Chapter 1

ECCENTRICITY

[ek-ˌsen-'tri-sə-tē] ***n.***: the deformation
of an elliptical map projection

My wound is geography.
—PAT CONROY

They say you're not really grown up until you've moved the last box of your stuff out of storage at your parents'. If that's true, I believe I will stay young forever, ageless and carefree as Dorian Gray, while the cardboard at my parents' house molders and fades. I know, *everybody's* parents' attic or basement has its share of junk, but the eight-foot-tall mountain of boxes filling one bay of my parents' garage isn't typical pack-rat clutter. It looks more like the warehouse in the last shot of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

The last time I was home, I waded into the chaos in hopes of liberating a plastic bucket of my childhood Legos. I didn't find the Legos, much to my six-year-old son's chagrin, but I was surprised to come across a box with my name on the side, written in the neater handwriting of my teenaged self. The box was like an archaeological dig of my adolescence and childhood, starting with R.E.M. mix tapes and *Spy* magazines on top, moving downward through strata of *Star Trek* novelizations and *Thor* comics, and ending on the most primal bedrock of my youthful nerdiness: a copy of Hammond's *Medallion World Atlas* from 1979.

I wasn't expecting the Proustian thrill I experienced as I pulled the

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huge green book from the bottom of the box. Sunbeam-lit dust motes froze in their dance; an ethereal choir sang. At seven years old, I had saved up my allowance for months to buy this atlas, and it became my most prized possession. I remember it sometimes lived at the head of my bed at night next to my pillow, where most kids would keep a beloved security blanket or teddy bear. Flipping through its pages, I could see that my atlas had been as well loved as any favorite plush toy: the gold type on the padded cover was worn, the corners were dented, and the binding was so shot that most of South America had fallen out and been shoved back in upside down.

Today, I will still cheerfully cop to being a bit of a geography wonk. I know my state capitals—hey, I even know my *Australian* state capitals. The first thing I do in any hotel room is break out the tourist magazine with the crappy city map in it. My "bucket list" of secret travel ambitions isn't made up of boring places like Athens or Tahiti—I want to visit off-the-beaten-path oddities like Weirton, West Virginia (the only town in the United States that borders two different states on opposite sides) or Victoria Island in the Canadian territory of Nunavut (home to the world's largest "triple island"—that is, the world's largest island in a lake on an island in a lake on an island).* But my childhood love of maps, I started to remember as I paged through the atlas, was something much more than this casual weirdness. I was consumed.

Back then, I could literally look at maps for hours. I was a fast and voracious reader, and keenly aware that a page of hot Roald Dahl or Encyclopedia Brown action would last me only thirty seconds or so. But each page of an atlas was an almost inexhaustible trove of names and shapes and places, and I relished that sense of depth, of comprehensiveness. Travelers will return to a favorite place many times and order the same dish at the same café and watch the sun set from the same vantage point. I could do the same thing

* This "honor" is sometimes claimed by Vulcan Point, on Lake Taal in the Philippines. But point your Internet map of choice at 69.793° N, 108.241° W—the unnamed Canadian island-in-a-lake-on-an-island-in-a-lake on Victoria Island is much bigger.

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as a frequent armchair traveler, enjoying the familiarity of sights I had noticed before while always being surprised by new details. Look how Ardmore, Alabama, is only a hundred feet away from its neighbor Ardmore, Louisiana—but there are 4,303 miles between Saint George, Alaska, and Saint George, South Carolina. Look at the lacelike coastline of the Musandam Peninsula, the northernmost point of the Arabian nation of Oman, an intricate fractal snowflake stretching into the Strait of Hormuz. Children love searching for tiny new details in a sea of complexity. It's the same principle that sold a bajillion *Where's Waldo?* books.

