

PHASE THREE

Making Lies Work Magic

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

Michel Foucault

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'In SoHo.' He replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jimmy, you mean?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds like a character." Dale says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Why do you ask?' He questioned me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This is crazy." Dale says.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fine." Dale says, clenching his teeth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then how did God create the world?"

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

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

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

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

I lift my back off the grass.

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

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

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

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

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

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

13

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

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

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

"Let's keep walking." He says.

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

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

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

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

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

right by the door and looked at his walls, his clothes, his bookcases. I remember thinking that if I had to guess what New York City neighborhood I was in based on the interior of his apartment, I would have guessed Times Square. His apartment was the stereotype of the living accommodations of a beginning actor in New York. The futon was always left open in the bed position with messy sheets. Clothes were tangled with scripts in the corners of the room. He had a bulletin board hanging on the wall with his headshots, some family photos and a "goals" memo he hasn't updated in over a year. On the wall above his futon, hung a huge black and white framed poster of Robert De Niro from the movie Taxi Driver. The photo was of that famous scene where Robert De Niro talks to his image in the mirror with a gun in hand. As I glanced at the poster, I was instantly reminded of the hundreds of times Jason recited those famous lines to me 'Are you talking to me? Are you talking to me, mother fucker, are you talking to me?' Taxi was Jason's favorite movie, and every time he would quote those famous lines, I would make fun of his poor imitation of a trashy New York accent. I returned to my apartment with out a lie plan, but realized that my idea would have to come from his space since it pertained to his life.

I spent about four nights roaming around Jason's studio apartment in search of material for a lie. Every night after he would fall asleep, I would go up to his apartment and look at his stuff. I would imagine the faces he makes to himself in the mirror, the thoughts that he had when he looked at his outdated bulletin board, or the things he would do while listening to his answering machine messages. And then, on the fifth night I spent in his place, the perfect lie idea came to me, literally. The complete plan came directly to my ears; I just had to edit it and voice it to Jason. It was 3:30 AM when Jason's phone rang. I let the answering machine pick up. It was Denise Palmer, an

actress from school who was working with Jason on a class project. I listened carefully to the message:

'Hi, it's Denise. I know it's really late, but I just got in from L.A., and couldn't wait with this news 'till the morning. So... Oh, shit. I really want to tell you this live and not on a stupid machine, but whatever, leaving you in the dark at this point in the message would be mean. I got the lead role in Martin Scorsese's new film. I got the audition with connections, but I fucking got the part by myself. Can you believe it? I was looking over the lists of names of some of the other actors casted, and your name was there as playing Scott's tutor in college, some dude who helps him out when he starts messing with drugs and fucking up his school work. Anyway, it's a speaking part with at least two lines and the tutor's a real cute character, so..'

The beep sounded, and the answering machine cut Denise off in the middle of her sentence. I remember praying that she will call back with more details to support the lie that was already half cooked in my mind by this point. Three minutes later the phone rang again. After three rings and no answer, the machine picked up:

'Hi, it's me again. Your machine cut me off. Anyway, I don't know if you auditioned for this part or something else, but the assistant producer told me that they hadn't made the announcements for any of the small parts yet. I think they're going to make the calls tomorrow. I thought it would be pretty cool if I would let you know. I guess I will have to bail on our class project. Can you believe how huge this is? Anyway, you can call a guy by the name of Vinnie, the casting director's assistant at three one zero three nine zero zero zero eight one. He knows the exact deal with your part and

everything. I will see you in class tomorrow morning, or you can call me at four two five four two eight zero.'

As soon as the beep sounded, my mind started racing. One thing was certain: this was my golden opportunity. I felt like I used to feel when I lied as a child. I sensed that someone up there was acting as a silent partner in my plan, pointing out the right direction when I was losing my path.

I stared at the De Niro poster on Jason's wall, and noticed my wide smile in the reflection from the glass. I breathed deeply and tried to slow down the pace of my thoughts. I reran the fresh details of my plan in my mind. I remember thinking how brilliant it was.

'Scottt's tutor or Scott himself; what's the difference?' I thought to myself.

The casters decided they wanted Jason in this movie all by themselves. All I had to do was tell them they really wanted him for the lead role. This was barely a lie. It was more like an exaggeration.

It was truly amazing how all this came to me. The plan was emerging in my mind at such a fast pace. I felt like my mind was split into two independent thinking units. One smaller part was working on the details of the plan, while the second larger part was observing this process, smoking a cigarette, admiring the speed of thought displayed by the small part. My train of thought only got stuck once. I was missing one piece of critical information. I did not know what part Jason had originally auditioned for. I knew that I would have to use great caution and precision in selecting words for my lie. As I was watching flashes of De Niro and myself alternating in the framed

poster across from me, I made all critical decisions and was ready to begin executing my plan."

"I don't get it"

"What?" I ask, not understanding what type of interruption occurred.

"I don't get it. Your plan. I don't understand what you were going to do." Dale interrupts.

His head turns sideways towards me. I am frozen. I feel as if his question stole me from a world. I feel he has called me to stand by his side with a remote control beyond my will.

Dale twists his wrists outward and holds the palms of his hands upward. I am still frozen. Dale continues:

"Let's see, the message was already there on the machine specifying Jason's small part. What were you planning on doing? Erasing it?" Dale turns to me with a puzzled expression. A wrinkle forms above the bridge of his nose.

"That's precisely what I was planning on doing." I respond calmly, trying to bring him back into my story.

"But you cannot mimic Denise's voice and rerecord the message. How could you recreate the message with your own script? " Dale continues to ask as the frustration is growing in his voice.

