

## THE ART OF LYING

Once I excused my daughter's absence from school with a lie. We wanted to get a jump on traffic for our vacation, so I told Sister Paulette that Bonnie would be attending her great-uncle Max's funeral on Friday. Indeed, he had passed away last winter, the touch of truth that made the lie easier. It takes some chutzpa to lie to a nun, though people of all ages have been doing it for years.

What did I feel? About twelve years old, like one of the girls roaming around me in their hiked-up blue skirts.

But I was determined, with a specific purpose in mind: we would leave early for vacation and avoid the Friday rush. Bonnie's commitment to her classes and Sister Paulette were the only obstacles. My lie, like most lies, was a method of achieving my goal. Our goal, my family's goal, that of expediency or safety or however I justified it at the time.

I was also careful, perhaps more so than the uniformed teenagers around me. After all, I was replacing the truth with a falsehood and it had to be believable, with characters, details, motivations. Believable, but simple; I couldn't imagine myself reciting an elaborate story, sustaining that kind of false energy.

"Liars should have good memories." —An old proverb.

Two weeks later, well-rested and back in my routine of dropping Bonnie off at school, seeing her safely inside, then leaving for work, Sister Paulette pulled me aside. We sat together under the bronze crucifix and sentimental portrait of Our Savior, the office a whirlwind of bells, buzzers, and flicked ponytails. I wondered if the school was bankrupt and she was breaking the news to each parent individually. Or maybe

Bonnie was in trouble of some kind. I was alert and confused. Sister Paulette held my hands in hers and peered directly into my pupils, as if to mark whether or not they were contracting. She whispered, "I'm so sorry for your loss."

Loss. *What loss?* My chin dropped. I glanced to the left, hoping to recover my bearings. I felt a pilot light catch under my skin and heat climb. I had forgotten all about the long suffering uncle. My response came after a long pause, during which time I was frantically searching my back-up files. "Sorry for your loss," I repeated. "Oh, that loss. Well, he was a distant uncle. We were not very close to him."

Sister Paulette saw it all. If she hadn't been 100% confident before, she must have noticed my relief when the subject changed, and we began to discuss the air-conditioned county in Wisconsin where we relaxed and recreated. If I had been telling the truth, I might have been a bit more eager to return to the theme. A woman who has lost someone wears her grief like a plus-size coat: her skin droops, her shoulders slide. I was refreshed after my two weeks-and-a-day vacation and rather perky.

*The body never lies.* In its collusion with the truth, it avoids eye contact, limits movement of arms and hands. The liar is not likely to touch her chest, but fidgets a lot, grazing face, throat, hair. She backs up in her chair, sits stiffly, compresses her physical space. Timing and duration of emotional gestures are also slightly off—too short or late. When a liar is faking emotion—delight or grief—her facial expressions can't really get into it. Eyebrows furrow as if a fly were in the air, a smile's confined to the lips instead of the whole face.



Aphasics who have lost the ability to speak or understand language quickly develop an acute sensitivity to physical gesture. They are among the best lie detectors, notes Nancy L. Etcoff, and others, in *Nature* magazine. They pick up all their clues from watching a liar move, rather than listening to her speech.

My mother too was gifted with an unusually keen social intelligence, her “shit detector,” as she called it. She never trusted John Erlichman or Gordon Liddy *before* the Watergate scandal broke. Though Lutheran by baptism, she had a Jewish impatience with niceties, euphemisms, whitewashing, and could see from a mile away whether someone was lying to her.

This made my adolescence difficult. To honor my curfew, I went to bed at eleven, locked my door, climbed onto a chair under the window, cranked the handle, squeezed through, and dropped to the begonias below. Then I’d walk briskly to the bridge by Mohegan and Goldsboro where my boyfriend stood smoking under haloed streetlights. Night after night after night, our relationship secretly bloomed.