Mapmakers must know this—that detail, to many map lovers, is not just a means but an end. The office globe next to my desk right now is pretty compact, but it makes room for all kinds of backwater hamlets in the western United States: Cole, Kansas; Alpine, Texas; Burns, Oregon; Mott, North Dakota (population: 808, about the same as a city block or two of Manhattan's Upper East Side). Even Ajo, Arizona, makes the cut, and it's not even incorporated as a town—it's officially a CDP, or "census-designated place." What do all these spots have in common, besides the fact that no one has ever visited them without first running out of gas? First, they all have nice short names. Second, they're each the only thing for miles around. So they neatly fill up an empty spot on the globe and therefore make the product look denser with information.

But I also remember a competing instinct in my young mind: a love for the way maps could suggest adventure by hinting at the unexplored. Joseph Conrad wrote about this urge at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness:*

> Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, "When I grow up I will go there."

When *I* was a "little chap," there were (and are) still a few mostly blank spaces on the map: Siberia, Antarctica, the Australian outback.* But I knew these lacunae weren't just empty because they were rugged and remote; they were empty because nobody really wanted to live there. These were the places on the Earth that, well, sort of sucked. So I never put my finger on the glaciers of Greenland and said, "I will go there!" like Conrad's Marlow. But I liked that they existed. Even on a map that showed every little Ajo, Arizona, there was still some mystery left *somewhere*.

And then there were those amazing place-names. My hours with maps featured lots of under-my-breath whispering: the names of African rivers ("Lualaba . . . Jumba . . . Limpopo . . .") and Andean peaks ("Aconcagua . . . Yerupajá . . . Llullaillaco . . .") and Texas counties ("Glasscock . . . Comanche . . . Deaf Smith . . .") They were secret passwords to entry into other worlds—more magical, I'm sure, in many cases, than the places themselves. My first atlas listed, in tiny columns of type under each map, the populations for thousands of cities and towns, and I would pore over these lists looking for comically underpopulated places like Scotsguard, Saskatchewan (population: 3), or Hibberts Gore, Maine (population: 1).† I dreamed of one day living in one of these glamorous spots—sure, it would be lonely, but think of the level of celebrity! The lone resident of Hibberts Gore, Maine, *gets specifically mentioned in the world atlas*! Well, almost.

The shapes of places were just as transporting for me as their names. Their outlines were full of personality: Alaska was a chubby

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* My personal favorite has always been Bir Tawil, a tiny trapezoid of desert on the border between Egypt and Sudan that, by international treaty, neither nation can claim. (For complicated reasons dating back to the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement of 1899, both Egypt and Sudan would lose their claim to a much more attractive slice of territory called the Hala'ib Triangle if they were to call dibs on Bir Tawil.) As a result, Bir Tawil is one of the last remaining bits of *terra nullius*—land belonging to no one—on Earth.

† There's a downside to this kind of fame, *The Boston Globe* learned in 2001 when it profiled Karen Keller, the lone resident of Hibberts Gore. The Census Bureau doesn't release demographic information for individuals, but it does release *average* totals for all towns and cities, which means that Keller's salary, for example, was published as the average household income for Hibberts Gore.

