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# How “True” is True Enough?

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How “True” is True Enough?

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## How “True” is True Enough? Navigating Secrets and Confidentiality in Memoir

When readers pick up a memoir, they expect a true story. That’s the draw—memoir is more than torn from the pages of real life, more than *inspired* by actual events. Memoir is *related* to fiction in that both are narrative art forms (Larson 25), but memoir is *not* fiction. The word “memoir” comes from the French, “memoire,” meaning memory or reminiscence—imperfect and highly unreliable memory. This essay explores how published memoirists have approached the issue of revealing secrets or potentially objectionable details about the characters or events portrayed in their work. Memoir writers are certainly entitled to their version of the “truth” (lower case “t”), but in choosing to publish under the banner of “memoir,” the writer implies their work is based on things that actually happened. With no governing body and no formal means of enforcement, each writer is left to develop his or her own ethic regarding “truth.” How do writers reconcile conflicts over content? How do they decide what to leave in and what to leave out, and how those choices serve the story? How do they honor the unspoken pact with the reader to deliver a true story taken from real events? Every memoirist must answer these questions for themselves. However they’re resolved, a memoirist is absolutely responsible for the work they produce.

For the purposes of this discussion, a common understanding of “memoir” will be helpful. In his introduction to *Inventing the Truth*, William Zinsser defines memoir as “some portion of a life...memoir narrows the lens, focusing on a time in a writer’s life that was unusually vivid” (13-14). In *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, Thomas Larson discusses the past as something dividable, made up of thematic centers. He encourages memoir writers to search for a temporal phase or emotional thread. He says, “to write a memoir is to be selective” (2). What stays in and what is left out depends on the story the writer intends to tell. Larson says,

“Memoir is *a* record, a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past...a version, a variation on, what happened” (19). The concept of memoir as a *version* of the truth is commonly held.

For Annie Dillard, writing memoir isn’t at all about preserving memories: “Memory is unsubstantial. Things keep replacing it” (103). Writing memoir is like writing any other book—it’s about fashioning a text (102). In her essay “Memory and Imagination,” Patricia Hampl says “Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of story-telling and essay-writing” (271). Memoir can’t be “an act of dutiful transcription” because memory doesn’t work that way (267). When Hampl finds inaccuracies in her early drafts, she treats them as opportunities to explore what she doesn’t already know. She mines for the greater emotional truth that her memory is conjuring based on the details it has offered up to her. In writing memoir, the writer has to “accept the very humble position of writing a version rather than ‘the whole truth’” (272).

Zinsser goes further: “Memoir writers must manufacture a text imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation, they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone” (7). As he worked on his chapter for the collection *Five Boyhoods*, Zinsser was conscious of his family’s presence, as if they were “perched” on his shoulder as he wrote (10). Upon reading his chapter, his mother was highly distressed because her memory of his childhood was happier than his memory of it (8). She also disputed his memory of his grandmother (11). However, for Zinsser, “intention is the writer’s soul,” and he sees his contract with the reader as an obligation to report the truth as he best understands it (interview). In the end, he trusted his rendition of his grandmother: “she was like that to me—and that’s the only truth a memoir writer can work with” (11).

Vivian Gornick, author of the critically acclaimed memoir *Fierce Attachments*, has been scrutinized for admitting she “made a composite out of the elements of two or more incidents—

none of which had been fabricated—for the purpose of moving the narrative forward” (9). Gornick asserts that there’s a misunderstanding among the broader memoir audience regarding how to read memoir: it’s not journalism or a historical narrative (8). She says “The key word in memoir is ‘*reflection*.’ It is the depth of the writer’s reflection that makes or breaks the work” (9). What actually happened versus the way the memoirist reflects on what happened—that’s what matters (8). Her goal in writing memoir is to remain “scrupulously faithful to the story, not the situation” (7); that’s how she interprets her pact with the reader: to try, “as honestly as possible, to get to the bottom of the tale at hand” (8).

In her essay, “Points of Departure,” Jill Ker Conway talks at length about how her reflection on various events in her life has driven the narrative of each of her three works of memoir; determining what those events meant to her in the context of the story she was trying to tell. For example, in *The Road from Coorain*, the story of her life until she left Australia, her goal was to write an honest narration of a woman’s life without romance as the plot (32). Where this memoir ended was key to that narrative. Ker Conway met her husband after she arrived in the United States. If she ended the book at that point, she knew romance would have overtaken the plot. So, she was very intentional in stopping short of that detail. Her facts are accurate, but what she chose to leave in and what she chose to leave out was driven by the story she wanted to tell.

### Truth in Memoir

Truth in memoir is truth in advertising (Starkey 182). In deciding to publish a memoir, it’s fair to say that the writer assumes their work will be read. It’s also fair to assume that the writer understands “memoirs operate under the sign of truth” (Doty 13). When a reader picks up anything categorized as memoir, they have the right to believe they’re getting a true story. In the

face of controversy, writers can say what they will to justify the construction of their narrative, but they cannot plausibly deny what the label of “memoir” infers: a clear signal that the work is true to the best of the writer’s ability to tell.

Whenever the subject truth and memoir is broached these days, James Frey is almost sure to be mentioned. He’s the writer who lied about a number of key details in his memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, and who got chastised by Oprah Winfrey on national television. Frey claims he only did what many memoirists before him have done: he embellished particular facts of his life to make for a better story (Zinsser interview). However, memoir writers generally agree that Frey crossed an obvious, ethical line when he exaggerated very basic facts of his experience—these weren’t merely the inconsistencies of memory. Frey grossly overstated his criminal record, claiming a violent altercation with police which was, in fact, a routine arrest for DUI and driving without insurance. He inflated the length of time he spent in police custody from the actual five hours to his published account of eighty-seven days. According to *The Smoking Gun*, which broke the story in January, 2006, “Frey also invented a role for himself in a deadly train accident that cost the lives of two female high school students” (1). In a September, 2006 interview with *The Guardian*’s Laura Barton, “Frey conceded that the book contained fabrications. ‘I think most of what they wrote was pretty accurate,’ he said of *The Smoking Gun* report” (2). The reading public’s sense of betrayal and Doubleday’s offers of refunds for those who bought the book are evidence that truth in memoir matters, that the unspoken pact with the reader is one hundred percent real.

During a 2006 interview with NPR’s Michelle Norris, William Zinsser discussed why he thinks the James Frey controversy “refuses to die—why it keeps turning up.” He sees the

public's reaction to this story as a metaphor for what he calls a "crisis of truth" in the United States:

...a metaphor for a deeper anxiety that the truth no longer matters to the people who are running our lives. The White House lies to us. Corporations lie to their stockholders by manipulating figures, and ransack their companies. Medical companies lie to their patients about defective heart implants. Congress is certainly less than honest about the extent to which lobbyists are paying for the laws of the land.

According to Zinsser, in the 1990s, spurred by "the carnivorous maw of talk show hosts," a new variety of memoir emerged, "suddenly no family was too dysfunctional, no memory too squalid or shameful to be trotted out for the amazement and wonderment of the masses....memoirs really became therapy. Everyone was a victim." Zinsser has no patience with tell-alls, though he takes the high road in this interview and doesn't single out any one author. For him, the determining factor in whether to publish a memoir is whether it's a good book or a bad book, and tell-alls are among the latter, "wallowing in lurid details...mere self-indulgence and reprisal" (6). In Zinsser's experience, one key aspect of *good* memoir is what he calls "integrity of intention." He likens memoir to a "search mechanism"—a method of making sense of our lives by taking into account who we were *then*, who we are *now* and the forces that brought us from point A to point B. "If a writer seriously embarks on that quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with quests of their own" (6). These will be the same writers who took seriously Zinsser's second element of good memoir: construction, "imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events" (7). These writers faced tough decisions about what to leave

in and what to leave out, determined which facts and details best supported the story they intended to tell, and wrestled with the very real possibility of alienating the very real people who were the characters in their work.

### My Memoir Dilemma

This is the dilemma I face in writing memoir. In seventh grade, some older cousins tipped me off that my parents had previously been married to other people, that my sister and eldest brother were products of those earlier unions. Jeanne came with my mother, and Mike with my dad. With the self-righteous indignation that is common to teenage girls, I exercised the “divide and conquer” tactic, approaching my parents individually. Each refused to discuss it. My father was direct and unequivocal, “It’s none of your goddamn business.”

My mother attempted a softer touch when I asked her, “What happened to Jeanne’s dad?”

“He died.”

“How did he die?”

“He drowned.”

“How did he drown?”

Then she recognized that her answers would only generate further questions. Her final words on the subject were “I don’t want to talk about it.”

So, at twenty-three, when I found myself pregnant, unmarried and uncertain about my baby’s paternity, I kept my own counsel, protected my own scandal. Of the two possible fathers, I chose the one I thought detracted the least from my character: my long time, off-again, on-again, high-school sweetheart, as opposed to the three-or four-night stand I had picked up at my

five-year high school reunion. It has chewed at me ever since, and I can see its tentacles woven throughout the every major decision that followed.

Recently my mother admitted to me that she never was married to my sister's biological father. She only fessed up to my sister Jeanne, who is eleven years older than I, two years ago. My mother was twenty-five and, I guess, didn't see a future with Bud. She never told him she was pregnant. Nor did she tell her parents, with whom she was living at the time. When her labor pains began, she let them believe she was having an appendicitis attack. What else could it be? When the doctor arrived to make the house call, he corrected their diagnosis. My mother's closest friends may have known, but they've been dead for many years. Some of our relatives may know; those who would have been old enough to be aware of such things. However, within my immediate family, my mother has trusted only Jeanne and me with this information: my three brothers, including Mike, remain in the dark.

That's how it is in my family: we don't talk openly about the things that matter. Now, here I am, studying the art of writing creative nonfiction, of memoir. I have every intention to use myself as an example in the subjects that I'll write about—that's the power of CNF. How do I write what is mine to write while respecting my family or others of my acquaintance? Do I need to? I'm dying to write about all of it, to be out with it once and for all, to try to reach some understanding about why we do this, to prove my conviction that all people lie—even good people. Do I have a right to do expose my lie now that my daughter is twenty-seven? Do I ever? Did I forfeit that right years ago, when I refused to come clean? How much of this is my story to tell? If I dance around the truth in my writing, what effect will that have? Will it be a brand new lie? Or merely perpetuating the old lie, maintaining the secret—no closer to the truth?

In the abstract, my mother and I are light lunch—it's impossible to count the women who've walked in our shoes. Readers are likely to understand the dread of the 1950s, unwed, pregnant woman; they might even appreciate the 1980s dilemma of not knowing your baby's paternity. But for those who are intimately affected, what are the ramifications of having this information exposed, of learning that your mother, protecting her own ego, randomly assigned one half of your family of origin? My mother and I have acted like our secrets were nobody's business but our own, but the weight each of us carries says that's not true. Looking at the dynamics within my own family, there's no doubt that lies and secrets cast a shadow.

