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Lie to Me

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Author Bio

Anna Markowitz is a senior and a psychology major. Anna markowitz has many important preferences: she prefers warm weather over cold, she prefers the west coast to the east, she prefers nonfiction to fiction, and she prefers poetry over either. She prefers tacos to sandwiches and almost any other name to her own. She also prefers the bullet to the mercury.

Lie to Me

Lying is wrong. I know this. If it is not the golden rule, it is certainly platinum, and if honesty isn't quite everything, it's close. That's why I didn't believe my psychology professor when she taught a unit on lies—the lies we tell ourselves, the lies that keep us functioning. She put it nicely, or maybe just technically, saying, "We create a system of representations that allow us to exist. We need schemas, shortcuts, even erroneous beliefs. The truth is too much for our minds to handle. If we tried to relate the enormity of the world to the minutia of our existence, we would be paralyzed. We would cease to function."

As a class, we protested our innocence and clear mindedness. We're college students! We're skeptical! We see the world for what it is! Of course, that was until she demonstrated the effects on us with a series of small experiments: estimate what percentage of the world has blue eyes, estimate the likelihood you will land your first choice job, explain your last test grade.

Almost unanimously we displayed false consensus (everyone shares your beliefs), uniqueness bias (belief in the significance of your own life), and the self serving bias (that success is because of my actions and failure is because of circumstances). It was the first time I'd heard a collective gasp. "These are the real lies," she asserted, "But we need them."

* * * *

I walked off the porch into the South Carolina evening. The sky was deep purple, and there was heat lightning in the distance. The air was wet, and the loose hairs around my face started to curl. Across the street, the pink-shirt woman tended to her grass, picking weeds with tweezers, trying to make the lawn as perfect as her neighbor's ferns. Every day I watched her eye the ferns, and tweeze, and tweeze. Every day I thought about revealing that her competition was made of silk. Instead I waved and continued walking.

The pool was about a mile from my aunt's house and I liked to swim there at night, when it was empty and the water was smooth. The pool lights spun bright orange webs along the floor. They were hypnotic across 10, 20, 50 laps. I used the lights to forget anything but my rhythmic breathing, counting the strokes and the slicing kicks. By the end of the summer I was swimming miles at night, running miles in the morning, moving and moving away from the hours in between.

I must have inherited my love of swimming from my grandmother. When she was 92, she still swam twice a week, waking up and toddling down to the bus for the Y. But turning 93 changed everything. Grandma was too tired to swim now. Maybe it was time to hand in her badge. Through the summer, we'd sit on the couch in her apartment, and more than once—an hour—she'd say, "I just don't have the pep that I used to. Seems my get up and go just got up and went!" The hilarity of this statement was never lost on her, and, sometimes, if I didn't laugh hard enough, she would explain it to me.

I had come to Greenville to take care of her for the summer. I was the only grandchild without a summer job, and the great grandkids were too young yet to be caregivers. I lived at my Aunt Sue Ann's and went every day to my Grandmother's apartment in Rolling Green Village, an 'active adult community'. Rolling Green is a set of mini-neighborhoods with cute coordinated names-- Lakeside, Creekside, Hillside-- connected by walking paths designed mostly as Eagle Scout projects. At the center of the -Sides is an apartment complex with five different colored buildings, a dining hall, and an assisted living complex. Grandma lived in the green building, in E205.

Truthfully, I didn't like E205 and I didn't like Rolling Green. The air made you want to pray the Rosary. There was something hanging in it that reminded you of the time you had left, or how much time is in eternity. The apartments were populated mostly by women in their 80s and 90s, wheeling or walking around, filling their hours with chores they didn't have to do, four different showings of the local news, and talk of their grandchildren, or death. They talk about death most often at Rolling Green. When they do, it is casually, jealously. I have to imagine that they cried at the funerals they went to, when they buried their brothers and cousins, parents and friends. But now the tears are only of bitterness; that someone else left before they did-- that they were left behind. When a man on the first floor died in July, Grandma and I watched the parade of cars that come for funerals: floral trucks, an ambulance, a hearse, some limos, a UHaul. The lobby was thick with pollen from flowers and sugar from condolences. But no one was sad. They were envious. "He's gone now," they'd say, "he's lucky."

