

# Everything In This Book Is A Lie

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# Contents

## PHASE ONE

*The Power of Words..... page 5*

## PHASE TWO

*Persuasion as Power..... page 75*

## PHASE THREE

*Making Lies Work Magic..... page 127*

## PHASE FOUR

*Image City..... page 221*

## PHASE FIVE

*Who Am I..... page 303*



*PHASE ONE*

*The Power of Words*

*If it be true that all knowledge lies only in the perception of the agreement or disagreement of our own ideas, the visions of an enthusiast and the reasoning of a sober man will be equally certain. It is no matter how things are: so a man observes but the agreement of his own imagination, and talk conformably, it is all truth, all certainty.*

John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding"

# 1

It is 3:00 AM. It is mid July. It is Manhattan. I enter the Subway station at 14th Street, and descend the cement stairs lined with metal and reach the lower level where I am to wait for my train. I stop. I wait. The long-dried layer of sweat covering my body once again becomes moist and mixes with the fumes of the trains and the smell of trash. On the train tracks to my left, there are big orange diamond-shaped signs that say "Construction in Progress". I see no men working. The station is empty. I assume I just missed a train. I try to recall the frequency of the N&R trains during off-hours. I realize I have at least half an hour of waiting ahead of me. My hair is pulled back into a small bun. I smooth my hair back with my hands, skipping over the bun, and rest them on the back of my neck. I release my head backwards. My long neck cracks. I release the lock of my fingers and let my hands drop to my sides. I walk to the edge of the platform. I look left, following the tracks with my eyes and see no train in the distance. I place my right-hand fingers on my collarbone. It is mostly exposed through my tight sweaty tank top. I begin moving my fingers on this distinct bone, separating my neck from my small chest as if I am playing the piano. As my fingers dance on my sticky olive skin, I feel I am all bones and soul. I have no fat to dilute my turbulent spirit. My elongated body contains a strong current of passion and determination, swirling amongst my solid inner bones.

My fingers part with my collarbone. I begin pacing along the platform. I re-run the events of the evening through my mind in fast forward speed: I met Stacey for dinner at the little French Cafe on the corner of Christopher and Waverly. We ordered a nice bottle of

red wine. She brought me up to date on her failing relationship and her overly demanding career, while I swirled the wine in my mouth, wondering why we were still friends. We both spoke of our summer plans and I felt our voices absorbed in the background cafe chatter. The guys at the table next to us invaded our conversation and eventually joined us. They asked for our phone numbers. They were Italian and charming. We declined and left the cafe, saying goodbye on the sidewalk. She took a cab, I walked to this station thinking of how meaningless our interaction was, how far it was from my inner reality.

There is no need for language in this dull memory. I just run through the visuals of the evening and all the words come across like scrambled sound, too fast to be broken down into individual words. I am enjoying this game of images in my mind. The tape rolls until this very moment. The images stop. I am sitting on a bench in this humid station. I am desperate for another distraction, another mind-movie or something to stare at.

A man in his late twenties walks into the station. He is wearing an expensive suit that is well wrinkled from the events of the day and the night. He clearly dressed himself in this suit early in the morning. I imagine it was neatly pressed, straight from the dry-cleaners. Now it is wrinkled, carrying the sweat he produced throughout the day and scents from the different places he has been. He walks slowly and sits in the five-seater bench where I am sitting. He chooses the left corner seat, which is one seat removed from me. He pauses for a moment, and then takes off his jacket. I notice the French cuffs on his shirt. Each cuff has a star design on it. What is he doing in this station at this hour? I can't help wondering if he was sent to me. He loosens his tie and pulls out a book from his

briefcase. He places his hand on the bookmark, which is located half way through the book. Before he slices the book open, I manage to quickly glance over and notice that he is reading Nabokov's Lolita. As he starts reading, he lifts the bookmark, which is actually a business card, and in slow motion, without shifting his sight from the page, places the business card in the empty seat between us. My curiosity gets the best of me and I glance over and read:

***KPMG* Peat Marwick LLP**

Information, Communication & Entertainment

**Dale E. Reed**

Senior Consultant

1999 Avenue of the Americas  
Suite 1100  
New York, NY 10009  
Telephone 212 201 4734  
Fax 212 201 9187  
dreed@kpmg.com

I instantly know that this is his card and no one else's. The name Dale Reed just fits him so well. God, how I detest consultants. In my New York years, I have learned to place consultants and investment bankers in one category. They are the evil wealthy, the narrow-minded. They are unoriginal and they remain in their draining jobs only because they fear life. For some reason, none of these characteristics come to mind when I examine my bench neighbor, Dale Reed. He actually seems sweet. Since he is reading I feel free to stare at him, without fear of getting caught. I cannot see the color of his eyes since he is looking down at the book. I notice his long dirty blond eyelashes. His skin is pale and his lips are hot red. He must have had raspberries or cherries for dessert to stain his lips so strongly. Suddenly his red lips stretch into a smile that he holds for at least 30 seconds. It is an inner smile, not triggered by the content of the book, but by a thought he has, maybe a funny memory. He raises his head from the book, acknowledges me, looks straight ahead at the tracks, and closes the book after returning the business



card to the current page. He does all this while maintaining his radiating smile. He is not smiling at me; he is smiling at his thoughts.

I suddenly wonder whether Dale might be more than a distraction, an object to look at while waiting for the train. I look at his wide raspberry smile, his innocent, innocent eyes. I think he might be the tool I have been searching for. As I realize the great potential this encounter might hold, I become nervous. I realize I have ten, maybe fifteen minutes before the next train arrives. I must act fast. I must prevent him from boarding the next train. In an act of desperation, I ask him:

"Is this your first time reading Lolita?"

He smiles and then pauses, welcoming my intrusion as if he knew it were coming.

"It's actually my second. The first time I read it, I was in college, it was required reading for a course. This is the first time I'm reading it for pleasure and I'm hooked. I'm a sucker for confessions."

His words take me by surprise. The fact that he is in this station, sitting next to me, reading Lolita, could not be a mere coincidence. I no longer need to test him. I know he is right for the job I have in mind. His warm facial expressions reveal that he has the patience to absorb my story. His calm green eyes assure me that I have found my believer. I ask him if he wants to listen to my story, while we wait for the train .

"It is also a confession," I add.

Looking downwards, he lets out an abrupt laugh. Then he looks directly at me, testing my seriousness. When he notices my still face, he realizes I am not joking. "Go ahead. I am listening." he responds. He then opens his briefcase and puts his book away, leaving the briefcase in his lap. I notice how smooth and curvy his movements are. He gently rests his elbow on the briefcase, and places a few fingers under his chin. He looks at me.

I had always envisioned this scene taking place in my apartment over a well-cooked meal and several cups of coffee for dessert. Or maybe in a restaurant or diner that would allow my partner and I to stay at our table for hours. The Union Square subway station was not in my realm of possibilities. I have worked out this moment in my mind thousands of times. I have been waiting for the day I will have the courage and maturity to tell my story. But lately, I have been more concerned with finding the appropriate partner. I have carefully interviewed many listeners for this task, but found no suitable candidates. How could a complete stranger possibly fulfill the requirements of this intimate role? With all my doubts, somehow I understand that I have reached this envisioned moment. This is the time to execute my ripe plan.

"My story begins when I was eleven, even though I didn't know it at the time. Now I know that the events that took place at that time were essential pieces in the puzzle of my life. Those years served as an alarm clock, a synchronized scream of millions of generations warning me of my powers. However, at the time, I was too young to

hear them, let alone understand them. Everything was so innocent. I was unaware of my special skill."

As I speak, Dale straightens his posture and looks directly at my mouth. The last evidence of his long smile vanishes. He seems interested in my story. I decide to end my introduction, and begin telling him of my life experiences chronologically:

"All in all, I had an average American childhood. I was a so-so student and I had enough friends. I tried to dress and act like everyone else in my class. I envied the girl in my class who was most popular and tried to become her best friend. My conversations consisted of arguing with my mother about increasing my allowance and getting my ears pierced.

As every sixth grade girl in the history of time, I would lie myself out of trouble fairly frequently. I remember one particular recurring white lie I used to tell about Justin. Justin was the most popular boy in school. As I walked home from school with Tracy and Rebecca, my two neighbors, I made up stories about how Justin had a huge crush on me. These lies were easy to sell. Justin and I were assigned a science project together and were seen chatting with each other during breaks. One time, walking home from school, I decided to take my Justin lie a little bit further. I told my jealous girlfriends that Justin passed me a note during History class, asking me if I want to go to the movies with him. I enjoyed watching Tracy and Rebecca's eyes light up, and I made up the details of the lie as their questions came to me. When I got home that same day, I found a note crumpled in my backpack signed by Justin with the exact same words I had told in my lie. For about two weeks this happened every day after school. I would lie about a note that Justin wrote, make up

a cheesy love poem to my girlfriends, and then find the exact note I lied about, crumpled up in my school backpack as if I had already read it. I would look at the notes without even questioning how they came into existence. I assumed that some angel was looking over me, making my wishes come true; assisting me in covering up my lies.”

I pause for a moment to focus on my listener. Dale seems sober and a bit skeptical. Although I always envisioned being bombarded by questions at this phase of the story, he asks nothing. I cannot determine if he believes my story, or if he thinks I am another New York City lunatic released from an asylum due to tight federal budgets. An N train arrives at the station. As the train stops and the doors open, the dozen people that have accumulated in the station board the train. Neither Dale nor I move. He is biting his lower lip now. I think he is struggling with what to do. He looks straight at the train. He is considering taking it. He jerks his calve muscles as if to get up, but then relaxes back in his seat. His eyes return to me. The train leaves the station. All is silent and once again Dale and I are alone.

I lower my head and give Dale a questioning look.

“Please continue.” Dale says.

“Why are you here listening to me? You probably need to be in your office or some meeting a few hours from now. I am glad that you are here. But I need to know what made you stay?”

“You’re right. I need to be in the office in...” He glances at his wristwatch. “...in four hours, to be exact. I need to take the elevator up to the 47th floor. I need to enter my office, turn on my

computer, check my e-mail and voice mail, and jot down the names of the clients I will need to reply to. Then, I need to take the elevator to the cafeteria on the 43rd floor to get my oatmeal. I need to small talk with the colleagues I meet on the way about Seinfeld episodes." I laugh. He reciprocates with a smile.

"Let's see, then I need to stay in my office with my computer and my phone for about fourteen hours, doing the same shit all day, maybe taking a cab to Midtown to meet a client for lunch. Eventually, I will watch the sun set over The Statue of Liberty through my office window and eat my take-out dinner while reading over some reports. There are plenty of things I need to do tomorrow, but I think the corporate world will continue to tick even if I get no sleep tonight and come into work dead tired. So thank you for your concern, but I think I can handle my schedule." Dale says. His words contain a self-mocking tone. His speech mannerisms are the opposite of mine. He expects no impact to his words.

"Sounds *really* exciting." I say sarcastically, raising both eyebrows and smiling.

"Look, I don't want to speak about my job or my life. That isn't why I decided not to get on the train. I don't know why exactly, but I am interested in hearing your story, so please, just keep talking."

I am now confident I have selected the right listener. I proceed:

"Awareness of my special skill only came to me four years later at the age of sixteen. I was a sophomore in high school with a boyfriend in college named Doug. I had entered the post-virginity phase in a girl's teenage life where boys become everything. The phase in which

sex still hurts, and doesn't always work; the phase in which talk about sex is more common than the actual act; the phase in which conversations with girlfriends occupy the center stage of life.

I had an above average success rate in all these activities. Doug and I were already having sex; I had enough girlfriends for consultation and gossip. In addition, my father had been living in Europe since my parents' divorce ten years earlier and my mother was always busy with work. So I had all the freedom a teenager could possibly desire. I felt secure and powerful. I gained a sufficient level of self-confidence to believe I could influence my surroundings. The ground was fertile for my awakening. The countdown of the grand alarm clock of my life had begun. It was the following single event that changed my entire thinking and being forever.

During the fall semester, Doug would come home every other weekend. We would spend most of our time together at his house. He was an art student and loved painting me, so I would model for him for most of the weekend. We would talk about everything, his classes and friends, my parents and girlfriends. We would have sex, stay in his room naked, and talk about our bright future together when he will become a famous artist and I will be his famous model. I would spend my weekdays talking to my girlfriends about my love for Doug and his great talent, counting the days till his next weekend at home.

At the end of Doug's fall semester in college, he came home for a long six-week winter break. His break had begun three weeks ahead of my Christmas vacation. We decided that spending this time together was more important than me going to school. My girlfriends agreed that I should do whatever it takes to be with Doug. Thus, we devised a scheme. It was pretty simply and quickly became a routine. Every weekday

morning I would get up, get dressed and prepare for school, leaving my home at 8:15 AM, putting on a show for my mother - pretending to be going off to school. I would stop by the grocery store, which is close to Doug's house, and buy bagels, cream cheese and orange juice for our breakfast. I would walk slowly through random streets of his neighborhood to kill some time. Around 8:45 I would arrive at Doug's house, walk around the back and crawl into his room through the window. By this time, both his parents were at work, and his little sister was at school. There was really no reason for crawling in through the window. I could have walked into his house through the front door. The only person in the house in the day was his maid who barely spoke English. But this window crawl added sophistication to our plan, and we both thought that we should take all necessary precautions. After all, Doug's next-door neighbor, Stacey Whittle, was in my homeroom class. Even though she was at school, her mother, Mrs. Jennifer Whittle was a part-time European History teacher at my high school who was always looking for new ways to get involved. We both knew she would just love to report a student playing hooky to the principal, and prove to Doug's mom that she really ought to pay closer attention to her son's affairs. In any case, I would crawl through the window of Doug's room, and wake up my lover with a kiss and some breakfast symbolizing the commencement of another magical day of sex and art. Around 4:00 PM, I would start heading home. I would reach my house around 4:15, long before my mother had returned from work.

Two weeks had passed, and our ploy was working according to plan. I was surprised to discover what little effort was required to pull it off. My school had left messages on my home answering machine. But I always deleted them before my mother came home from work. I think they had assumed I was on a family trip of some sort because they stopped calling after the first week. My close friends knew where I

was and covered for me by saying they weren't sure where I was but they thought I was visiting my father in Europe. My mother was really my only close family member, the main challenge to this ploy. She was the only person in the world that knew where I was at any given moment and could smell something wrong whenever I acted strange. But my mother was always at work, rarely asked about my days, and didn't even have the time or the attention to suspect that I was cutting school.

On December 11th, 1986, the third Monday of cutting school, just one week before my real winter break was to begin, my scheme came to a sudden halt. I was buying some bagels and orange juice to bring with me to Doug's house, when Jennifer Whittle spotted me selecting orange juice from the fridge of the store. She left her groceries at the register where she had been in line, and started walking towards me, all the way to the back, next to the dairy section. I was caught off guard. Like in the 'drain' screen-saver of a computer, when suddenly the entire screen starts swirling down in a plummeting spiral, I saw my hand-built reality vanishing into the drain of a sink. Images started flashing through my mind, my mother's expression of disappointment, detention, being grounded for years. All these visions broke into particles, flushing into a single circle in the center of my vision. As I listened to the sound of Mrs. Whittle's high heels hitting the cold floor of the grocery store getting louder and louder, closer and closer, I knew the darkness of my reality needed more than a white lie. Mrs. Whittle came to a stop a few inches from my face. I could hear her breathing. Before she opened her mouth, I already heard the words she was planning to voice. 'Where have you been for the past two weeks? You wouldn't be skipping school to be with your boyfriend now, would you?' I knew I was not



destined to be caught just yet. I knew I had the power to get myself out of this one scratch-free...

As Mrs. Whittle had already parted her lips to say the exact words I had forecasted, I instantly broke into a sweat, my cheeks became painfully red and a large vein in my forehead came close to explosion. I opened my mouth to let out a scream that came from deep inside me. I broke into tears. My teardrops slid down my face and landed on the cold floor making a loud piercing sound. It seemed as if the entire store, or maybe the entire world was placed on mute by some grand remote control for roughly two minutes, except for the sound of my tears hitting the hard floor. I grabbed Mrs. Whittle by her shoulder, pulled her tight towards me and while shaking both of us rapidly, I let out another sigh of pain:

'W-h-h-h-y-y-y! Why did this have to happen to me? She was my only friend in the world.'

My grand scream left Mrs. Whittle speechless. She wrapped her arms around my shivering body.

'Why? Why? Why did it have to be my mother? She was such a beautiful person. She didn't deserve to die! It's not fair. Why? Why can't it happen to someone else?

My fragile voice came from the top of my throat. These were the most lethal words I had ever spoken.

Mrs. Whittle swallowed my performance as if I was serving her Tiramisú, slightly bitter from the cocoa powder sprinkled on top, but as rich and decadent as life inside. She tried to cope with the

greatness of my tragedy without collapsing. I felt her body shiver along with mine as my words vibrated inside her. All I had to do was help her stand straight and fill in the details of my mother's death. I told her of my mother's tragic accident in the house and how she died instantly. She gave me her condolences, and explained that the school would obviously do all it could to accommodate me during my period of grief. She gave me personal permission to miss as many school days as I needed and gave me her home phone number, in case I needed someone to talk to or a shoulder to cry on. She kept swallowing as she spoke, as if struggling to contain within her consciousness the great tragedy I had just revealed. I explained to her that I needed to be left alone, and that it would be a great help if she could inform the proper authorities at school. I wanted to make sure that the principle and some teachers wouldn't come visit. After holding me for another minute or two, she left without her groceries, and told me that she will drive directly to school and inform them of my 'situation'. As soon as she left, I paid for my bagels and was on my way to Doug's house, keeping up the pretense of a newly orphaned child for three more blocks to be on the safe side. When I was far enough from the store, I tried to cheer up. After all, I just got myself out of serious trouble. I lied and was therefore not caught. But the only mask my face would wear was one of sadness. As I walked slowly, I tried holding up the edges of my mouth with two fingers. But the minute I released my fingers, my mouth once again became a pout. My face remained sad even though there was no reason. I remember thinking to myself how absurd this all was. I knew I had lied about my mother's death. Why should my words of fiction affect my mood? They were not real. I slowed down my pace and tried hard to change my frame of mind. I decided not to think of my lie until I reached Doug's and told him the story. I cleared my consciousness and let warm thoughts wash over my mind. I thought of school, of my

upcoming vacation. I thought of Doug's beautiful paintings, of our times together over the past two weeks, of our magical love. But this mind game didn't help much. My emotions were listening to a different master than my mind. The sadness was growing inside me like cancer. My body began shivering once again. As I continued walking on the white cement sidewalk carved out of even lawns of well-kept suburban houses, fear entered my body like gentle summer evening's wind and accentuated my sadness with terror.

Only when I saw Doug, did my face of mourning transform into a cheek-to-cheek smile. I knew I had to conceal my terror from him. I instantly became cheerful. I jumped on his bed and woke him up with a kiss. Over breakfast, I told him the whole story about how I bumped into Mrs. Whittle and rescued myself from detention with a lie. I tried to direct my words out of my mouth nonchalantly. I spoke as if I might have selected any other story to tell, and this particular scene about lying to Mrs. Whittle was the choice of my memory, not my mind. Doug seemed confused and scared as I spoke. He demanded that I tell him what happened from the beginning, including all the detail I could remember. So I reenacted the whole scene for him. I demonstrated how I grabbed poor Mrs. Whittle, how shocked she was. I even raved about how I deserve an Oscar for my brilliant performance. I laughed as I played both our roles, shivering frantically when I played Mrs. Whittle. Doug did not find the story amusing at all. He told me that he was superstitious about stuff like that, and that my lie freaked him out. We had an awkward day together, flooded by breaks of silence. We avoided talking most of the time and stared at the TV to avoid conversation.

I decided to leave early that day, and headed home around 3:00 PM. In my mind, I was cooking up what I call a Preventive Lie. My mother

told me she wasn't feeling well that morning, so in case she was home, I was preparing to tell her that my 3:00 PM class was canceled. Half a block away from my house, I noticed two ambulances in our driveway. There were four men in white uniforms standing by them. One of the men was holding a clipboard and a pen, diligently writing what his partner was dictating. All of them seemed to be operating at a relatively slow pace. It seemed like whatever the emergency had been, it was too late for help. One of the men was sitting in the driver seat of one of the ambulances. He looked very young. I rushed over to him to find out what happened. I thought that the least experienced of the bunch might be the most truthful. I asked him why they were there. He paused for moment fishing for a way out of his awkward situation.

'Please step aside. I am not allowed to give out any information. You will have to wait until my supervisor returns if you have any questions.' He replied in an official tone, as if reciting the query response written in his manual.

'Come on, this is my home. I have a right to know. Please, tell me. Did something happen to my mother?'

The young driver realized he had no way out. He had to break the news to me. He started his sentence several times and stopped, deciding there was a better, less painless way to deliver his tragic message. Finally, he came right out and said it:

'An accident has happened. I am sorry to inform you that your mother electrocuted herself by adjusting the wire connections behind the TV while her hands were still wet from washing the dishes. She passed

away instantly. You should be comforted to know that she experienced no pain.'

As his mouth stopped moving and his lips were again motionless, time came to a sudden halt for me and never resumed ticking in quite the same way. The words from his mouth kept slapping my face again and again as if in an instant replay on a basketball game broadcast. The words returned to his mouth in rewind, and then, in slow motion slapped my ears, nose, forehead and cheeks. This must have happened nine or ten times. My face became red. I thought I would rather die than watch these words return to his mouth and hit me one more time. After his words hit me for the last time, I felt them shatter on my face and land on the grass of our front yard beneath my feet. I released my head and looked at the grass. Everything became clear to me. I created these evil words I was staring at. They originated in the warm space of my mouth that very morning; they hit Mrs. Whittle, bounced around the town, killed my mother and were now resting at my feet after slapping me, after fulfilling their destiny. I watched the words extinguish on the grass like fresh cigarette butts. I had murdered my mother by lying about her death.

I felt my innocence flee from my body in a matter of minutes. In every bone, vein, and cell of my body, I felt the existence of guilt. I was now fully aware of my powers. Instances from my past surfaced, and I remembered odd reactions that followed my words. The notes that followed the Justin Lie were no coincidence. As I scanned my brief life history, I fully understood what I had done. Everything I ever lied about found its way into reality and somehow became truth."

I stop talking.

It is 4:30 AM. The R train stops at the station. It brings with it a roar of sound and a strong wind tunnel runs through the platform. It is as if the train had waited for me to finish my story, afraid to interrupt my powerful words. Another dozen people that have accumulated in the station, board the train. Dale and I remain at our seats on the bench. We are facing each other. This time Dale does acknowledge the train. For the first time since I began telling my story, he allows his eyes to wander away from my mouth and towards the train. He restores his vision to me, this time to my eyes. I look away from him and stare at the train. I see my distorted reflection in the silver metal of the train. I watch my reflection wobble on the train's side as it pulls out of the station. I stand up as if in a reflex. I suddenly feel too close to Dale. He stands up too, facing me. I notice he is much taller than I am. My mouth is the height of his chest. I feel long and hollow. I feel as if the train has taken with it some of the tension between us. Six subway workers dressed in orange, jump off the ledge of the platform and begin working on the tracks. They speak loudly amongst themselves and make noise with their tools, filling the station with industrial sounds.

I feel as if Dale and I are floating, or at least misplaced in this dark underworld. Even though I had planned out my story-telling thoroughly, I do not know where to go from here. I stick my index finger inside my belly button to stop the pouring of my soul. I look at my feet like an embarrassed little girl. Dale speaks:

"Hey, I have an idea. Do you know the Waverly Restaurant?" he asks.

"No." I reply, still staring at my toes.

"It's this diner a few blocks away where we can keep talking. I am fascinated, but without some caffeine in my system, I doubt I will be able to stay attuned for very much longer. Besides, it's getting pretty noisy in here."

I nod in agreement. I am relieved at his suggestion. He stands up and reaches for my hand. My fingers part with my navel, and I follow him up the stairs. I feel much lighter than I did entering this station an hour and a half ago. My mind is racing, and in order to slow it down, I count the steps. I reach seventy-eight. It's bright daylight outside, and the streets are quiet and dirty. The abandoned wide sidewalks are filthy with bottles, brown paper bags, coffee cups, and colorful flyers. It seems as if a windstorm has lifted all the trash from the cans onto the street. We walk down Sixth Avenue in silence, each one of us thinking in our own language, but clearly walking in the same path.

# 2

We enter the diner. Dale opens the door for me. The waitress is sitting on a stool at the bar wearing a black dress with a zipper through its center and a white apron with many pockets. She points to the many vacant booths in the restaurant, indicating that we can sit where we want. Dale leads the way down the aisle to the back of the restaurant. The light is a warm, stuffy yellow, a complete contrast to the white morning light of the street. With both hands, Dale lifts his gray pants from slightly above the knee before sliding into the booth. I slide in and cross my legs on the dark red cushion. Our booth has no window. On the wall between us is a photo of the Waverly Restaurant covered in snow. Dale stares at the photo. I look around, examining the mostly empty diner. There are two students sitting in a window booth with their books and notes scattered on the table, leaving only a modest space for two coffee mugs. They are not speaking. They are both reading and jotting down notes. Their movement is minimal and they look tired. It seems as though they are pulling an all-nighter for a final. There are three Europeans, two women and a man, sitting in a booth deeper in the restaurant, closer to us. They are dressed in black, speaking a foreign language I cannot identify. Both women have heavy makeup, which is mostly smudged from the evening's events. All three of them are eating eggs and hash browns with coffee, restoring energy they borrowed earlier in the night on credit. The waitress comes by. We both order coffee. Finally this scene is beginning to resemble the story-telling fantasy I had thought out so many times. Neither Dale nor I speak. We are both tired. We choose to wait a few more seconds before jumping into the next session, knowing it will be an intense one. It is as if we are not permitted to speak until the coffee arrives. The coffee will



be my cue to continue, like the lifting of curtains at the theater. We wait another minute in silence. The coffee arrives. Dale opens two packs of sugar with one hand stroke, pours them into his coffee, adds cream, then sips loudly. I add Sweet & Low, stir, then speak:

"Shall I continue?"

"Actually, no, not yet. Before you move on, I think we need to make a little detour in your story. I think I need a better understanding of these powers you claim to have. To be honest here, I'm not sure I believe you."

"Dale, I learned the boundaries of my powers through experience. If you hear my story through, you will learn everything you need to know."

"That's great. But, I think I don't even understand the basics. What do you mean your lies come true? I mean, for God's sake, could you just say that tomorrow Dale Reed will be the richest man on earth and have it come true. If you told me you were Madonna, would you magically transform into her? Could you lie about there being no more world poverty, and have every family in Africa instantly receive a refrigerator filled with food, a dishwasher and cable TV?"

Dale pauses and allows an expression of awkwardness to develop on his face as if he is questioning the source of the words he just spoke. He places two fingers on the bridge of his nose and looks down at the table.

"You have a right to be doubtful and all your questions are valid." I say. "You will get your answers one at a time as my story unfolds. But since you seem so anxious, I will pause and try to explain what I mean by 'lies coming true'. I think that if you look at the way our society operates, you will no longer find my powers so hard to believe."

"OK, I'm listening."

He takes a loud sip from his coffee and keeps his mug high, cuddling it as if attempting to keep his hands warm. Even though the mug is covering his chin and the lower part of his mouth, I can tell he is slightly smiling. I am too. I see this as approval to proceed and start explaining:

"This power is present in everybody to a certain degree. Words are out there causing reactions all the time. Words, as soon as they leave the warm and moist space of our mouths towards a dryer, wider space, bouncing off people and objects, will have an impact."

Dale gives me a half-mocking smile. "OK, I think I understand that. I don't need any examples or exercises. You can move to the next lesson."

Dale unties his tie, and removes it from his neck with one slow pull. He places it on the seat beside him and then unbuttons the top button of his shirt.

"Obviously, words change things. For example, as we walked in the diner, I asked you to explain some of your powers to me and now we are discussing them instead of proceeding with the story. So, my

words changed the direction of our conversation. Voila. Beautiful. But what about those two students sitting by the window? Can my words impact their lives without them hearing me speak?"

"Wait a minute, don't be so patronizing. I'm getting there. But first, it is important to me that you understand that even though words are not physical, they lead to very physical results."

As I speak, I remove the elastic band from my hair and fix my ponytail. I brush back my hair with my hand until every hair is neatly pulled back. I twist my ponytail into a spiral and secure the elastic around a neat bun of hair at the back of my head.

"Let me show you an example of how words impact people that don't even hear them. Do you follow the market?"

"The stock market? Yes, of course."

"Great. I thought you would. Let's take an example from the financial markets. Do you know who George Soros is?"

"Yeah, of course. He runs the Quantum fund. He's one of the most successful investors in the world."

Dale answers my second question instantly, as if someone is measuring his response time for an IQ test.

"Do you know why he does so well?"

"He researches well before he invests, he has a deep understanding of market forces... I don't know. Why does he do so well? What do you think?"

"George Soros is an investor, but, most importantly, he is a philosopher. He uses his theory of reflexivity in investing. This theory is the reason for his great success. The theory of reflexivity holds that the situations we need to examine to make decisions are constantly affected by the decisions we make. Soros claims that there is an innate divergence between the expectations of events and actual future events."

"Are you saying that if investors expect something, regardless of its truth, it will happen?"

"Yes. But there has to be some rationale behind investor's expectations. Let me give you an example of how this works. In 1992, as more and more details about the unification of European currencies emerged, investors became highly involved in speculating about the exchange rate between different European currencies. The investment community started speculating that the Italian Central Bank would not be able to support the high value of the Lira and would have to devalue. The Italian Central Bank made opposite claims, saying it would support the high value of the Lira. Investors did not believe the Central Bank, and kept betting against the Lira. Because investors kept selling Lire, the Italian Central Bank ran down its foreign reserves and was no longer able to back the value of the Lira. The Central Bank of Italy was forced to devalue its currency and fulfill investors' speculation. Because investors expected the Central Bank of Italy to devalue, the central bank had no choice but

to devalue. You see, investors' expectations became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Dale removes the French cuff links from his sleeves, and begins folding one sleeve upward on his arm. He stops momentarily to signal the waitress with his free hand to refill his coffee. After pointing to his empty cup, he continues to fold. He straightens his back in his seat and prepares a response.

"O.K. I must say that is a good example of the power of words, or even the power of lies. But your Soros example only showed a change in currencies, or the values of currencies, not changes in real life events, nothing like your mother's death."

Dale finishes folding up his second sleeve and places his hands on the table. The waitress fills Dale's mug with coffee and then mine.

"Let me give you another example. This case changed a lot more than the value of a currency. Monica Lewinsky said she had an affair with President Clinton. Her words were channeled to the entire world through the TV broadcasts, newspaper articles, voices of all kinds of experts analyzing the alleged affair, and even private conversations among friends all over the world. Clinton said in a sworn deposition that he never had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. But in the public's mind the affair did take place."

Dale begins moving his index finger from side to side in disagreement.

"No, no, no... Wait a minute. Clinton admitted he did have an affair with Monica later on. The affair happened. That is a fact. This is reality. She didn't create the affair with a lie. It was real."

"Yes. But even before Clinton admitted that he previously lied, polls showed that more than seventy percent of Americans believed he did have sex with Lewinsky. So, in essence, regardless of the truth, in our minds they did have sex just because Monica said so and everybody believed her, not because it was true."

Dale interrupts: "But Monica didn't even lie. She just exposed the truth. This is totally different from the powers you're talking about. The affair was real."

"That's besides the point. In a way, the truth doesn't matter. Reality has no meaning because words have the power to alter reality. If I came out with a convincing lie about an affair I had with President Clinton and the media swallowed it, it did happen. If our affair occurred in the minds of millions, then it did occur. It becomes reality."

Dale sinks his fist onto the table. "No, it is not reality. It never happened."

"Can't you see that reality is man-made? It is always changing." I exclaim.

Dale contracts his chest and brings his shoulders forward as if my words had punched him in the stomach. He tightens his lips together.

Suddenly, I understand my efforts are pointless. It is too soon to expect him to understand. I know we must end this disagreement and proceed with my story. I need to find a way to calm him and get him to listen. But at this very instance, I need to speak to someone other than Dale. Just as angry men punch the wall to exude their violence, I need to direct my words elsewhere so they will not bring him pain.

I signal the waitress. She walks over:

"Is there anything I can get you?"

"Yes, sorry to bother you again, but the last time you refilled my coffee, the coffee was cold. Could I get a fresh cup, please?"

"Sure, yeah, no problem. I'm sorry about that, I didn't realize it was cold. I thought I grabbed the pot that just finished brewing," she replies with a warm smile. She grabs the cup and walks away towards the bar. "I'll be right back."

"Thank you" I say, feeling slightly relieved.

Dale looks puzzled. "I don't get it. She refilled my cup at the same time as yours, and mine is fine... I think." Dale tastes his coffee again and discovers it is cold. His face becomes wrinkled and distorted, as if he just drank sour milk. "It is cold, you're right. But that's so strange. It was fine a minute ago."

I smile awkwardly and raise my shoulders to show him I have no explanation.

As the skin on his face irons out and returns to its natural smoothness, Dale looks into my eyes:

"Listen, I'm sorry I am getting overheated here, OK? It's just that I am not sure I understand. In the subway station you were telling me how you killed your mother with a lie. Now you are trying to say that what you did was nothing special and your power is present in all of us. This is starting to sound like a self help book about finding the energy within, or something like that, they call those *healing books* these days, don't they?"

I smile widely. My smile is my mask. His words hurt me. I swallow and continue.

"I think it is time to continue with my story, but let me just make one thing clear. I lie. The world somehow finds a way to make my lies reality, whether they are about the past or the future. This is a trait that I don't think George Soros or Monica Lewinsky possess. This is a skill I have not yet found in any one but myself. And trust me, I did search for brothers and sisters but came up empty handed. I was trying to bring you examples you are familiar with to show you how logical it is to hold powers such as mine. I think my powers are not so far fetched from the world you know. That's all."

"OK. On with your story, then." Dale licks his lips in a dramatic tongue motion. They are still a remarkable glossy cherry red. I see his smile as a peace offering.

"OK." I smile back. I accept. I pause.



My attention drifts to my watch, it is 6:30 AM, and then to the happenings in the rest of the diner. The students have left. The three Europeans have just received their check. The man rises from the seat with the help of one hand and searches his jeans' pocket for money with the other. He pulls out a moist, crumpled up twenty-dollar bill, falls back on the cushion, straightens the bill, and places it on the table. The three of them leave the diner and stop a taxi before the diner door closes behind them. We are left alone, just like in the subway station. The last batch of night people has left. The next diners will soon be coming in for breakfast after a night's worth of sleep.

# 3

We both enjoy a couple of minutes of silence. Without words, the tension of our argument subsides. The waitress arrives with two fresh mugs of coffee. Steam rises from each mug. I feel it is the right time to continue. I speak:

"I think the next chapter of my life will be helpful to you in understanding more about the characteristics of my power. I advise you to do more listening and less talking." I smile flirtatiously and roll my eyes upward.

Dale laughs out loud. "Great, I think I'll take your advice. I'll be good, just keep talking."

I anchor my elbows on the table and bring my upper body closer to its edge. I rest my chin in my hands. I decide to invite him with quiet words. He is still on the periphery of my story and I must seduce him further in. I speak in a low voice. I am almost whispering:

"During the winter break that followed my mother's death, family and friends gathered at my house daily to mourn. My father never came. He said it was bad timing and promised to visit me in the summer when business would slow down. He only called a few times to check up on me and to convince himself that I was doing fine without him. My mother's mother came up from Florida to stay with me, and she took over all the funeral arrangements. None of my school friends came to visit during this time. I think my grandmother told them I preferred it that way. This was partially true. I really had nothing to say to them. I thought their visits would only burden me with questions,

questions I had no answers to. The house was regularly filled with about a dozen people I saw as aliens. They claimed to be my mother's friends or distant relatives of some sort. But I am still convinced that some of the guests at my house at that time were strangers that drove by and were simply attracted to the crowd."

"Wow, that sounds pretty morbid", Dale says.

"Well, you see, from a very young, age I felt I was made of a different substance than my family, even my mother. I had darker skin and darker hair. I had different thoughts and different reactions. They all touched each other freely when greeting each other. Their arms would clash when they passed dishes amongst themselves over the dinner table. I never participated in this body clashing interaction. When speaking, I never pushed their arms away in disbelief. They never tapped me on the shoulder to get my attention. An unspoken rule excluded me from their touching game and I was happy with it. I had imaginary borders drawn in my mind fencing my space and my thoughts. Everyone knew not to cross these. When uncles, cousins or friends of my mother would come over for dinner a few times a year, they were all aware of these rules. I was never asked to give grownups reports on what I did at school like others. Even the other kid guests would refrain from crossing my borders. They never asked me to come play when they got tired of sitting at the dinner table. I never wanted to participate in their mischievous adventures. I observed discussions from my autistic mind and felt as if my eyes were blessed with a reverse magnifying vision. I saw all relatives and guests in our house through a distant wide-angle lens, as if they were in a far away scene that could never reach me. Since I was an only child, I always made up stories to myself about how my parents stole me from the hospital because they couldn't have children of their own. I felt that I was an alien to the happenings around me. Everything was a

movie, something constructed for me to view. I tried as hard as I could to remain unaffected by surrounding lives. I witnessed behavior around me and looked only to draw lessons from it.

The discovery of my powers only confirmed my childhood notions. In the time after my mother's death, I became certain that the people in my house were not of my blood. I felt like I was at someone else's family gathering, like she was not my mother at all. I watched everyone's sadness and it only made me more aloof. In my mind, I pretended to be a reporter staying at the house to cover a tragic story. I spent minimal time during meals with my grandmother and guests and I did not understand why they asked the questions they did, or even chose those particular words to form their question. But mostly I remember not understanding what they were all doing in my house for so many days. They kept speaking of all the things they were missing and how hard it will be to catch up at work when they return to their normal lives.

Since I saw them as a foreign species, I addressed all my questions to the sky. I took long walks of solitude and took refuge in the deserted park close to my house. I would lock my hands behind my neck and rest my head backwards till my face became parallel with the sky. I would scream questions upward into the air. "Who are these people invading my home? Why do they insist on grouping together in my living room, bouncing off each other's gibberish words of the weather and sports? Why do they all start crying as soon as one of them breaks down in tears? Why do they need to be together?" I asked the sky all these questions as if expecting a reply. I waited for an answer that never came. I waited for the clouds to give me the blessing of understanding. But nothing arrived.

One night, three days after my mother's funeral, I screamed at the sky over the park, which changed from light blue to purple, then to dark blue and finally black. I realized it was not going to answer my questions. On my walk back to my home, which was still crowded with strangers, I thought of my mother. I tried to think of what advice she would grant me if she were alive. Instead of imagining her reaction, I scanned my memory for words she had spoken to me in the past. I remembered a time a few months earlier when I had very painful period cramps. I laid in bed crumpled up like a ball, holding my stomach tight with both hands, sweating out my agony. Every few minutes I experienced a sharp, forceful cramp; my body tensed up, my mouth opened wide stretching the skin of my face and I let out a deep scream of pain. After my third or fourth scream, my mother came into my room. She sat by my bed and straightened my legs slowly. She placed her cold, dry palm on my forehead. I felt the coolness of her hand seeping into my head. She looked at me with a peaceful expression while she held my forehead tight with both hands. She told me that she used to have the exact same painful cramps when she was my age. She smiled remembering the many times she stayed up at night from pain and her mother came into her room to place her hand on her forehead and comfort her. Then she looked at me and said.

'You know what sometimes helps ease the pain? Masturbating. Have you ever tried that, honey?'

I told her that I hadn't ever tried and did not know how to do it. She explained to me how and where I should touch myself and coached me through my first attempt at pleasuring myself.

'It relaxes your muscles down there and releases some of the tension. There, did it help? Do you feel better now?'

I did feel relief and the pain had weakened. As I lay exhausted on the bed she told me how happy she was that we had this talk and experience together.

'This is a lesson in life, baby. It's not just about a painful period. Remember this day when you feel weak and helpless. You must learn the tools to your freedom. Learn to know yourself and you will not need to rely on other people.'

This memory kept replaying in my mind. I saw her words tattooing my chest *learn to know yourself and you will not need to rely on other people*. I slowed down my pace as I was approaching my house. I wanted to allow this memory to linger a moment longer. I wanted.. '-

"Why are you telling me this?" Dale interjects and his words fall heavily to the center of our table.

I pause and look at his face. He is wearing a red expression of embarrassment. His arms are crossed about his chest. I see subtle lines appearing and disappearing on his face.

"Well, because it is part of my story."

I look at his face closely, trying to follow the pattern of the moving wrinkles as his expression changed.

"But this intimate talk with your mother doesn't really seem to have anything to do with your skill." Now straight deep lines remain constant on Dale's forehead. The rest of his face is smooth.

I hold my lips tight and stare at his eyes. I want to tell him that he makes me want to reveal everything to him. That I wish I could give him some computer disk or file that would make him understand everything that I do, my motives for every action. I want him to understand all the circumstances that led to my decisions in life. I want him to know that as he sits across from me now, he is the judge of my life, he is becoming my conscience; but I hold my lips tight. I am still afraid to scare him off. I smile shyly, as if laughing at my own foolish behavior.

"Look, I'm sorry. My story seems to embarrass you. Maybe I shouldn't have told you the part about my mother teaching me to masturbate. But it is important to me that you understand what memory triggered my next action. This thought of my mother's words as I was walking home triggered me to take action. You see, I listened to my mother. I decided to learn myself, to find all the answers from within. I decided to research my mysterious skill. I knew that as long as it remained a mystery to me, it would continue to govern my life and bring me pain that was worse than my period cramps.

I entered my home around 9:00 PM, hung my coat behind the door in slow motion, and tried to attract as little attention as possible from the dozen occupants of my living room. Nothing had changed from their first day of mourning, except their number had shrunk slightly and they were no longer all in black. Some allowed color to sneak into their clothing palettes. They were still sipping coffee, eating cake and whispering about issues as far removed as possible from my mother's death. All I could see was a gray cloud formed of meaningless whispers hovering above the living room sofas. I acknowledged the guests with a modest head gesture, and walked up the stairs to my room. I still remember hearing some of their whispers

escaping their cake-filled mouths and following me as I climbed the stairs:

'Poor little girl, she is left with no one in the world...', 'How tragic...', 'what a great tragedy...'

When I reached my room, I quickly removed two new ring-bound books from the top drawer of my desk: one yellow, one blue. I decided to use the blue notebook for documenting the experiments I would conduct with my powers. This notebook would include journal type entries, recording progress on my experiments. I decided to use the yellow notebook to document my findings. Only several blue notebook entries would amount to one conclusion written in the yellow notebook. I decided that the number of written pages in the yellow notebook would be the mark of my progress. I knew that only my conclusions, written in the yellow notebook, would be instrumental in my future.

I took out a black magic marker from the second drawer and wrote on the cover of the blue notebook 'The Book of Experiments'. I then wrote on the cover of the yellow notebook 'The Book of Rules'. I straightened my back in the desk chair, which I had long ago outgrown in size. I remember sitting there at my desk and feeling it belonged to someone else, some little girl. I looked at my notebooks, my stickers, my tapes, my Doug in a heart frame, my flowery bed spread - they all seemed like items that belonged to a girl or a young teenager. Such a girl could not possibly be a murderer, or a woman with powers. For a few minutes, I lost my concentration to wonders, not of my future, but of my present state. I no longer knew how I was to behave, or even if I should behave differently. I knew that my prior self was a stranger to me. And I knew that the only way to find out who I was or who I should be was by learning about my abilities.



Whether my powers were to become a gift or a curse in my future, they were part of me and I needed to understand them. I took a deep breath, opened the Yellow notebook, and carefully began to write.

*Rule Number 1:*

*When I lie and claim that a living person is dead, that person will die.*

I released the pen from my tight grip and stared at the sentence I had just written. I was not certain it belonged in the Yellow book. This had hardly been proven, I thought. No respectable researcher would base a groundbreaking conclusion on a single experiment. I was puzzled as to how I would prove this strong claim. Should I lie about some stranger's death and see what happens? Is it fair to conduct these experiments at the expense of others? I took the pen back in my hand, and quickly scribbled over what I had written. I took the magic marker in my hand and scribbled over the sentence once more. I was upset with myself for having ruined a perfect first page. I ripped out the page and made sure I eliminated all scrap remainders so it would seem like page two was the original one. I tore the sheet of paper into small pieces. I knew I must start with something smaller, something I could easily prove. I decided to conduct an experiment to be recorded in the Blue book, confirm the results, and only then revisit the Yellow book. I closed the Yellow book, returned it to the top drawer of my desk, and opened the Blue notebook to page one. I wrote:

*Experiment Number One:*

*Hypothesis: a lie about the physical location of an object will change the location of that object.*

*Experiment: ask a person to bring me an object that is not located where I say specify.*

*Expected Results: that person will find the object exactly where I claimed it would be.*

I closed my notebook and rushed down the stairs. All the guests seated in the living room stared at me. I brought a chair from the kitchen and joined the circle of guests. For the first time since they arrived, I realized that I recognized most of them. I realized that some of these people might have been sitting in the living room since the funeral three days ago. My grandmother was sitting on the sofa across from the TV watching the local news in mute; the neighbors and their two kids were sitting on the couch next to her, interrupting her TV watching with one line sentences in order to feel helpful. Sam, a guy my mother used to date, was playing with our CD collection and speaking to a man I did not know. In the kitchen, I could make out some more familiar faces. However, through the filter of my mind, they were not people. They were strangers with some familiar features. At best, they were rats in my grand lab, subjects for my experiments.

I placed my chair next to Rudy, the youngest daughter of our neighbors. I started asking her questions relating to her age, grade, and school activities. She said she was in fourth grade and interested in Basketball and History. I was paying close attention to her every word, looking for an opportunity to execute my experiment. I asked her what they were doing in history class, and her reply gave me a perfect experiment idea. Rudy said they were learning about history through people's objects, instead of boring history books, kind of like Show and Tell. She said that the teacher had told them

to bring to class something from their homes that had some connection to history. She mentioned a few examples her teacher gave: an old radio that was listened to in World War Two and a glass bottle of milk, from the time when milk was delivered to houses in bottles. Rudy's mom helped her remember some other examples. She added that someone brought an old watch with no batteries that you needed to wind up everyday, and someone else brought an old map of the United States that looked totally weird because it was drawn over two hundred years ago when the first European settlers came to America. Lucky for me, Rudy mentioned that she had not yet figured out what she was going to bring to class. A few seconds later, I had the perfect Experiment Lie prepared in my mind. The living room was quiet. All the guests were listening to my conversation with Rudy. Even my grandmother was listening. I knew I had to be cautious with my lie. Even though I was speaking to a fourth grader, all the adults in the room were judging me."

I pause. Although words are not coming out of my mouth, I am still linked to Dale through our eyes. Sweat is pouring down his forehead. He licks both his lips to gloss them with moisture and then reseals them in a tight lock. He wipes his forehead of sweat. I move my body back on the cushion and notice the focus in his eyes adjusting automatically to my new distance. His eyes are focusing on me like a warplane locks on its bombing target. They adjust to my movement automatically, almost instinctively. I return to the edge of my seat, and once again observe his pupils' adjustment. I am honored by his attention.

"Dale, I am about to tell you of the first lie I told with knowledge of my powers. Just as policemen always remember the first man they shoot, I will always remember this lie. And even though it was a

harmless lie and I was only telling it to learn more about my powers, it was a grand step I knew I would never be able to retract. I hesitated. I looked around the room. Everybody was trying to come up with good ideas of objects Rudy could bring to class. Her father suggested an arrow he bought on an Indian reservation, but Rudy's mom thought that was too violent. My grandmother suggested her immigration card into the United States with an official stamp from 1928, but Rudy thought that was a stupid idea. Everyone was thinking out loud about different possibilities, throwing their words into the center of the room where Rudy and I sat. All I could think about was this innocent girl sitting next to me with her loving family and how I was about to touch her with my coldness, to contaminate her with my lying words. Why did I choose her, of all people, I asked myself? Was I jealous of her warm family? Did I envy her innocence?

Now Sam was throwing object ideas towards us too, and I knew my time was running out. If I didn't fire my words at that moment, I knew I never would.

'I have a great idea for you Rudy. I have something for you from the sixties.' I said

'Well, what's the object?'

'Well, my mother was a teenager during the sixties. This was the beginning of Rock & Roll. She loved a band from England called The Beatles. And when they first appeared in the United States on The Ed Sullivan Show, people went so crazy that their arrival was called the British invasion. People still speak of that famous Beatles concert like it was a revolutionary historical event. Rudy, I am telling you this because my Mom was at this famous concert. After the show, she

was invited backstage to meet the band and was given an autographed copy of their first album. If you want I can lend you the album and you can bring it to class with you.'

'Will you tell me the story again later about the British invasion, so I know what to say?'

'Sure. No problem. Do you want to know where the album is?' I remember being surprised at how easy it was to tell her this lie, how naturally it still came to me.

All the guests were impressed, particularly Rudy's parents, who were happy to finally resolve this issue.

'If you look through my Mom's record collection in the study room, you will find the autographed Beatles' album. It's the first one from the left side. She always made sure it was first because it was her favorite.'

Rudy got up and walked slowly towards the study room, which I was pointing to. In fact, most of the story I told her was true. My mother did receive an autographed Beatles album, but she always kept it in her bedside drawer. A few minutes later as I saw Rudy making her way back to the living room with the record in hand, I quickly excused myself, ran up the stairs, and locked my room door behind me. My first real Yellow notebook entry was ready to be written. I opened the notebook, and wrote on my second page one:

*Rule Number 1:*

*When I lie about the physical location of an object, the object will relocate to the location I lied about."*

It is 7:30 AM at the Waverly Restaurant and breakfast is in full session. Most people seated at booths are talking loudly. A strong morning energy is present. There is a waitress who is dedicated solely to the task of refilling coffee. I look at Dale. I notice his tongue is curled upward massaging his upper lip. He seems deeply concentrated. As he notices I am looking, he quickly hides his tongue inside his mouth. I sigh and look at my watch to mark the end of a chapter and the beginning of recess.

"Wow!" Dale says, "I'm kind of hungry. Is this a good time to order some breakfast?"

"Sure" I reply. "I'm actually really hungry too."

I find my story telling is draining me. We each glance at the ten-page, plastic laminated menus, which are located behind the napkin holder. We both skim through the pages, back and forth a few times, even though all the breakfast items are consolidated on page one. Dale closes his menu, and I follow. The menus don't close. We both try a few times, but the stiff plastic covers keeps reopening. We both laugh from our throats with closed mouths and try closing the menus again and again, enjoying watching them open up every time. We enjoy this silly game for a minute or so. It is a welcomed relief from my heavy words. Dale raises his eyebrows and holds out a finger, as a sign of an idea, still holding back words. He holds his hand out and I pass him my menu. He takes both menus, closes them together and places them in the thin space between the napkin holder and the wall. I clap my hands quietly in support of his solution. The waitress comes over, quickly spotting our readiness. Dale smiles towards her.

"Before we order food, I think both of us need refills on our coffee." The waitress nods with a smile, grabs a pen from behind her ear, a notepad from her apron pocket and says "What else can I get you."