When I watch the national media go up in arms over the latest scandal, exposing the latest egregious liar, I know that I, too, have lied. Once told, my lies, in need of protection, have mutated into secrets. I wonder how many other people are guarding secrets; it would be easier to count those who aren't. I wonder about the people who are vitriolic in their outrage. I remember Newt Gingrich leading the Monica Lewinski charge against Bill Clinton at the same time he was carrying on his own extramarital affair. I wonder why we distinguish between secrets and lies. Are they fundamentally different? Is the lie the thing I say out loud, the utterance, "You're the father," while *secrets* live in the details I choose to withhold? For example, when I allow you to presume, from the statement, "I'm pregnant," that you're my baby's father because you must be—why else would I be telling you?

What if more of us told the truth? What if it was safe to do so, if we knew we weren't alone? What if I used myself as an example? In order to do that, though, I can't avoid implicating other people. How do writers make these decisions?

## Memoir Dilemmas Others Have Faced

I found a number of authors who faced similarly complicated decisions in writing memoir and who have openly discussed how they resolved them: Russell Baker, Jill Ker Conway, Annie Dillard, Mark Doty, Carlos Eire, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Vivian Gornick, Michael Patrick McDonald and Azar Nafisi.

Janet Burroway says, “It is likely that the most troubling conflict you face as a writer of memoir and personal essay will be between your essential truth and obligation to those you know” (241). The experience of each of the authors discussed in this paper confirms that. Each struggled in one form or another with “telling,” with being the one committing these characters and events to the written word. Each had to set aside their anxiety in order to get their story on the page. Burroway advises “Write your truth. You are under no obligation to publish it, and you may find yourself under the pressure of personal integrity not to. If you need to alter details in order to conceal a living person, let it be later” (241). Writers balk at telling until they find their way past the voice of the internal critic, the Naysayer who is ever ready to rise up and proclaim, *You can’t say that—what will they think?*

Memoir writers find inspiration in every direction; their narratives are driven by the act of reflection upon particular memories or details. Even when that reflection is rendered honestly, with no intent to harm or vendetta pursued, conflicting interests are at their elbow. Mark Doty says betrayal is built into memoir, in the act of outing family secrets and problems, in the act of describing the people we love—our characters (157). It can’t be avoided; “The whole *point* of memoir, in a way, is to make these people known” (156). Closely related to that sense of betrayal is the sense of personal guilt. Ian Frazier, author of *Family*, says “guilt is the headwind you sail into” when writing about family, “there’s no escaping that” (116). He feels a sense of

responsibility even toward the dead. Still, Frazier considers guilt a form of narcissism—an extreme of self-centeredness that only gets in the way of our writing. For him, getting over that, finding ways to work around it, is “psychic jujitsu” (117). Frazier had no shameful family history to disclose. Still, he told everyone in his book what he wrote about them and asked their permission. His goal wasn’t to skewer anyone; his intention was to give meaning to his parents’s lives (112).

In his first draft of his best-selling memoir *Growing Up*, Russell Baker carefully skirted around any references to his mother. He interviewed several members of his family, but his mother’s health rendered her unable to speak for herself—her “mind went out one day as though every circuit in the city had been blown” (23). As an experienced journalist, Baker believed he could work around the fact that his mother got pregnant before she was married. In the end, his initial draft was solid journalism, “reminiscences of today about yesterday” (25), but it didn’t work as memoir. His agent observed that Baker had tried to write a book about himself in which he didn’t actually appear on the page (26). No matter the veracity of what Baker included, what he’d chosen to leave out had impaired the whole, “that dishonesty left a great hollow in the center of the original book” (26). Baker wound up rewriting the entire book.

He included his mother’s pre-marital pregnancy in the revision. Baker’s sister objected to their mother’s “disgrace” becoming common knowledge, “but not violently.” However, Baker felt like the truth served their mother well, “it would make her plausible in this book” (28). Plus, that fact explained a lot about their life, starting with the animosity between his mother and his paternal grandmother. Baker’s wife, who was missing from the first draft, became integral in the revision. He asked her permission, she agreed to be interviewed, and he let her review the sections where she appeared, assuring her “if there’s anything you want cut, I’ll cut it.”

However, rather than cuts, she suggested including some things—things which “sort of shocked” Baker. He considered her proposals but ultimately decided not to add anything (30).

Annie Dillard’s family was alive and well when she wrote *An American Childhood*. She gave each of them the option to review the book, promising “to take out anything that anyone objects to—anything at all” (101). Dillard knows writers who intentionally skewer their parents, but for herself, she doesn’t “believe in a writer’s kicking around people who don’t have access to a printing press. They can’t defend themselves” (102). On the other hand, Dillard is known for manufacturing the opening paragraph of her memoir *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

I used to have a cat, an old fighting tom, who would jump through the open window by my bed in the middle of the night and land on my chest. I’d half-awaken. He’d stick his skull under my nose and purr, stinking of urine and blood. Some nights he kneaded my bare chest with his front paws, powerfully, arching his back, as if sharpening his claws, or pummeling a mother for milk. And some mornings I’d wake in daylight to find my body covered with paw prints in blood; I looked as though I’d been painted with roses (4).

Except, Dillard didn’t own a cat. Some readers are willing to accept Dillard’s account of the cat as a metaphor, but “nowhere does she really acknowledge that the cat is a literary device or a fiction constructed for this purpose.” That’s what has other readers up in arms, “for many readers this constitutes a breach of contract” (Miller, Paola 156).

For other writers, the risk of offending occurs at a higher level, that which could include serious political consequences. Carlos Eire is a historian by trade, so when he wanted to lay bare

the big lie of the Cuban revolution—“that Fidel Castro is an idealist who has done great things for his people” (168)—he turned to fiction. However, a savvy editor recognized a true story and refused to publish his book as fiction. Not only did he risk alienating colleagues (historians aren’t artifacts), he had friends and family who could be made targets of the Cuban government. Eire changed the names of his characters, and the book was published as memoir. Azar Nafisi was in a similar position. In publishing *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she risked exposing her former students and family members, many of whom remained in Iran. To protect them, Nafisi not only changed their names, she also changed what she felt were identifying characteristics to make them individually unrecognizable. On the other hand, the subject of Michael Patrick MacDonald’s memoir, *All Souls*, was the damaging code of silence within the community of South Boston. He felt no real conflict to any individuals, per se. MacDonald was weary of the code of silence that contributed to his neighborhood’s suffering at the hands of mobsters: people lived in fear of mafia bosses at the same time their friends and children were being wiped out by drugs and crime. For MacDonald, the truth-telling act of writing was extremely empowering.

In addition to contending with family secrets, in his memoir *Colored People*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also faced the sense of betraying the black community. To write about growing up in Piedmont, West Virginia was to expose racial and ethnic secrets—long considered to be risky business. “Most black people will edit themselves for their audience. They’ll say, ‘I shouldn’t.’ They’ll ask, ‘How will my story be appropriated against the race’” (75). Gates knew some wouldn’t like his book—his telling—no matter what, but his goal was to create a portrait of his mother, for his daughters, in his father’s vernacular (67). Gates knew what he wanted his book to be, and he was willing to accept the risk.

...I decided that it was time to tell the African-American story honestly. Each generation between Frederick Douglass and our generation has felt looser, I think, but Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison hated Zora Neale Hurston. She lifted the veil too much (76).

Gates wrote full-out for his initial draft, which was in the form of letters addressed to his daughters. During revision, he chose to rewrite the book in standard prose style. It was also where he started making decisions about how revealing he wanted to be (74), where he began to “cut down on some things I thought would be better left undisclosed” (69).

It’s common for writers to acknowledge the inconsistencies within the body of their texts: conflicts between their own and other people’s memory of the same events, how things felt as opposed to the actual circumstances, what written records reflect. Laura Flynn’s *Swallow the Ocean*, Mary Karr’s *The Liars Club* and Cheryl Strayed’s *Wild* are all fine examples of this. Many authors, these women included, choose to include an “Author’s Note” at the front of their books. They remind readers that their work is “drawn from memories,” they alert us to literary tactics they have used (changing names and identifying characteristics) and offer reassurances as to the veracity of everything else.

### Vetting the Work

If we listen to Steve Zoumer, author of *You Don’t Have to Be Famous*, a “how to” manual for writing one’s life story, we will let our conscience be our guide. His yardstick for determining whether to show your work to “the potentially wounded person” is when you can’t get past your own sense of guilt. Even then, he cautions against it because, in effect, “you’re

inviting others into your writing process. You are coming close to giving them a right of final approval, or at least the right to request specific edits.” Certainly there’s no guarantee how people will react; some people will be more sensitive than others. One person might be okay with being characterized as a promiscuous drunk, where another is sure to be mortified. Zousmer laments “How nice it would be to just tell the story and not worry about reactions.” (Writers Digest 61). Other writers support this approach for the first draft, but beyond that they seem to be consistently aware of the potential effect of their words.

In reality, the outcome of showing people our work isn’t as black-and-white as Zousmer would have us believe. Just because someone offers their opinion doesn’t mean the writer is beholden to respond to their satisfaction. Again, practical experience shows that it comes back to the narrative. Ultimately, it’s up to the writer to decide what’s in and what’s out, what serves the subject and the emotional truth of the piece. When authors have received negative or concerned feedback, it has served to make them think more deeply about the role and power of memory. It has spurred some to pursue further research or corroboration: rooting through public records, examining personal artifacts like journals and correspondence, and interviewing people about their history and memories are common tools of authenticity.

For many authors, vetting their manuscripts with the people who appear in their books is just a matter of course. Jill Ker Conway considers it an invasion of privacy not to; “If you’re going to see yourself in print you deserve a chance to correct anything that may be wrong” (35). Doty gave copies of his manuscript to both his sister and his father (160). He was eager to show his sister, who was generally supportive. However, based on prior conversations regarding his work, he was more reluctant to show his father. If not for his publisher’s lawyers, who were demanding a signed release, Doty might never have followed through in sending his manuscript

to his father. As it was, Doty's father never responded and, in fact, hasn't spoken to him since. Doty's not happy about that outcome, but for him, "the alternative is silence, a frozen politeness, a fake life" (164). He needed to write the book.

Kim Schworm Acosta found herself in an awkward position when a personal essay she'd written was accepted by *Brides* magazine: her first acceptance from a big publication. The essay was about her process in deciding whether or not to take her husband's name. Obviously, her husband played a major role in the essay, but he hadn't read it—not until the day Acosta got the good news. He wasn't gung-ho about seeing himself in print, but after some discussion, they decided she should proceed: *his* friends weren't likely to read an article in *Brides* magazine. Then, going forward, she agreed to show him any work that included him—prior to submission.

Dave Bry wound up rewriting a scene from *Public Apology* after he showed it to the woman who was his girlfriend at the time his father was diagnosed with cancer. She tipped him off to a critical detail that he'd gotten completely wrong. Though his failed memory delivered better irony and dramatic effect, Bry decided he couldn't live with himself if he knew it wasn't true. He couldn't reconcile himself to (his hero) David Foster Wallace's "casual attitude" toward the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. During a 1998 interview for *The Boston Phoenix*, reporter Tom Scocca asked Foster Wallace about handling facts in nonfiction. Foster Wallace said, "The thing is, really, between you and me the *Boston Phoenix's* understanding readers, you hire a fiction writer to do nonfiction, there's going to be the occasional bit of embellishment" (3).

