

THE LOST

A Novel

Tony Cohan

I FIRST MET PETER Altos at The Formosa Café in Hollywood in 1988. It would change the course of my life, but of course you don't know those things at the time. The Formosa had red walls hung with black and white celebrity photos, the kind you used to see in places like The Brown Derby on Vine Street, which is closed now, or Chasen's, also closed. It featured reliably indifferent Chinese food, dim lighting, and the congealed aroma of alcohol, perfume and cooking oil. Peter Altos was sitting in a red leatherette booth, sketching on a napkin, a cigarette in his mouth, nursing a tequila in a narrow shot glass. He looked like his photos, tall and lean and weathered, though he wasn't that old, forty-five then, with prematurely silver hair and a large head that gave him an imposing air. Sit down, kid, he said.

Those were his first words to me. Oddly, they would also be his last.

He was in LA to raise money for a feature drama built around the Maya of Central America, he said, but of course the studios weren't interested. They wanted another realist suspense like *Forgotten Man*, shot in Italy, a sleeper hit critics still treat like biblical revelation. They'll throw money at me to shoot in Death Valley with Eastwood, he said, but not a dime for something important. He was living in an old ex-convent in the Mexican mountains by a lake, he said, and he wanted to get back there and finish his Maya film.

I was twenty-two years old, in my last year in the director's' program at UCLA, though it was turning out I was better at writing about movies than making them. You can blame my French mother for the *cineaste* gene. Two years of film reviewing for *The Daily Bruin* had honed my chops, and a Peter Altos interview was to be my first for *Film Quarterly* in Berkeley, the place to publish at the time. Peter Altos, evidently quite ripped on the tequilas, showed little interest in answering my questions or in talking very much at all, and soon he called for the bill.

We walked out together into the asphalt glare of the parking lot and climbed into a red Lexus a studio had rented him. He drove us none too steadily up Highland Avenue, then

while keeping one hand on the wheel managed with the other to extract a ball of silver foil from his pocket, flick a shard of pale green hash into a little silver pipe, and light it. I thought my god, here I am driving along getting high with Peter fucking Altos.

At the time, he was up there in my pantheon with Sam Fuller, Nick Ray, Shirley Clarke, Cassavetes. There were the iconic, trailblazing films, of course, but there was more: architect, ethnology studies at the New School, documentary photographer, theater director. There was the notorious troupe he and his actress wife, Mina Soriana, had driven through Europe in a minibus, restaging the classics until they were busted in Greece on obscenity charges. A rebel, smashing barriers, living and working on the edge, outside the very canon he was on the verge of redefining.

We ended up somewhere in Nichols Canyon at the end of a wooded lane before a sprawling log-cabin style house. The door was open, and inside Mina Soriana, tall and dark and thrillingly present in flowing gypsy skirt and wild loose hair, stirred soup in an open kitchen with an infant boy on her arm and a young daughter beside her. A renowned Polish cinematographer was talking on a telephone. A well-known character actor watched a Dodgers game on television in the living room. Other figures wandered in and out of rooms, or to a swimming pool out back. Peter lurched to the toilet and pissed loudly with the door open. Mina turned and gave me a good look, then asked me my name as if she really wanted to know.

Remy Moran, I answered shyly.

Directors are seldom alone, their work by definition collaborative, but Peter and Mina seemed to live at the locus of an entourage, a kind of running ensemble. I would recall from that first visit fragments of conversations, a steady stream of arrivals and departures, profferings of dubious substances, and my first encounter with poolside nudity. Heady stuff for a film school dweeb from a family of academics. That evening, after a rash of phone calls, Peter announced that the studio had committed to a film to be shot at his village in Mexico.

Not his Maya epic, he said, but a remake of one of B. Traven's Mexico novels, *The Bridge in the Jungle*. Rip Torn was on for the male lead, Jessica Lange the female. Production was to begin in April, the dry season there. What the hell, Peter said. A deal with the devil I can live with. Somewhere during the celebratory hours that followed he said to me: Why don't you come on down, kid? Should be a ball.

I would remember little of the rest of that night save blundering in upon a couple having some sort of tantric sex in a bedroom. I must have fallen asleep on the living room floor, and when I awoke it was dawn, the house littered with inert bodies.