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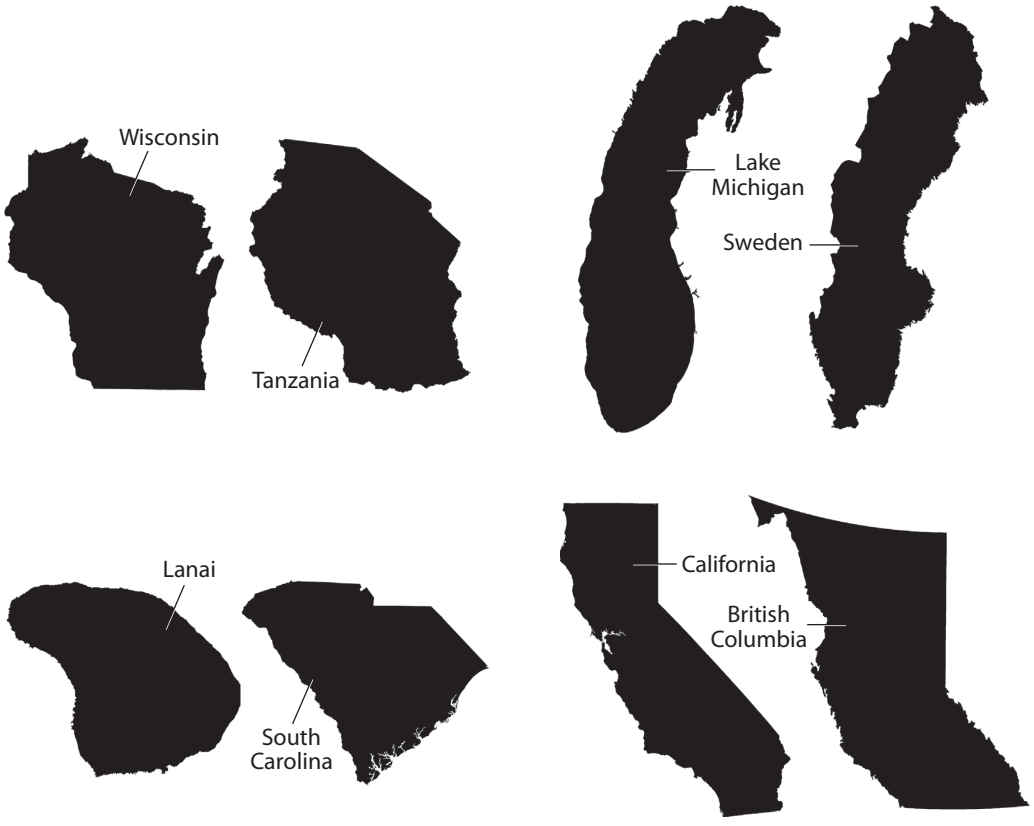
profile smiling benevolently toward Siberia. Maine was a boxing glove. Burma had a tail like a monkey. I admired roughly rectangular territories like Turkey and Portugal and Puerto Rico, which seemed sturdy and respectable to me, but not more precisely rectangular places like Colorado or Utah, whose geometric perfection made them false, uneasy additions to the national map. I immediately noticed when two areas had slightly similar outlines—Wisconsin and Tanzania, Lake Michigan and Sweden, the island of Lanai and South Carolina—and decided they must be geographic soul mates of some kind. To this day, I see British Columbia on a map and think of it as a more robust, muscular version of California, just as the Canadians there must be more robust, muscular versions of Californians.



Separated at birth

These map shapes had a life of their own for me, divorced from their actual territories. Staring at a map for too long was like repeating a word over and over until all meaning is stripped away. Uruguay ceased to represent an actual nation for me; it was just *that shape,* that slightly lopsided teardrop. I saw these outlines even after the atlas was closed, afterimages floating in my mind's eye. The knotty pine paneling in my grandparents' upstairs bedroom was full of loops and whorls that reminded me of faraway fjords and lagoons. A puddle in a parking lot was Lake Okeechobee or the Black Sea. The first time I saw Mikhail Gorbachev on TV, I remember thinking immediately that his famous birthmark looked *just like* a map of Thailand.*

By the time I was ten, my beloved Hammond atlas was just one of a whole collection of atlases on my bedroom bookshelf. My parents called them my "atli," though even at the time I was pretty sure that wasn't the right plural. Road atlases, historical atlases, pocket atlases. I wish I could say that I surveyed my maps with the keen eye of a scientist, looking at watersheds and deforestation and population density and saying smart-sounding things like "Aha, that must be a subduction zone." But I don't think I was that kind of map fan. I wasn't aware of the ecology and geology and history manifest on maps at first; I was just drawn to their scope, their teensy type, and their orderly gestalt. My dad liked maps too, but he preferred the black British atlas in the living room, a Philip's one from the 1970s in which the maps were all "hypsometric." Hypsometric maps are those ones that represent terrain with vivid colors: greens for low elevations, browns and purples for high ones. He liked being able to visualize the physical landforms being mapped, but I preferred the clean political maps that Hammond and National Geographic published, where cities and towns stood out neatly on lightly shaded territory and borders were delineated in crisp pastels.