### Points of Consensus

As we have seen, authors choose different paths to resolving conflicts over what they choose to reveal in their works of memoir. If one is going to write memoir, it is impossible to

sidestep the issue of implicating family and friends in the telling of the tale. “The mere fact of putting something into words changes it” (Burroway 239). Oral histories are one thing: anecdotes and fireside chats, where each telling invites a new spin that’s as dependent upon the teller of the tale as it is on the audience. The ante is raised with memoir, where memory is transformed into written histories, into artifact.

Still, in their approach to memoir, these authors have demonstrated several clear points of consensus. On the surface these may appear unrelated to the issue of reconciling conflicts over content, but each is key to the foundation of memoir. First: memoir is a “tale taken from life, that is, from actual, not imagined occurrences” (Gornick 8), the writer’s version of events. Second: memoir should be a story worth telling. “If you’re going to make a book out of it, you might as well make it into a story” (Baker 28). Frazier takes it further, “Your objective is to find something that corresponds with the reader...It’s a seduction” (112). Third: as tricky as memory is, learn to trust it. Memoirists can’t afford to dismiss out of hand that which, on the surface, appears to be faulty data. Memory is a powerful tool; the way details are reconstructed is often more representative of the memory’s emotional truth. Hampl says “there may be no more pressing intellectual need in our culture than for people to become sophisticated about the function of memory” (272). Fourth: the story and its emotional truth are best served by writing full-out during early drafts. The editor, the lawyer, your family and former lovers don’t get a voice at this stage. Zinsser encourages, “Whatever you’re writing, write for yourself. The important thing is to get it down” (interview). Addressing inconsistencies and vetting manuscripts should be staved off until revision. Fifth: the choices a writer makes ultimately rest on his or her individual integrity, on their willingness to do the footwork required for them to make informed decisions about what to leave in and what to leave out, what they can live with,

and what best serves their art. Finally: though unspoken, the contract with readers is real. “A reader has a right to expect a memoir to be as accurate as the writer’s memory can make it” (Hampl 268).

Hampl’s observation that “No one owns the past” (272) seems straightforward enough. While there may be common ground in how memoirists resolve the conflicts they face, each author is forced to arrive at that place on their own. And, as much as an author is committed to a particular protocol, for example, vetting their manuscripts, I suspect their reaction to the outcome of that vetting varies with each instance, and each character. The conflict forces an author to make a choice. Of the scenarios I read in preparation for this paper, no author’s reaction was a snap decision—each weighed the feedback they received against the essential truth of the story they were trying to tell. Only in exercising that system of weights and measures did they arrive at the solution they could live with.

My experience in writing the creative pieces that are included in this project echoes that approach. Two of the four essays involve a sticky wicket. With respect to “Caprice: in Triptych,” I asked Shawna, the friend I accompanied to court that morning, to read the final draft. I didn’t guarantee I’d make any changes, but I did promise to carefully consider her feedback. However, I didn’t feel any obligation to give her husband, Justin, the same opportunity. In the draft Shawna read, Justin drove a pickup truck. In fact, she told me, it was a white car, probably a Civic or a Corolla. Too bad! The truck was a better detail, but I revised it for accuracy in the final draft. With respect to changing their names, she left that decision to me. Since last names aren’t used, I kept their real names. However, I did change names in “Pathos, Party of One?” Criminal activity is mentioned, so I changed the names of the principals in the anxiety/drug-running conversations. “Barry” was eventually caught and served time in prison, but he and “Martha” were separated at

the time, so she was never implicated. There were no conflicts in either “On Lies, Liars and Lying” or “The Race Card.” I am the only character who figures prominently in both of those essays.

With respect to my own dilemma in writing memoir, it’s obvious I can no longer avoid having this conversation with my daughter. Even in a small, seemingly unrelated essay like “Caprice, a Triptych,” a seed of doubt is inferred by the man who questions my baby’s paternity. It’s reasonable to assume that such a central fact in my life will continue to factor into other indirect works.

However, I don’t want to spend my writing life tiptoeing around the larger story: the parallels between my mother and me. It seems like a story worth telling; whether that’s in essays or in a book is unknown to me. I think Russell Baker’s approach will serve me well—talk to people, conduct interviews of my own, get people to tell me about their lives. My mother is still alive; she’s fully capable of speaking for herself. Conversations about my family’s history are typically superficial, I think because they all hinge, in one way or another, on the fact of her secret pregnancy. If I come clean with her about my own pregnancy, she might be more open to talking about hers. If she does, I suspect it will free her up to discuss the rest of her life more openly. If not, I’ll still have history and information to gather; I’ll write the story anyway. It’s fair to say this is my story to tell, that it’s my job to go full-out with the first draft. After that, I’m responsible for vetting my work with the people who are most directly affected.

Personal integrity is an amalgam of making informed choices and being willing to accept responsibility for those choices. What an interesting contradiction, talking about the importance of personal integrity as we discuss whether, or how, to reveal lies that we’ve told and secrets

we've kept from the key players in our lives. Some people might consider lies to be different than vagaries in memory, but I think they're related. Certainly, memory is unreliable, but oftentimes so is our perception of events as they take place. The human mind is a powerful database, busily cataloguing the details of our lives sometimes seemingly at whim. Toss in the filter of false narratives that we tell ourselves (I'm stupid. I'm fat. I'm ugly.); imagine how those color how memories are tucked away and then, again, are retrieved. Then, consider our emotional investment in believing those false narratives. All of that gray area and, still, our egos cling to the notion that we're right, or at least we're not as wrong as all that.

Every writer must choose and be accountable for his or her own ethic. Carlos Eire and Mary Karr made decisions to trust their memories in the telling; others conducted extensive research on the front end, gathering facts to help quell the Naysayer. By and large, each of the authors discussed in this paper allowed the people they wrote about to read at least portions of their manuscripts, though the authors typically reserved the right to accept or reject any feedback that was offered. In every case, any conflicts they faced between what they considered to be the "essential truth" of the work and their sense of obligation to the characters who appeared in the work were resolved during revision. Revising—that's where they exercised informed decisions about what to leave in and what to leave out, in support of their narrative.

"The past is not static, or ever truly complete; as we age we see from new positions, shifting angles" (Doty 154). It's on us to determine how fair or unfair we'll be to the people who appear in our stories. Just because the story needs to be written, doesn't mean it needs to be published. According to William Zinsser, what makes for a good memoir is one in which the author has no axe to grind. There is truth in the telling, but that truth is tempered with compassion and understanding. When there is integrity in the writer's intention, readers will

respond to it (interview). But if the work never gets written, if we keep ourselves paralyzed behind the question, “What will they think,” we’ll never know. We’ll never have done the hard work of choosing, and we’ll deny ourselves the opportunity to get to the essential truth of the matter.

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## Caprice, a Triptych

### Central Panel

We agreed to meet up with each other at the courthouse. On the off chance that her husband, Justin, showed up for the hearing, Shawna didn't want to face him alone. Lewis and Clark County processed protection orders first thing on Thursday mornings. Hearings didn't actually start until 9am, but it was important to be there early and get checked in with the Clerk of Court. First in; first out. That was the theory.

When I got to the top of the steps at the north entrance, I recognized Shawna's lanky frame on the far side of the cluster of people waiting their turn for the clerk, her long, yellow-blond hair swayed gently as she paced the first floor hallway. In spite of all the activity, there was an unnatural hush, like a dense fog, the kind of quiet that pushes you up onto the balls of your feet and compels you to remain silent until you're close enough to whisper. "I figured you'd be outside, squeezing in one last smoke before the hearing."

"I know, right?" She was too nervous—her laugh wasn't convincing. She tried to act like she wasn't watching the doors. "The clerk knows I'm here; I haven't seen *him* though."

"Well, that's his business." I gave her a hug, put my arm around her waist and steered her toward the double staircase at the center of the building. "If you really don't need to smoke, we should head up."

We climbed to the third floor, keeping close to the banister, well away from the sag worn down the center of the marble stairs; the mark of erosion so common to government buildings, evoking an invisible parade of people whose lives had intersected with Helena's justice system since the building went up in 1887.

The stairway dumped us into an open area; wooden benches and doors alternated around the perimeter of the square. The aluminum box of the 1970s-era drinking fountain on the far wall seemed a glaring anachronism. If there were bathrooms on this floor, they weren't for the public. Shawna and I milled around, looking at paintings, reading the metal plaques that were tacked to some of the benches, until the clerk gave us permission to enter the courtroom.

We made our way to the front bench in the center section of the gallery, where we chatted quietly while we waited for our next set of directions. "You look nice," I said.

Tall and leggy and slender, Shawna was my exact opposite. Her hair fell mostly straight to the middle of her back. It still had some of the curl she'd worked for that morning, though gravity would overcome the hairspray by lunchtime. Her jacket was gabardine, not quite denim. It was a warm shade of cocoa and cropped just right to meet the waistline of her tweed skirt. Opaque brown tights spanned the distance between the hem of her skirt and the top of her brand new, knee-high boots.

"Are you doing training today?"

"No. I just got lucky...out shopping the other day. Found some great deals."

We fell silent at the *whoosh* of the double doors. In the vacuum of the empty courtroom, it was the seal of an airlock being broken. A woman entered, breathing kind of heavy, from a hurried climb up the stairs, maybe. Her coat was draped over one arm; her other hand held the strap of her purse securely to her shoulder. She claimed the second bench in the section to our right. Some minutes later another whoosh ushered a man into the courtroom. It was obvious they knew each other from the cursory glances exchanged before he took a seat at the outermost edge of the bench two rows behind her. He stayed as close to the double doors as he possibly could.

Shortly after nine, the judge emerged from one of the doors behind her bench. If the clerk said, “All rise,” I don’t remember it, though we did, in fact, all rise, and we stayed standing until she gave us permission to be seated. None of us was surprised Justin hadn't appeared; none of us expected that he would. However, on the outside chance that he was only running late, the judge reversed the order of the two cases on her docket that morning.

She called the other couple forward, inviting each of them to take a chair at one of the two counsel tables on the other side of the bar. They were both white, in their late twenties or early thirties, dressed in clothes that would be categorized as business casual, nondescript. Based on my *Law and Order*-informed view of plaintiffs and defendants, they bore no obvious markers as to what led them to the courthouse that morning. Neither had any visible ink. I saw no signs of meth: their teeth seemed present and accounted for; there was nothing unkempt about either of them; no greasy hair or visible twitching. Nor was there any waft of alcohol as they passed in front of us to take their seats.

Before the judge swore them in, she explained that Shawna and I were free to stay or go. If we stayed, we needed to remain quiet; if we chose to leave, we needed to remain in the area immediately outside the courtroom.

Shawna and I kept our seats. My fascination with legal proceedings is likely fueled by the fact that I've never had to face a judge for any of my own shenanigans. As these people testified, it quickly became apparent that their business was absolutely none of my business. I toyed with the idea of leaving, but I knew my side-stepping out of our row would be a disruption. At the same time, much like reading tabloid headlines in the check-out line, I hung on every tacky word, praying for help to keep a straight face and the sense to keep my mouth shut. I was dying to interject a few questions of my own.

As the petitioner, the woman testified first. She laid out a compelling case in favor of the restraining order she was requesting. She was calm, specific and thorough. Among the details of why she feared the respondent there were assertions about his sexual proclivities. She was the mother of several small children—she didn't want him anywhere near them. It seemed all very tidy to me. Air-tight. Why wouldn't he just leave her alone like she asked him to?

