

## Stories

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I tell stories. I don't mean I just write stories as I am doing now. I mean I tell stories out loud, convincing stories I like to believe, person to person, but not the truth, never the truth (well, almost never).

I am not sure when all of this began, this untruthful storytelling. It must have a psychological label, as virtually everything does these days. I work as a psychiatric social worker—case manager—and I guess I should know, shouldn't I?

For me, I believe the practice began to take shape more or less on a transatlantic flight in the company of my then ten-year-old daughter. We were headed for Ireland, just the two of us. Her mother was to join us a week later. This particular flight was very full, and we were at the rear of the coach section. I noticed the stewardess walking down the aisle slowly and passing a lot of people before she reached me. Then, she stopped, looked "at me", and asked, "Sir, are you by chance a doctor?" I would have liked to have said, "Yes," but that would be nuts. She was clearly looking for someone to help a sick passenger. Actually, it turned out to be a crew member, a woman who had fallen on the flight deck and her arm was thought to be broken. This I learned later.

On another flight overseas, this time to London, more or less the same thing occurred. This time I was alone.

One year while in Ireland, sometime after all this had happened, I informed my wife Mary that I wanted temporarily to take on a new identity while we were in the country. I said I might become a brain surgeon. *Nothing doing*, she replied. *Well, how about a gynecologist?* I asked. She didn't even answer me that time. The expression on her face told me what she was thinking.

So I never did get to assume a new identity, but I did what I considered the next best thing. I began to tell untrue stories at work and at parties, even once to my own daughter, who is now grown. I told her and her boyfriend (soon by the way to be her husband) that an antique lamp I had recently purchased and paid \$225 for (that was the truth) I could resell for \$600 (not true). I told the two of them how the antique dealer—actually, more of a consignment shopkeeper—called me after I made my purchase to tell me a man was in the shop who had seen the lamp in the window and he and his wife very much wanted to purchase it. Now he was willing to pay me \$600 for the lamp. The shop owner gave me the man's telephone number, and my quandary was, as I told my daughter and her boyfriend, *Should I call and resell the lamp I had just purchased?*

My daughter's boyfriend Dave is a practical lad, and he said I should sell. And

that the lamps in his house were from Target and cost less than ten dollars each. My daughter wasn't so sure. She figured out quickly that if I resold the lamp, none of the \$600 was likely to come her way, whereas if the lamp stayed with me, it might very well come to her by way of inheritance some day. She seemed to like the lamp too, and she tends to be pretty practical, just like Dave.

I said earlier that I think this all began with flights overseas, but as I think about the subject, I am inclined to believe it began somewhat earlier, perhaps back when I was first single. (I am single now again, as in being divorced.) In those days, I used to frequent writers' colonies, places like the MacDowell Colony. This was some years ago. At one colony, I remember telling a certain talkative fellow, a somewhat well-known composer, that I was a pilot—I am a small plane private pilot—and that I had flown missions over Vietnam—I am old enough to have done that—from an aircraft carrier, no less.

I was interested in the response of others to having in their midst a so-called artist, a writer, who at one time in his life had dropped bombs from airplanes. I know the composer was impressed, but he seemed more impressed that I had the skills, or so he thought, to take a complicated aircraft off of a carrier in the ocean and then return it safely. What I did with it in between was of less interest to him.

The others, I suspect, were less impressed than my composer friend. While I know they knew the story, had got it from the composer, nobody confronted me, but a coolness seemed to develop in the social milieu all of a sudden, unless it was my imagination. I never reveal that I am putting a person on, either. I just go away and say nothing, as I did that with this writers' colony group.

I have one story that involves my 94-year-old mother, although she knows nothing of it. I have told people I work with that I spent part of my childhood in Revere, Massachusetts. When I was a kid, Revere, which is near Boston, had a reputation as a gangster underworld haven. Revere was a very tough place. In truth, I have never been there.

Revere today, by the way, is quite gentrified. But according to my tale, my mother was good friends with a lady who eventually became ill and died, but my mother helped her through her illness. My mother has done this before, helped the ill and dying, except this lady didn't exist, nor had we ever lived in Revere. As my account unfolds, this lady's son becomes later in life the virtual head of the New England mob scene. I describe him to my listeners as a somewhat more sophisticated Tony Soprano. He was of course very grateful to my mother for her attention to his late mother, and while we moved away from Revere, moved 20 miles north, this man, whom I call Manuel, always kept in touch with my mother, calling her several times a year to ask after her well-being, and if she were in need of anything, anything at all, he always said. The joke in our family was that because of the regular calls, my mother's phone, and maybe all of the rest of ours, were probably tapped by federal law officials trying to snag this gangster Manuel.