Watching the great masquerade of living by so many who want to die gave me a clammy feeling in my stomach and on my hands. I wondered at their desperation not for life but for the end. "Why is the Good Lord letting us live so long?" Grandma looked up at me. "Why is He letting me stay here when I'm useless?"

By the middle of the summer I had run out of new answers for her speeches. She was tired of living, I was tired of lying.

"My generation is living too long," she said. "They told us to take care of our bodies, and this is what they get! We're eating up the resources." It was unpleasant to think of life and death in relation to infrastructure.

"Grandma!" I would say, "You aren't living too long, you're living just long enough!"

Still, she was begging for death, trying to starve, forgetting to bathe, trying to somehow catch a cold in her hot, musty apartment. It was how I knew she was lying when she said in a flat, mechanical voice, "But, no, I've had a good life." She was saying it for my sake, or because my aunt had hated this speech enough to ask her to stop. When she went to bed and I left Rolling Green, I would wonder at the purpose of her good life, her five children, her job and her travels, if she could only resent its longevity at the end. I thought about what she told me, how the days were too long and the trees were too tall; how the world had gotten old. My mind wandered looking and looking for things I thought were new.

I was sent to Greenville because Grandma was losing her mind, a statement that is bland and meaningless when you hear it or read about it or use it when you can't find your keys. For Grandma it meant keeping over a hundred individually wrapped slices of bread in the freezer, tagged and bagged right next to the three or four loaves she had bought at Publix. As I sat in the kitchen removing the slices one by one, detangling them from the teeth of the ice-maker, I did not dwell on the absurdity of what I was doing. Instead I focused on being as quiet as possible; Grandma hated wasting food. When I found 26 oranges in the bottom drawer of the fridge, just a week after I'd last cleaned it, I told her I was taking them to Sue Ann's for supper. When she let a dozen bananas rot on the counter, I asked if I could take them for banana bread.

I didn't like lying to my grandmother. I told myself I might eat 26 oranges in one sitting or I might make myself some cider orange punch. I could even use them as a garnish. So it wasn't really lying. If those oranges got thrown out, it was unintentional and unrelated to the instance where I promised they'd be used. I would make Sue Ann do it. I already lied to Grandma enough when she commented on how tall I'd gotten, or, worse, how she was starting to forget. It seemed pointless to tell her blunt pamphlet facts about vascular degeneration and sinking, slouching bones. Like I was caring for a child, it was hard to know when I should tell her the truth and when I should gloss over the facts. I wondered how to bridge the gap between answers given to kids and consequences given to grown-ups.

It's not as if she didn't know she was changing. I watched her as she slid her hands back to her lap and tried to grip something from reality. It was too much to ask of her, to bear the conscious loss of her faculties. She would explain, slowly, as if to convince me, that she used to be quite sharp. She ran her hometown hospital with remarkable efficiency. Hastings never had a nurse like her. She wrote perfect schedules and always finished her reports in time to help out the ER. She was the first one called to fill in. "Durbin," they'd say, "we need you." They gave her a pension, in the end, even though she'd technically been a part time worker.

She had a good head. Had, she would clarify. I gave her a long winded answer about the benefits of change and how her life is still good in so many ways, but I was 19, these were lies, and she knew it. Her value came only from solace; it was just something else to disdain. And sometimes, watching her sort through her confusion, it was almost enough to understand why she wants to die. Many times she would look up from reading the paper and ask if I could tell something was wrong with her. Sometimes in the middle of a story she would purse her lips, and put her fingers on her face, saying, "Haven't I told you this before?"

"No, I don't think so. What did happen to Uncle Paul?"

