

Faking Science: A True Story of Academic Fraud

Diederik Stapel

Translated by Nicholas J. L. Brown

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He was killed late in the afternoon on a country road with his learner's permit in his pocket. He swerved to avoid a porcupine, and drove straight into a large tree. I thought you should know.

— Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Translator's Note

This translation of Diederik Stapel's book is a reasonably faithful to the Dutch original, which was published in late 2012 under the title "Ontsporing" ("Derailment"). One or two paragraphs that were likely to be of interest only to a Dutch or Dutch-speaking audience have been removed, and some examples and analogies have been reframed in American terms. Additionally, the "Notes, thoughts, and apologies" section has been considerably reduced in length. We anticipated that an English-language edition of this book might also require some other parts of the story to be shortened or removed entirely, and perhaps one or two to be enhanced a little. However, since we have now decided to give the book away, there doesn't seem to be a good reason to change anything further.

The translation process took place over more than a year, from May 2013 until today. For a variety of reasons, the chapters were not translated in their original order; the actual sequence was 3, 8, 9, 10, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10½, 1. As my working relationship with DS developed, the style and "voice" of the translated narrative evolved somewhat. The chapters that were translated later in the process are (I hope) more consistent and idiomatic in style. That said, DS is a much better literary writer than I am, so there are still plenty of places where the reader will (correctly) think, "This reads like it's been translated from another language." I have attempted to use U.S. English vocabulary and idiom wherever possible, but as a native speaker of British English I suspect that there are quite a few places where I may not have managed this. Please feel free to suggest improvements, point out typographical errors, etc.

I was inspired to offer to translate the book when I read a review of the Dutch edition by Denny Borsboom and Erik-Jan Wagenmakers, posted at <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2013/january-13/derailed-the-rise-and-fall-of-diederik-stapel.html>. When I saw Neuroskeptic's comment ("I wonder if this will ever be translated into English? I'd love that to happen. And I'd donate to a fund to pay a translator."), I realized that I was in a position to do it. (That fund never materialized—not that I expected it to—so I am not making a penny from this!)

Reaction from my recently-acquired colleagues in the world of academia was mixed; some told me it would be a very bad idea to go anywhere near this project, while others strongly encouraged me to go ahead. In the end I sounded out some Dutch psychologists—whose objections, if any, would hold the greatest weight for me—and the vast majority of them were in favor. As one of them put it, “Normally, people who commit scientific fraud deny everything and crawl away. To have Stapel’s confession available in English would be really important for science.” Personally I think this book represents a lot more than a confession; I will leave the final judgment on that point to the reader.

The appearance of the Dutch version of the book caused quite a lot of controversy. I hope that the fact that the English translation is available free of charge (for which thanks are due to Prometheus, the publishers of the Dutch version of the book) will avoid that, but otherwise, as it says on the tube: if irritation occurs, discontinue use. My aim is not to defend DS—I take no view on whether this book is an accurate representation of the events described within it—but simply to make his story available to a wider audience, and perhaps contribute in a modest way to his social rehabilitation. While I don’t expect to see him teaching psychology or conducting research in a university setting any time soon, I think he still has plenty to contribute.

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Foreword to the Dutch edition

I've spun off, lost my way, crashed and burned; whatever you want to call it. It's not much fun. I was doing fine, but then I became impatient, overambitious, reckless. I wanted to go faster and better and higher and smarter, all the time. I thought it would help if I just took this one tiny little shortcut, but then I found myself more and more often in completely the wrong lane, and in the end I wasn't even on the road at all. I left the road where I should have gone straight on, and made my own, spectacular, destructive, fatal accident.

I've ruined my life, but that's not the worst of it. My recklessness left a multiple pile-up in its wake, which caught up almost everyone important to me: my wife and children, my parents and siblings, colleagues, students, my doctoral candidates, the university, psychology, science, all involved, all hurt or damaged to some degree or other. That's the worst part, and it's something I'm going to have to learn to live with for the rest of my life, along with the shame and guilt. I've got more regrets than hairs on my head, and an infinite amount of time to think about them.

This book is an attempt to reconstruct my spin-off and the inevitable crash into a very solid wall that followed it. Hopefully this reconstruction will allow for a better understanding of what happened, for me but also for others who want to know. What did I do? How did it start? And why did it get so stupidly out of control? And, above all: who am I, really? Or perhaps, if I'm lucky: who *was* I, really?

So, this book is not intended to be a witness statement or a charge sheet. It's not a research report and it's not a comment on other research reports. This is my own, personal, selective, biased story about my downfall. It's nothing more than a series of images, sketches, thoughts, and anecdotes, which together form an attempt to understand myself (and maybe find myself again?). It started more or less by chance, as a bit of occupational therapy. I'd been fired, was stuck at home, hated myself, been feeling depressed for months. Writing kept me busy, plus—as I knew from some piece of psychological research I'd read somewhere one time—writing about a bad experience helps your recovery from that experience. So I started writing my thoughts and feelings in a small black notebook.

I started writing because I wanted (or, rather, needed) to find out more about myself. But how do you do that? I wasn't used to writing about myself. How was I supposed to work out which parts of me, my life, my memories were relevant and which not? What was part of the story and what wasn't?

Until my fraud was discovered, I'd always had a fairly ordinary, normal, happy life; never done anything exceptional or weird. Just like millions of others, I'd had a happy childhood, grown up in a good family, gone to a good school. I went to college like thousands of other people, fell in love like everyone does, and quite often had trouble getting to sleep at night. A-ha... but was that anything special? Should I write about that?

On the day in September 2011 when my life took a bizarre turn as my faked science came to light, everything I had ever done or felt or thought suddenly became a potentially critical event. How could it have gotten so far? Was it because I used to obsess about not treading on the lines between the sidewalk tiles when running home from school? Maybe. Or my colorblindness? Maybe. Was it a conflict between my extraverted behavior and my introverted feelings? Maybe. How about my fondness for really strange artwork on rock album covers? Maybe.

So whereas before I'd never had anything to write about when it came to myself, because I had what I thought was such a boring and normal life, after I fell off a cliff it seemed like every boring, normal detail was potentially worth examining and describing, because maybe it contained a clue to what I was going to bury myself with later. Now that I'd crashed with a loud rending of metal and bent my life out of shape beyond any possibility of repair, every single apparently meaningless detail of my life took on the status of "possible clue." My home town? Acting? Films? Police raids? Poetry? Marshall McLuhan? Neil Postman? Utopia? Context effects? Nihilism? Bach? Conference hotels? Raymond Carver? Drinking coffee on my own? School lessons? Groningen? Applause? The chaos of Manhattan? The structure of the Netherlands seen from the air? Propped-up trees in Limburg? Pumice? Amsterdam? Schiedam? Fear of heights? An attic window? A public bathhouse in Budapest? Fra Angelico? The Russian Revolution? A field of rye? All kinds of memories, inspirations, and random neural firings that popped up in my head while I was writing and started to connect to each other. They're all fairly normal events and experiences, and now that they're presented in this book as evidence for, or

explanations of, or arguments about my downfall, neatly ordered and enhanced with a beginning and a middle and an end, they seem to have more of an inevitability about them than seemed to be the case at the time.

Where it seemed to me to be possible, or relevant, or (in my opinion) interesting to do so, I've tried to explain some of these events and experience using the terminology of the phenomena, insights, and theories of the social sciences. During these digressions into what I hope is a popular-scientific treatment, I've tried to resist the strong tendency to refer to my own research, which I didn't think would necessarily be seen by every reader as entirely credible. At other points I do mention my own studies, but always in a way that makes it clear whether any particular study was faked or not. But most of the book comes straight from my head; it's my own collection of experiences, memories, and social-scientific interpretations, which I've tried to set down in written words as honestly as possible. A few of the more complex concepts are covered in greater detail in the section entitled "Notes, thoughts, and apologies" (p. 209)¹, in which I try to justify, excuse, correct, add more detail, demystify, add details, and provide references. It might occasionally get a bit pedantic, but I wanted to do as thorough a job as possible. The less detail-oriented reader can ignore this extra information without missing anything of vital importance to the overall story.

Finishing the last paragraph of this book means that my story of my scientific and personal downfall is now complete. I can well imagine that over time, other—perhaps more relevant—memories, inspirations, and random neural firings will come to my mind. There's nothing to be done about that. But for now, this is the only story I have to tell.

