

The Dance of
DECEPTION

**A GUIDE TO AUTHENTICITY
AND TRUTH-TELLING
IN WOMEN'S
RELATIONSHIPS**

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Tony and the Martians

When I was twelve, I told a lie that grew to epic proportions. I told my friend Marla, who lived across the street from me in Brooklyn, that I had been contacted by a man named Tony who came from another planet. Since first grade, Marla and I had been on-again, off-again best friends.

I told Marla that Tony told me to find a date. Since no one had asked me out yet (and I believed that no one ever would), Marla had to fix me up with a blind date because Tony said that something bad might happen to me otherwise. Marla, who could accomplish almost anything she set her mind to, went about this project with her usual vigor and enthusiasm. The blind date came and went. Tony did not.

A few minor characters from the same planet were added to the drama, as the personality and presence of Tony grew and became part of my deepening friendship with Marla. Tony emerged as a good-hearted, playful fellow who told me funny things that I could tell only Marla—and that she could tell no one. At a time when my other girlfriends were dropping one best friend for another, my special status with

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Marla was secure. Tony stabilized our friendship and strengthened our sense of camaraderie and commitment. And I was in charge—an active director and orchestrator of the threesome: Tony and Marla and me.

I don't remember how often Tony visited or how long he stayed around, but I think it was at least a year before I let him drift out of our lives. Years later, when Marla and I were both graduate students in Berkeley, California, I tearfully told her I had made Tony up. Until then, we had both walled off the Tony business, not bothering to reflect on it or even to remember. Marla protected me and our friendship by choosing not to subject this interplanetary drama to close scrutiny. After all, anything is possible. When we finally talked about it, Marla was lighthearted and forgiving, as I hoped she would be with our long history of friendship binding us together.

In the early 1970s I entered psychoanalysis during my post-doctoral training program in clinical psychology and confessed my "Tony story." I half-jokingly voiced my concern that my analyst would downgrade my diagnosis to something either very bad or very sick. My uneasiness was hardly surprising. Although lying is commonplace in both personal and public—especially political—life, the label of "liar" is a profound condemnation in our culture, bringing to mind pathology and sin. I know parents who punish their children more severely for lying to them than for any other behavior. I have heard otherwise calm parents scream at their children, "Don't you *ever* lie to me again!" So heavy are the negative associations of intention and character that it is difficult to think lovingly, or even objectively, about the role that lying plays in the lives of children and adults.

My analyst (coincidentally also named Tony) was, as always, empathic and nonjudgmental. In psychoanalysis—as in the rest of life—insight and self-understanding do not flourish in an atmosphere of self-depreciation or blame. He and I explored Tony in the context of my distant relationship with my father and my related desperation about getting the “blind date” that I first used Tony for with Marla.

Many years later, after the birth of my second son in 1979, I faced a personal crisis, a health scare, that pushed me to learn more about my mother’s diagnosis of advanced endometrial cancer when I was twelve. While talking to my parents at this time, I recognized that I had brought Tony into the picture when my mother, then forty-eight, had been given one year to live. Although I was unaware on a conscious level of her diagnosis and prognosis, I am certain that my unconscious knew everything.

As I reconstructed that year, multiple lies emerged, beginning with my mother’s harrowing experience with a medical system that did not provide her with facts. After a long period of misdiagnosed vaginal bleeding, my mother hemorrhaged and was hospitalized for an emergency D&C. This procedure led to the unexpected diagnosis of a hitherto unknown invasive cancer. Her physician (who may himself have been reacting to the long period of misdiagnosis and neglect) told my father the facts—but swore him to secrecy. After the initial procedure, my mother was packing her bags to return home when she was told that an additional stay in the hospital was necessary for a second surgery to “stretch her uterus.” With this improbable, mystifying explanation, her doctor performed a complete hysterectomy without her knowledge or permission. She awoke from the surgery, confused and disoriented, and suffering from inexplicable, intense pain.