In fact, I dislike hypsometric maps to this day. They look stodgy

* Yassir Arafat once claimed that he spent an hour every day folding his *keffiyeh* headdress so that it would resemble a map of his longed-for Palestinian state, showing everyone he met that Palestine was—literally!—always on his mind. I don't think that the Thai people were always on Gorby's mind, but that was the impression he may inadvertently have been giving map nerds everywhere.

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and old-fashioned to me, something you might see a matronly 1960s schoolteacher straining to pull down in front of a chalkboard.* But it's more than that. I have to admit that I still like maps for their order and detail as much as for what they can tell us about the real world. A good map isn't just a useful representation of a place; it's also a beautiful system in and of itself.

Maps are older than writing, so of course we have no written account of some Newton's-apple moment in cartography, some prehistoric hunter-gatherer saying, "Hey, honey, I drew the world's first map today." Every so often, the newly discovered "world's oldest map!" will be announced to great fanfare in scientific journals and even newspaper headlines. But whether the new old map is a cave painting in Spain or a carved mammoth tusk from Ukraine or petroglyphs on a rock by the Snake River in Idaho, these "discoveries" always have one thing in common: a whole bunch of annoyed scholars arguing that no, that's not a map; it's a pictogram or a landscape painting or a religious artifact, but it's not *really* a map. When a cryptic painting was unearthed from the Neolithic Anatolian settlement of Çatalhöyük in 1963, its discoverer, James Mellaart, proclaimed the eight-thousand-year-old artifact to be a map of the area. The domino-like boxes drawn at the bottom of the wall represented the village, he claimed, and the pointy, spotted orange shape above them must be the nearby twin-coned volcano of Hasan Dag. Cartographers went nuts, and historians and geologists even combed the painting for clues as to the history of prehistoric eruptions at the site. There's just one hitch: subsequent researchers have decided that the spotted thingy probably *isn't* meant to be a volcano: it's a stretched leopard skin. That's not lava spewing forth, just a set of claws. Ergo, the mural was never a map at all. Archaeologists' embarrassing inability to tell a leopard and a volcano

* Hypsometric maps are also out of fashion with many cartographers, who find them misleading. Readers often assume that the hypsometric tints represent vegetation, not elevation. But the most barren desert might be verdant green on one of these maps, if it's sufficiently low-lying. Conversely, lush highlands might be a lifeless beige.

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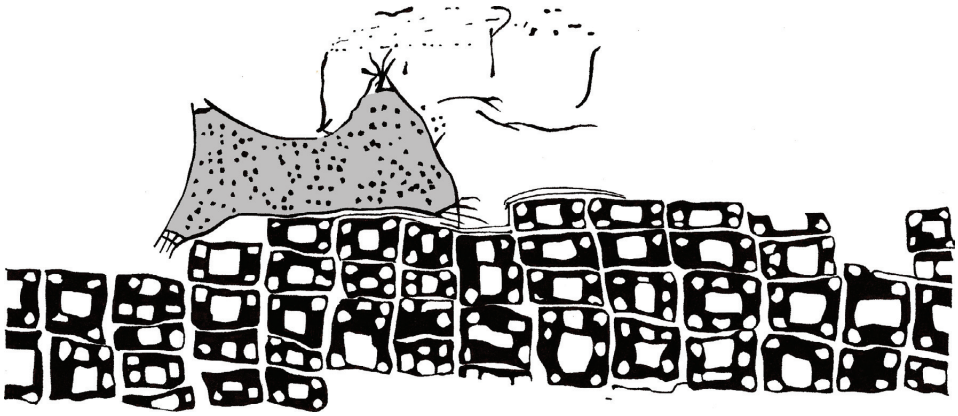

The Çatalhöyük mural. Volcanoes or leopard? You make the call.

apart turns out to be the same syndrome that had me seeing coastlines in my grandparents' wood paneling. It's called "cartacacoethes": the uncontrollable compulsion to see maps everywhere.