¹ Translator's note: About two-thirds of the original "Notes, thoughts, and apologies" section has not been translated in the current English version of the book.

Chapter 1

Those kids over there, waiting for the bus; they're too young to be college students. They're just a little younger; high school seniors, probably. On their way home from one of the clusters of schools on the edge of town, after a day of studying, hanging out with their friends in the yard, maybe sneaking an occasional cigarette. They're having a good time. Or at least, they look as if they are. It's a bright summer's day and their faces have caught the sun a little. It looks like the summer vacation did them all good. Their new school bags, full of books, hang casually from their shoulders. The boys are a little shorter than the girls, which is how it goes at their age. They look at their shoes while they speak, kick the curb absentmindedly, and laugh a little too hard at jokes that aren't really very funny.

For the past few weeks they've lain on the beach, visited small towns and large cities, been dragged against their will up and down the French Alps, camped with their parents and their annoying younger brother, and fallen hopelessly, stupidly in love for the first time. But mostly, like teens in summer everywhere, they've hung around the house, not doing very much. In a few short weeks, they've become another year older.

That's what the summer vacation is for, really. It's a time for growth and change, more than the moments in the calendar that are officially assigned that role: Christmas, Easter, and New Year. Those events have become institutionalized and thus, mechanically, also a bit half-hearted. The birth of Jesus, his death and resurrection, blossom on the trees, eggs, flowers in bloom, a new symbolic beginning: they're already programmed in every calendar, and we all go through our little rituals every year, making resolutions and promising to reinvent ourselves. We give our family members a kiss, eat a painted egg, give the sheets a good airing, and think for a few seconds about the inexorable march of time, but it doesn't usually lead to anything actually changing.

In summer, on the other hand, anything's possible. The hours and days and weeks go by, and we don't care. The sun makes us laid-back; we slow down and take a little more time for everything we do. We take the time to enjoy the long, light evenings, to relax and prepare for new challenges in the fall. Summer is when we really grow.

I just arrived here in Zwolle. I drove here from the University of Tilburg in one hour and 38 minutes, and parked in one of the narrow streets behind the train station. I timed my journey precisely, because it's important for my story. I have a notepad on the passenger seat. Left Tilburg 12:33 p.m., arrived Zwolle 2:11 p.m. I have to know this kind of detail if my story is to be believable. Just before the summer vacation, I drove to Zwolle and Groningen, and did some questionnaire-based research with students on the campus of the technical college in each of those towns. Now, here in Zwolle, I thought it would be easy to find the college, but to my consternation I can't. When I arrived in town I was expecting signs with clear directions, but they weren't there, or maybe I was too distracted to see them. Which is quite possible, because I've been pretty distracted lately. Actually, panicked would be a better word. Where the heck have they hidden their technical college in this stupid town?

Maybe the station would be a good place instead. I walk over there to check it out. Lots of high school and college students waiting for buses or trains. While they're waiting, I'm sure they'd have time to fill out a really brief questionnaire.

The questionnaire is in several parts. First, the participants are asked to focus intently on a picture for a few seconds. There are three different versions of the form, with a different picture on each: either a tree, or a cow, or a steak. Then they answer a few "background questions" which seem to be unrelated to whichever picture they saw. These questions allow a psychologist to measure how sociable, or competitive, or individualistic somebody is. For example, there's a frequently used questionnaire which asks people to split a hypothetical sum of money between themselves and an imaginary other person. There are three options for each question. For example, they can choose a "sociable" option, giving the same amount to each person (\$50 for you, \$50 for me), or a "competitive" option whereby the difference between the amount they get and the amount the other person gets is as high as possible (\$40 for me, \$10 for you), or the "individualistic" option, which means that they get the greatest amount of for themselves, regardless of what the other gets (\$60 for me, \$40 for you).

Could it work? Would the students here on the station give us a few minutes of their time to fill in the questionnaires, so that we could test whether looking at a picture of a steak makes people less sociable, and more competitive and individualistic, than looking at

a picture of a cow or a tree? It would be an elegant and fun way to demonstrate that meat makes people less considerate of others. One photo of a delicious, juicy steak and bam, people are thinking more about themselves and less about others. That ought to work, surely? We know from other research that meat, especially red meat, is associated with words like “tough,” “masculine,” and “aggressive.” Meat makes you big and strong and independent. If you eat meat, you don’t need other people. Meat means power; vegetarians are soft, left-wingers, liberals, tree-huggers. I have to admit that I love eating meat, and I can be pretty inconsiderate occasionally. So I have no trouble imagining that a study like that ought to work. But how realistic is it to make out that it all happened here, in the hall of the Zwolle train station? How many college students would have come through here on an ordinary day, just before the summer recess? A hundred, two hundred, more? And every one of them took the time to fill out a form, standing up, with one eye on the clock so they didn’t miss their bus or train? Two hundred questionnaires in a couple of hours? I think I’d better try and find the technical college after all.

I don’t want to speak to the kids here. It feels creepy. I know that I don’t belong here, that I’m acting a bit weirdly. My brain is racing. I have no margin for error; my story has to be perfect if it’s to have any chance of convincing them. OK, it happened here. I did the research here, at the station in Zwolle. But also at the technical college, somewhere else in town. That was the location I’d told people about. There would be way more students available to take part there than here at the station. But where is the campus? Or are there several, spread out across the city? That would be very awkward.

A bus pulls out from its stand. I have to jump out of its way, because I’m standing in the middle of the road. The bus driver shakes his head at this idiot and points at the sidewalk. The kids who are waiting at the next stand watch in amusement. They’re looking at a tall, dark-complexioned man, slightly balding, with trendy glasses and slightly unkempt, slightly graying, dark brown hair. I’m wearing a smart suit and an expensive light-blue shirt with custom cufflinks, in the form of round glass buttons with a little photo of my daughters inside. It was taken on vacation; they’re standing, arm-in-arm, looking directly into the camera, with cute colored sunhats on their heads.

I’m sweating in my smart, blue, striped, Italian suit. It goes well with the season, but it is a bit tight. Although I play a lot of tennis and try to go easy on the grilled cheese

sandwiches, I'm overweight, and have been for years. In fact, it's getting worse. When I talk with someone, I have to hold my stomach in if I want to make a good impression. That makes me look taller as well as slimmer. Stomach in, jacket buttoned, chest out. Then I'm Doctor Stapel. *Professor* Stapel, even. But when I'm at home, or sitting in my office, I let my belt out a notch and open the button on my pants to take the pressure off my belly and make it less uncomfortable to sit. Then you can just call me Diederik.

I've found a friendly, helpful boy of about sixteen who knows how to find the technical college, because his sister is a student there. It's located in a kind of industrial area behind the train station. The boy tells me this in a great hurry, because he can see out of the corner of his eye that his bus is about to leave and his friends are waiting impatiently for him. How would he score in the money distribution game? Competitive? Individualistic? Egotistical? Probably sociable, maybe even at the altruistic end of the spectrum. He's taking the time to tell me where I need to go and show me how to get there, while he's risking missing his bus home.

I hurry back to the street where I left my car. When I get there, I can see that the sunroof is wide open. I left my computer, cellphone, and wallet lying on the back seat for anyone to reach in and take. Everything is still there, luckily. This is Zwolle. It seems like only nice people live here.

A few months ago, thieves broke into my car in the university parking lot while I was at work. They smashed the back window and took my bag. Computer, cellphone, notebook, my wallet with my ID and credit cards, all gone. I'd parked on the edge of the lot, which is next to an attractive piece of woodland. As dean of the faculty of behavioral and social sciences, I had to chair a doctoral candidate's dissertation defense, and the entrance of the hall where these defenses take place is close to the wood. The thieves had probably been hiding out there, like modern-day highway robbers. At some time during the hour and a half that I spent sitting in my academic gown listening dutifully to the scientific question-and-answer session between the candidate and the thesis committee, they emerged from hiding, grabbed their loot, and disappeared back into the wood.

I don't remember what that day's dissertation was about. I'm pretty sure that I would have found the discussion interesting, because I usually do. But it was just one of many defenses that I chaired that week, and after a while they all start to resemble each other. Banned books and the question of Catholic censorship, the effect of type D personality on recovery from illness, latent class analysis and choice of school, body language and brain waves, emotions and brain waves, family structure and participation in the labor market, the stress of excessive choice.