My mother did not confront her doctor until immediately before her discharge from the hospital, when he referred her for radiation treatment. She demanded to know her diagnosis. He did not answer, but instead took her hand and told her to enjoy life and to try to have enjoyable sex in the year to come. He didn't mention cancer and she didn't push it. A part of her, too, must not have wanted to hear the word spoken out loud. With a referral for prolonged radiation treatment, however, my mother knew the name of her problem even though the medical establishment did not voice it.

In the year that followed, the word "cancer" was never spoken in my family. My mother's health was not even discussed. Inexplicably, she did not die, as predicted, and so we have had the opportunity to talk as adults about that traumatic year after her diagnosis. Our conversations have allowed me to appreciate more deeply how helplessly out of control I must have felt when I brought Tony down from another planet.

My mother, the emotional center of the family, seemed to be dying. Susan, my only sibling, had started college at Barnard and would soon be looking for an apartment in the city. She was getting launched, leaving me for her own grown-up life. My mother had quietly made plans for her brother and sister-in-law, then living in a different part of Brooklyn, to take me in after her death because she did not think that my father could care for me by himself. I was on the edge of losing everyone. Into this precarious world, threatening to pull apart at the seams, I brought Tony.

During the year after my mother's diagnosis, my most important relationships had a lie at their center. In my fam

ily, the lie was perpetuated through silence. There was a survival issue in my family that no one was talking about. Only once did I give voice to reality, to truth, in an incident that I myself do not remember. My mother tells me that some time after she had finished her radiation treatment and had recovered her energy and spirits, she came down with a bad cold and took to bed—a singularly rare occurrence for her. I stormed into the bedroom and screamed at her for lying down. “Get up!” I commanded with the full force of early adolescent rage. “You’d better not die—do you hear me?—or I’ll never forgive you!” My mother recalls this outburst—over as suddenly as it began—as our family’s only direct expression of feeling, our only articulation of danger.

Apart from this isolated outburst, I blanketed myself in denial, screening out my mother’s illness and my questions about how I would be cared for if she died. Reading back through my diary—my one place to tell the truth—I do not find a word during that year about my mother being sick or about my being afraid. I numbed my consciousness, both language and feeling. But because the unconscious seeks truth, I acted out all over the place—in trouble at school and a mess at home.

With Marla, my best friend, the lie was told in words, not in silence. I constructed, elaborated, and kept alive a narrative, immersing myself so fully in the drama that I did not experience myself as standing outside it. Only much later did I piece together enough context to make sense of my behavior, to think more objectively of its meaning.

Perhaps I wanted to be caught. One evening I found myself in my sister Susan’s bedroom, spontaneously telling her that I had become friends with a man from another planet. If Susan had taken this revelation seriously, a confrontation about Tony might have pushed us all toward

addressing the deeper issue. But for better or worse, Susan merely listened to my story, perhaps never giving it a second thought.

Thinking about Context

If my behavior with Marla was viewed out of context, an observer might say, “She lied because that’s how she is. She is a liar, out for herself, that sort of child.” Or a psychological interpretation might be based on a particular notion about human behavior: “Because she is insecure, she needs to manipulate and control—that’s why she lies.”

In the absence of context, we tend to view particular behaviors as fixed “traits” or as “personality characteristics” that exist within us, rather than as part of a dance happening between and among us. My creation of Tony, for example, could be viewed as evidence of my manipulative, controlling, and deceptive intentions—words that fit with our culture’s general description of how women have wielded power. Of course, these *were* my intentions—to manipulate, control, and deceive, just as my intentions were to love, to connect, strengthen, protect, and survive.

Context allows us to put lying—or any other behavior—into perspective. By broadening our view, we are challenged to take a more complex reality into account, to ask questions (rather than provide answers) about where lies begin.

Did the lie begin, in my case, with a frightened adolescent girl who desperately wanted to avoid any further threat of loss by holding on to her best friend by whatever magic possible?

Did it begin with my parents, unable to address, even with each other, a terrifying illness, then handed down as a death sentence? Or did it begin with *their* parents, Russian Jewish immigrants who could not begin to speak about the massive losses and separations they had endured?