I got a bit of response to this story at work and wherever else I told it, but overall, I guess I was disappointed and bored with the reaction, so I expanded the story somewhat. Again my poor mother was central to my story. I told a woman at work, who had actually met my mother a time or two when she visited me in Kentucky, that as a younger man I was in a Boston bar once and a little drunk—I did live in Boston for a few years, and I am sure I was a little drunk in a bar a time or two. This one evening, however, I was chatting up, with some success I thought, a pretty young woman at the bar. Turns out her boyfriend was nearby, and he was a regular at the place and a

tough hombre, and he hauled me out of the bar and took me behind the establishment and punched me out.

It was no contest, I said. I got the worse of the deal by far. Somehow the police were called and an item actually appeared in the newspaper, but the culprit was never caught, not at least until my mother saw the item in the *Boston Herald-American*, which she reads each day—she does read that paper, but not every day. She was annoyed and worried about what happened to me, although she never said a word to me of the subject, so she called this fellow Manuel in Revere and he sent someone out to find out the entire story. When he had an accurate account, he sent someone else around, an enforcer who collects bad debts with sash weights and is a very tough customer himself. And so he taught this fellow a lesson. In other words, he beat the hell out of him.

I am unsure if the woman I unloaded this story on believed me entirely, but since she knew my mother and knew also how old she is and how alert and vigorous, the woman had to give the account some level of credence, and if she did believe me, I know she told the story to others there.

I once got thrown out of a major hospital in Louisville—too long a tale to go into now—but after telling of my mother's underworld connections, I happened to say to a man who asked what became of the men who threw me out of that hospital, the security guards, and banged my head against a concrete wall a couple of times to teach me a lesson, I said that two of the three men involved in that activity were dead. Died in accidents, but I said no more than that, and the man listening to me didn't pursue the subject. He got the point, though.

But I think my favorite of all the lies is this one: I went out for a while with a neighbor woman, a much too young woman for me and I knew it. Nevertheless, sometimes when I was out of town for a stretch of time I would ask her to watch my house, pick up my mail, and so on. I even provided a key so she could go in and look around. I told her not to be too much a snoop, and of course she promised she would not be. I told her also that I possessed a valuable collection of figurines from Morocco. I knew she once lived in Egypt, so I thought I would use Morocco as a place of origin. Then in a whisper I said, "They are very obscene figures. My ex-wife called them *depraved*." I explained how my ex is from New York City and once when we were visiting there years ago, before my daughter was born, she introduced me to a man, a friend of hers—maybe a former lover, but I don't know this, I said, and didn't remember to ask her—and he had a collection of Moroccan figures, fifteen in all, and he needed money and offered them to me for \$500. And so I bought them. "They have to be worth a great deal more now," I said. My young friend was bursting with curiosity.

"Oh, can I see them?" she asked.

"No, they are too shocking for me to show anyone. They show people having all kinds of sex, including sex with animals. I have never displayed them, and I have a secret space behind a false wall to store them. You will never find them, but please do not try, do not look for them.

"My wife forbade me to put them on display," I went on. "And after our divorce, when I moved here to this house, I thought of putting them out, but I feared that might be misunderstood. I might somehow get labeled a sex pervert or child molester, or what have you. I seldom take them out."

I then went off on my holiday. Sometimes I made a big mystery out of where I was headed, when in fact I was probably going nowhere very special. (I don't know why I do any of this.) When I returned, I looked for evidence of a search, but I con-

fess I saw little that had been disturbed in the house, although I feel sure she hunted and maybe hunted aplenty for those figures. She was careful, however; there was no evidence left behind of a hunt.

I don't see this woman very often these days, but whenever I do, she always asks if she might see the Moroccan art, as she calls it. I say to her, "How old are you now?" and she answers 35 or 36. I then reply, "Sorry, you have to be 40 years old or older to see this stuff. It is that shocking and powerful." Good thing I didn't have much of a relationship with her, because at some point when I could not produce the Moroccan figures I would have had to fess up and admit there were none, and everything else I told her about my life would suddenly be suspect, just as everything I am telling you now has to be suspect.

Maybe this entire discourse is a lie, or maybe every last word is the truth. Hard to tell, I like to believe, not that it matters a whole lot anyway. Yet, as I said in the beginning, there has to be a medical label for such a condition, other than the obvious one that comes to mind, CHRONIC LIAR.