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BEAUTIFUL LIES, WONDERFUL LIES

Something about the smell of Dr. Schein's office reminded Larry Dugin of visits to the school nurse when he was a child—white walls, white cabinets, and grey rug; next to where Larry was seated, the syringe disposal box with its tilted lid; the magazines on the table that previous patients had forgotten to return to the waiting room. He lost himself in the history of his own health every time he entered this office. Dr. Schein, standing grim-faced and stiff in front of the lightbox on the opposite wall, was Larry's oncologist. Using his right index finger, Dr. Schein pointed to a white spot on the scan that resembled a tiny cluster of five small grapes.

"The scan confirms that there are now five glioblastomas, only the most posterior of which is operable," began Dr. Schein. "The interior four are not. Unfortunately, glioblastomas respond poorly to radiation, and the interior four have grown at an alarming rate despite the chemotherapy."

A humming inside Larry's skull persisted for several seconds. He tilted the lid of the syringe disposal box and looked inside. He looked at the plastic model of the human brain on Dr. Schein's desk. He did not look at the scan. Suddenly the doctor's voice broke through:

"—you may have trouble remembering recent events, but you won't experience any pain. In about six months, you'll probably have to stop driving, I'm afraid, and if you go out for a walk, you may need someone with you to get you back home."

It was at that moment Larry made up his mind to start lying. Not self-serving lies—just the opposite. In the radically shortened future he saw ahead of him, lying would be his salvation—antidote to the misery truth had brought into his life. He imagined the pleasure he might gift his wife and remaining child, his friends and co-workers, even Dr. Schein himself—looking so angst-ridden as he spoke, supplying details that Larry ignored.

As Dr. Schein droned on, Larry reviewed the events that had brought him to this point: the third blow in less than a year! The unfairness was infuriating, and struck him harder than the bad news itself. First, there had been the original diagnosis, delivered by the same doctor last June. He and his wife of fifteen years, Renee, rewrote his will together, “just in case,” but they both believed—as did Dr. Schein at the time—that chemotherapy would be successful. Second, in October, Larry’s thirteen year-old daughter Zoe died in a freak car accident, the news delivered by a young doctor in the ER who—without waiting for Larry and Renee to finish rising from their seats—had blurted out, “We did everything we could, Mr. Dugin.” Everything? What does that even mean? Renee became a rag doll in Larry’s arms; as she sobbed hysterically between requests to see her daughter, with her fingers digging into the soft flesh of his arm, Larry tried to keep up with his anger. His anger had mass to it, had heft. It flew past the young physician whose statement had such brutal casualness to it; past the elderly man whose heart attack behind the wheel had caused the pile-up; past the school bus driver whose dimwittedness had guided him into, instead of away from, the path of the elderly man’s truck. The anger gave him the energy to accompany Renee into the ER, give his daughter a good-bye kiss, accept condolences from friends and strangers alike, get through the funeral, look his wife in the eye day after day after day and not break down, and continue to wake up every morning.

Rather than dissipating, the core of anger mutated into a numbness that persisted throughout the winter, accompanied by new headaches Larry attributed to the rage he had let fester unaddressed. Because the headaches were frontal, and the tumors posterior, his family doctor had diagnosed migraines; medicine seemed to help, and when the first days of spring proved surprisingly warm and sunny, the headaches ended. Larry, Renee, and their son Patrick, ten, vacationed in St. Johns, breathed fully and deeply, and smiled again, and looked forward to baseball games and Sunday morning bike trips. All along, the side effects of the chemo had been surprisingly mild, which Larry took to be a positive sign, and he kept his work life, and home life, as vigorous as ever.

In June, Larry had submitted to Dr. Schein's new set of scans—"precautionary follow-up, normal procedure," he'd said—which had led to this visit. The unexpected, dark prognosis knocked the residual anger out of him like a Heimlich maneuver. Into that empty space vague thoughts about God and the afterlife began to pour—surprisingly—into a soothing vision of being accepted into some kind of heaven as one of the good guys. A good father. A decent husband who had never cheated, never even contemplated cheating. A thoughtful co-worker. A Democrat, for God's sake! With no hint of self-pity, he imagined himself not alive. Not breathing. Not seeing or hearing or feeling. Inside a cramped coffin. This led to severe anxiety which he combated by re-imagining himself above the earth, floating and observing his family, but unable to communicate. I should have started imagining heaven earlier in life. Note to self: no coffin. Read up on cremation. That seemed acceptable.

Having blocked out the doctor's lengthy synopsis of upcoming symptoms, Larry made a vow: to lie in order to make the world around him a happier place. The moment he had the idea it felt natural, as if it were the yang to his cancer's yin. It filled completely the space his

anger had just occupied. Finding happiness for himself, he felt, was impossible. And since possibilities are what Larry felt moved people from one moment to the next, it followed naturally: say whatever you have to in order to bring happiness into someone else's life. What is wrong with lying, really—if the goal is happiness?

Larry imagined reaching across the table to shake the doctor—so obviously uncomfortable—by the shoulders and sharing this amazing insight: There is a greater good beyond me. So much happiness is still possible—just not for me. And that makes it all that much easier to give away! I am no longer competing for it! Oh heavenly insight! The understanding came to him in an instant, or perhaps the few seconds it takes a cloud to form atop a high peak, or for a misty dew to become a dense fog. Larry remained seated as the doctor resumed, offering Larry a series of palliatives:

“Would you like to speak with anyone? A pastor? A minister here in the hospital? And of course you should seek a second opinion,” the doctor intoned, dully, as if from a written script. “Won't bother me at all. Everyone does it.”

Larry realized that his first opportunity might be now: this difficult moment for the doctor himself. The prospect of waiting for a second opinion, which doubtless would confirm the first, ran counter to the flow of Larry's new-found momentum. But for you, doc—my getting a second opinion might release you from the burden of being the sole bearer of bad news.