Did the lie begin under the hand of patriarchy, with the male-dominated medical system withholding facts from my mother, mystifying and falsifying her experience, denying her deepest instincts, protecting her from essential knowledge “for her own sake,” creating for her a situation of unutterable loneliness? Did truth-telling become less possible still when the doctor told my father to keep my mother’s condition a secret, for which she did not easily forgive him? And what of my mother’s unspoken plan to transfer me to a relative’s home upon her death? Was patriarchy (its consequences then hidden, unspoken, denied) at the heart of a mother’s felt knowledge or belief that it might be unwise to leave an adolescent daughter alone with an emotionally isolated father?

I was in my thirties before I connected Tony to my mother’s diagnosis of cancer, a connection which cast a new perspective on my behavior of twenty years earlier—as did the facts about my mother’s hospital experience then, and the culturally enforced silence surrounding any diagnosis of cancer at that time. Deception is larger than the particular individual responsible for it, larger even than a family. We can never know for sure where a lie begins, with whom it originates, or the many factors that sustain it. We can, however, move toward an increasingly accurate and complex understanding of ourselves as we widen our view of a lie, secret, or silence—or any deceptive behavior, for that matter.

This story about Tony illustrates the importance of context, and how empathy and understanding increase with the bigger picture of family, culture, and the addition of more facts. Further, this story illustrates that our most dramatic and colorful lies—the ones we can decide either to keep secret or to confess—are not necessarily at the center of our emotional life and not where we need to focus our primary attention. My lie to Marla was symptomatic of the paralyzing silence in my family surrounding my mother's illness. My family's silence was symptomatic of a culture which placed cancer, as well as other painful subjects, in the realm of the unspeakable. It is the unspoken, all that we cannot name and productively address, that gets us into trouble; lying is merely one expression of that trouble.

In truth, I did not experience myself as a "liar." Or, more accurately, I knew I was lying to Marla about Tony but I told myself I was *pretending*. We were, perhaps, all pretending—the doctors who withheld information from my mother (for her own sake), my parents who withheld information from us children (for our sake), and the children, myself included, who didn't persist in asking questions (for the family's sake). We were a family like any other, with strengths and vulnerabilities, doing our best to stay afloat in the face of massive anxiety about my mother's—and our own—survival.

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Deception and Truth-Telling

Whether our motives are unconscious or intentional, pristine or nefarious, deception is a part of everyday existence. It wears countless faces in daily life and takes on an endless array of forms and functions. Our language itself speaks to the multiplicity of ways that we depart from truth-telling and engage in deceit:

We say, she fibbed, fabricated, exaggerated, minimized, withheld.

We say, she told a white lie, a partial truth, a falsehood, a tall tale.

We say, she embroidered her story, she pulled the wool over our eyes.

We say, she keeps secrets (and also, she can't keep a secret).

We say, she covered up, covered over, concealed, misled, misinformed, twisted, distorted, falsified, misrepresented the facts.

We say, she is false, elusive, evasive, wily, indirect, tricky,

treacherous, manipulative, untrustworthy, unfaithful, sneaky, scheming, calculating, conniving, corrupt.

We say, she is deceitful, deceptive, duplicitous, dishonest.

We say, she is a hypocrite, a cheat, a charlatan, a callous liar, a fraud.

We say, she presented a clever ruse, a bogus deal, an artifice, a pretense, a fiction, a sham, a hoax.

We say, she is phony, artificial, affected.

We say, she is pretending, charading, posturing, faking, holding back, being an imposter, putting up a good front, hiding behind a facade.

We say, she did not own up, come clean, or level with me.

We say, she gaslighted me, messed with my mind, mystified my reality, betrayed and double-crossed me.

We say, she is two-faced; she speaks out of both sides of her mouth.

We say, she speaks falsely.

We say, she cannot face reality; she cannot face the truth; she engages in self-deception.

We say, how brave she was to reveal nothing, how clever to throw them off track.

We say, she acted with discretion.

We say, she lied out of necessity; she lied for the greater good.

We say, she lied with honor.