Then it was the respondent's turn. He revealed that these two had a long history together. He told the court they'd been putting each other through the paces for several years, hooking up and breaking up. In fact, the man's name was listed as "Father" on one of her children's birth certificates. During one particular fight, she claimed that the boy really wasn't his. And during another, she called the sheriff and got a "no trespass" order against him. The day after that, she called and invited him to come back over. When he told her he was afraid she'd call the sheriff again, she told him, "Well, then just don't make me mad." She told him not to text her, and then she texted him relentlessly. So he went back, or got her back, or took her back. Who was going which direction was fuzzy. They would have been perfect for an episode of Jerry Springer.

So much that didn't add up; every word out of their mouths only raised more questions, casting a massive shadow over their integrity. At the end, each of them was undaunted, firmly rooted in their version of events, neither of them willing to reflect on how they landed in front of this judge. As if it were an accident, *I wasn't even there, officer.*

The person I pitied was the judge. What was she thinking as she took this all in? Neither of them was innocent; their testimony had been self-serving, if not outright delusional. She had to know that. As the designated objective party, how do you repress the urge to tell them both to grow the hell up and leave each other alone? How do you sort through the nonsense and apply the law? A credit to her profession, the judge maintained a passive face throughout. At the end,

she clarified the next steps in the proceeding and then concluded, “If granted, the protection order would be issued within twenty-four hours.”

They both stood and thanked the judge, and then they cleared the courtroom separately. Standing at the counsel table closest to the door, the man tidied his small cluster of papers and then left without a backward glance. The woman busied herself with the contents of her handbag, ignoring the man and giving him a reasonable head start before she picked up her coat and moved toward the door.

#### Left Panel

The judge called Shawna forward; I had no official capacity so I remained in the gallery. She’d been fidgety sitting next to me during the first hearing, anxiously rubber-necking toward the courtroom door. It seemed like normal anxiety about whether Justin would arrive, but as she made her way to the counsel table, I took in the fact of her new outfit. It dawned on me that she had dolled herself up for Justin that day, trying to look her best, to make he sure he ate his heart out, that he was thinking about her as they had their turn in front of the judge.

Shawna was sworn in, and then she told the judge why she was seeking protection from her husband. Based on irreconcilable differences, she’d recently asked Justin to move out. He had moved, but he wasn’t happy about it. He wanted her back, but she wouldn’t take his calls.

One day earlier that week, he’d shown up in the parking lot of her job, at quitting time. As Shawna was unlocking her car door, Justin pulled up behind her midnight-blue Durango, using his car to block her in. He leaned out his window, told her they needed to talk, then got mad when she told him there was nothing more to say, that he knew where she stood.

Shawna got in her car and locked the doors. Justin threw his car into park and came to her driver's door. She kept her windows rolled up and stared straight ahead. Justin responded with threats and pounding on her window. That's when she called 9-1-1. Justin was gone before the police arrived, but the officer encouraged her to file the paperwork for a restraining order. He wouldn't guarantee that the judge would sign it, but he had made it clear that her only shot to get it approved was to attend this hearing.

The judge thanked Shawna for her testimony, and then gave her the same spiel she'd given the earlier couple, wrapping up with the same concluding remarks, "If granted, the protection order would be issued within twenty-four hours."

We were quiet as we left the courtroom, and remained so as we made our way back down the marble staircase. Shawna fished for her cigarettes, so she was prepared to light up as soon as we reached the designated smoking boundary, thirty feet from the building. We didn't slow our pace until we reached the sunny patch of concrete beyond the chill shadow of the courthouse.

"Okay. Carry on, I guess," I said. "And if he shows up anywhere that you are, you call the police." I didn't have it in me to ask whether she'd gussied herself up in hopes of impressing Justin. I was anxious to get back to work, to the comfort of my cubicle and my quiet, stable life.

## Right Panel

Somewhere in the mile between the courthouse and my office, the memory of my ten-year, high-school reunion pushed its way to the front of my brain. I was living in New York City then, in Kew Gardens, a little neighborhood of Queens, and I'd flown back to Minneapolis for it. I'd gone with my friend Maria. I was single, and her husband wasn't interested in going.

Maria and I had known each other since seventh grade; I helped her procure her first bag of weed. She was my character reference for the job I had during most of high school—the lunch rush waitress at Hong Kong, the Chinese restaurant in my neighborhood.

Maria has always been gorgeous: tall and thin, with fabulously thick, wavy, dark brown hair that none of my permanent waves ever got close to, not even during the sweet spot—two months in, after the Brillo helmet stage relaxed. Maria was of Lebanese descent; her brown eyes and delicious olive skin were the polar opposite of my fair-skinned, Irish-Norwegian-ness. While I spent my summers on the continuum of healing from sunburn, Maria was a bronze goddess.

Everybody loved her. She was always easy to be around, and she had this great laugh, so that when you heard it, you stopped what you were doing and hustled over to find out what you were missing. She was the first friend my parents genuinely liked, that they never made snarky digs about. My dad would agree to have dinner at Hong Kong, but only if Maria was working.

So, of course, when she came to pick me up, she came in to say hello to my folks. And, of course, my mom wouldn't let us get going until we agreed to let her take a few pictures, "You girls look so nice."

We were twenty-eight, both of us wearing black minis. Maria's was the classic little black dress, in cotton knit, accented with big, chunky, exotic, copper jewelry. She looked like the art student that she was. I wore the three-piece outfit I'd seen on a mannequin in the window of a little shop in Rego Park. *Serendipitous*, I'd thought, as I scrutinized every angle of myself in the dressing room mirror. The black leather mini skirt was later characterized as a wide belt; the matching bustier was a nice frame for my 32 Bs; the Bolero jacket brought an illusion of modesty. *As long as you don't go bending over*. With two-inch heels, at least my shoes were sensible.

I had no way of knowing whether Pepper would be at the reunion; we hadn't kept in touch since I disappeared shortly after we'd hooked up at our five-year reunion. The last time I'd run into him was at a random house party, several months after I'd given birth to my daughter. He caught me alone, as I was stashing my coat in the designated corner. He said, "I heard you had a baby."

"Yeah, a little girl—she's pretty amazing."

"I was just wondering...because it seemed...you know...we were seeing each other."

I had no patience for his stammering—I wasn't kind. "So, what are you saying? That you want to pay me child support, too?"

Pepper bowed out as gracefully as possible, and we went our separate ways to the beer.

So, when ten-year reunion time rolled around, even though Maria was really my only friend left from high school, there was no doubt that I'd be going. I bought a plane ticket, two plane tickets actually, because my daughter would have to travel with me. I bought that leather outfit with Pepper in mind, so that if he was there, he'd be absolutely clear that I'd moved on, that I was *great*, and that my ass still fit in a skirt that small.

### Artist Statement

Everywhere I go, I see myself, and I wish I didn't. It's never a flattering snapshot that throws itself into my path. Everywhere I go, I can't escape the evidence that we are animals—that *people* are animals. Our erratic behavior is wholly at odds with our claim to the top spot in the world's social order. Opposable thumbs and the ability to reason are beautiful things, but I wonder whether a greater measure of impulse control would have been more helpful.

## On Lies, Liars and Lying

“Almost all of us have been tempted to lie at some point,” said the press release announcing the new study *Psychological Science* was getting ready to publish in the fall of 2012—another study, by another team of doctors, in the effort to learn more about what motivates human beings to lie.

From where I sit, that entire opening sentence is a string of equivocation—a lie. I wonder why a prestigious scientific journal didn’t opt for a bolder statement, like, “Every one of us has lied.” Or, just plain, “Everyone lies.” Granted, “everyone lies” is more direct than some people are comfortable with, but at least it’s accurate. Plus, it doesn’t reinforce the illusion of a gray area—for those of us who think we’ve escaped the “almost all of us” equivocation.

Why are we so reluctant to say that everybody—every single person—is guilty of lying? We’ve lied in the past and we’re well on our way to lying in the future. We lie. I’m not talking about little white lies either, the tidbits that we tell ourselves are victimless lies. I’m talking about the stuff that’s not fit for public consumption, the information you would just as soon take with you to the grave, the stuff that is nobody’s damn business, the stuff that happened so long ago, how could it possibly matter now?

Except those aren’t lies, those are *secrets*. Secrets are different. *Everybody* knows that. The lie is the thing I say out loud, the spoken declaration: “Two beers, Officer.” *Secrets* live in the details that I choose to withhold: O’Doul’s or microbrews; frosty mugs, sixty-four ounce pitchers or beer bong; sipped over the course of the evening, chugged down at last call, or not counting this one in my lap?

Alright, then, if we grant our right to withhold information selectively, to keep secrets, then who outright lies?

That's easy—liars lie. I know you'll recognize at least some of these people: recreational liars, the people we typically refer to as bullshitters and embellishers; serial liars that just keep on lying, trying to cover the trail that follows them everywhere; the liars who get all tripped up in their story and contradict themselves; the jackasses who lie for the sake of lying, who approach life like a gullibility test; the liars who know you know they're lying but deny it just the same; delusional liars, the people who honestly believe the story they just made up; the spoiling for a fight liars who go strident over a trifle, in order to redirect suspicion onto others; pathological liars who consider themselves performance artists; redacting liars who liberally apply a Sharpie to the written record; the people who freak out at the people who get busted for lying, as if they would *never*, when, in fact, they have, and they do, and they will again.

The pastor who fudges his golf score or hits on his parishioners; eHarmony subscribers who post outdated photos and fabricate fictitious profiles; people who stalk exes and prospects alike on social media and beyond; job seekers who pad the credentials on their resumes; citizens who fudge the numbers on their tax returns or don't file at all; people who use cheater apps to crush friends and strangers at Words with Friends; cinema fans who parlay single movie tickets into day-long marathons; neighbors who insist *their* cat isn't responsible for the piles of cat shit all over your front yard; conspicuous consumers who spend more than they make, buying things they don't need, to impress people they don't even like, and their priceless dismay as they learn the ropes of bankruptcy proceedings.

What about babysitters who rob your liquor supply and dinner guests who rifle your medicine cabinet? We've got people who buy booze for kids, people who insist on driving drunk, repeat offenders who drive on revoked licenses, without insurance, and their friends who help them out by blowing sober breath into Intoxalocks. There are the people who "take

advantage of” young women who are too drunk to defend themselves, witnesses who look the other way, adults who help their children cover it up, and an entire justice system that puts the responsibility for sexual assault back on the victim.

Mad-cap partiers who make controlled substances “fun,” patients who study the DSM to give credibility to the symptoms they fake to procure prescription medication; the people who sell their meds for cash, those who buy them, and those who slip them to others, setting the stage for sexual assaults on unconscious, blacked out victims. Add to those, the lucky ones who don’t accidentally overdose or wind up in prison, who treat rehab facilities like revolving doors. We shouldn’t overlook the medical community: the docs who don’t understand whom they’re dealing with; those who prescribe in exchange for kickbacks from pharmaceutical companies; the companies that falsify study results to get their drugs to market; the medical journals with lax standards for what constitutes a valid study and “overwhelming evidence.”

