

PHASE ONE

The Power of Words

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

John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding"

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

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

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

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

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

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

***KPMG* Peat Marwick LLP**

Information, Communication & Entertainment

Dale E. Reed

Senior Consultant

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

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

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

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

"Is this your first time reading Lolita?"

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

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

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

"It is also a confession," I add.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I lower my head and give Dale a questioning look.

“Please continue.” Dale says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I stop talking.

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

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

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

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

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

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

2

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

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

"Shall I continue?"

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

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

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

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

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

"OK, I'm listening."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The stock market? Yes, of course."

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

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

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

"Do you know why he does so well?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I signal the waitress. She walks over:

"Is there anything I can get you?"

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

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

"Thank you" I say, feeling slightly relieved.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rule Number 1:

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

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

Experiment Number One:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Well, what's the object?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rule Number 1:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I regain my seriousness and answer in a sober voice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I breathe deeply.

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

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

I speak coldly, monotonously.

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

"A break from what?" Dale asks

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

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

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

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

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

"Were you close?" Dale asks.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sure. So that was number two?"

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

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

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

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

"I was seventeen."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No. " I reply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Good. This makes me very happy."

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

5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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