Dale orders some scrambled eggs and a side order of pancakes. I order my eggs over-easy with fruit, instead of hash browns. The waitress continues to write the order as she walks towards the kitchen. Our eyes follow her until she tears the order sheet from her pad and places it on the Formica counter connecting the kitchen to the diner bar.

As our faces turn back towards each other, Dale asks:

"So, do you still have The Blue Book of Experiments and The Yellow Book of Rules?"

I regain my seriousness and answer in a sober voice.

"Of course" I reply. "Actually, I have been reading the Yellow notebook a lot recently. A few months ago I decided I wanted to tell someone my story. I was thinking of simple ways to explain my skill. So I turned to the Yellow notebook to see how I defined my gift back when I discovered it. I found the language I used in it to be basic and clear. A lot of the words I am using now to explain my skill to you are taken from the Yellow notebook. "

"That's wild. So how many rules do you have? I'm only talking about Yellow notebook stuff, of course?" Dale smiles and straightens his back in his seat. I think the morning energy around us is reviving him.

"A surprisingly low number. Seven rules. The first few rules are similar to the one you just heard. *'When I lie about someone saying something to me, later on the person will remember saying it; When I lie about someone liking me or hating me, the person's feelings towards me will change in accordance'*. You know, pretty specific rules. They are narrower in scope. They mostly provide the terminology for my continued experiments. The last rules are more profound. They are based on years of research, and they were mainly discovered through life experiences and not planned experiments. They reflect a deeper understanding of my powers, and each rule applies to almost every lie."

The waitress arrives with our food. Dale's pancakes look very tempting and I regret ordering the eggs. We both smile, as the familiar smell of breakfast rises from our plates and caresses our faces with comforting egg steam. Dale maintains his smile after mine is long gone. I note this tendency of his to prolong smiles until the absolute last moment. He pours maple syrup on the stack of pancakes and cuts a five-layer bite. He stuffs his mouth and says to me while chewing:

"Listen, I really love your story. But you have to take it easy on me. I am working on very little sleep here, and it's hard for me to keep my concentration. How about if while we are eating, we just talk about something else? Or maybe not talk at all for a few minutes. Yeah, how about just not talking while we eat. It's just that I need to replenish my mental reserves or something. You know?"



"Sure. Let's not talk while we eat. I can play this game." I raise two fingers to my mouth and then turn them, as if I am turning the lock to my mouth. Dale locks his mouth as well.

We both eat slowly, making funny faces at each other in silence. None of the sounds from the other tables infiltrate our quiet and all I can hear is our forks and knives touching our plates and occasionally the sound of a glass bottom hitting the table. Dale begins to exaggerate his movements and act goofily. He chews with an open mouth and then pretends to wipe his mouth with his sleeve. I smile and try to steal a piece of his pancake while he is drinking his water. He battles my fork with his fork and saves the pancake with a swift move. I make a sad face and pretend to cry. Dale raises his shoulders as a sign of surrender, grabs the pancake with his fork and places it on my plate. I show him how happy I am with a gigantic smile and rub my tummy as I chew the pancake to show him how much I am enjoying it. We continue to speak with gestures and simple hand signs in a language free of words.

# 4

We finish our food but continue to play with our silverware on our empty plates. We are playing a game of pantomime. Dale draws an object with his fork on his plate. I must guess what it is. I am not certain about the rules, but I think the object must be present in the diner. Before Dale drew a lamp and I drew a menu. This game allows us to maintain our silence. I think he is drawing a saltshaker. First he draws a half circle on his plate with his fork, following the bottom curve of the plate. Then he taps the upper part of the plate several times with his fork as if poking holes. I point to the saltshaker. Dale shakes his head, looks directly at me, points to his eye, meaning "look." He repeats the drawing on his plate, slower this time. The waitress arrives.

"What happened to you two?" She asks as she removes Dale's plate before I have a chance to second-guess. "You got nothing more to say to each other, or something?"

Dale smiles at her joke and replies: "No, no. We are just trying to live in a world without words for a little bit."

"No words, huh? That's a good one. I wish I could get my husband to play that one with me." She answers and walks away with our dishes neatly piled in one hand.

Dale turns to the napkin holder, pretends to take something from it, smells the imaginary object in his hand and smiles widely.

"A flower? That's what you were drawing? But I thought it had to be something in the restaurant." I say.

"I never said that. Besides, there are flowers behind you at the bar."

With a swift movement, I turn my head, and then return to face Dale, as if I was afraid he would rearrange something on the table while I wasn't looking. "Yeah but I can't see them. And besides, they're plastic. They have no smell."

"Well, relax. I was just giving you an extra hint about the smell of flowers because the waitress already took my plate away and I couldn't draw on it anymore."

Dale extends his arm to me and hands me the flower, holding it gently with two fingers.

I do not take it from his hand. Suddenly, I realize the stupidity of our silence game and restore to my adult posture. I adjust myself in my seat; I cross my left leg over my right under the table.

"Now that the table has been cleared, we're allowed to talk again, right?" I ask.

Dale lets air out through his nose, and says "Sure." in a low voice. An expression of embarrassment develops on his face, as if he has been caught doing something silly. I feel as if I have transformed into the teacher that caught him playing with another student during my class.

"Good. I will continue. The following year and a half of my life, the last leg of my high school education, was dedicated to the perfection of the Blue and Yellow notebooks."

"Wait a minute, I just remembered, I meant to ask you this before, what happened to Doug?" Dale rudely interrupts.

"Oh, Doug. Well, I wasn't planning on speaking of him anymore since our relationship no longer affected my powers. At least not directly."

"What do you mean? Doug knew of your powers, right? I mean, you told him how you lied in the grocery store about your mother's death. This was before you knew she died."

Dale's elbows and hands are resting on the table. His body is forward and he looks up at me as he speaks.

"You're right. Doug must've known of my powers. But he chose to do nothing about it. We broke up shortly after my mother's death, and as far as I know he never told anyone about my Mother Lie."

Dale straightens his body and bounces his back off the cushion. "Why did he keep quiet? Was he too scared to speak or did you ask him not to?" Dale asked in an interrogating tone. I feel I am defending myself.

"Listen, my involvement with Doug after that didn't really help me learn more about my powers, but I guess I could tell you more about him and our relationship. After all, it is crucial to your understanding of my powers since he was the main character in my life

at the time I discovered them. In a way, he was the trigger to my awakening. He was part of the reason I was forced to come up with this lie in the first place."

"Exactly." Dale replies with a head nod. "So why didn't he tell anyone, I mean, he must've..." -

"Dale, you cannot interview me this way." I hold out my hands in the center of the table in order to hold back his words. I wish to put an end to all his rude intrusions.

"I have to tell you the story the way I see fit. You must understand this is not a casual conversation we are having here. To me this is the most important thing in the world. This is my life." I pause. I look into his eyes. "If you have any questions after I speak, you can ask, but please, try to focus on listening."

"Sure, sure, I'm sorry." Dale folds his arm around his chest and stares at my mouth. He breathes deeply and quietly. I witness him enter a frozen state of attention.

"I believe that Doug is the only man I ever really loved. He was the only one to move me inside, to alter my being. He reached a deep place inside me where I was made of soft and moist clay. And even though he was older than I, he let me touch the same sensitive spots in him. With my words, with my bony teenage body and girlish laugh, I illuminated him. Of course, we never spoke of our connection this way. I'm not sure if we were even aware of how deep things became between us. Everything flowed naturally. We never decided to go out, have sex, spend all our time together. When we first met, he was simply the neighbor I would play with when I got back from school.

Then, when he moved to a nearby neighborhood, he became the friend I would invite to sleep over, or the place I would go to for dinner when my mother was working late. Once I was in Junior High and girls started kissing boys, I kissed him. When he was a junior and all his buddies were starting to have sex, we started having sex. You see, nothing was ever a decision. We never had discussions about our togetherness. We never talked about having sex, or being exclusive or going to his prom. We simply adapted our friendship to include whatever it was our peers were doing at the time. It was a beautiful, natural progression we experienced together over the span of our childhood, a gradual flow towards sacred intimacy."

Dale holds back a sigh. I think it was a sigh of comfort he wished to voice. I notice him hold his lips tight and consciously remain neutral with his body. I smile. I am happy he is respecting my rule. I am flattered that he enjoys my description.

"But from the time we first met, one thing remained constant. Doug would always create, and I was always his muse. He always painted. First with markers and crayons, then with pastels. Eventually he only painted me with oils he carefully mixed on his palette. When we were young, he produced colorful drawings of me and my red bicycle that ended up on our parents' refrigerators. As we grew older, he began focusing more on my body, my flesh. One day, he asked me to take off my clothes and he painted me nude. Eventually he only painted with Rembrandt oil paints on canvas he stretched himself. He drew sketches before every painting. Sometimes he spent over a month on one painting, gathering criticism from his university professors, referring to the works of the master to find solutions to his problems with composition and form. My body tended to get numb from staying in the same pose for a long time and I took breaks every

twenty minutes. On breaks I would always run over to where he was standing and glance at the emerging figure on canvas. I loved looking at his paintings of me. All the hours of remaining still paid off the minute I saw his creation. My numbness would disappear as soon as I glanced at his canvas, looking at myself through the filter of his mind. I watched his work progress every twenty minutes as the painted figure settled into my features. Through his paintings I became aware of the subtleties of my being: my growing breasts, my large green eyes. Sometimes he would paint my face as if it only contained two, huge almond eyes. Sometimes, when he was older, he would barely paint my face and all that appeared on the canvas was red flesh. I could always see his mood in his paintings. He didn't have to tell me what he was feeling; I could read it in his colors and strokes. Sometimes, he asked me to be quiet, so he could concentrate, but usually we would talk for hours as he painted. He would prompt me with questions and I would give him long detailed answers. I would make up stories about how famous we would be together, stories about strange people with distorted relationships, fantasies about creatures on other planets. Doug and I constructed a world that no one could invade, a world that contained both nudity and shyness, sex, flesh and innocence - and all at the same time."

Dale is listening to my words peacefully with his arms still crossed about his chest. His mouth is slightly open. He is consumed in my story like a child who is being read a book by his parents. "I don't get it. This sounds like true love. What happened?"

I don't mind his interruption this time. It is instinctual. It is a token to his attention.

I sip from my coffee to regain my breaking voice. I continue:

“Well, my powers are what happened, the presence of sin. The morning I sneaked into his house through the window and told him of my lie about my mother, everything changed. Doug decided he didn’t want to paint me ever again. He kept making excuses, saying he was tired or just not in the mood. But I knew that something was wrong. Already during the two weeks that we spent together before my Mother Lie, he barely painted me. He looked at me differently, with disappointment in his eyes. He didn’t argue with me, but he seemed very distant. See, Dale, he knew me better than I knew myself. I think he saw I was different even before my Mother Lie. Because he was not painting, I demanded that he talk more. I started arguments with him; I told him about other boys at school. I tried everything to get a reaction out of him, to stop him from nonchalantly drifting away. He never told me what he was feeling. He just remained disenchanted and passive. Dale, I think he realized what was growing inside me. When he looked at me, he could no longer see my love or innocence, only a growing thirst for power, for manipulation.

After my mother’s death, everything collapsed. When I left his home before finding the ambulances at my house, carrying out my mother’s body, I had the strange feeling I would never see him again. I did see him after her death, but we weren’t the same people. I came to him a few times to escape my mourning house. One time, about two weeks after my mother’s death, I convinced him to paint me. It was awful. He wanted me to keep quiet while I posed. My mind was racing and all I could think of was my powers. I couldn’t stop my thoughts, I kept inventing lies, lies that would help me get out of this stupid town, lies that would make Doug love me again, lies that would bring my mother back. I could not control the race of my mind. When I took a break and looked at his canvas, I saw a middle-aged woman with



wrinkles on her face and bitterness in her eyes and mouth. I felt pain in my chest. I began to cry. I kept hitting him with my fists but he just stayed there by his easel, aloof. I was desperate for a reaction, any type of reaction. I couldn't stand him standing still while my innocence was slipping away. I hated him for seeing what was happening to me and not trying to stop it. So I told him. I told him I didn't love him anymore. I told him that he didn't love me either, and that I knew he felt nothing for me from his absent behavior."

I lean back on my seat and feel my lips with two fingers. I raise my eyebrows and then let them return.

"And that's it. With those words it was finally over. I bumped into him a few more times in life but there is really nothing more worth telling, because after that day, I felt nothing for him. I am assuming that he felt nothing as well because he never called. It was like a switch I turned off in both of us with one abrupt statement. After living with Doug in a world of light for six and a half years, I darkened our reality by speaking less than a paragraph. I promised myself I would be cautious with words after I killed my mother. But my emotional turmoil let out those lethal words. I guess I had just lost control of my mouth."

It is 9:00 AM at the Waverly Restaurant. Dale's arms are folded on the table. He has a piercing look. Pools of water are accumulating in my eyes. I hope they will not grow too heavy to hold back. I wish gravity would leave my watery left eye alone so it will not be sucked down towards the table in the form of a tear. Why did I agree to tell Dale about Doug anyway? I speak in order not to feel:

"I don't know why I even told you about Doug."

"No, no, what are you talking about. That was amazing." He looks up at me. I notice his lips are no longer red. The food has washed away the artificial coloring. His lips are now pale pink. I feel the water in my eyes seeping back to its home.

"Hey", Dale touches my shoulder, "So, you don't think you can love again?"

I smile widely and hypocritically, as if to wipe away the emotions that my face is exuding. I feel them sticking to my cheeks.

"Well, you see, I think it's all a matter of timing. Doug reached me in my innocence. I don't think that's possible anymore."

I breathe deeply.

Dale straightens in his seat. "Well, I'm glad I let you tell your story without interfering. You definitely answered all the questions I had."

I breathe deeply again. This time, as I exhale, I regain my posture.

I speak coldly, monotonously.

"You're probably tired. I know I am. But there is one more part I want to tell you about before we part this morning. I think I should tell you of how and why I finally left home. It won't take very long and this way we will have a clean break."

"A break from what?" Dale asks

"Oh, it will take me a few more meetings to complete my story-telling. I would like to bring you up to date on my gift. After I am done for today, you need to decide if you are interested in hearing my story till the end."

I don't look at Dale as I speak. I look at the wall directly behind him. I focus my eyes on a thin line of white wall.

Dale looks behind his seat to see what I am looking at and then turns back to our table. I see his adjustment in his seat out of the focus. I refocus on him. His eyebrows lower and rest on top of his eyes as he looks at me. "Yes, sure. Go ahead."

I clear my throat. I begin speaking. I feel as if I am reciting a poem in a foreign language. I pronounce all words correctly; I allow even breaks between words and slightly longer ones between sentences. But I refuse to let any emotions leave my body wrapping my words. I make an effort to keep my voice and rhythm consistent:

"The following year and a half of my life, the last leg of my high school education, was dedicated to the perfection of the Blue and Yellow notebooks. My grandmother became my legal guardian, and began fulfilling all motherly duties around the house. She hired a private tutor to help me make up the schoolwork I had missed. She cleaned. She cooked. She complained. She opened the mail."

"Were you close?" Dale asks.

"No. At first she tried to speak to me about the loss of my mother. She would speak about her fear of dying, her loneliness since the death of my grandfather. She shared her emotions with me and hoped I

would open up as well, but I remained cold. I could never relate to her stories or feel any sympathy towards her. I always felt that everything she did for me was out of obligation. Her sad stories never sounded real. I always suspected she got them from some discount self help book on how to connect with your child. After several failed attempts at closeness, she finally let me be. From that point on, I found our lives together pretty comfortable, even complementary I would say. During the days, we never saw each other. In the mornings, I was at school. In the afternoons, she napped. In the evenings, we ate dinner together, speaking only of house chores and different arrangements. We spoke about bills, my schoolwork, what to do with my mother's clothing. What time I needed her to wake me up for school, and extra money I needed for different occasions. After dinner, she would watch TV until she fell asleep on the living room sofa and I would go upstairs to my room. I would lock my room door and document my ongoing experiments, searching for new patterns in the responses to my lies.

"Wow. She just let you live separately in the same house. I don't know, she sounds pretty cold to me." Dale shows me his profile as he speaks as if questioning my grandmother's behavior.

No, she wasn't cold. She just understood that her role was not to replace my mother. I will always respect her for that. We actually had a very trusting relationship. I assured her that things were fine at school and occasionally she received a report card confirming my words. She never nagged or pried. Not once did she ask me what I do when I'm alone in my room all evening or why I never have friends over to the house. And I let her live her life as well. I helped with the cleaning when I saw she was tired. But I let her do most of the work so she could still feel wanted and helpful.

A few months into my senior year in high school, roughly a year after my mother's death, my grandmother returned to Florida. She was glad to return to her card-playing group of retirees and I was happy to gain full independence, no longer needing to disguise my research. She left me a long list of names and numbers of people to contact in case of an emergency. She said she would be back soon and that she was only going home to check on her house. We both knew she would not be back. Even though I could handle living alone in the house, it was imperative that the school not find out I was left alone. Shortly after she left, her 'check-up' calls dropped in frequency. For the remainder of my senior year in high school, I was on my own; free to research the only subject I had interest in - myself.

I disassociated myself from all my childhood friends and spoke only with a few friends that I was involved with in school projects. I made sure that I always had a sufficient group of friends to provide an audience for my lies. As my experiments continued (all documented in the Blue book), I discovered that I had to speak my lies to others for them to come true. I could not create change by lying only to myself. I documented this in the Yellow Book. I understood that as much as I enjoyed being alone, I was dependent upon other people to activate my powers."

"What if you lied to yourself out loud?" Dale asks.

I smirk. "No. I tried that too, but it never worked. That's actually a good question because it taught me a lot about my skill. It meant that part of the magic occurred after my words were released to free air. This meant that other people contained part of the magic. Part

of the mysterious reactions to my lies are dependent on other people's perception."

"I think I just became a lot more confused." Dale brings his eyebrows close together and a deep vertical wrinkle emerges on his nose bridge.

"Don't worry Dale. I will get into this aspect of my skill next time, for now I am just touching on a few Yellow book discoveries."

"Sure. So that was number two?"

"Yes. And the Period Lie is Yellow book discovery number three. Whenever I wanted to get out of gym class, I would tell my teacher that I had my period. Now this is a common lie every high school girl tells. And just like the other girls who lied about their periods, I got sloppy with my words. Sometimes I used the Period Lie two weeks in a row. Sometimes I told it with intervals of five weeks. Every time after lying and picking up my 'excused absence' from the school nurse, I would go to the girl's room and confirm that my lie came true. Every time I was surprised to discover my words brought physical change to my body. This lie was groundbreaking for two reasons. Firstly, like I just said, it had a very clear, physical impact on me. I rarely lied about myself in my experiments. I was usually too afraid of the consequences. I was afraid my words would change my personality or certain aspects of my behavior. So I had little data on how Self Lies worked. Before the Period Lie, I thought I might be immune from my words. This lie taught me that my body was weaker than my words. Secondly, this lie became an instant test of my

powers. Whenever I suspected I was losing my powers, I would lie about my period to someone. Often my listener was a strange woman in line to the ladies room in a movie theater who I would ask for a tampon. Sometimes I would tell a girlfriend that I was really worried I was pregnant because my period skipped a month. And then, of course, it did. This lie became a kind of powers-checker, my 'Duracell Test' to see if my batteries were still good."

Dale scratches the top of his head in rapid machine like movements. It looks as if he is trying to awaken a part of his head that has gone numb. He stops. He speaks:

"Forget about your period for a moment. What about lying about something fun? I mean you were sixteen, right?"

"I was seventeen."

"Seventeen. OK, same thing. If I could make my wishes come true like that when I was seventeen, I would have a blast. I would have the best life, I swear. I mean, I would fix everything in my life with lies. Why didn't you lie about getting your driver's license or having a fortune or something? You know what I mean? Anything was possible for you, why not lie big and crazy and say you're a new teen movie star? There must have been something you really wanted."

Dale stays with his mouth slightly open, slightly smiling, awaiting my response. I remain frozen and sober, staring into his eyes with a tight mouth. He notices my seriousness. His face gradually mimics mine. Suddenly he looks like my mirror.

"I cannot believe you just asked me that question." I remain stone frozen, aside from subtle and sharp movements of my mouth and teeth.

"Oh c'mon, why? Because it's not serious enough? Lighten up, have a little fun." When Dale finishes speaking, he moves his head sideways, breaking from my gesture, and rests his head in his hand with his elbow anchored on the table.

"Dale, I thought you understood what I told you when we came into the diner. Words are not light, they have real physical consequences. They have real power. In my case, they have an immense amount of power. I cannot afford to be fun.

See, you have a privilege that I do not have. You can use lies without thinking too much about them. You can point to a sexy girl at a nightclub and lie to your friends about how you slept with her the night before. No big deal, right? Before I lie about having slept with someone I have to make sure they are not HIV positive. Or, I have to make sure that person didn't have a really special event the night before, because it might be canceled in everybody's memory because of my lie. I have to treat words with great caution. One result of my mother's death was the full realization that I can no longer use lies casually."

Dale looks upset. I feel I was too patronizing. I do not regret my words, however. There are a few moments of awkward silence. Dale is looking down at the table, his face still sideways in his hand. Without raising his head, he speaks.

"OK, sorry. I couldn't resist it. Tell me what happened after your grandmother left. I am really tired. I think we should break soon."



"Fine. I kept experimenting with lies diligently, while recording in my notes every move. However, I did not test my powers with big lies. I was still too scared by my ability to kill my mother. My next big lie was executed exactly one year after my mother's death. The results were successful. This was a very simple and instrumental lie.

See, I never took the SATs or filled out any college applications, because I considered my personal research far more important. During winter break of my Senior year, my grandmother and other relatives made their way to our house for the one-year anniversary of my mother's passing. When my Grandmother questioned me about my plans after graduation, I told her all I had wished for:

'I haven't told you the good news yet, have I? Well, I'm sure I told you I got 1550 on my SATs, and you know how I have been working hard all semester with my guidance counselor on my college applications. Anyway, the good news is that two weeks ago, I received an early acceptance letter from an Ivy League University including a four year full tuition scholarship award.'

Two days later, a letter arrived in the mail, postmarked exactly sixteen days earlier, specifying all the details of my lie. I even called the testing center in Princeton, New Jersey to confirm that I had received 1550 on my SATs. I couldn't believe it was so simple. Just for kicks, I ordered two copies of my test results to impress my friends. I decided to meet my guidance counselor for the first time and brag about my SAT results. I knocked on the door of room 208. Dr. Salvo's eyes lit up as I opened the door, and he spoke to me as if we've been friends forever. I did not recognize him, but I assumed that this was the counselor I spent time with preparing my

applications. All I knew about our relationship came to me from my lies. Of course there was no need for me to brag about my score. He remembered how happy I was the day I received it in the mail, and how good I felt after the announcement was made over the school intercom that I had received the highest score out of the entire Senior class. After questioning some students, I confirmed that everyone remembered the principal congratulating me over the intercom.

I did not stay in town for prom, graduation and other formalities. I was anxious to conclude this chapter of my life. I arranged for early dormitory residence at the university, packed everything I wanted from home in one duffle bag, and informed my grandmother that the house could now be sold. I did not plan on ever returning to my childhood home."

I am silent for a few minutes. It is 10:00 AM. I turn my head sideways and rest my cheek in my left hand, my left elbow anchored on the table. I am Dale's mirror now.

Dale opens and closes his eyes a few times as if awakening from a dream. I notice how long his eyelashes are and observe them in motion. Dale smiles peacefully as if he has just smelled his favorite perfume.

"You know I am a serious listener to your story, right?" As he speaks, his jaw opens and closes, moving the palm of his hand. His lips seem as light as his skin. He looks pure.

"Yes, of course. I know it is hard; my story is intense."

Dale releases his hand and straightens his head. "Aren't you curious why I'm here?"

"No. " I reply.

"Why do you think I'm here? I mean, you already know I have a job, right? You know I have things to do that I am missing so I can be here, so I can listen to you."

"Yes, I know." I reply nonchalantly, "I think you are here because you find my story very interesting."

"You're right. I do. But don't you think there should be something more, something stronger keeping me here all these hours through the night?" Dale asks. He emphasizes the word 'something' both times he says it with an accent on the 'some' part.

I pause for a few seconds and think. "No, not necessarily. I think interest in my story is enough to keep you here. You said yourself that you are bored of your job. My story is probably a refreshing change. "

"Well, you're right about all that. But now that I've had some moments to wonder about it, I think I know why I'm here. Do you want to hear why?"

"Yes, I do." I say with little enthusiasm. "Actually, to be honest with you, all I really care is that you are so interested, that you are listening. I don't really mind *why* that much. But if you feel like telling me why, I will listen." I reply.

"But first I have to know something. Does all this mean that you *do* want to meet and continue hearing my story?" My voice rises in tone as I ask this final, crucial question and cracks at the end.

"Yes, of course, I thought that was obvious" He replies.

"Good. This makes me very happy."

The waitress arrives with a warm coffee pot in hand. We both cover our empty coffee cups, declining a refill. She clears our table completely, and wipes it clean with a wet rag. I am forced to lift my elbows from the table and straighten my back as she wipes. I watch her rag wiping the table back and forth in an arched motion as if she is cleaning the windshield of a car. All the crumbs from our breakfast are accumulating under the rag. She places her open hand close to the edge of the table and brings the rag near with her wiping hand collecting the crumbs in her palm. The table remains sparkling white with a glossy layer of moisture. I feel clean as well, clean of words. Only now I am relieved as I realized my story telling is done for this morning. I have successfully seduced Dale into hearing me until the end. The waitress leaves.

# 5

"Can I tell you a short story now. It has to do with why I am here. Or at least why I think I am here?" I notice a small crack in his voice. I look at him closely. He fixes his hair behind his ears and licks his lips.

"Sure. Go ahead." I reply. I fold my arms around my chest. I lean back. My ponytail is stiffly pressed against the cushion and is irritating my head. I release my hair from its elastic. I refold my arms. I rest my head all the way back on the cushion. My chin is pointing at Dale's chest. My eyes, half-open, focus on his face.

"Well, this is kind of strange, but my story also has to do with my mother. Let me warn you in advance. I am really tired and I'm an awful storyteller, you know, from work, I'm more of a numbers man. But I'll try to explain to you where I'm coming from."

"Go ahead." My voice comes out low and rusty.

Dale is sitting upright as if an invisible string from the top of his head is pulling him upward. He is jumpy, as if the invisible hand is jerky with this imaginary string. Maybe he needs to pee. Maybe he is just nervous. He speaks:

"Well, my father, Alex, he's Russian. He came to America when he was twelve to live with his aunt and uncle in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He was a violin player, and he used to play at weddings. You know, this was all when he was in school. He would play at weddings so he could make extra money to send to his family in Russia. Anyway, he met my mother when he was playing the violin at the wedding of my mother's

sister, Teresa. They danced at the wedding when he finished playing and instantly fell in love. It's funny because my mother also caught the bride's bouquet that her sister threw at the wedding. And that was actually the night she met my father, her future husband. So it's kind of cute."

Dale pauses for a minute and scratches his ear. He seems to be in thought, in memory.

I do not understand why Dale is telling me this. I have completed my task for today and want to go home to sleep. But I tolerate it. I fake a smile. "That sounds very romantic." I say.

"Yeah, anyway, I don't even know why I am telling you all this. About the bouquet and everything. I guess it really has nothing to do with what I want to say. I'll try to stick to the point. OK, when I was fourteen, my father died from a heart attack. And this is where lies come into the story. This is how everything connects to why I am so interested in your story. My father died when my brother and I were very young. At the time of his death, my father's mother back in Russia was very ill and my father was her favorite son of five children. My uncles and aunts all lived in Russia and took care of her, but all she wanted to talk about was her Alex. Alex was my father's name." Dale points to himself with both hands as he says 'my father'.

Dale seems thirsty for energy to continue his story, as if the imaginary hand had dropped his string. But words keep flying out of his half open lips. His words come out like fumbling footsteps. They seem to awkwardly lead his mouth and lead the story, independent of his thoughts.

"So, anyway, when my mother called my sick Grandmother in Russia to tell her that her son had died, my aunt Galina picked up the phone. She told my mother that this news would definitely kill my grandmother. I mean when a healthy mother hears that her son died, it's bad enough. But she was also very ill. So Galina, for the sake of protecting my ill grandmother, devised a plan. She and her brothers in Russia decided that it was best if my grandmother went on believing that my dad was still alive, that he was continuing everything he did, still living in AllenTown with his wife and two kids. They decided that my mom should write letters to Russia in the name of my father, saying how great everything was going and how much he missed her, the same letters he used to write when he was still alive. They thought my mother would be good at faking these letters, because when my father was alive they used to write them together. My mom would mostly dictate and my father would write her words in the letter in Russian. So they thought she could write letters that were similar to what my dad used to write. So Galina wanted my mom to send her fake letter that she would translate into Russian, fake my dad's handwriting and mail them back to my mom. My mom would put the Russian letters in an envelope, add her own little note in English, you know some little lie like "Looking forward to seeing you soon when Alex and I come to visit" and mail them to my sick grandmother in Russia. This way, my grandmother would never know that her son had died, and she will live longer. Everybody thought it was evil to break the old woman's heart. They were sure that if she ever found out my dad died, it would kill her."

Dale pauses to think, to lick the dry spit that has gathered at the corners of his pale lips. He signals the waitress and asks for some

water. As soon as it arrives he sips, crunches some ice with his teeth and continues:

"Anyway, this went on for about five years. My grandmother in Russia ended up outliving all the doctor's forecasts. By the time I graduated high school and my brother was well into junior high, my mother was still writing those damn letters of lies. She would read the weekend section of the newspaper, looking for good lies of things the family had done together. She would sit in my father's sofa and write in his voice, saying she, herself, was right beside him, describing the haircut I had gotten as my dad wrote the words down. I remember my brother and I watching her as she paced around the house, looking for new lies about our 'happy family' to include in her letters. You had to see it to understand. But it was horrible. A little bit of her died with each letter she wrote. The pages she sent to Russia to be translated were always wet with her tears. She cried for hours after mailing off each letter. And it was as if, for her, my father died all over again every time she shipped off his fake words to be translated. It killed my mother. She couldn't handle reliving her life with a dead man. She really never recovered from what they made her do. Long after my grandmother died, she kept speaking to my dad out loud around the house and making up stories of things the family did together. She continued to live with my father's ghost in her mind until she died six years ago."

Dale stops speaking and sips some more water. Then, he drinks all the water, swinging his head backwards and holding the glass over his lips with its rim around his mouth until the ice in the glass drops to his teeth. He crunches the ice. I get goose bumps from the sound. I am tired. But I am touched. Not by the tragedy of his story, but by the boyish way he told it. I look at him across the table in his



suit, with exhausted low hanging shoulders and black circles under his eyes. Under his corporate costume, I see a kid - a gullible boy.

"I'm really sorry, Dale. That's awful what they did to your mother, to your family."

Suddenly, Dale looks ridiculous to himself. I feel he sees his current behavior on a movie screen and is embarrassed by the way he comes across. He forces a change on his face. A grin appears on his lips.

"No, I don't want you to be sorry. I just want you to know that there is nothing in this world that I hate more than a lie."

"Everybody hates lies, Dale. But we all lie anyway."

"Yeah, well I don't approve, that's all. I am fascinated by your story. But I don't want you to think that I approve of your actions just because I am still listening, that's all."

"I won't. You can judge me in whatever way you want. All I ask is that you listen."

"Fine. Well, I just assumed that you want me to do something after I hear all of this, like be on your side or vouch for your character or something."

"Just listen. Trust me, that's all I need you to do." I close my eyes as I say these words.

I suggest that we part. Dale agrees. He suggests that we meet back at the Waverly Restaurant at 6:00 PM for an early dinner. He pays the bill at the cashier by the door and jokes with the waitress who is beginning her shift that she will be seeing us again very soon.

We leave the diner together. I take a left to walk to the subway. Dale walks to the edge of the sidewalk, holds his hand out and immediately a yellow cab stops at his feet. "Hey, where do you live? Do you want to split a cab or something? Maybe I can drop you off on the way." He yells towards me.

"No, thank you. See you at six." I say in a voice too low for him to hear as I continue to walk away. I wave. Dale waves back through the cab window and becomes one piece of the downtown mid-day traffic mosaic.

PHASE TWO

*Persuasion as Power*

*We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies. If he only shows in his work that he has searched, and re-searched, for the way to put over lies, he would not accomplish anything.*

Pablo Picasso

Excerpted from an interview with Marius de Zayas, 1923

# 6

It is 6:05 PM. I enter the Waverly Restaurant. It is mostly full and has a warm family feel. I see a kid at a table with his parents. He is eating spaghetti with meatballs and tomato sauce. He is banging his fork on the table and has red sauce all over his mouth and his paper-napkin bib. The next booth in line contains an old couple. The woman is apathetically picking at some cottage cheese, orange melon and green garnish. She seems to break down each grain of cheese in her mouth by grinding her teeth. The meticulous motion of her mouth translates into a bitter expression. The man sitting across the table from her is frozen. He has not touched his juicy steak, which comes with mashed potatoes and vegetables, and the smell of meat and fried onions rises from his dish in steam and floods the diner with beef aroma. I collide with the waitress as she is delivering a saltshaker to the old couple. I apologize. She is fine. I apologize again. I inhale a last whiff of meat and move down the aisle.

I glance towards the booth in the back and see Dale sitting in the same seat at the same booth from this morning. He is wearing a pair of dark blue jeans and a worn-in T-shirt. His shirt says "Crew" on it in large white faded letters. Even though he is dressed casually, he still looks corporate. I can imagine him selecting this shirt from a pile of college T-shirts neatly folded in his closet, each with slogans of different college activities or teams. Dale wears a thin black belt with a simple gold buckle tightening his jeans on his waist. He must've taken this belt from the waist of his suit pants. I look up at his face as I arrive at our booth. His hair is neatly combed and still wet from his shower. He is happy to see me. He awkwardly tries to stand up as I arrive, but his knees hit the

tabletop and his body defies his will and drops back to the seat. I slide in across from him, holding my skirt with one hand. I am energized and ready to start. Dale places his hand on my bare shoulder as a sign of affection. He feels the shiver in my bony shoulder and returns his hand to his half of the booth. He speaks loudly, enthusiastically:

"I am so, so glad you came. I wasn't sure you'd wake up. Actually, I wasn't sure if you were real. For a second there, I thought I'd dreamt the whole thing, you know it's so strange how everything happened with us last night. Did you sleep well?"

As his fresh words dance upward from his mouth like notes from a flute, I feel an urge originating in my lower stomach. I swallow.

"Yes, I slept very well, thank you." I reply. I smile back at him politely.

"Listen, I don't want to smalltalk. I wish to begin." I lock my glance on his eyes.

"Sure. That's no problem. Go ahead."

My stomach is forcing its energy outward. I cannot resist it. I target my words directly at him:

"...On July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1988, after one flight and a taxi ride, I arrived alone at the University. Although I brought with me only one duffle bag, I left nothing I cared for behind. I remember the day I arrived very well. I arrived a few months before the school year began. It was summer and the campus was abandoned. I received my keys and my

dorm room assignment. I unpacked my few belonging into a new closet and anonymous drawers. I spread my sheets on the still-foreign mattress and sat on my bed to look at the golden sunset through the room window. After the sun sank below my vision borders, I turned my attention back to my new room. There was no phone, no TV, no magazines, no photos. My belongings seemed uncomfortable in this sterile environment. The desk, bed and closet were so similar in wood color that they must have all been cut from the same tree. Aside from the wooden furniture, there was only carpet. As far as I could tell, there was no human sound, no flesh color or body warmth for miles. I sat on the bed in my new room staring at the carpet, uninterrupted. For the first time in years, I felt I had nothing and no one to run from. And then I decided to temporarily halt researching my skill. I'm still not quite sure why. I think I was simply exhausted. I placed the Blue and Yellow notebooks in the bottom drawer of my desk and I did not open that drawer for the entire year. And with my hand movement closing the drawer that day, I consciously put an end to a phase in my life. I archived my eerie high school experience. The cleanliness of my new room made me feel pure and light.

During the following year, I stopped testing the boundaries of my powers. I conducted no planned experiments with lies. I even rarely thought of my mother. I did everything I could to lead a normal college life. I became friends with other students; I went to fraternity parties and hung out in the cafeteria and dorms. I dated boys; I gossiped with girls. I still used lies loosely, but I made sure they were simple and light. I would go to a party and lie to a girlfriend about some cute guy liking me. I would lie to a friend about staying up all night studying hard for an exam. My lies never failed me or interfered with my shallow college life. A few months

into the school year, I was convinced that I cleansed myself of my childhood weirdness.

Ironically, during my sophomore year in college, a time when I accepted my powers and no longer questioned them, I learned of my greatest handicap. In April of 1990, when I thought I had my special skill figured out, life schooled me on the limits to my power."

"Coffee?"

"What?" I ask as a reflex, before figuring out where I am and who's asking.

"Coffee" Dale says. "The waitress wants to know if you would like some coffee. She's behind me. I didn't want to interrupt."

"Sure. Coffee would be nice. Thanks." I speak to an out-of focus pink image behind Dale.

"Great." Dale says, holding his thumb up to the waitress "And can we also have some of those fried calamari with mustard sauce. Just something to nibble on before we order. Thanks."

Dale turns to me: "Sorry for the interruption, please continue. So tell me about what happened your sophomore year."

I notice Dale is bouncy in his seat. His movements remind me of a happy dog.

I lower my voice and deepen the intensity of my stare. I try to anchor Dale with my voice. I speak every slowly, directing each word at Dale as if blowing soap bubbles through a ring:

"Like most college girls I had a best friend. Her name was Tina. Tina was not a woman. She was a girl, but a very special girl with the most unbelievable look. She had long, thick black hair that slightly curled at the bottom, and huge dark eyes. She had olive colored skin and was tall and thin, though curvy and feminine around the thighs. Her mother was Swedish and her father was Iraqi. Only such a mix of extremes could have created her deeply sexual and exotic look. She was one of those few women who are so beautiful that they get everything they want. She was enrolled in university only to please her parents and to avoid working. She managed to keep a high GPA with the help of an army of men tutoring her and writing her papers. She was so beautiful that even women would quickly become prisoners to her charm, just wanting her to be happy so they could be blessed by her luscious smile. She was not dumb. She was simply uninterested in academics. She was living proof that beauty is all one needs to succeed in our shallow world. I would be amazed at how even professors quickly got caught in her web of beauty, giving her extensions on papers, allowing her to retake exams. Whenever Tina would reflect upon such incidents, she would always claim that her 'street smarts' got her into favorable situations, and not her looks. But even though she did not admit to it in conversation, I believe she knew that her beauty was the cause. In some bizarre way, I had great respect for her behavior. She knew what her strength was, and used it fully to advance in life.

She was always fun to be around, always trying to find a more happening party, a spicier food, a stronger drug. She feared boredom more than death. But there was this strange element of sadness to her. Deep inside, she knew that someday the grand party of youth would be over; her looks would no longer be strong enough to carry



her through life's complications, and she would be forced to find another skill - a skill that requires more effort, and contains less immediate rewards. This awareness made her even more eager to seize the day, to suck all she could out of life while it was still all so easy. You see, her sadness and recklessness went hand in hand, fueling each other and each making her more attractive as a friend or lover.

Every day after class we would meet. We would go to the cafeteria, an off-campus bar or just hang out with friends in our dorms. I couldn't imagine what I would do on a school afternoon without her. We were inseparable. Of course, I can try to explain why we were so good together. I was attracted to the potential for danger she brought with her, and she loved my intense thoughts and wild imagination. But the reason really doesn't matter. The point is that we were very close and very competitive. We both had different ways to solve our problems and improve our situation. We both enjoyed great results. She would charm and I would lie. Her beauty was equivalent to my words - it could make anything happen. And our powers were so different that we complemented each other. Like the merger of two great companies, we each brought to the table great resources, with a higher combined value than each company alone. Our joint projects produced phenomenal results."

I pause for a few seconds. I wish to let the words I have spoken absorb in Dale's mind. With my fingers, I grab a piece of calamari, dip it in mustard, bend my neck backwards, and drop the calamari into my open mouth. I straighten my neck and focus on Dale. He looks hypnotized. He sticks his fork into the pile of calamari, dips in the mustard, stops at his plate to let the sauce drip once and removes the fried curls from the fork with his teeth - all the time keeping

his eyes focused on me. He barely moves his mouth as he chews. He places his hands on the table and licks his saucy lips. His goofiness has washed away. He is once again in the world of my youth. I proceed:

"I found myself lying more frequently when I was around her. 'Tina, you won't believe what happened today, Professor Reid called me at home to ask me out, I filled out one of those scratch tickets and won \$2,000, I got the highest score on my exam in that graduate level math class I'm taking...' I had to lie more to keep up with her tricks. She never understood the source of my magic. But she was never suspicious as to why things always work out so well for me. You see, for someone like Tina it seemed natural to find an equally capable companion, even though I did not hold her prize of great looks.

The college years we spent together were a wild time in my life. Students always surrounded us and tried to impress us. They would buy the same clothes we wore and adopt our slang to their language. People we barely knew esteemed us as if we were spiritual leaders. They felt privileged to be in our presence. They repeated to their friends things we said in conversation. But together we viewed everyone around us as inferior. At the end of most nights, we would gossip alone, criticizing everyone, mocking their ideas and reflecting on their behavior as if they were studies in our sociology experiment. When we talked together late at night, I felt as if we were hovering above the world, analyzing everything from the sanctuary of our world of two. Sometimes I think that we only socialized during the day to gain material for our intimate night talks.

But in one single day our haven was shattered and everything changed. This was the day I introduced Tina to Kevin Broder. Kevin was the teaching assistant of a physics class I took during the first semester of my sophomore year. He was a senior on full scholarship. The Broder Science Complex in the center of campus was built from money donated by his father. His parents were both university alumni and members of the Board of Trustees. Kevin, however, had built his own name with his own involvements. He was captain of the swim team, vice president of student senate and president of the physics honor society. The most important thing about Kevin, however, the most defining detail of his life was his mad love for Tina. When he asked me to introduce him to Tina at a school function, I told him that I would be happy to make the introduction, but there is no need for such formalities. He can simply walk over to her and start talking. Kevin insisted that Tina was the type of woman that one needs permission to speak with. I liked Kevin. He had already come up in conversations Tina and I had. His looks and charms were definitely noteworthy. I was glad to walk over and introduce him to Tina. I faked the introduction: they both knew each other's names and faces; my words just provided them with an official connector. It was a fairy-tale match meant to happen. I cannot take credit for creating the magic that followed.

They each nurtured their relationship for different reasons. To Kevin, Tina was the missing piece in a perfect life puzzle. She was not the all-American girl everyone had expected him to date. She was wilder and more beautiful. Kevin felt rebellious towards his family, and privileged towards his friends. In his eyes, she outranked him in almost every category, and she was clearly helping to beef up his portfolio of achievements. But with time, his love for Tina became far less calculated. His reactions to her words, even her looks,

became so extreme. If she smiled he felt blessed; when she was sad, he acted like a curse had been placed on him. He lost all control of his life and placed his fate in Tina's changing moods. For Tina, Kevin was something very different. He was her Gameboy. He made her laugh. He always reacted to everything she did. Whether he disapproved of drugs she took or encouraged her to get involved with a school club, he always actively responded. He voiced his opinion in every phase of the way and followed her every action. She loved how much he cared, how much he responded. The fact that he was slightly conservative made her feel even wilder. The attention he gave her was equivalent to a thousand eyes of watchers, making her feel like she was always on stage.

At first, I thought Kevin would be a nice addition to our duo. I thought he would add material to our nightly conversations. But as their relationship developed, the imbalance of their love grew more severe and harder for an external supporter like myself to bear. Tina kept telling me how much she missed our late night conversations now that she slept over at Kevin's off-campus apartment. But in the little time we still spent together just the two of us, she spoke about Kevin all the time, trying to make their love something the three of us shared. She would analyze every word he said to her that came across as strange and consult with me on all their relationship decisions. And Kevin, of course, would come to me for relationship advice since he knew I was Tina's closest friend. I was frightened by the strong words he used when speaking of her. I was shocked to discover the extent of his worship for my best friend. You see, I was not the third wheel at all as I thought at first. I was the bearing holding their two wheels together. Their relationship depended on me being there in the back for support. Tina did not satisfy Kevin's needs for intellectual conversations. And Kevin did not share Tina's

quest for hedonistic pleasure. I began feeling like a merchant of second-rate products. I sold them both things they could not find in each other. Only when they found they could not communicate, they turned to me for support. Only when a part was found missing in their relationship, each one of them would turn to me for a substitute.

I grew agitated with the entire relationship. It took too much of my time and my energy. It deteriorated my self-esteem. I began developing little cells of hate for both of them inside my veins. I knew I had to act. I had to restore order into my life and return my Tina to me. But looking back, I realize that I was more jealous than annoyed. Tina had won a battle over me because she was in a serious relationship. The rules of our continuous competition had changed. Before Kevin arrived, the object of our game was to suck as much as we could out of people and circumstances to reach the wildest and richest experiences. Her looks and my lies both worked magic. The goal of the new game was to build meaning and depth with one man. I was incapable. With all my lies and powers, I could not tolerate intimacy. You see, parties and games were all still new to me. I was serious and solitary for most of my childhood. For the first time in my life I enjoyed mingling with many people, observing and participating in social scenes. I wanted to remain in this lighter existence for a little bit longer.

And then, on the other hand, I began seeing Tina as the loser. She became less powerful in her seduction techniques. Now that she was associated with Kevin wherever she went, she was less desirable to other men. Everyone knew she was taken; she was now part of someone else's portfolio. It was as if all men had scored a collective victory as the relationship between Tina and Kevin grew serious. Tina was always considered a wild one that could not be tamed. Now, it was

a proven matter that even Tina, the wildest of the wild flowers, got picked from the field and placed in a vase in someone's living room. Even Tina chose to surrender her freedom to a man.

So, the rules had changed. I needed the old Tina back in my life, the friend and parties we enjoyed together before Kevin Broder entered with all his heaviness. I continued to be a listening friend to both Tina and Kevin, while a lie started cooking in my mind on low heat. At first, I imagined this would be a lie of little sophistication. After all, playing cupid was not very difficult for me. I just needed to *tell* someone that Tina no longer loved Kevin, or that Kevin was in love with someone else. That is all it would take to murder their love. As I rethought the circumstances, I was not sure if breaking their love was enough. Maybe they grew a deep dependency on each other and love was no longer a necessary glue.

I realized I needed a more vicious lie, a whole 'scene' to end their relationship with a bang. As I grew more impatient with their relationship and the inferior role I was assigned in it, I raised the heat on my planned lie. Since their story was a fairy tale, I had to turn it into a nightmare. I wanted them both to hurt, just as I had been hurting on the sidelines of their love game. I meticulously wrote down the details of my plan in a neat notebook. I planned the lie that would murder their love. I waited patiently for the right opportunity to execute my lie. And surely enough, a few weeks later it arrived."

I do not know where I am when the waitress suddenly injects her words into the space of our booth.

"Do you think you guys had enough time to decide what you want to order?"

I am confused. Dale is not. He understands she is being sarcastic and responds accordingly.

"Let's see, I know that we met here at 6:00 PM. What time is it now?" He asks. Then he looks at his wristwatch "It's 8:00 PM." Dale concludes. He brings forward his lower lip to show he is considering the time.

"Mmmmm. I must agree with you that two hours should be enough, even if it is a very, very long menu."

The waitress is appeased. Her bitterness melts away and transposes into a smile. She pulls out a notepad and pen from her apron and stands ready to write our order.

Dale orders: "I guess I'll have a tuna melt with cheddar cheese. That comes with fries, right?"

"Yes. With French fries, coleslaw and a deli-pickle." She responds automatically.

"And I will have the Greek salad, the half-size portion, and a bowl of clam chowder." I say.

The waitress reads back our order and says she will be right back with our food.

I look at Dale with amazement.

"God, I would never have the patience to handle her so well. I usually get pretty pissed off when a waitress makes me order fast so she'll make tips on more tables."

"It wasn't that difficult, you know. All I really did was agree with her and smile."

"Well, I must say, I have noticed your smile. It has an amazingly soothing affect. It can melt bitterness. I think it's what got me staring at you in the first place. Not too many people can smile intensely, you know? I know I can't." I say.

"You lie. I smile. Maybe that is my special gift. It's not nearly as powerful as yours."

A few minutes go by. Both of us remain silent. Or rather, an uncomfortable silent hovers above us like a low hanging dark cloud. I have no idea what Dale is thinking of. I do not know if he is interested or bored, tired or shy. I have no idea what he thinks of me. If he thinks I am cruel or maybe just confused. I try to pick up a sign, but he is just looking at me expressionless. Yesterday I found it pretty easy to read his state of mind, his gestures. Maybe he is just normal right now. Maybe this is his basic state and I cannot recognize it because there is nothing unusual about it.

I cannot handle this silence, this state of mutual examination. I break the tension with a toss of some words:

"I think it's noble how you smile and disarm the conflict, like what you just did with the upset waitress. I usually choose to further arm conflicts with lies."



"But that's exactly what's interesting about your story. Most of us have the desire to further complicate, but we do the right thing, we try to resolve things we should. You act upon this desire. You don't suppress your dark side"

"And you think that is noble?" I ask.

"No, not at all. But I think it's healthy sometimes. I think if I were in your situation, I wouldn't murder the love of my best friend to get more of his time."

"Why not?" I ask.

"Well..." Dale pauses for a few seconds "... because I think it's mean."

"Let me understand something. You wouldn't break your friend's love not because it will hurt him, or you want him to be happy, but because you think it's wrong?"

Dale wraps his right hand over his left and places both hands under his chin resting his head in a contemplative way. "Listen, I am just trying to listen to what you told me of your experience and adapt it to my life. If I was really that jealous, that desperate to get my close friend back, I might think up something bad like you, but I would never act on it. Because I would have an after thought, telling me it is wrong. I would suppress that mean instinct. That's just how I feel. That's the difference, OK?"

"OK." I say, "I understand fully. You are basically saying that the only difference between you and I is words."

"Words?" Dale says, "What are you talking about. I just told you that I would not destroy my friend's love. You are about to tell me the story of how you did. There is a huge difference" Dale raises his voice as he speaks. My words tense a nerve inside him.

I explain calmly: "Listen. You would think of something bad, just as I did, but you would never actually act on it. In my case, I thought up something bad to break up Tina and Kevin, but because of my powers, I didn't have to act on it. I just had to say it. I only went one step beyond thinking a mean thought. I voiced it. That's enough to cause action with my powers. The difference between my behavior and yours is only in the words."

Dale does not respond and we share ten more seconds of uncomfortable silence.

He places his hands back on the seat and straightens his head. "I don't know what I would do anymore. Maybe speaking my thoughts isn't that far from having them. I still think I couldn't do it. But maybe the difference is smaller than I thought. OK?"

His voice is boyish and I feel as if he is offering me a truce.

"OK", I say, accepting his offer.

"Excuse me," the waitress says as she slides our dishes onto the table. This time her intrusion is welcomed by both of us.