“I will. Yes. Yes. First thing tomorrow. Any suggestions, doc?” Easy-peasy. Too easy? More like a run scored off the infield fly rule, instead of a hit. More like a reprieve than happiness for the good doctor.

But for the first time since Larry had entered the office, Dr. Schein smiled. Re-energized, he began scribbling a list of names on the back of his prescription pad. “I will understand if you want to change doctors, Larry. Call me if you decide to use any of these referrals, and also to let me know how you’re feeling. For now, we can discuss some drugs that will really cut down the symptoms.”

Dear God, look at his face. Try to tell me you don’t love me for this lie.

On his way out, Larry passed an elderly woman with a scarf wrapped around her partially shaved head, and realized a second opportunity was presenting itself. The woman’s sad, watery eyes followed him as he crossed the room. They were a fierce blue, and he knew that those eyes had once looked brightly into a future filled with the promise of happiness, but not now. Not now, those eyes spoke to him, not anymore. Into those empty eyes Larry poured the hope he no longer felt for himself. While the receptionist processed his credit card, Larry eyed the elderly woman peripherally. Her eyes were focused directly on him. Being ignorant of her situation gave him an uncharacteristic boldness.

The receptionist handed Larry back his card, and asked casually, unaware of the turmoil such a question could unleash, “So how was your visit today, Mr. Dugin?”

Aware that the elderly woman was paying attention, Larry saw another opportunity to exercise his newfound reason for living. To the receptionist, he responded, “New lease on life, ma’am. Dr. Schein is like a miracle worker.” OK, so just a small pin in the pin-cushion of hope, but why not? Larry reached out to touch the old woman’s hand, to enhance this brazen bit of energy if she would let him. She held out her hand; he clasped it in his. She leaned into him. A vision problem? he wondered. Did those beautiful blue eyes struggle to see?

“You’re a terrible liar,” she whispered, smiling a great toothy smile. She has whiter teeth than I do, he thought, as she loosened her grip. Perhaps her prognosis is better as well. “Try again,” she whispered, pursing her lips afterwards in anticipation. Larry lost his balance momentarily, regripping her hand tightly as he recovered. She resumed her grim facial expression, almost as a taunt.

Her eyes, which had seemed so sad to him seconds before, bored into him, dared him to respond. He had lost his bearings. “You have a beautiful smile,” he said lamely. So I’m reduced to telling the truth, after only two tries!

“I do, don’t I?” said the woman, letting go of Larry and settling back into the chair. Her smile softened a bit. “My children say I don’t smile enough these days, though. They’re in the cafeteria, waiting for the bad news.”

“They should—at least one of them—should be here with you,” said Larry.

“Well, I lied,” she giggled. “I told them to go off, that I would be just fine and they could join me here later.” Wow. That’s how you do it, thought Larry. There has to be purpose to the lie. No use swinging at a pitch that hasn’t been thrown.

“My friends and coworkers—even my wife—think I’m here for just a regular check-up,” said Larry. He sat down next to her.

“It’s better that way,” said the woman. “Less to-do over everything. Otherwise, everyone’s so gloomy right up ‘til the end. And for a good bit after, I think. Of course I’m only going on what happened when my own mother died. Was sick and died, I mean. All the sickness part, all the knowing.” Yes, the knowing. He allowed his mind to wander for a moment. The knowledge that you will die, that’s what the snake brought into the garden.

That's what sex is for! Note to self: Make mad crazy love with Renee tonight. Let the sperm fly. Full steam ahead!

Feeling more comfortable, he asked her outright, "What are you here for?"

"Rusty pipes," she said softly. "Had an aneurism a month ago. Hit my vision. I don't see so well anymore. They opened up a part of my skull to relieve the pressure" —she tapped where the scarf smoothed out against a bald spot— "and gave me some drugs to ease the headaches, but I can tell I've had a few little ones since then. I do feel like the pipes'll burst soon enough. Dr. Schein is going look at the latest scan and tell me if I'm right or not. But I know I'm right."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be. All this feels age-appropriate, as they say these days. What about you? You're a young man."

Suddenly, Larry felt the urge to tell her of his child's accident and death, the sadness that still had the power to overwhelm him; the pounding pain in his heart, the shortness of breath whenever he thought about her 13th birthday party, such a happy affair days before the accident. Tell her! Tell this near-blind elderly woman about your distress. But he caught himself. If he spilled his guts, he'd be doing it for himself. So he lied, or tried to. More of a diversion.

"I just hope this round of drugs'll do the trick," he said. A knee-jerk reaction, a falsehood. Not really a lie. It didn't count.

The woman smiled sweetly. "Oh, they will, I'm sure. You just have faith." The sports analogies continued for Larry: Tennis: Service. Return. A single lie, stroked back over the net. Don't keep score. Just play the game. Goes against all previous learned behavior.

Curtis Flynn, Larry's Creative Director, former writing partner, and immediate superior at Lucian Beller Advertising—not a good friend, but a work friend, a drinking buddy—was the only associate Larry had told about his condition, and the doctor's appointment this morning. He had arranged to meet Flynn at the Starbucks next to the Lucian Beller office building on Clinton, west of the river.

“Sorry I'm late. I'm buying,” said Larry. “Go triple vente if you like. Caffeinate yourself silly.” Flynn was by nature glib and likeable; a glad-handing, joke-telling, smart-ass, ill-equipped for the real world, and thus perfectly suited to advertising. He gave Larry a quizzical look, pantomiming impatience. Larry reacted: “You want it with sugar or black?”

“God, you are such a cynical bastard!” said Flynn. “Just tell me what the doc said.”