Weeding the side yard one hot afternoon, my mother spotted the crushed flowers. I blurted out an explanation: *It must have been those dogs. A whole pack of them. Look what they’ve done!* We both knew the real story. To my mother, it wasn’t worth the fight, so nothing surfaced, little changed, except perhaps my avoidance of her begonias when I leapt into the steamy dark.

In common use from the fourteenth all the way up to the seventeenth century was the adjective *gull*, of Germanic origin, which meant “yellow or pale.” The noun *gull* referred to “an unfledged bird, especially a gosling.” A young, inexperienced bird, pale and yellow, might be easily deceived. From this comes the word *gullible*.

Though pale, Sister Paulette was no fledg-

ling bird, sparrow, nor goose. Neither was my mother.

“. . . Kindness should override truth.”  
—Samuel Butler

I don’t think my parents ever lied to me. No, I take it back. The worst I remember is a kind of imprecision. When asked about the results of my IQ test, she responded “Oh, somewhere between mine and your father’s.” I could tell, in the name of tenderness, she allowed herself a white lie, a clean cloth over a knotty table. I was satisfied with her answer and sat like a sparrow, safe between my parents on the swaying intelligence wire.

The truth is often too hurtful, terrifying, unpleasant, mundane, or confusing to deal with. It begs embellishment. As a consequence, in varying degrees, for multiple reasons lying is an essential element of social interaction. Here are seven points on a possibly infinite list of examples:

- Joni Mitchell doesn’t wear make-up: “Not really . . . a little blush, concealer, a dash of mascara, a little color on the lips. And that’s it.” Joni wants us to think her beauty is effortless. The *Times* calls this “make-up denial.”

- My cousin suffered a bone infection that left her with a broad scar the color of masking tape on her shin. I stared and stared as children do, and when she noticed, I mustered terrific concern for the antique toy chest she was sitting on. *It might break with all that weight.*

- Please do not call them McMansions. They are *luxury estates*, a phrase that conjures up Versailles, Fontainebleau, Kensington Gardens in the shade-dappled, rolling hills of England or France. For a mere \$5 or 6 million, you too

can be a count, lord and lady, prince or princess from a long line of blue bloods.

- One summer in Maine, remembering a phrase I'd read somewhere, I pronounced, "The novel is nearing extinction." Smart enough to see this was a provocative idea, I assumed I could call it my own and leave it at that. Across the huge walnut table, my brother-in-law Karl perked up and asked me to elaborate. But I hadn't read any further, so the conversation fell over a cliff.

- The director promises to get you started in the very next play, scheduled for spring. When you don't sleep with him, the part never materializes; you can't even get him on the phone.

- "I did not have sexual relations with that woman," said President Clinton. Note his avoidance of the contraction "didn't," his formalizing, distancing himself from Monica Lewinsky. Thousands of teenagers are now "abstaining from sex" by practicing fellatio. This benefits boys in particular, a happy new population of Little Bills.

- Claire Wallace was a chronic prevaricator, clear-faced and calm no matter whom she was lying to. When I met her father, a mean, angular man, his temper ever on low boil, I understood.

A lie is a social tool. We lie to avoid consequences—hurting the feelings of a loved one, embarrassment, a "time-out," failure, impeachment, jail, or sometimes just because it's easier than relaying the complicated truth (I borrowed the sweater from my sister who borrowed it from her roommate who bought it at a thrift shop. Or: Thank you. I don't remember where I got it). We also lie to get something we want, whether it is a fluffier version of our lackluster selves, a longer vacation, membership in some elite intellectual group, or a house in Pacific Palisades.

Even animals will lie. Our hound-dog Emma sleeps on the living room couch; it's her spot, her kingdom. When her sibling Monty hops up there before her, she rushes to the front door to let roll her mellifluous, hound-dog bellow. There is, of course, no intruder. We all know she's faking except Monty, who jumps off the couch to join in the fray. Who can blame him? It's the wolf's cry, the irresistible bugle call of the hunt. He's bewitched, and falls for it every time. As soon as he lands on all fours, Emma stops barking abruptly and leaps onto the couch before Monty knows what hit him.