"This looks great. Thank you." Dale says to the waitress through a wide full mouth smile.



# 7

Dale takes a juicy bite from his tuna melt and says to me while still chewing:

"Come on, I can't wait anymore. Please continue." Dale swallows and I see the ball in his neck rising. I imagine the food going down into his chest in a mesh of beige bun and brown tuna. He licks his upper lip to clean it from mayonnaise.

"The opportunity finally came around for you to execute your plan to break up Tina and Kevin... So... What did you do?"

"OK, give me a minute to taste my food." I taste the clam chowder and let its thickness fill my mouth. I swallow. I offer Dale a spoon-full from across the table. I insert the spoon into his mouth, moving it upward as I pull the spoon out, like mothers feed their baby. He signals he likes it and I feed him another spoon full. A little bit of chowder dripped onto his chin. I scrape it upward with my spoon, and re-insert the spoon into his mouth.

"Thank you." He says, licking his lips clean and padding his chin with a napkin. I smile flirtatiously at his goofiness.

I add oil, vinegar, pepper and salt to my salad. I toss it. I take a bite from my salad, I chew. I swallow. I clear my throat. I continue:

"A long weekend was coming up and Tina invited both Kevin and I over to her parent's house in Connecticut. Kevin declined, saying he had exams coming up and needed to stay at school and study. I was craving

to spend time with her family. She had told me so much about her father's Middle Eastern cooking, her mother's story telling at dinner, her beautiful, warm home. I wanted to go with her even more since I knew Kevin wouldn't be there. But I had to decline. This weekend was a golden opportunity to execute my plan. It was a rather simple, conventional lie. I would even call it cliché. I was studying for a physics exam, and planned on asking Kevin for help. I would make sure that Kevin and I spent sufficient time together over the weekend. When Tina would return, I would tell her that as her best friend, I could no longer keep this secret from her. I would inform her that Kevin and I had an affair over the weekend. I was planning on presenting myself as a victim of alcohol and his charm and winning back her friendship as a result of my honesty. I decided I would conclude by telling her that Kevin has only caused trouble in our friendship. As soon as he will be out of the picture, the two of us can return to being as close and as happy as we used to be.

I was pretty nervous about this lie because I never lied about having slept with anyone before. I knew that once this lie was told, Kevin would remember the experience and I would not. Just like my high school guidance counselor and all my peers remembered my SAT score announcement. I realized that after this lie, Kevin would look at me differently. He would look at me clothed and know what I look like naked. He would hear me speak, and remember me moaning. As I would speak my lie to Tina, I would instantly develop an intimacy with Kevin that I was not sure I could bear. The experience would exist in his memory. And really, I had little control of how it would emerge. You see, sex through a lie brings more vulnerability than actual sex. I would not be there for the experience. I would have no way of controlling what my lie imprinted in Kevin's memory. But I decided

that all this vulnerability was a small price to pay for the wonderful prize of having Tina all to myself again.

Friday afternoon, Tina left after her last class and Kevin and I had planned to meet to study together on Saturday morning. We met for breakfast at the cafeteria and then walked over to the library. We spent the day at the library together. The campus was empty. There were maybe twenty or thirty other students in the entire library, mostly foreign students with no homes nearby. It was safe to assume that whoever remained on campus was at the library, and that we were pretty much staring at the same thirty faces that we would see over the next three days of holiday. Kevin and I studied in two adjacent cubicles in the main section of the library. We spent the entire day together, studying, whispering short conversation, and making excursions to the cafeteria's snack bar to escape our notebooks. He helped me with my physics homework and I helped him with his Tina problems. Kevin kept complaining that things weren't like they used to be between them. He said that Tina's attention span was too short and he was afraid she would soon lose her interest in him entirely. All this commitment and sharing will become too much and she will be thirsty for someone new. I agreed with his observation about her attention span. The Tina I knew was always distracted from something by something else, and then the distraction would become too long and she would find new stimulation in something different just because it was different from what she had known. She was one of those people who watched TV on mute while listening to the radio, flipping through a magazine and talking on the phone. But as I told Kevin, and I sincerely believed this was true, his case with Tina was special. Even though he had already become a familiar experience, she kept returning to him, not despite his familiarity, but because of it. I

told Kevin that I thought she was really changing, that maybe he was her first true love.

After breakfast, seven hours in the library, and two cafeteria runs, we had covered more than we had planned for the day. Both the topics of Physics and Tina were thoroughly discussed. Kevin and I headed to the cafeteria for dinner and without any additional manipulation on my part, the details of the Tina Lie all fell into place. During dinner, Kevin asked if he could sleep over, since his dorm was on the other side of campus and my roommate was away. I agreed, of course with a smile. This greatly reduced the risk of my lie. Now that he would be sleeping in my room, my Tina Lie would become a mere exaggeration.

The rest of the weekend flew by. Kevin spent the following two nights sleeping in my roommate's bed. In the mornings we went to the cafeteria, followed by the library. We enjoyed deep conversations, the kind you cannot have in the stream of the semester when one is too absorbed in classes. We lay out in the sun; we ate our meals slowly and got a good amount of work done. I remember lying in bed on Sunday night, rethinking my plan. I remember shutting my eyes tight until my forehead wrinkled, trying to suppress my doubts. Kevin was sleeping across the room from me. We had planned to go to the library in the morning and then to the train station to pick up Tina in the afternoon. I felt my doubts harden in my mind like rocks. Kevin and I grew very close during the weekend, and it would be hard to hurt him so deeply. I grew comfortable with him. I could already categorize his humor. He always switched in and out of characters, people we both knew, politicians or movie characters. His favorite three were our physics' professor, E.T and Princess Leia from Star Wars. He would impersonate their voices and improvise on their words,



saying something that the character would say if he or she were with us. I learned to play the game of his humor, responding to his Princess Leia comments with something Darth Vader would say. I learned that he never danced at parties unless he was drunk, that he thought fraternities were stupid, that he loved Phish and fell on the pavement when he was four years old, which is how he got that strange scar on his eyebrow.

And even though he did not know of my power, I felt that he got to know me fairly well. You see, Tina never understood me. As much as I love her, she was self-absorbed and incapable of seeing the depths of my personality. But across the room from me was a sleeping man that had inside him a little nugget of understanding of me. During the same day, he predicted whenever I wanted a study break. He noticed that whenever I wanted a break I released my hair from its elastic and let it loose, playing with a few strands of hair with my right hand fingers. He noticed that I always paid attention to people's mouths, when I described them or looked at them. He kept making jokes about my 'mouth fetish' and claimed this was because I had thin lips. 'Oh, what sexy metal bars you have in your mouth, Darth Vader, so much sexier than Luke's pink lips.' he would say in a high-pitch Princess Leia voice. He even told me that he thinks it was cute how I quote my mother all the time. And that it's strange because the last thing he would expect from a tough girl like me was to speak of her mother. I looked at Kevin as I replayed these weekend scenes in my mind. His eyes were shut, and he fell asleep with a Buddha half-smile on his face as if someone were rubbing his tummy. I knew that if I were to devastate him with this lie, I would also kill that little nugget inside of him that understood me."

"Wait a minute, are you going to tell me that you still did it? You still ruined his life with a lie?" Dale interjects, enraged. I return to the diner and his face comes to focus immediately like through the lens of an automatic camera. He is frozen in the gesture with which he completed his words. His mouth is half open, his arms are outstretched and his palms face upward. He is looking at me with an expression of half question, half disgust. I feel as if my camera eyes have snapped a photo and now all I can see is a still.

"Dale, if you stop interrupting me, I will tell you why I still did it." I say enunciating each word clearly, allowing my annoyance to come out with my 'S's and 'T's.

"Well, I won't interfere again until you take a break, but let me just say that you were wrong before. There's a lot more than words that separate us. Before I didn't know all these details. So I agreed with you that I might have acted similarly. Now I can tell you that if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't even have thoughts of harming them." He rests his hands on the table, palms facing upward. He looks like he is choosing to give up on our connection. For now, he is opting to quit the game of understanding we had begun.

"Fine." I say, accepting his resignation. "Can I continue now?"

"Sure" Dale whispers, as if he does not have the energy to produce a louder sound.

"You see, after having these warm thoughts of Kevin, I looked at sleeping Kevin one more time. But this time, I did not think of scenes from the past three days. I looked into the future; I focused on the next three days when Tina will be back and classes will

resume. I imagined what it would be like picking her up at the station. How Kevin would run to her as she got off the train as if she had returned from years of Foreign Service. How they would embrace, unite, in a glorious moment of kitsch. Then I thought of how I would once again return to playing the role of reserve parts. As their love will dance between fulfillment and disappointment, they would each, once again, come to me for the little they couldn't find in each other. And that small nugget that Kevin developed inside for understanding me would just vanish. It will float freely inside his body radiating light for about fifteen more hours, and then, as he will greet Tina at the station with excitement, it will be swallowed forever by his overwhelming love for her. I fell asleep that Sunday night with imagery from the train station replaying in my mind with romantic music in the background. By the time sleep fell upon me, I had no more doubts about my Tina lie.

Tina returned on Monday afternoon, as scheduled. I told Kevin I had things to do, and that I could not join him to pick her up. I had to perfect the details of my lie and make some final decisions. I called Tina that evening. Kevin answered the phone and asked me to come over. I told him I had a stomachache, and said that I must have eaten something bad. I asked to speak with Tina, and we arranged to meet at her place at 4:00 PM the following day. I stared at the piece of paper on which I had hand-written my lie details, and suddenly felt a sharp pain in my lower stomach. After it persisted for a few minutes, I realized what happened. Of course, I thought, I had lied to Kevin about a stomachache. Couldn't I have just told him I was busy?"

Dale let's out a laugh as an instinct and it reaches me like a feather cloud. I laugh as well. I enjoy being amused by my story. I

never found my stomachache funny before. But now, as I tell all this in the presence of Dale, I am learning to see the comedy in my life.

"Anyway," I say in a stretched out descending tone, " I lay down on my bed, and with both my hands holding my stomach, I once again worked out the details of the Tina Lie.

The next day, as I finished my last Tuesday class and started walking towards Tina's dorm room, I tried to plan my mood. I wanted my behavior to come across as slightly odd before telling her of the weekend's happenings. The ideal situation would be if she questioned my strange behavior, and only then I lied to her of Kevin and I. I arrived at Tina's and greeted her with a hug and a kiss. She was in a great mood. She immediately started talking. It was as if she had to close the time gap that occurred, as I didn't know what she had been doing for the past three days. She had to bring me up to date before we could do anything else. She spoke of how great it was to be home for a weekend and how well she got along with her family. She spoke of her uncle taking his yacht to Europe over the summer, and how the three of us should fly to Italy and meet him in Sicily and then join him on his yacht for part of the ride. I tried to keep a cold face, but was genuinely happy to see her, hear her voice, and look at her beautiful smile. She spoke maybe for half an hour, and I barely managed to slip in a word. She built a whole empire of words, a tower around her I felt I could not break with my speech. The only time I could interrupt was to answer her question regarding my summer plans so we could coordinate the trip to Europe. After her story was out and most of her words had relaxed by the floor, some of her enthusiasm subsided, and I told her that there is something very important we must discuss.

'Kevin and I had sex over the weekend.' I said.

I studied her face, in search of a response.

'Just once, or several times throughout the weekend?' She said with a wide smile, almost laughing.

'Are you sick or something?' I said in a low voice, trying to change the casual tone of the conversation.

'This is not a joke, Tina. Actually, it's pretty damn serious. I am confessing to having slept with your boyfriend. Does this not disturb you at all?'

Tina paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. She looked straight at me, still with loving eyes like a faithful dog staring at its master:

'Listen. You did not have sex with Kevin. He told me that he spent the nights in your dorm because it's closer to the library. If that's what you're worried about, than don't. You and Kevin are my best friends. Why should I have a problem with you two sleeping in the same room?'

I grew extremely nervous. I knew I could not change my story. I was at a point of no return. I had to persuade her that I was telling the truth. I lowered my voice one more notch:

'Listen, Tina, I know that this hurts, but you must believe that I am telling you the truth. Kevin didn't tell you because he did not want to hurt you. But you must believe that what I am telling you now is

the truth. We were not drunk. We were not stoned. We came back from the cafeteria, entered my room, and started listening to some music. We felt extremely close since we had been discussing you for the entire day. He started stroking my hair. It felt really nice, and I gently started traveling his lower back with two of my fingers. We stayed like this for maybe half an hour. My arm and back got slightly tired and I leaned back on the bed. The CD reached its end and the music stopped. He moved from playing with my hair to playing with my belly button, then my breast. And then we had the gentlest sex you could ever imagine. It was not mad or passionate. It was soft and soothing.'

Tina had this ridiculously annoying smile on her face throughout my telling. I had the urge to slap the smile of her face. She once again looked me in the eyes and responded with the same calmness I used in my speech:

'Listen. I know both of you better than you know each other. And I am telling you, sweetie that no matter what you dreamt last night or thought happened, it didn't. It couldn't have.'

At this point I became filled with sheer fear. Why was my story so hard to believe? For God's sake, if I were in her shoes, I would have suspected an affair from the start. Did Kevin tell her he was not attracted to me? Or did she really just know us well enough to know that neither of us would take part in such a disloyal act. I tried to maintain my calm. I thought to myself that I must prove this to her. After all, it did happen. Everything I lied about must have already taken effect and become the truth. All I had to do was produce some hard evidence to make her buy the story.

'Tina, baby, don't make this harder than it already is. If you don't believe me, I can easily prove it to you. Would you like to walk over to my room? The condom is still in the trashcan; the room still smells of his cum. You know what, he couldn't find his socks this morning. They are probably still in the space between my bed and the wall. You would recognize his funny red socks with the black diamonds on them, right?'

Tina was utterly confused. She signaled consent with a head gesture, and we both started walking towards my room without speaking. I knew I was golden. I could come up with all the proof she wanted. The fact that Kevin and I had sex was as real as my mother's death.

We arrived at my room. There was no condom in the trashcan. Both my bed and my roommate's bed were neatly made, and the space between my bed and the wall was clearly exposed, revealing no red socks. Tina had expected this. I clearly did not.

Paying no further attention to Tina, I quickly opened the lower drawer of my desk, and started pulling out papers and notes in search of the Blue and Yellow notebooks. As soon as I found the notebooks, I grabbed them tightly in my right arm. With Tina still standing by the door, I raced out of my room and the building. I did not know where I was running. I just needed to be removed from this scene, outside of this awful reality. I did not think of Tina and Kevin's destiny. I did not even mind losing the only two people I cared for in the world. I felt extremely weak, yet I kept running. I reached a train station across the freeway from the campus. I sat alone on a bench along the outdoor platform. I softened the grip of my hand on the notebooks. I asked myself "Are these notebooks the only evidence I will ever have of my powers?" I imagined myself trying to explain to

my future husband and kids about my bizarre life story and watching even them mock me in disbelief. I wanted to write an entry directly in the Yellow book of Rules, even though I usually drafted my words first.. I knew I had no rule to write, but I felt I had to document this moment, the moment I lost my powers. I realized I had forgotten to grab a pen when I rushed out of my room.

The closest university building to the train station was the campus police station. I knew I couldn't buy a pen there, and I thought the officers were too stingy to lend me a one. I walked up to the help window in the police station. There was a young officer with the name 'Kevin' imprinted above the right hand pocket of his police uniform.

'Can I help you?' Kevin addressed me promptly.

His words brought all the racing thoughts in my mind to an immediate halt. I rolled back my shoulders to release some of the tension in my back. I looked at Kevin, and almost instinctively, I spoke a lie:

'Yes, I lost a very expensive pen in the library over the holiday weekend. It was a gold Mont Blanc pen and it had the words *To my Love* engraved on it. My father gave this pen to my mother, and when she died it was passed on to me. I asked at the library and they recommended that I check with you. Do you keep a lost and found box here or something?'

Kevin looked at me and smiled:

'Well, you are in luck, because a young gentleman by the name of Kevin Broder had turned your pen about an hour ago. He said he found it in his backpack when he returned from the library. He thought he



must've taken it by mistake. It looks pretty damn expensive. Here you go. It sure is a nice pen.'

The officer handed me the pen through the booth window. I thanked him, and ran back to the deserted train station. I had my notebooks and gold pen, but I could not write. I did not know what to write anymore. I was not sure if I had lost my powers. This pen incident couldn't be just a coincidence. But if I still had my powers, why didn't my Tina Lie come true. Was I being punished for devising a cruel plan? Were my powers only meaningful under good intentions? No, this couldn't be true since I killed my mother with no good intentions. I was desperate for answers to all these questions.

Thoughts were madly racing through my minds. I knew that this frantic mind search would not reap concrete results. I decided to conduct another quick test of my powers. I returned to campus grounds and walked straight to the ladies room in the cafeteria. It was dinnertime and there was a line of three girls waiting for a vacant stall. I asked the girl ahead of me if she happened to have a tampon. I told her I just got my period a few days early by surprise. She said she didn't. As soon as I reached a stall, I unbuckled my pants and discovered my underwear was stained with blood. I sat there on the toilet staring at the red drops dissolving in the clear toilet water. I felt comforted that my last two test lies had positive results. I grabbed some food from the cafeteria and brought it back to my room. I stayed in my room for three days. During this time, I spoke to no one. I missed all my classes and only ate food from the vending machines on my floor. I read both the Blue and the Yellow notebooks, again and again, searching for a hint from my past as to why the Tina Lie had failed me."

It is 10:03 PM at the Waverly Restaurant. The waitress has cleared most of the dishes from our table. My salad and soup remain in front of me barely touched. I look down at my food. A thick crust of cream has emerged on the top of the soup. The salad is soaked in oil and vinegar and the tomatoes are brown around the rims. I feel Dale's foot vibrating the entire table. I look at him and notice he is sweating. His lips are tightly sealed. It seems as if he is biting the edge of his upper lip from inside his mouth. As soon as he recognizes my long pause as a break, he excuses himself from the table and says he will be right back. His jeans wipe the side of table as he slides out of our booth and walks towards the restrooms in the back. I watch Dale's back as he walks away. His jeans uncrease and slide further down his legs, crumpling up at his shoes. His walk is perfect smooth. He is long and erect. He brushes his hair back with both hands as he walks, and I see his hands meeting and folding at the back of his neck before he releases them and opens the bathroom door. I notice the waitress is also watching him walk. I scan the diner with my eyes. It is almost empty, though several tables have not been cleared yet and still contain the dishes of people that must have just left. There are two people sitting at one booth. They are the same two students from the prior night, once again sitting with books and notes spread open on the table, studying, sipping coffee, picking at fries soaked in ketchup without removing their eyes from their books. Since Dale is not across from me at the moment, I am not conscious of my face, of my mask. I let my thoughts freely swim in my mind. I think of Kevin. I feel as though I just met him after years of not seeing him. I think of how he would have acted if he were here in the Waverly Restaurant. He probably would have grabbed two menus from behind a napkin holder, secured a paper napkin around his waste as if it was an apron and walked up to the two students studying, pretending to be their waiter, asking them

if he could get them anything. He probably would have imitated the Brooklyn accent the waitress has, and recited to them some ridiculous made-up daily specials. I smile to myself imagining this scene. Dale walks towards our booth, and as if in a dream, I see him as Kevin. Then, Kevin's features slowly dissolve into those of Dale. By the time he sits down, he is fully Dale. He is sitting down in the center of the seat, directly across from me. He must have wet his hair when he washed his hands in the bathroom. His dirty blond hair looks almost brown now that it is wet. He once again brushes his hands through his hair and looks directly at me. I am once again aware of my face, of my presence.

"Well, you realize that you cannot end this chapter like this. I will not allow it. I have to discover the logic behind what is happening here. There is some logic to your lies, right? I mean it's not just arbitrary. It can't be. There is a reason why some of your words turn to truth and others remain just lies, right?"

I smile. I feel flattered by his enthusiasm.

"I thought you were going to tell me that you think I am mean." I say, "Or at least ask me again, how I could I possibly hurt people I loved so much."

Dale looks at me and smiles calmly. He seems refreshed now, even well rested.

"Well, I think I was going to make a comment like that when you finished speaking. But then I stepped away for a few seconds and realized I am not here to judge you. You just want me to hear your

story. That's what you asked me to do. Right?" He raises his eyebrows at me looking for conformation.

"Right." I reply.

"So, I am not going to analyze your personality, or to tell you how wrongly you behaved. You would go to a shrink if that's what you were after. And besides, I have a feeling I am not going to understand you even if I try. But I *am* going to try to understand your powers. Does that sound OK with you?"

"Yes. That's perfect. That's all I ask for." I lie. Dale looks at me from a distance. It is almost as if he is carrying a tune to himself in his mind while he is talking to me. His apathy is bugging me. I want him closer. I want him moved by my story like he has been up until now.

"Well, there is a logic to my powers. And after three days of struggle, I solved the greatest riddle of my skill. I discovered the most important Yellow Book rule of my powers. Do you have any idea what it could be?" I ask, inviting him to intrude.

"Mmm... Do you like rice pudding?" Dale asks and his eyes light up like a child.

"Yes. I love rice pudding. But what the hell does this have to do with my powers?" I ask.

"Well relax. It's just that they have really good rice pudding here. I was going to suggest we order one and share. And that I will try to

guess the logic to your lies by the time it arrives. If I can't guess by the time the rice pudding arrives, then you tell me the answer."

He looks at me as I consider this option. "It shouldn't take long. They actually have the pudding already made. The waitress just needs to scoop it up." He adds.

"OK, that sounds fine. We can play this game if you want. But what does the winner get?" I ask, relieved to find Dale is still playful.

"Well, I wasn't thinking of bringing awards into this. I mean, I doubt I will get it. It took you three days to reach this discovery, and you knew your skill a lot better than I know it now."

Dale pauses for a few seconds, biting his nail, then continues.

"Besides, I really have no lead at the moment. I was just trying to make my guessing time short before you go on and tell me the answer.

"But, since you want to put some stakes on this game..." Dale places two fingers on his lip and looks upward as if he is scanning his mind for ideas.

"How about in our last meeting, when you are finished telling your story, the winner gets to ask the loser whatever question they want. And the loser must give an honest, detailed answer?" Dale straightens his back, pleased with the rule he pulled out of his mouth.

"That doesn't seem very fair." I reply, "You hardly ever lie. You would tell me the truth right now if I asked for it"

"That's not true. How do you know? You barely know me." Dale says, in a higher voice than he usually speaks.

"Well." I slow down the release of my words, "I know this because yesterday you told me about the tragedy of your mother, and how there is nothing you hate more than a lie."

Dale lets my words absorb in his skin before he replies. He suddenly seems uncomfortable in his seat. I can tell he has not told the story about his mother to many people. He is not used to hearing someone else speak of her life back to him. "OK, my mother's tragedy made me hate lies more than ever. That still doesn't mean I don't use them."

This juvenile game begins to irritate me. "Listen", I say, "I know you rarely lie. Someone like me can tell these things, OK? It's like gay people can always spot other gay people. They are sensitive to other people's sexuality, because its something they pay attention to. I can tell you're a truth teller. I'm really good at this game. In your case, it's really easy to see. You live your life like a sitcom character, always doing the right thing. You probably decided to listen to my story because you think I am a sick woman and your listening might help. And in any case I don't even have any interest in asking you a question."

Dale pretends not to hear my words. As I am speaking, the waitress walks by and he turns his head sideways towards her:

"Excuse me, can we have one large order of rice pudding with no whipped cream and two spoons." He holds out one finger to show her we want one pudding and then two fingers meaning two spoons. "Thank you."

He then turns back to me "Are we playing or not?"

"Sure." I say. "Go ahead. Start guessing."

Dale grabs the edge of the table with both his hands and leans forward towards the center of the table. I feel his foot once again vibrating under the table. He speaks quickly so as not to waste much time on each guess.

"OK. mmm...When ever your emotions are too strong, your lies don't work?"

"No. How could that be? Think about my mother." I answer slowly, calmly.

"OK, OK, right, mmm... Whenever you are in love your powers don't work?"

"No, what about Doug? I loved him when my lies works?"

"OK. Right, obviously.... Let me think... mmm... The Blue and Yellow notebooks have to be exposed for your lies to work?"

"No, come on, I told you, they were in the lower drawer of my college desk from the first day of school. That never stopped my lies from working." I maintain my calm speech. I enjoy responding slowly to his hurried guesses.

The waitress is walking towards our table with a thin tall glass filled with rice pudding. My head turns sideways and follows her as she arrives.

Dale whispers, as if coaching himself on how to find the right answer.

"It has to be something more substantial. Something to do with the words themselves."

He speaks in a louder voice again. "Your lies have to be believable, otherwise they don't work."

The waitress places the pudding in the center of the table and hands us each a spoon.

"Good guess. Almost, but not quite." I say as I dig my spoon deep into yellow, sweet, sticky rice. I slowly fish the spoon out of the deep glass dish. The spoon is full of pudding and the handle is yellow half way up. I offer it to Dale. He clears the spoon with his lips, closes his eyes to heighten his senses, swallows and licks his lips. He smiles widely. It seems to relax him. I take a bite for myself. I swirl the rice with my tongue in the palette of my mouth. I feel every sweet grain in my gums, my throat, on my teeth. "You're right. This is so, so damn good." I say.

"So what do you mean I was almost right." He smiles, taking pleasure in his partial victory. "Am I right or wrong?"

"I told you *not quite*" I say with annoyance. But no competition or bitterness can exist between us now. We are both so in love with this pudding right now. As we swim in sensation, the same sensation but each one alone, our guessing game seems silly and distant. Dale's goofy smile is smeared in pudding. It completely disarms me.

"How about we finish eating and then I'll tell you the logic."

Dale nods in consent while licking his upside-down spoon. We continue eating with exaggerated and smooth motions. Each one in turn, diving their spoon into the long dish, deeper than required, then licking



the spoon, all the way down till our tongues reach the tip of our fingers. We speak no words, but we are communicating in a dance, a dance of tongues. We are following the same rhythm; our spoons hitting the dish create an actual beat. We dip our spoons in the dish in turn, never colliding our spoons or having to wait outside the dish for the other to clear the way. The motion of our tongues swirling in our mouths and the movement of our arms dipping in the dish are in perfect sync.

# 8

"On the third day of solitude in my room, reading through the Yellow and Blue notebooks, I found a clue. In the Blue Book of Experiments, I read the following entry:

*March 7th, 1988*

*Yesterday, my powers failed me when I lied to a friend about my mood. I was fairly depressed at the time, and when asked how I was, my immediate response was that I was fine. But my bad mood persisted throughout the day. I do not understand this. How come my words cannot bring a sincere smile to my face?*

After reading this entry, I began remembering different instances when lies about my mood had failed me. Once I told my grandmother that I didn't want to go to school because I felt sad and I remained happy. Another time, I studied a lot for a final that Tina was not prepared for, and I carelessly lied and told her that I was also stressed out. But strangely enough I remained calm. As these episodes were floating in my mind, the elegant solution to my riddle came to me in a flash. Tina did not believe my story - Tina or my grandmother. When I claimed that I was in a good mood, my friend didn't believe me. Each one of these instances followed a failed lie, a lie that the listener didn't believe.

I was shocked at my discovery. I straightened my back in my seat, and tried to decide whether I liked this new finding. I found that I liked it a lot. It added complexity to my skill. I realized I would need to be more cautious with lies. I must be persuasive not only to avoid being caught, but as a necessary requirement for my lies to

come true. I was glad to have solved the most mysterious aspect of my skill. I always knew that my powers must have some limit. Now that I knew what it was, I no longer feared it. I was comforted to know that my powers did not disappear and reappear according to some bizarre schedule. Everything made perfect sense. If Tina would have believed my story, we would have found the condom and red socks right there in my room."

It is 10:30 PM at the Waverly Restaurant and Dale seems glad to have obtained on a new tool to understanding my story.

"That makes perfect sense," he exclaims, holding up the dessert spoon as if it were a teacher's pointer. "That's why if you tell me that you're Madonna, you won't transform into her before my eyes. I simply wouldn't believe you. But if you tell me you're extremely wealthy and dress well making a convincing appearance, I will believe you and it will come true."

"Exactly. This is key to understanding my limitations. I can make fantasy become reality. But first someone must believe that I am only telling them the reality that is already in front of their eyes. My view of my role in the world had entirely changed. When I finally left my dorm room, I had new goals and a fresh outlook. I knew that to fully utilize my gift, I had to master the art of persuasion. I went straight to visit one of my favorite professors, Arnold Shwallberg, during his office hours. Professor Shwallberg was head of the Sociology Department. He had no computer in his office, only books, stacks of papers on his desk, and two extra wooden chairs for his visitors. His office hours were open to everyone, even students that had never been enrolled in his classes. He was known as a great

listener and educator. To me, he always seemed like the last of a dying breed, the remains of a past time when universities had fewer students and more ideology.

Arnold Shwallberg knew me pretty well. I had taken one of his classes and excelled in it. Even though he dedicated time to every student, I always felt he treated me differently. When I took his class, I would visit him during office hours at least once a week. I would come up with a list of questions from my lecture notes not because I really wanted to know the answers, but because I enjoyed spending time with him. He always treated me as if he knew somewhere deep inside that I was destined for greatness.

On this visit, however, my motive was different. My visit was a well-calculated step in my newly formed plan. Tina and Kevin were no longer my friends. I had no audience for my words. I came to Professor Shwallberg to feed him a lie. A lie he must believe; a lie that must become a springboard into the next phase of my life. I sat on the bench outside Arnold's office, quickly drafting in my mind the details of my lie.

As I entered his office, a smile of light filled his face. He always wore that smile when I visited him. It was a smile that only older men have. After a sufficient amount of smalltalk, I explained my plan.

'You see, even though the world of academics has been very hospitable to me, I never really felt that I belonged here. I have this urge to build things, not just write research papers. I feel I need to do something that touches the masses, not just the academic community. I need to follow a path that allows more expression of creativity than

a Liberal Arts program.' I finished my speech and watched the professor closely for any reaction.

Professor Shwallberg looked baffled. He did not really understand where I was going with all of this. I continued:

'I've been accepted to a two-year acting school program in New York City. I got a full scholarship too. I think that this is what I always wanted to do. In any case, the program will accept some of my undergraduate credits, and I do have free housing in New York anyway, so all the details of my transfer seem to fall right into place.'

Again, I could not detect a clear reaction from the professor. He crossed one corduroy leg over the other and breathed in deeply and exhaled very slowly through his nose. While we sat in silence for a few minutes, I could tell that he was trying to decide how to phrase his advice to me. He kept inhaling through his mouth, and exhaling, slowly through his nose.

'I think it would be unwise for you to leave without graduating, my dear. You know, we do have quite a good theater department right here. It might be a little too late to switch majors, but I'm sure you can take several theater classes and participate in university theater productions. After you graduate, you can move to New York if you still think acting is the right career for you.'

I was not listening. But by the serious expression he wore on his face, I knew he believed me. All I wanted was to voice the rest of my lie and leave. It was too painful sitting in my favorite professor's office and telling him that I was not going to graduate, telling him

that he bet on the wrong horse all along, that I was a nobody, a drop out.

'I appreciate your concern, Professor, really. But this urge I have to act is fairly strong. I cannot postpone my plans for two years. I have considered studying at the theater department here, but from speaking with people in the industry, I understand that New York City is really the only place to be. The acting school I have been accepted to guarantees internships on Broadway to all its students. I feel this is an opportunity I cannot pass up.'

After that, he kept speaking and preaching and quoting and advising, breathing deeply between each remark to let his thoughts harden before he voiced them. I digested nothing of what he said to me. All I could hear was the Professor's tongue brushing his teeth as he spoke, making the sound of a water sprinkler. I knew I had to leave his office as soon as possible. And as a sprinkle of his spit reached my forehead, I decided to end this meeting without planting any further details of my New York life. Before I left, the professor asked me how soon I was planning on leaving. I answered that my apartment in New York was already available. I told him I would leave as soon as I will be done with my finals. As I walked back to my dorm room, I remember regretting not being more specific about the apartment.

'I should have said that my *SoHo* apartment is already available' I thought to myself."

Dale lets out an abrupt laugh. I am embarrassed at the bad joke I just made. It reminds me of jokes old people make when they play with

words in an unsophisticated way. I smile out of embarrassment. I stop speaking.

# 9

It is 11:07 PM at the Waverly Restaurant. Our table has been cleared and there are no remains of our rice pudding sloppiness. Dale seems fairly relaxed. His elbows and hands are resting on the table. One arm is straight such that his hand is almost touching my side. I feel drained.

"Well, that's it for today." I say in a nonchalant way, as if I am his private foreign language teacher and I have just finished administering his weekly lesson.

"So this means we have finished another phase?" He asks, though he knows the answer. He is trying to prove to me he remembers, paying me a complement by using the lingo I taught him.

I am flattered.

"Yes, exactly. From now on my story takes place in New York. Actually, the next phase begins with my journey to New York, to be exact."

Dale nods repeatedly and slowly. He forgets to spot the motion of his head and continues to nod. His mind is investing all its energy on some thought and it forgets to tell his head to stop nodding.

"Dale," I say, "Even though it is still early, I do not want to continue now because the next phase needs a fresh day. So if you have any questions, now would be a good time to ask them."



Dale stops his nod by placing both hands on his cheeks, and bites his lower lip.

"I think all my questions have been answered in the past hour or so. I did not understand your powers before you told me the convincing your audience part. They were too abstract. But now that you explained the restriction, I think I understand a lot better. Let me give you an example. I was thinking about this last night when I got home. I couldn't understand why when you lied to yourself or just lied out loud nothing would happen. Now it's obvious."

Dale is speaking slowly, as if the main resources of his mind are still working on another project, another thought.

"Dale," I say, placing my hand on his hands, which are now resting on the table "Are you tired? Because if you don't have any questions, we could just stop here for tonight and I can tell you of the next phase tomorrow."

"No, not at all," He says, swinging his head sideways, and brushing one hand through his hair. "I've just been thinking about us. That's all."

I smile awkwardly, "Yes..." Trying to suck his ideas from his thoughtful mind to his mouth, then to my ears.

"I've been thinking that maybe a woman would be a better listener to you story than a man."

"Why?" I ask as if serving his words back to him, not accepting them without a better explanation.

"I think a woman could be more sympathetic, you know, understand your motives better." He does not look at my eyes as he speaks. He is sending his words all around me but not directly at me.

I look at Dale and speak to his mouth: "I told you before, I am not looking for sympathy."

"Yes, I know that. But you keep stressing that you want me to fully understand. Well maybe I am so different from you that I cannot fully understand."

"How so?" I ask, serving his words back for a better reply once again.

"Let me give you an example." He says. "If I were in your shoes, and Tina was Tom, my best friend. Let's say Tom had fallen madly in love with a girl and was neglecting our friendship. I would simply go with him to a bar and tell him how I feel. I would choose truth. I would tell him that I feel neglected, that I miss our time together."

"You would not" I brush his words to the side. "That is the ultimate female reaction." I say raising my voice in mockery, "How many men do you know that would talk to their best friends about feelings?"

"Fine, you're right. That's what I would do, and it might not be the typical male response. But most men would ask their best friend what was going on, what's the reason for this new distance, or maybe even not say anything. But the point is a man would never devise a plan like you did. We would never manipulate a friend into closeness with a lie. We wouldn't even think about it. We either take a direct

approach of talking or we do nothing at all. Only woman have this cat instinct to complicate everything, to arrive at a situation where their actions are predetermined."

"Do you find it disgusting?" I ask, bending my back forward, my shoulders arched inward and raising my eyes upward towards Dale.

"No, just very different. That's all" He looks at me tapping his finger on the table gently, as if repeatedly double clicking a mouse.

"I agree with you completely. But everything you are saying is why I never even considered a female listener to my story. I want you to see me as different, as far away from you as possible. My powers put me even further away from you than ordinary women."

"So, I don't get it." Dale shakes his head. "Why not tell your story to a listener that is similar to you, more able to understand your behavior."

"That's very simple. I think that the further away your personality is from me, the easier it will be for you to really see me. Let me give you an example, when you look at me, you see many things. You see a tall woman in her late twenties, but you do not see my whiteness, because you are white. If a black man were in your seat, looking at me, he would see most of the things you see as well as my white skin. I chose you because you are my opposite. That's why you are able to see more of who I am."

Dale looks pensive. He pauses for a few seconds, allowing my words to absorb. "Well, I sort of agree. I can see a lot of things about you from our two days together. But I cannot *understand*. I cannot

relate." Dale is tapping his fingers more forcefully on the table now, accenting his tap on 'understand' and 'relate'. It is as if the imaginary mouse at his fingers has stopped responding and he is frustrated at its idleness, pressing harder and harder, growing desperate for a response.

"Dale, I never asked you to fully understand me, I only asked that you understand the rules of my powers. All I really need you to do is hear and see me."

Dale raises both hands in the air, and taps on his chest. "Then I'm your man." He says with a smile stolen from a detergent commercial.

I smile back. "I already know that, silly. Now, where and when do you want to meet?" I raise my hand to the waitress and she immediately notices me since the diner is empty. She looks over at me and I scribble my signature in the air.

Dale holds his finger in the air, advising me to be cautious "Before we decide on a place and leave, don't think I forgot that you owe me an answer to the question of my choice in our last meeting. I guessed the limit to your powers, remember?"

I smile. "Not exactly. You said my lies have to be believable. But, in fact, they can be completely ridiculous. As long as I convince someone that they are true, they will become truth."

Dale tilts his head sideways and looks at me as his eyes form a diagonal line. A flirtatious smile appears on his lips and I watch it turn leftward as his face turns. "C'mon, that's a technicality. You know I was on to the right thing. How about we call it a tie. We both

get a free shot question with an honest, detailed answer in our last meeting?

"OK, that's a deal." I reply, unable to resist his boyish charm.

"Where and when do you want to meet?" I ask.

"You can suggest a place," Dale says, "As long as it's not here. I think the waitresses here are beginning to lose their patience with us."

The waitress comes over with our check on a saucer and smiles as she overhears Dale's remarks. "Not at all. You don't bother me." She says. "We all have bets here on what your relationship is."

Dale smiles at her comment and hands her a twenty-dollar bill. "I'll get it", he says to me, "Good entertainment in New York City costs a lot more than what I'm paying here."

I fake a smile at his unwitty words. I push a 'thank you' out of my throat. I stand up and begin walking towards the door. Dale follows behind me. As I open the door and step out onto the street, a warm, humid wind wraps my body. Dale stands next to me on the sidewalk. He raises his arms sideways, pushes his chest forward and cracks his back with his mouth open as if swallowing the thick air.

I speak: "I heard on the news this morning that it should be a little bit cooler tomorrow. How about meeting by the carousel in Central Park tomorrow at 6:00 PM? That way we can walk for a while in the park before we sit down somewhere."

"Sounds perfect. I'm sure the weather will be nice if you say so."  
Dale yawns out his words. "See you tomorrow at five." He does not offer me a ride. He vanishes into a cab and I begin walking up Sixth Avenue.

PHASE THREE

*Making Lies Work Magic*

*I am well aware that I have never written anything but fictions. I do not mean to go so far as to say that fictions are beyond the truth. It seems to me that it is possible to make fiction work inside truth.*

Michel Foucault

# 10

It is 6:05 PM. It is Central Park. It is still mid July. The sun is an overpowering, full red circle laying low in the sky. I am standing on the peripheral road of the park at the entrance to the carousel area. I see Dale from behind. He is sitting on a bench, facing the carousel, soaking up the unbelievable red. He is sitting in the far-left corner of the bench with his legs crossed. I think of how odd his seating choice is. Most people would sit more spread out or in the middle of the bench. But Dale is seated at the left edge of the bench with his hands in his lap and his legs resting straight ahead as if he is an extension of the armrest. I stand still observing him. For the first time since we met I wonder who he is. Why is he such a dedicated listener? Who has sent him to me? I approach the bench from the left side, and place my hand on his shoulder. He turns to look at me and smiles. I sit to his right and cross my right leg over my left. We both stare at the sun, which leaves no room for words. We are at peace under its potent spell. The carousel is not running. The park is almost empty. The few people I spot wandering around the park are moving in slow motion as if out of respect for the sun that has chosen to come so close.

I remove my eyes from the sun and look at Dale. At first I only see his silhouette, then my pupils adjust and his colors and features emerge before my eyes. He is wearing sunglasses, a tight, white, ribbed tank top, and a pair of loose-fitting gray slacks. I think of how he probably purchased the slacks as part of a suit when he was slightly heavier. And now that they are too free for the office, he must have converted them into his casual wear. He is crossing his legs in a slightly effeminate way. He looks less like a consultant,



and I think to myself that a stranger might think he is an artist or at least gay. He looks free and beautiful, painted yellow and red from the rich sun. I do not want to talk. I just want to stare. For a moment, words seem superfluous in life. Words seem to stain beauty, contaminate anything that is pure.

"What did you do all day?" Dale asks me. He continues looking at the sun.

I don't reply. I just continue to look at how long and strong he looks.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. You disallowed smalltalk in our game." He says, stretching the word 'disallowed' and pronouncing it with a British accent.

"That's right, and this is not a game." Even though I am trying to bring about seriousness, my words sound warm and playful.

"Yes, I know," he replies in a soft voice. "I was just feeling lazy and light sitting here in the sun. So tell me of how you moved to New York. How old are you now, anyway? I mean when you moved to New York, not now?"

"Twenty one. Every phase in my life from this time on, can be characterized by one man." I say, trying to introduce my next phase the way I have rehearsed it so many times.

Dale lowers his sunglasses along his nose and turns to me: "A man?"

"Yes. Why is that so surprising?" I ask right at him, now that I have the attention of his face.

"Well, I don't know. I just don't see you as a woman that would define herself by the men in her life." He lifts his glasses to the top of his head. They collect his hair and hold it back from his forehead. He is looking at me through squinting eyes.

"Some art critics believe that the best way to examine Picasso's work is through the women in his life, each woman defining a certain period of his painting career. This doesn't mean that Picasso's women were the genius behind his work, only that each woman affected his work in a different way." I watch Dale for a response.

Dale's lips slightly part to form a half moon. I feel he is laughing inside at my absurd analogy. "But you don't paint... or sculpt... or write. You lie. Why would you need a man as a muse?"

"Listen, I didn't mean to flatter myself with the analogy to Picasso. I think I am unique but I don't think I am a genius. OK? You're right; I am not an artist. These men were not my muses, but they affected me, nevertheless. As you will soon discover, each one of these men defined a phase in my relationship with my powers."

I pause. I do not remember where I left off. Dale puts one elbow on the back of the bench and fastens a knee underneath his arm. His body is now facing me. "Did you love these men you call phases?" He asks, feeling proud of his witty question.

I hate his question. It is once again forcing me to speak of episodes I have not yet told. His beauty begins to disintegrate into his

stupid questions, his narrow ideas. I notice a small bump in his chin. I hate him now. I swallow my anger. I decide to respond. I take a moment to gather my thoughts.

"I was never in love with them the way I loved Doug. But I was always nice to them. I had a good time with each one. I liked them a lot and respected them too. I would never go out with somebody I didn't like. You know, I enjoyed dining at nice restaurants together, going to galleries, movies or the theater. But I was rarely moved. I never felt swept away as if I was losing control, if that's what you mean." As I speak I also rest my elbow on the back of the bench. I fold one knee and rest my leg on the bench. I am now facing Dale.

"So, you just stayed with them even though you didn't love them?" Dale asks.

"You must remember that in the context of my powers, love is virtually impossible. I could not lose control because I was pulling the strings."

"What do you mean you were pulling the strings?" He raises one eyebrow and half of his upper lip.

I am getting annoyed at the abstract nature of this conversation. I want to begin telling my story but I do not know how to start.

"Well, I viewed them as part of my work. Having a boyfriend was part of my strategy. I had to maintain at least one listener in my life at all times. It's strange, but I found boyfriends to be a lot less demanding than girlfriends. You can always appease men with sex. When I moved to New York, my experience with Tina was still fresh, and I

did not want to reach that type of closeness with a woman. I dated men. They would listen. My words would come true. Pretty simple."

"Yes, but real life isn't that simple, is it?." Dale says, bringing his other knee closer to his hand on the bench. He speaks in a low intimate voice as if the two of us were cuddled around a fire. "I understand you needed an audience for your lies, someone that would always be there. But it seems natural that you would eventually fall in love with them too, even if that wasn't your original intention. You know, there was this really smart girl at school that tutored me in economics. I knew she had a crush on me, but I didn't think she was all that attractive. So I convinced myself that I would retrieve only the economics from this girl. You know, I will study with her, take advantage of her knowledge and remain unaffected. But see, humans don't work that way. Without even realizing it, I fell in love with her. She was an amazing person. We ended up living together for three years.

"So what's your point?" I ask loudly.

"My point is that we can't just spend a lot of time with someone to lie to them or learn something from them. Eventually, after enough time passes together, feelings get meshed up in the whole game. We can't help ourselves. Don't you think?" His eyelids are weakening before the strong sun and he places his hand horizontally on top of his eyebrows to block it out.

"No. I don't. Not with my powers. Here, Imagine a certain situation with me. Let's say I met a guy that I liked at a friend's party.. I would make up our relationship to some innocent listener at the party, and then it would happen. He, or even they, if you want, would

become mine. They were always very nice. And I already told you I did really like them. So what's the big deal? All I am saying is that they didn't fascinate me. They're mystery never drew me in. You must understand, my relationships were never a creation of two people. They were only my own creation. They were first made up in my own mind and only then they existed outside of it." My voice becomes sharper, revealing a slight annoyance.

Dale pauses for a second, absorbing my words. "Sounds pretty depressing to me." His eyeballs drop to focus on the bench.

"Listen, it's not as if I planned it this way. This is just how things always were. We're wasting too much time on this. Maybe it was stupid of me to try to explain all this to you before you heard the actual events. Just like when we walked into the diner and I tried explaining my powers with all these examples before you even heard what I had been through."

"You're right. It was confusing then. And it is now." He says, stretching his arms upward, his legs outward and stretching so strongly and stiffly he looks like a long wooden stick leaning against the bench.

"Let me just tell you what happened. You still don't know of my journey to New York. If you have any questions when I'm done, you can ask." As I speak, I raise my voice and sit upward on the bench with my legs folded.

"So after leaving Professor Shwallberg's office, I went to my room, packed all my things and headed straight to the bus station. I was once again in the familiar situation of having one duffle bag with me

in search of a new life. I was waiting at the Newton Bus Station for the bus traveling to Port Authority, New York. I decided before boarding the bus that I must be picky about whom I sit next to. After all, there were detail lies I would have to plant in the mind of the person sitting next to me. And now I knew that my listener had to believe me for my lies to come true.

At 4:00 PM a bus arrived at the station. The bus was mostly full since it came from the main Boston bus station. There were only two other passengers waiting for the bus. Nobody rushed to grab a seat. I was the first to get on the bus. I walked the aisle, holding my handbag in front of me and examined the available seats. I scanned the rows on both sides like a radar. The first seat was next to an Arab woman in traditional Muslim clothing with a white veil over her face revealing only her green eyes. I suspected she might not speak English and kept walking. The second available seat was next to a middle-aged, fat black woman, with her two young daughters sitting together across the aisle energetically singing a song, one braiding the other's hair. The mother was already passing them the McDonalds dinner she purchased at the main bus terminal. She asked me to get out of the way so she pass some chicken nuggets to her daughters. I kept walking, as the smell of McDonalds French fries filled my nostrils and reminded me that I had no food for the ride.

And then, one row before the last I spotted a seat next to Jason Lease. He was lying comfortably in his seat listening to music on a walkman, subtly moving his body to a rhythm I could not hear. He was wearing an extra large pair of khakis supported by a thick tightened belt and a white T-shirt. I watched his pants swim over his knees as his legs responded to the rhythm in his ears. He looked about twenty-five, and had a dozen brown braids tightly knit to his scalp running

down the back of his head reaching his shoulders. His arms seemed abnormally long and I notice his massive hands as they drummed on his thighs. Something about his proportions seemed strange to me. His skin was the color of peanut butter, a tone I had never seen before. I could not pinpoint his nationality or categorize him into anything familiar. I had arrived at his seat having not yet made a decision whether he could be my lie-listener. I placed my handbag above his seat, buying myself a few more seconds to decide. He looked at me as I raised my arms to fit my bag in the overhead storage. I looked at him when my bag was secure, with my arms still raised, pushing my bag further in. His mouth was opened in an 'O'; his eyes were the biggest eyes I had ever seen. I imagined drawing his face with the use of three equally shaped circles. I felt as if I was looking at a collage: the face of a baby glued onto the body of a man, or rather, I was looking at the soul of a baby inhabiting the body of a grown man. I stood for a few seconds staring at him and eventually released my hands and sat down beside him.

He adjusted his muscular body in his seat to allow me more space. I was surprised at how gentle his movements were in contrast to his massive size. The bus left the station, and I knew I had my work cut out for me. I still needed to decide where I wanted to live in New York and what life situation I wanted to exist in. I then had to convince Jason to remove his earphones and listen attentively to my New York plans. I was hoping my plan would fully emerge in my mind before he decided to take a nap, which most passengers did about half an hour into the ride.

Ten minutes later, as I was still searching for ideas to complete my lie, I felt Jason's large foot stepping on my toes in the area under my seat. I looked at him. He had fallen sleep. His head was resting

on the window and quivering with the vibrations of the bus engine. His thumb was hanging from his lower lip and his walkman rested in his lap with the play button pressed. I looked at him sleeping in peace and suddenly all my worries subsided. I focused on his face and then on the view out the window that was framing his portrait. As I watched the green grass run past my eyes, I knew that I needed Jason and all of his purity in my new life."

"Wait a minute. You didn't actually wake him up to tell him your lies, did you?" Dale interjects with a smile. "That would be very rude, you know."

"Of course I didn't wake him. That would be too obvious. But half an hour later, when I was ready to begin my lying, I gently slid his foot back to his territory with my hand, as if trying to move him without waking him up. But he did wake up. I felt my fingers on his leg interrupting his sleep. He stopped his walkman; he still seemed half in dream world; he apologized for his foot crossing over to my side. When he spoke I noticed he had some sort of British accent. I asked him where he was from. He told me that he was from New Zealand. And after a little bit of conversation, I learned of his history. He was of a Maori tribe and was born on a Maori reservation in Northern New Zealand. Because of poverty and racism, his parents immigrated to the United States when he was five to work at a carpet store that a distant relative owned. He grew up in New Jersey with his parents. He loves America and was movie obsessed. He had been studying acting for two years in Manhattan, supporting himself by waiting tables three nights a week at a restaurant in the West Village. He seemed to talk about his life as if it was a video game, describing the different stages as if they were levels in the game. He told me how he moved here, how he liked it and what he did next to advance. From what I



heard it seemed like he had a fairly hard life, always holding at least two jobs while studying full time. But something in his voice made it seem like he was the most privileged child in the world. He had this naiveté to him that most of us lose early on in our childhood. It was as if he had been dreaming at the movies when the rest of us learned our harsh lessons in life.

He asked me whether I lived in New York. I explained that I had all my belongings with me on the bus and was on my way to a new life in New York. I told him briefly how I dropped out of college to study acting in New York. I quickly asked him where he lived in the city so I could beat him to the housing question, and prepare a lie:

'In SoHo.' He replied.