Many early protomaps do share some similarities with modern cartography, but it's a blurry line: their primary significance was probably artistic or spiritual. The essential traits we associate with maps today evolved gradually over millennia. We first see cardinal directions on Babylonian clay tablet maps from five thousand years ago, for instance, but distances don't appear on maps for three thousand more years—our oldest such example is a bronze plate from China's Zhou Dynasty. Centuries more pass before we get to our oldest surviving paper map, a Greek papyrus depicting the Iberian Peninsula around the time of Christ. The first compass rose appears in the Catalan Atlas of 1375. "Chloropleth" maps—those in which areas are colored differently to represent different values on some scale, like the red-and-blue maps on election night—date back only to 1826.*

* Part of the reason for the long gaps here is that many early maps, though widely used, haven't survived to our day. The timeline is spotty and tattered for the same reason that, say, a Honus Wagner baseball card or a copy of *Action Comics* no. 1 is so valuable: because everybody's mom threw stuff away. Just as mapmaking is a science of omissions—the cartographer can't include *everything* on the map, no matter how tempting that sounds—so the history of maps is a series of gaps and omissions as well.

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But if the historical "discovery" of maps was a slow and gradual process, the way modern mapheads discover maps as children is more like the way cavemen must have discovered fire: as a flash of lightning. You see that first map, and your mind is rewired, probably forever. In my case, the Ur-map was a wooden puzzle of the fifty states I got as a Christmas present when I was three—you know the kind, Florida decorated with palm trees, Washington with apples. On my puzzle, Nebraska, confusingly, wore a picture of a family of pigs. The two peninsulas of Michigan were welded together into a single puzzle piece, so that I believed for years afterward that Michigan was a single landmass in the lumpy shape of a lady's handbag.

For other kids, it was the globe in Dad's study, or the atlas stretched out on the shag carpeting of the living room, or a free gas station map during a family vacation to Yosemite. (Many cases of twentieth-century American map geekdom, it seems, began the same way that many twentieth-century *Americans* began: conceived in the backseats of Buicks.) But whatever the map, all it takes is one. Cartophilia, the love of maps, is a love at first sight. It must be predestined, written somewhere in the chromosomes.

It's been this way for centuries. That wooden map puzzle that took my map virginity when I was three? Those date back to the 1760s, when they were called "dissected maps" and were wildly popular toys, the ancestors of all modern jigsaw puzzles. For Victorian children, the most common first map was a page in a family or school Bible, since a map of the Holy Land was often the only color plate in a vast sea of "begat"s and "behold"s. Nothing like a dry two-hour sermon on the Book of Lamentations to make a simple relief map look suddenly fascinating by comparison! That single page probably drew more youthful study than the rest of the Good Book put together—Samuel Beckett makes a joke in *Waiting for Godot* about how his two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, have never read the Gospels but remember very clearly that the Dead Sea in their Bible maps was a "very pretty . . . pale blue." Joseph Hooker, the great British botanist, once wrote to his close friend Charles Darwin that his first exposure to maps had been a Sunday school "map of the world before the flood" that he said he spent hours of his "tenderest years" studying. That one map led to his lifelong interest in exploration

and science, during which he helped Darwin develop the theory of evolution.

In the twentieth century, when kids were spending less time in front of Bibles, the inevitable map on their schoolroom wall served the same purpose: something to stare at when a dull monologue on fractions or *Johnny Tremain* started to turn into the wordless "wah-wah" drone of the teacher from a *Peanuts* TV special. I just now realized *why* I know all the Australian state capitals, in fact: my desk in second grade was right next to the bulletin board that had the world map on it. My head was just inches from Darwin and Adelaide and, um, Hobart. (See? I still got it.) If I'd been a little taller then, I might be an expert on Indonesia or Japan today instead.