Doctoral dissertations are an important source of funding for Dutch public universities. So the more PhD students who graduate, the better. For every successful dissertation, the government hands over a little more than \$100,000. Naturally, this leads to some creative ideas for ways to increase the numbers of doctorates being awarded. Some of the money is shared with the individual departments that produce the greatest number of dissertations, so there's also a decentralized financial incentive to increase throughput. Individual professors who graduate more candidates than the rest enjoy greater prestige, and are generally closer to the head of the line when it comes to promotions and landing plum committee jobs.

So, when it comes to a borderline case between passing and failing, a number of non-academic factors—the usual suspects of money, status, and power—can sometimes come into the equation and create perverse incentives to give a substandard candidate the nod. How many professors are prepared to stand up in front of their colleagues and state outright that a particular dissertation doesn't come up to the standards of science and its author should fail, even if this means a loss of income for the university? For the moment, there are still enough brave souls like that, but it's becoming more and more difficult to make that stand, because universities' financial resources are dwindling and dissertations are an increasingly important source of income. The pressure to take a few published articles, put them in a binder, and call them a thesis is getting stronger. Somebody out there wrote a well-researched book about a tragic historical figure? Give him a call and see if he'd like to turn it into a dissertation. There's a Master's student with an interesting dataset of hospital outcomes? Let's see if we can get her interested in writing a few papers about it, so she can get a PhD and we can score another \$100,000. That guy who's thinking about giving up because he's been working on his idea for four years and still not gotten

anywhere? Let's see what we can salvage. All you need is a pass mark. A mediocre or even outright bad dissertation still counts for the money machine, which is why an increasing number are just a hastily assembled collection of the candidate's published journal articles rather than a carefully crafted masterpiece written from scratch. That's not good, because science that's "carefully crafted" tends to be worth more than the "hastily assembled" variety. Our system of handing over money for every successful dissertation may not be doing much for the quality of the science being done.

So why don't we stop it? Why don't we remove the perverse incentive to graduate as many PhDs as possible by turning the funding system on its head? Universities shouldn't be given money per dissertation accepted; they should have to *pay* for each one. Not a fortune; maybe a few hundred dollars. This will very likely reduce the quantity of people getting a doctorate, but the quality of their work ought to improve out of all proportion. People spend money on things that they value, whatever the source of those values might be. If a university had to pay to accept a PhD thesis, it would only do so if there was a certain amount of agreement that the work it contained represented something worthwhile. A dissertation would only make it to the stage of the public defense in front of the thesis committee if it had already been extensively reviewed and critiqued by a group of senior faculty. That would remove the incentive to fill those committees with complacent professors who know and are already sympathetic towards the candidate; it would also reduce the temptation to submit an average thesis, when it could be turned into something really top-notch with a year or two of extra effort.

I drive around the station, across the new loop road, and sure enough, there are the signs I was expecting, pointing the way to the technical college where I handed out a bunch of questionnaires a couple of months ago. Phew. I park outside the main entrance. The college seems to consist of a mixture of older and newer buildings, with the latter having noticeably more glass in their construction. I walk into one of the newer ones. It's completely quiet; there are no students around, just a couple of reception staff behind a counter. They're talking about their respective vacations; I guess it's probably their first day back at work. They look happy and relaxed. "Yep, the cafeteria is in this building. Just walk down that corridor and you'll see it." I follow their directions and find what I'm

looking for. Here's where I did the study. A big, brightly-lit dining hall with rows of tables and chairs. Next to it I can make out one end of a library or a bookstore.

This is the place.

The academic year starts in earnest next week, and then this place will be full of students. And they'll all be keen to help the cause of science by taking part in a study, filling in a questionnaire with cool photos and intriguing questions.

I've seen enough. As I head back outside, I'm walking a little quicker than when I arrived. Relief. I can still do this. I believe it could still work. I carried out the research at the Zwolle train station and at the technical college behind it. I talked to a few students, and they filled in the questionnaires and recruited some of their friends to do the same. And so on, and so on; it snowballs, and before you know it you've got a couple of hundred forms filled in. That's how I always do it. Everyone wants to help the progress of science, especially students. Simple. Next stop: Groningen.

The road from Zwolle to Groningen is just that little bit too long. Everything past Zwolle is too far for a day out. When you drive from Tilburg to Groningen and you get to Zwolle, you think you're most of the way there, but you still have a whole stretch of boring, featureless, flat terrain to cover. It happens to me every time I go to Groningen: I get to Zwolle, think "almost there," and then find I've got another hour to go. I note the time when I arrive: 3:07 p.m.

It takes me a while to find the University of Groningen's recently renovated satellite campus on the northern edge of town, surrounded by fields on one side and new suburban housing on the other, but when I get there I'm amazed. When I worked at Groningen I hardly ever came out here. The psychology department was in the center of town, right next to the botanical garden and not far from the nicest park in the city, so there was little incentive to go to see my colleagues in the economics and natural science departments in their 1970s concrete buildings.

All that had changed. The campus is now called a Science Park and a whole series of impressive buildings has appeared. It's good that I've seen it now; it'll help make my story of how I did my research here more credible if I can give a bit of detail about the place. There's what looks like a giant egg emerging from the edge of an artificial lake, and a little

further on there's a row of windows sticking out of the earth like a tectonic plate. I have no idea how to orient myself here. There are no signs anywhere and, as at Zwolle, no students yet.

I feel almost existentially alone, but I have to keep myself going. It's starting to rain and the wind is getting up. Which building belongs to which department? Where is the library, or the cafeteria, or some other place where the students hang out? Where would be a good place to do a quick questionnaire-based study? I drive around and around, looking for the place where I did that study a couple of months ago. I drive and look and try to think.

Suddenly I can see a lot more grass and a lot fewer buildings. The road comes to a dead end. I look around, but all I can see is drizzle. I drive back towards civilization, into the middle of the campus. I park my car outside a randomly-chosen building and go inside. As I go through the revolving door, a man smiles at me. He looks like a manager of some kind. His voice is full of pride and enthusiasm as he explains where I am. He points over his shoulder to the cafeteria, but that's just for this building; the main cafeteria is in the white building across the square from here. That's where most students go to eat. "Over there, behind those windows on the first floor." He gives me a little map ("You never know when you'll need it!") and I walk back out through the revolving door.

Through the dreary rain I can see it clearly: that's where it happened. It's a long, narrow, white building with lots of windows. It looks ungainly and empty at the moment, but next week, when the semester begins, it'll be full of energy and life. That's where the research was done. That was where I toured the tables, asking students to answer some questions over their lunch. They were keen to help; they thought it was cool. And it was for a good cause, for science. This could still work.

So, between one train station and two college campuses, I've made quite a lot of progress with my story. But why did I make it so difficult for myself? Why the heck did I tell people that the research had been done in Zwolle and Groningen, hundreds of miles away, instead of somewhere close to home? Is this some kind of game I'm playing? Am I trying to make it hard for myself so that I have to try extra hard to win, so I can be proud of what I've done? Do I have to keep raising the bar, so I can keep my mind on the jumping and floating, rather than the falling and crashing?

I get back in my car. It's starting to get dark. It's time to go home. I look at the notepad next to me and start to have doubts. Is this going to work? It's still a pretty weird story. A busy professor who designs a study, and then gets into his car and drives to the other end of the country to hand out questionnaires himself in public places, alone, with no students or research assistants. Who's going to believe something like that?

I'm having difficulty concentrating on the road. There's been lots of renovating and building going on around here. My GPS is old and doesn't know about all the changes to the roads. At one point I get lost and end up on a service road. Looking in the rear-view mirror, I can see the outline of the Groningen Science Park and the housing development next to it. Big projects using government money in an attempt to encourage people to stay in their provincial town instead of heading west to the big cities. I really hope it works. This is a nice place to live. There's space and peace, order and innocence.

I turn round and drive through the town, along the street with our old house. I take my foot off the gas as I drive past. We lived here happily for six years. This is where our daughters learned to walk, speak, and sleep. Just as I get to the house, our former neighbor, Harald, steps out of his front door. I crouch down, shield my face with my left hand, and pull away. He looks tired, and his hair is longer than I remember it being before. I hope he didn't see me. How would I explain that? What am I doing here?