'No way, where in SoHo?' I asked faking my excitement.

'Well, on Broome Street, between Mott and Mulberry. It's still technically SoHo because its between Canal and Houston, but it's on the East side of Broadway. It's sort of where Little Italy meets Chinatown.'

'No way! I can't believe this. This is totally crazy!' I replied with overly exaggerated amazement. 'What street number?'

'384 Broom Street, apartment number 12. What's so amazing about that?' He asked puzzled.

'This is too weird.'" I say, shaking my head sideways, as if I am having trouble accepting the strangeness of this encounter.

'This is the most bizarre coincidence that has ever happened to me. I have with me the keys to 384 Broome Street. I just got the lease. I'm moving into apartment 8.' I say.

'You're kidding me? You mean Jimmy is moving out? He's been living in that apartment since he was a little boy.' Jason asks me with large, believing eyes.

I didn't expect this complication. I didn't want my lie to have so many far-reaching implications.

'Actually Jimmy is moving to another apartment in the building, I think.' I stuttered gently as I searched for a clean way to resolve the situation. 'I think the landlord gave him a different apartment or something like that. Really, I am not sure what the details are. You see, my aunt got me this apartment. She lives in New York and when I told her I was accepted to an acting school program in the city, she offered to find me an apartment. She mailed me the keys. From speaking with her over the phone, I understand its a pretty friendly neighborhood, but I've never actually seen the apartment.'

Jason swallowed all my words like a baby eating Gerber. There was no questioning, no doubts, no chewing of my words - just an immediate, almost instinctive swallow. I felt as if his ears and throat were large funnels, ready to swallow whatever I chose to pour in.

In a moment of excitement, we pulled out the keys to our apartments, placed the keys to the building one on top of the other, and witnessed a perfect match. We both laughed out loud. I think we even woke up a few people on the bus with all our excitement. We put our keys back in our pockets and there was a moment of odd silence. I

could see Jason's eyes grow brighter. I felt what he was thinking. I might have thought the same if I didn't have my power and life had left me a little more innocent. Jason's head became transparent for one short moment, and I saw the word *destiny* tickling his throat. He dared not voice it. It was too overwhelming for him to speak.

The first half-hour Jason and I spent together was a preview to our two-year relationship. The key match we experienced on the bus ride was the first sign I had to the strength of Jason's belief. This same dynamic continued to govern our relationship until the very end. Not once did I need to use my Period Lie to check my powers. I didn't even suspect they were gone for a second. It was really very simple. I lied and he believed."

It is 7:10 PM. Dale is folded up on the bench, his eyes piercing my mouth. My body is spread out on the bench, casting a long evening shadow on him. The red sun is kissing the tall, distant trees of the park.

"This is crazy. It's as if your powers were doubled or tripled just because of this guy." Dale says in excitement, bobbing his head like a hen.

"Exactly." I say, holding up my pointer finger.

"But why didn't he ever suspect you were lying? Everybody is skeptical sometime. It's too weird." Dale says.

"I agree", I say "It was almost as if Jason was made of a different material than most human beings."

"You mean, because he was so gullible?" Dale asks.

"It's not even that he was just gullible. He didn't recognize lies because he never used them himself. He didn't understand why anybody would want to lie. You know, the natural tendency most of us have to make up stories to look better, or to hide something embarrassing... This tendency didn't exist in him."

"But that's impossible", Dale says, "You yourself said the opposite thing when I told you about my hatred for lies. You told me that it's impossible never to lie. I think you were right. It's as if humans are too weak to abstain from lying, right? That's what you said. That's why lies are so fascinating to me. We all agree that they are wrong but we can't stop using them." Dale bobs his head more subtly now, allowing doubt to affect his motion.

"Right. Everybody lies, and someone who says they never lie is lying in that exact statement."

"Right. Exactly" Dale says, tapping me on the arm in consent with a deep head dip.

"But Jason was special. He was different. I was always puzzled by his nature. It was soothing and confusing at the same time. His behavior seemed inhumane to me, too. It was too noble."

"I think I want to meet this Jason character." Dale says. "I almost want to test him. You know, see if I can get him into a situation where it is so tempting to lie, or at least exaggerate. He sounds weirder than you."

"Well, you can if you want to." I say nonchalantly.

"Why? He still lives in New York? You are still in touch with him?" Dale asks only half jokingly.

"No, he moved to LA about five years ago and we don't keep in touch, but there is a whole tribe of people like him. They are not all called Jason, but they also never lie." I say with a serious voice.

"C'mon, stop pulling my leg. I thought you were being serious with me." Dale says in a half whine.

"I kid you not. There is a very special Aborigine tribe that lives in New Zealand. They are called The Real People. Most of the tribe members live on reservations like Native Americans in the United States. In any case, they lack the ability to lie. It's not that they believe in truth and think lies should be forbidden. They just would never think of lying. Their language doesn't even have a word for it. Some of them have tried to integrate into the Westernized culture in New Zealand, and they have learned what lies mean, how they can be beneficial on job applications, with lovers. But they are still not capable of doing it. It's almost as if the rest of the world has a lie gene that they lack." I watch Dale's pupils enlarge as I speak as if I were dimming the light in the sky.

"That is wild. So what do the Real People do? I'm sure most of them stay on the reservation. Or else, they probably lead miserable lives in New Zealand. They probably get screwed over all the time." Dale refastens his hands around his legs.

"You're absolutely right. Imagine trying to get your first job, even the most basic job like washing dishes at a restaurant. If you cannot lie, you will have to say you have no experience. No one will hire you, and you will never be able to get any experience, so you will keep telling every employer that you have no experience and you will continue to be rejected. Think about it, we all get our first break in a field by playing with our words, pumping up our experiences, telling stories of friends as if they were our own. Imagine not being able to do that. We would all remain on step one. We would probably never be given a chance. That's how most of the Real People live. They never get a chance because from the start they admit they know nothing. They live in great poverty. In major cities such as Sidney and Melbourne, they even have their own ghettos. They rarely leave the ghetto. Some Real children are born there and don't leave their poor neighborhood until they are adults. As long as they stay in their ghetto, they know they will be told the truth."

Dale scratches his chin with two fingers as if he had an itch. "Even though this is all very sad," he says, repeating the scratch "In some weird way it makes me happy to know they exist." His eyes become small, focusing on the distance as if he can see through me, as if he is staring at miles and miles of air.

"But let's get back to my story now." I say as I jerk my body forward, as if trying to rid us of our abstract thoughts and return to the details of my life. I secure an elastic around my hair. I use exaggerated movements, holding my elbows high as my fingers wrap and lock tighten my hair. I want him to refocus on me.

"OK, but there is one thing I am still confused about in your story." Dale says as his eyebrows diverge. "If Jason is such a strong

believer, then what happened to that poor guy whose apartment you took with a lie?"

I smile, once again relieved that Dale was back in my world.

"Jimmy, you mean?" I ask.

I pause for a moment and a picture of Jimmy emerges in my mind. I see him in front of me now with his thick well-trimmed white beard and whiskery mustache, standing outside his Italian restaurant on the first floor of our building, greeting his customers with a warm Sicilian smile.

"Jimmy was all right. My lie did impact him strongly, but it ended up improving his situation. When I lied to Jason about the apartment my aunt had rented for me, I knew nothing about New York rent. Of course, it turns out that housing in New York was a lot more complicated than I ever imagined."

"Tell me about it," Dale says with a smile, lifting only one corner of his mouth. Dale releases his hand lock and places his elbow on his knee. He is relieved to have landed on such a familiar subject as New York rent. I think this is one of the few moments in which he feels he can contribute, converse, relate.

I clear my throat. I do not wish to speak of the overly discussed topic of skyrocketing New York rents, bargain rent-control situations. I only mentioned it to clarify the story about Jimmy. I move on.

"Yes. I didn't know what I was talking about on that bus ride. I must have used the wrong terminology for everything. But I guess since Jason was such a strong believer, everything changed in the building, and it all happened according to New York housing laws. It turned out that Jimmy was one of the few Italians still living on Mulberry Street in the neighborhood of his childhood. By the time I moved in one floor below Jason, most of the tenants were Chinese. Apparently, Jimmy's grandmother started renting apartment number 8 in 1896. Since then, Jimmy's mother was born there, as well as Jimmy and his four brothers and sisters. Because of rent control and his long family history in the building, Jimmy was paying \$25 a month in rent. The landlord, an Orthodox Jew from Brooklyn, was doing all in his power to kick him out and rent the apartment to a new tenant that would pay over \$1,000 a month. But Jimmy had no intentions of ever moving out. He ran the Italian restaurant on the first floor of the building, Umberto's Clam house, and accepted the reality of being one of the last Italians to remain in the historical neighborhood of his childhood. He was happy to die right where he was born. In any case, my apartment lie to Jason swirled around in this historic feud and worked its magic. The landlords ended up reaching a deal with Jimmy that took effect the day I moved in. They agreed that Jimmy would move into a renovated apartment that was slightly larger, but two stories higher. Jimmy gladly agreed because he was getting more space. And the landlord was happy because it was easier to rent out apartments on lower floors in a building with no elevators.

In any case, all the technicalities fell into place after speaking my lie and the residents of my building were in good spirits when I arrived. Jimmy and I became friends. He introduced me to many people in the neighborhood and always helped me fix things in the apartment. Whenever Jason and I ate at Jimmy's restaurant, he would join us at



our table and tell us stories about how Little Italy used to be vibrant in the days of his childhood. He would tell us endless stories about the traditional neighborhood feasts, the stupid tricks he and his friends used to get away with in the streets, the few times when they did get caught and word would get back to their mothers. Jimmy would always end his emotional tales by blinking a few times and then rolling his eyes as if closing a chapter of his memory. Then he would say how different things were now with a cracked voice. "Everything changed, you know? Now that Chinatown keeps expanding and all the Italians moved to the suburbs. He would stand up, tap Jason on the back and tell one of his waiters to bring us over two espressos and a Tiramisú on the house."

"Sounds like a character." Dale says.

"Yes, he is, but I am getting sidetracked, again. I still have to tell you how my skill developed during the Jason years and we barely got started."

"OK, relax. I will ask fewer questions. I promise." Dale.

I cannot resist but to smile at his boyishness. My smile tilts my head sideways as it climbs down my neck, tickling my chin. Dale reaches out with his arms and stretches his back. It cracks. A sweet moment of silence follows. We both digest and linger on the same abstract tickling thoughts, the soothing sensation of a shared experience.

I tap him on the back "OK, let's start circling the park. It's starting to get dark and it will probably take us at least an hour to go all the way around. He stands. His skin looks golden in the red

sun, almost the color of peanut butter. He offers me his hand. I hold it and he pulls, lifting me from the bench. I feel as if he has lifted me into a float, a dream in red air. We walk hand in hand to the beginning of the peripheral path. I feel the moisture gluing our hand grip, the pulse beating through the veins in his hand. I shiver. I free my hand from his palm in a swift motion, almost as a reflex. We both glance at the gradually ascending path ahead of us, the road that will be the background to the Jason years.

# 11

With the sun still watching us out of the corner of its eye, we naturally begin the course of circling the park, walking north. I look at our feet. We each draw our right foot at the exact same time, then the left. Our steps are perfectly synchronized.

"I had lied to Jason about being accepted to the same acting school he was attending, and most weekday morning we would wake up in bed together and take the subway to school. Our classes were different since I took introductory courses that Jason had taken two years earlier. I was surprised to discover that most of the students at our school were not frequent liars. I always thought that actors were professional liars. But I soon found out that most of them were sincerely in search of truth. Good actors, I learned, found a closeness to truth that I found very admirable. You see, lies were viewed as an obstacle to acting. One needed to find one's true self and be able to ignore it when assuming different characters. Everybody at school was always extremely aware of their gestures, employing them intentionally, never subconsciously. Most students stood and spoke in the most neutral way, assuming no character when they were off stage. I know this sounds counter-intuitive. At least it sounded so to me at first. I mean actors lie all the time from a certain perspective. Every role they play, every line they speak, can be seen as false since it is not there own."

"What do you mean 'from a certain perspective'? It is all false in the end" Dale interjects with a sturdy voice as if he is the ultimate authority on the matter. "Actors take lines that were invented by

some writer and pretend that those words are their own. C'mon, there is nothing true about what they do."

"But actors *don't* lie. They don't pretend that they are a character. They become that character and assume its gestures." I reply.

"No." Dale says. I am surprised by his instinctive response. I have never heard him voice the word 'no'. The word does not leave his mouth with the required intonation and I feel as if he has only recently begun to use it. It sounds like a curse word he is speaking hesitantly for the first time, still testing if it fits the palette of his mouth.

"Maybe they convince everyone in the audience that they are the character they are acting. *That* I can understand. Hell, maybe they even convince themselves that they are that character. But they are still only themselves. It doesn't matter how persuasive their acting is."

"Listen, Dale, you are being narrow minded. I expect you to understand by now how words and perception alter reality. Actors do not lie on stage. Let me give you an example. When something unexpected happens during a performance, like a baby in the audience starts crying, or a dog strolls onto an outdoor stage, the actors will respond in a way that is true to their character, not true to their personality. As far as I am concerned, this is proof that they are the characters they act. Think about it, their instincts become those of the character. They are the characters they are acting more than they are themselves."

Dale looks into my eyes and I can tell he disagrees. I do not really care right now. I wish to proceed. I feel I am wasting time.

Dale lowers his head and looks at his feet and the passing asphalt. "I think I understand what you are saying. Within their lies, as actors, they are truthful, consistent. But I still think that the whole damn thing, the entire show is one big lie."

"In any case, I found many aspects of acting school very educational. Many classes focused on breaking down the superficial layers we all wear and discovering the naked soul within. During class exercises, students often cried and experienced dramatic emotional breakdowns. This was all part of gaining awareness of our past, our behavior, our interaction with other people, our reasons for behaving in such ways. Only after such breakdowns, only after understanding oneself could an actor be free to assume other characters.

I did very poorly at school. I never broke down. I never searched for the truth. I found it very difficult to drop my natural gestures and assume ones that were foreign to my character. Because I was constantly lying, because I had been lying for so many years, I found I was completely unaware of my nature. I could not cancel my innate responses and improvise the behavior of the characters I studied."

"Like your eyebrow thing?" Dale asks, nodding his head as he walks.

"What eyebrow thing?" I ask, attempting to target my vision on his face even though our footsteps are no longer in sync. His head is moving up and down as he walks in a rhythm that is different from mine.

"You know, the way you move your eyebrows up and down when you speak. But only when you speak, not when you listen or just look." Dale smiles. He feels shy speaking to me about me.

"I never realized I do that." I say, trying to become conscious of my eyebrow movement as I speak. I suddenly realize he is right. As I just spoke, I think I felt them dropping lower on my forehead, stopping right above my eyes. I consciously restore them to their natural position.

Dale smiles as I speak. I think he felt my thoughts. I think he noticed that I followed my eyebrow movement in my mind, restoring them to their neutral position with a mental command. Dale realizes that I witnessed their movement for the first time. He is laughing.

"Don't be silly. Of course you knew you move your eyebrows when you speak. I mean how could you not notice? They swim on your forehead like water snakes every time you talk. It's almost like they are two additional lips on your head that rise and fall, stiffen and relax as you talk."

I stop walking. Dale stops walking. I stand on my toes and look in his eyes from up close like an eye doctor. I see my reversed reflection in his pupils. I look at my reflection and think of what he said. I enjoy his visual comment. I drink it slowly like champagne. Slowly an image develops in my mind. I see water snakes dancing on his forehead. I scratch the side of my neck. I look away. I continue to walk. Dale follows.

"That was very interesting what you said. Anyway, I think I should get back to acting school now."

I lower my vision to the street level and look at the large field of groomed grass to our left. I am hoping the green will wash my eyes, erase the water snakes. I look back at Dale. He is still wearing the same strong smile on his face. I wipe my forehead to rid myself of distractions.

"In any case, I think that the most important lesson I learned in my years at acting school was not about myself but about others. In one of my classes we were instructed to study the behavior of the people around us all the time. Each student kept a journal on the behavior of their friends or strangers they noticed on the subway and in restaurants. The Professor taught us that every person always had objectives and strategies to attaining their objectives. She said we all did this subconsciously all the time and that to act successfully, we must deeply understand our character's objectives and strategies. While preparing scenes in class, we had to write out long lists of our character's main objectives and strategies for each scene. One time I was preparing for a scene that took place in a nineteenth century British aristocratic society. I played Annabelle, a passionate young woman that kept failing at playing the bourgeoisie's games of wit because she was too passionate, too sensitive. So as I read the play, I wrote down her objectives and strategies. Annabelle's main objective was to be loved and therefore to feel alive. I discovered she ultimately needed to feel alive all the time. I had to write down all the implications of this objective and different strategies for achieving it. In one scene, my objective was to make my mother scream at me. In another scene, my objective was to make my lover cry. While acting, I had to keep my goal in mind and try different strategies. In one scene, I compulsively fixed my hair and swallowed my words, trying to annoy my mother until she

screamed. I thought her reaction would make me realize that she cared. I failed. I think my mother caught on and ignored me purposely, speaking her lines nonchalantly as if I wasn't even present in the room. In another scene, I tried to touch my lover's soul by speaking softly while looking in his eyes. I thought that my emotionally soothing words would pierce him and make him cry. I failed again. I don't know why. Who knows what his objectives were or how he was interpreting my approach. Actually, I almost always failed at reaching my character's goals, whether I was improvising or reading lines from a famous play. You see, in real life, I always relied on my powers to trigger action. In class or on stage, I felt naked without them. I did not know any other way to make people react.

"Was Jason any good? I mean, he barely knew what a lie was. Can someone like him act at all?" Dale asks.

I look up at Dale. I notice his prior smile has finally vanished. He is now mine, deep in my story.

"Jason is probably the greatest actor I have ever known. I sat in on a few of his exercises in class and I also saw him act in two school plays. He is passionate and his voice is powerful. But most importantly he is real. I spoke to him about it a million times, I think. He always claimed that he refined his skills by observing strangers interact, defining their strategies and writing them in his journal. But I knew it was simply his talent. During a scene, during any scene he would fight for his objectives as if his life depended on it. He would deeply and honestly want what his character wanted. It was amazing to watch him. He would throw himself at his goal, try strategy after strategy, regardless of how cliché or absurd it might



seem to others. Some would fail and he would quickly change his approach."

"Did he ever make it? I mean as an actor?" Dale asks enthusiastically with wide-open eyes.

"Wait, I promise you I will get to that. But first let me tell you how our relationship developed, how he affected my skill." I look at him, though my head is stationed straight ahead and only my pupils shift towards him in my eye sockets.

"You must let me tell my story the way I think is best."

"OK, I'm sorry, go on." Dale taps my elbow as he apologizes as if asking me again to lighten up.

I swing my neck to the left and give him my face. I pause. I am silent for 10 seconds as I continue to walk. I restore my vision to the path ahead.

"Once again, I neglected the Blue and Yellow notebooks and stopped contemplating my powers. I went to school four days a week and luckily, I didn't need to hold a job. Eventually, I elaborated a lie to Jason about my aunt paying my rent, my tuition and giving me some pocket money too. I made her into a seventy-year-old lonely widow living on the Upper West Side who loved Broadway plays and was extremely supportive of my acting aspirations. I explained this all to Jason, saying she had no one else in the world, not even any interests, and that although we were not close (I almost never saw her), she enjoyed financing me and following my ups and downs in life as if I were a stock.

Jason worked in the evenings as a bartender in The Village and I took long lonely walks in the city whenever he was at work. I had no friends but Jason. When I was not with him, I was alone. But really, I feel that during this time in my life, I was closer to society than at any other time. I did not spend any time studying my skill or devising plans, but I constantly observed people. Everywhere I listened to people's conversations and then deepened their characters by writing in my journal when I could no longer eavesdrop. I tried to figure out their goals and objectives. You know, she wants him to pay more attention to her, that's why she is speaking so loudly in her girlfriend's ear. He is insecure and upset that she is stealing all the attention at the dinner table. His strategy is to insult her and put her down in front of their friends. He uses brief but lethal comments that seem to hurt her deep inside. His other strategy is to be rude to the waiter. What an asshole. That strategy isn't working at all either. I observed and wrote, read what I wrote and suggested new strategies, analyzed deeper, built entire scenes in my mind and on paper that manifested the strategies my characters assumed. I wrote many pages a day, reading over my words at least three times before I put them to rest. I compiled an entire journal of observed behaviors and invented lives. Through these exercises, my vision grew clear. I saw helplessness and misery in people's eyes. I saw anger, sadness, and a lot of jealousy. And even though I spoke to very few people, I felt fully integrated in the human experience of life.

One Saturday afternoon when Jason was at work, I decided to rollerblade to school to pick up a scene I wanted to read over at home. After picking it up, I sat on the steps of my school to put my rollerblades back on my feet. It was a cold winter day and the streets of midtown were abandoned and surreally gray. The cold wind

had wiped out all humans from the city and the rigid tall buildings surrounding me were the last stubborn evidence of civilization. I decided not to return my walkman to my ears and leisurely blade downtown, soaking in the bizarre atmosphere. I looked in all directions as I bladed on the street close to the curb. I was used to the midtown of weekdays, where streets and sidewalks are busy with aggressive taxis honking, vendors with lines, men and woman rushing, colliding, all dressed in suits. It seemed like this weekend, midtown was another city, a different reality. I turned left on to a street that was further south than my usual blading route. As no music cluttered my ears, I became extremely aware of every sound, every graffiti slogan and uneven sidewalk. This street had no stores. A UPS warehouse lined the block with trucks showing their evil fronts through open garage doors like metal teeth of a monster. The sidewalk was disrupted with many subway ventilation openings, releasing black fumes into the gray cold air. I came upon about a dozen homeless people, bundled up in dirty blankets, sitting over ventilation openings, warming up in the subway fumes. Some were sleeping; some were just sitting, guarding their shopping carts filled with junk in plastic bags. They all seemed drained of life. I focused on an old man with a square face sitting on the pavement leaning against the brick wall. His long hair and dense beard were the same gray as the sky. His pink bluish lips were firmly sealed creating deep wrinkles around his mouth, displaying his weakness, his fragility. He sat passively staring at a young woman with several scarves tied around her head and large red lesions on her face and bare neck. I couldn't see her lips. I assume they were the color of her skin. It seemed as if they had been erased and only pink skin remained adorning her dark mouth hole. Then I saw more faces of misery, more wrinkles, more cuts crusted with dried blood, many more eyes that said nothing, not because they had no feeling, but because they were too weak and too

cold to exude. I wanted them to talk so I could learn about their strategies and objectives. But even though they were sitting pretty close to each other, no one was speaking. They all had this blasé look on their faces as I walked by. They didn't even seem to mind the cold and no one asked me for change as I maneuvered my way amongst their cardboard shacks. I do not know why they left such a strong impression on me, but they did. As I bladed passed them, my mind became flooded with technical questions about their lives. "Are some of them lovers? If they are, where and when do they have sex? What do the women do when they have their periods?" One block further south, I decided I wanted to help them. It was not a deep urge I felt. It was a slightly more calculated feeling. I knew that with my powers, all I needed to do was plant a few words in some anonymous ear for them to earn a warm bed for the remainder of the winter. As I continued to descend downtown on my wheels, I thought of ways I could help them. I thought of my past lies in different variations, but none seemed to apply to their case. You see, I didn't even know their names, so I couldn't really help any specific one of them. On the other hand, I was too scared to lie an abstract, *city-sweeping* lie about some non-profit organization providing all the homeless in New York with housing and jobs. At the time, the economy was still pretty sluggish and the city kept cutting back its funding for social programs. Nobody would believe me if I told them that homeless numbers were going down or that the city found an adequate solution to the problem.

That same night, Jason slept over at my apartment. After sex, as we both lied in bed in a world of sensation, beginning to follow the inviting finger of sleep, I nonchalantly asked Jason a mini-lie question:

'Did you see that new homeless shelter that opened on Mott Street?'

'Nope' he replied, tempted by sleep. Then he grew curious as to where I was going with this. Or maybe he was just surprised to discover that these were my thoughts at this particular moment.

'Why do you ask?' He questioned me.

'Oh, I don't know. I just noticed it as I was blading home earlier. They opened this shelter and soup kitchen for the homeless. I think it's affiliated with that church on Mott and Prince. I think it's one of those deals where they let you spend the night and then they give you a nice meal the next day.'

'That's good, I guess.' Jason replied, looking to return to the path towards sleep.

'Yes, it is. They were setting up tables for a food line as I passed by, and I was amazed at how many homeless people were already there, waiting outside the church. There must have been two hundred people there.'

"That's great" Jason said as he dug his ear deeper into my chest, adjusting himself into a more comfortable sleeping position. I mumbled some more words, trying to make a point out of the lie I had delivered to his ears.

"It's so amazing how the homeless always know where to go for shelter. Don't you think? I mean, I always assumed that they were an unorganized group of people, that most of them do not know each other. You know how they always seem to be fighting for begging

spaces and change, never sharing it. It's a survival game for them. And besides, they don't have phones or addresses to receive mail. They can't check out the website for recent charity events. But then they always know where the free food is. They always show up. It's amazing. I guess that type of news travels fast. I guess they meet on the subway or street corners or somewhere else and pass it on. Jason, don't you think it's weird? Jason?' As I expected, he had fallen asleep.

The next morning, a Sunday, we awoke at 11:00 AM, and walked over to Cafe Gitane on Mott St. for brunch. I purposely suggested Cafe Gitane because it is located right across the street from the church and my invented shelter. I wanted to see what the many little architects of my imagination had erected at the sight. The cafe was rather crowded with trendy young urbanites and we had to wait for a table. We sipped our Cafe Au Lait on the blue bench outside accompanied by a smooth morning cigarette. As we drank and smoked, I cuddled in Jason's chest and enjoyed the unusually warm winter sun tingling my pale face. We both stared at the flocks of homeless people in line across the street, maybe one hundred in total, as a group of a dozen volunteers served them food from a tent that was put up outside the church.

The homeless in line were dirty and poorly dressed. Their colors looked faded compared to the bright red brick wall behind them. They went through the line, collecting their coffee, eggs and rolls, engaging in conversation, some just reading the paper. Their manner was strikingly civilized and warm. They all seemed to be in good spirits, bathing in the winter sunshine.

'Pretty trippy, isn't it?' Jason turned to me, breaking our silent stare.

'What are you talking about?' For a second there, I thought he was reading my thoughts, realizing that I created this great get-together with the prior evening's lie.

'You know what I'm talking about. I see you staring too, and I know the way you think.' Jason, of course, was once again spotting people. He was innocently studying the characters across the street, trying to infer their objectives and strategies.

I smiled when I realized his comment was an innocent observation, but I was still unsure if he was speaking about the people at the cafe or the homeless at the church.

'Are you spotting them, or them?' I asked pointing to the cafe and then the church.

'That's exactly it.'" He said. "See, I knew you would see it too. The homeless people in this soup kitchen look almost exactly like these trendy artists in Cafe Gitane. I mean, they are even dressed similarly. If you looked at both these scenes on two different screens, you could switch their soundtracks and make a pretty funny movie out of it.'

'What do you mean *switch the words*?' I asked.

'I mean, it would be *really* funny to dub the conversation a table is having in Gitane with the conversation some of the bums are having across the street. Here, listen to the conversation of this table here to our right. Sshhhh.' He placed his index finger on his lips and opened his eyes wide to show me his enhanced attention.

Jason and I stopped speaking and listened in silence for a few seconds. The table consisted of three SoHo characters, each sipping a Cafe au Lait and eating dried Meusli with fruit and yogurt. A middle aged man, with fluffy feather blond hair dressed in black with a peacock's posture; a skinny man in his early thirties, also blond, crossing his legs rather femininely and wearing black corduroys and a tight black turtle neck that revealed his abdomen and erect tiny nipples, his hand resting high on the woman's upper thigh; a strikingly beautiful woman with exotic green eyes, perfectly arched pointy eyebrows and a gray cashmere sweater that wrapped around her thin waist and tied in a bow just below her breasts. The woman was resting her elbows on the round table, her wrists touching each other and her open hands holding her head by its chin as if it were a precious vase. The older man was speaking loudly with a strong German accent about a photo exhibit that the younger man seemed to have recently held. His language was descriptive and articulate, and every time he used a big word, it would sound more like German than English. His speech was monotonous, but slowly paced, as if he was giving cooking directions. But the seriousness of his eyes and voice made it seem like he was giving commands to his troopers. The young couple listened closely to his remarks, the man confirming with little nods of his head, the woman looking at him piercingly, accentuating her lips forward, as if preparing to give a kiss.

'Now, look at that threesome' Jason remarked, pointing to three homeless people that just completed the last station in the food line and moved to sit in the sun. Again, the combination was two men and a woman. A white skinny man with holes in his face that reminded me of Edvard Munch's The Scream; a fat Black man in overalls that looked like Fat Albert; a Puerto-Rican woman in sweat pants and a flamboyant



curly blond wig. Her wig was too large for her head, falling low on her forehead, almost covering her dark eyes. All three wore army winter coats in faded shades of khaki with holes and patches. They were sitting on the sidewalk curb, the black man's stomach spilling into the street, the white guy talking as if chewing on his inner cheeks. The woman pretended to be listening but was staring with huge eyes at her plastic plate piled with food. They conversed rather passively, slowly in-taking food and releasing words. Like the threesome from the cafe, they too seemed extremely gentle.

I looked at them from the blue bench across the street and tried to make out what the white guy was saying from the movement of his lips. Occasionally, he placed a half filled spoon in his mouth, letting the food swirl among his tongue and inner cheeks as if he had no teeth to chew with. I couldn't make out any of his words, as his mouth opened and closed like a hand-operated sock puppet. Jason was targeting them with his eyes as well, watching their most subtle movements and trying to reveal objectives and strategies. We could still hear the strong commanding voice of the German man entering our ears from behind, praising and criticizing different exhibitions and inferring theories about contemporary art. The woman interrupted him with a question.

'Can you imagine that white homeless guy talking like that? And then having the lady with the weird wig say in the voice of the Gitane woman 'Do you know what is showing at the MOMA right now? My sister is flying in from London tomorrow and I would love to go with her. It's quite embarrassing. I actually haven't been to the MOMA in ages.'

Jason tapped on my shoulder and I turned to look at him. He made a prima Donna face, moved his hands on his scalp as if he had long hair and repeated the Gitane woman's question about the MOMA, exaggerating her British accent.

We both laughed at his funny imitation. We once again looked at the homeless threesome, while listening to the conversation of the threesome at Gitan. It was remarkable. The gestures of the homeless seemed to perfectly match the words of the Gitane group. We both stared with amazement, not talking, out of fear of missing one line of text. When the homeless woman bummed a cigarette from a walker by and lit it, the Gitane woman began smoking as well. It was a perfect fit; they even inhaled and exhaled simultaneously. Jason and I felt as if we were given a great gift, as if someone had put these two parties close to us to provide us with an awakening or insight, so we could study their similarities.

Only after about fifteen minutes of silent observation, I remembered that this entire encounter was the result of my lie. I was the one who gave Jason and I this glance, this gift. I was the one that erected the whole charity event by voicing a few words in Jason's half sleeping ear. I looked at these contrasting yet similar scenes again and felt a deep sense of satisfaction. You see, Dale. In fact, I was the one giving the homeless threesome their food. I was the one giving them this privileged Sunday morning. I granted them the opportunity that the cafe threesome takes for granted. I was the force of justice, taking the pie that was sliced unevenly and re-slicing it into equal pieces of a joyous Sunday morning."

"This is crazy" Jason says. My ankle twists sideways and I almost fall. I keep walking as nothing happened. Hiding my pain in my teeth.

I look to my right. I see Jason walking beside me. And then his features begin converting to Dale. He stiffens; his frizzy brown hair corrects to a smooth dirty blond.

"What?" I ask in an instant, trying to clear my mind of its wild imagery with the release of a word.

"This is crazy." Dale says.

Gradually, Dale and the park come into full focus. I look down at the black road in an attempt to finally separate memory and reality. As the asphalt passes underneath my walking feet, I decide: Dale and the present are to my left. Jason, my story and memories are to the right. I visualize this separation. It is easy to remember the sides since Dale is to my left. I shift my head leftwards and look at Dale.

"I know" I say, "It is crazy."

"No, I'm serious. Do you understand how powerful you are? With a few words, you made this huge event happen. Do you understand how many people's lives you've changed?" Dale's eyes are frozen, locked on me as our bodies are in full bouncy motion, continuing forward. I cannot tell if his wide eyes are accusing or admiring."

"I mean, did you actually talk to these people? You do understand that you affected all their lives and their families in a weird way too?" His hand is open and his arm is stretched forward leading the way. Dale's eyes are frozen. Now he definitely sounds accusatory.

"Actually, yes. I did speak with them. I did find out how I changed them. This is exactly what I was about to tell you next. Just like

you right now, I was also very surprised by the power of my lie. I wanted to interact with these people. I suggested to Jason that instead of waiting for our table on the bench outside of Gitan, we should eat at the tents by the church for free.

So, we paid for our Cafe Au Lait and joined the food line. Instead of having a Brioche, we feasted on eggs made from powder and day-old rolls. Most of the homeless had finished eating and there was more than enough food to go around. The staff was eating by this time as well, so we did not feel like we were depriving anyone needy by joining in. We sat on the sidewalk across from the cafe, and felt surprisingly comfortable. We spoke with some of the homeless and volunteers. They explained that this event had been in the planning for months and will now occur regularly every Sunday. I asked some of the homeless how they knew about what the church was organizing and they said that they had seen ads for this event in shelters.

I remember feeling genuinely happy. But stronger than joy was my feeling of empowerment. You are absolutely right to be amazed, Dale. This is shocking. How could my Shelter Lie penetrate history so deeply, and drastically change so many people's lives? What were the limits to the changes I could bring about?

I told Jason that I wanted to sleep alone that night. I sat at my desk all evening, trying to think of the logistics that were involved in the execution of my lie. After I spoke to Jason in bed on the prior evening, the lives of over two hundred people must have instantly changed. The homeless that attended must have instantly had conversations about this event planted in their minds. All the volunteers had been working on this project for months. The families

and friends of these volunteers must've spent less time with them during those months.

Throughout the night, my mind raced in all directions. I tried to consider how I changed the path of each person I met. I tried to think of what their lives would have been like if I hadn't voiced my lie. And then I thought of their lives after my lie, how I shifted them to a new path in life that could lead to a million other places. The implications were too great. I thought of a girl with a brown ponytail that served me eggs in the food line. I remembered her telling another volunteer that she was an actress. What if because of my lie, she worked late one night on this project instead of going out with her friend to a bar? What if that night, if she would have gone to the bar with her friend, she would have met a producer working on a new Hollywood film, looking for a girl just like her to star in his new movie? What if he would have casted her, they would have fallen in love, made dozens of films together and lived happily ever after? All this will not happen because of me. The minute I told Jason about that damn church, I destined the ponytail girl to waiting tables for the rest of her life, just waiting for that career break that I prevented.

Then, I stopped this self-inflicted guilt trip and tried to contradict my feelings with an opposite hypothesis. If I hadn't lied to Jason, one of the homeless guys wouldn't have come to eat. Instead, he would have stayed drunk throughout the day, getting off the subway at the wrong station in a really bad neighborhood. Maybe he would have ended up murdered on some street corner with no one to claim his body. Maybe because he heard of this event, he got off the subway at the Spring Street stop, walked over to the church on Prince and Mott and his life was saved. But then, wait, maybe that's where

he was murdered and if he never would have heard about the free food, he would continue downtown and be saved?

These thoughts were too scary and pointless. I knew that destiny did not exist, and if it did, I was its sole designer. In a way, I decided what happened to hundreds of strangers with my words. I was the writer, director and producer of some people's movie of life. Or maybe just one movie of many lives."

"But wait a minute." Dale speaks with a stretched out hand once again. "The lies you had told me of before today, they were different from this one. They affected people's life in a major way; your Mother Lie, your Kevin Lie, but they never affected strangers. They didn't seem to ripple through society like the Shelter Lie. I don't get it. What changed all of a sudden?"

"Jason is what changed." I wait for my words to land on Dale before continuing. "Jason, who never lied or suspected lies in anyone. His deep belief in me, made my powers so much stronger. Even though I tried to tell low impact lies during this time, my words seemed to lose their focus. Instead of impacting the one person I was lying about, they would spill over and change hundreds of people's lives I didn't even know."

"Right, but he shouldn't really change anything. Your lies always came true when people believed you. If people believe you, your lie becomes reality; if they don't, it stays a lie. This is a black and white rule. I don't understand how Jason could make your lies

stronger. By believing you, all Jason could do is make all your lies become reality. Right?"

'No, not right, Dale. This is where things get a little more complicated." I say slowly, still undecided if I want to reveal the more technical aspect of my skill.

"Shoot. I'm all ears." He points to his ears. His body twists to the right, facing me. He is almost walking sideways.

"OK, first of all, nothing is black and white about belief. Nothing. No one just believes or disbelieves. Every human has both faith and doubt inside. When you hear a statement you cannot prove or disprove, even if you choose to believe it, you contain a little bit of doubt towards it as well. Let me give you an example. A politician tells you he will reform his country's labor laws or end an ongoing war. You have two options. You can believe him or not believe him. So let's say that this politician has delivered on his promises in the past. Every public promise you have heard him make, he fulfilled. You choose to believe him because of his track record. Maybe also because he seems trustworthy on TV or because he reminds you of someone you once knew that was very trustworthy. You still do not have 100% faith in him. You have, let's say, 80% faith in him because you feel so strongly about his past. But you still remain with 20% percent doubt. Since you can't prove he will deliver, a drop of doubt remains hard and dense inside you."

"OK, in politics, maybe you are right. I mean, I cannot believe anyone one hundred percent if I don't know them personally. But I always totally believe my brother. Throughout our lives we've been through so much stuff together. He's the closest person to me in the

world. I know him inside out. He has absolutely no reason or interest in lying to me." Dale says, ending his sentence on a high tone, as if posing a threat to my theory.

"Oh, come on, Dale. Don't drag us one step backwards again. We have been through this already. I thought we agreed that everybody lies and that we all agree that it is morally wrong, but we still all lie."

"Right." he says still keeping his back straight and arm outreached, maintaining a physical defense towards his statement as he walks.

"Right. So if we all lie, we cannot help ourselves, although your brother might be a great guy, maybe even a saint, and he might love you very much, I'm sure he lies to you, no matter how small or how rare these instances might be. They will and do happen. Even with your brother"

"Fine." Dale says, clenching his teeth.

"So, knowing this, you're not capable of believing him 100%. Don't take this personally. Everybody is like this. Every trusting suburban house wife sometimes doubts her husband's whereabouts; every priest sometimes questions the existence of God; every great cynic plays with the thought that the love someone expressed towards them was indeed sincere. We all dance in the game between faith and doubt. Towards every statement or notion that cannot be proven, we feel them both: faith and doubt. No matter how little the quantity of each, they are always with us.



So, you see, the power of my lie is determined by this percentage game. The higher the percentage of faith my listener holds for my story, the stronger my powers will be in the execution of that lie. If my listener has more than 50% doubt in my lies, they will never be executed."

"OK," Dale says, nonchalantly. "I know how the story connects from here. I'm sure this is a Yellow book entry somehow. Let's see.." he scratches his chin and points it to the sky.

"But Jason is different, right? He was born of a tribe that cannot comprehend lies, so he never suspects them. Jason has no doubt."

"Exactly." My eyes light up. "Jason is the exception to this rule. When I whispered in his ear about the new shelter for the homeless on Prince Street, as always, he had 100% faith in my words."

"Wow!" Dale says. I see the word "wow" fly out of his mouth like a butterfly. The two 'W's turn sideways and act as wings. The "o" become the elongated body of the butterfly, moving forward, cutting through air as the 'W's flap. I watch the butterfly, a product of Dales amazement, fly ahead of us and disappear over the hill in the path straight ahead.

# 12

Dale and I are approaching the infamous, steep Central Park hill. To our right is a path that exits the park into Harlem. Looking in that direction, I see broad avenues, tall buildings that look like hospitals and people loitering on the street, burdened by the heat, drinking, playing, throwing tired words at each other. I look at the path straight ahead; my eyes lose focus in the asphalt covering the hill. It looks like a waterfall of gray stones is coming straight at us. I think of how many times I have circled Central Park on my own, each time reaching this point with the exact same feeling of exhilaration. This is the first time I am circling the park with a companion. I look at Dale and read the same feeling of exhilaration in his eyes. I think of how bicyclers ascend this hill, always lifting their asses from their bike seats, struggling to maintain the circular motion of their feet in the face of the steepness, eventually stepping off their bikes and walking the last part of the hill. I think of all the rollerbladers and their ascent, sweating and struggling sideways as they fight to advance forward. They look at the bicyclers with envy because they cannot remove their wheels. They are left with no choice but to continue climbing. I see them now ascending, breathing heavily, making their bizarre, jerky movements sideways.

Dale and I begin the climb with no hesitation. I consider walking in silence for the remainder of the up-hill to preserve my breath. I see Dale looking at me. A drop of sweat is making its way from his temple to his chin and then to the pavement. I feel the urge to continue.

"Sometimes I think that the year and a half I spent with Jason was the best time of my life. I truly felt satisfied. I almost thought I understood why I received these powers. When I was with Jason, I lived my life like a sitcom character. I always did the right thing, not because I was told to or because I feared being caught doing wrong. I helped others almost instinctively. Everything I did was rooted in my own desires. This phase proved to me that I was good at my core. That deep inside me rested beauty."

"So", Dale says and I feel the warmth of his breath hitting the side of my face, "are you telling me you actually continued to help others?"

"Oh, yes. After the far-reaching implications of my Shelter Lie, I thought I had found my purpose in life. I was convinced I had been given my powers in order to make the world a better place. I helped someone new almost every day. I developed this basic routine. I attended acting classes five days a week. I would complete all my seminars by four or five. In the afternoons, I would randomly walk the streets of Manhattan. I would walk in search of a charitable project. Once I found one, I would prepare a Help Lie in my mind on the subway ride home. Jason would usually arrive around 8:30 or 9:00 PM. We would either cook dinner or go out to a restaurant. Then, we would return to my apartment and have sex. After sex, Jason would lie on my chest with his ear close to my mouth. He could never speak after he had his orgasm. He would become extremely peaceful. All he could do was listen. I would wait a short while, maybe five or ten minutes until I caught my breath. Then I would start funneling lies into his dormant ear. I would gently pour into his ear the plan I had formed on the subway. I would lie about the wonderful things I had seen on the street or heard of through a friend or the radio. I

always spoke softly; I would feed him my words through my mouth and my emotions through my chest. I would place one hand on his back and one hand on his head, playing with his hair with the tips of my fingers. I felt my words vibrating inside his quiet body. I sensed their movement through both my hands.

For example, one time, I spent the afternoon talking to a homeless guy in Times Square about his misfortune. He told me how he got AIDS from a blood transfusion; his wife took the kid and moved in with her sister once the red lesions started appearing on his neck and arms. He never heard from them again... the whole story of how he ended up on the streets. That night, after dinner and sex, I asked Jason if he read in the Metro section of The New York Times about the homeless guy from Philadelphia by the name of David Walker, who won the New York State Lottery. Of course, Jason did not answer. He just listened. Softly, I massaged his ear with the words of David's sad story. I told him how David spent his last dollar on a lottery ticket. How remarkable I found it that a man left with nothing still had some form of hope. He still believed in the lottery. I made up a beautiful ending about David's victory. How he was quoted in the paper saying that he planned on taking care of himself and his family with a portion of the money and donating the rest to non-profit organizations that help AIDS patients and their families. Every night after Jason fell asleep, I continued the lies silently in my head. In this case I imagined David's new life, his future home, his dedication to helping others. It's really remarkable now that I think back at those times. I would enjoy looking at my happy inventions in my mind long after Jason fell asleep. In any case, the next morning, I confirmed that my lie had been executed by looking at the prior day's paper.

"Wait a minute." Dale says scratching his forehead. "Did you say the prior day's paper? You mean the paper from the morning when you woke up, right?"

"No. I meant the prior day's paper. I lied to Jason about an article I read the day before, remember? So my lie changed the paper from the day before. An article appeared about David the day of my lie. Remember?"

Dale holds out his hand horizontally as if letting it rest on the air, as if he is physically examining my words. "But, wait a minute. I'm confused. Who wrote it? This invented article of yours just sneaked into a day old paper without anyone noticing it?" Dale stops wiggling his hand and continues to hold it frozen in front of his body.

"Oh, different staff writers would write these articles, depending on what topic my lie related to. I know this all sounds magical, even spooky, but you must remember that Jason was an a hundred percent believer. He had no doubts in him. Therefore he made my lies more powerful than ever. My bedtime words would often change events that already happened. And the whole world accommodated them and adjusted to my lie. *Everything* would change. I would ask people if they saw this or that article in the paper and they would often say they had read it or heard about it earlier. Do you understand what this means? My lies changed more than the press during these powerful years. They changed entire perceptions of who knows how many people."

Sweat is dripping off the side of Dale's face. We are only half way up the hill, and most of the bicyclers have already stepped off their bikes and begun walking.

"This was just one example I gave you. I would lie to Jason almost every night remedying some stranger's life. After Jason would fall asleep, and my lie telling was complete, I would sneak out of bed and sit in the living room. I would open the Yellow book to the last page and enter the name of the person I had helped. Eventually the list got so long that I had to start flipping the pages backwards as I continued adding names."

Dale wipes the sweat off his forehead in the direction opposite me. He turns to me: "Tell me that this good heartedness of yours doesn't last much longer. I liked you a lot better when you were mean." Dale smiles but I think he was not joking. I think he is sick of this phase.

"Don't worry. I soon realized that even though I was born with these powers, I was not born to be Jesus Christ. " I reply.

Dale sighs. "If I were you, I wouldn't be so sure. I mean, how did you know that you weren't Jesus Christ?" He asks, his voice raising as he speaks. A walking bicycler looks at both of us as he hears the name "Jesus Christ". Dale and I look at each other and smile. We both notice we acquired a listener. I slow down my pace. Dale slows down as well. The bicycler, now noticing that we are aware of his attention, accelerates up hill. The bicycler's awareness of us brings us closer. We look each other in the eyes. We feel like partners in a secret project, accomplices in crime. We move aside and let the bicycler pass us on the hill. I watch his calve muscles tense and release from behind.

"Name number 96 was the last one I wrote in the Yellow Notebook six pages from the end. His name was Ibrahim. He owned the deli a few blocks from where I lived. I lied and cured his wife of her cancer. It was a simple, easy lie that made me feel really great. Ibrahim was the last stranger I helped."

"But why? What happened? Did this Ibrahim guy hurt you or something? Did your lie backfire?" Dale asks with renewed enthusiasm.

"Oh, no. The change in my behavior had nothing to do with Ibrahim, or any of the 96 people I had helped for that matter. It did have to do with Jason, though. As I told you before, Jason had made me more powerful than ever. My lies had far reaching consequences that spread over many people and possibly many lands. I could no longer control their consequences. Sometimes I would think things in Jason's presence and without speaking one word I would feel that they had manipulated reality. I am still not sure if this actually happened. It might have only been my misconception. I became so terrified of my words and thoughts that maybe I started imagining things. But one thing I knew for sure. I was losing my grip on my skill. I no longer controlled the domain of my lies."

"But how could you be losing control if Jason made you so powerful?"

"But that was exactly the issue, Dale. Jason made my words powerful, not me. I would desire a simple change and ten side effects would emerge, changing reality in ways I never foresaw. It's almost as if my words became stronger than my soul. Do you understand? My words took on a life of their own, like a computer ruling its human master."

We slow down our pace; there is no one around us; only pavement bordered by grass and trees on each side. I hear nothing, not even our footsteps. Then I hear the sound of Dale's sweat drop hitting the ground. I prolong this silence ten steps more. We both raise our eyebrows and open our mouths wide as we finally see the end of our ascent; the peak of the hill is revealed in the near distance.

"My situation was deteriorating and I knew I needed to take action. So one afternoon, I decided to break my routine. I wasn't going to continue roaming the streets, finding a cause, planning a lie on the subway, having dinner and sex and then speaking my potent words. I called Jason at home and told him I would be late. I told him I was visiting my aunt on the Upper West Side. My imaginary aunt had been a prominent character in my relationship with Jason. I had invented her the first time we met on the bus to New York. She had given me money for school, an apartment and sometimes, like that day, she provided me with an escape to wander off alone.

So I left school and took the subway downtown. I wandered around the streets of SoHo aimlessly, trying to lift myself from the heaviness of my life. I tried to imagine I was floating, too light to keep my feet down on the pavement. I smiled widely at passers-by and forced giggles out of my mouth. I threw each leg forward in turn and tried hard to convert my walk into a stroll. I walked in and out of maybe six shops, looking at paintings, touching furniture, trying on clothes. I entered one boutique and tried on a floral spring dress that I had noticed in the window several times before. I posed in front of the mirror fixing the straps. I liked the way the dress looked like fluid on my skin. The saleswoman went off to get me some sandals to try with the dress and I continued fixing my hair and smiling at my image in the mirror. I looked at myself and assumed the



gestures of an innocent teenage girl. I liked this acting game. I liked the naive woman the dress made of me. And then, I noticed in the mirror, a woman standing behind me. She was looking at me playing this game, thinking I had not noticed her. She was smiling at me widely, like grownups smile at the silly behavior of children. My eyes focused on her image in the mirror. She looked just like my mother. I turned around at once; I knew it couldn't be her. I had killed her myself. She noticed my direct stare and immediately turned away and began fiddling through a nearby clothing rack. I watched her gestures, so similar to my mother's gestures. Then I understood I was looking at my made-up aunt."

"What?" Dale asks, his tongue accentuating the 't'.

"I am telling you that the woman in the store was the aunt I had lied to Jason about.

"Did you talk to her? I mean what did you do?" Dale's face is all red. He is staring at me in full fascination.

"Well, I did not know what to do. I didn't know if she was planning on approaching me. If she knew me from the many stories I had made up about her. So just as the saleswoman returned with my shoes, I pushed her aside and stormed out of the store. The alarm sounded as I ran out through the large glass doors of the boutique. As I ran, the dress caressed my skin like water; my bare feet hurt every time they hit the cobblestone street. The alarm from the store grew louder in my ears. My feet were in pain; my body was sweating. The dress glued to my body. I accelerated my speed as if prompted by the alarm. I stopped. I could not run any longer. I sat down on the stoop of a building in a deserted windy street in TriBeCa. I still heard the

sirens loud in my ears. I closed my eyes in an attempt to calm myself. All I could see behind my shut eyes was the face of my aunt. No matter how hard I tried to think of other things, to distract my attention, her face would not fade from my vision. A few minutes later, I began walking home. As I walked in exhaustion and euphoria I understood that the only way to restore order to my life was to leave Jason. Then I realized I forgot my schoolbag with my money and ID in the boutique. I knew that the store would call me. Fuck, I was sloppy, I thought. I had left trails of my lies all around. I realized that I was not made to save the world. You see, I had made several sloppy mistakes during those months. In fact, every lie I told about my aunt was sloppy. Most of the side effects of my lies to Jason were pure sloppiness. I phrased things too vaguely; I left holes in my stories. I wasn't good enough to be an angel. I realized I wasn't meant to cure the world."

