

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"

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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 5th, 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.

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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.

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"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:

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"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.