I realize that I must slow down. For a moment, walking together I mistook Dale for a manipulator, almost an accomplice. I shoved aside

his righteous nature and saw only his hungry eyes. I breathe deeply and swallow my disappointment. I look at Dale.

"I am getting there. Don't worry. Let me tell you what I did next. You will soon understand where I am headed."

Dale nods with an expression of embarrassment as if he has let something slip out of his mouth beyond his will. I continue:

"I re-listened to part one and part two of Denise's message and wrote down Denise's phone number and the LA phone number of Vinnie. I deleted the message. In fact, I pulled out the tape from Jason's machine, broke it, and put in a blank tape.

I locked up his apartment, taking a quick look around as I turned off the lights to make sure I left everything as it was before I entered. I tiptoed back upstairs to my apartment. I threw the tape in the trash, and joined Jason under the covers, holding him from his back, trying to complement his sleep. As I fell asleep, I made sure that I set my mental alarm clock to 7:30 AM. I knew I was holding between my arms a soon-to-be-discovered star. After four restless nights, I finally fell asleep.

I awoke at 7:30 AM. Jason was still sleeping beside me. I practiced my lie in my mind. Once I felt ready, I began stroking his hair gently, then his arm. I wanted to wake him only partially. I preferred lying to him when he was still half-asleep. Jason knew that I had a better memory for small things than he did. He often used me as his Filofax. I would remind him of his errands, his auditions, and he trusted my memory more than his own. I had planned on using this

to my advantage. I had planned on reminding him of something that never occurred.

Jason was sleeping on his stomach. I sat up on his ass and started touching his back gently with both my hands. I whispered his name.

'What time is it?' He asked with a deep, cluttered morning voice.

'7:45 AM' I replied.

'What do you want?' He asked in a boyish voice.

As I mumbled an answer, reminding him it was Tuesday and he had two morning classes, he began to part with his dream.

'Remember? You asked me to remind you on Saturday. You have to pick up Carole's luggage from the TWA terminal in JFK today.'

'What are you talking about?' He raised his head from the pillow, straining his neck. He turned to look at me with squinting eyes.

'You don't remember. John called about a week ago and told you that TWA lost his girlfriend's luggage on her way to Paris. They found her suitcase in New York and you said you'd pick it up...'

Jason began recalling the incident. You see, this lie was rooted in the truth. The only discrepancy was that the suitcase was never found. John called Jason a week earlier to confirm that if they do find Carole's suitcase in New York, Jason would be willing to pick it up.

'We listened to the message together Saturday night at your apartment. You were really wiped out. I don't think you really paid attention. But John left you a second message about Carole's lost luggage. They found her suitcase at JFK and he asked if you could go pick it up today.'

'OK,' he replied, easily convinced 'Well, what do I have to do?'

Jason, still between dream and reality, took my words as matter of fact. He slowly straightened his elbows and lifted his body from the bed with the force of his arms. He reached for his jeans on the chair, and then the phone from the kitchen. He was still mostly asleep. It was easy to tell. He stood for a moment with his jeans in one hand and the phone in the other, not knowing which item to address first. Then he placed his jeans back on the chair and dialed his number to check his messages. He held the receiver with his shoulder and began inserting his legs through the sleeves of his jeans. As he was buckling his belt, he signaled me to pass him a pen and paper. I watched him jot down all the airline information that John left in his message. My morning lie had already been confirmed. As John's voice was speaking to Jason, all the information of the flight appeared before my eyes in ink on a yellow sticky pad.

Jason was overly aggravated by this annoying errand. We chatted as I made coffee.

'God, this whole thing really pisses me off. I can't believe I just forgot about it like that.' By this time he was awake enough to be down on himself.

'I guess I would want to forget about such an annoying favor too.' I replied in sympathy.

'Yeah, but you never do, do you? Anyway, what really pisses me off is that Denise and I were supposed to work on our scene together. She missed last week's class because she was in LA for an audition, and we can't afford to miss another week of work.'

'Well... Why don't you schedule to work with her later in the week?' I innocently suggested.

'I don't have her number. I can't even let her know that I won't be in class.' Jason's slowness now turned to heaviness.

In an attempt to help him, or what you could call phase two of my plan, I offered to arrive at my afternoon class early, introduce myself to Denise, and get her phone number so they could schedule to meet later in the week.

Jason thanked me for helping and agreed that the best thing would be if I met Denise at school. He gave me a big kiss that tasted like coffee and morning. We kissed by the kitchen sink for a few minutes, each lost in a world of thought. Jason was still upset with himself for being so absent-minded. And I thought of how most of my lying was done for the day."

"I still don't see what you were planning on doing" Dale says, his back slightly bent forward, his walk seeming heavy.

I look at him. I smile to appease him, to lift him. He reminds me of the way Jason looked that morning when I reminded him he must go to the airport.

"That's because I haven't told you yet what my plan was." I reply calmly.

"Well, are you going to tell me now or what?" Dale's words leave his mouth smoothly now.

"I was not planning on going to classes at all that day. I did not need to get Denise's phone number. I already had it from the message she left Jason the night before. As soon as Jason left, I cooked two scrambled eggs, made toast and some more coffee. I sat down to eat my breakfast and review the plan I had written the night before. I tore off the top part of the paper. It included instructions for the part I had already executed. I focused on what remained on the sheet of paper"

I open my handbag and unfold a half-torn sheet of paper. I hold it before my eyes as Dale and I continue to walk.

"So what did it say?" Dale asks.

I hold the sheet in my left hand at eye level. I read:

Leave Jason message from a pay phone around 4:00 PM stating that I have great news and that I am making a special dinner for the two of us to celebrate.

