

LOVE'S compass



WHEN WE'VE LOST OUR WAY

ANGUS NELSON
with evan braun

The man you're about to read about is a stranger to me now. He died long enough ago to escape my recollection, yet there's no running from the lessons he taught me. In the pages that follow, I hope you learn as much from him as I...

CHAPTER ONE

The Need to Feel Loved

I slid my forefinger over the bottle of Budweiser, my free hand resting on the bar. The calluses from years of guitar playing kept catching on the label. I didn't mind; in fact, it was my only source of entertainment. My mouth was awkwardly wrapped around a bummed cigarette. It was the kind I hated, a Marlboro Light, which always tasted stale in my mouth, but it was all I could negotiate after exhausting my usual brand, Camel Turkish Gold.

As my eyes drifted across the smoky pub where I'd spent so many late nights singing karaoke, I found a number of familiar faces looking back at me through the haze. The regular crowd was milling about, just like any other small town bar in America. Normally I would have made conversation, but tonight things were different. Peculiar even. My emotions were about as gloomy as country music at Christmas time. Nonetheless, I was aware of everything, my ears picking up the essentials of each discussion going on around me. Every interaction, every motion caught my attention. I wasn't ordinarily so astute, so tuned in to my surroundings, but like I said, it was a peculiar night.

Melissa sat on the stool next to me, cradling a drink of her own. I debated whether or not to tell her what was going

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on, to unleash my inner pain. It wasn't going to be pretty, and yet I thought she might lend a sympathetic ear, having been separated from her second husband for several months. Her own situation made a small, pathetic part of me feel a bit better. True, I was on the brink of divorce, but at least it was still my first marriage. Fortunately, the arrogant thought vanished almost as quickly as it occurred to me.

Sensing my internal conflict, she asked me if there was anything wrong. Stupid instinct kicking in, I lied. Why did I always do that? I was overwhelmed with regret the moment the words came out of my mouth. Perhaps I wanted to protect myself and preserve whatever dignity I still felt, to dismiss her offer of help. Maybe I could pretend everything was fine just a little bit longer, just long enough for a miracle to occur. But nothing about my situation was fine. How had everything gone so horribly, horribly wrong? I wanted to scream, to curl up in the fetal position, to collapse into a heap on the floor... A voice in the back of my mind reminded me that no display of hysterics would magically do away with the years of unacknowledged hurt that had built up in my heart like bad cholesterol.

Our conversation that night had started off innocently enough. Melissa's family had helped me out with a non-profit I was running, so in theory we had a lot to talk about. We joked, engaged in some harmless flirtation, I forced laughter, and she saw right through me. Looking back, it seems obvious that she would easily penetrate my thinly veiled deception. I've never been any good at reining in my emotions. Truthfully, nobody in the bar needed to ask what kind of mood I was in; I was wearing my anguish on my sleeve. For one thing, I was uncommonly reserved, hardly saying a word, which is the first sign of trouble for anyone who really knows me—like

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Melissa did. I was subconsciously hanging my head and there was a strange slump to my posture.

There was no fooling her, so she asked again. Was there anything wrong? Was there anything I needed to talk about? Inside, I was screaming a full-throated, Yes! Outwardly, I said nothing, holding my façade in place just a little longer, perhaps still hoping for that miracle. Then, after another pregnant pause, I caved. I spilled my story, revealing the ugly truth that my marriage of two years was over.

I felt like such a failure. The impossibility of my situation still hadn't entirely sunk in. I was dazed and confused, like a deer caught in headlights.

Only a few nights before, my wife had come over to the house to discuss the division of property. Division of property? Just as marriages aren't designed to be temporary, there are certain things that just can't be conveniently split in two. My wife and I had built a life together! It was one of the most difficult two hours of my life, an evening of such deep pain, regret, and sorrow that I knew I would never forget it. I didn't even know if I would be able to make it to the next week. And yet there we were, dividing up everything we owned like we were picking teams for kickball. The biggest items got snatched up first, then we whittled down through articles increasingly insignificant until every last thing was spoken for. We bartered endlessly until a line was determined as "half."