It was a lie. We sat in the living room, every day, and I listened with my book open. The stories were familiar after a week: she maintained not only the exact words, but also the exact order of her pauses. If I could bury myself deep enough in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, I might not hear again the story of poor deaf Lucy. It always followed "Uncle Paul moves to California," the account of how Uncle Paul was literally allergic to his home. In the end,

his weak sinuses cost him contact with most of his family. Shortly thereafter, poor Lucy would be deaf, but no one would realize that was the trouble. In school the nuns would think she was stupid and shake her for disobedience. We closed with a classic story of starvation overseas. Far be it from us to feel depressed only about subjects within the continental US, Grandma reminded me that in foreign countries literally everyone starved to death. In fact, she knew a girl who was adopted from Russia that stole food from her parents and neighbors. They found it buried in her room when the house started to smell of mold. She lived in America the rest of her life, and never did believe there would be enough.

"That's so sad," I would say, exactly on beat. The Count was 100 pages into his revenge on Fernando, and slowly destroying his marriage, his wealth, and his life. Grandma continued her stories. It was always the sad ones-- the death of Cousin Randy, women who hated their babies. I wanted to ask her if she remembered something about life aside from who died and how and if that meant they lost the farm.

But then she would pause and say, "But, I believe it. I believe that people are mostly good." It was the same voice she used when she said she was grateful for life.

Grandma and I used green notebooks. In mine I kept a journal and wrote letters to my friends back in Pennsylvania. "Dear Maura," they read, "Weather's beautiful down here. Grandma's better every day; we're reading Tom Brokaw. Do you need any oranges?" I couldn't say whether I wrote the letters for Maura or for myself. They were not honest, but they were words going somewhere, words saying that everything was alright. The letters may have revealed what I lied to myself about—that I was unable to help her, that I was failing this job and stagnant at Rolling Green—but still they were hiding it, somehow.

Grandma used her notebook to conceal her condition from family and callers. She wrote down what happened each day, taking notes so her life cohered. "7/26," it read, "Anna here (again). Called Tom. Sandy ok. Choir practice Tuesday AM." Every other page or so held a list of family members, written out like an exercise. I couldn't say whether she loved or hated the notebook, but she needed it. Even as it called attention to the new failings of her mind and memory, it helped her mask them. When Tom called back, Grandma knew which kids were his, she knew what to say. Conversations with Tom seemed almost normal.

Grandma was often reading from her notebook in the afternoons when I came to wake her from her daily nap. "Oh! Anna! How are you?" She scanned her notebook to see if I was expected.

"I'm great, Grandma. I picked up some tissues for you." I placed the grey marbled box in the cabinet, finding three more bottles of shampoo and a misplaced bar of soap. "How was your nap?"

"Oh, I never sleep in the afternoons." She closed the notebook. "How are you?"

"I'm doing well. I got us a new book from the library this afternoon." I pulled old post-its from the phone. Buy shampoo, Choir on Tuesday.

"Good, good. And what did you do this afternoon?"

"Not much after I left you, actually, just picked up the Kleenex you asked for." I wondered if she'd notice that I just answered differently. When she repeated questions, I never knew if I should be repeating answers.

"Great!" She didn't seem to care. "And how are you?"

By the end of the summer, the good days were when she didn't compare me to a fascist dictator. Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, she had no preference, or maybe I was enough like all three, demanding that she eat her lukewarm Beef Wellington and wash her hair. She would look at me, heavy lidded with suspicion—"What are you doing here?" she'd demand. "Go get yourself a job!" When we were out at the store picking up new shampoo or a gallon of milk, she'd point out every business that was hiring. I'd arrive in the mornings and find post-its tacked on the phone—"cancel caregiver."