Shop around Chinatown for the biggest Jumbo Shrimps I can find.
Buy beer, wine.

Return home. Prepare beer-battered shrimp.

After Jason arrives, tell him over a wine toast that I did meet Denise. She was ecstatic. She told me that he got the role of Scott and she got the role of Mia in the film they both auditioned for.

Give Jason Denise's number. Expect him to call. Since Jason believes my lie with 100% faith, Denise will confirm my announcement.

Jason and I will celebrate and eat shrimp.

Jason's career will be made.

My job is done!"

As I read to Dale the steps of the plan, my voice grows monotonous and distant. I pause after each step as if I am reading off names in roll call, waiting for a reaction after pronouncing each name. My final words "my job is done" part my mouth cheerfully in a loud voice. Dale and I leave the park. Or rather, the streets and cars of the city intrude on us like a burglar, so unexpected. I can feel the disappointment of these words, "My job is done", as if they had feelings of their own. They expected to smoothly fly out of my mouth and float amongst the green grass and trees. Instead, upon leaving my moist mouth, these words bounce around in the noisy Columbus Circle, hitting the dry water fountain and being pushed away by mouths of

screaming children. Columbus Circle is flooded with hot-dog vendors and horse carriage drivers soliciting tourists for their money. The noise from the crowd of families is excruciating, for my words as well as for Dale and I. My words almost die in the crowd. I envision them sinking to the ground dirty with bird shit, being stepped on by feet of all sizes.

Dale stops in the middle of the circle, and saves my struggling words:

"My job is done. Ah!" His forceful male voice then shoots them up to the sky like a rocket.

I am so proud of Dale. He is learning to see words.

14

Dale and I are standing in the touristy Columbus Circle, trying desperately to maintain the peace of the Park. It is 9:00 PM. I look around. I focus on a hand-written sign that reads "3 tee-shirts for \$10". Beside the sign stands a skinny old Pakistani vendor guarding a table with a dozen piles of New York tee shirts in all colors. The vendor points to his merchandise and smiles at me, noticing my stare. I quickly look away. A line of horse carriages is formed in the corner of the Circle. One horse is taking a clunky shit. Another carriage driver is bargaining with a family over the rate for the ride in the carriage through the park. I hear them quoting prices to each other. "One hour, sir. It is \$85", "No. But I told you already, we only want twenty minutes." "Sir, one hour, \$60, we go now." Dale and I turn our heads in both directions, from side to side, becoming computerized radars of this scene. The motion of our heads is constantly activated by chatter, laughter, honking taxis. Our eyes are washed in faces, shapes and asphalt. Everything is floating in gray, city air. We are not speaking. We are absorbing all the sounds, all the pollution. We are no longer at peace. Dale breaks our silence with a logistical suggestion:

He speaks loudly, competing with the noise. "Do you want to stop by the Cosmic Coffee Shop before we head back downtown to the Waverly Restaurant? It's right across the street. It's this nice diner, but it closes at midnight. So we can hang out there for a while before we go to the Waverly. Besides, I wouldn't even try to last the night without returning to Waverly at a certain point." He extends his arm, and points to the coffee shop across the street. His sarcasm is unsophisticated but cute.

I confirm with a head gesture and follow his pointing finger across the street and into the diner. We enter. I observe the change in sound. The chatter of the diner is different than the voices of the street. It is the sounds of people who are sitting down. Several people are sitting at tables well into their meals. The booth we are seated at is next to a larger round table seating a family of blonde tourists with a strong southern accent. The children seem restless, playing with their burgers as if they were puppet mouths and sword fighting with their French fries. The father of the family is silent, while the mother persistently polices the children. She keeps slapping the back of their wrists as they raise their fries at each other. I desperately try to ignore this family, but the sounds of wrists being slapped penetrate my thoughts.

We both order burgers and coffee. This is the first time we order the same item. Even though our actions are in unison, I feel very far from Dale. We are now affected by others, not by each other. We are observing a given scene. For the first time in our togetherness we are not creating our environment.

I do not want to drown in this passivity. I remind myself of my goal.

"Well, Dale, I read you the note with the remains of the plan for my Jason Lie. Before I tell you how and why it did not work as expected, do you want me to clarify anything about the plan?"

He smiles at my sweet offer. He sips from his water. A thin line of light emerges on his upper lip. It is the light's reflection in the water. He replies:

"No, I think I pretty much got it. Let's see, over dinner, you lie to Jason about meeting Denise and drop the bomb about her telling you that she and Jason got the lead roles in the movie. Since Jason is the greatest lie-eater on earth, he believes you. You give him Denise's phone number, which you got from his answering machine. By the time he calls her, your words have become truth. She confirms that he got the lead role. Jason's career is made. You paid him back for his help. Your job is done, right?"

He smiles as he speaks with rejuvenation. His words sprinkle both of us with energy.

"Pretty good. Now, do you want to hear what really happened?"

"I can't wait" he replies.

The intensity of our joint experience is once again ascending. The noise from the kids gradually diminishes, as if a DJ is lowering their voices with a dimmer effect. We both load up the coffees we just received. Dale adds sugar and milk, and I add Equal. We sip from our coffees simultaneously. I cut my gulp short, rest my coffee mug, and speak:

"I spent the afternoon walking around Chinatown buying groceries for the dinner I had planned. I found these huge shrimps that I knew Jason would love. I bought three whole peppercorns, celery ribs, Bay leaf, and of course, beer. I went to a liquor store and bought some red wine.