Our language provides us with incredibly rich possibilities for describing our departures from truth-telling. Different words and phrases evoke varied images of deception, connoting a range of implications about intention and motivation, and the seriousness of harm done. We may have learned to associate some of these words more with women, some more with men. In either case, we have more words to

describe the nuances of how we deceive each other than to describe how we love.

Deception is not a “woman’s problem” or even a uniquely human phenomenon, for that matter. From viruses to large mammals—from disease-causing microbes to baboons and chimps—deception is continually at play: an African beetle kills a few ants and attaches their carcasses to its body in order to enter an ant colony to feast undetected; a chimp misdirects her group away from a food source, covers up her own movements so that the location of the food can’t be traced, and returns later to dine by herself. Many baboons and chimps, when threatened, make themselves appear larger. Deception has played a major role in the evolution of human life. It is interesting to think about the fact that deception and “con games” are a way of life in all species and throughout nature. Organisms that do not improve their ability to deceive—and to detect deception—are less apt to survive.

Do only humans engage in calculated deception? Not according to the finest animal trainers, who attribute a capacity for moral understanding to a number of species other than our own. Trainers, notes Vicki Hearne, distinguish horses who are trustworthy (“Relax, there isn’t a tricky bone in that horse’s body”) from those who are “sneaky” (“Don’t worry, he’ll come around okay, he’s no real criminal, just a juvenile delinquent”) and even “irredeemably dishonest.” Although such anthropomorphic, morally loaded language is criticized as naive, even heretical, the scientifically minded critics are hopelessly behind the trainers when it comes to engagement in the real world of animal-human encounters.

The subject of deception pertains to every member of our species, but this book speaks directly to women, and undoubtedly to some women more than others. I invite men to read it, too, of course, not just to learn about the women in their lives but also to find themselves in these pages. Much of what follows is “generally human”; where it isn’t, it’s useful for the reader to define both commonalities and differences. We can all benefit from examining how we hide the real and show the false. Unexamined deception is now threatening our survival far more than enhancing it.

How, specifically, do we engage in deception?

We lie outright, as I did to Marla, with the intention of convincing the other person of what we know is not true, of what we do not even believe ourselves. As our language illustrates, words and phrases which connote deliberate deception tend to condemn, reflecting our feelings about being on the receiving end of deception. When we are the active players, however, we are more likely to experience ourselves as lying to prevent harm, not create it.

We also depart from truth-telling through silence, as my family did, by failing to speak out. We do not ask an essential question or make a comment to clarify the facts. We withhold information from others that would make a difference in their lives. We do not even say, “There are some things I am not telling you.”

In contrast to how we react to stated lies, we are slower to pass negative judgment on what is *withheld*. After all, no one can tell “the whole truth” all the time. (A friend commented recently, “Can you imagine what an impossible world it would be if we could all read each other’s minds!”) Deception through silence or withholding may be excused,

even praised: “My daughter is lucky I never told her about her father”; “The doctor was kind enough to spare her the truth about her illness”; “How incredible that she is always cheery for her children when she is feeling so wretched.”

When we are silent or withholding about the self, we may call it “privacy,” a word suggesting that our failure to disclose is neutral or harmless. We would all agree that we don’t have to tell anyone everything, although the more intimate the relationship the greater both the possibility and the longing to tell—and the bigger the emotional consequences of not telling. Privacy differs from deception. But when we say, “This is nobody’s business but my own,” we may obscure the full meaning and consequences of secrets and silence, of a life in hiding in which we do not allow ourselves to be known.

Then there are lies, secrets, and silences that begin with the self. We are not clear about what we think, feel, and believe. Our priorities and life goals are not really our own; our behavior is not congruent with our stated values and beliefs. On important matters, we give in, go along, buckle under. We may not feel genuine or real. We are not “centered,” “grounded,” or in touch with ourselves. As a result, we are not fully present in our most important relationships.

Because of the enormous human capacity for self-deception, we may fail to recognize when we are lying—or when we are not living authentically and truly. In any case, we can be no more honest with others than we are with the self.