For a while, Harald and I tried to get slim and fit by going swimming together a couple of times a week, at seven in the morning, before work. As a weight-loss program it was doomed from the start, but we had fun while it lasted. Once or twice a week we'd meet up by the garages behind our house, wearing bathrobes and slippers, towels around our necks. Harald drove a BMW 535i. He was a business owner and more or less lived in his car. He made regular trips to Eastern Europe looking for business ideas, partners, concepts, and deals. The car was full of cigarette butts, coffee cups, CDs, books, papers, attaché cases, clothes, ski boots, building materials, you name it. After a few disappointments with indoor pools (too much chlorine) and outdoor pools (too many people), we finally found the perfect pool on the edge of town: outdoors, not too many people, not too much chlorine. On the way there, we'd stop at the gas station for coffee, in our bathrobes, and on the way back, we'd stop at the Mercure Hotel to partake of their

extensive breakfast buffet, still in our now-damp bathrobes. There we'd sit, with wet hair and unshaven beards, looking somewhat incongruous among the salespeople, management trainers, consultants, personal coaches, and the rest of the traveling circus.

It's not much fun to get up in the morning knowing that you have to do something unpleasant (like swimming, if it's cold outside), but if you know that your neighbor just got up with exactly the same feeling and is now waiting outside for you, then you do it anyway. Phoning to cancel and going back to sleep isn't an option. And actually, swimming in our favorite pool isn't unpleasant at all. It's small and simple, run by volunteers, and in a nice setting: next to a campsite and with a view of farmland. When you're in the water, you can hear and see the cows in the distance. Swimming with nature. I often found myself trembling with fear, doing my breast stroke laps with my mouth clamped shut, because every time I turned at the end of the pool I imagined I could see a big frog looming in front of me, looking for somewhere to hide. Was there one at each end, or was it swimming along with me? Breathe. Breathe in, breathe out. Out. Out.

Back home, to Tilburg. Then I can spend the evening working on the details of my story. I've still got some time. Enough time to get all my ducks in a row. I have to be ready for anything, because they're building a strong case against me. How solid is my story? How plausible can I make it? What questions can I expect? I started doing the research in June. (When in June, exactly?) The end of June. (But that was the end of the academic year; were there still enough students around?) I'm impatient and I like to have everything under control, so I did everything myself. (But you're the dean, for goodness' sake!) I went out on the road. (How did you find time that?). I handed out questionnaires in Zwolle and Groningen. (Why did you choose those places?) I asked people to help, at the train station and on college campuses. (And they said yes? Just like that, with no reward?) Well, most of them were happy to do it to help the cause of science, but I paid some of them. (How much? Where did you get the money from?) Then, when they'd filled in their questionnaire, I asked them to help me find some more participants. (Why would they go along with that?) I paid them for that. (How much?) A buck or so per questionnaire. (And you thought this was OK?) The questionnaires were very short, so they didn't take long to fill in. (How short? Did everyone take the same time?) I guess the whole thing took about

five to seven minutes per person. (Times a hundred questionnaires?) I've done this kind of flash-mob research before. (When? Where?) It's kind of borderline, ethics-wise, but it's quick and easy, and I get a real kick out of it when it works. (You don't say.) Not least because it's so edgy. (Do you enjoy taking unnecessary professional risks?) Then I went back to my car and entered all the data into my computer. (In your car? What was the hurry?) I always want to find out what happened, whether or not the study worked. I get so excited that I can't wait. (And what happened to the questionnaires?) I don't like having piles of paper lying around, so I threw them away. (Where?) In a dumpster that I found by the side of the road. (Where? Which street? Do you think the dumpster has been emptied since then?) That's what I did. That's how it was. (Do you even believe this yourself?) It's unorthodox, I know. It's not the kosher way to do things. But that's just how I roll. (That's just how you roll?) That's just how I roll.

It's getting darker, and the traffic is getting busier. The evening rush hour is starting. I'm feeling thirsty and hungry. I try to find the bottle of water that ought to be somewhere in the car. My head is just about ready to explode. People don't just disappear. So there must be people walking round in Zwolle and Groningen who took part in my research. They'll still be there in a week or a month or a year from now. If you stood outside the Zwolle train station and asked every person who looked like they might be a student who came by if they'd filled in a psychological survey some time before the summer vacation, there's be a few who'd say that they had. If I were to sit on a chair in the middle of the campus in Zwolle or the Groningen Science Park—maybe with a large sign next to me saying “DO YOU KNOW THIS MAN?”—then some of the students would recognize me because they'd remember filling out one of my questionnaires. That has to be true. You can't do a study in June and find that everyone's vanished off the face of the earth by the end of August. People move to a new city, but not everyone, every couple of months. Students finish their degrees or go on to study somewhere else, but not all of them every year. Out of the couple of hundred people who took part in my study, it ought to be possible to turn up a dozen or so with no problem at all. So where are they?

I drive past Zwolle, but instead of continuing on to Tilburg I decide to go to Utrecht, because I need to assemble some credible evidence there too. By now the evening rush

hour is at its height, and it takes me ages to reach the center of town. I park my car at the upscale Karel V hotel opposite the train station. My head is thumping and my hands are shaking. I leave my coat in the car; this has to be done quickly.

I get out of the car, close the door behind me, make my way quickly out of the hotel's garage, and cross the street to the station. Well, that's the idea, anyway, but the sign says "Don't Walk" and two cars have to screech to a halt to avoid hitting me. A couple of other pedestrians stare in concern at the crazy guy. A couple of minutes later I'm standing, out of breath, in the main hall of the station. Looking around, I see nothing but people, masses of people everywhere, and I can't get my bearings. Still, I have to work out how and where it happened here.

The first study was in March 2010, unless it was April. The cleaning staff at the Utrecht train station were on strike for higher pay and better conditions. The station hadn't been cleaned for days, while the constant stream of travelers continued undiminished. Pretty soon, the whole place was a real mess. And that made it the perfect setting for a study to test the idea that people are more inclined to think in stereotypes in a messy, chaotic environment than in an orderly, clean one. When surrounded by dirt and disorder, people are more likely to believe that Muslims are terrorists, Brazilians are sexy, British people are polite, New Yorkers are pushy, women are emotional, and the Irish are drunks, than in a place which is clean and looks welcoming. Stereotypes are mental detergents that wash away the pollution of uncertainty. People like to pigeonhole others, because it makes this messy, chaotic world seem neat and tidy. Stereotypes help us to understand and predict people's behavior. Once you know that a person is from New York, you understand why he's always playing with his iPhone (because being from New York means he's impatient), but you also know that there's more chance he'll want to talk to you than if he was from some small town (because he's probably an extrovert).

I'd imagined it like this. Somewhere around the edge of the main station hall we had set up a row of five chairs. One of our research assistants sat on the first chair. We asked passing train travelers whether they would answer a short questionnaire for our research. The questions asked them to judge various groups of people according to different character traits (efficient, precise, cool, criminal, conservative, etc). When someone agreed to take part, we asked them to sit in one of the chairs to fill the form. Our research question

was about not only how the travelers would fill in the form, but also which chair they would sit on. We predicted that they would use more stereotypes in their answers while the cleaners were on strike and everything was in a mess, than when the strike was over and the station had been cleaned up. If people are asked to judge others while sitting in a dirty environment, they'll be more likely to reach for the mental detergent. Furthermore, we expected that people's use of stereotypes to provide them with a simplified, orderly, cleaned-up view of the world (the French are snooty; the Japanese are quiet) would depend not only on how clean or messy the environment was, but also on how far they chose to sit from the research assistant at the end of the row of chairs.

This was the most subtle part of the experiment. The idea was to have two different people presenting the forms: one Black and one White. We thought that when approached by a Black research assistant in a messy station, the travelers (who were mostly White; Black people are very much a minority in the Netherlands) would tend to sit further away than if the assistant were White or the station were clean and tidy. Disorder increases the tendency to stereotype and discriminate, so that in a disorderly environment people will be more inclined to distance themselves from 'immigrants,' 'foreigners,' or 'strangers' than in more appealing surroundings.