I stopped at a pay phone and left a message on Jason's answering machine. I rehearsed the message in my mind before dialing to make sure my excitement would sound sincere. I spoke after the beep:

'Jason, baby. Hope your airport pick-up wasn't too painful. I introduced myself to Denise today, like I promised. She was very understanding, and I got her phone number so you two can schedule to work together later in the week. Listen, baby, I have the most amazing news you could ever imagine. It concerns you more than me. And trust me you will not be disappointed. This is huge. I will be out for the rest of the day, but I'm preparing a nice dinner for the two of us to celebrate. Come upstairs at 8:00 PM. Love you. See you tonight.'

At 8:00 PM, as I was still preparing the food, Jason knocked on my door. I greeted him with a long wet kiss. He was dressed in a nice pair of black slacks and a buttoned down white shirt tucked in at the waist. His hair was still wet from the shower and he smelled nicely of cologne. He looked very polished, as if he was on his way to a first date. He entered my apartment and was impressed by the dinner preparations he observed in the kitchen. There was no smell of food. I planned on doing all the cooking on the spot only after he arrived. He noticed the small dishes on the kitchen counter, each containing neatly sliced vegetables. He also noticed a larger bowl containing two dozens of large fresh shrimp, cleaned and de-veined. I reached for a bottle of red wine from the counter and handed it to Jason with a bottle opener. He placed the bottle opener on top of the bottle and started screwing it in. I watched his ironed white shirt wrinkle in different pattern as he screwed the bottle opener into the cork and then pulled.

'I can't wait any longer. What's the good news?' He said right before pulling and the sounding of the pop from the cork.

I thought I would tease him just a few seconds more.

'First a toast' I said.

I opened the top cupboard of the kitchen cabinets and pulled out two large wineglasses. I rested them on the counter. Jason poured the wine, handed me a full glass and took the other in his hand. I could tell he was nervous. His hands were shaking.

'So, what are we drinking to for God's sake? C'mon, I beg you. Don't be cruel. What's the good news?' I could tell he did not like this guessing game. He looked serious and tense.

We both held our wineglasses at shoulder-height and I began the toast:

'To your successful acting career. No wait, let me be more specific. I hate when people are vague with their toasts. To your success in your new casting as Scott in Martin Scorsese's new film.'

I gently tapped my wineglass against his. Jason held his glass still.

I observed his response. He did not have the immediate ecstatic smile I had expected. After a few seconds, an awkward smile of relief made its way onto his face.

'You mean I got the role I auditioned for... as Scott's college tutor. All right. This is great. My first speaking role in a major Hollywood...'

I immediately interrupted and corrected, fearing his spoken words might have the wrong effect:

'No, no, no, Hon. You got the *lead* role. You were cast as Scott. When I met Denise at school today, she was looking for you all over to tell you the good news. Apparently, she's connected with the producer and had a special audition for the female lead role. She will play Mia, Scott's girlfriend. And you, my dear, Mr. Starving actor with zero connections, will play Scott. I guess you are just so damn good you got it all by yourself.'

Jason looked puzzled and dizzy. He placed his wineglass back on the counter, forgetting to sip from it first.

'But that's impossible. I didn't even audition for that part of Scott. That was not part of the open calls. I assumed they had the part cast already with some Hollywood big shot. I auditioned for the part of Scott's tutor. Are you sure you did not hear wrong? Denise probably said 'Scott's tutor', and you just remembered 'Scott'. Yeah, that's what probably happened.'

I explained once again, after sipping from my wine.

'No, I am sure I got it right. This is why Denise was so overwhelmed. She specifically said that both of you got the leads in the film. Maybe the actor who was supposed to play Scott nagged on his contract and the director liked your face or something. You know stuff like

that happens in Hollywood all the time. Anyway, I don't know the details of how this came about, but I'm sure I heard Denise right.'

Jason did not respond to my words. I pressed a little harder. I placed my glass on the counter and wrapped my arms around his shoulders. I looked him in the eyes.

'You are Scott, honey. In less than a year, every teenager in Middle America will have your pictures up on their wall; you will be recognized in restaurants. You will have to choose the roles you want to play from a stack of manuscripts because you won't have enough time to accept all the movie offers you will get. This is it, baby, your big break.'

I lifted both wineglasses, handed him his, and forced a 'cheers' between us. It still did not help. Jason simply did not believe me. He paused and thought for a few minutes, trying to find where the misunderstanding in the chain of events could have happened. At this point, instead of continuing to try to persuade him, I froze."

"Wait a minute" Dale interrupts. "How could this be? I thought he always believed you. I thought he trusted your memory more than his own. I thought that his entire Maori tribe had no doubt inside them. How could he suddenly be questioning you like this? It doesn't make sense."

Dale is focusing on my lips. He is holding his coffee mug high with both hands, hiding his mouth and chin. I smile. I love his question. He is searching for rational within the rules of my life story.

"Yes" I reply with enthusiasm, "I was asking myself the exact same questions. How could Jason possibly doubt my words? I am still unsure, even though I have a few ideas. His disbelief might have been the result of the many years he had spent living in the West. Maybe he was born with no doubt, but as he matured in New York City, doubt developed within him. Or maybe it was just his low confidence that caused him to grow doubt inside. Jason always believed my every word because he never believed in himself. What I was asking him to do in swallowing this lie was believe in himself. He simply could not do it. He was too humble. But in any case, whatever the reason might have been, I was as surprised as you are right now. For the first time since we met, Jason did not believe me.

Dale clears his throat. I sip from my coffee.

"But let me get back to our story. I dropped the wine glass I was holding. It hit the counter, and then shattered on the floor, splashing red all over Jason's white shirt. Jason was in deep thought. He barely reacted to my accident. I began unbuttoning his shirt. After I had undone his fourth button, he snapped back and took control, removing his shirt and placing it in the bathroom sink with some water. Jason returned with a suggestion.