We reach the top of the hill. Dale places his hands at the sides of his waist, leans forward and breathes heavily with an open mouth as if puking air. We step to the side of the road and sit down on the grass.

Dale looks at me. His eyes seem in thought. "So, you think you were just not made to do such work."

"I know I was not made to do such good work. I could not handle being so powerful. The truth is it was all very scary. I had responsibilities no human should have." I rest my back on the grass and let my head lay motionless among the green leaves, relaxing my neck. I look at Dale.

He is still in deep thought. He waits a few seconds and then folds his legs. "I still don't understand why you stopped helping others. OK, so not all your lies were executed the exact way you had planned. And some happened without you planning them at all. But you were helping so many people."

I smile. Dale still doesn't understand words, I think to myself. I look at his smooth face. His tight shirt is now marinated in sweat sticking to his body. But I now feel a breeze coming. It soothes us both. I look up. The sky is still red, even though the sun is not visible.

"Dale, have you ever read the book of Genesis?"

He smiles back and answers a stretched out questioning "Y-e-e-e-s-s..."

"Think of the first few sentences of Genesis. Do you remember the beginning when God created the world?"

"Y-e-e-e-e-s." He answers slower this time, still not understanding where I am heading.

"Then how did God create the world?"

He folds his arms about his chest and bites his lower lip. "Well, he said 'let there be light' and then there was light."

"Exactly." I reply, happy that he remembered the correct wording, happy that he gave me the answer to prove my point.

"God created the world with the spoken word. Now do you understand how powerful words can be? Now do you understand why I felt too weak to handle it all?"

I feel my words pierce him like a commandment. Dale picks at the grass with his hand, places one sliver of grass between his teeth and begins to swing it from side to side in his mouth as if it were a toothpick. He stretches his arm and rests on his back with his hands folded under his head. He looks at the sky. I look at him. Dale closes his eyes. "So what did you do? How did you break it off?"

I lift my back off the grass.

"Well, even though I knew I had to leave Jason, it was a very hard thing for me to do. He was my only connection to the world and I was terrified of being alone once again. I couldn't imagine New York without him. As I thought of a way to end our relationship, images of our times together appeared before my eyes."

Dale opens his mouth though his eyes remain shut "Did you think of maybe lying less and staying with him?"

"No. I mean I felt very sad, I didn't want us to end. But a clear sober voice from inside me was telling me that I had to move forward."

"C'mon, it couldn't have been that simple, that clear. Don't tell me you didn't want to stay with him."

"I didn't. Our closeness was warm and comfortable, but it was also a prison. I was thirsty to discover the New York City outside of our

bubble world. Anyway, I needed to execute one final act of giving. I had to repay Jason for all his help. I thought that this last act of kindness would liberate me. I knew what I had to give him all along. The best gift I could possibly grant Jason was a successful Hollywood career."

# 13

With my palms anchored in the grass, I focus on Dale's eyelids. Through them, I can see his eyes are in rapid movement, pacing from side to side under a thin layer of soft skin.

Dale opens his eyes and raises his back from the grass.

"So tell me about this lie. Did it work? Did Jason become famous?" Dale wipes the grass off his back.

"Let's keep walking." He says.

We take small steps towards the path. As we reach the wide asphalt road, we look right. The downhill that follows is much flatter than I expect. We both breathe deeply, as if trying to store this air of heights in our lungs before walking down the hill. We start a nice, leisurely decent. For an unknown reason I don't want to descend the hill. The sun is no longer with us. The sky is gradually transposing from red to deep blue. I don't want to continue my story at this point. I enjoy Dale thinking of the good acts I have executed with my powers. I wish to linger on this moment. I do not want to tell Dale of my Jason Lie. I think of how Dale and I would interact under different circumstances, without the burden of my story. I look at him walking beside me. This is an unexamined moment now. I do not think of his role, his meaning. I just look. He looks at me as well, only looks. He is not smiling. His face and body are completely neutral. Our eyes meet in the air between our bodies. Our eyes are not projecting, piercing or challenging. They are simply together, all four, floating in the center of the space between us. I sigh

silently, accepting our roles in this play. I resort to my telling plan. I reveal yet another chunk of my life story:

"Well, to answer your question, my lie didn't succeed. It's fairly ironic since I wanted this lie to work more than any other. I prepared it well in advance and worked out the details time and time again. I guess the incident you are about to hear is proof that I am not the designer of destiny, and certain things were just not meant to be, no matter how persuasive a liar I am."

"In preparing my lie to Jason, I entered a rigid routine I was familiar with. Just like after my Mother Lie and my failed Tina lie, I started shortening my sleep, and prolonging my nighttime thinking. For about a week, I struggled with ideas and came up empty handed. Jason was not speaking of any recent auditions he had gone to. He was frustrated with going to open auditions for parts he didn't really want or had little chance of getting and decided to focus on refining his acting skills. Because of the drought in his career he preferred to talk about other things and I had no leads to follow or to glamorize into a promising acting career. I assumed that since I spoke less of what I read in the paper and what was going on in the city, he would take a more interactive role in conversation. Instead, my silence developed a distance between us. We would lie in bed after sex, each remaining in the confines of their pleasure; each in the realm of their own thoughts.

After a week of brainstorming with no results, I decided I needed a change of environment. One night after Jason fell asleep beside me in bed, I took his keys from his jeans' pocket and walked up one flight of stairs to his apartment. I walked around his cramped studio apartment looking for ideas. I sat on the kitchen counter that was

right by the door and looked at his walls, his clothes, his bookcases. I remember thinking that if I had to guess what New York City neighborhood I was in based on the interior of his apartment, I would have guessed Times Square. His apartment was the stereotype of the living accommodations of a beginning actor in New York. The futon was always left open in the bed position with messy sheets. Clothes were tangled with scripts in the corners of the room. He had a bulletin board hanging on the wall with his headshots, some family photos and a "goals" memo he hasn't updated in over a year. On the wall above his futon, hung a huge black and white framed poster of Robert De Niro from the movie Taxi Driver. The photo was of that famous scene where Robert De Niro talks to his image in the mirror with a gun in hand. As I glanced at the poster, I was instantly reminded of the hundreds of times Jason recited those famous lines to me 'Are you talking to me? Are you talking to me, mother fucker, are you talking to me?' Taxi was Jason's favorite movie, and every time he would quote those famous lines, I would make fun of his poor imitation of a trashy New York accent. I returned to my apartment with out a lie plan, but realized that my idea would have to come from his space since it pertained to his life.

I spent about four nights roaming around Jason's studio apartment in search of material for a lie. Every night after he would fall asleep, I would go up to his apartment and look at his stuff. I would imagine the faces he makes to himself in the mirror, the thoughts that he had when he looked at his outdated bulletin board, or the things he would do while listening to his answering machine messages. And then, on the fifth night I spent in his place, the perfect lie idea came to me, literally. The complete plan came directly to my ears; I just had to edit it and voice it to Jason. It was 3:30 AM when Jason's phone rang. I let the answering machine pick up. It was Denise Palmer, an



actress from school who was working with Jason on a class project. I listened carefully to the message:

'Hi, it's Denise. I know it's really late, but I just got in from L.A., and couldn't wait with this news 'till the morning. So... Oh, shit. I really want to tell you this live and not on a stupid machine, but whatever, leaving you in the dark at this point in the message would be mean. I got the lead role in Martin Scorsese's new film. I got the audition with connections, but I fucking got the part by myself. Can you believe it? I was looking over the lists of names of some of the other actors casted, and your name was there as playing Scott's tutor in college, some dude who helps him out when he starts messing with drugs and fucking up his school work. Anyway, it's a speaking part with at least two lines and the tutor's a real cute character, so..'

The beep sounded, and the answering machine cut Denise off in the middle of her sentence. I remember praying that she will call back with more details to support the lie that was already half cooked in my mind by this point. Three minutes later the phone rang again. After three rings and no answer, the machine picked up:

'Hi, it's me again. Your machine cut me off. Anyway, I don't know if you auditioned for this part or something else, but the assistant producer told me that they hadn't made the announcements for any of the small parts yet. I think they're going to make the calls tomorrow. I thought it would be pretty cool if I would let you know. I guess I will have to bail on our class project. Can you believe how huge this is? Anyway, you can call a guy by the name of Vinnie, the casting director's assistant at three one zero three nine zero zero zero eight one. He knows the exact deal with your part and

everything. I will see you in class tomorrow morning, or you can call me at four two five four two eight zero.'

As soon as the beep sounded, my mind started racing. One thing was certain: this was my golden opportunity. I felt like I used to feel when I lied as a child. I sensed that someone up there was acting as a silent partner in my plan, pointing out the right direction when I was losing my path.

I stared at the De Niro poster on Jason's wall, and noticed my wide smile in the reflection from the glass. I breathed deeply and tried to slow down the pace of my thoughts. I reran the fresh details of my plan in my mind. I remember thinking how brilliant it was.

'Scottt's tutor or Scott himself; what's the difference?' I thought to myself.

The casters decided they wanted Jason in this movie all by themselves. All I had to do was tell them they really wanted him for the lead role. This was barely a lie. It was more like an exaggeration.

It was truly amazing how all this came to me. The plan was emerging in my mind at such a fast pace. I felt like my mind was split into two independent thinking units. One smaller part was working on the details of the plan, while the second larger part was observing this process, smoking a cigarette, admiring the speed of thought displayed by the small part. My train of thought only got stuck once. I was missing one piece of critical information. I did not know what part Jason had originally auditioned for. I knew that I would have to use great caution and precision in selecting words for my lie. As I was watching flashes of De Niro and myself alternating in the framed

poster across from me, I made all critical decisions and was ready to begin executing my plan."

"I don't get it"

"What?" I ask, not understanding what type of interruption occurred.

"I don't get it. Your plan. I don't understand what you were going to do." Dale interrupts.

His head turns sideways towards me. I am frozen. I feel as if his question stole me from a world. I feel he has called me to stand by his side with a remote control beyond my will.

Dale twists his wrists outward and holds the palms of his hands upward. I am still frozen. Dale continues:

"Let's see, the message was already there on the machine specifying Jason's small part. What were you planning on doing? Erasing it?" Dale turns to me with a puzzled expression. A wrinkle forms above the bridge of his nose.

"That's precisely what I was planning on doing." I respond calmly, trying to bring him back into my story.

"But you cannot mimic Denise's voice and rerecord the message. How could you recreate the message with your own script? " Dale continues to ask as the frustration is growing in his voice.

I realize that I must slow down. For a moment, walking together I mistook Dale for a manipulator, almost an accomplice. I shoved aside

his righteous nature and saw only his hungry eyes. I breathe deeply and swallow my disappointment. I look at Dale.

"I am getting there. Don't worry. Let me tell you what I did next. You will soon understand where I am headed."

Dale nods with an expression of embarrassment as if he has let something slip out of his mouth beyond his will. I continue:

"I re-listened to part one and part two of Denise's message and wrote down Denise's phone number and the LA phone number of Vinnie. I deleted the message. In fact, I pulled out the tape from Jason's machine, broke it, and put in a blank tape.

I locked up his apartment, taking a quick look around as I turned off the lights to make sure I left everything as it was before I entered. I tiptoed back upstairs to my apartment. I threw the tape in the trash, and joined Jason under the covers, holding him from his back, trying to complement his sleep. As I fell asleep, I made sure that I set my mental alarm clock to 7:30 AM. I knew I was holding between my arms a soon-to-be-discovered star. After four restless nights, I finally fell asleep.

I awoke at 7:30 AM. Jason was still sleeping beside me. I practiced my lie in my mind. Once I felt ready, I began stroking his hair gently, then his arm. I wanted to wake him only partially. I preferred lying to him when he was still half-asleep. Jason knew that I had a better memory for small things than he did. He often used me as his Filofax. I would remind him of his errands, his auditions, and he trusted my memory more than his own. I had planned on using this

to my advantage. I had planned on reminding him of something that never occurred.

Jason was sleeping on his stomach. I sat up on his ass and started touching his back gently with both my hands. I whispered his name.

'What time is it?' He asked with a deep, cluttered morning voice.

'7:45 AM' I replied.

'What do you want?' He asked in a boyish voice.

As I mumbled an answer, reminding him it was Tuesday and he had two morning classes, he began to part with his dream.

'Remember? You asked me to remind you on Saturday. You have to pick up Carole's luggage from the TWA terminal in JFK today.'

'What are you talking about?' He raised his head from the pillow, straining his neck. He turned to look at me with squinting eyes.

'You don't remember. John called about a week ago and told you that TWA lost his girlfriend's luggage on her way to Paris. They found her suitcase in New York and you said you'd pick it up...'

Jason began recalling the incident. You see, this lie was rooted in the truth. The only discrepancy was that the suitcase was never found. John called Jason a week earlier to confirm that if they do find Carole's suitcase in New York, Jason would be willing to pick it up.

'We listened to the message together Saturday night at your apartment. You were really wiped out. I don't think you really paid attention. But John left you a second message about Carole's lost luggage. They found her suitcase at JFK and he asked if you could go pick it up today.'

'OK,' he replied, easily convinced 'Well, what do I have to do?'

Jason, still between dream and reality, took my words as matter of fact. He slowly straightened his elbows and lifted his body from the bed with the force of his arms. He reached for his jeans on the chair, and then the phone from the kitchen. He was still mostly asleep. It was easy to tell. He stood for a moment with his jeans in one hand and the phone in the other, not knowing which item to address first. Then he placed his jeans back on the chair and dialed his number to check his messages. He held the receiver with his shoulder and began inserting his legs through the sleeves of his jeans. As he was buckling his belt, he signaled me to pass him a pen and paper. I watched him jot down all the airline information that John left in his message. My morning lie had already been confirmed. As John's voice was speaking to Jason, all the information of the flight appeared before my eyes in ink on a yellow sticky pad.

Jason was overly aggravated by this annoying errand. We chatted as I made coffee.

'God, this whole thing really pisses me off. I can't believe I just forgot about it like that.' By this time he was awake enough to be down on himself.

'I guess I would want to forget about such an annoying favor too.' I replied in sympathy.

'Yeah, but you never do, do you? Anyway, what really pisses me off is that Denise and I were supposed to work on our scene together. She missed last week's class because she was in LA for an audition, and we can't afford to miss another week of work.'

'Well... Why don't you schedule to work with her later in the week?' I innocently suggested.

'I don't have her number. I can't even let her know that I won't be in class.' Jason's slowness now turned to heaviness.

In an attempt to help him, or what you could call phase two of my plan, I offered to arrive at my afternoon class early, introduce myself to Denise, and get her phone number so they could schedule to meet later in the week.

Jason thanked me for helping and agreed that the best thing would be if I met Denise at school. He gave me a big kiss that tasted like coffee and morning. We kissed by the kitchen sink for a few minutes, each lost in a world of thought. Jason was still upset with himself for being so absent-minded. And I thought of how most of my lying was done for the day."

"I still don't see what you were planning on doing" Dale says, his back slightly bent forward, his walk seeming heavy.

I look at him. I smile to appease him, to lift him. He reminds me of the way Jason looked that morning when I reminded him he must go to the airport.

"That's because I haven't told you yet what my plan was." I reply calmly.

"Well, are you going to tell me now or what?" Dale's words leave his mouth smoothly now.

"I was not planning on going to classes at all that day. I did not need to get Denise's phone number. I already had it from the message she left Jason the night before. As soon as Jason left, I cooked two scrambled eggs, made toast and some more coffee. I sat down to eat my breakfast and review the plan I had written the night before. I tore off the top part of the paper. It included instructions for the part I had already executed. I focused on what remained on the sheet of paper"

I open my handbag and unfold a half-torn sheet of paper. I hold it before my eyes as Dale and I continue to walk.

"So what did it say?" Dale asks.

I hold the sheet in my left hand at eye level. I read:

Leave Jason message from a pay phone around 4:00 PM stating that I have great news and that I am making a special dinner for the two of us to celebrate.



Shop around Chinatown for the biggest Jumbo Shrimps I can find.  
Buy beer, wine.

Return home. Prepare beer-battered shrimp.

After Jason arrives, tell him over a wine toast that I did meet Denise. She was ecstatic. She told me that he got the role of Scott and she got the role of Mia in the film they both auditioned for.

Give Jason Denise's number. Expect him to call. Since Jason believes my lie with 100% faith, Denise will confirm my announcement.

Jason and I will celebrate and eat shrimp.

Jason's career will be made.

My job is done!"

As I read to Dale the steps of the plan, my voice grows monotonous and distant. I pause after each step as if I am reading off names in roll call, waiting for a reaction after pronouncing each name. My final words "my job is done" part my mouth cheerfully in a loud voice. Dale and I leave the park. Or rather, the streets and cars of the city intrude on us like a burglar, so unexpected. I can feel the disappointment of these words, "My job is done", as if they had feelings of their own. They expected to smoothly fly out of my mouth and float amongst the green grass and trees. Instead, upon leaving my moist mouth, these words bounce around in the noisy Columbus Circle, hitting the dry water fountain and being pushed away by mouths of

screaming children. Columbus Circle is flooded with hot-dog vendors and horse carriage drivers soliciting tourists for their money. The noise from the crowd of families is excruciating, for my words as well as for Dale and I. My words almost die in the crowd. I envision them sinking to the ground dirty with bird shit, being stepped on by feet of all sizes.

Dale stops in the middle of the circle, and saves my struggling words:

"My job is done. Ah!" His forceful male voice then shoots them up to the sky like a rocket.

I am so proud of Dale. He is learning to see words.

# 14

Dale and I are standing in the touristy Columbus Circle, trying desperately to maintain the peace of the Park. It is 9:00 PM. I look around. I focus on a hand-written sign that reads "3 tee-shirts for \$10". Beside the sign stands a skinny old Pakistani vendor guarding a table with a dozen piles of New York tee shirts in all colors. The vendor points to his merchandise and smiles at me, noticing my stare. I quickly look away. A line of horse carriages is formed in the corner of the Circle. One horse is taking a clunky shit. Another carriage driver is bargaining with a family over the rate for the ride in the carriage through the park. I hear them quoting prices to each other. "One hour, sir. It is \$85", "No. But I told you already, we only want twenty minutes." "Sir, one hour, \$60, we go now." Dale and I turn our heads in both directions, from side to side, becoming computerized radars of this scene. The motion of our heads is constantly activated by chatter, laughter, honking taxis. Our eyes are washed in faces, shapes and asphalt. Everything is floating in gray, city air. We are not speaking. We are absorbing all the sounds, all the pollution. We are no longer at peace. Dale breaks our silence with a logistical suggestion:

He speaks loudly, competing with the noise. "Do you want to stop by the Cosmic Coffee Shop before we head back downtown to the Waverly Restaurant? It's right across the street. It's this nice diner, but it closes at midnight. So we can hang out there for a while before we go to the Waverly. Besides, I wouldn't even try to last the night without returning to Waverly at a certain point." He extends his arm, and points to the coffee shop across the street. His sarcasm is unsophisticated but cute.

I confirm with a head gesture and follow his pointing finger across the street and into the diner. We enter. I observe the change in sound. The chatter of the diner is different than the voices of the street. It is the sounds of people who are sitting down. Several people are sitting at tables well into their meals. The booth we are seated at is next to a larger round table seating a family of blonde tourists with a strong southern accent. The children seem restless, playing with their burgers as if they were puppet mouths and sword fighting with their French fries. The father of the family is silent, while the mother persistently polices the children. She keeps slapping the back of their wrists as they raise their fries at each other. I desperately try to ignore this family, but the sounds of wrists being slapped penetrate my thoughts.

We both order burgers and coffee. This is the first time we order the same item. Even though our actions are in unison, I feel very far from Dale. We are now affected by others, not by each other. We are observing a given scene. For the first time in our togetherness we are not creating our environment.

I do not want to drown in this passivity. I remind myself of my goal.

"Well, Dale, I read you the note with the remains of the plan for my Jason Lie. Before I tell you how and why it did not work as expected, do you want me to clarify anything about the plan?"

He smiles at my sweet offer. He sips from his water. A thin line of light emerges on his upper lip. It is the light's reflection in the water. He replies:

"No, I think I pretty much got it. Let's see, over dinner, you lie to Jason about meeting Denise and drop the bomb about her telling you that she and Jason got the lead roles in the movie. Since Jason is the greatest lie-eater on earth, he believes you. You give him Denise's phone number, which you got from his answering machine. By the time he calls her, your words have become truth. She confirms that he got the lead role. Jason's career is made. You paid him back for his help. Your job is done, right?"

He smiles as he speaks with rejuvenation. His words sprinkle both of us with energy.

"Pretty good. Now, do you want to hear what really happened?"

"I can't wait" he replies.

The intensity of our joint experience is once again ascending. The noise from the kids gradually diminishes, as if a DJ is lowering their voices with a dimmer effect. We both load up the coffees we just received. Dale adds sugar and milk, and I add Equal. We sip from our coffees simultaneously. I cut my gulp short, rest my coffee mug, and speak:

"I spent the afternoon walking around Chinatown buying groceries for the dinner I had planned. I found these huge shrimps that I knew Jason would love. I bought three whole peppercorns, celery ribs, Bay leaf, and of course, beer. I went to a liquor store and bought some red wine.

I stopped at a pay phone and left a message on Jason's answering machine. I rehearsed the message in my mind before dialing to make sure my excitement would sound sincere. I spoke after the beep:

'Jason, baby. Hope your airport pick-up wasn't too painful. I introduced myself to Denise today, like I promised. She was very understanding, and I got her phone number so you two can schedule to work together later in the week. Listen, baby, I have the most amazing news you could ever imagine. It concerns you more than me. And trust me you will not be disappointed. This is huge. I will be out for the rest of the day, but I'm preparing a nice dinner for the two of us to celebrate. Come upstairs at 8:00 PM. Love you. See you tonight.'

At 8:00 PM, as I was still preparing the food, Jason knocked on my door. I greeted him with a long wet kiss. He was dressed in a nice pair of black slacks and a buttoned down white shirt tucked in at the waist. His hair was still wet from the shower and he smelled nicely of cologne. He looked very polished, as if he was on his way to a first date. He entered my apartment and was impressed by the dinner preparations he observed in the kitchen. There was no smell of food. I planned on doing all the cooking on the spot only after he arrived. He noticed the small dishes on the kitchen counter, each containing neatly sliced vegetables. He also noticed a larger bowl containing two dozens of large fresh shrimp, cleaned and de-veined. I reached for a bottle of red wine from the counter and handed it to Jason with a bottle opener. He placed the bottle opener on top of the bottle and started screwing it in. I watched his ironed white shirt wrinkle in different pattern as he screwed the bottle opener into the cork and then pulled.

'I can't wait any longer. What's the good news?' He said right before pulling and the sounding of the pop from the cork.

I thought I would tease him just a few seconds more.

'First a toast' I said.

I opened the top cupboard of the kitchen cabinets and pulled out two large wineglasses. I rested them on the counter. Jason poured the wine, handed me a full glass and took the other in his hand. I could tell he was nervous. His hands were shaking.

'So, what are we drinking to for God's sake? C'mon, I beg you. Don't be cruel. What's the good news?' I could tell he did not like this guessing game. He looked serious and tense.

We both held our wineglasses at shoulder-height and I began the toast:

'To your successful acting career. No wait, let me be more specific. I hate when people are vague with their toasts. To your success in your new casting as Scott in Martin Scorsese's new film.'

I gently tapped my wineglass against his. Jason held his glass still.

I observed his response. He did not have the immediate ecstatic smile I had expected. After a few seconds, an awkward smile of relief made its way onto his face.

'You mean I got the role I auditioned for... as Scott's college tutor. All right. This is great. My first speaking role in a major Hollywood...'

I immediately interrupted and corrected, fearing his spoken words might have the wrong effect:

'No, no, no, Hon. You got the *lead* role. You were cast as Scott. When I met Denise at school today, she was looking for you all over to tell you the good news. Apparently, she's connected with the producer and had a special audition for the female lead role. She will play Mia, Scott's girlfriend. And you, my dear, Mr. Starving actor with zero connections, will play Scott. I guess you are just so damn good you got it all by yourself.'

Jason looked puzzled and dizzy. He placed his wineglass back on the counter, forgetting to sip from it first.

'But that's impossible. I didn't even audition for that part of Scott. That was not part of the open calls. I assumed they had the part cast already with some Hollywood big shot. I auditioned for the part of Scott's tutor. Are you sure you did not hear wrong? Denise probably said 'Scott's tutor', and you just remembered 'Scott'. Yeah, that's what probably happened.'

I explained once again, after sipping from my wine.

'No, I am sure I got it right. This is why Denise was so overwhelmed. She specifically said that both of you got the leads in the film. Maybe the actor who was supposed to play Scott nagged on his contract and the director liked your face or something. You know stuff like



that happens in Hollywood all the time. Anyway, I don't know the details of how this came about, but I'm sure I heard Denise right.'

Jason did not respond to my words. I pressed a little harder. I placed my glass on the counter and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. I looked him in the eyes.

'You are Scott, honey. In less than a year, every teenager in Middle America will have your pictures up on their wall; you will be recognized in restaurants. You will have to choose the roles you want to play from a stack of manuscripts because you won't have enough time to accept all the movie offers you will get. This is it, baby, your big break.'

I lifted both wineglasses, handed him his, and forced a 'cheers' between us. It still did not help. Jason simply did not believe me. He paused and thought for a few minutes, trying to find where the misunderstanding in the chain of events could have happened. At this point, instead of continuing to try to persuade him, I froze."

"Wait a minute" Dale interrupts. "How could this be? I thought he always believed you. I thought he trusted your memory more than his own. I thought that his entire Maori tribe had no doubt inside them. How could he suddenly be questioning you like this? It doesn't make sense."

Dale is focusing on my lips. He is holding his coffee mug high with both hands, hiding his mouth and chin. I smile. I love his question. He is searching for rational within the rules of my life story.

"Yes" I reply with enthusiasm, "I was asking myself the exact same questions. How could Jason possibly doubt my words? I am still unsure, even though I have a few ideas. His disbelief might have been the result of the many years he had spent living in the West. Maybe he was born with no doubt, but as he matured in New York City, doubt developed within him. Or maybe it was just his low confidence that caused him to grow doubt inside. Jason always believed my every word because he never believed in himself. What I was asking him to do in swallowing this lie was believe in himself. He simply could not do it. He was too humble. But in any case, whatever the reason might have been, I was as surprised as you are right now. For the first time since we met, Jason did not believe me.

Dale clears his throat. I sip from my coffee.

"But let me get back to our story. I dropped the wine glass I was holding. It hit the counter, and then shattered on the floor, splashing red all over Jason's white shirt. Jason was in deep thought. He barely reacted to my accident. I began unbuttoning his shirt. After I had undone his fourth button, he snapped back and took control, removing his shirt and placing it in the bathroom sink with some water. Jason returned with a suggestion.

'Listen, you have Denise's phone number, right?'

'Yes, of course. She gave it to me today. I already told you'

'OK, why don't I call her and clarify this whole mess. In the meantime, you can start boiling the shrimp. I will be off the phone by the time the food is ready, and we'll sit down to eat.'

I had no answer to his suggestion. I reentered my frozen mode. This whole episode reminded me of lying to Tina back in college. That was the only other time a lie had failed me. That was the reason I decided to study acting, for God's sake. I could not believe that I got myself into this situation once again.

I handed Jason the number, avoiding eye contact, thinking the next time he will look into my eyes, he will no longer be in love with me. I turned to the stove and started emptying the little plates of chopped vegetables into the pan simmering with olive oil. I heard Jason dialing. I prayed that my lie helpers would come through. I remember hearing and feeling my heart beat in my chest. This waiting period was killing me. I watched the vegetables simmer, and tried to disappear into the eclectic smelling steam.

Jason returned to the kitchen and watched me stir the vegetables as he spoke:

'She's not there and her message says that she's out of town and will be back tomorrow evening. I didn't leave a message. I'm so confused I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. I'm sure I just got the tutor part, which is what I auditioned for in the first place. But anyway, that's pretty amazing news. Thanks for preparing dinner, sweetie. This is still definitely a cause for celebration.'

Jason came closer to the stove, turned me towards him and kissed me. His chest was bear, and we kissed over the stove in a bath of vegetable steam dominated by onion. I released myself from his lock, and walked over to the fridge, grabbing three cans of beer from inside. Jason took a seat by the kitchen table, noticing my imposed distance. I began pouring the beers into the pan, and than lowered

the heat. I added the shrimp and sat beside Jason. I thought I would explain one last time, calmly. In fact, this situation was very different from the Tina Lie episode. This time I knew the rules to my power. I knew that if my listener did not believe me, my lie would not take effect. Instead of looking for evidence, I opted for stalling.

'Look, I know what I heard. It hurts me that you don't trust me, but I'll tell you what we'll do. Tonight, we should celebrate and enjoy the food, because whatever part it is, we both agree you got it. Tomorrow, you will speak with Denise and clarify everything. Even if she is not back tomorrow, she mentioned that they should be making the announcement real soon. So you will probably hear from the casting director by tomorrow.

This way we cover both options. Tonight we can celebrate getting the tutor's part. And tomorrow, if you find out that this is the part you were casted for, you will not be disappointed. But if you find out that I was right and you got the lead role, we can celebrate all over again.'

I checked on the shrimp. They were rising to the surface of the beer soup in the pan. I watched the movement of the shrimp and imagined they were alive, swimming in my pan. I poured myself some more wine. We both drank. It was a nice temporary solution to our disagreement. We did not speak about the film for the remainder of the evening. We ate the beer-battered shrimp and pretended to enjoy the evening.

We were each engaged in an intense level of thought that we chose not to share. Jason (I imagined) was working out the impact the different scenarios will have on his career. I was on an aggressive mind search

for salvation. I still believed I could get myself out of this one, and I was desperately searching for a clever way out.

We finished dinner. Jason retired to his own apartment. We decided to speak the next day around lunchtime. As soon as he left, I began pacing frantically in my apartment. As I paced back and forth, I became more aware of the disastrous consequences my failed lie could bring. I sincerely feared for my powers. You see, after almost two years in acting school, I thought I was an excellent persuader. More than that, I thought I was a good judge of what people could or could not believe. The fact that I was wrong scared me. If I cannot estimate what people are capable of believing, I will never master my skill, I thought.

I stopped pacing and sat on the fire escape outside my bedroom window. I looked at my watch. It was midnight. I looked at the sky in search for those helpers; those angels that helped me lie in grade school and covered for my sloppiness throughout life. They must know a way out of this catastrophe, I thought. I needed them to guide me. I tried to stop thinking. I tried to listen to their voices.

Surprisingly enough, the answer did come in the form of a voice, or to be more specific, two loud Italian voices. I heard a conversation of two diners at Umberto's Clam House, the restaurant downstairs. After listening for a few minutes, I recognized the louder voice as Jimmy's. He was speaking of the good old days of Little Italy. I could make out the end of a sentence '...before the Chinese took over the whole damn neighborhood!'

Jimmy's voice entered my ear and triggered a reaction inside my brain; I felt the tingling sensation of activity in my mind. In a

matter of seconds, I had formed a revised plan. It was both basic and brilliant. I still today do not understand why I hadn't thought of it earlier. It was so brilliant I felt the urge to speak it out loud, even though I was alone:

'If Jason is not going to believe me that he was selected to be the next Hollywood star, Jimmy will. As long as someone believes me, my lie will come true.'

I quickly threw on some clothes and walked downstairs, pretending to be on an excursion to the deli. Jimmy spotted me. He was sitting outside with the cook drinking red wine and smoking filterless cigarettes. The restaurant was empty and only the waiter was still busy clearing tables and setting them up for the next day's lunch. I saw Jimmy, sitting in full posture, stroking his white beard and mumbling something about a street fair in which Southern Italian culture was celebrated. As soon as he spotted me, he opened his arms widely and dramatically. I heard his gold bracelets clinking with his gesture. He called me over and asked me to join them for a late night drink. He was slurring heavily. He introduced me to his friend, the cook. He introduced me as the prettiest girl in the neighborhood. I smiled and sat down beside him as he signaled the waiter to bring out another wine glass.

'Thanks, Jimmy. I would love a drink. I even have a great reason for celebration. Today was a very, very special day.'

Jimmy questioned me further, and I spat out my newly cooked lie without even wasting a few truthful sentences as an introduction:

'You're not going to believe how great this is. Today, Jason received news that he was chosen to play the lead role in a new Martin Scorsese's film. Can you believe it?' I spoke with pantomime gestures of exaggeration, throwing my dramatic voice in all directions.

'Unbelievable, you hear that Tommy?' Jimmy turned to the cook. "Where is he right now that devil of a kid? Why isn't he celebrating?"

'Well, Jimmy, you know, he was so shocked by the news, I think he needed to sleep on it. This way he can hear the news again in the morning and discover that it was not all just a dream.'

Jimmy laughed out loud, tapping both the cook and me on our backs rather firmly as if to rescue us from choking. Then he stood up suddenly, ran over to the bar, and pulled out a bottle of Chianti from behind a glass cabinet that he had to unlock with a special small key.

He explained how he always saves bottles of this wine for special occasions and how this clearly qualified as one. Jimmy proceeded to give us a speech on the subject since he was already sufficiently drunk. He praised Jason with poetic words of love as if he had passed away. I think his friend, the cook, was grateful that the topic had changed and we were no longer discussing the good old days of Little Italy.

'I knew that boy always had it in him. He just has that Hollywood look about him, you know? That jelled-back dark hair and his smile with those two dimples, come on he's a stallion. You know, He's such a hard worker too that kid. Always running from work to auditions to

school, juggling so many jobs, such a responsible hard working kid, I tell you. ...'

"Wait a minute", Dale asked, "Did he believe you for sure? I mean, and even if he did, was this strong enough to compensate for Jason's disbelief?" Dale's eyes are watery and piercing as he speaks. He taps his pointing finger on our Formica table as he speaks, accenting each word with a tap. He reminds me of a lawyer, fighting a passionate case.

"Hold on, relax. I am about to tell you what happened. First let me finish with Jimmy."

I speak in my defense.

"But I don't care about Jimmy. I want to hear what happened to Jason." Dale accents each word with a strong finger tap.

"Dale, you must let me tell my story the way I see fit. It is important for me to paint you full pictures of all the characters involved in my story. As you have seen, their personalities have a direct impact on the results of my lie"

"Fine." Dale lifts his finger from the table and holds both hands at shoulder height to indicate surrender. "I'm sorry for interfering. Please continue."

"Well, Jimmy went on and on and my attention drifted elsewhere. In fact my attention drifted right back to its recent home - the plan. I tried to imagine what the next day would be like. Jason finding out from Denise that he was cast as Scott. Or maybe even better, I



thought. Maybe Jason will get a phone call from the casting director, officially informing him that he got the lead role.

When my attention returned to Jimmy's speech, I noticed that the conversation topic had returned to the good old days of Little Italy when Jimmy was a teenager and all his friends lived on our very block. I am not quite sure how Jimmy connected the two topics, I think he spoke of how the neighborhood's Italian boys are only interested in hanging out and doing drugs and never show the dedication that Jason shows. In any case, I left them to discuss the death of their childhood culture, and I returned to my apartment. This time I was convinced that my job was done.

Looking back, I can see that the following day had a striking resemblance to the day my mother died. I was once again awoken by the grand alarm clock of life to realize the full extent of my powers. Jason called me in the early afternoon. By that time he had spoken with both the casting director and Denise, and the full chain of events had been clarified. I remember him telling me over the phone that I was right about the part. Then he went on to explain how all this confusion arose. He spoke frantically and was not making any sense. I asked him to come upstairs and explain.

When he arrived, I could see in his eyes that he no longer contained any love for me. I think his love was swallowed by his fear. His eyeballs were frozen in their sockets like glass. He stayed close to the doorway as he told me what happened as if I were a witch he wanted to remain protected from.

'The actor who was originally going to play Scott was Denise's boyfriend from LA. He had acted in a few Hollywood films; none were

as big a production as this one is going to be. This was going to be his big break, too.' Jason pauses momentarily to reflect.

'He was the one that got Denise the audition, and eventually the role of Mia. They both fantasized of acting in a movie together. Anyway, I am getting sidetracked,' he said. He closed his eyes out of exhaustion and I wasn't sure that he had the strength to reopen them. His eyes opened half way. He seemed to be struggling against his heavy eyelids. 'Two days ago he died in a car accident. He was driving home drunk from a nightclub and he drove right into a tree off the side of the road. He died on the spot. Now do you understand? The reason Denise was away for the day was because she was attending his funeral.'

Jason's words hit me in the face like the words of the ambulance driver that informed me of my mother's sudden death. The words sliced through the thick air between our bodies and hit me again and again. I did not know whether to hug Jason or remain distant. So I did nothing. I froze. After a moment of awkward silence, I noticed Jason looking at me strangely, as if something was wrong with me, as if I was having some strange physical reaction. Then he spoke again:

'It's really bizarre how this all happened. It freaks me out. It's almost like God, in some sick twisted way, wanted me to have this role, you know? It's almost as if this tragedy happened to adjust to the huge size of my dreams.'"

I lean back in my seat and look at Dale. His mouth is open to the shape of an 'O'. His hands meet behind his neck. I sip from my

coffee. I feel inexplicable relief. I continue to speak, slowly now. My words are gentle brush strokes filling in color.

Jason got over the weirdness of his circumstances very quickly and started enjoying the stardom status he instantly received by everyone at school. He stopped going to classes that week, and made the decision to drop out of acting school by the weekend. In a matter of a month, his apartment was packed and his lease had been broken. The production assistant had already found him a great deal on an apartment in Santa Monica, and in his mind he was entirely in L.A..

Although he was sweet and asked me to join him, we both knew we were not meant for each other. His departure was the perfect opportunity for us to have a clean breakup. Before Jason left for the airport, I hugged him real tight, looked him in the eyes, and said:

'Listen to me, I am not saying this as an ex-lover, I am saying this as someone who observed your professional development over the past two years. You have an amazing talent and a look that sells. You will be huge one day, you hear me. This part is just a stepping-stone for you. Fifteen years from now, after you made it big, people will not remember what your first film was, and they will laugh after you tell them that you played pretty boy Scott in Scorsese's 1993 film.'

As I watched him wave a final good-bye from the back window of the taxi cab to the airport, I prayed that this time he believed me."

# 15

It is midnight. Dale and I sit in silence. I am very tired. I am ready to leave. The diner is empty. Dale signals the waiter to refill his coffee. The waiter refills his coffee and returns to his seat at the bar to count his tips and cash out the bus boys. A busboy is flipping the chairs onto the tables. Another busboy is mopping the floor.

"...And this concludes the Jason years of my life." I announce in an exaggerated TV commercial intonation, raising my eyebrows and elongating my neck as I speak.

I earn a smile from Dale, a smile of delirium.

"So I guess you never saw him again." He says.

"No." I say with a neutral stance. I run my hand through my hair as I tilt my head sideways.

"Listen, Dale, since this is a good time for a break and this place is obviously trying to close, I suggest we end our session for tonight. We can get some good sleep, and meet tomorrow for an early lunch to start on phase four." I look at Dale for a sign of approval.

Dale does not react. It is as if he did not hear my words. He looks directly at me, but seems to be looking through me.

"That's all you have to say about the outcome of your Jason Lie?"  
Once again, I sense an interrogator's voice coming from inside his body.

"Well, I told you what happened. I meant it when I said this was like another awakening for me, similar to the one I experienced when my mother died."

"Still!" Dale says vehemently, "Forget about your awakening for just one second, or how this affected your powers. You killed a perfect stranger. You must have felt somewhat guilty. You must've experienced some degree of remorse. I mean, for Christ's sake, do you even know the name of Denise's dead boyfriend? Do you think about him? Sometimes, late at night, do you think about his parents, his friends, how much happiness you stole from so many people?"

I feel as if Dale is poking me with a thin, long metal pole, searching for an emotional reaction; Or rather, I feel I am Dale's computer and I just died on him in the middle of the typing of an important document. I am tired and unresponsive. Dale, with his persistent words, is frantically pressing every possible button of my keyboard in search of a response. He is placing both his hand and pressing all the keys at once.

"I'm not as cold as I seem." I reply, holding my hand out as if to physically stop his attack. "I never wanted to know his name because I knew that it would just make things harder."

Dale's eyes remain intensely focused. They are still piercing me.

"Listen, this incident changed my life in a sharp and sudden way. But you must remember what happened prior to this. The stakes in my lie game were getting too high for me to handle. I did not know how to lower them. This was the only way out I saw."

Dale's fervent stare remains frozen.

"Besides, it all started with good intentions." I say in my defense. "All I wanted to do was help Jason. You know, I wanted to repay him for all the people he helped by believing in me. And in hindsight, I can tell you that this tragedy led to an awakening in me that made the Victor years possible."

"The Victor years?" Dale questions, mocking my dramatic speech. "What are you talking about? Have you been listening to a single word I've been saying? I am talking about Denise's dead boyfriend, not about your powers. I don't want to know how this lie affected your skill. I want to know how this accidental murder you committed affected you, how it made you feel." As Dale speaks, small red veins emerge in the rims of his eyes. I observe them as they make their way to his pupils.

Dale stops speaking but continues to breathe heavily and loudly through his open mouth. He shakes his head from side to side, as if amazed by my denseness.

I have the urge to spit in his face and walk out of this diner. How dare he speak to me like this. But then I remember my plan. I think of how instrumental Dale can be in my healing. I breathe in deeply and try to relax. I focus on his words. I try to understand. I wish to appease him.

Dale closes his mouth and exhales slowly through his nose.

"Listen," I say "when I met you two nights ago, I asked you to hear my story, and you agreed. Naturally, I tell you all the details I find important to my story. If something affects my skill, I speak of it. Otherwise, I omit it. You must not misunderstand me. All these events did affect me emotionally, just like you ask. They still do. It's just that I don't see why you would want to hear about that."

"OK." Dale lifts both his hands from the table and holds them up, signaling he is backing off. "Maybe you had reactions to your lies and the deaths that you caused and you choose not to share that with me. That's fine. You really don't owe me an explanation for anything. But I think I should know if you were significantly affected by the consequences of your lies. I think you should want to tell me these things. Otherwise, I cannot understand you, your motives. Do you understand what I am saying?"

I remain still with no response. I still feel as if Dale is poking me with a cold metal pole. I want to close up like a flower.

Dale continues "All I'm saying is that I think I need to understand your emotions in order to understand your powers. That's all."

Now I feel as if Dale is plucking my eyebrows, one by one. I feel little tweaks on my eyelids, stings on my face. I breathe deeply once more. I search for a weapon to defend myself from Dale's attack. I lean back in my seat and cross my right leg over my left. I outline my lips with my tongue. I lower my chin and look at Dale, now raising my eyes to him. I smile playfully.

"Are you adding a condition to our game, Dale?" I ask, holding my pointing finger out and marking a 'no, no.' with my finger movement and raising my eyebrows.

Dale smiles back. "You bet I am." He says in a softening voice. "I just want to know what is really going through you. That's all." He ends his sentence with a wide smile. I look in his eyes and see my face twice in reverse. He is imitating my smile. He is softening. A moment of silence occurs between us. Animosity melts away and makes room for flirtation.

I straighten my back. I speak. "Well, I know this will sound cold and maybe even heartless, but I will say it anyway because it is my true feeling. A million starving children in Africa don't hurt me as much as my fingernail breaking."

Dale smiles and swipes his fingers in the air. He doesn't believe me. I can tell.

"No, don't laugh. I am quite serious", I say with a smile. "You see, I have affected so many people, ideas, even countries in my life that I can not give them all an emotional value. Instead, I choose to experience only my own pain, my own pleasures. I can't feel for the whole world, or even for all the people I impact."

"Come on", Dale says, sweeping the table of my words with a hand gesture. "That is such a copout. I don't feel for the whole world either. But I try not to bring pain upon others. And when I do, it hurts me. Even if I'm not the one causing the pain, it hurts me. When



my mother suffered alone, forced to uphold a lie that drove her mad, I suffered. I felt pain."

"Dale," I speak with seriousness, pausing after each word "do not compare me to you."

"Why not?" Dale says, "I am not comparing you only to myself. I am comparing you to everybody. I realize you affect many more people than most of us, but you must feel something towards the people you affect. You are not a computer for God's sake."

Once again I speak slowly and seriously as if explaining to a child something very important concerning their safety: "Let me try to explain. One afternoon, I felt the need to escape Jason and my apartment for a few hours. I entered the subway station at Broadway-Lafayette and took the first train that arrived at the station. It was the D train and I took it all the way into Brooklyn, randomly getting off at Bed-Stuy. After spending the day in a neighborhood I knew nothing about, I called Jason from a pay phone. I told him I was visiting a friend from college that lived in Bed-Stuy. I was looking for an excuse for coming home so late. There was a TV on with a very loud volume coming from the corner deli. People were outside and there was lots of noise from the street. So I made up some story to Jason about people fighting and demonstrating in the streets. So later on, I got home and..."

".. Are you saying you started the Bed-Stuy riots?" Dale's pupils enlarge abruptly as if someone was holding a flashlight to his eyes.

"Yes, but I didn't mean to. I just wanted an excuse for coming home late. And since Jason was such a strong believer... "

"Do you have any idea what this means? Do you know how many people were killed in those riots? This is insane. Black-white relations in this city, what am I talking about, in this country, have dramatically deteriorated because of these riots. The damage you brought is still happening. How could you live with yourself after creating so much destruction?" Dale's mouth twists like a doodle. With his eyes still wide, he is at once fascinated and disgusted.

"Exactly." I reply "Don't you see that you are helping me prove my point. I think now you are beginning to understand. I cannot feel for all these people that I harm. Denise's boyfriend was no exception. No human can possibly feel for so many. The only way I can survive is by not even thinking of all these people. The only way I can live through my days is by feeling my pain exclusively."

Dale nods his heads sideways, refusing to agree. "No, no, no. Wait a minute. There is a middle ground here. I don't feel the pain of the entire world either. I feel for the people I care about. Did you ever think about behaving like the rest of us and just feeling for the people that are close to you, your friends?" Dale speaks with elaborate hand motions as if he is delivering a podium speech.

"But the people that are close to me keep changing faces. My phone book has so many names that are foreign to me. I don't even keep my phonebook alphabetized for God's sake. I write in the names of people that I meet page after page in a chronological order. This way I never have to flip too far back. People that are more than two, three pages backwards in my book, I am usually no longer in contact with. Every few weeks, I rip out the old pages. Every year or so, I throw

out my old book and buy a new one. I usually have no numbers to copy over."

"That's pretty awful."

"That's how my life is. There are no permanent close friends for me to care for. There are these slots, for boyfriends, peers, shopping friends, advisors... Even when someone enters my life and becomes important, I know they are only temporary visitors. So, who do you want me to care for? The people that happened to be in my life when they experience pain? Should I care deeply for them, feel their pain for the few months that they are still fresh in my phonebook before I flip the page?"

Dale places his hands flat on the table. My heart seems to slow down his attack. He bites his lower lip with his upper teeth. "I don't know. I really don't know what to tell you." His eyes clear of redness and once again his pupils are framed in bright white. He seems tired, drained of anger and enthusiasm.

I cover his hands with mine. I lower my head and look up to him with droopy eyes.

"I am actually glad that we had this conversation." I say in a slow, rattling voice. "No matter what you will ultimately think of me. This was the reality that led me to the Victor years. The Victor years were simply more extreme. During those years, faces of the people around me began changing more rapidly. "

"Well..." Dale says with a sleepy voice and heavy eyelids, "I guess Victor is the next lover?"

"Exactly." I smile.

Dale looks to the right and then to the left. The diner is quiet and empty. The waiter is sitting on a stool at the bar by the register, reading over the receipts from the evening, and documenting numbers in his accounting book. The busboys are gone. The floor is sparkling clean.

Dale looks back at me and blinks a few times before his eyes fully focus. "I guess Waverly at 2:00 PM?"

"Exactly." I maintain my smile.

I stand up to leave. Dale explains that he still wants to use the men's room before leaving. He assures me that he will see me tomorrow at two.

I leave alone. I look back at Dale through the glass window of the diner as he walks towards the restrooms. His walk seems heavy. Could he be upset that things didn't workout between me and Jason? Is he hurt that I am moving on to Victor so soon? Then I realize he is probably still thinking of the death of Denise's boyfriend. As I walk alone, I think of how beautiful it is to watch him develop a conscience in my story. I am lighter leaving the diner. I take the subway home.

PHASE FOUR

*Image City*

*It is no more than a moral prejudice that truth is worth more than mere appearance; it is even the worst proved assumption there is in the world. Let at least this much be admitted: there would be no life at all if not on the basis of perspective estimates and appearances; and if, with the virtuous enthusiasm and clumsiness of some philosophers, one wanted to abolish the 'apparent' world altogether - well, supposing you could do that, at least nothing would be left of your 'truth' either. Indeed, what forces us all to suppose that there is an essential opposition of 'truth' and 'false'?"*

Fredrich Nietzsche

From "Beyond Good and Evil"

# 16

It is 2:00 PM. I enter the Waverly Restaurant. Dale enters the Waverly Restaurant. As I see him approaching, I hold the door open for him. I stand at the entrance to the restaurant observing him as he observes me. We experience an awkward moment. We are both silent, unsure of the proper way to greet each other. We are each waiting for the other to act first. Even though we are standing close to each other, I feel like we are participating in a Wild West gun draw, each observing the other's most subtle movements from a distance. I allow my eyes to scan him. He is wearing khaki shorts with two large pockets on each side. I look at his awkward, square knees. He is wearing a white T-shirt that advertises some college event with the date "October 5, 1989" printed across the chest in faded red. I laugh inside at the image this triggers in my mind. I imagine Dale as captain of his university's crew team in the Head of the Charles race. I imagine him standing at the edge of the boat as it cuts through the still water, energetically shouting at his team to row faster, telling them they can do it, they can really win. But in this diner, Dale looks like a rookie today, a New Englander out of place in the big city. He even reminds me slightly of Kevin.

Dale breaks our strange moment and begins to walk towards our booth in the back. I follow him. As we walk, we both glance around. The diner is filled with people. Chatter and smoke pass us by as we walk. It is a strange gray summer day outside and I feel as if the weather has seeped into the restaurant's atmosphere. We walk slowly. Oddly enough, our regular booth is the only vacant spot, as if the restaurant staff had anticipated our arrival and reserved our table.

We glide into our seats in slow motion. The waitress arrives with two cups of coffee.

I feel I need to insert shallow words into the thick air in order to dissolve it. I feel we need a light preparatory conversation to soften our interaction.

"Nice T-shirt. You look like a recent college graduate. I feel I should give you career counseling or something." I say to Dale in a mocking, flirtatious way.

Dale looks down at his shirt and then back at me. He smiles.

"I like this shirt a lot, actually." He replies with confidence, filling his chest with air. "It brings back a lot of memories."

"Oh, I know. I can tell you like it." I point to the date printed on his chest. "It seems pretty worn in."

"Which is why it's so comfortable." He adds.

"Well, it makes you look like an out-of-towner." I say, tilting my head sideways as if to show slight disappointment.