Flynn presented an even more meaningful opportunity than the previous two. He might be on the verge of sweating out his own mortality. The lunch crowd at the Starbucks on the corner of Clinton and Adams filled it to capacity. Traders with different colored jackets and huge lapel IDs gulped their lattes like marathon runners gulped water on a hot day. Lawyers with oversized briefcases waited impatiently in line, tapping their toes, rubbing their knuckles, looking over their shoulders, searching the crowd to see if they were being recognized. Shoppers slid their huge bags up their forearms to free their two hands to hold cups and sandwiches as they elbowed the door open and squeezed out while others slid in. Right here, right now, thought Larry, who is thinking of death? Most of the customers were smiling and exchanging meaningless courtesies with the baristas and cashiers. After ordering, Flynn found two seats recently vacated by two razor-thin women dressed in power suits and sneakers. Not them, thought Larry, as he sat.

“See someone you know?” asked Flynn, watching Larry scan the crowd.

“Nah, just curious,” said Larry, as Flynn leaned towards him with eyebrows pinched in, lips tight, forearms resting on the table.

“So—what did the doc say, for crying out loud! Or don’t you want to tell me.”

“Well, the tumors are still there, Curtis.” A dash of truth, for the lie to taste sweeter. Flynn’s face drained of color.

“Jesus Christ no!” he blurted out, loud enough for nearby patrons to hear and turn their heads. “First Zoe, and now this.” He looked as if he were going to cry. He whispered: “We’re the same fucking age! This can’t be happening!” The color drained from his face. If only you could see your face, Flynn. How desperate you are for hope! The old adage was that you didn’t have to swing hard to hit a home run, you just had to meet the ball when the right pitch came. Steady now, here it comes...

“But with a little radiation, I should be out of the woods in a few months.” A home run, possibly. Larry traced the arc of the ball’s flight in Flynn’s transformed features.

“Thank God!” said his boss. Color returned to Flynn’s face. “You’re gonna beat this, Larry.” He straightened up in his chair. Easy for you to say, you self-centered prick.

“Well, thanks for your support, Curtis. The follow-up bunt: “It means everything to me.”

Flynn’s whole body relaxed; “No man, thank you. You are a fucking inspiration. God forbid I should get sick, I would hope I would handle it like you. Fuckin’ A.”

“You’d be a champ, Curtis, a winner like you always are.” The phrase: “The hits just keep on coming” occurred to Larry. So, how you like me now, God? Just a few right words from me, and Flynn is unburdened.

“I dunno, man. Hey, you wanna take the rest of the day off? Spend some time with Renee? Share the good new—?”

Larry cut him off. “Actually—I know this sounds strange—but I want to work.” I’m on a roll here. Don’t stop me! “Let’s just go back to the office. Call a meeting for the candy thing. You OK with that?”

Flynn hesitated. His somber demeanor returned. “If you want. Of course.” Shit. That didn’t last long. What now? “Let’s not rush, though,” Flynn continued, looking down and fidgeting with his coffee cup. “Let’s enjoy this break. Enjoy the coffee.” I get it. How desperate he is for hope! Real happiness will have to come from him feeling good about himself, not from my beating this.

“No one else knows about my cancer, right, Curtis? You haven’t told anyone?”

“No. just me, pal.”

“Let’s keep it that way, OK?”

“Whatever you want, Larry. Whatever you want.” Larry intuited that his lie had given Flynn a specific role to play. He thinks he can help ease my pain. Tonight he will look in the mirror while brushing his teeth and think about how he is helping me. He will smile and sleep well. Note to self: You are a natural at this!

They walked to the office. Periodically Flynn would slap Larry on the back congenially, and say “Wow!” or “Man oh man!” To Larry, all the strangers on the street became inanimate objects, no different than cars or busses, or the postal box; all the noises—horns honking, brakes hissing, the rumble of the L overhead, all the conversations taking place, all the voices, including Curtis’—blended into a background for his heartbeat. He started planning how he might widen his scope at work. There were people there he could help.

He weighed the pros and cons of calling Renee before settling into work: She would have questions; she would demand details; he would struggle—he needed more practice before tackling the difficult job of lying to the love of his life. But if she called, he could claim work pressures had prevailed. Waiting until he returned home was the best option.

Just before entering the Lucian Beller building, Flynn stopped abruptly and put his hands on Larry's shoulders. "I—I don't know what to say." He put his arms around Larry and held him tightly for several seconds. "I'm here for you." Was Flynn crying? Have I overplayed this one? Look at you, Flynn—right now you need me more than I need you!

At Larry's request, Flynn called a meeting to review the Hessler's Candy creative. To the writers and art directors on the 28th floor, it felt like a pop quiz announced by an irritable English teacher.

An hour later, three writer/art director teams—and Larry—gathered in Flynn's huge corner office to present new creative work for the Hessler's Candy account which Larry and Flynn had won as a team twelve years ago and, after Flynn had been promoted, Larry had supervised day-to-day. Flynn sat at his desk and leaned back twirling a pencil along the fingers of one hand. The others sat in a semicircle in two sofas and two lounge chairs that fronted a large coffee table. Each of the teams had brought in a stack of print ads mounted on black foam-core and had placed them on the coffee table. Behind them two walls with presentation rails awaited. Jane Hawley and Greg Shade, the youngest team, sat with their backs to the window, furthest from the door. Sid Sharpton and Nancy Etheridge, twenty-year veterans, took the sofa across from Flynn's desk. Donald Cunningham and Benny Walters—on fire

recently—were the last to enter, and sat in two chairs near the door. Three presentations. In and out in a half-hour, if all went well.

Larry knew in advance what the work was; Flynn did not. This gave Flynn the edge in objectivity. Larry's role was to get the best out of his teams; Flynn's was to be brutally honest. Larry could sell as he chose. But only Flynn could buy, and in turn, convince the managing partners of Lucian Beller what the agency should officially offer as the campaign. The product was a new mint-chocolate candy. Mint outside—tough to crack—with soft chocolate inside. In product testing it had gone off the charts. Tentative name: Mintz.

“Who wants to start? You want to pick somebody, Larry? I know you got a lot on your mind these days but these are your guys.”