'Listen, you have Denise's phone number, right?'

'Yes, of course. She gave it to me today. I already told you'

'OK, why don't I call her and clarify this whole mess. In the meantime, you can start boiling the shrimp. I will be off the phone by the time the food is ready, and we'll sit down to eat.'

I had no answer to his suggestion. I reentered my frozen mode. This whole episode reminded me of lying to Tina back in college. That was the only other time a lie had failed me. That was the reason I decided to study acting, for God's sake. I could not believe that I got myself into this situation once again.

I handed Jason the number, avoiding eye contact, thinking the next time he will look into my eyes, he will no longer be in love with me. I turned to the stove and started emptying the little plates of chopped vegetables into the pan simmering with olive oil. I heard Jason dialing. I prayed that my lie helpers would come through. I remember hearing and feeling my heart beat in my chest. This waiting period was killing me. I watched the vegetables simmer, and tried to disappear into the eclectic smelling steam.

Jason returned to the kitchen and watched me stir the vegetables as he spoke:

'She's not there and her message says that she's out of town and will be back tomorrow evening. I didn't leave a message. I'm so confused I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. I'm sure I just got the tutor part, which is what I auditioned for in the first place. But anyway, that's pretty amazing news. Thanks for preparing dinner, sweetie. This is still definitely a cause for celebration.'

Jason came closer to the stove, turned me towards him and kissed me. His chest was bear, and we kissed over the stove in a bath of vegetable steam dominated by onion. I released myself from his lock, and walked over to the fridge, grabbing three cans of beer from inside. Jason took a seat by the kitchen table, noticing my imposed distance. I began pouring the beers into the pan, and than lowered

the heat. I added the shrimp and sat beside Jason. I thought I would explain one last time, calmly. In fact, this situation was very different from the Tina Lie episode. This time I knew the rules to my power. I knew that if my listener did not believe me, my lie would not take effect. Instead of looking for evidence, I opted for stalling.

'Look, I know what I heard. It hurts me that you don't trust me, but I'll tell you what we'll do. Tonight, we should celebrate and enjoy the food, because whatever part it is, we both agree you got it. Tomorrow, you will speak with Denise and clarify everything. Even if she is not back tomorrow, she mentioned that they should be making the announcement real soon. So you will probably hear from the casting director by tomorrow.

This way we cover both options. Tonight we can celebrate getting the tutor's part. And tomorrow, if you find out that this is the part you were casted for, you will not be disappointed. But if you find out that I was right and you got the lead role, we can celebrate all over again.'

I checked on the shrimp. They were rising to the surface of the beer soup in the pan. I watched the movement of the shrimp and imagined they were alive, swimming in my pan. I poured myself some more wine. We both drank. It was a nice temporary solution to our disagreement. We did not speak about the film for the remainder of the evening. We ate the beer-battered shrimp and pretended to enjoy the evening.

We were each engaged in an intense level of thought that we chose not to share. Jason (I imagined) was working out the impact the different scenarios will have on his career. I was on an aggressive mind search

for salvation. I still believed I could get myself out of this one, and I was desperately searching for a clever way out.

We finished dinner. Jason retired to his own apartment. We decided to speak the next day around lunchtime. As soon as he left, I began pacing frantically in my apartment. As I paced back and forth, I became more aware of the disastrous consequences my failed lie could bring. I sincerely feared for my powers. You see, after almost two years in acting school, I thought I was an excellent persuader. More than that, I thought I was a good judge of what people could or could not believe. The fact that I was wrong scared me. If I cannot estimate what people are capable of believing, I will never master my skill, I thought.

I stopped pacing and sat on the fire escape outside my bedroom window. I looked at my watch. It was midnight. I looked at the sky in search for those helpers; those angels that helped me lie in grade school and covered for my sloppiness throughout life. They must know a way out of this catastrophe, I thought. I needed them to guide me. I tried to stop thinking. I tried to listen to their voices.

Surprisingly enough, the answer did come in the form of a voice, or to be more specific, two loud Italian voices. I heard a conversation of two diners at Umberto's Clam House, the restaurant downstairs. After listening for a few minutes, I recognized the louder voice as Jimmy's. He was speaking of the good old days of Little Italy. I could make out the end of a sentence '...before the Chinese took over the whole damn neighborhood!'

Jimmy's voice entered my ear and triggered a reaction inside my brain; I felt the tingling sensation of activity in my mind. In a

matter of seconds, I had formed a revised plan. It was both basic and brilliant. I still today do not understand why I hadn't thought of it earlier. It was so brilliant I felt the urge to speak it out loud, even though I was alone:

'If Jason is not going to believe me that he was selected to be the next Hollywood star, Jimmy will. As long as someone believes me, my lie will come true.'

I quickly threw on some clothes and walked downstairs, pretending to be on an excursion to the deli. Jimmy spotted me. He was sitting outside with the cook drinking red wine and smoking filterless cigarettes. The restaurant was empty and only the waiter was still busy clearing tables and setting them up for the next day's lunch. I saw Jimmy, sitting in full posture, stroking his white beard and mumbling something about a street fair in which Southern Italian culture was celebrated. As soon as he spotted me, he opened his arms widely and dramatically. I heard his gold bracelets clinking with his gesture. He called me over and asked me to join them for a late night drink. He was slurring heavily. He introduced me to his friend, the cook. He introduced me as the prettiest girl in the neighborhood. I smiled and sat down beside him as he signaled the waiter to bring out another wine glass.

'Thanks, Jimmy. I would love a drink. I even have a great reason for celebration. Today was a very, very special day.'