One could easily point to cases in the animal kingdom where lying is a virtue. Consider the nesting plover who spots a predator and immediately begins an elaborate charade of limping, squealing, dragging, and dipping of one supposedly broken wing towards an adjacent sand dune and away from her brood. Animals dissemble for many of the same reasons we do. Monty's hair rises along his spine and he grows two inches taller. A magnificent frigate bird puffs up its scarlet feathers until its throat is bigger than a bear's heart. Plants too: The mountain laurel's pollen-coated, spring-loaded stamens are painted a bright, alluring pink. From scent and color, the lady slipper creates a tantalizing canoe-shaped trap for bees and spiders.

Rocks and cement do not lie. The very idea is absurd. It appears the lie is a characteristic of *living* things, an extension of Darwinian notions of natural selection. The liar, whether plant or animal, casts a spell for a handful of reasons: to jump-start the reproductive process, protect their young, defend their territory, escape predation, scare or intimidate rivals, or otherwise appear more fit in the world's eye.



“THE ART OF LYING”

“The most enchanting things in nature and art are based on deception.” –Vladimir Nabokov.

Here is a poem that describes a deception-gone-wild, from Jeffrey Harrison’s collection, *Feeding the Fire*:

“Our Other Sister”

*The cruelest thing I did to my younger sister  
wasn't shooting a homemade blowdart into her knee,  
where it dangled for a breathless second*

*before dropping off, but telling her we had  
another, older sister who'd gone away.  
What my motives were I can't recall: a whim,*

*or was it some need of mine to toy with loss,  
to probe the ache of imaginary wounds?  
But that first sentence was like a string of DNA*

*that replicated itself in coiling lies  
when my sister began asking her desperate questions.  
I called our older sister Isabel*

*and gave her hazel eyes and long blonde hair.  
I had her run away to California  
where she took drugs and made hippie jewelry.*

*Before I knew it, she'd moved to Santa Fe  
and opened a shop. She sent a postcard  
every year or so, but she'd stopped calling.*

*I can still see my younger sister staring at me,  
her eyes widening with desolation  
then filling with tears. I can still remember*

*how thrilled and horrified I was  
that something I'd just made up  
had that kind of power, and I can just feel*

*the blowdart of remorse stabbing me in the heart  
as I rushed to tell her none of it was true.  
But it was too late. Our other sister*

*had already taken shape, and we could not  
call her back from her life far away  
or tell her how badly we missed her.*

The first false sentence the speaker recalls in this poem—the pronouncement and vague shape of another sister—is the easiest. But a lie is seldom solitary; it begs another and another, until an imaginary skeleton is built, bone by bone, muscle and flesh, a sister-hologram with hobbies, home, hair. The greater the detail, the less likely she will crumble. The longer her history, the greater the strain upon the liar until he can't even make the truth believable, and must suffer “the blowdart of remorse.”

Initially, the speaker lies to get what he wants. Perhaps it began with a whim. Or big-brother meanness, like the homemade blowdart. Perhaps indeed the speaker was “toying with loss,” or “prob[ing] the ache of imaginary wounds.” Whatever the motivation, the lie flatters the liar. Like “the novel is extinct” or Joni Mitchell’s “make-up denial,” or the frigate bird’s magnificent feathers, it allows him “that kind of power.”

True consciousness, the recognition of self separated from world, occurs at around age seven, the age at which a child also begins to lie. Teenagers are notorious liars. They lie about their whereabouts, drugs and alcohol, school attendance, grades, boyfriends, sex, mostly to avoid punishment from various authority figures. But they lie to their friends as well, boosting their intelligence, sexual experience, *cool* quotient. The high social pressure of adolescence makes them desperate for any and every kind of “spell.” It is often a way of *being*. Bonnie once told her teacher she had been abused and now

her parents were divorcing. She had noticed how victims were getting all the attention, their status clearly elevated to the point of celebrity. Again, we were pulled into the Sister’s office as the first step in a kind of intervention. We could see the open training manual on her desk, as well as a Xeroxed list of professional counselors.