“Jane? Greg? How about it?” said Larry, and dutifully the two got up, snatched their work from the coffee table, and moved to one of the railings. They each sighed when they heard their names called; presenting first means that the fresh scent of your ideas has to last through the competing perfume of subsequent presentations. Even great ideas suffer when presented first. Less than a year out of Atlanta Portfolio, Greg and Jane already knew the best is nearly always saved for last, so after a couple of heavy intakes of breath, they stood ready, certain in the knowledge that their work would be rushed over in pursuit of a more sellable idea from another team. They waited for an introduction from Larry. They stared at him, and he could imagine their thoughts: Why are you fucking us over like this? We are the young turks. We are cutting edge. We should fucking quit and go to San Francisco or back to Atlanta where we'll be appreciated. The truth was, Larry knew, that the Hessler family was never going to buy cutting edge work. Within a few seconds of seeing the dismayed look on their faces, Larry had come up with a lie tailored for them.

“Now is the time, and this is the product, that should bring Hessler’s into the 21st century. Greg and Jane have managed to do what I thought was impossible, create a cutting edge impression—for a conservative company—that works. The distributors will eat it up, and the target will line up to buy t-shirts in six months when they see this stuff.” A lie, thru and thru. Bold and beautiful. Listening to Larry, Jane and Greg’s faces lit up. “I’m telling you Curtis, we have to try to sell this work.”

Larry motioned for Greg and Jane to begin. The two of them did not lack for confidence; they also knew that soon they would have to taste victory; soon they would have to have some work produced. Although it was not in Larry’s nature to take risks, his lying crusade was underway, and it seemed as natural as breathing to continue it. Greg put up a board with the words “Mint Condition.” Then Jane put up a board with the words “Mintz Condition.” Larry smiled. He zoned out during their presentation, instead preferring to picture them two days from now, winners at last. Suddenly Flynn was speaking: “Who’s next, Larry?” He looked up at the railing before proceeding, to see if Greg and Jane had added or subtracted anything from what he already knew. Looks like it did yesterday. Fucking brilliant. Completely unsellable.

“Fucking brilliant, guys,” he said enthusiastically. They gathered their work from off the rails and sat down. Larry had thought for months they might be having an affair. I bet you are lying about it to close friends. Self-serving lies. Wait til someone you love dies, kids.

The two veterans, Sid and Nancy, were next. Dependable Hessler favorites, the duo was responsible for the phenomenal success of Temptations: 4 little round balls of hard-shell milk-chocolate covering a gooey dark- chocolate interior. They came up with the name, the packaging, the ad concept—still running—and the spin-offs. Neither of them needed to keep

working; Hessler had given them stock in the company as a reward ten years ago, which presented a challenge for Larry: What can I really do for you? Nothing. I can't even think of the names of your respective spouses. I used to know the names of your children, all of whom are alive, I suppose. If you don't throw me something, I can't hit anything.

Their ads were on the rails before Larry finished his intro. He looked back over his shoulder at them. He remained twisted in his chair, with his cheek resting against his left arm, staring at a space between the first two boards on the rail, and zoned out again.

Spurred by the growing discomfort in his lower spine, Larry zoned back in just as Nancy finished her summation.

"As usual, you have nailed it," said Flynn, forgetting protocol. Realizing his mistake, and with a pained expression exaggerated for effect, he added, "Both teams, Sid, Nancy, Jane, Greg. Fabulous. What a start." He paused as Larry untwisted and faced the group. Still feeling awkward, Flynn went on: "And we haven't even finished yet!"

"OK, guys," said Larry, dutifully, to Cunningham and Walters. "Knock it out of the park." The spoken cliché irritated him. This is where his pitch/hit metaphors for lying had originated: the ad world was full of pretentious sports analogies that everyone accepted without thinking. You sold work with a pitch. You hit a home run or struck out. Maybe you went down swinging. Phrases could be parsed out to include doubles or triples; stolen bases, bunts, you name it. Cunningham and Walters had an aura about them; they stood up energetically, oozing self-confidence. An under-30 writer/art director team with a dozen produced commercials to their credit already—in only 4 years—their ideas were always supremely visual, with very little copy or dialogue. Larry let his eyes cross as the two passed by him, waiting to uncross them until they began their "pitch." Note to self: Find new analogy for my lying.

Larry was attentive to the tone and manner of Walters' delivery, but not the words. Cunningham put up all the boards at once, slick photoshop-rendered images of planets and super-novas, exquisite colors. He pointed and smiled, and interjected periodically. Larry knew the work from the team's presentation to him several days ago. The possibility existed that something new had been added, but that was unlikely.

He zoned out again. Suddenly Flynn pressed him, "So, Larry? Who's it gonna be?"

Larry surveyed the room. Cunningham and Walters, by virtue of having presented last, smirked knowingly, as if they'd already won. They believe they are the smartest, cleverest people in the room, thought Larry. They don't need my help. Look at them whispering to each other, probably talking about what restaurant they are going to celebrate at later. They are not looking to me for hope. Sid and Nancy sat apart from one another, and alternated glances between each other, Flynn and Larry. They weren't nervous; it was more like watching a friend try to follow the puck at a hockey game. They just wanted to follow the action—not miss anything. What would Hessler do for you if you win this thing, eh? Give you even more stock? Probably!

Only Jane and Greg looked at Larry wide-eyed and hopeful. Bring Hessler's into the 21st century? What was I thinking? Mintz Condition? Made me laugh. Are mints funny? Who cares?

"Jane and Greg," said Larry. "I stand by what I said earlier. And I don't think that consumers care about the Hessler family tradition. Or if they did, they don't anymore."

Cunningham and Walters shifted in their seats. For a moment Larry thought they might put up a fight, challenge his decision. Sid and Nancy leaned over and said, together, "Hey, nice going kids. Nice presentation." Jane and Greg's eyes ballooned.