Politicians who stand behind lecterns, their grave expressions framed by the cluster of microphones, as if there is news to report or some headway being made, only to recite their broken record of self-serving talking points. Media moguls who spin the narratives around which the rest of us revolve; the people whose livelihoods depend on maintaining our sense of fear and apathy. The consuming public who take trusted reporters and their favorite pundits at their word without questioning whose story is being told or who profits from our buying into *this*?

I’m pretty sure that covers everyone—makes it impossible for any of us to stake a claim to complete honesty. Yet, “liar” remains high on the list of bad words. It’s a fightin’ word, a “shut your mouth, take that back this instant,” kind of word. Call me a poseur or a prevaricator, and I’ll just laugh that off and keep on going. Bwahaha—kidder! Call me a *liar* and I’ll stop

traffic. I'll hit you with a chorus of gasps and a volley of equivocation so impassioned you may have to wipe a drop or two of my spittle from your chin. Even if I did lie, I am certainly no *liar*.

“Liar,” then, in actual practice, is a binary. I've got twenty bucks that says a random survey conducted out front of any box store would prove my hypothesis.

I imagine myself wearing a white lab coat and sensible shoes, I take up a position near the store's entrance. My grey hair and bifocals assures the store's patrons that I am no run-of-the-mill canvasser. A clipboard propped against my hip, and my pen poised to collect their data, I approach. “Pardon me. Can I trouble you to take part in a brief survey? Only two questions. A simple “yes” or “no” answer to each.”

To those too polite to brush past a medical professional, I would say, “Thank you for stopping. First question: have you ever told a lie?”

In response to their request for clarification, I would say, “For the purposes of this survey, to *anyone*, for any reason, however minor or earth-shattering. Just *ever*, have you ever told a lie? Perhaps something that led to a secret you're now keeping?”

Their answer will elicit a corresponding checkmark in the “yes” column for question number one on my datasheet. I would continue, “Very good. Alright—last question: do you consider yourself a liar?”

I won't need to explain the second question. After recording their answer, a checkmark in the “no” column, I would reestablish eye contact and reach to shake their hand. “That's it.” I would smile, maybe chuckle, and say, “I know—I told you it would be painless. Please, enjoy the rest of your day.” Then I would step away, my eye toward the next customer.

Lying isn't exclusive to human beings—I know for a fact that my little dog lies. I catch him all the time. What began as an aggravating puppy-habit of rolling in shit has, in his old age, evolved into an obsession with eating his own shit. There were middle steps along the way, from vacuuming our back yard for rabbit turds to noshing our other dog's Prednisone-laced feces.

I caught on to him one evening after he came inside from a potty run. A few minutes after he settled back into his loyal position at my feet, I heard the gurgly burp of indigestion, soon after that I was overwhelmed by the indisputable stench that wafted up from him. Sometimes it's so foul that I'm forced to light a match in self-defense.

Determined to break him of this disgusting habit, I started spying on him through the kitchen blinds, like a prison guard in a watch tower. When his posture signaled his luck, I'd fly out the door, clapping my hands and shrieking, "Max! NO!"

Smart and properly motivated, he's taken to looking back over his shoulder, toward the house, as he makes his rounds of the yard. *Is she watching?* With each thwarted attempt, he only gets sneakier: a nonchalant gait during his perimeter checks, occasional pauses to more closely investigate non-poop items, situating his body between me and his prize, wasting less and less time chewing.

When we had to put our other dog down in July, Max quickly transitioned to eating his own. It's added an element of contortion as he tries to maintain his pooping posture while at the same time positioning himself to snap up the warm turd before I make it out the back door.

He's found a thing that gives him satisfaction, and no matter what I think of his habit, he's going to keep on keeping on, even if he has to endure my hollering. It's a good trade. So what if he occasionally gets busted—there are plenty more times that he doesn't, when he's able

to snack his way around the backyard in peace and leisure. My husband, Curt, often reminds me that intermittent reinforcement is the strongest kind.

Max is also something of an actor. When he stops to poop during walks, he fakes near total disinterest in what he's left behind. He takes only a quick sniff to ensure it's his and then moves on without further hesitation. *I'm not eating that—wouldn't think of it.*

So, I don't eat shit, right? But I certainly recognize myself in that little dog. I luck into the thing (or the next thing) that trips my trigger, brings me a little power surge, and then I run it out just as far as I can, far beyond the point where consequences outweigh any obvious benefit. The thrill and romance of believing this time will be different, and the chagrin of being wrong. I hem and haw and debate whether to give it up because there's also something juicy in believing I'm powerless, in feeling bad about myself, in spinning a tale to hide the fact of my humiliation.

Behavioral science says lying is a normal part of human social development, that it's a vital tool in learning how to differentiate ourselves from others. On average, children start lying at around three years old. It's an important landmark in childhood development—the evidence that the wee bairn has discovered his or her mind is independent of their mother or father's mind. Experts in early childhood development put it on a par with a child's discovery of the word “no.” With good parenting, the science says, most of us come to understand the negative consequences of lying. We learn to enjoy the comfort of living in cooperation with our conscience.

We repeatedly see the penalties for lying played out on the national stage: faces splashed across the front of every media outlet; long-standing careers and personal reputations destroyed; business empires reduced to rubble; people stripped of national and world athletic titles, banned from the sport they love; lengthy prison sentences and massive financial restitution; the fact of

genuinely good works overshadowed by infamy; all future conversation and interest rooted in the scandal, the only thing media representatives will want to talk about from now on.

On a local level, among the lesser known of us, the consequences are equally devastating. I get caught lying, and suddenly the people whose regard matters the most no longer trust me; everything I say or do, even kind and honest acts, become suspect. Life-long friends are lost, or perhaps my family disowns me. Sometimes, I drift away on my own, when I can no longer look you in the eye, or when the constant state of high alert has become too much. Sitting vigil over lies is stressful. When my lies implicate other, innocent people, they may be considered guilty themselves. If I lie to the wrong people, I risk getting the crap beat out of me, or worse. Lies can even alter reality, when I tell them long enough and often enough that I actually come to believe them myself.

“The truth will out.” It’s another thing Curt loves to say, a spiritual axiom, and I believe it, but here’s the deal about lies: there’s always someone out there who knows the truth. In the bizarre, rare circumstance where there were no witnesses, I’ve *never* been able to keep my mouth shut. I have always had to tell *someone*.

Still, how often do I act like this axiom doesn’t apply to me? For example, it never occurs to me when I’m backing out of our garage, setting off on a covert trip to the Holiday gas station for a bag or two of Angie’s lightly-sea-salted Boomchickapop (my favorite popcorn) and a couple of twenty ounce Pepsis. It’s my Curt’s-out-of-town debauchery, though Curt doesn’t really care what I eat, and he pays even less attention to the contents of our garbage. Still, the morning of the day he’s due back, my mind fires off a reminder to dispose of the neon green evidence. I gather up the trash and the recycling, I pull my fleece jacket on over my mismatched flannel pajamas and head out the back door. I imagine myself one of James Bond’s protégés as I

lift the lid of our recycle bin and bury my empty Pepsi bottles deep beneath the cereal boxes and newspaper.

When I confessed this behavior to a variety of friends, I learned I wasn't alone. I gained enough of a sense of humor about it that I was finally able to tell Curt. We had a good laugh, and I put that foolishness behind me, until the next time he went out of town.

Many years ago, I was on the phone with a friend of mine, lamenting over some strain of dishonesty that had just been exposed. I whined the tedious, rhetorical question, "But, *why?* Why do I do these things? *Why* can't I stop?" As if I was interested in changing.

My friend said, "Because you're getting something out of it, honey. If you weren't, you'd have moved on to something else by now."

It was such a simple explanation. I remember feeling stunned, like I was being beamed back down to Earth from the transporter deck of the Starship Enterprise, trapped in that weird rematerializing stage where only a particulate shadow of me was visible while I waited for the rest of my molecules to complete the journey through outer space.

"When the payoff goes away, you'll knock it off." She'd said it like it was good news, like I could be hopeful. "When your excuses wear thin—even for you."

*I said I was sorry. What more do you want? I was stuck in traffic (or road construction or behind the plow). I lost track of time. I need a new alarm clock. I meant to call. My phone died. Just until payday. I promise I'll pay you back. Oh, wow, you definitely misunderstood. Did I leave that part out? It must not have seemed important at the time. I don't know what you're talking about, Officer. No, sir, that's not mine. I have no idea how that got there. He's your boyfriend? Oops. I meant no disrespect. Um, that was a joke. Would it hurt you to lighten up? I*

*thought you knew. I was just pretending. I didn't want to hurt you. We were in a hurry. I swear you didn't look that bad. Seriously, if you would've asked, I would've told you. Why are you making a federal case out of this?*

What's the payoff in lying? Especially for people like me who have proven they'll lie about things no one even cares about. Especially when the freedom of a clear conscience feels so good: knowing I have nothing to hide, holding my head up and looking you in the eye, sleeping soundly through the night, knowing the lights flashing in the rearview mirror aren't gunning for me, getting back all of that time I would have wasted in managing the details of my lies. Why won't some of us own up, eat crow, and come clean once we've been found out? All the way back to fictional Adam, "Don't blame me, God. It was Eve's idea."

Money and material gain are obvious motivators, but they don't move everyone equally. Power is another juicy lure. Sometimes I just like believing that I'm smarter than you, or that I'm above the rules that seem to apply to everyone else. I have lied to save face, to protect my own ego, or perhaps even yours. I've lied to get a laugh, to draw attention to myself, to make people think I'm more interesting than I really am. I've lied when I couldn't reconcile reality with my fantasy of what should have been. I've lied when I thought it was the only way to get something I wanted, and I've lied to hang on to something I was unwilling to lose. I have lied out of plain, old-fashioned jealousy, when desperate steps were required to take you down a notch, to level the playing field, to give myself a fighting chance. I've lied altruistically, coming to the aid of a friend. Sometimes lies have just fallen out of my mouth; they dropped into my lap like that glob of hot dish that slipped off my fork, forcing a split-second decision about whether to own up to something so stupid or just let it stand.

So, the boon is a moving target. Not only is it different for all of us, it varies from lie to lie, and from telling to telling. The boon depends on a host of things: my audience, my emotional state, on what I want or fear most in any given moment, and whether I'm able to convince myself that I'm not *really* lying.

As powerful as it is, the payoff for lying is intensely fragile. It lives within a framework of reasoning, much like a plot. I kick it off with my initial excuse, but my conscience is rarely assuaged by such simplicity. So, I add on, complicating the plot, creating the foundation for suspension of disbelief because, without this scaffolding, my story will collapse.

A universal example: I had a hard day at work, and I don't look forward to another day of it tomorrow. I keep myself up far too late, vegging, entertaining myself with game after game of mind-numbing Minesweeper. I play until my mouse hand is a claw and my eyes stream tears of fatigue. When the alarm goes off in the morning, I smack the snooze button, and I think, *Wow. I feel like shit*. Every time the alarm sounds, I catalogue another reason that I'm too sick to go to work until my case is substantial enough to justify calling my boss. Whether I stay in bed or I move to the sofa, at some point, my conscience begins to suggest that I'm faking. In self-defense, I rehash my original list, and I continue to add to it as the day goes on.