Perhaps lying follows the natural curve of a child’s independence—my lie makes me NOT YOU. My lie makes me ME. Human beings are not ants who, lifelong, remain committed to their basic job description. We have the ability to depart from communal dependence. The lie, whether to avoid, or get something, is the primitive beginning of the effort to distinguish oneself.

Like most young people, I experimented with a variety of personas, from Amazonian firefighter to urban botanist to country school teacher. Only the poet stuck, but even then, in order to write poems, I faked masculinity. I dressed in jeans and flannel shirt, sat at a table swept clean of comforting objects. Then I imagined how a guy would see the mule grazing in my front yard, the piles of rotten osage oranges, dirt road winding out to our mailbox and grackles decimating the few tomatoes left in our garden. I feigned confidence. My voice deepened and I began to write, using description as a way in.

This maleness was where most of the published works came from back then, where the good ideas lived, or so it seemed. My poems



had almost nothing to do with my true life; they were chill, disembodied fabrications. But I believed in them, and they were successful, published in prestigious literary magazines.

Not long after, I married and had a baby, a colicky no-sleeper whose very existence squashed my conceit like an egg carton. Pretend to be a man, when your entire body is in service to a famished child, a *female* at her functional peak? After three years of this, I hardly recognized the person who had written my poems. It was absurd, even impossible to lie, to play the cowboy again, and pick up where I left off. I began a slow crawl back to some semblance of honesty in my work, and then to publish these poems at the level I had before. Now I partition off my identity, using my maiden or “professional” name for poems and essays, my married name for church newsletters and legal documents, and a little bit of both for my work in publishing. This fits right in with shifting notions of the “self.” We are made of *many* selves, not just one.

Over a lifetime, we float between honesty and fabrication, between conformity—our dependence on others—and the urge to be separate from them. Maybe the natural truth *is* dependence and the denial of it necessary for us to accomplish anything beyond basic survival.

In Harrison’s poem the speaker lies to his sister, his incentive a whim or cruelty or the need to appear larger than life, like the magnificent frigate bird. But what of the poem itself? Is the writer telling the truth? Was there a sister at all, trusting and loyal? If not, what are the writer’s motives in deceiving us? What can we make of

this enchantment inside an enchantment, writing that casts a spell on the reader too?

The con man may employ wit and cleverness in his scam, but his lie remains a “poor man’s lie,” with close ties to evolutionary pressure. His enchantment is basic and blunt. Freud would place the artist only slightly above the criminal. In his assessment: “[The artist] desires to win honor, power, wealth, fame and the love of women.”

But art is not solely a form of greed and self-aggrandizement. Harrison’s poem, by the nature of its medium, will never bring him more than a few dollars. At best, a successful poem will garner a thousand extra readers, hardly the legions of adoring fans that flock to rock concerts. Doesn’t the artist also: Compose a suite of songs to remember, or reactivate some past music in herself? Paint to safeguard the view from a farmhouse window, visualize a betrayal, pleasure, loss? Write to understand, clarify, generalize, move from the micro to the macro, the personal to the public, like a reverse set of Russian dolls?

Artists play with reality, whether they manipulate language, paint, or a digital camera. Call it poetic license, embellishment, or outright lying, they are loose in their allegiance to facts. How interesting that the word *fact* comes from the Latin *factum*, to do or make. It’s the same root for artifice, counterfeit, facade, facsimile. Icarus’s wings did not melt when he defied the warning and flew too close to the sun. A princess cannot *really* feel a pea under dozens of mattresses. Artists prevaricate in order to tell the truth.