During the negotiations, the phone rang. I sat idly by as my wife whimsically frolicked her way through a chat with the man I had walked in on her making out with. Her tone reminded me of a 16-year-old schoolgirl admitting to another girl that she had a crush on a boy. My stomach was nauseous, heaving, my breath labored, my hands sweaty, shaking uncontrollably. It took everything in me to force back the anxiety

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attack I knew was just around the corner. After ten minutes of absolute nonsense, I interrupted the conversation. Through dry vocal cords, I asked her whether or not she wanted to finish up this ordeal. She hesitated, then quickly said goodbye. I sat motionless as she set the cell phone down on the table.

Now that we were free to continue, I found myself struggling to draw breath. Have you ever been in so much emotional pain that you feared any sudden movement would literally cause you to crumble to the ground? That's exactly how I felt. My eyes were glazed, my heart raced, and the humiliation and mockery of my situation bore down on me like a ton of cement. I felt my face go flush and I itched all over—the analytical part of my brain informed me that this was because my blood was purging toxins from my body. Whatever the reason, I was too immobilized to scratch the itch. In some ways, I felt like I was in shock.

Though I know I made it through the experience, I don't actually remember what happened next. My mind clouded over at that point, sparing me from having to relive the remainder of the division of assets over and over for the rest of my life. I'm almost certain the sheer overload of excruciating agony repressed my memories of the hour that followed.

What happened after that hour, however, I remember vividly. Like it was yesterday, unfortunately.

My wife collected up her legal pad, now scribbled from top to bottom with notes and agreements about who got what. She slipped her purse over her shoulder and picked up the now-cooled caramel macchiato still languishing in her favorite, holiday-red coffee cup. Avoiding the awkward, drawn-out goodbye I both desperately needed and very much wanted to steer clear of, she proceeded toward the front door.

But she didn't quite get that far. In the span of a single second, she stopping suddenly in the middle of the living

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room and turned. What she was about to do was so bizarre I couldn't have expected it. After a short pause in which our eyes found and locked onto each other, she asked if she "could at least have a hug."

The request caught me flatfooted. It was a moment I had longed for countless times since our separation eight months before. Caught off-guard, I obliged.

I arose from the couch I was slumped in. The moment my arms went around her, she melted into me. Her walls came down, an inevitability we had both been fighting since seeing each other that day. She cried and cried into the front of my shirt, soaking it through as she lamented, "I don't want to get divorced! I can't do it all over again. I don't know what to do."

Although I couldn't bring myself to cry with her, I continued to hold her for several long minutes. I remember telling her that I understood what she was going through and that I would be there for her no matter what her decision was. We stood together for quite some time. After a while, we dropped ourselves onto the couch and she leaned back into my chest, where I just held her and ran my fingers through her hair, a simple pleasure I would never again have the chance to repeat. It was a surreal moment.

It was a glimmer of hope that was immediately snuffed out.

Her cell phone rang and she pulled away to answer it. It was my soon to be former father-in-law calling to check in. Though I never found out what the call was about, all I know was that this final moment of intimacy between us was lost. Whatever heat had been exchanged in that long embrace had been completely extinguished by the cold splash of water that was her ring tone.

As I unraveled my tale of marital woe, Melissa did the best thing she could have done: she simply listened, not offer-

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ing a word of advice. I'm grateful she didn't respond with her own break-up stories—she had more than a few—since all I was looking for was a shoulder to cry on. In my exhausted, emotionally-depleted state, she was the perfect friend in the most imperfect situation of my life.

Before leaving, she put a hand on my shoulder and spoke for the romantic in all of us. “She’s never going to go through with it,” she told me.

“We’ll see,” I murmured, my eyes glancing at my watch. It was after midnight now. The two of us shared one last smile before she walked away, stepping out the doors and disappearing into the cold winter night.

I reached down the bar and picked up my now-empty beer bottle, once again skimming my finger over its surface, tracing the raised edges of the Budweiser logo. I went back into observer mode. With almost supernatural powers, I felt as though I could discern every motive of every interaction between the other patrons that night. After a few minutes of scanning the crowd, I came to one simple conclusion: no one wanted to be alone. I saw person after person trying to work their mojo, their magic, on members of the opposite sex, to mixed results. It's a picture to be repeated every night in every pub around the world.

The lyrics to the Blues Brothers' song “Everybody Needs Somebody to Love” ran through my mind until I wondered how long it would be before I could get the tune back out. As I rehearsed the chorus in my head, I realized what was wrong with it. It wasn't so much that everybody needed someone to love as they needed to feel loved.

That night, I needed to feel loved.