Jimmy questioned me further, and I spat out my newly cooked lie without even wasting a few truthful sentences as an introduction:

'You're not going to believe how great this is. Today, Jason received news that he was chosen to play the lead role in a new Martin Scorsese's film. Can you believe it?' I spoke with pantomime gestures of exaggeration, throwing my dramatic voice in all directions.

'Unbelievable, you hear that Tommy?' Jimmy turned to the cook. "Where is he right now that devil of a kid? Why isn't he celebrating?"

'Well, Jimmy, you know, he was so shocked by the news, I think he needed to sleep on it. This way he can hear the news again in the morning and discover that it was not all just a dream.'

Jimmy laughed out loud, tapping both the cook and me on our backs rather firmly as if to rescue us from choking. Then he stood up suddenly, ran over to the bar, and pulled out a bottle of Chianti from behind a glass cabinet that he had to unlock with a special small key.

He explained how he always saves bottles of this wine for special occasions and how this clearly qualified as one. Jimmy proceeded to give us a speech on the subject since he was already sufficiently drunk. He praised Jason with poetic words of love as if he had passed away. I think his friend, the cook, was grateful that the topic had changed and we were no longer discussing the good old days of Little Italy.

'I knew that boy always had it in him. He just has that Hollywood look about him, you know? That jelled-back dark hair and his smile with those two dimples, come on he's a stallion. You know, He's such a hard worker too that kid. Always running from work to auditions to

school, juggling so many jobs, such a responsible hard working kid, I tell you. ...'

"Wait a minute", Dale asked, "Did he believe you for sure? I mean, and even if he did, was this strong enough to compensate for Jason's disbelief?" Dale's eyes are watery and piercing as he speaks. He taps his pointing finger on our Formica table as he speaks, accenting each word with a tap. He reminds me of a lawyer, fighting a passionate case.

"Hold on, relax. I am about to tell you what happened. First let me finish with Jimmy."

I speak in my defense.

"But I don't care about Jimmy. I want to hear what happened to Jason." Dale accents each word with a strong finger tap.

"Dale, you must let me tell my story the way I see fit. It is important for me to paint you full pictures of all the characters involved in my story. As you have seen, their personalities have a direct impact on the results of my lie"

"Fine." Dale lifts his finger from the table and holds both hands at shoulder height to indicate surrender. "I'm sorry for interfering. Please continue."

"Well, Jimmy went on and on and my attention drifted elsewhere. In fact my attention drifted right back to its recent home - the plan. I tried to imagine what the next day would be like. Jason finding out from Denise that he was cast as Scott. Or maybe even better, I

thought. Maybe Jason will get a phone call from the casting director, officially informing him that he got the lead role.

When my attention returned to Jimmy's speech, I noticed that the conversation topic had returned to the good old days of Little Italy when Jimmy was a teenager and all his friends lived on our very block. I am not quite sure how Jimmy connected the two topics, I think he spoke of how the neighborhood's Italian boys are only interested in hanging out and doing drugs and never show the dedication that Jason shows. In any case, I left them to discuss the death of their childhood culture, and I returned to my apartment. This time I was convinced that my job was done.

Looking back, I can see that the following day had a striking resemblance to the day my mother died. I was once again awoken by the grand alarm clock of life to realize the full extent of my powers. Jason called me in the early afternoon. By that time he had spoken with both the casting director and Denise, and the full chain of events had been clarified. I remember him telling me over the phone that I was right about the part. Then he went on to explain how all this confusion arose. He spoke frantically and was not making any sense. I asked him to come upstairs and explain.

When he arrived, I could see in his eyes that he no longer contained any love for me. I think his love was swallowed by his fear. His eyeballs were frozen in their sockets like glass. He stayed close to the doorway as he told me what happened as if I were a witch he wanted to remain protected from.

'The actor who was originally going to play Scott was Denise's boyfriend from LA. He had acted in a few Hollywood films; none were

as big a production as this one is going to be. This was going to be his big break, too.' Jason pauses momentarily to reflect.

'He was the one that got Denise the audition, and eventually the role of Mia. They both fantasized of acting in a movie together. Anyway, I am getting sidetracked,' he said. He closed his eyes out of exhaustion and I wasn't sure that he had the strength to reopen them. His eyes opened half way. He seemed to be struggling against his heavy eyelids. 'Two days ago he died in a car accident. He was driving home drunk from a nightclub and he drove right into a tree off the side of the road. He died on the spot. Now do you understand? The reason Denise was away for the day was because she was attending his funeral.'

Jason's words hit me in the face like the words of the ambulance driver that informed me of my mother's sudden death. The words sliced through the thick air between our bodies and hit me again and again. I did not know whether to hug Jason or remain distant. So I did nothing. I froze. After a moment of awkward silence, I noticed Jason looking at me strangely, as if something was wrong with me, as if I was having some strange physical reaction. Then he spoke again:

'It's really bizarre how this all happened. It freaks me out. It's almost like God, in some sick twisted way, wanted me to have this role, you know? It's almost as if this tragedy happened to adjust to the huge size of my dreams.'"

I lean back in my seat and look at Dale. His mouth is open to the shape of an 'O'. His hands meet behind his neck. I sip from my

coffee. I feel inexplicable relief. I continue to speak, slowly now. My words are gentle brush strokes filling in color.

Jason got over the weirdness of his circumstances very quickly and started enjoying the stardom status he instantly received by everyone at school. He stopped going to classes that week, and made the decision to drop out of acting school by the weekend. In a matter of a month, his apartment was packed and his lease had been broken. The production assistant had already found him a great deal on an apartment in Santa Monica, and in his mind he was entirely in L.A..