“Thanks, Larry. We won’t let you down. We know we got tweaking and stuff—”

Larry held up a hand to cut them off. He turned to Flynn. OK, Flynn old boy. God, are you going to let him undo my work on behalf of these fine young people? Flynn, you know and I know that this will be a tough sell. Are you with me?

“Am I what?” said Flynn, rubbing his chin. Larry realized once again he had spoken out loud.

“Are you with me on this?” Larry repeated. The fact that Flynn hesitated was a good sign. It meant that either on the merits of the work, or because of the conversation at Starbucks, Larry’s decision would stand.

“Of course,” said Flynn. Let the celebration begin!

Renee was waiting for Larry in the living room when he returned home. She held a Kleenex in her lap with both hands. Her eyes were watery and lower lids puffy.

Larry kissed her on the cheek and hugged her as he sat. “I’m sorry I didn’t call. Hell of a busy afternoon. Have you been crying all day?”

“You didn’t call! So what could I do except assume the news was bad? So yes, I’ve been crying all day. It can’t be good or you would have called. You hold things in. You always have.”

“I love you, Renee,” he said as she kissed him again. She was all over him like when they made out in the back of his Chevy convertible in high school. Her way in the world was—had always been—physical. She touched, and fed, and washed and dried, she nursed and hugged, and kissed and held hands. Renee was all about proximity. Nothing was real—nothing

mattered—that she couldn't feel with her hands. Larry was comforted knowing that this woman, this lovely woman whose scent he loved more than his own, had chosen him to sit next to for the rest of their natural lives.

Suddenly she pulled away and asked him, “So? How much time? I can always call Dr. Schein, you know. You hold things in. You can't do that with me. Not about this.”

Larry surmised that if he told her, if he simply repeated Dr. Schein's dismal prognosis, his current euphoria—note to self: life is all about momentum!—would wobble and he might not be able to regain it. “Do you want the truth?” He looked into her eyes. She would win a staring contest, no question. If she says “yes” I am undone. Ha! How Shakespearean!

“Oh my god,” she said. “Just tell me!” Love of my life! The happiness I want for you!

“Dr. Schein suggested I get a second opinion. There's a possibility he's been misreading the scans.” A good lie must be tailored to its audience—and be believable. A good lie must keep the greater purpose—a greater good—in perspective. It's not for me, my darling Renee, it's for you. A few more days, maybe weeks, of happiness.

“Well that's good news, isn't it?”

“I believe it is.” He kissed her and smiled, then walked into the kitchen and poured two glasses of wine.

“You know you've really got to act quickly,” she said firmly. “Right away. I can't wait.”

“OK,” Larry responded dully, fearing she might see through him, might catch him in the lie that was for her benefit.

“I mean it. You have to see another doctor.”

“I will, I will.”

She jumped on the indifference in his tone. “You do it for me. That’s what I want.” He hadn’t counted on her being so defiant.

“I will get a second opinion,” he said firmly. “I’ll call first thing tomorrow.” Renee’s glare weighed heavily on him. “Happy?” he said, desperate to ease the pressure.

She cupped his chin in her hands. “I’ll be happy when this is over. When you’re not sick anymore. And I’m going with you this time,” she added.

Larry knew this about her: this was proximity at work again. Being with him in the doctor’s office, holding his hand, hugging him—it might just make a difference. She knew it was irrational, and she knew Larry knew, but nonetheless she pursued it.

She had upped the ante. He considered the alternative—had he shared his true feelings, the hopelessness he had for himself, what might have transpired if he had tried to explain his bizarre new mission in life—and hardened his resolve. For you, Renee. For you, love of my life!

That night, after they had made love, he stayed awake for a while, and when he spooned her he whispered in her ear the highlights of his day at Lucian Beller—how he had done the unexpected and recommended the work of the young staffers Jane and Greg, how the fallout might be that he’d put the agency’s largest account at risk, but that he didn’t care, because he knew how significant the decision was to them. “Best day ever,” he said. “The afternoon, anyway.”

She kissed him and told him what he needed to hear: “Whatever makes you happy, honey. That’s all that’s important.” What an exquisite lie, thought Larry, as he drifted

peacefully off to sleep. What you really want right now is for me to live beyond you, my happiness be damned. But oh, such a beautiful lie, as beautiful as you are, my love.

The soonest he would be able to see the first name—and the only one circled and starred—on Dr. Schein’s list was in a week. Renee accepted this, and Larry set about telling as many wonderful lies as possible, returning home each night to the comfort of his wife’s arms, secure in the knowledge that he had her blessing, at least for the time being. “You can lie to other people, just not to me,” she had said emphatically. He was not foolish enough to think she was doing anything but humoring him, temporarily, until the appointment. Larry knew she was fervently hoping, praying privately to the god-image she had, for a reprieve. Renee was a giver, and had read up on Kubler-Ross’s five stages of dying when he was first diagnosed. Her gift to Larry was to allow him his bizarre form of denial.

With their son Patrick, Renee was also helpful. “Daddy is sick, even though he doesn’t look it,” she had said. One evening he asked if Daddy was going to die, and Renee gifted Larry again. Before he could respond, she said, smiling, “not for a long time yet. Not for a long time.” God bless my ever-loving wife, he thought, while kissing Patrick on the top of his head. She is better than me at this, too!

At work, he planned and executed a sophisticated lie to Lilith Sinclair, secretary to Dennis Horton, account supervisor on the Spin Chewing Tobacco account. It occurred to Larry that if anyone deserved cancer, it was Dennis, who had been chewing his client’s product for fifteen years. Having just finished art school, Lilith had foolishly presented her portfolio to

Donald Poindexter, the Spin creative director, who had predictably judged it “hopeless.” Larry told her she could bring her portfolio to him, for a second opinion.

In Larry’s office, after most of the staff had left for the day, Lilith began with an apology—“Donald said I practically have to start from scratch.” She had been crying, and was ready to burst into tears again. “But I hardly know where to start.”

