

PHASE TWO

*Persuasion as Power*

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

Pablo Picasso

Excerpted from an interview with Marius de Zayas, 1923

# 6

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Coffee?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I look at Dale with amazement.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why not?" I ask.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"OK", I say, accepting his offer.

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

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



# 7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I studied her face, in search of a response.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kevin looked at me and smiled:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I smile. I feel flattered by his enthusiasm.

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

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

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

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

"Right." I reply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 8

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

*March 7th, 1988*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# 9

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

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

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

I am flattered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sounds perfect. I'm sure the weather will be nice if you say so."

Dale yawns out his words. "See you tomorrow at five." He does not offer me a ride. He vanishes into a cab and I begin walking up Sixth Avenue.