Does that make me a liar? It's the classic flaw in every binary—life is rarely an either/or proposition. Conventional wisdom says liars can't be trusted, but I happen to know that people can trust me, mostly. Sure, I lie, but not about *everything*, and certainly not without good reason. When I have lied without good reason, it was something trivial. Mostly, though, I'm honest. I've never broken any *bad* laws. The primary difference between my lying and your lying rests in our clearance levels. I have full access to my own case file, but only minimal access to yours. I am

exonerated by my background material, but with no insight into yours, I am left to presume there is some deep weakness in your character. It keeps life tidy, if only in my mind, and that's enough for me.

That's the relative scale at work. We all have one. It's the secret measuring tape we whip out whenever we need to put some distance between ourselves and the liars of this world. It's the highly individualized continuum of mitigating circumstances, the list of obstacles that stand between me and telling the truth, the shit that provokes me to lie, that forces my hand. It's the spin that makes the claim, "If it had been up to me, I would have been straight with you from the start," seem so true.

## Pathos, Party of One?

I hoped the most recent edition of the DSM would include an entry for “Navel Gazing.” It’s an emotional condition that’s caused a lot of trouble in my life, easily as debilitating as some psychiatric disorders. The list of symptoms might include: an ability to focus almost exclusively on oneself, allowing life to be dictated by the whim of one’s feelings; an absolute faith in one’s ability to assess one’s own problems and to devise the solutions, in spite of the damning trail of evidence which suggests that one’s solutions are, in fact, worse than one’s problems; a dogged belief that the source of one’s problems will be found “out there,” rather than the natural consequence of one’s own actions; a myopic insistence on entrenching oneself in the problem-solution, coupled with a refusal to ask for (or accept offers of) outside help; when challenged, sufferers are armed with their analysis as to why *this time* is different. Not to be confused with narcissism, navel gazing is exacerbated by mantra-like, self-talk: “Trust me—you’ve got this.” “This is light lunch for someone like you.” “If you had a college degree, you *would* be dangerous.” “You were so close that time—don’t give up five minutes before the miracle.” “If only...”

When I was sixteen or seventeen, I deduced that I was allergic to citrus because every time I drank screwdrivers I got violently sick. I wasn’t drinking alone in those days, so my puking was no secret from my friends. When the other party-goers saw the panicked look on my face, they took a step back and flattened themselves against whatever was behind them, clearing my path to the john or the exit, whichever was closer. Still, I never discussed my problem with anyone—I never saw a doctor. I figured it out all by myself. It was among a handful of topics that kept me up at night, laying in my twin bed wondering *what is up with that?*

In this case, I reasoned that orange juice was highly acidic; that too much of it *would* be upsetting to a person's stomach, though I didn't think I was drinking enough of it to warrant getting *that* sick. Disregarding the second ingredient of screwdrivers altogether, I hypothesized that an allergy to citrus was the only explanation for all that vomiting. With the exception of Mountain Dew, I avoided citrus in all forms for well over ten years. When anyone offered me a glass of orange juice, I'd politely refuse. With a straight face, I'd say "No, thanks, I'm allergic." My mother's Jello-salad with Mandarin oranges? Same thing. "I couldn't possibly."

During my twenties, seeking some explanation for what often happened to me at closing time, I diagnosed myself with a hormonal imbalance. Evenings at the bar always started at a table, having a few beers, chumming with my girlfriends. Once the music started, I disappeared onto the dance floor, my beer in one hand and a cigarette and in the other. I only left the floor if I was about to pee myself, or if my glass was empty. I don't recall anyone ever offering to buy me a drink, and the rare man who asked me to dance never stayed for a second song. No matter, come last call, most nights there would be a guy looking to pair off and finish the night. As often as that happened, it felt accidental every single time. On the nights when there were no prospects, I climbed in my car and made a tour past the homes of various men I'd tried to date. I'd park out front of their place and smoke while I debated whether to ring their bell, calculating whether my reception would be a warm one.

Invariably I drove on until I was parked in front of my long-time, off-again, on-again, boyfriend's house. It was the last place I wanted to be, and the one place where I knew the door was always open. He and I went around and around for roughly nine years, tedious as can be. Every time he flatly refused to propose marriage, I threw a tantrum and broke it off. He never

tried to talk me out of leaving, nor did he turn me away any of the times I materialized on his stoop. Self-loathing had no appreciable effect on my behavior, and neither did any of the schemes I hatched to deter myself from what seemed so inevitable.

A side-effect of my hormonal imbalance was a nagging fear of pregnancy that plagued me from month-to-month. I refused to practice birth control during my windows of singleness—it would have signaled a degree of premeditation I couldn't possibly own up to. In contrast, every one of those hookups felt like fate-driven spontaneity: spontaneity that occurred no more than a few days after the end of my period, prior to ovulation, when I couldn't possibly get pregnant. I interpreted the fact that I only got pregnant once via this method as proof of my brilliance.

Today it's easy to see the fatal flaws in that logic, but I banked on those diagnoses for years, until the day I ventured to discuss it with my best friend. I said, "Why does this always happen to me?" As if they were accidents, as if I hadn't been present every step of the way.

"Teresa," she said, quite seriously, "this stuff only seems to happen to you when you've been drinking." A breeze blew the curtain back and the mystery was laid bare.

On my own, given my hearty appetite for historical romance novels, I was more inclined to believe I'd been born in the wrong century. It was lucky for me Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* wasn't published until 2005, or I'd have boarded a plane to Scotland and launched out on a quest to find a cleft in an ancient circle of stones where I could hurl myself back in time and be dropped into the path of a strapping Scottish Highlander. After some tussling, he and I would have lived happily ever after.

Sadly, these reasoning skills aren't confined to my drunken youth. More than once, after I pixied my hair, I gained weight. Ergo, short hair makes me fat. Standing up straight, I measure five-five but I was taking my meals, and my desserts, alongside my foodie husband who's six-two and has never experienced a fat day in his life.

Back in the day when credit cards still offered zero percent introductory interest rates, I racked up thousands of dollars in debt rolling balances from one card to the next. Logic said I would pay it off faster if there was no interest accruing. That is absolutely true. However, equally true, though entirely lost on me, is that the principal balance would continue climbing if I didn't stop using the cards.

This kind of logic goes a long way toward explaining why it took me nearly half the semester of General Psychology before I had even a basic grasp of the principle of parsimony. Parsimony says that when you are faced with competing hypotheses, the simplest possible explanation is also the best and most likely.

In my case, I never made it to competing hypotheses. I demonstrated a remarkable knack for honing in on the details that would support some explanation that wouldn't require any substantive change from me, the details that would allow me to remain mystified by the circumstances of my life. Sure, I agonized over these things, but I consistently overlooked the obvious, simpler explanation for my troubles.

Only when I took my hypotheses out into the light of day did things begin to shift, and then, only slowly. It was typically an act of desperation that drove me to confess—a well-rooted fear that I might actually be crazy. The relief I felt for having come clean was quickly

overwhelmed by a sense of horror that I'd betrayed myself. *Now they know. What have you done?* I met every offer of help and advice with passive belligerence, "Honestly! I'll be okay."

Still, I carried the new information with me into my next period of rumination. The seed had been planted. My gaze had been lifted, if only the tiniest bit, up and away from my navel.

"I think I need to see a doctor," my friend Martha confided. "My anxiety is back, and it is *really* kicking my ass. I've been hoping it's temporary, but it's not going away."

I asked her, "You drink coffee, don't you?"

"Yeah. So?"

"How much coffee do you drink?"

"No more than unusual."

"What's 'usual' for you?"

"I don't know. A couple of cups."

I forced myself to draw a slow breath before I asked, "So, how big is your cup?"

"I don't know! It's the same cup I use every day. What the fuck?"

"Seems like it's worth paying attention to. Whatever's making you anxious, pouring a vat of coffee on top of it can't help."

Silence.

"How much do you smoke?"

She answered, "Seriously?"

"It's in the same family—don't you think? Stimulants? The stuff that gets us fired up—fight or flight, and all of that. I'm not saying don't talk to a doctor, but it seems reasonable that you'd want to mention your coffee and cigarette habits. That's all."

More silence.

Many of us have our “go-to,” our crusades, our pet culprits that, we think, explain everything. For me, it’s capitalism and the strain of living in an unsustainable consumer culture. For others, it’s lunar cycles, astrology, past lives or domineering parents. Some people rely on nutrition: sugar, white flour, processed foods, dyes, additives and preservatives. Still others think psychiatric disorders are at the root: anxiety, bipolar, depression and ADHD are ubiquitous these days. It’s interesting how we describe them in the possessive—your depression, my anxiety.

My cell phone jerked to life, vibrating in tiny circles across my desk. The calypso ring tone would have been less jarring. It was the least offensive of the stock tones that came with the phone, but I didn’t want to be associated with it in public. I opened the clamshell. “Hello?”

“Hey. Are you busy?” It was Martha.

“I’m at work...”

She continued over the top of me. “I just got done with that counseling appointment...”

In addition to a prescription for anti-anxiety meds, her GP recommended counseling. Martha ignored my advice about mentioning caffeine or nicotine, and the doc hadn’t asked. For whatever reason, Martha had held off on filling the script until after she met with the counselor.

“The counselor told me I should talk to you. Can you talk?”

“Okay....what’s going on?”

“No, I mean in person. I’m outside your building. Can you come out?”

When I rounded the corner of the building, I saw Martha across the street, complying with the “No Smoking within Thirty Feet of Building” rule. We met up in the shade of a boulevard tree. “Alright, here I am. What’s up?”

“I know why I’ve been so anxious,” she said, taking a dramatic pull from her cigarette.

“Wow—that’s fast work—all in the first session.” I waited.

She exhaled a cloud of smoke. “We’ve been dealing weed.” Not exactly a blurt, but close enough.

“Seriously?” We stood still, both of us quiet. I knew I’d heard her. “So, what does that mean, exactly? ‘Dealing’?”

After another pull from her cigarette, “Barry’s been bringing loads of it back from California with him. His parents have a medical marijuana license. Remember?”

“How much weed are we talking about?”

“Altogether? Or each trip?” Then, in response to the look on my face, “Oh, sorry. Never mind. Pounds. Pounds of it on each trip. I’ve lost track of how many trips. We haven’t been selling it though. We’re not making any money. I mean, not like that. He just delivers it to the next person—to the people who sell it. Well, they pay him for making the trip, but that’s it.”

I burst out laughing. “So there’s no mystery then, is there.”

“What do you mean?”

“It seems like anxiety would be a normal reaction to transporting drugs across interstate lines? Stop doing that, and your problem is solved.”

I could tell by the expression on her face that what seemed an obvious, easy solution to me wasn’t the least bit encouraging or hopeful to her.

While I don't suffer from drug-running-induced anxiety, I have my share of irrational tendencies whose origins are a mystery to me. Example: I wish I wasn't always tired. I get up at 6am, I refuse to go to bed before 11pm; most of what I eat has little nutritional value, and I rely heavily on coffee to remain upright. I don't think any of that is relevant to my weary bitchiness or the catty intolerance I experience while driving in highway traffic when I find myself trapped behind anyone traveling below the posted limit. If I had more time, I might go to the doctor and have my thyroid checked.