I'm getting a bad feeling in my stomach. I look around the vast hall of the station, trying to find a good spot. I turn and look and turn and look. I run to a different part of the hall. Turn and look and turn and look. People everywhere, pressing ahead, not looking around. It's the rush hour. This is completely different from how I'd imagined it. What an idiot! I can't find anywhere we could have put a row of five chairs. How had I set it up? How had we done the study? I walk over to the first track, and back to the last; to the left, to the right; past the supermarket and Burger King on one side of the massive hall, and past the newsstand and a café on the other. How is this possible? There isn't a good spot to do the research anywhere. There's nowhere you could put a row of five chairs anywhere along the side of the hall, against the wall or by a window. You could maybe fit them right in the middle of the hall, but that would attract too much attention. You can't expect people to take their time and concentrate on filling in a form when they're sitting right in the middle of the busy hall, with all those people milling about them. No way.

I had imagined something that simply wasn't possible. There's nowhere in the station with ten feet of space in front of a wall or window where the study could have been done in the way I'd described it. Not now, not back in March 2010 during the strike, and not the next month when everything was clean again. Why hadn't I thought of that before? Why hadn't I at least come here to check? How could I have been so sloppy?

I've got a thumping headache. With my right hand I push against my forehead to try and ease the pain, and with my left I take my glasses off for a moment. When I put them back on, I see someone I know approaching in the distance. A short man, a nice, very erudite guy. A professor. He lives near me and he's always keen to chat. I'm not sure if he's seen me, but I can't afford to take that chance. I look down at the ground as he approaches. Then, pretending I haven't seen him, I look thoughtfully at the ceiling for a moment, then turn and walk off. What would I have been able to say to him? What am I doing here? Research?

Back at the hotel where I parked my car, I go to the front desk to pay for the use of the garage. The clerk asks if I'm here for one of the seminars the hotel is hosting today, which would entitle me to a discount. I hesitate. Maybe. It might also explain why I was here. I look at the monitor above the desk showing the day's events. The delegates at the various events are financial advisors, lawyers, historians, medical specialists. "No."

I'm a social psychologist. And I'm in big trouble.

Sitting in the car, I retrieve my notepad and check what I've written today. All I can see is a bunch of squiggles written in an barely decipherable scrawl. Did I write that? Under the map reading light I can make out arrows, exclamation points, times, distances, numbers of participants, notes about research settings, questions, answers, remarks, ideas, solutions. A few half- and whole truths, but mostly lies. Some vaguely white, but most jet black.

I check the rearview mirror, start the engine, loop round the bend at the end of the car park, and insert the card to open the barrier. I stop for a moment, remove my glasses, then put them back on. I drive straight home. It's over.

A week earlier, Maarten, who chairs the social psychology department, had confronted me with the question I had been dreading for years. “Diederik, I have to ask you: have you been faking your data?”

Of course, I denied it flat-out. It was a Friday evening, and we were sitting in Maarten’s bright, modern living room. I went round to his house after an evening out with friends, watching the local pro soccer team play yet another mediocre game. Maarten’s house and mine are a stone’s throw from each other. We’ve become good friends, and we like to meet up and talk. Our kids go to the same school. Maarten is a hotshot researcher. He’s a quick thinker, comes up with research ideas that are easy to understand, and usually manages to work out an elegant way to test them out. I’d like to be able to just shoot from the hip the way he does. His ideas are never complicated or esoteric, just simple and smart and quick and authentic. When we were both studying for our doctorates in Amsterdam, Maarten had a lot of trouble getting his research to work. After a string of disappointing results, his supervisor started to doubt whether Maarten was up to it, but he stuck it out and graduated at the same time as me.

Maarten had sent me a text message earlier that evening to ask if I would come over: “It’s important.” While watching the soccer match I hadn’t thought any more about it, but as we left the stadium I checked my phone and saw that he had tried to contact me again: “Are you coming?”, followed by “???” It sounded like something urgent. What could be the problem? Maarten had been divorced for a few years and his girlfriend had recently moved in with him. Maybe there was a problem between them, or it had upset his children. Maybe he wanted to talk about it and get some friendly advice? I’m always happy to lend an ear. But I was way off base.

As soon as I entered his house, he came straight to the point.

“How are you?” I asked, as he stood in the kitchen, making a cup of tea.

“This is not good, Diederik. Not good at all.” He had just returned from a conference in London where a group of young researchers from Tilburg had taken him to one side one evening after dinner, and told him about their strong suspicions that I’d been playing fast and loose with my research for some time. Nobody knew where I was getting my data from. Had I been making it all up?

I tried to act tough and pretended to be shocked at these terrible accusations. I was nonchalant and dismissive. After all, if nobody's gossiping about your research, it's probably not very good. I asked him for whatever specific details he had and tried to counter them; after all, what evidence did they have?

But inside my head it was as if the flimsy structure of my secret world, the walls and floors that I had casually erected over the previous ten years, was slowly starting to collapse. For a moment I hoped that at least the bottommost stories would hold up, but as layer after layer after layer folded in on one another, the whole edifice crumbled.

The researchers who had blown the whistle on me had clearly convinced Maarten that they were on to something, with a great deal of detailed evidence and not-so-wild accusations. He didn't want to believe it, but he didn't have much of a choice. He'd spoken to a young PhD student with whom I had coauthored an article that we'd managed to get accepted by one of the top international journals. It had taken two years of intensive research, and lots of writing and rewriting. But now she had lost all sense of pride in her achievement because she didn't believe in the data that I'd given her. Maarten told me that the gossip about me was spreading in academic circles across the country; from now on, whenever I gave a presentation of my research, there were going to be a lot of raised eyebrows.

(Oh come on, I retorted silently, that's always the way. People are always trying to cut you down to size. We're in a competitive business, and there's a lot of jealousy, envy, and outright hatred in our little incestuous world. It makes party politics look like a Sunday school outing.)

My attempt to shrug everything off as just a big misunderstanding seemed to me to be having an effect on Maarten. He loosened up a bit, poured me a glass of wine, and started to talk about the conference. He'd met some nice people and been to some interesting presentations. Inside my head, the clouds of dust rising from the debris of the collapsed towers of my self-image were becoming darker and more impenetrable. Maarten carried on talking about the conference, but I'd stopped listening. What could they have found out? Everything? Surely not. Nobody would believe everything, surely? Nobody believes everything. Maybe I still had a chance? This was too big, too terrible, too weird; too big to fail, as they used to say about the banks.

I'll come up with something. I'm a lucky guy. It'll all turn out OK. I can talk my way out of this situation. But it turned out that couldn't; it turned into an unstoppable juggernaut. It kept the Dutch media busy for months. Radio, TV, Internet, newspapers, magazines, books, reviews of the year, top ten lists. The story was front-page news all around the world. New York, Los Angeles, Johannesburg, London, Sydney, Tokyo. The Lord of the Lies. The Lying Dutchman. A master of deception. *Fraude cum laude. Magna cum fraude.*

I had just got back from a wonderful vacation the south of France and nearby Italy. We'd been in Aix-en-Provence, Nice, San Remo, Barolo. Great places to hang out and relax in the sun. *La vie en rose. La dolce vita.* I had returned feeling refreshed and at the top of my game. The previous academic year had gone very well. I'd had some great articles published in the leading journals, the researchers working under me were going some very interesting work, and in my role as Dean of the social sciences faculty I'd taken a few calculated management risks that seemed to be turning out well and were already producing results. I wanted to get away from the oppressive weight of the bureaucracy and its obsession with rules, procedures, formal meetings, and filling in forms. I was looking to instill a new atmosphere that would fire people up and build bridges between them. Trust, security, and mutual respect were the watchwords. Team spirit. Building community. I was working hard. Finally, I had something that I wanted to work for, that made me want to get out of bed in the morning. I hadn't felt like that for many years. I felt as if I belonged, as if I could finally relax. I had started to sleep reasonably well for the first time in many years, instead of lying awake looking at the ceiling or the slowly flapping drapes.

I was a doctor, a professor, dean of faculty. I had graduated near the top of my class in psychology and communications science, and obtained my doctorate with all the honors and distinctions imaginable. I was a prize-winning researcher with over a hundred publications to my name, in several different countries. I'd had my work published in the leading journals of my field and served as associate editor for several of them as well. I'd been chair of the national psychological association for several years. I was a co-founder of a research institute that aimed to make a complete inventory of the psychological determinants of economic behavior. I was always working. I loved spending time with my

colleagues, doctoral candidates, and undergraduates working on problems, constructing theory, and devising studies. Together we would explore the mental foundations of social life and put them together in a simple, logical way. There was nothing else I'd rather do and I was completely dedicated to it. I had become one with my work.