Here’s another poem—mine—rife with deception:

“Homesickness”

*On another continent, my mother circles the farmhouse.  
She steams gnocci, tosses them in butter.*

*My mother and I have matching teeth, like a zipper.*

*If I fly home I'll lose eight hours. Were my car amphibious, the loss  
would be hardly perceptible.*

*There's always the mail. And the cell phone, like a human cowbell.  
Especially if you are loved.*

*She rings me from the bus stop, train station, grocery store.  
When it's time to pay, she says hang on. The bus pulls up, gotta go, so long!*

*Emotion: from the Latin emovere—to move away, “in transport.”*

*How would they land a jet in the country, gravel roads  
and all those electric fences?*

*I open my mail, a blue mountain of Mit Luftpost, Par Avion.*

*Genes are a kind of blue letter from a mother  
to her daughter: Good news, bad news.*

*What is a mother but a tooth's way of producing another tooth?*

My mother never lived in a farmhouse; she was raised in suburban Milwaukee. My mother and I do not have matching teeth, like a zipper. The zipper came first as an image of connection/disconnection; our teeth match only in the sense that all teeth match. It is not true that my mother rings me on the fly; in fact, she passed away 27 years ago, long before cell phones became the norm. It is true I've imagined her living on another continent in some lovely rural setting, like Portugal. “What is a mother,” I conclude, “but a tooth's way of producing another tooth?” This is a rather cold statement stumbled upon by fusing genetic “blue letters” and those

matching teeth—a drastic reduction of a mother's role, true to the poem, true perhaps of some mothers, but definitely not true of mine.

“Do you know how poetry started?” asked Nabokov in a *Playboy* interview. “I always think that it started when a cave boy came running back to the cave, through the tall grass, shouting as he ran, ‘Wolf, wolf,’ and there was no wolf. His baboon-like parents, great sticklers for the truth, gave him a hiding, no doubt, but poetry had been born—the tall story had been born in the tall grass.” Tall tales, yarns, fish stories, there are many names for this sort of lie. But in most



cases, the motives are similar: to entertain, yes, but also to get at a truth the facts won't allow. Perhaps lying has, by its narrow definition, been given a bad name. Maybe Ulysses is an elaborate lie, originating on the same ground as the Mafia don denying the assassination of an entire family. The difference is motivation and, of course, elaboration. The Mafioso's lie is simple survival. My lie to Sister Paulette was pure greed and selfish desire. The artist in her lie hints at a deeper definition of self and a greater organization of world. “Artistic growth,” said Willa Cather, “is a refining of the sense of truthfulness. The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is.”

“Where is your *Self* to be found? Always in the deepest enchantment that you have experienced.” —Hofmannsthal

Sister Paulette wore an indigo habit of the modern style, skirt just below the knee, sensible shoes. She was sturdy and moved nimbly for someone her age. I couldn't help but notice she'd sprung for the more expensive graduated lenses for her wire-rimmed glasses. After years spent absorbing and dodging various crises,

demands, and fibs, she was a solid combination of common sense, spiritual discipline, and perhaps the slightest hint of vanity.

Or, there were no graduated lenses, no sensible shoes, indeed, no Paulette or Catholic school named Sacred Heart. Like Harrison, I have designed a Sister-hologram with language and imagination, instead of bone and blood—all inventions to dramatize the story, to underscore the flagrancy of a lie and its uncomfortable consequences. Perhaps Bonnie went to a huge public school with an overworked staff and a multitude of misbehaving students. Perhaps we picked her up as usual on Thursday and hit the road early the next morning. Her absence on Friday would hardly be noticed.

It doesn't really matter. I'm almost not sure myself after all these years—a lifetime of truths, lies, truths that turned out to be lies, lies that turned out to be true. It's all part of the effort to explain what I'm doing here, on earth.

*Acknowledgments:*

“*My Other Sister*” appeared in *Feeding the Fire*, by Jeffrey Harrison (Sarabande Books, 2001)  
“*Homesickness*” is forthcoming in *Pool*.