Here's another: I'm twenty pounds overweight and peri-menopausal. My metabolism has slowed down; it's harder for me to lose weight. In a weak moment of health-consciousness, I joined Snap Fitness. The promise of a twenty-dollar rebate from my health insurance motivates me to go at least twelve times every month. Most visits, I can keep myself on the elliptical machine for a full thirty minutes, but there are also those times when the massage-a-lounger over in the corner calls to me. It reminds me about my fatigue, and cautions me against pushing too hard, against risking a heart attack and leaving my loved ones bereft.

Weight Watchers worked for me both times I tried it, for just as long as I stuck to the plan. I made strong starts but, without fail, soon started cutting corners. I'd sit quietly in the meetings, jotting down helpful hints to trick myself into not feeling deprived. On my way out, I'd buy boxes of whatever two-point snacks were on sale that week, then I'd inhale the whole box almost as soon as I was back within the safety of my cubicle.

One day, after a disappointing weigh-in, one of the leaders cautioned me to avoid fluids for an hour before weighing in. "A pint of fluid equals a full pound on the scale," she said.

Don't eat breakfast that day. Don't wear jeans or heavy jewelry. Pee before you get on the scale, even if you don't feel like you have to go—every ounce matters. I remember feeling

particularly clever when I started scheduling my Red Cross blood donations just prior to my weigh-in.

When I explained my new angle to my friend Stacy, she just shook her head. Playing by the rules that apply to all of us (eat less and move more), she'd lost over a hundred pounds and has managed to keep it off for well over five years. I'm happy for Stacy's success; she's found sanity with food and exercise. Diet Coke was a staple for her, even after her naturopath told her that aspartame, a prominent ingredient in diet sodas, has strong links to the chronic migraine headaches that Stacy suffered. She agreed to cut back to only one or two twenty ounce bottles a day, though she had no intention of kicking the habit entirely. Stacy is willing to endure periodic, incapacitating migraines—the nausea and vomiting and sensitivity to light, the cap of pain—in exchange for caramel-colored, aspartame-laced, fizzy deliciousness.

That's the thing. I get to decide, and what I decide seems dependent on the vacuum lock between my eyes and my bellybutton. If I never look up, I'll never be confronted by the truth. Compulsions fall into the same category, I think. They're another form of emotional trouble; another means of deceiving myself.

Sometimes these things are born by an act of kindness. My daughter grew up in the heart of Beanie Baby madness. Her best friend had the squirrel, named "Nuts," an ironic portent, and she wanted one to match. At five bucks, it was easily affordable, so I agreed. Sweet as can be, she took that squirrel with her everywhere she went. No harm in any of that.

Then, and I'm not even sure how, it mutated into an all-consuming *thing*: a collection. It started small and sweet, on Saturday afternoons during the winter we'd make the rounds of the

stores that carried them. I'd let her choose two or three—the few that she couldn't live without. Before long, we were rooting through the bins, snapping up anything new *and* anything that was missing from her collection. The next thing I knew, I was ducking out of work for an hour here and there, conducting surgical strikes in a quick loop past the nearby stores.

Then one day I got curious about how much we'd spent—*invested* was the story I'd been telling myself. Conservatively? Over a thousand dollars. Add to that the time spent driving around town on the hunt for the latest releases to round out her collection. Plus the time spent browsing the internet to replace the discontinued bunnies that our little dog mutilated, and the time devoted to maintaining the spreadsheet I created to help her keep track of all this. I wondered how many pounds of Beanie Babies we'd hauled home in our luggage after her grandparents went overboard at Christmas.

That evening, after I'd finished doing the math, I sat my daughter down. I broke the news to her as gently as I could. "This has to stop," I concluded.

Unfazed, she said, "Okay." No tears, no wringing of hands, no begging. She meant it.

I'd been telling people this was *her* obsession, yet there she sat, a-okay with the fact that it was over. I was profoundly baffled. The veil lifted just enough to show me that while she had been safely tucked away at school, I'd been the one acting like a lunatic.

On one hand, I'm convinced that I am in control: I'm an adult—I *know* what I'm talking about. On the other hand, I suspect I'm clueless. Psychologists call this "cognitive dissonance." It's the discomfort we feel when the actions we're taking conflict with our idea of ourselves. Cognitive dissonance is the process we go through as we try to resolve the conflict, or escape the discomfort, depending on one's maturity and mental health. We either adjust our behavior, or we

find an answer we can live with until further conflicting evidence is revealed. Then we have another opportunity to do something different. Bah-dump-bump.

More than once, I have been mortified to see how long I'd been clinging to some particular delusion. That citrus allergy lasted nearly fifteen years. My relationship with my first husband lasted ten where, in reality, we probably shouldn't have had a second date.

Over and over again I have cast myself in the leading role of my melodrama. Sometimes it's the combination superpower/curse: the thing that sets me apart, that makes me larger than life yet dooms me to isolation. Sometimes I'm the tortured soul courageously shouldering her burden alone. Sometimes I'm the hapless victim you scream at in horror films—the idiot girl who has no choice but to take that turn down the dark alley. The persona depends on the day. No matter the role, though, I emerge heroic, larger than life.

Recently I told a woman I know, “I think too much.”

She said, “Or maybe not enough.”

The evidence seems to support her assessment: the diversions I've stumbled into, then painstakingly nurtured into bad habits without forethought to where they would lead. When I've made efforts to resist my impulses, my mind has always been poised with solid reasons why *this* budding foolishness is my only reasonable course of action. Sometimes I can see through the lies, and other times I fall for them. I give thanks reality TV didn't exist when I was at my most vulnerable.

I could write myself off as an outlier, or even a nut-job, and be done with it, except I'm not the only person exercising this strain of analytical dexterity. An hour of channel surfing proves that. The poor lactose intolerant people have Lactaid to help manage the side-effects of consuming dairy products, because no one should have to live without cheese or ice cream.

We've got Larry the Cable Guy pitching Prilosec. In his bib overalls and torn off sleeves, he assures us that it's just plain American to eat and drink whatever we like—consequences be damned. Heh-heh. If we're smart (like him), we'll evade heartburn by taking Prilosec before we gorge ourselves on brats and baked beans. If something doesn't agree with you, you're just not taking the right stuff. We turn to daytime talk shows and reality TV for help in solving our problems. Only Maury Povich's producers can count the paternity mysteries he has sorted out, and there's no shortage of people vying for spots on Jerry Springer or the next season of the Bachelor.

I know mental illness and trauma are real. I know people endure disastrous, horrible events. I think anxiety disorders are debilitating for many people—I mean them no disrespect. But there are also people like me who overdramatize simple matters of day-to-day living; people who lay claim to diagnoses without having a remote clue what they really are; people looking for any explanation that will allow them to keep on keepin' on rather than face the heavy lifting of changing; people whose gaze is resolutely fixed on their navel.

So, why do we do it? Especially when so many of our solutions/diagnoses turn out to be worse than the initial problem we set out to solve?

I think there's a growing line of people who expect life to be smooth sailing, who believe life is easy for everyone except them. When we fall anywhere short of good and confident and okay, we get busy looking for the culprit, the thing that's screwing us up, the thing that's to blame. Some of us hustle off to doctors demanding answers. How many of us give them the whole story? How many of us withhold information or offer false symptoms to support our own diagnosis? How many doctors don't ask the right questions or, worse, don't know who they're up against?

And maybe there's an adjacent line for those of us who can't make the connection between our actions and what turns out to be their logical consequences. We're consistently mystified about why we're *not right*, why we *feel* funny, why we *do* the things that we do.

I imagine some of us have a foot in both of these lines, like those people you see at Costco or Target or the grocery store, the ones who work like hell to maintain their position in two checkout lanes in case one of them bogs down. We're the people who can't stand feeling like the asshole that chose poorly and got themselves stuck in the slow line.

Even if I am deceiving myself, I don't want to know about it.

## The Race Card

I almost spit my coffee when I read that morning's top headline on MSNBC's website: "Obama: Some folks 'don't like the idea of a black president.'"

Well. There you go. He said it himself—out loud—during an interview with the *New Yorker*. I'm sure others have said it publicly. It probably wasn't even the first time the president had said it. Still, it felt like someone had just called out the elephant in the living room—the detail that we all dance around when we debate the reasons for the latest spate of Congressional stalemates, as panels of talking heads opine and wring their hands over why President Obama can't seem to get anything done, why no one will work with him. I don't know how many times I've hollered back at my TV, "It's because he's black!" It seems so obvious to me, though I'm often told it's not that simple.

Within hours, MSNBC updated their banner with news that Sarah Palin had taken to Facebook to chastise the President for playing the race card. Tsk-tsk, Mr. President—Martin Luther King, Jr., would be ashamed.

"The race card" is a handy phrase. Like a cobra, it rises in response to mentions of racial discrimination, and even racial awareness: it flares its hood and bares its fangs, simultaneously issuing its hair-raising hiss. A prudent person, stumbling into such hostility, takes careful steps backward, moving beyond the snake's striking distance as quickly as possible.

"The race card" is a phrase that most effectively serves to shut down meaningful attempts at conversation about race. What if we followed the LGBT community's example in taking back the word "queer"? What if we reclaim the "the race card," what if we changed our reaction to it,

took away its power to shut us down? What if we started responding to it for what it really is: an opportunity for a serious conversation about race.

This catchy axiom gained big traction during the 1995 criminal trial of O.J. Simpson, wherein his defense team leveraged LAPD Detective Mark Fuhrman's bigotry as a means of tainting key physical evidence taken from Simpson's residence.

A succinct definition of "the race card" is hard to pin down. It's most often seen as a tool employed by ethnic minorities, invoked as they try to evade personal responsibility for the circumstances of their lives. When racial minorities risk characterizing the barriers they face as evidence of discrimination, they are accused of playing the race card.

I would argue that the race card—or *a* race card, anyway—is also expressed in white America's constant reminders about how far we've come as a nation; when we take comfort from films like *Twelve Years a Slave*, grateful that *those* days are history, and that *that* kind of racism is long behind us; the gushing expressions of pride and gratitude for what progress we have made; the demand for still more patience as we continue to inch our way forward, toward equality. "Can't you see we're working on it?"

The term "colonized mind" seems relevant to this conversation. It's used to describe a phenomenon that occurs in oppressed peoples: it's a common consequence of repressive social constructs. A colonized mind is characterized by the subordinate group's desire and efforts to follow the customs and traditions of their oppressors. The oppressed people are assimilated to such a degree that the absorbed reality becomes the standard for "normal."

However, the colonized mind isn't a one-way street that oppressed groups of people travel alone. While the aspect of emulation doesn't go both ways, members of the dominant group are firm in their convictions that the status quo represents what is "normal."

We can see the white colonized mind at work in the racist posture that Native Americans were savages, and in the practice of removing Indian children from their families and putting them in assimilation schools. We see it in the racist minds of plantation owners who believed slavery was the appropriate order of things, and in the economic infrastructure that thrived on slave labor. We see it in the racism of Jim Crow's delusional "separate, but equal." We see it today, too: when we accept the premise that the ratio of white to non-white prison inmates is consistent with the ratio of white to non-white lawbreakers in the United States; when people of color successfully compete for opportunities, and their achievement is diminished by attributing it to quotas, that's evidence of the colonized mind.

Stereotypes get muddled into this as well: the reflexive, snap judgments we make about people based on skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity, religious affiliation, primary language, the clothes we wear, where we live, the work we do, and the car we drive, if we're able to afford a car. Young black men get labeled "thugs" for wearing saggy pants, while Justin Bieber is just a dipshit boy who needs to hitch up his pants.