And now it turned out that I'd committed professional suicide. I'd spent years slowly, carefully, deliberately, and with great precision, digging my own grave. I'd started with a teaspoon, and ended with a hundred-horsepower backhoe. Plenty of other people had slid into this hole, too. My wife and children, the rest of my family, my colleagues, my students: they all got dragged in. I'd killed myself, but I was still there, still hurting people. I was no longer a doctor, or a professor, or a dean of faculty, or a scientist of any kind. Just a body, breathing in and out. Everything that I had put my heart and soul into all those years, I had comprehensively destroyed with a web of untruths, prevarication, fairytales, illusions, fantasies, and big, fat, outright lies.

So this was what the end of the world felt like.

Chapter 2

I'd called the party "This is not America," and arranged the music tape so that David Bowie's eponymous hit came round every so often. "This is not America, this is Oegstgeest (population 19,000), which is why it's time for me to spread my wings and see the world." I was eighteen years old, had just graduated from high school, and the party was a send-off for my study trip to America. I had scholarship money from the Dutch and U.S. governments, and some from my parents; that would keep me going for at least a year at East Stroudsburg University, a small college in Pennsylvania.

During the party I tried to impress people by telling them about the amazingly cool time I was going to have at an American liberal arts college, but in fact I wasn't so sure I wanted to go after all. I enjoyed living in Holland. Of course, going off to study in America was a great opportunity to broaden my horizons and experience new challenges—that was how I'd put it in my scholarship applications, anyway—but I'd really enjoyed my time in high school. So why did I want to go? I'd worked hard, hung out a lot, and fallen seriously in love. We both acted in the theater club, and I gave her extra help with economics. One day, in March of our senior year, we decided to forget about economics for a day, cycled home, and had proper sex (with all the bells and whistles we could think of) for the first time. It was great, but we were sure we could do better, with more practice. We decided to cut class more often. In the end she got an A- in economics, and I only got a B+. She's still the love of my life, and I'm lucky to wake up next to her every morning. Now, as then. Yes, even now. Especially now.

I was an accident, or at least, my conception wasn't exactly planned. I'm the last of four children. My sister is nearly ten years older than me, my brothers six and four years older. This had the advantage, during my time in high school, that I pretty much had the run of the house. My brothers and sister had moved out and were living in college towns in other parts of the country. My parents had busy lives and had decided they could trust me. So I was often home alone, which was fun. Our house was just eight minutes by bike from my school, large and welcoming, and I regularly had friends over to drink tea and listen to music while we sat on the thick embroidered rug in front of the fireplace. I can't remember

what we talked about while we drank our tea, but I'm certain that at the time, in the mid-80s, we all thought we were having a pretty exciting time, full of deep thoughts and smart ideas. Deeper thoughts and smarter ideas than our parents and the other adults around us. We were teenagers, in our own little world, running on hormones and existential questions.

Meanwhile, outside, it was a different world. The newspapers and TV brought a constant stream of bad news. Riots and demonstrations, punks, "No Future," unemployment, austerity. But that sort of thing was happening in big cities like Amsterdam or The Hague. Not in Oegstgeest. About the closest we got to punks were the three or four gangly, hunched-over guys who were always hanging around by the bike shed, smoking and swapping safety pins. "No Future" was a cool slogan for a T-shirt. Proper bad stuff happened somewhere else. Our sheltered upbringing left us full of hope and optimism.

Most of my high school classmates went on to study something useful, like law, economics, or medicine. There was also a group who had discovered two new subjects: European studies and business studies. European studies could lead to a job in the promising world of cross-border cooperation, while business studies courses were aimed at the apparently endless demand for managers, consultants, and executives.

I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I enjoyed more or less everything, but nothing in particular stood out. I enjoyed languages, literature, economics, and history, but I couldn't imagine spending the rest of my life on them. I was jealous of my friends who'd known from the age of ten that they wanted to be doctors, lawyers, or biologists, or "just plain rich." I suppose I wanted to be rich, too—I wanted that quite a lot, if I'm honest—but to make my choice of what to study on that basis seemed to me to be a recipe for disaster. You have to be realistic, because the jobs aren't just sitting there waiting for you. On the other hand, you don't want to be *too* realistic.

What did I like? What did I most want to do? What about my hobbies? I didn't really have any. I could draw and paint a bit, but without any real conviction. What did I do out of school? Well, I really enjoyed going to the movies. And lately I'd spent a lot of time in the theater. Maybe that would be something for me. I'd been to a lot of dance performances and art exhibitions, and I'd spent quite a bit of time studying how to act in or

direct Harold Pinter's plays. With a couple of actress friends and a teacher of Dutch, I'd created a theater company called Sepia, which produced Pinter's long plays in the school hall. I loved to read and deconstruct Pinter's texts, trying to understand what made his characters tick.

The things people avoid, the things they try not to talk about, are much more important than what they face up to and are prepared to admit to. Pinter's characters fight and hurl insults at each other, but the impact of all those words only becomes apparent in the silence that follows.

When Sepia played Pinter, we made it a challenge to make the pauses and silences in the text last as long as possible. One day, we read an analysis of Pinter that talked about the 20–40 rule (or maybe it was 30–60; I don't remember exactly). Twenty seconds makes a pause, forty makes a silence. We thought that was too long. Even a Pinteresque silence can't hold its meaning for that length of time. With every play, I tried to make my part's pauses and silences as long as possible, but I never managed more than ten seconds. Whatever I tried, after seven or eight seconds I became impatient and wanted—had—to carry on speaking.

Silence.

We've met before, you know. Anna and I. Yes, we met in the Wayfarers Tavern. In the corner. She took a fancy to me. Of course I was slimhipped in those days. Pretty nifty. A bit squinky, quite honestly. Curly hair. The lot. We had a scene together. She freaked out. She didn't have any bread, so I bought her a drink. She looked at me with big eyes, shy, all that bit. She was pretending to be you at the time. Did it pretty well. Wearing your underwear she was too, at the time. Amiably allowed me a gander. True blue generosity.

Pause.

I was afraid that the audience would get restless, start shuffling in their seats, if I kept quiet any longer. Why didn't I let that happen? Why didn't I try that little experiment, let the silence fill up with meaning (or with coughs, muttering, and giggling)? I often remembered

that question, many years later, when I had to break bad news to people. Then, too, I found it hard to admit Pinteresque pauses into the conversation, to let the silence do its work. Coaches and therapists will tell you about the power of silence, but I always wanted to add something, solve problems, give help. I wanted to get somewhere.

A little knowledge of Pinter also came in handy in a lecture hall with several hundred students. “Last week we talked at length about the fundamental attribution error. Who can remember what that is?” Nobody raises a hand or says anything. Do they know, or is something holding them back? Probably it’s a case of “collective ignorance.” Most of the students know the answer, but they’re a little unsure and so don’t put their hand up at once. They look around and see that nobody else has raised their hand either, which of course increases the tendency to keep quiet. And of course, the chances that you’re the only student who knows the answer are pretty small. Why would you know the right answer if all these other people don’t? That’s how we arrive at the situation where people in a large group are terrible at estimating the level of knowledge or the opinions and norms of the group as a whole. Why do high school students drink too much? Because they all think that “everyone else” drinks a lot and enjoys it—and yet, that’s usually not the case. Why are soccer fans so often aggressive and ready for trouble? Because they all think that the other guy is spoiling for a fight too—which he usually isn’t. Why do so many students in a crowded lecture hall stay quiet when you ask them a simple question to which most of them know the answer? Because they’re all waiting for each other, and think that if nobody else has answered, it means that nobody knows the right answer. In this last case, a Pinteresque silence can be a useful solution.

Don’t give any hints, don’t be impatient. Don’t fill the silence; it will wait. With a bit of luck, one student’s desire to express their knowledge (“I know! Pick me!”) will win out over the perception of collective ignorance (“Nobody seems to know, so I’m probably wrong too”). So, a bit of Pinter can help to create a culture that makes it easier to share knowledge. In one of these long silences, the desire to express and spread your knowledge grows: “I know. The fundamental attribution error is where people think that individuals are defined by what they do, conflating the doer and the deed, without taking into account the influence of the situation, and overestimating the causal role of personality in the formation of behavior.”