Although he was sweet and asked me to join him, we both knew we were not meant for each other. His departure was the perfect opportunity for us to have a clean breakup. Before Jason left for the airport, I hugged him real tight, looked him in the eyes, and said:

'Listen to me, I am not saying this as an ex-lover, I am saying this as someone who observed your professional development over the past two years. You have an amazing talent and a look that sells. You will be huge one day, you hear me. This part is just a stepping-stone for you. Fifteen years from now, after you made it big, people will not remember what your first film was, and they will laugh after you tell them that you played pretty boy Scott in Scorsese's 1993 film.'

As I watched him wave a final good-bye from the back window of the taxi cab to the airport, I prayed that this time he believed me."

15

It is midnight. Dale and I sit in silence. I am very tired. I am ready to leave. The diner is empty. Dale signals the waiter to refill his coffee. The waiter refills his coffee and returns to his seat at the bar to count his tips and cash out the bus boys. A busboy is flipping the chairs onto the tables. Another busboy is mopping the floor.

"...And this concludes the Jason years of my life." I announce in an exaggerated TV commercial intonation, raising my eyebrows and elongating my neck as I speak.

I earn a smile from Dale, a smile of delirium.

"So I guess you never saw him again." He says.

"No." I say with a neutral stance. I run my hand through my hair as I tilt my head sideways.

"Listen, Dale, since this is a good time for a break and this place is obviously trying to close, I suggest we end our session for tonight. We can get some good sleep, and meet tomorrow for an early lunch to start on phase four." I look at Dale for a sign of approval.

Dale does not react. It is as if he did not hear my words. He looks directly at me, but seems to be looking through me.

"That's all you have to say about the outcome of your Jason Lie?"
Once again, I sense an interrogator's voice coming from inside his body.

"Well, I told you what happened. I meant it when I said this was like another awakening for me, similar to the one I experienced when my mother died."

"Still!" Dale says vehemently, "Forget about your awakening for just one second, or how this affected your powers. You killed a perfect stranger. You must have felt somewhat guilty. You must've experienced some degree of remorse. I mean, for Christ's sake, do you even know the name of Denise's dead boyfriend? Do you think about him? Sometimes, late at night, do you think about his parents, his friends, how much happiness you stole from so many people?"

I feel as if Dale is poking me with a thin, long metal pole, searching for an emotional reaction; Or rather, I feel I am Dale's computer and I just died on him in the middle of the typing of an important document. I am tired and unresponsive. Dale, with his persistent words, is frantically pressing every possible button of my keyboard in search of a response. He is placing both his hand and pressing all the keys at once.

"I'm not as cold as I seem." I reply, holding my hand out as if to physically stop his attack. "I never wanted to know his name because I knew that it would just make things harder."

Dale's eyes remain intensely focused. They are still piercing me.

"Listen, this incident changed my life in a sharp and sudden way. But you must remember what happened prior to this. The stakes in my lie game were getting too high for me to handle. I did not know how to lower them. This was the only way out I saw."

Dale's fervent stare remains frozen.

"Besides, it all started with good intentions." I say in my defense. "All I wanted to do was help Jason. You know, I wanted to repay him for all the people he helped by believing in me. And in hindsight, I can tell you that this tragedy led to an awakening in me that made the Victor years possible."

"The Victor years?" Dale questions, mocking my dramatic speech. "What are you talking about? Have you been listening to a single word I've been saying? I am talking about Denise's dead boyfriend, not about your powers. I don't want to know how this lie affected your skill. I want to know how this accidental murder you committed affected you, how it made you feel." As Dale speaks, small red veins emerge in the rims of his eyes. I observe them as they make their way to his pupils.

Dale stops speaking but continues to breathe heavily and loudly through his open mouth. He shakes his head from side to side, as if amazed by my denseness.

I have the urge to spit in his face and walk out of this diner. How dare he speak to me like this. But then I remember my plan. I think of how instrumental Dale can be in my healing. I breathe in deeply and try to relax. I focus on his words. I try to understand. I wish to appease him.

Dale closes his mouth and exhales slowly through his nose.

"Listen," I say "when I met you two nights ago, I asked you to hear my story, and you agreed. Naturally, I tell you all the details I find important to my story. If something affects my skill, I speak of it. Otherwise, I omit it. You must not misunderstand me. All these events did affect me emotionally, just like you ask. They still do. It's just that I don't see why you would want to hear about that."

"OK." Dale lifts both his hands from the table and holds them up, signaling he is backing off. "Maybe you had reactions to your lies and the deaths that you caused and you choose not to share that with me. That's fine. You really don't owe me an explanation for anything. But I think I should know if you were significantly affected by the consequences of your lies. I think you should want to tell me these things. Otherwise, I cannot understand you, your motives. Do you understand what I am saying?"

I remain still with no response. I still feel as if Dale is poking me with a cold metal pole. I want to close up like a flower.

Dale continues "All I'm saying is that I think I need to understand your emotions in order to understand your powers. That's all."

Now I feel as if Dale is plucking my eyebrows, one by one. I feel little tweaks on my eyelids, stings on my face. I breathe deeply once more. I search for a weapon to defend myself from Dale's attack. I lean back in my seat and cross my right leg over my left. I outline my lips with my tongue. I lower my chin and look at Dale, now raising my eyes to him. I smile playfully.

"Are you adding a condition to our game, Dale?" I ask, holding my pointing finger out and marking a 'no, no.' with my finger movement and raising my eyebrows.