"Well, that's OK, because I was from out of town. I moved here for my first consulting job four years ago." Dale is sitting with a an erect posture as if mindfully trying to avoid touching the back of his seat.

"I know almost everybody in New York was from somewhere else at one time. But none of us want to look it. It seems weak if you look like

you're from somewhere else. You're revealing that you are not familiar with the way things work here in the big city."

"Wait a minute, here" Dale says, using his hands to push the air in front of him towards me, "First off, I don't think I look like a new comer. And besides, I don't mind looking like I am from somewhere else. I like where I'm coming from. I love my hometown. I love my college years. As a matter of fact, I love October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1989, because my team won a race that day and I had a great time."

"Listen," I say in a diplomatic intonation "I don't have a problem with your past or with your clothes, as long as you realize that people judge you by what you wear." My voice lowers as if I do not think it is worthwhile discussing this topic with him.

"Well, I am wearing a piece of my history, OK? This T-shirt is from a memorable day in my life. It reveals a moment of truthfulness from my past. I *am* this day, and every other day of my life. My achievements, my failures, my history - that is what defines me."

Dale pounds on the table as he ends his remark. I think of how he was probably taught to pound on the table when trying to *get a point across* in some business school class. He probably uses this 'table pound' technique all the time in his corporate career and finds it very useful.

Dale smiles at me. I smile back. Through silence, we both realize the absurdity of our debate, the exaggerated seriousness with which we are discussing trivia. Dale's smile converts to self-embarrassment and his cheeks grow red. My smile progresses into soft laughter.



"Well," Dale says, "Now that you've had your fun, may I say a few things about what you choose to wear?" His eyebrows meet at his nose bridge as he asks. His eyes are inviting me to play.

"Feel free. I take great pride in my style. I carefully select my clothing to fit the image I want to portray."

I stand up from my seat at the booth with great posture. I raise my head, raise my eyebrows, and take a bow as if accepting an invitation to dance.

"Well. You may sit down. I saw all I need to see. I formed an opinion of your style long before today."

I sit. I place my elbows on the table and bring my head close to him. I am truly curious, attentive to his words.

"Well, when I first met you in the subway station, I thought you were a vampire from an Ann Rice novel, coming to tell me the adventures you had experienced in your seven hundred and fifty years of vampire existence. You wore all black and your red lipstick looked like real blood. You wore that weird black lace, slip, thing. Whatever you want to call it. Come to think of it, you always wear black. And your clothes are always tight. Really the only thing that you change everyday is the type of material you're wearing. I don't know where you find all that weird stuff. I guess some East Village vintage shop or maybe in flea markets upstate..

In a nutshell, you dress to be noticed. It almost seems like you're rebelling every morning when you get dressed, trying real hard not to

conform. Be unique. Be individualistic. Or maybe you just enjoy being asked at New York restaurants if you work in fashion or something. "

"Oh" I say as if attempting to swallow his hard blow. But now I smile. With my widening lips, I belittle the effect of his words.

"But you do like it, right?" I ask half sarcastically. I am actually really not sure what his conclusion was.

"Oh, I enjoy it, I guess. It's very entertaining. But I still find your whole image very pretentious, very New York."

"Well, I'm glad were venting. It's a good ice-breaking conversation before I tell you about the Victor years."

"How is this all related to this Victor guy?"

"There is a connection. You see, I adopted this style during the Victor years. During that time, I invested a great deal in my look, in order to remain on a level that was no more than skin deep."

Dale shows me the palms of his hand. "Wait a minute, I don't get it. This guy told you what to wear?"

"No, but he showed me New York in a new light, and I adjusted both my behavior and my clothing. Until I met Victor, I spent all my time in New York with Jason. I didn't really mingle with the scene that much. I pretty much remained an outsider."

"I don't know." Dale says, "If I met you in any other part of the world, with out even talking to you, just by looking at you, I would

know that you are a New Yorker. Maybe it's that cynic look or tough attitude, I don't know. Maybe it is just your clothes."

"Well, Victor is the one that made me such."

"It's hard to believe that a man made you a New Yorker. From what you have told me so far, it seems like you were made for this city."

"You know what, maybe you're right. I didn't phrase it correctly. Victor didn't mold me into a New Yorker. He introduced me to Image City."

"Image City?" Dale asks, feeling stupid even repeating this inexplicable term.

"Well, I'll try to be brief. But in essence, New York is the ultimate island of falsehood. Everyone wears a mask before leaving their home. Most New Yorkers own a closet full of these masks and false personas. You see, everyone, all of us, are constantly being observed by each other. I don't know if this is because so many people live so close together here, or because advertising, PR and modeling agencies chose New York as their global base. But the point is that New Yorkers are always observing and being observed to the extreme, all the time, at restaurants, the theater, everywhere. And everyone is aware of this game. Everyone feels the city camera following them around town. Because of this, New Yorkers invest so much in their masks, in their lies, in their images. That's why there are so many void people here." I point to our surroundings, displaying the Waverly as if it were Exhibit One.

"Now wait one minute," he holds his pointer finger out, pausing my words in mid air. "I happen to agree with you. I think it's disgusting. I mean you can't have dinner at a restaurant in SoHo without feeling watched, without feeling insecure about something in the way you look. And it's also true that people put a lot into their image here, or 'masks' as you call it. But that could just be an exterior thing. It doesn't mean they are void, or anything. It doesn't reflect on their souls, I don't think."

"Of course it does, Dale. You need to be more perceptive. Let me try to explain. When people invest so much in their look, they become image shells. They think only of how they look to each other, not to themselves. They focus all their energy on perfecting their shells, and because they invest nothing on what's truly in them, their fake shells start seeping into their void souls. Thus, they remain a shell. Their exterior lie becomes their true nature."

"This sounds exactly like your powers." Dale exclaims.

"It is another manifestation of my powers."

"No, but see, I don't think that that's how the world works. People in the city may be very different, very diverse. But this is not because of a lie. This is because we are all different. It's people's souls that radiate their true nature, not just their image, for God's sake. It's all about who we really are. If someone is special or different, it comes out through their clothes, their movements." Dale's speech is slow and lacks confidence. I feel he is swaying from his argument while speaking it.

"No, Dale. You're wrong. If it was New Yorkers' real self that came out through their look, it would be natural, effortless. But people are spending so much time and money on building these false images." I am speaking loudly but I feel Dale is not listening. He is already constructing his next defense lines. I crave him to hear me. I increase my voice and my force. I rape him with my words.

"Listen to me, entire firms specialize in creating these images. Universities construct theories and models to create more effective masks. They can only be false. C'mon, look around you, people nurture their created image as if it were a child."

Dale covers his ears with his hands, preventing the words from entering him. But this is all show. I know that he swallowed them.

"What you are saying can't be true. Nobody would treat a lie like a child. People dislike lies too much. Not even New Yorkers would pay so much attention to something that isn't true. They would know it's a waste of time."

I realize that there is no benefit to this argument. I remind myself of my goal. I swallow my frustration. I try to diffuse and continue.

"Look, I am getting ahead of myself again. I haven't even introduced you to Victor yet. Of course you cannot yet understand the world that he exposed me to. Let me first tell you what happened. We do better together when I stick to the order in which things happened. I have a lot to tell you today and we haven't even started yet. But first let's order some food. I am starving."

As we slice open the large weighty menus on to the table, all words and resentment are brushed aside and fall to the floor. Silence takes over us. I look at my watch to assess what meal this is. It is only 3:11 PM. It is still lunchtime. I signal the waitress and she comes to our table immediately. I have not seen her before. She seems intimidated. I order a turkey club sandwich with fresh fruit instead of fries on the side. Dale orders a tuna melt.

We wait in silence for our food. As the food is placed on our table, our booth is empty of words. We eat loudly, each holding a sandwich in one hand, and using our other hand to maneuver the fries or fruit into our mouths. We are looking at each other with softer eyes now. I place the last bite of my sandwich in my mouth, chew it loudly and then speak:

"The day Jason left New York, I was freed. I began a new life. I was lifted into a lighter existence. I was no longer shielded from the outside world. I immersed myself in the cafe and museum culture. I no longer felt the need to use my powers to help others. Jason's departure provided me with a release from the army. I was liberated from the guilt that came with my skill. I had paid my dues to society. I granted myself permission to be egocentric. I bathed myself in hedonistic pleasures.

I arranged for an early graduation from acting school, completing a shorter course study and lost all interest in acting. Since I no longer lied about my aunt's stipend to me, I had very little money. So I used men as the means of funding my expensive social life. I was constantly dating. I was more interested in learning about ideas than developing closeness. I used men as my key to a mansion of knowledge.

I became a waitress at a French cafe in the West Village to get some extra cash and gain exposure to new faces. On one of my shifts, I met Nicholas, a twenty-five year old French man from Paris who was working for a French investment bank in New York. Nicholas was born into the old Paris bourgeoisie and only associated himself with Parisians with a similar background. He would take me to the theater, the opera, champagne lounges and parties filled with European aristocrats. We both felt extremely comfortable together. I found his accent charming, and he loved my outspoken nature. We both liked the good time we shared more than each other's personalities. Although we spent a lot of time together, we didn't know each other at all. You see, our comfort with each other was not a result of familiarity. It was merely the outcome of our defined position. He loved me as a beautiful piece of jewelry, and I enjoyed playing this shallow role in his life.

After a few dates and some nights of passion, I began lying to his friends about how deeply he loved me. His heart had no choice but to obey my words. He showered me with gifts. He flattered me constantly. He did everything in his power to keep me happy. His happiness came to be directly linked to mine, and the size of my smile was mimicked on his face. But there was no use. After a few months of dating and partying, I quickly lost interest. You see, I became bored. I felt like I was playing chess with myself, moving the pieces for both players. I ruled the relationship with my lies and poor Nicolas had no contribution to the outcome of events. The game we played was just too damn easy for me.

After Nicholas, there was David the musician from California. After David, there was Marco the fashion designer from Milan, John the

architecture student from Brooklyn, and Nathan the consultant from God knows where, I can't even remember.

Each relationship followed the same Nicholas model. I lie about their love. They fall in love with me. I get bored. I leave. I became the queen manipulator, a true femme fatale. I even believe I grew more physically beautiful during this time. The fantasies these men have of me started to intertwine with my true appearance. I was playing a role that I knew all men desired. I was professional and well educated, but naughty and dangerous. As I played this role, I became that woman as well. I was not sure who I really was. I only knew who I was acting.

I was looking to join a higher league; to find a stronger match. Who knows, maybe I was just in search for a non-believer. And then came Victor."

Dale twitches mildly in his seat. The same shudder ran through his body when I mentioned Victor before. His jolts remind me of a schoolboy's reaction every time he hears his name called in class, afraid to be asked a question or to be called to the blackboard. This type of attention triggers what we all build for ourselves for classrooms and dinner parties to prevent being caught off guard. But it was not Dale's name that was being called. It was Victor's. Maybe Dale knows a Victor. He might fear that his Victor and mine are the same. A person he knows sacrificed his flesh and became a character in my story, a piece of my life. I stop speaking. I let the name 'Victor' hover over our table and seep into his consciousnesses. A few seconds pass by. The waitress walks by and refills our coffees.



We both over thank her to break our awkward silence and add sugar and milk.

# 17

It is 4:05 at the Waverly Restaurant. I look around. There are two girls in their twenties chatting in a small booth in secrecy. They are both skinny and tall, wearing tight spaghetti-strap tops that reveal their hard nipples. They are both wearing sunglasses even though it is a gray day. They are smoking, giggling, keeping their shoulders and arms fixed while animating their whispers with expressive facial gestures. They seem to be talking about something forbidden.

Dale looks at them as well. I think of their masks, their images, how expensive they must have been, how gracefully they wear them. I can tell Dale is viewing them in the context of our conversation as well. I do not think he is looking at their masks. I think he is trying to examine who they really are, cut through their show and smoke. He is searching for truth. He looks back at me with the same examining stare. I can feel the pierce of his look. It passes a shiver through my body.

"So what was so different about your relationship with Victor?" Dale asks, his chin instinctively moving forward as he speaks.

"Everything." I reply, moving in my seat, trying to break free of his eye-lock.

"Does this mean you finally fell in love?" Dale's tone is slightly sarcastic.

"God, no" I respond immediately as a reflex to the word 'love'. Just as I would blink if Dale stuck his finger in my eye.

"I cannot be in love. Remember? I invent love. I cannot be taken over by it."

"Well then what was so different about Victor?"

"Everything was different. In fact, I cannot think of one thing in our togetherness that resembled any of my prior experiences. But more specifically, our competition was different; our closeness was different; our sexuality was different. And most importantly, in the context of this story, our lies to each other were different."

I sip from my artificially sweetened coffee. I feel the after taste in my mouth. The drama has been built. I can now proceed:

"The night I met Victor is one of the most memorable nights of my life.

We met at a party in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The party was at a huge loft of a German painter. The loft was scarcely furnished, and the most noticeable objects in it were the huge abstract paintings of color on the wall. The crowd was very Avant Garde. I arrived with a friend that knew the German painter from a class they took together. She was not close to me and she had a mad crush on the painter. The only reason she called me to come along was because she didn't want to go alone. I knew I would be abandoned at the scene the minute we arrived. This was actually what convinced me to join her.

In any case, shortly after we arrived I found myself alone, standing by the alcohol table, sipping punch and observing the scene. There were about fifty people in the loft. And although the space could easily fit over a hundred people, the rich group of characters seemed to fill the space nicely. Most of the people were bohemian New Yorkers, almost every person had something unique or unexpected to their look: a cowboy hat, red boots, large seventies sunglasses. At first I thought this was a costume party, then I realized that these were simply masks people wore to go out at night. Maybe this was to expose their artist identity; or maybe to hide their daytime jobs. Next to me by the punch bowl was a heroin-skinny light-haired girl with extremely fair skin, a big Afro wig, and intense black eye make-up. I looked at her for a while. I was tipsy. The jungle music and ambient green lighting made me feel comfortable, though. I kept observing from my cocoon.

I narrowed my focus on one couple that was standing and talking on the opposite side of the loft. They were standing in front of a large Jackson Pollack-like painting with red, purple and black paint splashes and no frame. The woman was tall and skinny with a body that revealed many bones. She had short brown hair thickened by gel, slanted green eyes, and huge dark red lips. She was wearing tight green suede pants, and a tight white ribbed tank top, the kind that is usually worn by working men as undershirts. But the trashy white top looked so gentle on her bony body, its starched stiffness curves tightly around her collarbone. She was speaking to a man with blonde hair, wearing a white button down shirt tucked into a pair of thick white jeans. His white clothing made him stand out against the strong colors painted behind him. Through my punch eyes, I saw him glowing, a soft angel in white, defusing the zesty nature of the speaking woman. They seemed to be life-long friends. He was shorter and

gentler. She was active in their conversation, fully animated, using a lot of hand gestures and touching him throughout. The man was tender and calm, absorbing her extroverted style.

Later I learned that she was Star and he was Victor."

Suddenly, Dale's eyes shut and open at the speed of a camera shutter. He then folds his arms on the table, and lets his arms slide forward, bringing his head closer to me. I feel his eyes are like mini cameras. As he slides forward on the table, his eyes zoom in on my face. He is giving me full attention. I sense the sharpness of his ears, the alertness of his mind.

"Star and Victor. What an amazing introduction they had into my life. Every few minutes someone would interrupt their conversation, greeting them with two cheek kisses and a brief exchange of words. They knew the host well. They knew most of the guests. I read their urges in their gestures as if each glance was a sign. Star wanted to complete her pressing story. Victor wanted to mingle more, but he listened with seriousness, while occasionally kissing an approaching friend. Star maintained her enthusiasm, regardless of the interruptions, competing with each distraction.

I watched them like one watches an art film. I paid attention to all the small details of their behavior as if a director had choreographed their every move to reveal some profound subtext idea. Their conversation was beautifully framed by the colorful painting behind them, and the rhythm of their movements was in perfect sync with the music. Between hugs and kisses in the flow of the story, I noticed both of them looking over at me. I was so curious about them, so seduced by their glances. I knew it was too late to try to

retrieve my attention. I was hooked. I continued observing them without feeling insecure. I kept sipping and watching my film.

Star stopped speaking and the three of us shared a moment of intense, wordless staring. Star said something to Victor, and pointed towards the alcohol table near where I was standing. She must've offered to get them more drinks. As she began walking towards me, I tried to think up some lies I would tell her, and possibly Victor later on. I initiated a mind search for the most interesting and least harmful lie I could find.

Star reached the alcohol table, picked up two beers in her right hand, and turned to me.

'Hi, I am Star.'

The depth of her voice disarmed me. Its smooth low voice soothed me. I instantly forgot all the lies I had planned on telling. My mind became blank.

'Hi, nice to meet you.' I replied, looking in to her eyes and noticing that they were gray.

'Listen, my friend and I were adoring you from afar. We were going to come over and talk to you, but Victor used to be a pretty bad alcoholic, and he would hate to watch all his friends' reactions if they saw him standing by the punch bowl. Would you like to come over there and talk to us for a little while?'

As she spoke, she caressed me where my arm becomes my shoulder. With one finger she was drawing imaginary circular doodles on my skin and

I felt the shivers running through my body in the same circular shapes only increasing in size as they made their way through my body. She was still playing with my arm after she finished speaking. I remember feeling uncomfortable. I noticeably moved my arm away from the touch of her finger to ash my cigarette. I asked and she naturally withdrew her hand. I was unsure if Star was Victor's messenger or the message itself. But in any case, the truth mattered little. Star restored two fingers to my shoulder and let them slide down my arm to my hand. She then grabbed my hand and guided me through the crowd in the direction of the red and green painting. When we arrived, Victor was not there. Star stopped next to the painting, let go of my hand and began looking around. I spotted Victor sitting with his legs crossed on a couch in the hallway that led to the bedroom. Victor was easy to spot even without the painting's background behind him. His white clothing made him glow in the dark space. I pointed him out, and Star gently pulled me behind her as she walked towards him. When we arrived at the couch, Star sat down and pulled my arm down until I was seated between her and Victor. I was surprised by the strength of her pull. I felt she was pulling me under water, bringing me down to another world. The couch was a love seat meant for two people. I felt a thigh pressuring against each one of my own - the same pressure coming from two sides, two different people. Victor pulled out a thin, neatly rolled joint. He rolled his fingers over it a few times and then lit it. Time seemed to pass at a different pace from the sofa. Sounds were different too. I did feel as if I was scuba diving among corals. I knew I had entered a new phase.

We passed the joint between the three of us. Victor sat with his legs crossed, moving his shoulders to the beat. Star adjusted her position. She bent her right knee and brought her leg on to the

couch, such that her right foot rested between her open legs, while her left foot remained grounded on the floor. She was seated sideways, facing me. I crossed my legs in response and we continued smoking in silence sending signals to each other with our eyes. Potent smoke was dancing amongst us and occasionally upsetting our curious, examining eyes. Each one of us was surveying the other two faces as if studying its features for a written exam. We smoked the joint until there was nothing left of it. And then Victor pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his white jeans' pocket and offered us each a cigarette. He then pulled out a lighter and lit them for us courteously. He put the pack and lighter back in his pocket, all without uncrossing his legs, and spoke:

'I am Victor.' he said. 'I just returned from an excavation in Africa. You see, I am the collector of a rare form of Sub-Saharan dirt.' He accentuated the 't' at the end of his sentence as if he were about to spit.

Star laughed as soon as he began speaking. She held her stomach and bent her chest forward and laughter kept pouring out of her mouth and dripping from the couch to the floor like liquid. Clearly, Victor was making all this up. Victor laughed as well throughout his speech, enjoying listening to his own imagination.

'...You see, five years ago when I was vacationing with my ex-Ethiopian girlfriend in Africa, I learned of this rare dirt. When it is mixed with water and some African spices, it creates this special mud that can heal the deepest emotional scars. After returning from my two weeks in Africa, I swore to myself that I would dedicate my life to exposing this mud to the Western world. I mean clearly we have a great need for this natural emotional healer.'



At this point I joined in and contributed my portion of laughter, watching it mix with theirs and trickle into the sofa. Victor swallowed some air to control himself and continued:

'This miraculous mud is called Ginji. I spent the past four months in Africa, searching. About a month ago, I finally found some virgin Ginji dirt in Somalia. I had my old Somalian guide assist me with the preparations, and I now know the secret of the Ginji. I consumed some of it, and I am now healed. I have no emotional scars. My parent's divorce, my loneliness during high school, my Ethiopian girlfriend leaving me for a man of her tribe...I have dealt with all these issues; I am healthy and balanced. I healed these wounds with the help of the Ginji. And now...'

Victor holds out his pointer finger right between my eyes,

'... I plan to heal the rest of the world which is still ignorant of this magical substance.'

We all laughed therapeutically - our rolling giggles serving as an echo to his words. We were radiating our joy. Star was massaging my left shoulder and arm, while Victor was gently gliding his fingers over my back.

'And what is your story, Star? And don't disappoint me. If you work in publishing or advertising or something boring, you better not speak to me and our new friend at all.'

Victor invited her to play in this game of imagination. Star giggled once more, holding out her hand, asking for a cigarette before she

started speaking. Victor quickly reached for the cigarettes in his pocket, offering her one, like tourists offer street performers change for their show. He lit her cigarette. I swung my head leftward, departing from Victor and focusing my attention to Star. She inhaled deeply, giggled, gathered her seriousness, and began:

'As opposed to your story, mine is slightly unconventional.'

Victor and I laughed, knowing we were in for a good one.

Star did not laugh with us. She maintained her seriousness, and waited for our laughter to subside. Only then, she continued.

'The reason I am called Star is because my actual childhood home is on Xuxu, a star five million light years away. Have no doubts, of course, I am an earthling like both of you with red blood and everything. But part of my childhood was spent amongst the inhabitants of Xuxu. Even though this all sounds very far fetched, I am actually the result of a very simple occurrence. You see Neil Armstrong is my biological father. He was having an affair with an illegal immigrant from Mexico by the name of Maria Martinez who worked as a janitor at NASA. Maria became pregnant with Neil's child and refused to have an abortion. So I was born in some trashy suburb outside Washington DC, the bastard child of Neil and Maria.

Of course, Neil stopped the relationship and told Maria he never wanted to hear from her or the baby again. You can't really blame him. He had a family of his own and his affair with my mother was scandalous. Anyway, when I was two years old, my mom confronted Neil and asked him for money. He refused to help her. When my mom threatened to blackmail him, he claimed that no one would believe her

story. At this point, I was becoming a significant financial burden on my mother. When she realized that I was not going to help her get money from Neil, she wished she never had me in the first place.”

Victor and I are both silent. We are lost in the hypnotic eyes and soothing voice of Star. I am frozen, listening with an open mouth, no longer feeling Victor’s hand on my skin.

“Now this is the interesting part, so listen carefully. Five days before the Apollo 11 was to take off into space and my father was to address the world from the moon in an historical speech, my father called Maria at home. They arranged a discrete meeting in which Neil convinced Maria to send me off to space. You see, my father was a freak, fully dedicated to the research of space. He thought up a brilliant, sick plan. He planned on leaving me in space. In the case that I would die, he would never have to hear from me or my mother again. But, if somehow some space creatures would pick me up and care for me, eventually communicating with the earth through me, NASA would learn more than it had ever imagined about life in space. My father’s notion that there is life in space would be confirmed. My poor mother, who at this point was willing to kill me to get on with her life, was easily persuaded.’

Star stopped speaking for a laughter break. She could not keep a straight face any longer.

At this point Victor and I were sprawled out on the couch, laughing with open mouths. I was leaning forward with my face in my lap, almost in tears, and Victor, with his hands on my back, was leaning forward on top of me, laughing as hard as I was. I felt the movement in his stomach muscles straighten every time he renewed his laughter.

After releasing her laughter, Star regained her posture and seriousness once again:

'So, my father snuck me onto the spaceship, without informing his colleagues of this secret plan. I don't know the details of how he kept this from the other astronauts. All I know is that soon after the spaceship set back to America, the inhabitants of Xuxu (watching this whole episode from hiding) picked me up.'

In order to make sure this wasn't the end of a lovely imaginary tale, I asked the stoned Star a logistical question:

'Well, how did you get back to earth, Miss Armstrong?'

'Yeah, how'd you pull that one off, smarty pants?' Victor backed me up.

Star answered half laughing, half speaking, trying to pronounce every word clearly, even though her mouth was dry from the pot:

'That's all really simple. If you knew the Xuxu lifestyle you would not be asking such a basic question, guys. They come here all the time. It's a fifteen-minute ride from their planet to earth using the tele-transporter they developed. They just don't want any earthlings to discover them because they use us for scientific research. They view us as this grand lab for experiments. So my adopting Xuxu parents traveled to earth a few times, and quickly figured out the plan that my parents had plotted. When I was five, they confronted my mother, who was still working at NASA. They gave me back to her, and gave her a lot of US money that they hologramed from regular

dollars. They made her promise to raise me far away from Washington DC and never tell my father of my return. At this point my mother changed my name from Sophia to Star. I never spoke to a Xuxu again. They left me with my mother and never contacted me again. But I still remember what they look like.'

'What do they look like?' Victor asked, no longer laughing. He seemed truly fascinated by Star's wild imagination.

'You guys, I don't have a fucking clue what they look like. I am really stoned, O.K.? I think I'm done with this story. Besides, this shit is starting to freak me out a little.' She broke her words with abrupt, silly laughter that started with a sprinkling spit. She rubbed her dry eyes and she laughed and fell forward on the couch.

'OK. OK' Both Victor and I let her break. The three of us just sat there on the sofa laughing in our incubated party, completely oblivious to the rest of the people in the loft. We kept repeating catchy phrases from Star's story and making silly comments.

'Star Armstrong, the Xuxu girl' or 'maybe there is a Xuxu watching us right now...'

We were like three children playing pretend, amusing ourselves with our own imagination.

Victor reached over me, hugged Star and said:

'You have one sick imagination girl. But that's why I love you.' And then he laughed out loud again and both of us followed.

Star commented that this whole episode only happened because we were so stoned, and that that's why she liked smoking dope so much. As our laughter began to subside, I suddenly grew uncomfortable. I felt claustrophobic. These two characters were strangers to me an hour ago, and now their fingers were traveling the secret paths of my body. I noticed that Victor and Star played an eye contact game that I was not part of. I suddenly grew paranoid. I started thinking that I was somehow part of a plan. Maybe they had a bet on who would take me home for the night. Maybe they would call it a tie if we all went home together. I needed to exit our world to gain a little perspective. I suddenly stood up. I said I had to go to the bathroom. After pushing through people and waiting in line, I reached the bathroom. I didn't really need to pee before. But since I lied, I suddenly needed to go really bad. After peeing, I stood in front of the mirror. The music and people seemed miles away with the bathroom door shut. I thought about my situation.

I studied my face in the mirror, and I realized it was my turn to lie. I observed my smile grow wider and wider as I realized the rare opportunity I had been granted. I spoke to my image in the mirror:

'My God, this is a dream come true. I have just been handed the opportunity I have always wished for. I am free to lie like a kid again. Star and Victor know that my words will be lies. I can't believe this. I am liberated of my powers for the night. Whatever I say will have no impact whatsoever. I am free to make up jargon, be whoever, blame whoever, let my imagination run wildly out through my mouth.'

I left the bathroom and made my way back to the sofa, physically bumping into many people on the way. I noticed how the party had

filled up. I noticed that I was really stoned. I looked for Victor, my guide in white. When I found him with Star, both still laughing on the sofa, I felt safe. I was a kid. I took my place on the sofa between them, and gladly told them my lie-story. I went on for maybe an hour. Words came out of my mouth floating upward like music notes. I made up some ridiculous story of how I was the daughter of some rich Arab sheik, how I grew up in a palace. Then I spoke of my lovers, all wanting me for my royal name. I spoke about my friends, my fears... I went on and on. I told my story slowly and enjoyed every second, prolonged every moment as if I was eating a divine dessert. I didn't want it all to end.

They listened with laughter and fascination. I don't even remember how much sense I was making; I just remember speaking, laughing, and occasionally being questioned about a detail of my story.

I don't recall ever feeling as liberated as I felt that night. I released ideas and thoughts that were chained in my mind for twenty-three years. Ideas and thoughts that I previously assumed had a lifetime sentence in my head.

When I finally shut up, I was as clean and as pure as a baby; I was a nymph truly satisfied for the very first time. I was a liberated slave, an enlightened retard. My sense of release was greater than any orgasm."

# 18

Orgasm orgasm orgasm orgasm orgasm orgasm orgasm orgasm. I watch the word multiply before my eyes. Dale sees them too. Then, each 'orgasm' continues to float above our heads, slowly, like thick cigar smoke in a sealed room.

It is 6:00 PM at the Waverly Restaurant. Some early evening eaters are dining and the restaurant smells of Beef Stroganoff. It is broad daylight outside, although little light enters through the restaurant's heavy curtains. Dale notices my pause and quickly recognizes it as a session break.

"I guess this means it's dinner time," he says. His face is red. The 'orgasm' words are upsetting his skin like mosquitoes.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

"Not really," Dale says, biting his lower lip as a sign of being lost for words. "...But we have reached an intersection in your story, right? Usually we follow up with food. I could wait a little, I just thought that you stoped 'cause you meant--"

"So could I." I stop his mumbling with my own words. "If you'd like, we can talk about this night for a little." I suggest, trying to examine his level of enthusiasm.

"Well," Dale pauses, placing one hand on his chin and looking upward at the ceiling. I feel him scrolling through the different thoughts



in his mind, trying to fetch the one thought that would be most appropriate to speak.

"I guess lying freely for the first time could be enlightening for someone with your powers. But this is not how most people feel when they lie. You realize this, right? I don't feel free like that when I lie."

Dale is speaking to me from afar. I want to bring him closer.

"What do you mean? Then how do you feel?"

Dale grinds his teeth, holding back, waiting for the right thought to ripen into words.

"I guess I feel that kind freedom you described when I find truth. You know, truth that was buried deep, something that I had to struggle to uncover. Like understanding completely what someone means when they talk to me... or seeing things as they truly are for the first time. It's a rush" His voice is unsure. He tilts his head sideways like a dog, seeking approval.

"Oh, c'mon, but that's not the same thing. I am talking to you about releasing imagination. You are talking about being a reporter or something." I make a dissatisfied face as if I had just tasted sour milk. A vertical line emerges between my eyebrows.

"Don't you see the high that comes from experiencing truth? It's like having a great workout or something. Man," he swings his head from side to side, "When I used to watch my girlfriend sleep and out of her state of dreaminess, she would open her eyes and tell me she

loves me for no reason." He closes his eyes momentarily and moves very gently, subtly. "That is truth." Dale opens his eyes "Or take something simpler, like the solution to an algebra problem or even understanding how a radio works for the first time." Dale's eyes light up. He swings his head again. "It doesn't matter if you discover truth alone or if it comes to you from someone, it's the same high." He points to me with a forceful finger " I love listening to you. I want to completely understand you. That is a high for me. It's like staring reality smack in the face without any fear."

I fold my arms around my chest and freeze my expression until he is done speaking.

"That all sounds great Dale. But that's not at all what I'm talking about. Don't be so narrow minded." I say. "You don't have to uncover the mechanisms of this world. You can build a new world with your words. Just be creative, speak in fantasies."

"I don't know, I don't think so. I don't feel that way. I could never have fun playing that game with Star and Victor. A lie is always a burden to me. I only lie when there is a reason. And even though I don't plan my lies like you, I always have a rationale for lying. Christ, I'm always afraid of getting caught. I can't just lie for fun." Dale looks at the table as he speaks and his eyes seem to be out of focus. He is trying to describe his own nature. He is confused.

"Yeah, well this was an unusual situation. Star, Victor and I chose to accept lies and flow with them."

Dale still seems confused. I feel he cannot relate to my experience even though he is trying very hard. I do not know how to further explain what that night meant to me.

Dale touches his forehead with the tip of his fingers and tries to connect again. He is still looking down at the table.

"See, what I don't understand is why. I mean, if someone tells me that everything they are about to tell me is not true, I don't want to hear it."

"Why not?" I ask.

"I don't know, I'm just uninterested if the story is not true." He replies.

"Well, I say, "When I met you in the subway station, you were reading Lolita. That's not a true story.

"That's not the same thing. Fiction is different."

"But that's exactly what was different with Victor. He gave me the legitimacy to lie. He made our lies fiction. A mere tool to imagine more, something to learn from."

"Yeah. You can also use lies as a tool to escape reality, which is the more common use."

"You know what, why not? What's wrong with escaping reality? Why can't you be someone else every night by making up a different life

story?" I ask, straightening my back and speaking with my hands as if I am delivering a speech.

"Why? Are you seriously asking me this question? Well, I will tell you exactly why."

Dale emphasizes each word and pronounces each syllable as if speaking to a child, or a foreigner.

"It's really, really simple. Let me try to explain to you how our world operates. The more developed societies in our world have built this social contract of truthfulness. Every boy and girl is told by his or her parents time and time again that lying is wrong. And when we grow up, most of us strive for truthfulness in our lives. This way, we can rely on each other, believe what we are told, build meaningful relationships and business contracts, and advance as a society. If we lie all the time, we can only trust ourselves; we cannot collaborate. If this was the way we chose to run our society, we would still be living in caves." He smiles condescendingly and holds out both hands as if saying, "There you go, now wasn't that simple?"

God, how I hate being talked down to like that. I must strike back. I feel the need to score at least one point in this argument before I continue with my story.

"Great answer. Congratulations. Lies are evil. But it's not that black and white. There are an infinite number of grays in between. Is there a difference between planning to lie in advance and lying spontaneously? When someone is asked an inappropriate question, is it O.K. for him or her to lie in response? If your audience clearly does

not believe you, is your lie still wrong? When you don't tell all the truth, are you as wrong as someone who actively lies?"

"I see where you're going and you got me all wrong. I think there are extreme cases when lying is legitimate. Let's say a murderer is searching for his victim, and the victim is hiding in your house. If the murderer comes and knocks on your door asking you if you saw his victim, I think you should lie, save the victim, and your lie is legitimate.

All I am saying is that lying should not be used as a form of entertainment. I don't just lie for fun, like you and Victor. When I lie, it's usually to cover my ass, and then I am worried sick about getting caught. And I am also concerned about the moral consequences of my actions."

"Usually to cover your ass, but not always, right? Did you lie to your boss to get out of work this week? Because you don't seem too worried about being caught eating lunch with me if you did. "

Dale's thoughts are clear in his head but he chooses not to voice them:

"Listen, we are getting too far from your story. I don't want to speak of my lies right now. We meet here to talk about your lies, remember?" Dale says, with defense in his voice and mild anger wrapping his words.

"Well, do I at least score a point in this argument because you are forfeiting?" I wink playfully. I smile at Dale.

He smiles at my girly behavior. Now that I have called our conversation a competition, it seems childish to continue battling in argument. I feel the tension escaping our conversation like air out of a balloon.

Dale holds his mouth closed. "Have you had that orgasmic feeling through speech ever again?" He smiles while forcing his mouth to stay closed and an awkward expression develops on his face.

I smile at his remark, not because he made me laugh, but because I was right. I knew the word orgasm was still floating in the consciousness of his mind.

"No. I never felt quite like that again." I let my words sink to the surface of the table.

"I mean you'll see what this relationship led to later on. Free lies continued in my Victor phase and helped me build an image and wear a decent mask. All the stuff I mentioned to you earlier. But I never again had that satisfying feeling of releasing stories and fantasies that were suppressed for so many years."

Dale smiles at my words. He seems comfortable. He places his elbow on the table, his hand under his chin. "Now I'm hungry," He says. He reaches for the menus placed behind the napkin holder and hands one to me.

I look him in the eyes as I take the menu from his outreached hand. Our state of comfort is framed with a thin lining of sexual innuendo. We both bury our faces in the large plastic menus.

I raise my head from the menu before deciding what to order.

"Hey." I say.

Dale looks up from his menu and smiles. As he raises his head towards me, I feel as if we are a couple uniting after a long time apart. I am so happy to see his face looking at me.

"Have I ever told you you're the greatest listener in the world?" He smiles widely this time and then lowers his head again and returns to the menu.

From behind the tall menu he says, "Stop it. You're just lying." And I feel his words reach me indirectly from the walls, the back of his seat and the ceiling.

# 19

It is 6:51 PM at the Waverly Restaurant. The waitress comes to our table as we close our large menus simultaneously, each receiving a mini gust of wind in the face. I order the Beef Stroganoff and choose broccoli and mashed potatoes as my side dishes. Dale orders the meatloaf dinner, which comes with the fix sides of stuffing and mashed potatoes.

We stare at each other for five minutes and I witness a transformation on Dale's face. He is no longer playful. He now seems pensive, unsettled. He opens his mouth to speak and closes it without releasing any words. He opens his mouth again, begins a hand gesture and then returns to his state of no speech. I look at him with questioning eyes, curious what thought he is hesitating to voice. He opens his mouth again, lifts his hand from the table and says:

"Let me ask you something," again his mouth opens and closes repeatedly, "Don't you think lying is wrong?"

I smile at his ineptness. "I think that we all do it. I think that we cannot help ourselves. I also believe that - "

I shift backwards on the seat as the waitress arrives with two hot plates of food. She places a plate in front of each one of us and remarks "Be careful. These plates are very hot." We both look down at the food. We reach for our utensils and begin eating. We eat in silence, like prisoners in a cafeteria being closely watched by a



guard. When we finish, the waitress clears the table. I view this as my cue and proceed:

"The legitimacy of lies." I pause, as if I am speaking the title of the next session.

Dale seems awakened by my announcement, as if I had just turned on the lights in a dark room. He folds his arms. He focuses his eyes on my mouth.

"Just like we spoke of before eating. The legitimacy of lies is what it was all about with Victor. The freedom that he granted me was limitless. I was like a child from a warm climate experiencing snow for the first time. I played with this newly found substance, rolled around in it with great enthusiasm and prayed that it will never disappear.

Star took off for Europe for a few months the day after the Williamsburg party. Although I appreciated her role in introducing me to this new world, I did not have a chance to pursue a friendship with her. Victor and I ended up exchanging phone numbers at the party, and decided to meet for dinner a few days later. The first time we went out, we played the same Williamsburg game. We met at a French restaurant on Thompson Street in SoHo. I recognized him by his white clothing. After we were seated at our table, Victor said that now that we were on a date, we should get to know each other's real personalities. For a moment, I actually thought he was being sincere. Then he quickly introduced me to another one of his false identities. This time he was an architect of museum spaces that drew his inspiration from experiments with psychedelic drugs. I played the game as well. I said I was a mystery writer that feared light and led

a completely nocturnal life. The following night he was a Pianist and I was a drug dealer. The night after that he was the owner of an electronic equipment store in midtown Manhattan with an IRS record for tax evasion. I was an exotic dancer at *Runway 69*, financing my college degree by stripping at night. We took our respective roles very seriously and played them out until the end of the night. When I was the dealer, I was tough, when I was the stripper I was an easy lay. The night I played the stripper was the first night we had sex. We checked into a motel room with hourly rates, and I removed his white button down shirt while licking his neck and danced with his shirt between my legs to Latin music from the radio. I removed my own clothing, slowly, performing. As I undressed, he vulgarly grabbed my ass and called me a bitch to fit his evening persona of a low class storeowner. Each one of our dates contained a new journey, a light world of impersonations, within a heavy dim world of reality and pain.

On Friday of that same week, Victor left town for the weekend. He explained his trip through the mind of the last character he played. He said he had to help his uncle set up a new store in Philadelphia. Over the weekend I had time to reflect on our emerging relationship. I decided to put an end to this game of false identities. I felt I had already let out all my suppressed lies. I also realized that although I knew Victor was lying, I believed parts of his stories. I truly felt pain when he told me, as a pianist, that he had sacrificed his life for music. I felt for him when he talked about all the complications he experienced in opening his store. I feared that Victor would soon start believing parts of my invented characters as well. I felt our game would have fatal consequences. I knew I had to end it soon.

Victor called me when he returned from Philadelphia. I told him that I wanted us to stop lying to each other. He said he thought this was a good idea. He told me that he would cook dinner for us that same night. I was glad he invited me to his apartment. I thought seeing his home would be a step in the right direction, a step towards truthfulness.

When I arrived at his apartment, I noticed his dark, bronze tan - the color one only acquires from island sun. His white shirt complemented his dark skin color. At that moment, I knew he definitely did not spend the weekend in Philadelphia. I guess I had a confused look on my face, because Victor immediately began to explain:

'Well... truth number one. I was not in Philadelphia this weekend. I was on the French Riviera. I am a celebrity photographer and I had an assignment there over the weekend. You know, because of the Cannes Film Festival. There were a lot of celebrities that needed to be shot. A lot of egos that needed to be fed.'

He smiled with slight embarrassment and took hold of my hand leading me through the space of his apartment towards the kitchen. His occupation was confirmed by large framed photographs hanging on the walls and camera equipment spread out elsewhere in the apartment. His loft was large and spacious. The furniture was minimalist and the most noticeable items were his large framed photographs on the white walls. They were all portraits of celebrities. Audrey Hephburn, Tina Turner, Tom Cruise and Madonna were all staring at me as I walked through the living room and followed Victor to the kitchen. I noticed that none of the photographs were taken in studios. Even though they were all close-ups, it seemed like they were shot at benefits, parties, or even on the street.

'You mean you are a Paparazzi?' I asked, "Remember, tonight is that night that we tell all truths.'

'My colleagues and I are often called Paparazzi. I prefer the term *celebrity photographer*. It sounds more professional.'

Victor reached for a bottle of red wine that was on his kitchen counter. He opened it and poured some into two glasses. He handed me one of the glasses and we toasted:

'To the truth' Victor says, with great vigor in his voice.

'To the truth' I replied with the same intonation.

I sipped from my wine and thought about the reality that was just presented to me. I was intrigued by his true profession more than his false ones. I began to interrogate him, knowing my witness was under oath tonight.

'So do you follow them around before you shoot them? Did you sleep in your car for days, following Tina Turner until finally one day she left her hotel room with very little make up when the lighting was perfect... and than... bam, you jumped up in front of her, snapped your camera and ran?'

'No. No. No. It's not like that at all. Most celebrities want us around. They need photographers to promote their events and document their lives. Most of them love the press. I would go so far as to say that some of them *live* for the press. Their PR agencies call our agencies and give us VIP passes to their events. So, I go, I have a

few drinks, talk to some people and shoot a few rolls of film. Then I FedEx the film to my agent in LA. He sells the good shots to *People* magazine or *Inquire Within* or some other magazine for a few hundred dollars a photo. It's a pretty lucrative business, actually.'

I found Victor's explanation too defensive. I pricked him a bit more:

'So you *never* take a photo of a celebrity that does not want to be photographed?'

'Sometimes I spot a celeb on the street. I'll shoot them with my zoom from far away and send it to my agency. They usually don't even notice. Sometimes when I hear someone is supposed to be somewhere, I'll go, do a little bit of hiding, and pop my head up with my camera and shoot. You can get big bucks for photos no one else has, you know? But I don't do that very often.'

Victor's profession fascinated me. I thought Paparazzi were sleazy and classless as a group. But they were the only brothers and sisters I had. They were liars like myself, in that they created sensation. They would glue one negative to another, put two people that never met in the same photo, and the world of housewives would swallow it as reality. To a certain extent Victor had the power to make his lies come true, just like me."

"That's amazing" Dale interjects. I am flattered by his comment, but do not wish to pause. I smile. I let his words settle. I continue.

"In any case, Victor cooked a superb meal that night, we drank wine, ate salad and risotto with mushrooms and saffron, and told each other our life stories."

"Wait a minute'" Dale butts in once more, holding out his finger.

"You actually told him the truth?"

"Yes. I mean, not about my powers or anything like that. You are the first person I have ever told about my powers. But I told him of my hometown, of leaving university to study acting in New York, I spoke of Jason and some other past relationships. But let me move on. I am getting to the important part. Eventually, around midnight, we decided to go out to a bar. Even though we were having a nice evening at his home, Victor and I thrived on crowds. Our dinner in his apartment did not contain the energy that we grew used to from meeting in public spaces. So we went to this trendy bar two blocks away from his apartment. We sat at the bar and talked about Star and her business in Europe. Then I decided it was time to test Victor. I had to confirm that he was indeed a nonbeliever. Our drinks arrived. I sipped my cocktail and began preparing a lie. I let my lie marinate in my Vodka-moist mouth for a few minutes as Victor continued to speak about Star. As soon as it was ready I spoke:

'I can't believe I forgot to tell you. You won't believe what happened to me over the weekend. I told you I went out for sushi at Nobu for my friend Sharon's birthday, right?

'Yeah, I remember you telling me something like that.' Victor said.

'Well, as we are eating, into the restaurant walks Bobby De Niro.'

'Robert De Niro, you mean. What? You're calling him by his first name now? Is that the new thing?'

'Wait. Listen. This is crazy. He walks into Nobu with this woman. Curly blonde hair, she looked maybe forty. She was wearing a business suit. Very professional looking. She looked like a book publisher, or something really straight. Anyway, half an hour later, we were all pretty drunk from the Sake. There were still a couple of sushi pieces left on our platter. You know, the pieces of unidentifiable sushi, the more fishy ones that none of us had the guts to taste... Anyway, the woman sitting with De Niro comes over to our table and asks us if we wanted to join them for a drink. Obviously we accept. De Niro introduces himself and we sit down at his table. I mean, he introduces himself and everything, as if we didn't recognize him or something. He remains quiet for most of the evening. The blonde woman and I do most of the talking. My girlfriends speak a little, but they are too overwhelmed to speak freely. De Niro sticks a word in here and there but he is mostly observing the scene at other tables in the restaurant. Sort of like the way people try to have a good time at their own parties. They pretend to be relaxed but they're really making sure nobody steals anything or throws up on their leather sofa. You know he owns Nobu, right?'

Victor immediately nods to confirm that he knows such basic trivia.

'Anyway, after about an hour of casual conversation, Sharon suggests that we leave. I think she was getting annoyed that she was not the center of attention on the one day a year she had the right to be. As we get up to leave, Bobby pulls me aside, pulls out a business card from his jacket pocket, and tells me to give him a call if I want to go out sometime. He did all this totally nonchalantly, as if it were no big deal. Can you believe it? 'Give him a call?' You know, if I'm bored and I want to grab a slice of pizza or something, maybe I'll give him a ring.'

Victor smiles and laughs at my sarcasm. I almost felt I should bow after delivering my animated lie speech. I waited for Victor's response.

'Wow. That's quite a story. I shot him a few times. He's a pretty slimy character but definitely one of my favorite actors. So what are you going to do?'

'What do you mean?' I told him.

'I mean are you going to call him?'

'I don't know' I replied, unsure if Victor swallowed my lie.

'I'm definitely not attracted to him and it's silly to go out with someone just because they are famous, right?'

'I would.' Victor replied. I think his answer was a test in itself. I think he was still judging the truthfulness of my story.

He elaborated:

'I'm sure he could show you a great time. Even if you are not into him, let him wine you and dine you. You never know where he might take you.'

'He has a weird business card, too.'" I said trying to strengthen my story with details, "Under his name, it just says in small font *Actor*. I know that's his profession, but I expected it to be a more



glamorous title, you know? *Super Actor, Celebrity, Legend*, or something like that.'

'Do you have it on you?' Victor was clearly searching for proof at this point.

'Hey, I think I do. I was carrying the same purse that night. I probably left it in there.'

Victor passed me my purse, which was hanging on his bar stool. I unzip it slowly, fearing the results. I opened it like people open important mail. I was desperate to see the results but almost too scared to look.

As I rummaged through my purse, I felt my lipstick, tampons, cigarettes, my address book at the time... I found no business card."

"Just like no condom and no red socks." Dale says as a reflex, as if not aware that he just spoke.

I smile at him "Exactly." I say with heartiness. "My previous suspicions were confirmed. Victor was a non-believer. He passed the test. I could be freer with him than with any of my past lovers. I was slightly hurt that he didn't think my story was possible. Maybe he knew that De Niro was out of town. Maybe he saw him at the Cannes Film Festival that same weekend. Or maybe he just thought I was full of shit. Regardless of the reason, he did not believe me. I was relieved. I got out of it somehow. I think I told Victor that I must have taken the card out to look at it when I got home that night, and that that's why it wasn't in my purse. I told Victor that I had to go home because I needed to wake up early the next day to make some

important phone calls. I felt like my words didn't matter at all. He probably didn't believe me anyway.

I took a cab home. When I reached my apartment, I sat on the fire escape and let the many colorful light dots of Manhattan merge into one big blob of light before my eyes as I rethought the events of the evening. It was 2:30 PM. Broome Street below me was quiet. I recalled the last time I sat on the fire escape. It was the night I executed the Jason Lie, the night I was saved by Jimmy. I calculated how long ago that was. Five months.

As my eyes remained out of focus, registering only an abstract smear of light, I reflected on the progress I had made. I left Jason to be lifted into a lighter existence. After a few months and several lovers, I felt success was near. I thought of Victor. I saw him as my angel in white. I remember feeling so, so *free*."

I hold my hands out and quiver my fingers like a magician. The word "free" flies in an upward spiral from my mouth and dances in the gloomy diner air with the persistent smell of beef stroganoff.

# 20

It is 10:30 PM on a weekday night at the Waverly Restaurant. I turn my head to the right, brushing the top of my shoulder with my chin. Only now do I realize that I am tensing my shoulders upward. I make a conscious effort to relax them. I glance at the other diners. Aside from us, there is only one table seated. Two German tourists are having coffee and cheesecake. They are both smiling widely, absurdly. They seem to be overly pleased with this humble diner. I think they feel they finally found an authentic piece of New York City. The skyscrapers and enthusiastic tour guides must have left them with a feeling of falsity. Here at the virtually abandoned Waverly they feel they are finally in the true New York. I restore my chin to my center of my body. I look at Dale. He seems more relaxed than usual. He is sitting in an extremely neutral way. He looks like the basic model human: a prototype molding of a white man before his gestures and quirks are added on. I think the time he is spending away from his office and in my story is having a therapeutic effect on him. He speaks calmly:

"So how about a refill on our coffee and one order of homemade rice pudding to celebrate your newly found freedom?" He smiles awkwardly and suddenly I see all his characteristics and distinctions adorn him.

"I'll have some more coffee but I'm really not hungry right now. Besides, I'd rather not take a break just yet. There are a couple hours of telling left to the Victor story, and I would really like to fit them in tonight, if that is OK with you."

"Sure. No problem. I'm really not that hungry anyway. I just wanted to do something together. You know, it's strange, but I think we have a really good food connection." Dale looks at me with a half smile, examining my reaction to his statement.

"No, you're right. I absolutely agree." I say.

"Why do you think that is?" Dale exhales his words to the center of the table and they float upwards as if they were cigarette smoke.

"Well," I say looking upward as if searching for a solution, "It's probably because when we eat, we don't speak. We interact without words."

"I think you're right." he says. "We exchange pretty cool looks when we don't talk, right?"

"Well, I guess that only when we have our meals I don't speak. So when we eat, I can't ruin our connection with my words."

"No way, you got it all wrong." Dale let's air through his semi-sealed lips. "Your story is what defines our relationship."

"Yes, but my words also contaminate us."

"I don't think so. I think your story is beautiful. I think this is the first time in my life that I am actually entering someone else, you know?"