Struggling up, I saw little Liana Altos sitting cross-legged on the couch, wide awake, her baby brother asleep beside her, drawing intently in a large notebook, as if indifferent to the mad sprawl around her, or the bleary, besotted film student tiptoeing past her to the door.

I stumbled out of the house and hitched a ride down the canyon. Climbing into my car in the deserted Formosa Café parking lot, I realized I had just had a formative experience. Something important had entered my life. Of course I had no inkling of what that was.

That was twenty-three years ago. Worlds have transpired. I'm as old now as Peter Altos was then, a professor of film at my alma mater, UCLA. Nico, the baby boy at Mina's breast, is a few years older than I was then, an aspiring actor. Liana, the little girl drawing in the living room that morning, is twenty-nine now and lives in San Francisco. Mina Soriana Altos drowned in Mexico nine years ago of an accident or a crime nobody was ever convicted of. Peter Altos, as far as anyone knew, never finished the last film he spent decades working on.

When news came that he was found dead at his house in Mexico, I didn't know whether to believe it or not. But as his alleged biographer – once official, now decidedly not – I figured I'd have to find out.

I
Tezcatlan

LIANA WAS STILL in bed in San Francisco when the doorbell rang. She got up and threw on a robe to greet a Federal Express woman at the door with a letter package from Mexico.

“What is it?” Richard called sleepily.

They’d stayed up late screening a beta version of a photo application they’d developed over the last several years. A search engine juggernaut planned to acquire it, contracts were being drawn up, and if things went as planned in a few weeks’ time the buyout stood to put some real change in their pockets.

The letter package was marked “commercial samples.” Inside she found a Ziploc bag full of fine, dark gray ash.

The return address was the house in Mexico, but as no courier pickups reached that remote stretch of lake, somebody must have driven it to Pátzcuaro. Who had drawn that macabre task? She didn't trust that bag of ashes any more than an NPR news brief that morning on her father's passing.

A few hours later, her brother called from Malibu, fresh out of rehab, his voice trembling. He'd gotten a Fedex too.

The Chronicle obit the next day cited Peter Altos's influential early features, the globetrotting troupe, his abortive Hollywood period, their running battles with the IRS. They ran an early photo of her parents in a pirogue there on the lake, he gaunt and grinning, Mina seated in a white cotton dress with a Chiapan shawl flung over her shoulders. It noted her mother's drowning in Mexico, his trial and acquittal, and the film he reputedly spent his last years working on. Maverick director Peter Altos found dead at seventy-one at his lakeside home in Mexico.

That afternoon she said, "Richard, I have to go down there."

"Why?"

"Somebody has to. Nico's in no shape."

"You haven't been in Tezcatlan since you were fifteen. What's there for you?"

"A house. A past. A painting I want."

"You always told me the house would go to the family lawyer."

"Maybe find out what happened to my mother."

"The only person who knew that is dead now. It's drug territory, a war zone."

"Three days down, three back. A week in Tezcatlan."

"Drive down? You're crazy. Liana, we sign contracts in ten days. We can't blow this deal."

PACKING THAT EVENING, she couldn't decide what to do with her wedding ring. Richard had presented it to her in a faux-French bistro on San Pablo Street in Palo Alto six years earlier, after their first big payday. She wanted to leave it behind for reasons of safety but feared he might misunderstand. Come to think of it, where was his wedding band lately? She decided to lock the ring in the glove compartment of the car for the drive down then figure out what to do with it when she got there.

Merced, Vegas, Tucson, I-10 east through Deming in the desolate heat, her father's alleged ashes on the car seat beside her. Coals to Newcastle, but damned if she was going to let him make the last move. If he was really gone, she'd scatter the ashes where they belonged, in the lake. If it was one of his stoned jokes and he lurched out from behind the velvet curtain in the *sala*, she'd fling them in his face. What had he thought, that she'd stuff a pillow and sleep on them?

Richard had offered to come but she didn't want that. He belonged to the edifice of clear reasonable achievement she'd spent years erecting. He had delivered himself often enough of his take on her parents: "Dissolute old hedonists. Bad wine, bad weed, bad art." Richard, elegant at writing code, found the Altos code unreadable if not contemptible. He didn't understand the good there and she'd never revealed to him the depths of the bad.