Pretending and Truth-Telling

In thinking about women’s lives, I have come to pay particular attention to the words “pretending” and “truth-telling,”

words that touch on all of our actions and relationships as well as who we are and what we might become.

“Pretending” is a word that may help us to suspend our moral judgments about what is good or bad, better or worse, so that we can think more objectively about a difficult subject. It also fits more appropriately into the fabric of women’s lives. Our failure to live authentically and to speak truly may have little to do with evil or exploitative intentions. Quite the contrary, pretending more frequently reflects a wish, however misguided, to protect others and to ensure the viability of the self as well as our relationships. Pretending reflects deep prohibitions, real and imagined, against a more direct and forthright assertion of self. Pretending stems naturally from the false and constricted definitions of self that women often absorb without question. “Pretending” is so closely associated with “femininity” that it is, quite simply, what the culture teaches women to do.

In some instances, however, we will rightfully be wary of the word “pretending” precisely because (like “privacy”) its neutral and benign connotations would have us trivialize and gloss over what does need our attention, if not our moral judgment. It is not useful to sanitize the fact that under patriarchy, women are continually lied to, and that in the struggle for love, sanity, and survival, we continue to tell lies. Sometimes, only a harsh word like “lying” will do.

Truth-telling, the heart of my subject, is a central challenge in women’s lives. The term “truth-telling” seems more encompassing, more courageous, and more richly textured in meaning than the word “honesty.” When I say “truth-telling” out loud, I think of bold and pioneering acts, as well as enlivened conversation on the headiest of subjects. For example, “What is truth?” “Who defines what is true and what is real for each of us?” “Do women really have a ‘true self’ to

uncover, find, or, alternatively, to invent?" "Whose truth counts?" Under patriarchy, women are well schooled in pretending and deception. We also have developed an extraordinary capacity to tell the truth, or at least to whisper it.

Reflections on this subject remind me of the tendency to organize our world into dichotomous categories: good and evil, masculine and feminine, yin and yang, gay and straight, and now, pretending and truth-telling. People, of course, are far more complex and multifaceted than the polarities or "opposites" we create.

Truth-telling is, on the one hand, closely linked to whatever is most essential in our lives. It is the foundation of authenticity, self-regard, intimacy, integrity, and joy. We know that closeness requires honesty, that lying erodes trust, that the cruelest lies are often "told" in silence.

Yet this perspective is only part of the overall view. In the name of "truth," we may hurt friends and family members, escalate anxiety nonproductively, disregard the different reality of the other person, and generally move the situation from bad to worse. I have watched my clients—and myself—make every variety of error about who to tell, what to tell, when to tell, how much to tell, and how to tell. And, of course, there are situations in which it may be wiser to be strategic than spontaneous. In my early years at the Menninger Clinic, for example, I was the sole identified feminist; I thus made it my job to openly confront every injustice and to raise the consciousness of my colleagues. In my efforts to convince others of "the truth," I quickly became encapsulated in a role that made it impossible for them to hear what I had to say.

In the real world, the seemingly contradictory activities of pretending and truth-telling are not always "opposite" or discrete. Pretending, for example, may be an indirect move

toward the truth, rather than a misdirected flight from it. In pretending love or courage, we may discover that it really does exist—or that we can enhance our capacity for it. Sometimes pretending is a form of experimentation or imitation that widens our experience and sense of possibility; it reflects a wish to find ourselves in order to *be* ourselves. Similarly, at a particular time, pretending may be necessary for survival, or we may feel that it is absolutely essential.

My goal, then, is not to create another false polarity, or to try to push the reader along an unexamined, linear path from pretending to truth-telling. Nor will I provide “answers,” “how-to” instructions, or reassurance, although my values and beliefs about a “right” course of action will surely come through. What follows are my reflections on aspects of deception and truth-telling that are vital to our lives. My primary focus is on relationships, including one’s relationship to the self. My hope is that you will join me in examining how all of us engage in deception and approach truth-telling—a subject that is at the heart of who we are in the world and what kind of world this is.