"That's a strange thing to say" I remark, vibrating my eyebrows in that strange way that Dale notices.

"Well, you know, I feel like I'm beginning to feel what you feel, even though I don't have your powers, and even though I don't agree with everything you do."

"That's very interesting, but let's move on." I clear my throat and scroll in my mind through introductory words to speak ... I cannot focus on wording because an image appears in my mind. I see Dale standing naked with his arms and legs spread out. He suddenly turns to purple smoke that I inhale through a cigarette. I feel Dale, in smoke form, entering me through my mouth and floating inside my body. I feel a tingling sensation followed by a dramatic shiver. As I watch this movie in my mind, I am still thinking of his words. "I am actually entering you."

Dale notices my fragility. I think he would offer me a glass of water if there was one on the table. With words, he offers me a hand and tries to remind me where I left off.

"So... I guess you and Victor continued seeing each other..."

"Yeah, we were a couple. At least we spent time together and everyone saw us as a couple."

Words flow out of my mouth, but my attention is elsewhere. I am still visualizing Dale, in the form of purple smoke, swirling through my body. I feel him inside me now. My scarce words come out with no emotion or attention. They are an automatic defense mechanism, trying to conceal my inner turmoil. I am silent, continuing to observe the movie in my mind.

"So..." Dale says slowly, stretching out his words "I guess you and Victor had a pretty normal relationship. I mean, you said before that he was a non-believer, so I guess your powers did not work with him." He ends his words with uncertainty, the same way a dog walks when it overtakes its owner on a trail.

"Yeah." I say, feeling purple blood gushing through my veins. My blood contains millions of little Dales in its cells that form a dizzying pattern.

"Well, I guess you were almost equal then, you and Victor, that is?" Dale says, his voice growing louder, his face coming closer to mine as he speaks.

I hear his words clearly now. A sharp distant sound of glass hitting a formica table restores my attention. The visual in my mind disappears in a puff.

"You seem startled," Dale asks, wishing to hear my voice, wanting to know what it is I am experiencing.

"No, no, not at all." I reply, gaining a few seconds to construct a defense. "I guess I am just surprised to hear you use the word *equal*, that's all."

Dale smiles. I think he is happy to see my return.

"Well, from what you said before, it seemed like you were kind of equal. You know, he didn't believe your lies. So I guess you couldn't just make up that he loved you or something wild like that. I guess I

assumed that without your powers working, you would have a pretty normal relationship..."

"Well, as I told you before," I continue as vigor returns to my voice. "Many things were different with Victor. But we still could not reach equality."

"Why not?" Dale says, lowering his voice, now using his words only to prompt my speech.

"Very few relationships contain true equality between partners. Usually, one lover is more dominant; one lover is more submissive. In most cases, the man is the dominant lover. He uses confidence and force. In cases where the woman is the more dominant, she dominates in her own female way. She uses manipulation and sometimes guilt."

I sigh. I am back, fully back. Dale leans his back against the seat cushion and folds his arms about his chest. He returns to being solely my listener.

I cross one leg over the other under the table. I re-stretch my ponytail and continue to talk as I secure the elastic around my hair:

"Victor and I constantly struggled for power. I believe we created a rare relationship that did come very close to equality. But our parity was of a very different kind. You see, this might sound a little strange, but my dominance was not of the female kind. It was of the male kind, just like Victor's. It was almost like we were in a homosexual male relationship. We were two Adams, wanting to penetrate. We were both armed with the same weapons. We both tried to gain dominance through ego and force. We constantly tried to prove to

each other how high our value on the market was. Victor would glamorize his past conquests of women; I would flirt with everyone we interacted with, showing him how desirable I was. We would compete in everything, but mostly in conquests of the opposite sex."

Dale smiles widely and passively at my words. He leans further back in his cushion. He has the expression of a man who has been surfing TV channels with the remote for a while and just now found the show that really interests him.

"Victor and I used to play this game of powers. We called it the Hunting Game. We would walk into a bar together and each order a drink. Before finishing our first drink we each had to choose the other's target for the evening. I would select a woman for Victor. He would select a man for me. The goal of the game was to get the phone number of our target. A French kiss from the target was like a double victory. We played this game so frequently that one night we decided on a set of permanent rules."

"Well what do you mean by rules? I thought you just explained how the game went."

"Well, we became really competitive in this game and found ourselves arguing a lot about the scoring. So, one evening, we decided to set up official rules. For example, in choosing each other's targets, we had to select someone we both found attractive. We were not allowed to inform them that we were playing a game. We always had to tell them that we were brother and sister. I wrote down the rules in nice handwriting and attached a scoreboard. We hung the results on Victor's bedroom door.



Victor often tried to pick targets for me that looked gay, and I would always oppose his selection. He always responded that all New York men look gay. In any case, after we finished our first drinks and bargained a little about the selected targets, we would both go hunting. Victor usually went for the more direct approach and introduced himself to his target. He was the master of charm. The same charm that got me interested in him from the punch bowl, a room's distance away. He had about a sixty percent success rate.

I used a less direct strategy. I would first talk to another guy as a decoy, or sometimes even a girl, and try to establish eye contact with my target. If my decoy was a believer, I would lie about the target wanting me. By the time I approached my target, my job was already done. My target would beg for my number, and sometimes try to kiss me right there in the bar. In the case where my decoy was somewhat sophisticated, I didn't waste any time. I quickly approached my target and stunned him with white lies and other stories of my glamorous past. I was better at this game than Victor. I'd say I had a seventy percent success rate.

Before leaving the bar, Victor and I would kiss wildly and wetly. Even if neither of us succeeded in conquering our targets that night, we enjoyed watching their startled reaction. The real goal of the game was obvious to both of us. We had to prove to each other and ourselves what hot stuff we were. The more victims we could suck into our self-admiration, the more persuasive we became.

Of course, Victor was twisted long before I met him. He had always measured his success with woman in quantifiable terms. No woman ever lasted more than a few months with Victor. His prior lovers felt too weak or too guilty to play his games of vanity. But I was different.

I was the first girlfriend he had that loved these games. I loved the freedom they granted me. You see, I learned so much about people while playing the hunting game. I experimented with lies. I penetrated minds of total strangers. I dabbled with the city and did not have to follow up on any engagement. Everything was cost-free because our victims were complete strangers. We never called them or saw them after the game was over.

Anyway, even though my Victor years started off with an experience of liberation, the Victor Phase soon transformed into my Vanity Phase. Our premise was quite simple. We both wanted to penetrate as many minds as we could. Victor was obsessed with penetrating minds to validate his existence. I got high from penetrating minds to reconfirm my lying powers.

Every time we were in bed, it was strange to discover that our sex organs were so different. We both expected me to have an equally powerful sex tool. Even when I tried to take control in bed, it was clear that Victor was the penetrator. I was almost always on top. I even tried using handcuffs on him, but in the end, he was still entering me. Eventually we found a semi-solution to this sexual discrepancy. Oddly enough, the solution came from a Marlboro cigarette.

Victor always smoked Marlboro Reds. Whenever I told him they were too strong, he claimed that Marlboro Lights were for faggots. He loved smoking and had never considered quitting. He actually used to argue that he is aware of the risks of smoking, but enjoys it so much he would rather die a smoker at fifty than a non-smoker at seventy. He claimed that twenty years of his life were a fair price to pay for the joy he received from inhaling smoke into his lungs.

One night, after I won the hunting game for the second consecutive night, both times with a kiss, we made out only briefly in the bar in front of my trophy target and quickly began walking towards Victor's apartment. I walked fast, very fast, pulling Victor by the hand. As soon as we walked through the door, I laid him flat on his back, tied him to the bed, and got on top of him. I rode him wildly. I took full control, I even smacked him a few times. But it was still very clear that I was not the penetrator. My victory seemed unrewarded. After he finally came, I untied him and lay down besides him, exhausted. I was so frustrated. No matter how many times I won our hunting game, in the end I always felt weaker than him. I slammed the back of my head onto the pillow and closed my eyes. I heard Victor getting up from the bed. I heard him turn off the light switch. In the darkness, I felt him grab both my ankles and spread my legs. I felt a strange tingling sensation between my legs. After a few seconds, I realized it was a Marlboro Red. It entered me filter first, and was soon nicely moist inside me. Victor removed the cigarette from inside me, grabbed his lighter from the night table, lit the 'scented' cigarette and lay back in bed, moaning every time he inhaled. Finally, I was penetrating him."

Dale sighs through his nose, making an effort to keep his mouth closed.

I do not smile. "This cigarette trick soon became part of our sexual routine. We were equal in our conquest of targets, and finally we found a way to be equal in sex as well."

I close my mouth and let my lips stick to each other. I stare at Dale.

# 21

"Should I continue?" I ask with my head low, my chin almost touching the tabletop, and my eyes looking up at Dale.

"Please do." Dale says in an overly casual tone.

"I promise no more embarrassing sex stories for the remainder of my telling." I say in a question intonation, raising both my eyebrows as high as my forehead allows.

Dale blows air out of his mouth, making the sound of a tire just gone flat. He is trying to convey "whatever". Then he breaks into a smile, admitting his slight embarrassment.

"Well... how about we split a rice pudding first? I feel like one now." I still look at him from below as I speak. Could it be that *I* am slightly embarrassed?

Dale quickly looks away in an attempt to find our waitress.

"Hi there. One rice pudding please. With two spoons. And whipped cream on the side. Thanks."

She smiles and walks away. I follow her with my eyes. As she passes the counter, I notice three policemen seated at the long formica counter swiveling their stools and throwing words of mockery at each other. Their words scrape the bottom of their throats as they speak. I cannot make out individual words. They are seated too far away. I only hear voices scraping throats and a squeaking sound from the

movement of their stools. They throw some words at the waitress. She seems to be familiar enough with their company to ignore them. From behind the counter, she reaches towards the kitchen window for three oval plates with a hamburger and fries on each. She places a plate in front of each officer. She then disappears for a few seconds to a corner of the counter that is out of the boundaries of my vision. She reappears with a trophy filled with rice pudding, walks along the inner side of the counter, passes the cops, then walks by the outer side of the counter in our direction, and places the rice pudding in the center of our table, an equal distance from Dale and me.

"Here you go guys." She says. I stare at the pudding and see Dale's head floating above the tall pudding dish that widens towards the top. The pudding has plenty of whipped cream flowing over the rim of the glass and a cherry on top. My mouth is fully watered. The waitress stretches out both her arms, and hands us each a long silver dessert teaspoon at precisely the same time. It almost seems like she is handing us weapons for an imminent fencing match. I prepare to dig in.

Dale holds out his free hand and makes a gesture to say, "Wait a minute." With his long spoon, he flips the whipped cream that neither of us like over the rim of the dish. The cream follows his hand's motion and gushes over the side of the dish like lava from a volcano. I smile and swirl my spoon in my hand in preparation for our sweet feast. Then Dale once again motions me to wait a minute with the exact same gesture. He brings his eyes close to the dish, and then distances his face from it. Dale has a look of disgust, as if he were staring at a lie. He points to show me a short black hair on the top of the pudding that is now bare of whipped cream. I release my spoon from my hand onto the table and reciprocate his expression. I see the

black hair. With no words, we share a moment of sincere disappointment. We both swallow the water in our mouths.

Dale looks around to find the waitress. She is at the other end of the counter talking to the three policemen. They keep prompting her with questions. I hear the echo of her responses as they reach our table. She seems to be giggling, slightly embarrassed as she voices short answers to them. The officers continue to interrogate. Dale is engaged in a dramatic scene of pantomime, trying to flag down the waitress as if he were signaling a distant ship from a deserted island. For some reason, he refuses to use words.

The busboy approaches our table. He is a short stocky Spanish man with a thin, dark mustache, bad acne on his face, and a blue bandana tied around his head.

"There is a hair in our rice pudding." Dale says to him, pointing to the evidence in front of us.

"No hablo Ingles." The waiter responds in a remarkably high pitch voice.

Dale looks at me to find a partner for his frustration, but all I can do is smile at this absurd scene.

"Look," Dale points to his own eyes, "in our rice pudding, there is a hair," now Dale is pointing at the pudding "...someone's hair in our food, do you understand?" Dale enunciates every word clearly and slowly as if he were speaking to a retarded person.

"Oh, no hay problema, senior." The busboy smiles and his acne adjusts to his widening lips. He holds his smile while he sticks his thumb in our dish and the black hair glues to his finger. He then wipes his thumb on his white apron and further widens his smile, looking now directly at Dale for approval. The busboy walks over to the kitchen end of the diner, lifts a large bucket of dishes and carries it to a dirty tables, clearing the dishes into his bucket. Dale looks at me. He lifts his hands in the air in despair. Still, I can only smile.

Dale stands up and walks over to the waitress, which is still flirting with the crass cops.

I hear Dale speak to the waitress in the other end of the diner. His voice is coming from his stomach as if he were delivering a Shakespearian speech on stage. They both walk over to our table together. Dale leads the way. He stands at the edge of our booth and points to the rice-pudding.

"Oh, yeah," the waitress says, bringing her hand to her forehead. "I forgot, you asked for no whipped cream. I'm sorry."

"No." Dale says, now visibly trying to hold back his anger. "I just told you, there is a hair in our pudding, for Christ's sake. Clearly this is not acceptable."

The waitress leans forward with her hands holding each other behind her back and brings her face close to our dish as if she were about to lick it like a dog. She then stands straight, still holding her hands behind her back and answers in the sweetest, kindest voice "I'm sorry, sir. I don't see a hair in your food."

Dale, now slightly red, holds the bridge of his nose with two fingers to contain his anger within his head. "I know there is no hair in the pudding now. That's what I was trying to tell you. The busboy took it away, for God's sake."

The waitress looks at Dale with a smile of confusion. "Now why would Jose do that?"

"I really don't know why he did it. I didn't get a chance to ask him. He walked away too fast for me to ask. And besides, I don't speak Spanish." His voice transforms from forceful to whiny. Dale takes his seat at our booth. He looks at the waitress, seeking salvation.

"Well, the shift manager already left for the night. It's almost midnight, you know? I don't have the keys to the register, so I can't take it off your check. So... I don't know what would you like me to do? Can I get you a new serving? Or maybe something else, instead?" As she speaks to Dale, she neurotically nods her head, as if to reassure him that everything will be all right.

Dale pauses, then inhales and exhales abruptly.

"No, no," he says in a changed, calmer voice. "Never mind. It's all right. I don't want anything else. Just please take this away." He points to the dish with his hand at a distance as if it were poisonous.

"All right." The waitress responds in an annoyingly condescending voice as she removes the dish from our table and walks away.



Dale shifts his head from side to side slowly, looking down at the table. He is shaking the anger out of his head. He raises his head and looks at me.

"Can you believe that waitress?"

"Well, she's right, you know?" I say nonchalantly.

"What?" Dale exclaims, emphasizing the 'w' and sharpening the finishing 't' with his tongue.

"Are you kidding me? You saw the hair too. It was right in front of your eyes."

"I know it was." I reply calmly, "But then it wasn't. So in fact, as far as she is concerned it was never there."

"Don't give me that bullshit now. This isn't even about words, OK?" There was a hair in my food that was taken away and the waitress didn't believe me, that's all. Don't try to make this into proof of your powers or anything like that, OK?" Dale's OK comes out with great heat.

"Dale, listen to me, you are upset over nothing. You are completely overreacting here. If you calm down and listen to what I am telling you, you will see that I am right. If the waitress didn't see the hair, if nobody saw the hair except some guy that doesn't speak English, than maybe it wasn't really there."

The waitress is talking to the policemen again. We both remain silent and try to make out her words. I cannot break down her speech into

words, but it is clear that she is telling them of her argument with Dale. As the cops continue to chew loudly on their burgers and fries, they look over at us repeatedly with grins on their faces. The waitress now laughs out loud as she keeps speaking. I look back at Dale. His face is entirely red.

"See," I continue calmly, "nobody thinks it happened now, not even the officers."

"Would you stop it already." Dale says to me, sweeping his hand in the air as if to kill a fly. "This isn't about lying. Not everything has a lesson, OK? There was no lie. We both saw the damn hair. It was real. We both saw it."

"Yes, but two people aren't always enough. Victor and I both thought we were the kings of the world, but we needed to go out all the time and play games with a crowd to validate our greatness. You see, only then we believed it. This relates exactly to everything I was telling you about the New York that Victor introduced me to. The New York I call *Image City*. Think about it for a minute. Think about our times, our city. Everything is in the appearance. Marketing is more important than the product itself. The image of something is all that remains. There is no longer any true reality."

"Come on," Dale says mockingly "only kids are fooled by images. We grownups in the world try to look beyond appearance and glitter and find hard truth."

"But don't you understand that appearance is the only certainty we have left." I say, allowing my eyebrows to kiss.

"Listen, please, can you do me a favor and just continue with your story now. I think listening to you will calm me down."

"Sure." I say. I am flattered.

"Maybe it's because your words take me to another world or something, I don't know, it's kind of like a lullaby. Anyway, just go on." Dale suddenly seems exhausted.

"OK, I will continue. But I'm going to say just a one more thing about this hair incident. Victor and I, just like you and I with this hair incident, needed a wider audience for our game than two. Otherwise, we couldn't be sure that it was real. We felt the beauty of our shells and our masks will only be confirmed if more people see them and speak of them, of course. See, the only way we could confirm we existed was to go out and be seen by others. Only when we were talked about did we truly exist."

"I thought that was what you were already doing with your Hunting Game. Weren't you showing everybody how easy it was for both of you to seduce others?" Dale asks, in a drastically calmer voice. His anger has subsided. His voice sounds soft, almost weak.

"You are right. It was the same reason that made us invent that game. But you see, Victor and I were addicts. We needed more observers, more people to talk about us." My hand motions feel suave. I feel as if I am showing Dale a magic trick. I pause.

"Go on, I'm listening." Dale makes the motion of a wheel with his hand to prompt me to advance.

"But Dale, I need your full attention now. Because the plan that Victor and I orchestrated was the trigger to my third and final awakening. You see, a coincidence interfered with our otherwise perfect plan and once again, my life was thrown into chaos."

Chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos, chaos. The word fills the restaurant. The officers leave the diner. Dale grows pensive. I proceed:

# 22

"A week before New Year's Eve, 1995, Victor and I decided to push our power game a little bit further. Between the two of us, we were invited to four New Year's parties. We planned on attending them all. We planned on having a memorable night that would fill us with energy that would last until spring. We both agreed that we needed to spice up our routine Hunting Game.

The plan was simple. We expected the results to be devastating. Not for us, of course, for our targets. We planned on attending all four parties, starting each one off with our usual first-drink selection routine. I would choose an attractive female target for Victor. And he would choose a male target for me. The goal was to charm and seduce our targets, as usual. But this time, we were searching for more than a phone number or a kiss. We planned on telling our targets that we came to this party with a date - a date that we were not interested in. At this point, Victor would point me out to his target, and I would point him out to mine. We would tell our targets that we do not want to disappoint our dates and leave the party with someone else. We would each schedule a late night rendezvous with our target. Each one of us had to convince our respective target to meet us at 3:00 AM at the Staten Island Ferry terminal."

"How did you come up with the Staten Island Ferry?" Dale asks, his voice low and filled with enthusiasm.

"Well, the Staten Island Ferry terminal is located at the most southern point of the Manhattan Island. It's a pretty far distance to travel. This just made our seduction assignments more challenging.

Besides, I think we both liked the idea of bringing these people really low. In any case, Victor and I had hoped to gather a crowd of at least three persuaded listeners by the end of the evening. There was another reason for choosing the ferry terminal. There was an office building not far from the terminal where a friend of Victor's worked. Victor convinced his friend to lend him his entrance card for the evening, explaining that he wanted to bring me to the fiftieth floor for a glass of champagne and a glance at the view. Victor and I planned on going up to the fiftieth floor, slightly before 3:00 AM and watching our victims gather at the station. We imagined watching their great disappointment once they realized we were not coming. We imagined witnessing from above their let down as they meet each other, compare stories, and realize they were conned.

I remember the evening that Victor and I coordinated the plan. We were lying in bed after sex. Victor had just finished smoking a 'scented' Marlboro cigarette. We both realized that our plan was slightly cruel, but found it very arousing. This would be the ultimate confirmation of our seductive selves. I thought over in my mind how my lying would affect this plan and realized I had nothing to fear. After all, even if my victims truly believed I would arrive, I was covered, because in essence, I did arrive at the station, just not to meet them.

New Year's Eve would have come and gone, and we would have had our fun and some stories to laugh about. This experience would simply rest in my large portfolio of past girlish ploys. However, one awful coincidence altered our plan. One tragic occurrence of faith brought me more pain than I ever imagined existed. Sometimes I think that what happened on New Years Eve, 1995 was punishment from above for our cruel plan. Sometimes I think that what happened that night was

punishment for my accumulating acts of evil. Maybe all that happened was not from above, and was brought upon me by my own powers. Maybe it was my special skill that killed my attempt to live a lighter life, and brought me down to the most awful state of torment.”

I pause. I look at Dale. His eyes are wide open. His stare fixed on my mouth. I breathe in deeply. I am nervous about telling this. I am concerned how it will affect my current state. I continue.

“On New Years Eve, Victor and I decided to meet at his apartment at 10:00 PM. I arrived wearing the sexiest dress I owned. It was black with thin spaghetti straps, and although it revealed a lot of leg, it had an elegant cut that made me seem very lady like. It was important for me to look both sexy and trustworthy. I was very impressed by my appearance. Victor was dressed in his usual white. He wore thick white jeans with a white silk button down shirt with ruffles around the collar. He looked like he belonged in the courts of the kings in Versailles. I tried to convince him not to wear white, out of fear of being spotted near the Staten Island Ferry. He strongly opposed. He explained that it was imperative to appear in our grand performance wearing his trademark white color.

The first party we went to was rather boring, and although we followed the rules of the game, nothing exciting happened. We chose each other’s targets and went hunting. My target was a boring accountant. When the accountant asked me what I did for a living, I lied and said I was a model just to see if I could pull it off. He went on to explain that when I file my taxes, there are all sorts of write-offs I can take for make-up, clothing, and skin care products. He asked me:

"If you don't mind me asking, what's your annual income?"

He was clearly a believer. I thought before I answered. I decided I needed to gain at least something from that boring conversation.

'No, no, I don't mind you asking at all. My income varies from year to year. I don't have a contract with an agency, so I don't have a set annual income. I mostly model runway and do catalog stuff, and that's all on a freelance basis. I would say I earned about... \$80,000 this year. I mean soon to be last year, right? Isn't it almost midnight?'

He laughed at this miserably dull joke. I laughed as well, hoping to see a belated Christmas bonus in my bank account.

I continued the conversation just for the sake of my power game with Victor. I glanced over to where Victor was working his target, and he signaled to me while his target's back was turned that we should leave soon. I agreed. I told the accountant what my situation was. I told him that my date was a close friend of a friend and I didn't feel right letting him leave the party alone, but I felt something special happening between us and I absolutely had to see him later on in the night. I told him he should meet me at the Staten Island Ferry terminal.

'3:00 AM sharp' I said 'Don't keep me waiting.'

He promised me he would be there.

I went over to the bar to fill my champagne glass. Victor arrived a few minutes later and we quickly left the party. It was 11:15 PM when



we entered the elevator to leave the party. I remember looking at my watch as the elevator doors closed. On the way down Victor discussed what a flop our targets had been and how we needed to be more careful with our selections. Victor said that he did not think his victim bit the bullet. I said I thought mine did. We walked roughly ten blocks to the loft of a photographer friend of Victor's. We both expected this party to have more interesting people. I refreshed my lipstick in the elevator and we both walked in with renewed optimism, heading straight for the bar.

I did not know at this point that I would leave this party a changed woman.

As we sipped from our new champagne glasses by the bar, we each glanced over the new crowd. We stood close to each other and scanned the crowd for victims.

'Victor, you know, we're not doing a great job at seeming like a couple on a first date. You haven't looked at me once since we arrived. You almost spilled the drink you poured me because you've been staring at that guy in the corner for ten minutes now. You really should be more subtle.'

'I know, darling, I'm sorry' he explained 'It's just that it's 11:35 PM, and I figure if we select our targets quickly, maybe one of us will be able to find a kiss by midnight.'

I remember being shocked by his words. Actually, I remember feeling physical pain from his words. I thought I was the woman Victor would kiss at midnight. I never imagined it differently. He was the only person around I cared about, the only person I knew. I fondled his

elbow. He pushed my hand away, making sure his champagne was still steady in his hand. He was tense. I knew that his behavior could be easily explained. He was nervous about me having the lead in the game. So far I was leading one-to-nothing.

'Well. I'm ready' he announced.

'Really? Who's my lucky victim?' I asked eagerly.

'Well, do you see the man standing there next to the really tall guy with the party hat?'

'You mean the one facing us with the velvet shirt?'

'Yeah. That's the one. He's handsome, don't you think?'

'Actually I think he's gorgeous. I don't know what it is about him. But I am definitely attracted. He has a familiar face, you know?'

My target was fairly tall, dressed in a pair of worn-in jeans that clashed nicely with a formal green velvet shirt. The shirt made him seem like he was royalty. He spoke with his hands, but in very gentle gestures. I got lost in staring at him, until Victor interrupted.

'Quick, what about my target?'

I turned my head sideways and pointed to the first woman that did not seem to have a man wrapped around her. It was close to midnight and I could only spot one such woman in my vicinity. Victor agreed and was on his way. He kissed me on the cheek and started walking directly towards her. He was eager to catch up. I stayed at the bar for a few

minutes, and stared at my charming target. He seemed like a challenge. I wanted to devise an articulate plan before approaching him. I looked at him as I thought up what my first move/lie should be. He was still talking to the same tall guy with the hat. But the tall guy had his girlfriend beside him and midnight was near. My target had no girlfriend in sight.

I sipped my champagne, making eye contact with my lovable target. Suddenly, he started walking straight towards me. I was shocked at his magnetic response to my eye game. He walked slowly, and stared at me continuously as he got closer. He gradually developed a wide smile...

'Oh my God. I thought it was you; you haven't changed one bit since high school. How the hell are you?'

I was already tipsy from the champagne and my vision was slightly blurred. Only when my target was very close, already holding out his arms and reaching for an old friends hug, did I notice who he was. I almost choked. It was Doug, my high school boyfriend; my first sex; the only true witness to my Mother Lie. I placed my glass on a nearby table barely in time to surrender to his strong hug. As his arms locked around me, I felt I was drowning; sinking into a puddle in the backyard of my mothers house in my little hometown; falling deep into the unfamiliar substance of my true past.

He finally let go of me, still smiling widely. He spoke:

'My God! You look great.'

As if my body was made of clay, I remained in the shape that his hug had molded of me with raised shoulders and feet tight together. It took me a minute to refocus my eyes. It took me a few more minutes to remember the details of our joint history."

"Wait a minute," Dale says, "How could it take you a few minutes to remember him. I mean you told me pretty detailed accounts of your relationship with him. I'm sure it all instantly came back to you, even if you were a little bit drunk."

"I did remember. I still remember. In my mind I have recorded many more details about Doug than you can ever imagine. But, you see, my mind works differently than most people's minds. I have lived through so many different false phases, that I store all memories, like a computer stores files. Whatever I am telling or living through acts as my open file. I can usually only have one file open at a time. That is usually the file I am living in. All my past experiences are archived, so to speak. Conversing with my high school boyfriend required searching through the archives of my memory, and retrieving a file that has not been open in roughly ten years. But in any case, you are right to wonder, and I do remember. I found the appropriate file in my mind, because, as you know, I remember my time with Doug very well. I opened it as soon as I found it and the memories all returned to my consciousness instantly. Even the smell of Doug's parent's house became fresh in my mind. Only then was I able to speak:

'Oh my God. This is unbelievable. You actually have changed, Doug. You're a man. I remember a boy.'

'Oh, c'mon, I was already a man back then, wasn't I?'

'You were on your way there. But you were still boyish. You just look so damn professional. Wow, this is so weird. Ah, so what's going on in your life? Do you still paint? Have you been living in the city for a long time?'

'Yes, Yes. In fact, I moved here from San Francisco about two months ago. My company transferred me over. I'm actually working for this computer software firm that produces a customized program for clients interested in human resource management that considers input from all employees in the organization. It's pretty cool. I customize the databases of corporations that...'

That's all I could hear clearly. After that, Doug's words became distorted in my ears as if I was listening to a recording of his voice on very low speed. As Doug continued speaking, my attention drifted into the darkest place that existed in my mind. All I could think of was concealing this from Victor, preventing my two men from meeting. I needed to stop such a meeting from happening at all costs. I searched for a clean escape. I searched through my brain for an elegant lie, but there was just too much thought processing for my mind to handle. I tried to return my thinking to a practical path. I needed a reason to leave the party. I foresaw a fatal chain of occurrences beginning. A chain I knew I must break.

As these thoughts were racing through my mind, I wiped the sweat off the side of my forehead. I saw Victor approaching.

Victor clearly noticed our embrace and knew that Doug was not a fair target. He probably wasn't being terribly successful with his target. Otherwise he would have never called off all bets and approached.

Victor arrived with a glass of champagne in one hand and his other hand reached out, preparing for a handshake with Doug.

'Hi. I'm Victor, you know, the boyfriend. I noticed your dramatic hug while I was talking to someone else. I guess you two are old friends or something...'

Every muscle in my body froze and I became completely immobile. Luckily I froze with a half smile on my face. Otherwise the two of them would have noticed that something was wrong.

'Hi, I'm Doug....' He reaches out his hand with examining eyes.  
'Wooooowoo voo woo meet wyouu.. .'

I tried to decode the low distorted sounds I was hearing every time Doug spoke. I watched him introduce himself, point to me and continue to speak. I understood nothing of what he was saying.

Suddenly Victor turned to me:

'Honey, your mother passed away when you were in high school? I can't believe you. You never told me that.'

Luckily I still heard Victor's speech clearly. I assumed Doug just told him that he was my boyfriend at the time of my mother's death. Somehow, I managed to mumble out a few words of jargon:

'Well, you know, I really never talk about my hometown or my family. My mother's death is something I haven't brought up with anyone, not even my aunt, oh actually maybe you never heard of her either. The

one that lives in New York. Anyway, I don't talk about my mother. It's just the way I am, you know. It's not really important to me anyhow, you know, some people just...' -

'Yeah, but this is huge, baby' Victor interrupted my broken speech.

'Well, if you recall one time when you asked I did tell you she does not live in the country. I just failed to mention that she doesn't live in any other country either. So technically, I really didn't lie to you.'

They both laughed awkwardly, unsure if they were supposed to or not.

I froze again. They continued to converse as Victor's speech transformed into a blur as well. I heard their voices meeting in the center of our interaction in a long smear of sound. I lost all touch with what they were saying. I think Doug did most of the talking. I think he was speaking of how I was in high school. I think Victor was asking some questions.

All I heard was their distorted slow speech. I felt forces in my body struggling against each other. My body became a microcosm of all world conflicts, all the universe's struggles. I felt the liberation and oppression movements in different countries. I felt all the freedom fighters, all the dictators and all their followers. The forces of our planet, as complex or as simple as they may be, were all roaring within the shell of my body.

As these forces grew stronger, I made a few final moves. I ran outside of the loft. I ran down four flights of stairs. I ran a block and a half away from the party and sat down on a stoop of a random

building. As I sat down these forces strengthened inside me. I hunched over bringing my chest to my knees, and holding my stomach with both my arms to prevent myself from exploding. I tried to figure out how I brought all this upon myself. Was the accountant at the prior party the devil, wanting revenge? Was I being punished for all the games I played with other people's lives? How could anyone do something so bad to deserve such intense pain? I felt these forces roaring in my head, my stomach. Every one of my toes had little forces battling within it.

In hindsight, I know it was my identity that was swirling and twisting inside me. On one hand, I was the girl that Doug knew. He knew me and loved me before I used to plot with lies. He knew my mother. He knew my childhood friends. He even knew my innocence before it died. He painted it. On the other hand, that was no longer who I was. The femme fatale that Victor knew was a true part of me, as well. The confidence and arrogance I displayed with him is real. Or also real, as real, it must be if he believed it.

The problem was that both Doug and Victor believed they knew me. Because of my powers, I became the person each one of them believed. But I couldn't be two people at one time. The contrast in their beliefs translated into the great pain I was experiencing. The two men were comparing their versions of me in the party upstairs. I am sure of it. As they would sway each other's view, as their belief in who I was changed, I changed. They were changing my personality with their own minds, with their very different perceptions.

It was as if they were holding up a voodoo doll of me throughout their conversation. Each time one of them adjusted their views of me, they struck a pin through the doll, and I felt the pain. The pain was



not in my flesh. It was in my soul. It was my identity that was hurting.

Exactly at midnight, a mild wave of optimism hit me as the pain subsided temporarily. I assumed that Doug and Victor broke off their debate momentarily to sing with the crowd *Auld Lang Syne* and watch the couples kiss. I used these few minutes of relief to run home. I ran as if my killer was running close behind me about to catch up. My panic fueled my motion forward. I knew I would only be safe in the confines of my apartment.

They must have resumed their arguing about twenty minutes after midnight because I felt the sharp pain return to haunt me from within. I was already running up the stairs of my building when the pain abruptly returned and I made it safely to my bedroom. I lay in bed with pain. I realized that I could only stop the pain if I figured out who I really was. If I had one truthful persona I could remember, I would hang on to that and I would survive. But this was precisely the problem. This was the root of my pain. I did not know who I was."

It is 1:00 AM at the Waverly Restaurant. Since I began this session, no one has come or left the diner. I shift my head sideways to look around. I feel my head movement stirring up the still air. Dale and I are alone in the restaurant. Even the waitress and the busboy are out of sight. It is as if my intense story occupies the space of the entire diner. Passers on the street, considering entering the Waverly, recognized the strong aura in the restaurant and decided to go elsewhere. All is deathly still. A video of the diner right now would seem to the eye like a still photograph. Dale is frozen. I notice a sweat drop making its way from his left temple to his chin.

I believe he understands my pain. I am happy with the word choices I have made. I feel I have penetrated him with my words.

Dale wipes the sweat drop from the bottom of his chin with his hand.

"Don't tell me that this is where you were planning to break for the evening. There is no use in me going home now. I clearly won't be able to sleep." He is looking in my eyes as he speaks, not at my mouth. His voice is stern now.

"Well... This is the end of the Victor phase." I say.

"Well... What phase is next? Actually, how can this be the end of a phase? Your phase can't end in the middle of the night you just described, at such a peak. Something more has to happen to you. You can't just wake up and start a normal day after such a night." Dale's look is demanding, unyielding.

"I am telling you that this is how my Victor phase ends. Remember, this is my story, not yours. I changed that night, Dale. The next morning I was a completely different person. I believe very few people experience such a dramatic shift in their character over night. But I did. After that, I was entirely different."

"Look, I'm sorry if I'm coming across as pushy. I don't mean to tell you how your story goes. I understand that you changed completely and you want to talk about this change next time. I'm just so damn anxious I can't help myself. You have to understand, with this New Year's party scene, you gave me great hope. I feel like I need to know who was the person you became." His speech is forceful and his words are potent. I see fire in his eyes.

"Hope?" I ask with skepticism, with my mouth remaining open.

"Yes, of course. Don't you see? You just admitted that there was a reality. There is a reality. For a while there I thought I was never going to find truth in your story. You kept saying that nothing is real. Your words change what's real. You wouldn't even agree that the hair in my rice-pudding was real, for God's sake." Dale smiles as his words trigger the rice pudding memory.

"But Dale, I think you misinterpreted my encounter with Victor and Doug. It's true that it left me in pain and confused. But I still think reality is changing. *Truth happens to a situation. It is not a given condition.*"

I speak slowly, as if to give added value to each word. As if I just delivered my grand thesis to him on a platter.

"Maybe, but there is one truth out there about you that I will reveal. Don't you see, you just explained that there is someone under your mask. I can find that someone in your words. I know it."

Dale is looking at me with wide pleading eyes, as if I am a judge and he is a convict, asking for another chance, begging for a pardon.

I cannot disappoint his optimistic eyes. I choose not to argue. I choose to conclude. "Whatever it is you wish to find, you can search for it tomorrow when I tell you of the Plato phase. This is the last period you will hear me speak of. This is the phase I am still living in."

"So you met some guy named Plato and because he didn't wear all these masks he saved you from the pain somehow?" Dale's tone is interrogative. His face glows.

"No, no, no. When I say Plato, I mean Plato the great Greek philosopher, the disciple of Socrates. He became the most important man in my life. Even though I obviously never met him, I developed quite a deep relationship with him."

"Why now? I mean, he didn't sit next to you on a bus or meet you at a party. You could have picked up one of his books at any point in your life?" Dale's fist pounds the table with the end of each sentence or question he speaks. It is dictating the rhythm of his words, his thoughts.

"Listen, I promised to finish the Victor phase tonight and I stood by my word." My voice let's out the remains of my energy. I cannot compete with his enthusiasm at this time.

Dale slams his back against the diner booth cushion like men jerk back in their sofas when a sports player misses a shot on TV.

"OK, fine. When would you like to meet tomorrow?"

"Well, tomorrow will be the last day of my telling. I think we should meet here at 4:00 PM. It will probably take me about four hours to conclude my story and bring you up to date. Then, we can celebrate with dinner on me at a restaurant of your choice." I smile at the cookie I just threw him, looking closely for his response.

Dale smiles. He loves when I map out the next day's events. I think it reminds him of being in summer camp and having the head counselor read the next day's schedule of activities.

Dale love schedules, systems to work within.

"Fine." he consents, with a tone of compromise. "I will take care of the reservations. 8:00 PM, right?"

"Yes. That should leave enough time for my story."

"Great" Dale concludes. He stands up immediately as if someone has just called out his name. He stands straight and pumps up his chest with air. He gives me a swift kiss on the cheek and marches out of the diner. His enthusiasm puzzles me. I do not know what he thinks he is searching for. I think it is the search for something that excites him. No one can be so excited about finding mere truth. Maybe he is preparing something I am unaware of. Maybe I should be more cautious, more worried. Maybe I am just overanalyzing.



PHASE FIVE

*Who Am I*

*The "who?" question sets aside the notion of essence, of intrinsic reality, and thus, of the distinction between reality and appearance.*

Richard Rorty

# 23

It is 4:00 PM. It is pouring rain. New York City is dark gray and cold. The filthy streets are finally being washed of their stench. The smell of industrial trash and sweat are running down the margins of the streets and into the sewers. I walk up Sixth Avenue with my umbrella tilted sideways, against the wind, and feel the raindrops on my toes as my feet slip in my summer sandals. I reach the Waverly and stand at the entrance to shut my umbrella before opening the door. I breathe in through my nose. I inhale a sincere smell of nature, of water. I see Dale stepping out of a taxi. "Thank you very much. Keep the change." I hear him scream to the driver in an absurdly loud voice. He runs across the sidewalk towards the restaurant's door, seeking shelter from the rain as if it was hurtful. His olive green raincoat blows in the wind; his hands are secured in the side pockets of his coat. Dale spots me at the door; his body jerks backward and stops inches from the glass door. Dale opens the door for me. I hear the jingle of the doorbell and gracefully begin walking down the aisle in front of Dale. The restaurant is filled with wet people, sighs and whispers; people enjoying the sanctuary from the rain. I feel as if we are invisible; nobody notices our walk. Each table in the restaurant is enjoying their food and conversations of whispers in their own bubble world, apathetic to the happenings around them. I sit at my designated seat at our usual booth and begin wiping the rain off my bare arms.

Dale is still at the entrance to the restaurant. "Cindy," he calls the waitress by her nametag, "Could you please bring two cups of coffee to our table."



"Great. Appreciate it." He says. Dale marches towards our booth. His hands have now moved to the pockets of his black slacks. I observe his polished black shoes as he advances with confidence. He seems overly energetic and professional. Yet he is not with me at the restaurant; he is on a mission. Dale wipes the rain off his coat, removes it, and walks back to the diner entrance to hang it on the restaurant's only coat hanger. He marches towards me again. But this time he reveals a neatly ironed white shirt. As he sits across from me, he wipes his forehead with a handkerchief, and I notice some more subtle changes to his appearance. He is shaven clean cut and smells strongly of cologne. Cindy arrives with our coffees before we exchange a word. She places them on our table.

"Again, appreciate it Cindy." Dale speaks to her today as if she were his life-long secretary. As if she had delivered his 4:00 PM coffee every day for the past ten years. His voice is strident. He speaks with the same absurd loudness with which he addressed the taxi driver. I laugh inside me and a smile escapes my mind and curves my mouth upward. "Why is he acting like a detective?" I ask myself. "What a strange mask Dale has chosen to wear." I think.

Dale sips loudly from his coffee, keeping his eyes focused on my face. Without a warm-up of words, a mild exchange of mundane thoughts, Dale slams his coffee cup back in its saucer, and introduces my next story-telling session:

"The Plato years." He announces as if he is speaking to an imaginary tape recorder hidden in his pocket, documenting our session.

I smile and make an effort to swallow my amusement and not ridicule his strange behavior. Instead, I decide to participate in his game,

to join him in his assumed formality. I add sweetener and milk to my coffee. I sip. I place the coffee cup back on the table, slightly softer than Dale, so he won't think I am mocking him. I inhale deeply through my nose, trying to return in my mind to the fatal New Years Eve, upon my return to my apartment. I speak in a slightly louder voice than usual to facilitate Dale's game:

"Although some say that our memory cannot store sensations, I remember the physical pain I experienced that night as if I were feeling it right now. I never archived this pain in my mind. It remains on the desk top of my consciousness always. Every thought or feeling I've had since that night has been slightly tainted by this awful experience. I stayed awake all night, feeling and thinking, feeling and thinking. As the sun rose and the city awoke to a quiet New Year's Day, I felt as if I had just delivered a baby. The pain had subsided by sunrise, but I was not at ease. I was overwhelmed by weakness. I felt a strange sense of accomplishment. I had been through a long, excruciating experience, and I did have some results to show. Through the hours of high fever and sweat, I had reached some truthful revelation about my reality: I found it to be non-existing. In fact, it is inaccurate to say I gave birth that painful night. In all truth, I was born. I was still in the graveyard of darkness I had built for myself throughout my adulthood, but I finally realized I needed to lift myself to the light of day."

"What is all this abstract talk? What happened to you? What did you do?" Dale asks , a bit aggressively.

"Well, in the morning I finally got up from my bed. I showered and rinsed the sweat off my body. I scrubbed myself meticulously all over until my body was the color of red wine. I watched my dead skin swirl

down the shower drain, and prayed that I was really cleansing myself of something. I returned to my bedroom and stared at myself in the mirror. As I stared at my naked body and face, the question that had haunted me through the night returned to my consciousness. Like a burp restores the taste of a meal hours after it has been eaten, the question once again echoed freshly in my mind:

*'Who am I?'*

But I was stronger that morning. I was up for the task of answering this question. Even though I remembered hearing the phone ring throughout the night, I did not check my messages. I knew I had to begin my quest immediately and alone. I put on some casual weekend clothes and a pair of sneakers and left my apartment. It was a bright and cold January morning, and I chose to wear a heavy sweater with no winter coat. I felt weak and light. I walked slowly and focused on my footsteps. I felt I was floating above the sidewalk. The streets were still asleep and abandoned. I walked them in search of a solution to my identity. I was looking manically, expecting to find some deserted help kit hidden in a phone booth, revealing the steps to salvation. I walked with eyes wide open, as if I was looking for an object I had recently lost. I felt like a character in a video arcade game, looking to save the princess or to find the keys to the castle. I walked up Broadway, and back down Mercer. I walked up Seventh Avenue, a bit further North this time, and then back down Sixth Avenue.

On the corner of Sixth Avenue and 8th Street, I noticed a black man standing by two fold-up tables, selling incense at one table and used books at the other. The man had long, thick dreadlocks and was wrapped in a red, green and yellow sarong. He smiled at me deeply as I floated by. And as if I had read the guidebook to the arcade game I

was participating in, I knew I had to approach. I glanced over the books on his wobbly table. There were maybe one hundred used books of different shapes and sizes. I tilted my head sideways to read their titles. Every thirty titles or so, I pointed to a book and looked up at the man in the sarong.

'One dolla' He replied every time with a heavy Jamaican accent.

I didn't know what I was looking for. I did know I was looking for a book."

"Wait a minute, how did you know to look for a book? Did someone or something hint at it? I don't understand." Dales words reach me like arrows and all I can think of is defending myself.

"No, it was nothing like that at all. Nobody *told* me anything about this search. Nobody in the world knew what I was going through. It was simply a hunch, an intuition. You see, I realized that people could not assist my healing. If I had people around me, my lying would interfere. I would instinctively wear a mask and never find truth. My healing had to come from ideas. I needed pure ideas, clean of my destructive skill.

In any case, I kept pointing to books and looking up, expecting the man in the sarong to change his response. I wanted a clue from this seemingly spiritual stranger as to where I should look for help. In a moment of frustration, I picked up the thickest book I could find on the table. It was entitled '*Plato: The Republic and Other Dialogues*'. I flipped through the first few pages. The first book within this collection was '*The Republic*'. I found the word 'truth' printed several times. The word 'knowledge' recurred as well. I thought the

book might be able to help me. I looked at the man in the colorful sarong one more time, hoping I was not aggravating him with my pricing questions. He replied:

'Two dolla; big book.'

I handed him two dollar bills and took Plato in my hand. I walked through a cloud of potent incense smells and continued floating downtown.

I sat in a park bench ..."

"Wait a minute. That's it? The man didn't say anything else?" Dale asks accusingly, as if he feels I am holding back information.

"No that was all, Dale. Although it is strange..." I scratch my chin.

"I knew something was weird here. What is it?" Dale prompts me.

"No, its just odd that I never saw the man in the sarong again. And I've passed by that street so many times, too. Anyhow, I kept walking downtown until I sat on a bench in Washington Square Park. I was alone with the soothing sun and the sleeping drunk homeless. I glanced through the pages of my heavy book. I purposely did not begin reading at the start. I was hoping for some guidance towards the relevant pages. I found it difficult to understand the words I was browsing through. I felt inferior to this great classic work. I felt too weak for such a grand challenge. I reached a visual description of a cave. I scrolled back a few pages to where the description began. I thought it would be easier to tag on to a picture than a concept.

In this segment Plato describes a scene in a cave to his fellow contemplators, a scene in which one man finds truth.

"Tell me the scene. I am curious to know what it was." Dale demands.

"Yes, of course," I reply calmly, "That's what I was about to do. It goes like this. Several men are chained from childhood in a dark cave, in such a way that they cannot see the entrance, which is open to the light. Behind them are a fire and a kind of stage. Figures and objects pass along the stage, but the men in the cave can see only the shadows cast by these objects upon the back wall of the cave. Because they are chained, of course, they cannot turn around. Never having known these objects, they take their shadows for reality. But really these shadows are twice removed from reality, since they are shadows of images of real objects.

Plato describes finding truth in two phases. The truth finder is first freed from the chain and can then turn around towards the fire and the stage. The sight of the moving objects bewilders him. Plato describes this as the first stage of liberation. The light he sees comes from the fire, and the objects he sees are still images.

Plato described the next phase of truth finding. The man ascends from the cave to the light of day. He sees the light of the sun and views the real objects. He is completely dazzled by this truth.

Plato's description painted a beautiful picture in my mind. I read it several times. I started voicing the words I was reading until I realized I woke up one of the homeless in the park. I didn't care. I wanted to make sure that I fully understood the message I was

receiving from this text. I read them aloud again and again. I chanted these words as if they were mantras. I craved to digest their true meaning.

You see, this passage introduced me to a new concept. In fact, it swirled my understanding of the world and reversed my view of lies. All my life I have been searching for a lighter existence. I tried to achieve lightness through lying, by making my life more comfortable. I suddenly realized that the only force powerful enough to shine me with light was truth itself. I ran through the significant lies of my past in my mind to test this fresh conclusion. The time I lied to Mrs. Whittle in the grocery store... the time I lied to Tina about sleeping with Kevin...the time I lied to Jason about my aunt in New York... the time I lied to Jimmy about Jason's career... These were not rescues of light. These were acts of darkness. As I lied my way out of everything, I was growing further into falsehood, further away from reality. It was all so clear in the park on that crispy cold January New York morning. As I bathed my face in sun, I knew I had to find the light that Plato spoke of. I understood that I must find truth."

"But not all your lies led to darkness. I mean you've told me yourself how many people you helped during your Jason years. Did you forget about all the people you helped with your words?" Dale asks condescendingly. He is looking at me accusingly, as if I distorted my story on purpose to make my point.

"Come on, it doesn't matter if my lies helped or hurt people? They all drove me further away from myself. Even the ones that ended up helping some people. I don't even know the final consequences of any of my words. Just like when Jason got his part and an innocent being

died to make that part available. I don't know what price the world paid to accommodate my words. Every false word I spoke trickled through reality, distorting it, changing people's lives. I don't know if my lies ever die. Maybe they are all still out there, continuing to distort." I respond enthusiastically. I pause to make sure Dale has finished his line of questioning. When I see that he is silent and observant, I continue.

"So, on that sunny park bench, I realized I needed to find truth. But I did not know how many truths I needed to find? I did not wish to understand the true nature of all things. That was unnecessary and probably impossible. I tried to focus on solving my problem. At that moment, I cared nothing for the world, only for my own well-being. All I wanted was to gain a true understanding of my personal history. I realized that the discovery of myself would suffice to finding Plato's light. I yearned to discover, or maybe just remember, the events of my life, as they occurred, not as I later told them. Then, Doug and Victor, no matter who they believed I was, would have no power over me. Only then, I would be liberated from my audience of believers. Only then would I be freed from the dark prison of lies I had begun building for myself at age sixteen."

It is 4:53 PM at the Waverly Restaurant. I pause. I sip from my coffee. I look at Dale. He is writing with a ballpoint pen on a yellow legal pad that rests on the table in front of him. I blink a few times to make sure that I am really seeing Dale writing on a yellow pad. Dale is writing rapidly in small and sharp pigeon gestures. His other hand is tensely wrapped around the pad. He stops for a moment and shakes the tension out of his hand. Then he continues to write. A minute later, Dale lifts his hand from the pad and slowly raises his head towards me, although his eyes are still



looking down, reviewing the words he has just written. Then in a swift motion, he looks at me and exclaims:

"This is great. So you do agree with me that a life of lies is not worth living?"

"Well, I realized my past errors through pain. I began an intense path of healing."

"I guess the most important question is did you stop using your powers?" Dale is smiling widely. It is a smile of discovery. My lips remain in a straight, horizontal line.

"Dale, why are you taking notes?"

"Well, you know, I just want to understand everything about your story. Taking notes helps me understand. That's all."

"You know, if you don't understand something, if you have a question, you can simply ask me. You don't need to take notes. Besides, I'm afraid you might miss something I say if you try to write everything down." I look down at Dale's pad; I look at Dale. I look back at the pad, then back at Dale again. I try to manifest disgust through my eyes.

Dale freezes with his hands in midair and his head in mid-movement. He is awaiting my verdict. Then, he widens his smile and looks directly at me. "I'm sorry, I just thought it would help me be a better listener. If it bothers you, I will put the pad away." Again, his voice is loud and he enunciates every word properly, performing

unnatural maneuvers with his mouth. I feel like a child or a deaf person.