Recently I was driving my friend Todd to the airport, and, while talking about his vacation plans, he outed himself as a bit of a geography nerd. (I'd known Todd for years, incidentally, but was only now finding out we had this in common. Map people sometimes live for years in the closet, cartophilia apparently being one of the last remaining loves that dare not speak their names.) He boasted that, thanks to the hours of his childhood he'd spent poring over atlases, he could still rattle off the names of every world capital, so that's how we spent the rest of the drive. We both discovered that the capitals we stumbled over weren't the obscure ones (Bujumbura, Burundi! Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago!) but rather major European cities like Bratislava, Slovakia, and Kiev, Ukraine. Why? Because these cities had committed the crime of becoming national capitals *after* the end of the Cold War, when Todd and I weren't map-memorizing nine-year-olds anymore! Apparently our knowledge of geography is like your grandparents' knowledge of personal computers: it ends in 1987.

I suspect that Todd and I are far from alone in this—that many people's hunger for maps (mappetite?) peaks in childhood. In part, this is due to the fact that nobody is ever as obsessed about *anything* as a crazed seven-year-old is; this week I'm sure my son, Dylan, thinks about dinosaurs more than any adult paleontologist ever. Next week it'll probably be spaceships or Venus flytraps or sports cars.

But there does seem to be something about maps that makes them specifically irresistible to children. Consider: most square, old-timey hobbies are taken up in middle age as a way to mortify one's teenage children. That's when Dad suddenly gets obsessed with Dixieland jazz or bird-watching or brewing lager in the basement. Not so with map love, which you catch either during your Kool-Aid years or not at all. In fact, I remember my map ardor abruptly cooling around puberty—you discover pretty quickly that it's not a hit with girls to know the names of all the Netherlands Antilles. In college, I briefly had a pleasant-but-bookish Canadian roommate named Sheldon. (Note: Nerdy first name not fictionalized for this story!) Sheldon moved into the apartment first that September and had the whole place—living room, kitchen, bedrooms—papered with dozens of *National Geographic* maps by the time the rest of us arrived. I rolled my eyes and resigned myself to the fact that we were never going to see a single girl inside the apartment. But in third grade, I'm sure I would have been over the moon at this development, making Sheldon pinky-swear to be my BFF and drawing detailed maps of Costa Rica on the back of his Trapper Keeper.

See, in elementary school, I was convinced that I was the only one in the world who felt like this. None of my friends, I was sure, ran home to their atlases after school. In the years since then, I've become vaguely aware that this, whatever it is, is a thing that exists: that some fraction of humanity loves geography with a strange intensity. I'll see a three-year-old on *Oprah* who can point out every country on a world map and think, hey, that was me. I'll read about a member of the Extra Miler Club who has visited all 3,141 counties in the United States or about an antique map of the Battle of Yorktown selling at auction for a million dollars. And I'll wonder: where does this come from? It's easy to see from my own life story, my *Portrait of the Autist as a Young Man,* that these mapheads are my tribe, but I'm mystified by our shared tribal culture and religion. Why did maps mean—why *do* they still mean, I guess—so much to me? Maps are just a way of organizing information, after all—not normally the kind of thing that spawns obsessive fandom. I've never heard anyone profess any particular love for the Dewey Decimal System. I've never met a pie-chart geek. I suppose indexes are good at what they do, but do they inspire devotion?

There must be something innate about maps, about this one specific way of picturing our world and our relation to it, that charms us, calls to us, won't let us look anywhere else in the room if there's a map on the wall. I want to get to the bottom of what that is. I see it as a chance to explore one of the last remaining "blank spaces" available to us amateur geographers and cartographers: the mystery of what makes our consuming map obsession tick. I will go there.

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