“Lilith,” said Larry calmly. Her name itself was like a plea for help. Lilith: her pale arms, like in some Romantic Period painting, reaching up, up from underneath the water. “Cunningham is an asshole.” She allowed herself a half-smile. “Show me.”

The work was good, but not great. Not surprising, not out-of-the-park brilliant, but full of life, some wit, a flair for language—good for an art director—and visually sharp, well-crafted. She had mastered Photoshop and Illustrator, the two most worn toys in the nursery, and Larry could picture her working her ass off in an entry-level position. He rubbed his chin several times, which Lilith misinterpreted as a sign of rejection.

“Oh my god, there’s no way I can fix it, is there?” she blurted out. It was as if she had stepped on a nail, and was afraid to look at the wound, afraid to pull it out.

“There’s only one thing you really need, Lilith,” said Larry. The wind-up, and...

“What’ that, Mr. Dugin?” she said, her pained expression intensifying. She produced a pad of paper and a pen. Ready to make notes.

“A job.” The pitch!

“But your group is full, Mr. Dugin. You’re not hiring. I know that.”

“Lilith,” said Larry. “Put your paper away. I’m not going to waste your time or mine giving you advice. Show this book to ten creative directors and you’re going to get ten

different opinions.” Larry began writing a short note on his personal Lucian Beller letterhead, to the Chairman himself:

Dear Lucian, Take this as both a letter of introduction and a letter of reference for Ms. Lilith Sinclair, who has been toiling away here at Lucian Beller—

“How long have you worked here, Lilith?”

“Three years.”

—for three years as a secretary while earning her—

“What degree are you getting?”

“My BFA, at Columbia College”

—BFA degree at night from Columbia College. So there’s an indication right there of how much she wants this. Don’t put all your marbles into her book. It’s good, not great. She’s got—

“You really want this, don’t you? To be an art director?”

“Oh my gosh, Mr. Dugin, yes.”

—fire in her belly. Remember that feeling? Hire her. I’d hire her but I’d have to fire someone to do it and she shouldn’t have to wait. Find a place for her. Do it for me.

Larry

He handed her the note along with an envelope. She began reading the note. She looked up and said, “Oh my god, Mr. Dugin!”

Lilith Sinclair left Larry’s office in an ecstatic haze. And she had something she didn’t have before she entered his office: the belief that someone believed in her.

Larry marveled at the beauty and power of this lie: It was almost true. It could be true. The best lies start with the truth and then bend it, rub it, mold it, prick it into a new life,

something willful, something with purpose. “It could be true” metamorphoses into “It ought to be true.” And perhaps, eventually, “It is true.” Larry wondered how much of human history had evolved in this way, how many lies had righted a wrong, bettered the human condition. A slogan popped into his head: “Working to make a better world—one lie at a time,” he chuckled to himself and closed all the folders on his desktop monitor.

After Sunday services at the Unitarian Church that Renee favored, Pastor Runyan grabbed Larry at the bottom of the steps and asked for a minute of his time. Larry was hardly ever in church, though Renee took the kids regularly. He termed himself a “lapsed Unitarian,” after the fashion Catholics had of terming their antipathy towards the church in the same way. “I’m a lapsed Catholic,” a man might say in a social gathering, which gave him brief protection from scowling church-goers, all too eager to berate non-believers; the expectation was: you’re welcome back any time. From the born-again, the lapsed Catholic might get a temporary pass as well; Catholics were still going to hell, but you had to respect the sheer power of the organization. Whereas saying you were a lapsed Unitarian was like saying you weren’t religious at all.

As he approached the pastor, it occurred to Larry that Renee might have leaked the bad news to him. The Pastor reached out—and held fast—to Larry’s shoulder as Larry took the last step down the entryway stairs. Renee stayed back a few feet with Patrick, who was already developing a healthy skepticism of all religions, probably from Larry. But isn’t that what Unitarianism cultivated? Skepticism? Jesus was probably just a man, not the literal son of

God—now there’s a good lie!— but we’re not going to take any chances. Not being sure— rather than the opposite—fueled a Unitarian’s urge to do good.

“Renee told me about the challenge you are facing, Larry,” said Pastor Runyan in a tone full of drama but devoid of sympathy. For the Pastor, sympathy was the result of momentum built on a series of empathetic exchanges, an amassing of little affections, small gestures, innocuous kindnesses; it had to build naturally, or his parishioners would sense falsity out of the gate. Sympathy offered too quickly was like worshiping a false god.

Pastor Runyan waited for a response. When it was not forthcoming he continued, “From what Renee tells me, your initial diagnosis was grim, Larry.” Renee passed behind the Pastor with Patrick in tow, moving quickly towards the crowd in the parking lot.

This will be hard, but not impossible, thought Larry. He is looking, as we speak, for God’s plan in this sorry tale. Something in the category of Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.

“Pastor, you know I’m not really a church-goer, but your words mean so much to me when I do come.” Pastor Runyan released his grip on Larry’s arm, and grasped Larry’s hands in his. First he brought both of Larry’s hands together; then covered them with his own. Larry felt the roughness of the Pastor’s skin. His hands were enormous. Did he buy this lie? He certainly softened quickly enough.

“That’s wonderful, Larry, just wonderful. But it’s not God’s love I want to share with you. I want you to realize that Renee and Patrick need your love. Don’t think your love for them isn’t giving them strength. Don’t count yourself out.”

“I won’t, Pastor. I mean—I don’t. Thank you.”

Pastor Runyan smiled broadly, and released his grip on Larry. He's smiling because he thinks he's soothed me somehow.

Following up on Lilith Sinclair on Monday, he learned she had received an Art Director job offer from Lucian Beller. At the Starbucks, he complimented a girl named Gina—"you look lovely today"—who had worked there for almost a year, and who bungled his orders regularly. He said "hello" to everyone he passed in the street on the way to work, to and from lunch, and on his walk from the train back to his home. Not because it made him feel better, but because he knew that it would make them feel better. Little lies, all day long. Jane and Greg, flush with pride from their victory in the Hessler shoot-out—another metaphor! Its either sports or the wild west, isn't it?—were still on cloud nine.