Sepia put on a number of Pinter shows in our senior year. Kids of seventeen or eighteen, playing as if they were in their forties or fifties, with real experience of relationships, breakups, and other life crises. I was still a greenhorn, pretending to be a grown-up. My parents still lived with each other. When they had one of their very rare fights, it didn't generally involve throwing crockery. And even if it did, it was soon forgotten. I lived in a nice suburban street in a nice part of a nice town, with doctors and lawyers and executives and professors for neighbors. In my world, everyone went to a good high school, nobody dropped out, and we all went off to study at the best Dutch universities, and then started a career as a doctor or a lawyer or an executive or a professor, just like Mom and Dad.

Of course, this was just an illusion. The laws of statistics tell us that it's pretty much impossible that the next generation from this privileged environment will all do as well as their parents. Everything tends to regress to the mean over time. In the same way that it's unlikely that two very tall parents will have an even taller child, it's also unlikely that all the children who grow up in a neighborhood full of doctors, lawyers, executives, and professors will be just as successful. That's the sad truth of these upper-middle class towns: excellence is hard to copy, and success is hard to repeat. Statistical reality provides an assurance of long-term balance. Exceptions are followed by the ordinary, success by mediocrity.

And sure enough, a few years later I began to realize that even in our neat, orderly commuter paradise, not everything was rosy. While I was away studying, the stories, rumors, and gossip about failing marriages and stagnant careers started to percolate through. Nothing was quite as it seemed. It turned out that even Oegstgeest had its fair share of adulterous spouses, flaky sons who spent their days smoking weed in the botanical gardens, non-conforming teenage daughters who got themselves pregnant, and alcoholic mothers who hoped that an intensive course of sherry would help them lose those extra pounds from their hips. *Et in Arcadia ego.*

I enjoyed Pinter's silences, and the opportunities they afforded me to grapple with my natural impatience by practicing how to sit still and just do nothing. They held in check my constant desire to push ever further on. They invited me to be different from how I

naturally was, to stretch and extend myself, and I liked that. In fact that was why I enjoyed any sort of acting: it was a form of self-expansion. In playing a part, I enjoyed the possibilities it gave me to do certain things, feel certain emotions, express certain thoughts that I found unsettling and tended to shy away from in real life. Playing at being in love, incarnating anger, depicting compassion. Everything's possible in the theater. For me, the stage was a kind of delivery room where I could give life to the desires and feelings that I was too nervous, fearful, and cowardly to express in the big world outside.

Acting makes life easier because you can try everything out before you commit to it: a movement, a pause, a silence, an accent, a few steps, a glance, the way you sit down, the way you enter or leave: on the stage you can experiment to your heart's content with who you are and who you'd like to be. And that's how I discovered what I wanted to be: an actor. I didn't want to study economics or law or medicine, because everyone was doing that. History just seemed too boring, and learning languages, whether Dutch or French or English, didn't seem to be very useful. So I signed up for the drama school in Maastricht. Now I would be able to turn my weakness into a strength and have all the time in the world to see which roles, feelings, and thoughts best fitted me.

Looking back, I can see that I made that choice for the wrong reason. I didn't feel a calling to becoming an actor, seeing myself playing night after night in theaters across the country; I just couldn't make up my mind, so this bought me some time. Of all the things I thought I might be moderately good at, acting seemed to be the least bad option. Of course, there's a big problem right there: you can only be a good (and/or happy) actor if you commit yourself to it completely, not if you're only doing it because there's no better option, or because it seemed to be a tiny bit better than the other options that you'd identified. I found that out for myself. I enjoyed acting and I felt liberated when I was up on stage, but I wasn't obsessive enough about it. I didn't want it badly enough. I signed up, but in the end I didn't go.

I later found out that for a good part of the year at the Maastricht drama school, they read out my name at roll call every morning. "Diederik Stapel?" "No, he's not here."

I was on the way to America, to defer the stress of choosing for another year. As a freshman at a small U.S. university, you don't really have to make any choices; you can do

everything at once. So I chose acting, but also philosophy, media ecology (which sounded interesting), film making, and scriptwriting.

My arrival in New York was spectacular. I'm not very good with small spaces and great heights. I don't like getting into elevators, and I prefer not to have to spend too much time in a small toilet. I'm a little bit apprehensive of large apartment blocks, church towers, and high bridges, and I get a funny feeling in a stomach if I so much as look at a photo that's been taken from very high up. There's a famous picture that depicts the building of the Rockefeller Center in New York City. You can see ten or so building workers sitting on a girder, eating their lunch. The rest of the city—cars, pedestrians, other buildings—looks like a collection of scale models, hundreds of feet below them. With their sandwiches in their hands, they're smiling at each other and at the photographer, who is presumably also delicately poised high in the sky near them. There's hardly enough room to sit on the girder. One of the workers is looking at an engineering drawing; another is lighting his neighbor's cigarette; a third is just staring straight ahead, looking a little tired. When I see that picture, I feel nauseous. Occasionally I look it up on the Internet, to see if I'm cured yet, but it hasn't happened yet. In fact, the feeling gets worse every time. When I have to fly somewhere, I'm always a bit relieved when the flight passes without too much turbulence and I don't have to take the barf bag from the seat pocket in front of me.

That relief was even greater when I landed at John F. Kennedy airport in New York, an eighteen-year-old high-school graduate on his way to a year abroad, and stood in the long, long line for immigration and customs. The flight from Amsterdam had been long, but I'd survived it. I felt weak and feeble, although I probably looked OK. I was wearing my best pants and a smart jacket, and carrying a big shoulder bag stuffed with papers, certificates, contracts, and immigration forms.

While I was mentally checking for the fiftieth time whether I had remembered everything (passport, visa documents, traveler's checks, cash, addresses, names of people to contact), I heard a loud American voice calling my name from nearby. I looked up and saw a big black guy in an impressive blue uniform. He had a nightstick and a revolver on his belt, and was holding a large cardboard sign with my name on it.

"Diederik Stapel?"

"Yes?" I stammered slightly nervously.

“Come with me.”

I had no idea what was happening to me, but I was so numbed by my nerves and thoughts of what I might be about to experience that I didn’t really have enough emotional space in my head to be particularly shocked. The people behind me in the line stopped their conversations to look at me in surprise. Was I a criminal or a celebrity?

The police officer looked agitated.

“I’m Mike. We have to hurry up.”

I decided it was best not to say anything, in case this was one of those situations where it could be used against me. I almost stumbled trying to keep up as Mike led me past the long lines of waiting passengers and through immigration and customs without showing my passport or any of the other documents that I’d carefully arranged in my bag. He explained what was going on: I was getting the VIP treatment! My father worked at Amsterdam airport and had asked a contact in New York to ask if he would look after me for a few days before I went off to college. I was prepared for that, but I didn’t imagine that it would mean being treated like a President and whisked through the arrivals hall at JFK before apparently being abandoned, with my suitcase, somewhere in the middle of the airport (“Bye now. Take care!” said Mike).

My confusion didn’t last long. A helicopter was waiting for me. The pilot collected me, put my case in the back, and climbed into the glass cockpit of his noisy, rickety-looking machine. With a smile, as if he expected me to be pleased, he told me that I could sit next to him. I’d rather have walked, wherever we were going, but that wasn’t an option. I climbed in, sat down, and took a very firm grip on my seat belt.

I spent the next seven or eight minutes switching between abject terror and total amazement. My vertigo kept up a constant chatter of fear that the collection of perspex and metal that I was sitting in was going to drop out of the sky at any minute, but at the same time I was enchanted by the rhythmic beauty of the grid of streets and avenues that came into view below. The scene on the ground was completely disorganized, but the buildings and streets had unintentionally formed a rather beautiful structure of high and low tower blocks, poor and rich neighborhoods, old and new houses. The helicopter took me to the southern tip of Manhattan and landed close to the twin towers of the World Trade Center.

The pilot helped me out and brought me my case. I was on a dirty grey helipad next to an abandoned warehouse, on the edge of the city, with a strong wind blowing. Behind me I could hear the East River slopping against the pier.

“Wait here. Bob will pick you up.”

The helicopter took off again and flew back towards the airport. Bob was the name of my father’s contact who would be looking after me for a few days.

