the car met the lamp post – a slow-motion crush of metal, glass, human bodies and concrete – Henry realised he was still clutching the atlas to his chest. He could feel the hard square of it against his rib cage, digging into his

stomach. When the only sound left was the spinning of a wheel, when he knew his father was dead because his head was twisted so far around that his blank eyes were staring straight at him, when he could see his mother and brother were unconscious but still breathing, only then did he turn to the page with the mouth-to-mouth instructions and begin to read.

Cara's message brought him to.

*Do you like the atlas? It's pretty cool for an old book.*

*My father had one just like it. I used to read it on long journeys.*

*But you're in Australia?*

*My father was a Pom. English. He brought it over with him. A keepsake.*

*That explains your love of maps. It's genetic.*

She added a smiley face icon. He stared at it a while.

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