It had been a promising few days.

"Gardner Franklin, M.D., specialist in neuroblastomas and glioblastomas." The name and the description were engraved on an oversized brass plate—like the plates on the walls of the Palace of Versailles—next to the entry door. No associates. "He's the most sought-after neurosurgeon in New York, maybe even the world," Dr. Schein had said when Larry called to notify him. Dr. Franklin had immediately ordered the transfer of all the scans and diagnostic reports.

The waiting room was empty; Renee clutched Larry's right arm as they traversed the lengthy space between the door and receptionist, gripping it the way a fearful child grips the leg of an adult. On the phone, Dr. Franklin's secretary had explained that the doctor saw patients in one-hour blocks, so as to avoid overlap, and—provided you did not arrive too

early—there was never any waiting. Being five minutes late would not bump you behind the next patient. They were ushered into the doctor’s office right away.

Dr. Franklin was standing at the far window in his office, more like the office of a corporate CEO than that of a doctor. There was nothing medical about the space. No anatomy posters on the wall, no huge medical library, no Physician’s Desk Reference on the table; rather, there were large atmospheric paintings on the walls by American and British painters, one Larry swore was a Turner—the Parliament behind the Thames in a dense fog—and two small certificates, indicating the doctor’s provenance: University of Illinois Medical School, Harvard Post-Doctoral Fellowship. Dr. Franklin himself was wearing a suit and tie, not a white lab coat. He was facing the fabulous view his twentieth floor office window afforded him of Lake Michigan, away from Larry, who stopped when he had made it to the center of the room. Might not even know I’m here, thought Larry.

“I’ve studied the scans Dr. Schein sent over, Mr. Dugin,” said Dr. Franklin, without turning around to look at Larry and his wife. Renee tugged at Larry, urging him to sit with her on the sofa facing the doctor’s desk. Larry resisted, not because he didn’t feel like sitting, but because his first impression of this “industry star” reminded him of the emotionally-challenged young resident in the ER who had failed so completely at empathy when giving him the news of his daughter’s death. The god-like Dr. Franklin. A flick of the knife here, and—death. A slice of the knife there, and—life. What are we to you, doc? Lab rats?

Both surprised at his own easily-accessed cynicism, and emboldened by this sliver of self-pity, Larry approached Dr. Franklin from behind, just as the physician turned. “I see you’ve brought the Missus,” the doctor said—a bit too energetically for Larry—while extending a hand with unusually long, graceful fingers. He surrounded Larry’s right hand with

both of his, as Pastor Runyan had. “I’m Gardner Franklin. Pleased to meet the both of you. Don’t get up Mrs. Dugin.”

Renee had her hand on the arm of the sofa as the two men walked back towards her, but at the doctor’s remark, she relaxed and settled back into the cushions. Dr. Franklin kept his eyes on Renee as Larry joined her on the sofa. The cushions were soft, and he sank deeply into them; in order to stand up again, he would have to maneuver, twist and press the cushions and the back of the sofa. A ploy to keep me beneath you?

Dr. Franklin extended a hand to Renee. She allowed him to take it, just her fingers, and he gave it a quick shake, and said, “I was just about to tell your husband about my findings. I realize that’s a bit bold, and maybe you’d rather we talked about his general condition, what’s happening now, before I launch into the prognosis?”

Larry looked at Renee, then the doctor. Then back at Renee. Finally she said, her nervousness apparent in her wavering tone, “I just came for support, is all. To support my husband.”

“I realize that, Mrs. Dugin, but I have found that when a spouse accompanies a patient under these circumstances, it’s often because the husband and wife are not on the same page, they are not in the same place, information-wise. There may be some things you do not know, that your husband has not told you, for whatever reason. I’m sorry to be so blunt, but Dr. Schein led me to believe that your husband tends to hold things in; that he doesn’t always tell-it-like-it-is, so to speak. If I’m wrong in my assessment, please set me straight.”

You are daring me, daring me to be honest, aren’t you? thought Larry. Well, have it your way. “I think that truth is overrated,” Larry heard himself saying, convinced the doctor’s approach was an expression of hubris—the classic flaw of the gifted, the intelligent, the

beautiful—and not just a poor attempt at demonstrating empathy. Unnerved by the doctor’s huge dark brown eyes, he nonetheless continued, “Everybody has a different idea about what’s true, anyway.” Renee squeezed Larry’s arm gently. Gently enough to suggest support; strong enough to suggest he stop.

“Wow,” said Dr. Franklin. “More than I expected. But I get it. Dr. Schein’s diagnosis was shocking, to say the least, and I’m sure you have been struggling to come to grips with its finality.”

Larry thought, You’re damn right it’s a struggle, but said only, “Yes,” just as Renee said, “Yes we have.”

“Well, then, Mr. Dugin. Let’s just get right to it then.” Dr. Franklin picked up a remote from his desk and aimed it at the wall that held his diplomas. Between the diplomas was what Larry had assumed was an actual 3’ by 4’ oil painting, the Turner. But with a click of the doctor’s hand-held device, the picture glowed impossibly, then abruptly changed, coming to life as an image of a brain scan. “Here’s the image that matters the most. Where Dr. Schein and I differ.” With his finger he pointed to the familiar cluster of what looked like white grapes near the center of the brain. “This is what we are concerned with. You’ve seen this before, right? In Dr. Schein’s office?” He waited for a reply.

Renee nudged Larry. “Yes. Yes I have,” he said, although he would have preferred not to speak at all.

Dr. Franklin continued. “And he read you the biopsy results from all five of the tumors? Five separate reports?”