It was worse during full moons. For no scientific reason, Alzheimer's and dementia patients experience symptoms more dramatically at full moon. Like a werewolf, Grandma would bare her teeth once a lunar cycle. We fought over small things, like which half of Europe was considered eastern. She told me I was overly cruel and overweight. We fought over big things, like whether or not I could convince her to bathe, wear different clothes, or move from the couch. We would fight until she fell asleep. I could fight hard because she wouldn't remember when she woke up. I hated it, hated yelling at her, hated losing to her, hated saying terrible things because I knew I had to. She would claim she had cooked breakfast, she had gone swimming, she had just come back from a walk. But she hadn't moved, she hadn't eaten, and these were lies, the small delusions that kept her alive. She was imagining a life because she needed one. But they would also kill her, hunger and disease. When I told her the truth she recoiled into the couch. She looked at me, big eyed for a moment, then angry, she repeated the same argument. I cooked breakfast, I went swimming, I just got back from a walk. It could last for hours. Eventually I would win, and she would quietly eat her sandwich and let me wash her hair. I would lather and rinse, anxious to finish, so she could fall asleep. When she woke up, she would believe again the things she wasn't.

The worst of these nights, my mom would call Rolling Green. Grandma would say I hadn't been there in days.

During my last week, I was washing shirts, sitting in my usual seat in Rolling Green's laundry room, listening to the buttons hit the wall of the dryer with an empty metal clank. I was wondering about the tissues. Grandma got weird about tissues. I had found 16 Kleenex in three pairs of shorts, and still ended up covered in lint after doing her laundry. The shreds floated in the room like clouds or big, fat snowflakes.

Laundry reminds me of Grandma. I think of when I was young and she would come down during the winter. After school we'd lie around in our uniforms until she came swinging through the house, braying, "Take off those clothes or I'll throw you into the washer with them!" We would squeal and run up the stairs on all fours to change. She would have made sticky buns or cinnamon bread during the day. She was in her 80s then, and had more

energy than I did.

I lie to myself and say that these will be the memories I have of my grandmother, that I won't remember her from this summer. I will remember her fresh cookies, and how she always made oatmeal scotchies for my dad. I will think of how she always greeted us with spaghetti and meatballs. And how amazed my brother was when he discovered the reason they were so good was that they were made of beef. Beef!

I will think of walking to the park from her Hastings apartment, and at night falling asleep to a lamp painted like Niagara Falls. Grandma would come in to check on us, and waves would travel across the room as my sister and I pretended to sleep. Grandma loved waves; she loved to swim in the waves at Glendale Lake, to look at them. The people of Hastings always thought she was crazy for standing there, loving the water, watching the water. I will remember staying up late watching Shark Week because it was educational, and how I cheated the first time I solved her Rubik's Triangle. I will remember these good things. These cannot be lies.

* * * *

The summer ended. In two days I packed and went back to school. I called home one night, driving back to my apartment from mini-golf or the grocery store, maybe. My mom had just talked to Grandma and was filling me in— she was doing fine, she liked the new caregiver, she asked about me and what I had done over the summer. The roads were wet. I stared at the white and yellow lines and cursed and cursed. Grandma didn't remember. She doesn't remember, but I do, I have to. I remember every slow minute and shred of emotion and which of the lies slipped out of me.

I thought back to my psych class and my apologetic professor. It isn't true, is it, the meaning we ascribe to ourselves. Our actions do not make a difference, to a 93 year old woman, to our neighbors' ferns, to our world. Nothing we do will last and live on after us. It is ludicrous, how passionately we learn to love a world that will leave us, go on without us, spurn us, and eventually destroy us. It doesn't matter, you just join them all, the ones before you, the dust under your feet. So you'll coat someone else's shoes and everything will continue. What holds you are the lies, the illusions, and they expire. Slowly your life becomes an exercise in the meaningless, and even if you live as a shell, your husk has a memory, it holds the pain.

My professor was right. We do need lies to function; we need to believe in our significance, believe in something-- like boy scouts who build walking paths or grandmothers who tell stories. I need to believe my life will add up to more than Rolling Green Village, more than pleading for the end, this slow frailty, these lost minds. I need to think my life is my own and means more than a forgotten summer and the hard truth of a psychology teacher. So I will join them, the liars. I will contort some scaffold and call it my past. I will build from it, adding and annexing, making my life's work from lies and biases like they were brick and steel. In the end, I'll be surprised to find it made of straw, that my lies are destructible. I'll watch trembling as the building is knocked down so quickly, so easily, by one summer, one grandmother.