Why is race so hard for some of us to talk about? White guilt and non-white victimhood are widely known and discussed. But what if I don't see myself in either of those categories? Am I excused from considering race at a more personal level? Cultural difficulties with talking about race aren't limited to "out there" in the larger cultural institutions—they also occur much closer

to home. No matter the color of my skin or my ethnicity, to live in the United States is to be affected by race. Whatever we might tell ourselves, there is simply no escaping it.

I must have been held up at work; late enough that it didn't make sense to go home before my next obligation that evening. Lucky for me, the locally owned organic market was between my job and point B. Their hot food bar always had something greasy and comforting. It must have been a busy time at work; busy enough that I'd felt obligated to bring work home with me, work that I planned to at least try to read while I ate my dinner. The manila folder at the top of the pile lay open on the table, just beyond my plate. This far past the dinner rush I didn't feel bad about hogging a four-top all to myself. It must've have been winter because the dining area had a low-lit, cozy feel, and I remember the glow of street lamps in the parking lot. I ate, and I read.

A shadow stepped into my peripheral vision. It was a woman I was acquainted with; a kind and gentle woman, a poet, admired and respected by many of our mutual acquaintances, though I knew she didn't like me much. I didn't dislike her—I didn't know her well enough. We were always cordial to one another when we landed next to each other in various circles, but there was always a palpable tension. Now here she was, Kerri Kumasaka, standing next to my table with a pained smile on her face and what appeared a heavy burden on her shoulders.

"I'm glad to see you here," she said. "Can I interrupt? There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

"Please. Absolutely," I replied. *Shit, oh dear.* When had such a conversation starter ever led me anyplace that I genuinely wanted to go?

“I don’t know if you remember that night we were out at Riverside, when you were telling the story of your high school nickname?”

“Last year. I remember.” I said. I wasn’t lying—I did remember.

“Well, it’s been with me ever since: ‘Tokyo Tess.’ I’ve just never had the courage to say anything to you about it until I walked in here tonight and saw you sitting by yourself.”

Breathing only as deeply as my sternum, I said nothing. I don’t remember setting my fork down or sitting back in the chair. I remember the aggravating squeak of the chair’s weave of plastic tubing rubbing against itself as my weight shifted. I remember the shock of the cool aluminum armrests against the palms of my hands.

“I just need to let you know what a bigoted thing that was. How damaging.” Then she was quiet.

I’ve no idea how long I was quiet before I answered her. “It was the seventies. I was a dipshit teenager.” A pothead, dipshit teenager who worked the lunch rush at “Hong Kong,” the Chinese restaurant in my neighborhood. When I smoked weed, which back then was several times a day, my eyelids collapsed, which is what inspired the nickname.

“Well, you weren’t a teenager when you told the story, were you? When you pulled the corners of your eyes back to paint the picture for those girls?” She let that hang for a few seconds before she added, “And besides that, Tokyo’s not in China. It’s in Japan.”

I remember staring at her, speechless, tears welling in my eyes. I remember making a hushed defense, “I’m not a racist.” I had no malice toward Asians.

I remember her saying something along the lines of how glad she was to have screwed up the courage to come and talk to me, to get this off her chest before she pushed her chair back and made her way over to the hot food bar, to make up her plate, to enjoy her dinner. When she had

rounded the corner and I was alone again, I went through the motions of finishing my meal, pretending to read the paperwork spread out on the table in front of me.

I'd been telling that story, the story of my nickname, for years. Only ever as a means of revealing what a loser I'd been in high school, of pointing out how much opportunity I'd squandered as a result of my pot habit, and always to big laughs. It never occurred to me that it was racist. My mind grabbed for evidence to refute what I interpreted as an accusation: I had been friends with Beverly Rhines, my classmate from the only black family in my neighborhood, and with other black girls in my elementary school; when I heard my sweet grandmother refer to Brazil nuts as "nigger toes," I'd openly chastised her; I had loved working for Ray Moy at Hong Kong—he employed half my family and he was the main reason my dad fell in love with Chinese food; when I worked at Barnes and Noble's corporate headquarters in Manhattan, most of my staff was Black or Latino or gay; my first husband was Colombian; I voted for President Obama—his was the first political sign I ever agreed to stake in my front yard.

A tidy list of the superficial markers white people commonly invoke as proof that we're not racist. According to Dictionary.com, a racist is "a person who believes in racism, the doctrine that a certain race is superior to any or all others."

Well, then, that settles that—I'm not a racist.

*Then what are you?* A voice from the corner of my brain comes forward to remind me about all the racist jokes I'd told and retold, and laughed at, for too many years. This isn't something I want my friends and colleagues to know about me.

*What about that day back in high school?*

It was 1977 or '78; tenth grade for me and the thick of court-ordered desegregation for Minneapolis Public Schools. My boyfriend must have had a different schedule that day, or I'd have been riding shotgun in his two-door LeSabre, cruising Minnehaha Parkway and getting stoned. Instead, I was walking east on 50<sup>th</sup> Street, hustling to Nicollet Avenue to catch the number 18.

I saw the two young, black men coming from the opposite direction; they were just walking, like me. I presumed they were fellow Washburn students, though I didn't know them. When we neared each other, I averted my gaze, looking to the ground as I passed by. Nothing in me expected the shoulder check. It wasn't hard enough to knock me down, but it was enough to force me off the sidewalk onto the grass of the boulevard. I turned to face them and probably said something like, "What the fuck?"

One of them stepped forward and slapped me hard across the face. He said something like, "Turn around and keep going, unless you want it again."

Outnumbered and overpowered, I turned again and started back toward the bus stop. Scared and shaking at first, but angrier with every step I took. At some point, likely when I reached what felt like a safe distance, I started walking backward, yelling "Fucking niggers!" back up the street. I was still hollering it when I got to the corner, and when the big, red MTC pulled to a stop. The scowl on the black bus driver's face made it clear that he'd heard my rant. I was embarrassed, but I didn't bother trying to defend myself. I plunked my fare in the meter and found a seat.

So, where did that come from? There was no gray area about this—I had screamed at those guys like a racist. If they had been white, I've no doubt I'd have screamed "Fuckers!" at the top of my lungs. But there's also a chance I might have known them, or recognized them, or

at least looked them in the eye and said “Hey” as I walked past. I wonder whether a simple greeting, or some gesture of acknowledgment, would have changed that situation.

My school was integrated: my circle of friends was not. Between ninth and tenth grades I fell in with the group of kids who lurked around in the parking lot at Diamond Lake Lanes, smoking weed and begging the twenty-somethings to make trips to the liquor store for us. Our niche of South Minneapolis was predominantly white, so that’s who our friends were. No person of color ever showed up looking to join our circle.

Was it that straightforward? That benign? Is that how we were able to get away with telling each other racist jokes while ignoring the implications of what that said about us? Everyone in our little cluster of potheads looked alike. Did that insulation make everyone beyond the circle fair game?

I can’t blame my parents for my bigotry; racism wasn’t part of the atmosphere in our home. In fact, my father had a lot of respect for Mr. Rhines, my neighbor Beverly’s father, who was a Minneapolis policeman. When Mr. Rhines called to warn my parents that he’d seen me hanging around the bowling alley, a haven to known drug dealers, they took it seriously and confronted me.

“He’s crazy—he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” Though I’d taken the time to squirt a few drops of Visine in my eyes before I came home, they clearly sided with Mr. Rhines.

All of my parents’s friends were white, but this also seems understandable given the fact of my mother’s Norwegian heritage. Both of her parents were immigrants; she’s the first generation born here in the U.S. My mother has been a member of the Sons of Norway since she

was a teenager, and my Irish father married into it, so our family's strongest social connections have always been through their lodge friends.

These are the mental gymnastics I go through when I think about myself in relation to race. My closest friends continue to be white, as are most of my acquaintances. Sometimes I wonder why that is but mostly, I presume it's normal, and then I quickly move on. I never look too closely—I wouldn't know what to make of it, or what to do with any damning information that I might find. Plus, it seems a little mercenary to go out looking for brown friends for the sake of having brown friends. Does my past makes me sheepish? Am I afraid of being found out?

These days I can comfortably claim I'm not a racist, but I can't deny my past. So, what happened to me? What shifted in me that made those jokes I was so fond of telling stop being funny? What changed that I started to be able to see them for what they were—mean, and wrong.

During the mid-eighties, I worked at B. Dalton's corporate headquarters in Edina. A couple years after the company was bought out by Barnes and Noble, I moved to New York City as part of the last wave of consolidation to their corporate offices on Fifth Avenue. It was 1988, and I was twenty-six. I moved into an apartment in Kew Gardens, a neighborhood in Queens that was about an hour from Manhattan by subway.

Overnight, I was thrust into this hugely diverse metropolis. To and from work, I was no longer isolated in the cab of my little Chevy S-10, pickup truck—I was among hoards of people, sandwiched into tightly packed subway cars with all of the other commuters. I remember the sense of satisfaction that came with squeezing into the subway car just before the doors slid shut, and then oozing my way to one of the vertical grab bars where it would be easier for me to

maintain my balance as the train moved from station to station. On the street, I navigated in and through throngs of people on crowded sidewalks, edging my way to the curb at intersections so I could capitalize on any break in traffic rather than wait for a walk signal.

Professionally, I was responsible for supervising the administrative support staff in the merchandising department. Of the twelve or so people among my staff, including the ones that I interviewed and hired, some of us were straight and some of us were gay; some of us were white, some black, some Latino, but I don't think any of us shared the same ethnic background.

One day, I was waiting for the subway, probably reading a book while I waited for my train. It wasn't rush hour, nor was the station deserted. I remember glancing up from my book, becoming aware that I was the only white person on the subway platform. I remember trying to act casual as I confirmed that it was true.

I remember the overwhelming sense of relief—we were all different. Up to that point in my life, I had invested an inordinate amount of time and energy in comparing myself to other people, especially women. As far back as elementary school, starting with Christina Holtan, the neighbor across the street who had perfect blonde hair and a training bra. It was an exhausting way to live. That day on the subway platform there was no need to compare—I recognized there was no point in it.

The race card is an insidious thing, as is the dynamic that gets played out when people are publicly outed for racial transgressions: we shame the bejeezus out of them and demand public apologies. Then, when the news cycle has run its course, that particular incident gets swept under the rug, until the next bigot is exposed, and we do it all over again. In this atmosphere, there's no safe way to discuss race, at least not in any deeply personal way. Too many of us are afraid to

risk being found out as shit-heels, past or present, afraid to risk exposing our bigotry, or our ignorance, fearful of the convenient personal or cultural scapegoating that might go along with these types of confessions.

Why would I come forward and volunteer to sort out my reprehensible history when castigation is the likely end? How can we learn to talk about race and white privilege if we can't keep ourselves at the table long enough to bumble our way through to the other side of this awkward and potentially volatile conversation?

When we refuse to talk openly about matters of race, when we invoke “the race card,” we effectively force our blind spots into hiding. That’s how we con ourselves into pretending racism and discrimination are things of the past. What if “the race card” is a red flag, an alert that tells us something—some racial thing—is desperately trying to skirt our attention. What if it’s no different than any other alarm system? When we ignore it, it’s at our own peril.