“There was just one report,” said Larry, feeling disengaged from his own voice, the heat of anxiety building in his chest. He felt the threat of the loss of control; same as when he had first

heard the bad news from Dr. Schein, and the bad news from the arrogant ER doc. His own voice seemed to come from a space in front of him, between him and Dr. Franklin, and not from inside himself, not from within, not from that place where his abiding love for his children lay, where his undying love for Renee lay. This voice told the truth in the same dull way that a child might say the sky is blue and what does it take to say that? He felt control slipping away from him. If I cannot lie, what is the point? I'm only here only because of Renee. She's the one holding out hope. She's the one who is not ready for me to die. I should tell you, doc, that shortly after we were married, and often since, we've expressed our love for one another by saying: "I don't want to go on living without you. I want to die first. I want to be looking at you when I go." He felt the old anger welling up in him. Like the cancer which with the first series of chemo had gone into remission, only to resurge with a vengeance mere months later, the anger which he had watched fade into the pale blue horizon of his past came towards him like an eighteen-wheeler. It shocked him into awareness. When the doctor spoke again, it was as if Larry had clapped his ears shut, the noise of his own breathing drowning out the words:

"Exactly, they biopsied this tumor here. The one that is easiest to reach." He was pointing to the tumor closest to the exterior wall. "It was such a silly error on his part; an assumption more than an error, as he is quite a capable doctor. Easy to miss, if you make the assumption he did. From the size and the shape, I don't blame him. He gives me many referrals, obviously appropriate in cases like this." The doctor paused to measure the effect of his words. "I have good news."

It was Renee who spoke. Larry was reduced to watching her face become animated. Her eyes brightened, but her eyebrows still furrowed. "What do you mean, Doctor?"

“Larry, you have two different types of cancer. Rare, but, well, it happens.”

“How is two cancers a good thing?” asked Renee.

I know where you are going with this, thought Larry, from the safety of his hiding place, tucked behind his own heartbeat, his own breathing. You say “good news” because you get to play God. You will open up my skull, when Dr. Schein would not. You will take the risks he would not. You will be the miracle worker. It is all about you, eh?

“Because this one out here, the glioblastoma multiforme, is the operable one.”

Operable, eh? I knew it! Just don’t be so all-fired sure I’m going to let you operate on me!

“And these other four”—he was now holding a folder in one hand, and flipping through the pages of it with the other—“are encapsulated. They can be abated successfully with chemotherapy.”

“But the chemotherapy didn’t work last time,” said Renee.

“That’s because it wasn’t tied to the particular stem cells of these tumors. Dr. Schein treated them all as glioblastomas. I am confident that the correct chemo can reduce or even eliminate these four other tumors. Dr. Schein was right that they cannot be excised surgically. They are too close to the cortex and may even be proximate to it.”

“And the other?” said Renee, tugging at Larry’s sleeve as she did, “The gio—”

“The glioblastoma? Normally these tumors are aggressive and spread rapidly, but yours has not, and I believe we can thank the other tumors for acting as a kind of shield. I can surgically remove it, and you will likely become one of that 2% of patients who beat this particular cancer.”

“Larry, sweetheart! Did you hear that?”

Larry appeared not to have been listening. The doctor squatted so that his face was level with Larry's, his eyes probing for a response. Part of Larry thought: You want to give me hope, don't you doc? I don't know what angers me most, your absolute conviction that you can save me—or the possibility that you are right. Dammit! I had things worked out! I had a plan! But another voice, jogged into action by the flurry of kisses Renee was planting on his cheek, said, "Yes, I did. Wow. Unbelievable."

Then Renee began convulsing with tears, which he didn't notice until her hands left his neck and gripped his hands—again, two hands enfolding his own—only her grip was so tight it was beginning to hurt. She was looking at him, scouring his face like the doctor had, like the Pastor had. He was a child again, and someone was trying to rip the anger from him like a toy. This is all a colossal lie, an elaborate lie, a most clever lie. This is what Renee needed to hear, not me. You are a great liar, doc. Look at what you have done for her!

Sensing Larry's reluctance to fully embrace the good news, Dr. Franklin continued, "It's not that there isn't some risk, Mr. Dugin. I will have to take some normal tissue when I operate, but that is what I am good at, and I will take as little non-cancerous tissue as is humanly possibly."

Renee kept crying, leaning into Larry. Her arms were around him now and she was kissing him again. Her cheeks were wet from tears, and the wetness touched off an almost electric charge in Larry when he felt them. His consciousness slowly returned to its rightful place. He felt her pressing against him, felt her long deep breaths against his left arm, felt her fingers in his hair, massaging his scalp with her need, speaking softly all the while: "I love you so much, I love you so much, I love you so much..."

“What’s next?” said Larry, not wanting to sound too eager, for in truth, he was only pleased with the happiness Dr. Franklin had brought Renee. Tears of joy, he said to himself as he wiped them from Renee’s cheeks. I gotta hand it to you, doc. Well done. A grand slam to win the game.

“That’s up to you.”

“What’s next?” said Renee, sitting back now and stretching her arms upwards and then out towards Larry. Then they brought her husband’s face towards hers. “What’s next? You have the operation is what’s next!”

Her enthusiasm said it all, and Larry realized that his greatest lie so far would be to treat Doctor Franklin’s prognosis as if it weren’t a lie. Look at Renee! She has her man back, is what she is thinking. She is not going to lose me. She thinks it may be possible after all for her to die before me. Once back home, Larry could start anew, improving the lives of countless others, telling beautiful, useful, ecstatic lies, for however long he lived, months or years. Yes! What a campaign it would be:

Working to make a better world—one lie at a time!

“So, Mr. Dugin, what have you got to say?” said Gardner Franklin, M.D., specialist in neuroblastomas and glioblastomas, to Larry Dugin, mid-level advertising executive, husband, and father.

“I don’t know what to say,” said Larry, in a kind of dead-pan, which could have been interpreted kindly as shock. But Renee’s electric smile reminded him of his plan, and he added enthusiastically, “Thank you, doc. Thank you so much!”