The only thing worse than the Motel 6 in El Paso – CNN drowning out a biker couple groaning through sex next door – was crossing the bridge into the empty killing streets of Ciudad Juarez at dawn, alert to every movement.

South on the deserted toll road past Chihuahua, saguaro cactuses festooned with plastic bags swept by like sentinels, the bottle of drinking water beside her hotter than the late June air. Foolish to drive when she could have flown to Morelia and rented a car, but she'd imagined hauling some things back. And she needed time to think.

A parent dies, you go back to *wrap things up*. Isn't that what you do? This sounded normal enough, though her family's life had been anything but that. What could Richard or their Bay Area friends and colleagues know of waking up under a minivan outside of Fez in

the rain, a troupe actor on acid pissing right next to your head? Huddling half-starved under a blanket with your baby brother in an unheated East Village walkup while your parents did a play? Wearing the same clothes for weeks because they were too busy fighting or fucking or filming to notice?

The pale Durango mountains rimmed a horizon bare of promise as the radio narrated *narcocorrido* ballads of death and betrayal. Three weeks earlier, she'd flown to LA to bail her brother out after police had found him wandering naked in Topanga Canyon, threatening to set fires. Taking his shot in Hollywood, getting roles but not enough to quit his day job, sitting in front of a bank of screens with headphones on in an office in Thousand Oaks making cold sales calls in Spanish, gulping his meds, a suicide helpline cued on his speed dial.

A house of ghosts, Richard had called it.

Maybe I need to meet those ghosts, she thought, pulling into high Zacatecas just after nightfall.

Gripping a chilled Dos XX in the dim, noisy lounge of an old miners' hotel off the plaza, she began sifting through half-lit memories of the old ex-convent, daring to imagine it anew as a place of succor, a refuge, to allay her brother's helplessness and dread, and her own.

What do you rescue from the past, what let go? What is forgiven, what not? What is outrun, what never?

By daybreak she was back on the road, making it to Tezcatlan by late Friday afternoon.

2.

SHE STOOD UNDER THE pirul tree at the foot of the road where the path led down to the lake, watching a man in a wooden pirogue paddle slowly up the channel through reeds, his single oar rising and dipping. She clenched and unclenched her fingers, crabbed and numb from hours at the wheel. Behind her, the dusty, mud-caked VW Passat made its clicking, cooling noises.

A breeze shivered the cane, rocking the pirogues on their tethers. The men who fish the lake used to tell her that all truth lies in the depths. They also liked to joke that people eat the fish then the fish eat the people, as everything around here ends up in the lake. In old sepia photos a paddlewheel steamer could be seen docking here, but since then the water line had dropped over twenty feet. Now wetland spread far out towards the big island and only a narrow channel ran out to the lake.

She watched the small, ancient fisherman tie up to the wooden jetty and start his climb up the steep stony path. Looking up from under his canvas hat, he saw her. He lowered his head and trudged on with his flat oar and gunny sack.

The lake glimmered silver and still. She used to paint it from the window at the end of the upstairs hall of the ex-nunnery where her parents lived. She had a canvas in the flat in

San Francisco but her favorite used to hang in her room here. The notion that she was coming to fetch that painting had aided her on the journey back, one she swore she'd never make, not while her father was alive.

The fisherman reached the top of the path. He looked up and met her eyes. "Guerita," he said, calling her Blondie as they always did here.

"What are you fishing, Julián?"

He shook his head gravely. "Whitefish gone. No more trout. Only *charal*."

He opened his sack to show her the tiny silver fish, eaten by the dozens with lime and chili, the last and least of the catch that had once made the lake cuisine famous, the fishermen's butterfly nets now on display for tourists on the ferries to the island.

Julián looked at her, clear-eyed. Deep into his seventies now, she figured. Her father used to fish the lake with him and sometimes they took her along.

"Yes, he's gone," he said.

They turned and stared silently back at the lake.

"Will you be here a while?"

"A week," she said.

"*Qué gusto verte*, Liana."

She watched him tramp on up the dirt road towards the village until he was gone, then turned back to the lake.

I carry this lake within me, she thought, a large and fluid thing, as my mother carried me in her. In her dream of the lake, which was always the same, she was walking across cracked mud flats, gathering her mother's bones in her skirt, speaking to her in a language of fish.