Dale lifts a mahogany-colored briefcase from the side of the table, opens it and inserts the pad into the briefcase and returns the briefcase to the inner side of our booth. Only now, do I realize he is carrying a briefcase. Dale looks at me but he is not with me. I fear I am losing him. I must do something to return him to my side. I pick up the teaspoon resting on the table. I place it in my mouth. I slowly pull the spoon out of my mouth, as if I am licking it clean of dessert, as if it contains rice pudding. I close my eyes and fake the sensation of the sweet pudding sliding down my throat. I open my eyes, blink a few times and then leave them open. I pass Dale the spoon and raise my eyebrows as if asking him if he would like a bite. My spoon is my apple. I am trying to seduce him, to tempt him to rejoin my world.

Dale smiles out of politeness. He takes the spoon from my hand and places it back on my side of the table, refusing to play my game of 'pretend'. Dale is no longer responding to my words or my gestures, only to his mission. I can no longer enchant him. I feel stupid now. I feel helpless. I feel powerless.

I look at him across the table from me in a world of intense thought. His eyes are engaged in rapid movement, searching for a truth, for my truth. They are testing me, collecting clues for his investigation. He is no longer playful. The lightness in his eyes has faded away. He is all head, all brain. He is now so absorbed in his assignment that he fails to see the beauty of stories and life. He reminds me of the consultant I met at the Union Square subway station four days ago,

waiting for the N&R. My playful listener has returned to his old habit of solving defined tasks.

"Dale, how about splitting one of those fabulous Waverly rice puddings?" I ask, unwilling to give up my smiles and flirts.

"Are you kidding me? After we found that hair in the pudding last night?"

"What are you talking about? There was no hair." I say smiling. The waitress walks by. I catch her attention. I order one serving of rice pudding with no whipped cream.

We sit in silence, each in the private space of their mind, awaiting our sugary dessert.

# 24

The waitress arrives and places the rice pudding on the table. There is no whipped cream on top. She places a long silver spoon in front of each one of us. I reach for my spoon in slow motion and stretch out my arm to dig into the glass dish. Dale mimics my movement in the same pace. He looks like my mirror. Our spoons clash at the top of the dish.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"No, it's quite alright. Go ahead." He removes his spoon in a gentlemanly way and lets me withdraw mine with a spoonful of pudding. Then Dale withdraws a spoonful for himself and places it in his mouth. He swallows quickly and asks:

"So what did you do next? How did you go about finding truth?" He reaches out and scoops some more pudding. He is eating for fuel, not for pleasure.

I swirl the pudding in my mouth and then smile widely.

"C'mon, don't you remember the rule you suggested on our first Waverly meeting? No story telling allowed while eating."

"Right. I forgot." He reaches into the dish again. He is facing me, but he is not looking at me. He is looking through me, or maybe past me. The focus of his pupils is targeted beyond. I feel he is staring at a wall or listening to the ticking of his wristwatch. He looks like a schoolboy in detention. He is waiting to be somewhere else.

We continue to eat with no words. There is no exchange of expressions between us. We leave the tall glass dish wiped clean.

"Are you ready to proceed?" Dale asks in a cold voice of an exam practitioner.

"Yes. The segment I am about to tell is the last one you will hear."

"I didn't realize we were *so* close to the end." Dale says tilting his head sideways, as if my statement has triggered neurons in his head."

"Yes, this will bring us up to date. But before I begin, I have one request."

"What is it?" for a moment his voice sounds concerned. I think maybe he feels for me. For a split second, maybe he thought that his current coldness is unfair.

"Just please, don't ask me any questions until I am done. I am about to unload a lot of information. Let me get through it first. After I am done, you can ask all you want. Is that OK?"

"I don't see any problem. I will keep my lips sealed." Dale faces me now, equipped with rationality as if I am solely a riddle, an exercise for the mind.

I speak:

"When I returned home from the park, I continued reading *The Republic*. I wanted to understand everything, hoping that Plato would

guide me towards truth. Two or three chapters into the book, I began grasping his basic theories.

Plato believed that two worlds existed: the temporary world of the senses and the eternal world of ideas. Truth could only be found in the world of ideas. There simply was no truth in the world of senses since everything was dependent upon people's interpretations. For example, Plato said that a particular beautiful round marble table top could never be associated with the truth because of its changing nature and its different appearance to different eyes. One could perceive it as classic and elegant; another would experience it as cold and detached. There was no true way to experience this table. It simply had no truth to it. However, within this round table top lies the idea of a circle. The circle belongs to the world of ideas. It passes the test of time and is a mathematical truism that can be agreed upon by all. Someone stating that there are only 240 degrees in a circle is clearly speaking falsely, no matter how old he is or what nationality he is. He is speaking falsely.

As I read Plato, I tried to find examples that applied to my life. But you see, I never tried lying about mathematical truths. I realized that I never disturbed the truths of the realm of ideas. Now I understood that I had been living in one of two existing worlds. I only lived in the world of the senses. I did not know how my word powers altered the world of universal truisms. I guess I assumed my powers would be worthless in the world of ideas. Maybe if I abandoned the world of senses and lived only in the world of ideas, my powers would become inactive, useless. So, I decided to switch over. After finishing *The Republic*, I made my first decision towards truth. I decided to search for my identity while trying to live only in the world of ideas. I spoke to no one and consciously tried to avoid

emotions and visual observations. I ignored my senses and thoughts within the square borders of rationality. I decided to live in the world of ideas until I untangled the truth of who I was.

I stopped reading Plato because according to his theory, there was no truth to be found in my personal history. But I continued searching through the framework method I discovered in his work. Plato's cave story stayed with me.

*Finding truth is like finding light.* Plato was close by holding my hand with his imagery throughout my search. I craved for this light. It fueled my body and mind.

I saw no people and lived only with ideas. Every night I went to bed with a different book by a great thinker. I thought of these thinkers as lovers. They penetrated my mind for the duration of one night. Even though I went to bed every night with a different philosopher, I decided that Plato was the one who took my virginity. He revealed to me a new world of thought.

I slept with Leibniz, Spinoza, Hegel and Bradley. They introduced me to rationalist theories of truth. They taught me different variations of the Coherence Theory. These philosophers mostly spoke of truth as being a part of a larger comprehensive structure. They studied reality as an entire system. Within this system, they believed, all true propositions were consistent with each other. But I disagreed with their most basic assumption. I did not believe such a complete system of truth existed. I knew that my lies distorted reality and created clashes of truth. I saw my powers alter propositions and dictate inconsistencies. My life had proven them wrong. From the

experience of my powers, I knew truth was relative. I knew truth was ever changing. I decided to stay away from philosophers that believed in such a system of Coherent truths. I only read the works of philosophers that that belonged to the school of relativism.

I spent a few nights with two nineteenth century American philosophers: C.S. Pierce and William James. I learned that they were jointly the founders of The Pragmatic Theory of the American Philosopher and one night, in my bed, we had a threesome of minds, as I alternated between both books that lay open on my bed. They both believed that reality was both relative and changeable by people. They claimed that an idea is true if it works and if accepting it brings success. Now these theories coincided with my powers. I almost thought Peirce and James were of my kind. But their flexible definition of truth only made matters worse for me. If truth was so loosely defined, I would surely never find one correct answer. According to their theory, at one point I might truly be the woman that Victor knows and truly be the girl that Doug remembers. I was frustrated when I awoke from our night. They were my partners, but they could not be my savers. I was looking for one answer to my identity question. You see, I still believe there was only one true me to be found.

On the fortieth night of obsessive reading, I was awarded a prize for all my hard work. I found the path to discovering who I was. This revelation came to me as I was reading '*The Fall*' by Albert Camus. I decided to take a break from philosophy and read some fiction. Even though fiction contained characters and emotions, I convinced myself I could stay on a level of ideas. I will learn the characters' ideas and remain pure of their imprints. That's what I told myself. I have to stay far from the world of senses that Plato had warned me about.



I began reading early in the evening. It was very cold outside that night and I cuddled under the covers of my bed. I knew that the next time I would stand up from my bed it would be morning, and Albert would have penetrated my mind. I enjoyed the relaxing read. It freed my mind from thinking of my problem, and invited me to a life far from my own, the world of Jean Baptiste Clamence. I felt the narrator was honest in his confessions. I tried to retain the flavor of his honesty. I felt Jean Baptiste had completed the task I was facing. While hanging out in Amsterdam's bars, he manages to construct a real portfolio of his life experiences. He discovered who he was. He also spoke directly to the topic of lies. He felt that before dying, he must share all his lies with at least one person. He saw this as a prerequisite to death. For the first time since the beginning of my search, I found a text that related lying and speaking. I felt close to Jean Baptiste, even though we existed in different worlds. I felt I knew him. I thought that he would be able to understand my powers if he was only a real person.

I turned from side to side in my bed as I was approaching the final pages. By this time, both my arms had been numb several times from holding the weight of my body as I flipped through the pages with one free hand. I had tossed and turned with my body and mind. As Jean Baptiste Clamence returned to his apartment one night, drunk on gin and with a high fever, he spoke of the truth:

Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the contrary, is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object.

I visualized this image in my mind, and then understood why my task had been so difficult. The great brightness of truth, the same truth Plato speaks of, is too harsh on the eye with its intensity - it is

impossible to see without some form of sunglasses. Lies, however, contribute a darker presence making things noticeable."

"Yeah, well obviously lies are easier to see than truth. But you are not searching for lies. You already know more than enough about lies."

Dale's remark stings me now. I do not respond. I am too bare to battle him right now. I lick both my lips and seal them together. I am waiting for the spit glue between my lips to dry. I look directly at Dale. I do not understand the rationale for his comment. I want my old curious Dale back - the boy/man who was so enchanted by my story. I try to tell him all this with a glance. He lowers his chin, and looks at me from below. "I'm sorry. I know I promised not to interrupt. You are speaking a lot of theory here and it is hard for me to stay focused without interacting a little. You know, I have a lot of questions for you already."

I look at him silently for roughly a minute, trying to project warmth through my eyes. I speak once more:.

"Truth, like light, blinds. Falsehood, on the contrary, is a beautiful twilight that enhances every object."

I pause, letting the words linger. I watch Dale. His eyes are engaged in rapid movement. From side to side they scan me like a radar.

"I thought of Camus' statement, and tried to translate it into a solution. I thought of the lies I had told over the years. I realized I remembered almost all of them. I had planned my lies so

meticulously that I still had authentic documentation from the time I had constructed each lie. I quickly read the remaining page of 'The Fall', so I could dedicate myself to my new project. After I was done reading, I knew it was time to write."

Dale's pupils swiftly freeze at the center of his eye sockets. They found the object they had been scanning for.

"I reached for the bottom drawer of my desk and pulled out the Yellow Book of Rules. I opened the notebook and tore out the first five pages, which contained all the rules of my powers. I cleared the spiral ring of scrap paper. I started writing on the new page one. I wrote down every lie I could remember telling. I started with age eleven and the lies I used to tell my girlfriends about Justin. I wrote several pages on each of my larger lies in life: the Mother Lie, the Tina Lie, and the Jason Lie... I documented even the most innocent lies. I documented every instance in which I used the Period Lie. I wrote down all lies about men falling in love with me, my confidence, my success, my control of my emotions... Lies streamed through the veins in my arms and gushed onto the paper. I felt my entire body draining of filth. I barely lifted my pen from the paper all night. As I wrote, more lies rose to my consciousness and soon left my mind and my body through my fingers. My left hand swiftly flipped the pages of the book as my right kept on writing continuously. The same way musicians flip pages of notes during performances. In fact, this entire experience was music to me. It had its own rhythm.

I finished writing in the early morning. I noticed the sun was already up, and suddenly I felt extremely tired. I closed the notebook and held it in my hand trying to grasp the significance of

what I had just constructed. I had reached my goal. There was one remaining step to my healing. I had to accept all these lies as false and subtract them from the whole experience of life. Then, I was certain I would be left with the truth. I held this book in my hand, and it became to me like sunglasses on a bright sunny day. I realized that with it I could see the light. The truth was no longer blinding to me. I could recognize all its subtleties, all its beauty with the help of my book of lies."

I look at Dale. My enthusiasm clashes with his expression. He is all uncertainty. His eyes slightly shrink. His nostrils grow larger and his mouth slightly opens. I can tell he is holding back his questions to comply with my rule. I speak again.

"Sometimes, a simple tool can solve a very complex problem. You see, it's like trying to draw a straight line on a piece of paper. You keep coming close, but you're not quite there. You become frustrated. It seems like a simple yet impossible task. Then someone gives you a ruler. You realize how simple this task is with your new tool. The task becomes child-play. My notebook was a ruler. My problem had been solved. It now seemed so simple with the help of my book of lies. Like an algebra equation, I reached the value of my truth, X, through the back door. I deducted all that was not X. I was left with the pure truth, the real light of life."

I pause. I let my words swim to Dale in the air, uninterrupted, like sperm.

"So, what happened to your powers?" Dale asks, with a voice that sounds frail compared to my potent speech. I continue, not allowing his sickly words to remain on the table.

"There is still one step I must tell you of before I speak of my powers. As I rejected all that was written in the notebook, I began to remember moments of truth. I remembered my father on one of his visits, building a model airplane from balsa wood with me when I was six. He stays up long after I fell asleep, trying to put together all the pieces so we could go fly it in the field the next day. And later on, my mother let him stay the night and the next morning, the three of us cooked breakfast together before going out to the field with the awkward plane. I remembered my mother helping me with my math homework. She never wanted to give the answer away. I would beg her because I had so many problems to solve. All she would do was give me a hint on how to solve the problem, and then she would proudly watch me reach the answer by myself. I remembered how she took me to work with her one day when I didn't feel like going to school, and the next day she wrote a note for my teacher saying we had a family obligation. This was our little secret, and I never told anyone at school, but I was so happy that she was on my side. I remembered holiday meals, visits to my grandparents when they were both still alive, my neighbor teaching me how to ride my bicycle without training wheels, sitting in classrooms, passing notes with my girlfriends, sneaking in to R-rated films, kissing Doug for the first time and feeling warm in my face. I recalled true moments of closeness along with many more moments of solitude. Images of my history appeared and disappeared in my mind. Ordinary events seemed so magical in this movie in my mind. And then the images started smearing into one blob of loud colors as tears ran down my face. I fell asleep for twenty-seven hours, viewing these bright colors throughout my sleep.

I awoke the next day in the late morning. I had lost my powers. My lies were no longer true. I was still unsure and wanted to confirm with a test, but I felt my special skill was gone for good.

So, I got up, got dressed and walked downstairs to get myself something to eat in the corner deli. I walked by Umberto's Clam House:

"Hey, Jimmy, did you see that they are playing a different *God Father* movie every night at the Angelika this week?"

'No Way!' Jimmy replied with wide eyes, scratching the bottom of his white beard.

'Yeah, today is the first one. Do you want to go? It's playing at midnight.'

'No, I can't make it tonight, sweetheart. Maybe we'll catch the third one together; that's my favorite one. I guess that would be the day after tomorrow, right?"

I walked three blocks north and two blocks west to the Angelika movie theater. There was no sign announcing that the *God Father* movies were playing. I asked at the ticket booth. The employees looked at me confused and annoyed. They assured me that there were no screenings of the *God Father* movies planned. They all thought I was crazy, Dale.

That's it. The facial expression of the teenager at the ticket booth was all I needed to see to know my powers were gone. She looked at me with these eyes. Eyes that you only use on someone insane, a person that does not grasp reality. It was my confirmation. I had finally

succeeded in freeing myself of my life curse. After forty days of studying and writing I had finally elevated myself to a lighter existence. I became free of the burden of words forever.”

I look at Dale. The shell of his body is not moving, even though I sense something is wrong from within. I imagine the inside of his body contains a swirl of two colors: purple and yellow. They are engaged, moving in a swirl of colors. The same swirl that McDonald’s ice cream has as it comes down to the cone from the ice cream machine. Yellow is his faith. Purple is his doubt. I watch the two colors swim in a spiral inside him, mostly in his upper chest. He locks his hands together in front of his chest and closes his eyes. Dale is aware of the turmoil inside his body. He is all battle. We both experience five minutes of sound silence. Inside we are both all screams..

# 25

"You are lying to me right now" Dale says with an expression of great disgust. His purple words of doubt wash over me like an ocean wave.

It is 6:30 PM at the Waverly restaurant. I feel I am drowning. I gasp for air.

"Excuse me?" I squeak out of my thin, tube vocal cords.

"You heard what I said, and you know what I mean. You are lying to me right now, aren't you?"

His words overcome me like a second wave, rattling my already weak body.

"No." I sigh out of desperation, speaking towards the sky. I regain my posture. I hide my fear. "Didn't you hear a word I said? I just told you of the day my powers disappeared. Why would I lie to you now, Dale? I have no incentive. My lies no longer become reality."

I wrap my weak body with my arms and grab a shoulder with each hand. I feel the ball in each shoulder rattling in my palms.

Dale inhales deeply. I see the colors inside him merging and settling into a light purple shade. He speaks to me slowly and softly, like the ocean whispers after a storm. He closes his eyes momentarily. He centers his energy.



"Actually, I believe this is a good time to share with you some of the thinking I've been doing. After the first few times we met, I went home and asked myself 'why is this woman blessing me with her story? What incentive does she have to tell a perfect stranger the most intimate details of her life?'"

At first, I believed that you just needed someone to talk to. You couldn't talk to those close to you; you needed a listener that was detached from your life. I thought I was serving as a therapist free of charge."

Dale takes a sip from his coffee accompanied by another deep breath. He is looking at me with a foreign expression. One drop of sweat is making its way down the left side of his face. It reaches ear level and stops. He looks at me like a chess player examines his opponent. He is trying to guess what my reaction will be to his move. He holds his breath in his lungs. His chest is filled with air. He seems larger now. The sweat drop departs his face and drops to the table.

"But see, after listening to your story, I realized that you had to have a deeper reason for your telling. For five days now, I have heard you speak of your manipulative plans, your evil lie games with people, and your self-serving existence. I realized that our situation was no different. It couldn't be different. It would be against your nature. I knew that I had to somehow be part of a plan.

Last night, I stayed up all night, trying to understand how I fit into your game of manipulation. The answer came to me about two hours before coming to meet you. Once I got it, it all made so much sense. I was actually annoyed that it took me so long to realize your obvious intentions. You *wanted* to rid yourself of your special skill.

You had seen your powers bring you up and drag you down, and you wanted to get off this crazy roller coaster. You wanted to throw your powers out with the trash. And of course, you decided to solve your problem the same way you make anything happen in your life. You decided to lie about it. Lies save you from everything, right?"

Dale's eyes are almost evil now. I see his teeth clenching as he speaks.

"But this required a very complicated lie. The only way you could convince someone that you do not have powers is first to convince them that you do have powers."

He smiles forcefully, wickedly. He slams his pointer fingers into his chest. "So, of course, you chose me."

I listen. I hold my words in my chest and mouth in order not to interfere, but I cannot hold it in any longer.

"Dale, Come on, that is the most absurd thing I have ever heard." I say lightly, trying to drain our conversation of its tension.

He lets my words shoot passed his consciousness as if dodging a bullet. He continues:

"It all makes so much sense. You chose me because I seemed naive enough to you, wearing my suit, reading a book on the subway. Another Jason type you could easily fool, right?" He pops his head forward as he ends his remarks serving his words like a tennis ball.

"Dale. My powers are gone. I swear to you. I am powerless. I know you might have wanted me to work some magic for you, maybe lie about your bank account or something. But they are really gone. I'm sorry but I am worthless to you." I speak slowly yet I intensely direct my words at his eyes.

"Oh, really?" Dale tilts his forehead forwards and raises both eyebrows, "Let's test them then. This will quickly settle our debate." Dale loudens his voice as he gains momentum in his speech.

"If you are telling the truth, then your powers are gone no matter what I believe. Your lie-test will not come true; you will prove to me that your powers are gone and we will have nothing more to discuss.

But if you're lying to me about your powers disappearing, I want you to know that I am not convinced. Your lie to me did not work. No red socks. No voicemail on anyone's answering machine. Your powers are still with you. I didn't help you get rid of them. Your lie will come true. We will both know that I am right."

I breathe deeply and loudly. I am terrified. I hate being tested. Never before had I lied in the presence of a true accomplice. Dale knows everything of my trade. I am embarrassed to perform a lie in his presence. I feel like someone is watching me masturbate; Dale is invading a ritual I had always kept private. I try to ignore the tension growing in my stomach. I call the waitress over with an ambiguous hand gesture. I feel small bubbles of warm sweat emerging above my upper lip. I place my fingers above my chest and let them play with my collarbone. The waitress arrives at our table. I speak:

"I think it was you who waited on us yesterday?"

"Yes, yes, I remember."

My fingers are now dancing on my collarbone beyond my control. They reach my lower neck and my voice comes out slightly choked.

"I just realized that my wedding ring is gone. I'm sure I had it yesterday afternoon and this is the only place I'd been to. I remember playing with it over dinner."

I hold out my hand and show her the finger that is missing the ring.

"It probably fell on the floor or between the cracks in the seat without me noticing or something..."

I move my body forward and run my fingers through the inner part of the booth.

"I really looked everywhere I can think of. I don't know what more to do."

I sit back in the seat and again hold out my ringless finger to show her.

"Um... it's a gold ring. It has the initials 'D.R.' engraved on its inner rim. Did you maybe see it when you were clearing the table last night? Or maybe somebody turned it in?"

The waitress hides her lips and shakes her head slowly from side to side.

"No. I'm really sorry. I didn't. I would've remembered. But maybe a customer turned it in during the morning shift. I just started my shift ten minutes ago. Let me check. I'll be right back."

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate it." My throat is congested with sadness as I thank the sympathetic waitress.

She walks over to the entrance of the restaurant to ask her boss at the register. I cannot distinguish her distant words, but her distressed voice reaches our table in echo form.

I am sad I lost my ring. I look at my finger again and touch its base with my hand, trying to get used to its new nakedness. I raise my eyes to look at Dale. His glance contains awe - the type of look a person has when they discover something new in the familiar.

"What?" I instigate, demanding an explanation for his dramatic stare. Dale closes his mouth and shakes his head from side to side, wiping his face of its conspicuous expression.

"Are you surprised at how naturally lying comes to me, at how I smoothly added the details to the lie about the engraving? You know it wasn't that complicated. I just chose your initials. Really, I didn't speak much."

Dale opens his eyes wider now to snap out of his awkward phase and then shakes his head again, this time slightly faster.

"No, not at all. I think that you lied well and all, but most good liars can make up details in their lies. I assumed that you were good at it with all the experience you have."

"Then what is it?" I ask wobbling my eyebrows and then freezing them on an upward movement such that horizontal lines dent my forehead.

"I just didn't expect you to grow sad about the ring, that's all."

Dale's expression becomes more neutral now. Now that he verbalized his amazement, the feeling has departed him. I think of his words. I consider my reaction to my lie. I am sad about the loss of a cherished ring. But how could this be, I know that I invented its existence a few minutes ago?

Dale interrupts my thoughts with words.

"It's funny, you know? As much as you have been complaining about the heaviness of your lies and all the responsibilities that come with your powers, I never felt sorry for you...until now."

"How could you not feel sorry for me? I told you in great detail about my painful search for truth? About my struggle to find my identity?" The words leave my mouth in a dramatic echo form. I lower my head and look closely at Dale's face from below, examining his pores, the hairs inside his nose. I am trying to understand why he does not feel for me.

Suddenly, Dale enters a daze. My questions echo in his mind and trigger new ones. Other parts of his mind are slowly grooming his database of experiences and knowledge for insightful solutions.

"I guess that you always seem so in control. You know?" Dale speaks slowly, trying to fully understand the thoughts processing in his head, "All the things that you told me you sounded so predetermined. You know?" He tilts his head sideways.

I am interested in his remarks. I want more. But Dale seems to be playing a game of solitaire. I am competing for attention with his inner dialogue.

"So, I still don't get it," I say "What makes you feel sorry for me now? What has changed?"

"Well," Dale pauses for a few minutes, as if to let the match in his mind come to an end.

"When I saw you lie to the waitress, and then get all sad about your ring, I realized what little control you had. I don't know why I never imagined it so, but you believe your own false telling. You are affected by your words. Who knows? Maybe you even affect yourself more than the changing reality."

As he speaks his mind, he is hearing his words for the first-time, like me. He is speaking and listening to himself at the same time. Then he clears his throat and looks at me freshly as he refocuses his eyes. Maybe he is remembering that we are waiting for the waitress to announce our competition results. He brushes his hand through his hair and adjusts his posture. Dale washes contemplation from his face and returns to adorning his detective mask. He lifts his coffee cup from its saucer preparing for a toast and gestures me to do the same. I lift my coffee cup and we clink them together.

"May the best man win." Dale announces in a vigorous voice. We both take a large sip from our cold coffees; we place our cups back in their saucers while keeping our eyes on each other. We experience a moment of anticipation. Nothing is present in our minds; everything is riding on the imminent future. Our intense stare is a battle. Our bodies are dormant yet fretful.

The waitress returns to our table, walking slowly, holding a gold wedding ring in her outreached hand. She feels unworthy of this precious jewel and she carries it ahead of her, walking behind it like a humble servant. She hands me the ring, and I watch its light reflection crawling towards me on the gray formica tabletop. She jerks back her hand a split second before I take it from her and holds it up high above our heads. She proudly points to the engraving, which matches my description. She widens her lips to a smile of satisfaction as if it was her hard work that made this recovery possible.

I thank her. She walks away from our table and down the diner's aisle with a straight back.

Her playful smile is contagious and I already detect its symptoms on Dale's face. I hold my lips tight by grabbing their inner meat with my teeth. I hand over the ring to Dale. He looks at it. He examines the engraving. He plays with it with his fingers. It is his trophy. The smile of satisfaction that originated on the waitress is now in full bloom on Dale's boyish face. His eyes glitter, saying, "There, you see!" He proved I still have my powers. He busted me for lying. He is now certain that he is not the naive boy I took him to be.



"So, what are we going to do now?" He lets the words dance out of his mouth. I watch them approach me in the shape of a moon since they were molded in Dale's large smiling mouth. His words remind me of sugar cookies.

"Well," I say, trying hard to mimic his playful intonation in order not to appear like a sore loser, "let's pay and get out of here. I've had enough of the Waverly Restaurant to last me a lifetime. Let's see if we can catch dinner a little bit early. I still think I owe you dinner, even if you didn't believe me."

"No, silly. I'm not talking about dinner. I meant what are you going to do?" His victorious voice mixes with his usual, more serious intonation now.

"I mean the whole purpose of telling me your story was to make me believe you were powerless and then have your powers disappear. You've spent five days with me here, and now your plan has failed. What are you going to do about your powers?"

I smile superficially and show no concern. I hold high my masks of the queen manipulator. It is stretched tightly on my face. "Oh, don't worry about me, Dale. You should know by now what a meticulous planner I am. There is always plan B. I'll tell you about it over dinner. Let's go."

We leave the Waverly restaurant slowly, each footstep carrying many heavy thoughts. Dale walks before me and as he opens the diner door, I look back and glance at our booth one more time. I feel as if I am about to emigrate from my home country, abruptly leaving a reality that constituted a routine. I know we will never return together.

Dale reaches the curb of the sidewalk and holds his arm out to catch a cab. Even though his arm is heavy and only slightly uplifted, a taxi immediately pulls over to the sidewalk. Dale opens the door for me then walks around the back of the cab and enters through the other door. Even though I tried to fool him with a lie, he is still insisting on being a gentleman. Or rather, these gentle gestures towards women are imbedded in him from his childhood and he performs them instinctively without giving them any thought. Our sides meet on the back seat, but Dale pretends not to notice and looks straight ahead. He looks at the driver's mirror, and tells him through reflections to take us to Spring Street between Broadway and Lafayette.

# 26

We step out of the cab right in front of Balthazar, and Dale converses with the driver through reflection, almost handing the bills to the image of the driver's hand in the mirror, asking for a receipt. We take seven steps across the sidewalk and a doorman dressed in black greets us and opens before us the first set of doors. It is 7:30 PM. We find ourselves sheltered from the noisy crass street in a warm yellow-lit space of privilege. The walls are covered with large distressed mirrors and decorated with detailed illuminated columns. Chatter rises from the different groups of people sitting in red leather banquettes and dark wooden tables. Eclectic voices mix with classical music notes on their slow ascent to the high ceiling decorated with dark wooden fans. There are about ten people seated in the bar area to our right, wearing their office stale clothes with their briefcases and handbags resting by their stools. They are speaking operatically, inhaling smoke and sipping cocktails between their words. The host greets us and my vision narrows to his face. Dale and I follow him to a table. Dale asks if it is possible to have a booth. The host consents with an exaggerated head nod, and shifts his walk to the left, eventually arriving at one of the wine colored booths with golden knobs acting as cushion pins. I watch his black shoes as they lead the way, stepping over small off-white stones that form a huge mosaic on the restaurant's floor. We sit. We are silent. We both smile with relief: our five-day experience of togetherness is now transforming to the substance of memory. This process tickles in our minds. Dale raises his left eyebrow and speaks:

"I figured we had to sit at a booth to bring a sense of familiarity to a new place." He pretends to look at me, but I can see his eyeballs pausing at the edges of his eye sockets as they move about, collecting brief glances of the gossipy crowd.

"I agree." I say, and my words restore his eyeballs to their usual center. I cross my left leg over my right. I rest both my hands in my lap. Dale smiles at me and once again allows his eyeballs to float in their sockets.

The waiter arrives and before he manages to deliver his introductory speech, Dale orders a bottle of champagne. As the waiter leaves our table, we glance at the menus. The menu is a one-page yellow sheet covered in plastic with a thin leather border; the menu displays descriptions in decorative boxes and illustrations, indicating different French delicacies in Old English font. I decide I will order the steak tartar and straighten the back of my neck to once again look at Dale. The waiter arrives and places a bucket of ice on a silver stand at the side of our booth. He then returns with two champagne glasses and a bottle of champagne. He places the glasses on our table, unwinds the metal cage of the cork and pops open the champagne. Our attention returns to our booth. But as the waiter wraps the bottle in a white cloth napkin and begins to pour the champagne, we are once again each occupied with the atmosphere. We are thinking of ourselves, of each other, but indirectly so. We are thinking of how the other diners perceive us. We each imagine the audience's thoughts as they hear the bottle's audio pop and acknowledge us, examine our body language, guess our words to each other. The waiter recites the specials dramatically as if he were on stage. I order the steak tartar and Dale orders the roasted chicken. After a subtle bow, the waiter disappears into the crowd and we feel

slightly freer to embark on our togetherness. I look at Dale. He is smiling at me in a sincere and sweet way. I think of how attractive he looks in this environment. Formality suits him. I have only known him as a boy in a diner. I find it odd that he feels so comfortable in this arrogant place. We toast:

"To truth" Dale says, holding his glass at the height of his eyes.

"To life." I say, clinking my glass with his.

We sip champagne. I let it flow down my throat like a river. I fully enjoy it.

"So. I guess I won." Dale says, smiling at his silly remark, holding his lips together, though allowing the champagne air bubbles to escape his mouth. I look at him and once again I see a boy.

"Well, I guess you could call it that. You caught me in a lie." I sip from my glass.

"Come on, give me a little bit more credit for my hard work, here. Let's say that I *revealed the truth*." He straightened his posture and crispens his enunciation as the word *reveal the truth* clink through his mouth.

"You revealed a truth" I move my chin forward on the a. I feel as if we are two animals engaged in some ceremony, competing in sounds and dictations.

"You see, there is no one truth to reveal in life. It is all a great misconception. There is no rare masterpiece called truth on a podium

in the center of the world waiting to be unveiled. Even I was naïve in my search for the one true interpretation of my life. Because there are many valid interpretations. Nothing in our mind can mirror reality. If we could mirror reality, we would not be able to hold our own perception; we would be computers. You see, we are further away from truth than you think. We don't even speak the language of truth. The best we can do, or the closest we can come to it, is to find many different ways of introducing reality into our many languages. I mean, philosophers from Plato to Popper have been struggling just to *define* truth all their lives. All they have found is different contradicting explanations of how we perceive reality, but none of them could articulate a meaning of truth that we all agree on."

I stop speaking, even though many more thoughts on the subject are stacked in my stomach waiting for their turn to ascent through my body and leave through my mouth. I swallow and suppress them until they disappear. There is no use to my thoughts at this place. They are only additional sound bites contributing to the restaurant's pool of chatter. I look at Dale.

Dale is no longer struggling to digest my theories. He listens to me speak and grabs hold of a few of the words, tossing them in the warmth of his ears out of context. He no longer allows them to access his mind. I am no longer his teacher. He has graduated from under my wing. The details of my story that he memorized have disappeared from his consciousness in a puff the minute he experienced his victory. Like a student walking out of a comprehensive exam, Dale has allowed all the studied information to sink to the bottom of his mind, millions of layers below. All that he can comprehend now is his victory. The events that took place between us are memorable in his mind while the details of my story are as vague as morning dreams. I

see our experience divided up in his mind to scores in a game:  
"subway talk one point for her, debate about the power of words at  
Waverly: two points from her, one point for me..

He is scanning my words for practicalities right now, an event he can relate to. I am giving him perceptions instead. I stop speaking in the middle of my sentence. I adjust my thinking. I try to act as a friend, a pal to him. I decide to provide him with the conclusion his eyes desperately await. I begin finalizing my riddle to him.

"...anyway, I don't know what I was rambling on about. What's important is that you know that everything I told you of my life was true up until the part about me loosing my powers."

I earn a smile from Dale and a quick lifting of his chin in my direction.

"That's kind of what I figured. I don't think anyone could have made up your crazy story."

This is the first time he speaks in several minutes, although his reaction to my words is almost instant. "Besides, it all makes sense this way. You had to convince me of your reality, before you could convince me that it had changed. But I'm dying to know, at what point did you start planting your lie?"

I gently close my eyes for a few seconds to help him erase his concerns. "The very end, Dale."

"No, I know that. I understand that your mother lie, all your relationships, they are all your real history. But did you add little

facts along the way to make me believe later on that your powers really disappeared? I mean did you plant your final lie from the moment we met?"

"No, nothing like that. I told you my life as I experienced it up until our last session today. I did have a crisis after meeting Doug at a New Year's party that I went to with Victor. I did have a revelation reading Albert Camus, just as I told you. I even wrote down all my lies, and found out who I was, more or less. All that is true."

Dale sips from his champagne glass, fitting his nose in the glass rim and keeping his eyes on me as he bends the glass over his face.

"...It's just that your powers did not disappear..." His voice sounds uncertain once again, like in the first days of our meetings.

"Exactly. You're right" I reply.

"...So you decided to plant one last lie. A lie to a listener that would free you forever."

"Exactly!" my word is like a pat on his back, "I assumed that by the end of tonight, you would have believed me and my powers would vanish." I smile and Dale's back suddenly arches like a peacock.

"Well, since I didn't believe you, what is plan B? How are you going to get rid of your powers?" He rubs his hands together as if they were under a tap of running water.



"Well, even though I still had my powers after that tortuous night, I found myself with a lengthy and detailed list of all my lies. I have been editing this list ever since that night. I have been documenting and compiling more and more lies as I remember them. I have spent many nights at home, typing my lies and saving them on my old college computer. I have spent over two years now, writing and rewriting. What started off as a dry list of lies has developed into a two hundred-page document containing all my memories. As I edited this list, I added descriptions of the places I lied in. I sometimes even wrote about my feeling towards executing a particular lie. I finished writing this a few weeks ago. It is now almost novel-length. It reads like a long personal essay. I am still missing an ending, though. I had to wait and see how our story would end. I found an independent publisher that is interested in my work; as a work of fiction, of course. Hopefully, it will be published by next winter. Who knows, you heard my story, you know how interesting it all sounds. It's very plottish. I think it could sell quite well. What do you think?"

Dale's head is heavy now "I don't get it. How will this help you get rid of your powers?"

"Oh, that's the simple part. I assumed you caught on to that already. I will publish my true-life story as a book of fiction. Readers will believe that my powers are false. They will think my stories are a product of my imagination. Think about it, who would believe that any writer, or any person, for that matter, truly possesses these supernatural powers?"

Dale stamps his finger strongly and repeatedly on the table as if trying to bury a sugar grain in the tabletop. "So after your book is published, you will finally have your wish come true. You will be

able to lie freely all the time like the rest of us. You won't be responsible for the consequences of your words."

"Yes, something like that. I hope my words will have a more subtle impact after my powers disappear. But like anyone else, my speech will still affect things."

"You will have to get used to a much harder life." Dale raises his right eyebrow and withdraws the left side of his face backwards.

"A much lighter life. A true life." I say smiling at his concerned intonation.

"Imagine meeting a man you like. He might not love you. You won't be able to lie about his feelings. And even if you do love each other, you might become paranoid of him stopping to love you." Dale pauses for an instance and then smiles at the thought ripening on his tongue. "Just imagine how different your life will be. You will have to get used to living with fears, constantly wondering whether the person you depend on so much might pack up his bags and leave you one day for no apparent reason. And you know, he won't stay with you long just because you're cute. You'll actually have to try to be understanding, make compromises. You know, develop intimacy..."

Dale speaks to me in a sarcastic tone. He is warning me about the complexities of life in a paternal way. We both realize the absurdity of this scene and Dale is now exaggerating his advising words, converting them into sarcasm "...You're probably going to have to get a real job, you know you won't be able to count on your imaginary aunt anymore." Dale holds out his index finger, tapping along in the air as he looks down at my eyes. We both giggle.

Gradually, the tension between us subsides. We have found a place of comfort together that exists beyond my story. Our contest of truth is long over. The meetings at the Waverly are nothing but a memory now.

We speak casually. Dale is doing most of the talking. He speaks of his job, his past loves, his childhood. I don't really listen. I pick up a few sentences. I find them rather boring. I hear him repeat the word "almost" very often.

"I almost moved to China after college to teach English through this program... I almost approached her when I saw her at this mid-town restaurant...I almost called my aunt Galina in Russia to reconcile with her on her 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday after not speaking with her since my mother died..."

Now he is speaking about a girl named Samantha that he once loved. He speaks of her innocence, her beauty, the wonderful two years they spent together until she left him.

I am wearing the mask of attention, nodding and smiling at Dale's remarks, while concealing my distant inner thoughts. Sporadically I hear the words *truth* and *reality* seasoning Dale's remarks. Because of my skill, my attention instinctively returns to his speech every time I hear these words.

"...I'm willing to sacrifice a lot for truth. It's the only thing I believe in, you know. When my mother was forced to forge those letters...And you know what, that is exactly why I don't take drugs. They are an escape from reality. The only way I enjoy living is with

reality, and I am willing to put the effort into uncovering it, like through listening to your story, for example..."

The bits of sentences that I catch from what Dale considers *his reflections in the context of my story* show me that he has learned nothing from my teachings. He still sees himself as some hero truth-fighter, unveiling a pre-existing reality. He still does not understand that a pre-existing reality does not exist.

The waiter arrives and places a large white plate in front of each of us. I take a bite and swirl the cold meet in my mouth. I chew. I wipe my mouth with the cloth napkin in my lap. I smile. I drift into my mind and play solitaire with my thoughts. Dale was right in what he said before we left Waverly. He was part of my plan of manipulation. But now I see that he overestimated his role. He was only a pawn in my game, and he is of no use to me now. The fact is I do not wish to keep him as a friend. His righteousness only makes me feel dirty. His corporate job, his battle for truth and search for intimacy - they all seem cartoonish to me: he is a container of modern society's garbage slogans: "If you work hard within the system, you are guaranteed eventual success; always be truthful and the world will be true to you. Giving makes your heart larger..."

But now I focus my eyes on Dale as he speaks. He has barely touched his food. He is consumed by his speech. He looks like the senior speaker lecturing words of conclusion before his graduating class. His hand movements are dramatic and he controls the upward stroll of his sweeping words. Despite his naiveté, I think he is sweet, or maybe precisely because of it. His efforts are always sincere. The visions of truth in his mind are magnificent. I think that a thought of Dale anytime in the future will always warm my heart. I decide I

should give him a small gift for being such a dedicated listener. I glance over at his briefcase. It is made of delicate maroon leather and has a logo printed on its side in Times Roman font: "The Four Seasons Hotel." I assume he received the briefcase as a corporate gift from his consulting firm, or maybe as a souvenir from some business relationship.

"What are you looking at down there?" Dale interjects my thoughts and restores my attention to the restaurant.

"Just your briefcase. I think it is really high-class. But anyway, I find your words fascinating. I barely gave you a chance to speak at the Waverly; it's just very interesting for me to hear how you see everything. I didn't know how unhappy you were at your job for example." I rescue myself with some words that floated my way earlier in his speech.

"Yeah, well. I guess it could be worse, right? So many people would die to have my job, you know? The travel, the pay - I guess it's quite tempting. And you know, my little brother is really impressed. He practically thinks I'm god because of my job. Sometimes he comes to New York and sees me wearing a fancy suit in my office with a view of Manhattan. In his mind, I made it big. "

I dabble in the conversation, now that Dale has released all the words that were urgent inside him. We speak of the hot summer, of how disappointing the movies have been this season, of the difference between people in New York and people in London...

Dale swallows the last bite of roasted chicken from his plate and excuses himself from the table to use the bathroom. I signal the host. He is standing at the entrance to the restaurant. He seems more like a manager or part owner. He dabbles with the customers and orders the staff to attend to a table occasionally. Maybe he is the maitre d'. His face seems familiar and I think I might have seen his picture in the newspaper before. He swiftly walks over to our booth. He stands by me like a pole. He is wearing dark gray slacks and a black button down shirt made from high quality stiff cotton. The collar of his shirt is so stiff that it stands slightly elevated from the shirt. He speaks with a thick Parisian accent:

"How can I help you Mademoiselle?" He turns his head towards me in a dramatic way.

"I know this is an odd question, but do you happen to know who your supplier of Moet & Chandon champagne is?"

"No, I am very sorry, I do not. I can easily find out if you'd like. Is there a problem with your champagne, Mademoiselle?"

"Well the reason I am asking is that... Well, You know who I am dining with, right?"

"No, no, no, I do not." He replies, while holding his lower back arched, he bends down slightly as he speaks, catering to me by speaking closer to my ear.

"Oh, my friend who just stepped away is Dale Reed. You know, the new owner of the Four Seasons Hotel?"

"Oh, of course. I believe I read something about him in a magazine." The owner/host pronounces the 'Z' from 'magazine' with such emphasis that the sound vibrates through my body and the hairs on my arms rise.

"Yes." I reply, straightening my back to be rid of the shiver, "There have been several articles about him in the past few weeks in the *Times* and the *Post*. He just bought the hotel. It was a bit of an ugly hostile takeover, and he intends to implement large changes in the management over the next few months. It's quite an ambitious challenge."

The owner/host nods, waiting for me to explain my request.

"In any case, I would hate to occupy much of your time, I was just wondering if you had the name of your champagne supplier. Mr. Reed was just speaking about how the current supplier overcharges the hotel and is often late with his deliveries. I believe he is looking to establish contact with a new supplier. I just thought if you knew who your supplier was off the top of your head, it might be helpful to..."

He quickly takes over my passive demand "Well, certainly, if you call the restaurant tomorrow at this time, the owner should be here and I'm sure he will be able to assist you."

"Thank you for your help."

He hands me the restaurant's business card with the owner's name written in pen. He then presents me with a final subtle bow of the head and returns to the front of the restaurant.

Dale arrives at our table. He holds his hand to his stomach as he glides into his seat. "Wow. I feel so much lighter now that I've said all I wanted to say." He lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry if I bored you with all of that personal stuff. I just felt that I needed to let it all out. I swear I was only planning on talking for a few minutes. But then, all these other words were suddenly necessary to explain to you where I was coming from." He let's out a goofy Dale smile.

"No, don't worry. Believe me, I know where you're coming from. I think penetrating words into other people's minds is greater than sex."

Dale let's all the air in his body out of his open mouth in an abrupt jerk. He is embarrassed, although he does not blush. He has learned to be flexible to my words.

"I don't feel *that* strongly about it. But if you say so." But now he looks away, trying to escape my look. He becomes pink. I like him this way. I take pleasure in still being able to trip him with my statements. His open mouth gradually converts into a subtle smile. For one simple moment, I wish I could stay with him longer. I wish we would join hands right now and begin walking the path of life together. I see us leaving the restaurant holding hands, going to his apartment, discovering each other's bodies, each learning the depths of the other's soul. I picture meeting his friends, his brother, going with him to his parent's memorial services every year and holding his hand, knowing how much they had meant to him, how they taught him through their death to place truth above all. I picture being comforted by understanding his behavior, knowing the origin of his many sentiments. I imagine walking around New York City with Dale



by my side, not needing to lie every time we bump into someone from my past. After all, he already knows my true story. He will examine my reaction to this person from my past and remember when I told him of my experience with them. He will know how they affected me. He will understand my reaction. He will probably smile at the absurdity of my coldness to them, knowing that at one point they meant so much to me.

I imagine us reaching a delicate balance of thought, gestures, sarcasm and romance. He will soften my harshness by making fun of my seriousness. I will inject a small dosage of reality into his ridiculously idealistic vision of the world. I can see us romantically arguing over films we see together, always disagreeing, but flirting through our arguments, ending the debate with a burst of laughs, a wild wet kiss, a wordless game of sex and pantomime. I imagine touching Dale and feeling like his body is a natural extension of mine. I think of how different it would feel to let him treat my body as a territory he has rights of passage to. I think of how it would feel to hold concerns for something exterior to ourselves, to nurture each other's bodies as if they were a part of our own.

I can see us with some of his friends at a dinner party when someone mentions the Waverly diner, either because they ate there or just walked by. I imagine us looking at each other as we experience the same memory. The two of us in a room with other people, living a memory together in our minds that no one else is aware of, communicating without words, solely with understanding. And then, there will probably be a million other memories of joint experiences that haven't happened yet, that only we will share in the entire world: maybe the day I give birth to our first child, or the years

that Dale follows an idea of his into a flourishing business. Our future memories might form the simplest moments. Maybe one time when I get really sick and he makes me laugh through my sore throat and stuffy nose until tears come to my eyes from pain. Maybe the death of a close friend, a prize to be proud of, a miscarriage, cancer, our child in college, a play that moves us both, a feeling of failure, more death, more happiness...

He is looking at me, not understanding my changing facial expressions, unable to translate my thoughts.

"What?" he says flirtatiously, "are you thinking up a lie right now? Is this what you look like when you described yourself as cooking a lie in your mind?" He draws back his head although his shoulders remain forward. He is gaining distance to examine me more thoroughly.

"No, don't be silly. I promise you that no one can detect when I am planning. Not even you." I draw back my face and raise my eyebrows. I will give him all the examination space he wants and still prove him wrong. He annoys me suddenly. He thinks he knows me so well.

"You might have heard me talk for a few days, but that still doesn't mean you can read my mind, you know?"

Dale bows his head, in a semi-apology "Fair enough. There you go again swiveling your eyebrows. They are swimming on your forehead like worms."

"And you are biting your lower lip without noticing it either. You do that when you are unsure." I say. I rest my elbow on the table and place my hand under my chin. I bite my lower lip. I mimic his lip

biting. Actually no, I exaggerate it. Dale places his elbow on the tabletop and rests his chin in his hand. His elbow is mirroring mine now. He begins moving his eyebrows up and down. We continue to bite our lips and wiggle our brows absurdly. The waiter arrives.

"Is everything OK, children?" He asks playfully. I turn my head towards him and notice the restaurant. We must look like a joke. Several tables are whispering and looking at us. I lift my elbow from the center of the table and adjust my posture in a quick lock of my lower back.

"Yes, everything is fine. Just the check please. You take MasterCard, right?"

"Certainly" The waiter replies.

"Then here," I say as I fiddle through my purse, "You can just print the check and charge it to this", I hand him my card "This way I save you a trip."

The waiter takes my card and disappears. I look back at Dale with stone cold eyes. I wish to cleanse our table of our sloppy encounter.

"Thank you for dinner." Dale says and smiles.

"You earned it." I say into my purse, as I am still rummaging through old receipts. I raise my head from my purse "So I guess we won't be seeing each other anymore" I speak directly to him now while my face remains still like stone.

"Well we should keep in touch. I am curious to know what happens with your book. And of course with your powers." He smiles, trying to melt the denseness that invaded our area. But the thick frozen air holds his mouth tight and only the corners of his lips awkwardly curve upward.

The waiter places a leather case with the check and the card inside on our table. I open it. I use the enclosed pen to sign the receipt. Dale pulls two business cards from his wallet and places them in front of my signing eyes.

"Here." He points to the cards. "Write your number on one of them." I write my number on the back of one of the cards and hand it to Dale. I put the other card in my purse. I stand up and lead us out of the restaurant. I try to walk gracefully for all the staring eyes, but I feel my entire body is rusty. I stand on the sidewalk and feel as if the street noise is being injected with a thin syringe into my sensitive ear. I watch Dale's body arrive beside me on the sidewalk. Before he has time to adjust to the new air and sounds, I tap a kiss on his cheek like a bird. "Good luck." I say and disappear into one of the yellow cabs that line the sidewalk waiting for Balthazar customers. I do not look back at him through the back window of the cab, although I am sure he took the taxi waiting right behind mine. I feel he is looking at my back through the taxi's back window. I reach back with my arm and scratch my back with the tip of my fingers until I do not feel Dale anymore. A few minutes go by. The cab fare is already \$5.70. I look at the business card Dale handed to me:

***KPMG* Peat Marwick LLP**  
Information, Communication & Entertainment  
**Dale E. Reed**  
Senior Consultant

1999 Avenue of the Americas

Suite 1100  
New York, NY 10009  
Telephone 212 201 4734  
Fax 212 201 9187  
dreed@kpmg.com

This is the same business card I noticed as a bookmark in the Union Square subway station when I first spotted Dale. I think of what impact I've had on his life. I wonder if he will be different tomorrow morning when he resumes his office routine. I try to picture what his reaction will be when he find out that he is the new owner of the Four Seasons Hotel. I wonder if this news will arrive to his consciousness by mail, by phone or maybe by some bizarre New York street scene. Maybe he will saves a millionaire's life by using the Heimlich maneuver and the millionaire will decides to repay him by giving him the hotel. I wonder if he will ever realize that this was my work. Maybe my gift will come with my smell or some hint. In any case, my lie is out of my hands. I have no control of how his reality will be altered. I wonder if I will ever see him again. I wonder if he believed me just now when told him about writing a book of fiction.

# 27

I arrive at my apartment. I turn on the lights. I turn on the computer. I scroll the names of the files on my hard drive. I find one file I have never seen before and do not remember creating: The filename is liar.doc. I double click on it. The first page is a title page: "Everything Written in This Book Is a Lie." I open the File menu and click on Properties.

File name: liar.doc  
Author: Orlee Shohamy  
Words: 99,303  
Pages: 336

I hold down the arrow key. Text floods the screen. I watch the lines of text soar upwards. Lines become words, words transform into equally distanced letters scrolling upward. I remain facing the screen but my mind no longer attempts to interpret what my eyes see. Letters wash over me.

## The End