

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.

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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. Peirce 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 lets 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 lets 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