Dale smiles back. "You bet I am." He says in a softening voice. "I just want to know what is really going through you. That's all." He ends his sentence with a wide smile. I look in his eyes and see my face twice in reverse. He is imitating my smile. He is softening. A moment of silence occurs between us. Animosity melts away and makes room for flirtation.

I straighten my back. I speak. "Well, I know this will sound cold and maybe even heartless, but I will say it anyway because it is my true feeling. A million starving children in Africa don't hurt me as much as my fingernail breaking."

Dale smiles and swipes his fingers in the air. He doesn't believe me. I can tell.

"No, don't laugh. I am quite serious", I say with a smile. "You see, I have affected so many people, ideas, even countries in my life that I can not give them all an emotional value. Instead, I choose to experience only my own pain, my own pleasures. I can't feel for the whole world, or even for all the people I impact."

"Come on", Dale says, sweeping the table of my words with a hand gesture. "That is such a copout. I don't feel for the whole world either. But I try not to bring pain upon others. And when I do, it hurts me. Even if I'm not the one causing the pain, it hurts me. When

my mother suffered alone, forced to uphold a lie that drove her mad, I suffered. I felt pain."

"Dale," I speak with seriousness, pausing after each word "do not compare me to you."

"Why not?" Dale says, "I am not comparing you only to myself. I am comparing you to everybody. I realize you affect many more people than most of us, but you must feel something towards the people you affect. You are not a computer for God's sake."

Once again I speak slowly and seriously as if explaining to a child something very important concerning their safety: "Let me try to explain. One afternoon, I felt the need to escape Jason and my apartment for a few hours. I entered the subway station at Broadway-Lafayette and took the first train that arrived at the station. It was the D train and I took it all the way into Brooklyn, randomly getting off at Bed-Stuy. After spending the day in a neighborhood I knew nothing about, I called Jason from a pay phone. I told him I was visiting a friend from college that lived in Bed-Stuy. I was looking for an excuse for coming home so late. There was a TV on with a very loud volume coming from the corner deli. People were outside and there was lots of noise from the street. So I made up some story to Jason about people fighting and demonstrating in the streets. So later on, I got home and..."

".. Are you saying you started the Bed-Stuy riots?" Dale's pupils enlarge abruptly as if someone was holding a flashlight to his eyes.

"Yes, but I didn't mean to. I just wanted an excuse for coming home late. And since Jason was such a strong believer... "

"Do you have any idea what this means? Do you know how many people were killed in those riots? This is insane. Black-white relations in this city, what am I talking about, in this country, have dramatically deteriorated because of these riots. The damage you brought is still happening. How could you live with yourself after creating so much destruction?" Dale's mouth twists like a doodle. With his eyes still wide, he is at once fascinated and disgusted.

"Exactly." I reply "Don't you see that you are helping me prove my point. I think now you are beginning to understand. I cannot feel for all these people that I harm. Denise's boyfriend was no exception. No human can possibly feel for so many. The only way I can survive is by not even thinking of all these people. The only way I can live through my days is by feeling my pain exclusively."

Dale nods his heads sideways, refusing to agree. "No, no, no. Wait a minute. There is a middle ground here. I don't feel the pain of the entire world either. I feel for the people I care about. Did you ever think about behaving like the rest of us and just feeling for the people that are close to you, your friends?" Dale speaks with elaborate hand motions as if he is delivering a podium speech.

"But the people that are close to me keep changing faces. My phone book has so many names that are foreign to me. I don't even keep my phonebook alphabetized for God's sake. I write in the names of people that I meet page after page in a chronological order. This way I never have to flip too far back. People that are more than two, three pages backwards in my book, I am usually no longer in contact with. Every few weeks, I rip out the old pages. Every year or so, I throw

out my old book and buy a new one. I usually have no numbers to copy over."

"That's pretty awful."

"That's how my life is. There are no permanent close friends for me to care for. There are these slots, for boyfriends, peers, shopping friends, advisors... Even when someone enters my life and becomes important, I know they are only temporary visitors. So, who do you want me to care for? The people that happened to be in my life when they experience pain? Should I care deeply for them, feel their pain for the few months that they are still fresh in my phonebook before I flip the page?"

Dale places his hands flat on the table. My heart seems to slow down his attack. He bites his lower lip with his upper teeth. "I don't know. I really don't know what to tell you." His eyes clear of redness and once again his pupils are framed in bright white. He seems tired, drained of anger and enthusiasm.

I cover his hands with mine. I lower my head and look up to him with droopy eyes.

"I am actually glad that we had this conversation." I say in a slow, rattling voice. "No matter what you will ultimately think of me. This was the reality that led me to the Victor years. The Victor years were simply more extreme. During those years, faces of the people around me began changing more rapidly. "

"Well..." Dale says with a sleepy voice and heavy eyelids, "I guess Victor is the next lover?"

"Exactly." I smile.

Dale looks to the right and then to the left. The diner is quiet and empty. The waiter is sitting on a stool at the bar by the register, reading over the receipts from the evening, and documenting numbers in his accounting book. The busboys are gone. The floor is sparkling clean.

Dale looks back at me and blinks a few times before his eyes fully focus. "I guess Waverly at 2:00 PM?"

"Exactly." I maintain my smile.

I stand up to leave. Dale explains that he still wants to use the men's room before leaving. He assures me that he will see me tomorrow at two.

I leave alone. I look back at Dale through the glass window of the diner as he walks towards the restrooms. His walk seems heavy. Could he be upset that things didn't workout between me and Jason? Is he hurt that I am moving on to Victor so soon? Then I realize he is probably still thinking of the death of Denise's boyfriend. As I walk alone, I think of how beautiful it is to watch him develop a conscience in my story. I am lighter leaving the diner. I take the subway home.