I waited a while for Bob to arrive. He was probably stuck in traffic. I was cold and tired. I put my shoulder bag on the ground, sat on my case, and looked around me. All my emotions—nervousness at entering unknown territory, vertigo from the helicopter flight, and amazement at the sight of Manhattan—were replaced by numbness. For the first time since I had left Amsterdam, about eight hours earlier, I felt alone. Alone, on the edge of a river in a chaotic megalopolis. This was America? What a dump.

A liberal-arts college is a good choice for students who don’t know what they really want to do. It’s like an academic buffet. You have to choose your major, and maybe a few other subjects that relate to each other in some way that you can call your minor, but otherwise the prospectus of your average liberal-arts college is a cornucopia of interesting and diverse subjects from which students get to pick and choose. From basket-weaving to marine biology, computer security to speech for performance, moral philosophy to hotel management, special education to international economics.

One of the nice things about the Dutch education system (for now, at least) is that if you get graduate with half-decent grades from high school, you’re up there with the best American college freshmen. Your English is good enough and you know how to study. The average Dutch high school graduate can do pretty well at the average U.S. university.

I started with basic classes in philosophy and sociology, but after a few weeks the teachers sent me to sophomore or even junior classes so I wouldn’t get bored. Later, I discovered that the Dutch system has another advantage (again, for now). If you know what you want to do, a liberal-arts education (which you can get in the Netherlands these days, at one of the recently created “university colleges”) is the worst thing you can choose. In the Netherlands, you choose a specific subject from the start, with very few options, and from day one, that’s what you study. If you’re a physical sciences student, you study

physical sciences and almost nothing else; if you're interested in becoming a psychologist, you spend your whole time studying psychology. That sounds (and is) pretty limiting and dull, but the end result is that new Dutch graduates in physical sciences, or psychology, or most other specializations, have a very good reputation and are often way ahead of students from other countries. Compared to an American liberal-arts graduate who majored in psychology (and probably minored in something else entirely), a Dutch psychology graduate is likely to be many times better informed, because she spent so much more time on her subject.

During my time as a researcher, I found that my American colleagues were often jealous of this. When we started out as junior researchers, we got to do the actual research—collecting real data!—while they were still boning up on theory. They still had to study psychology, while the Dutch graduates got to actually do it. (Of course, compared to the American liberal-arts system, the Dutch system is rather narrow and limited; there's not much space in the curriculum—less every year, in fact—to try new things and develop other interests. You have to do that in your spare time, which is a shame.)

I lived in Lyndon Hall, just one of many anonymous dormitories on campus. It was a pale-red concrete box with four floors, one window per room. Like everyone else in the dorm, I had a room-mate; mine was called Quentin. We each had exactly half the room. Quentin had the left side, with his closet, bed, and desk, and I had the right side. That was about right, because in the same way that the human brain is divided into two halves—the left rational, methodical, and into detail, the right more intuitive, imaginative, and into the big picture—so Quentin and I formed a contrast, with me being the creative element and he being the quiet, analytical one. Between the two halves of this particular brain was a *corpus callosum* of about 3 by 12 feet, which allowed for communication between the two halves of the room.

There wasn't a whole lot to do in Lyndon Hall. You had your room, where you could sleep and sometimes try to study, and there was a shower room on each floor. That was about it, unless you count the soda vending machine in the entrance hall. When I arrived, it was just a few months since the Coca-Cola Company had launched "the new taste of Coca-Cola" across the whole of North America. The vending machine was full of the stuff.

According to blind taste tests, even the most fanatical Coca-Cola drinkers found the new version nicer tasting and more refreshing than the old, trusted Coca-Cola, that had been unchanged for 99 years. Nicer tasting and more refreshing, and way better than Coke's great competitor, Pepsi-Cola. And the consumer surveys appeared to show that if this new formulation were to be launched as the new taste of Coca-Cola, lots and lots of people would switch to it—or at least, that's what people said. If, then, sure. I wasn't much of a fan of cola in general—I preferred 7-Up or other soft drinks, or juice—but on the basis of “When in Rome”, I started occasionally putting two quarters in the machine for a hit of this “new taste of Coca-Cola.” I loved it; very sweet-tasting, very refreshing. But I was in a very small minority. New Coke turned out to be a disaster for the Coca-Cola Company. Faithful Coca-Cola drinkers didn't want anything to do with the new version. Coke had been made the same way for almost a hundred years, with the same recipe, not quite as sweet as the new one. It might not have been the best-tasting formula in a blind test, but it was the Real Thing. Coke drinkers simply didn't want to change; they wanted their trusted, classic Coke back. Some pretty heated discussions took place around the vending machine in Lyndon Hall. This must be a hoax, some kind of rip-off. Students got into their cars and drove to the supermarket to protest by buying large quantities of generic cola, or even (the horror!) Pepsi. The newspapers were full of the story.

The lesson was clear: blind taste tests count for nothing compared to brand loyalty, when people love your product because they've made it their product too. Maybe there are other colas out there that taste better, or refresh you more, or cost less. It doesn't matter: you're a Coke drinker and you love your Coke.

It wasn't long before the Lyndon Hall vending machine was refilled with Classic Coke, which was the old, trusted recipe, in the old, trusted red can, with the familiar Coca-Cola logo, albeit with the word “Classic” added as a fig leaf for the marketing emperor whose nakedness had been revealed. Everyone was happy and the cans of “new old” Coke sold faster than ever before. The few remaining cans of New Coke were banished to the edges of the machine, almost invisible compared to the shining red wall of the classic cans. I think I was probably the only resident of Lyndon Hall who preferred the taste of New Coke. Like all the other customers of the vending machine, I was going to stick with my initial choice, my first love. And anyway, I just thought it tasted better.

For the first few days of my college life, I felt like an ant in an oversized, yet obscure, colony. The campus was enormous, with all the buildings far apart from one another. From about 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. the roads and sidewalks were full of cars and people. All through the day, there were short bursts of activity as students and faculty proceeded across the lawns and car parks from one building to the next. In the evenings, everyone went back to their dorm, or to one of the more upscale student houses just outside the campus, and everything would calm down again.

I found it hard to be myself with all this rushing about. I wasn't able to get attached to anything or anyone, to have time for myself. I went to class, showed up for seminars, took acting lessons. I went to the library to study and the gym to do some exercise. But everything I did felt like I was going through the motions. Everything had to be done now, quickly, or at least that was how it seemed to me. I wanted to do everything, and do it well, now if possible, but that meant I spent much of the day running around.

Fortunately, there was the dining hall.

The dining hall was the one place where I could escape from the bustle of college life, three times a day, seven days a week. It was there that pretty well all the inhabitants of the red dormitory buildings gathered to eat their breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It slowly dawned on me that these regular trips to the dining hall were the best way to punctuate the non-stop activity of a day that was filled with lectures, seminars, and acting lessons. My room in Lyndon Hall was right opposite the entrance, so I could look out of my window any day at 8 a.m., noon, or 6 p.m., and see a steady stream of people disappearing through the doors. Black, white, Asian, Hispanic, short, tall, ugly, cute, thin, fat, rich, poor, cool kids, nerdy types; it was like a big mixed salad bowl, just how I'd imagined America to be. Not wanting to be among the first in, eating my peanut butter sandwiches on my own, I would watch this spectacle for a few minutes and then join the throng. But inside, the salad bowl had turned into a neatly organized produce section, with all the different types of vegetables and fruits neatly sorted out, the apples with the apples, the green beans with the green beans. The dining hall was full of round tables that sat a maximum of ten people each. At any one of these tables, there was no trace of the diversity that I'd seen while watching people entering the building. The room as a whole was full of all kinds of looks

and colors and accents, but at any given table there was just one sort of vegetable, one type of person. The Christians, the Mexicans, the cute girls, the jocks, the computer geeks—every social group had found its own table. There was a table for Blacks, a table for each sports team, an “alternative” table, a table for the shy girls who giggled a lot.

I found it difficult to identify—although of course, as a psychology student I felt I had to do it—any simple criteria by which it was decided who sat where. Skin color, age, gender? It couldn’t be that, because for every table with all boys or all girls, all older or all younger students, there were many more with a mixture of sexes and ages and skin colors. Was the split by major? No, because sometimes there were economists on the psychologists’ table and biologists with the philosophers. By dorm? No, because I was always the only resident of Lyndon Hall at the table. It had to be some kind of hierarchical model, in which the size of the major social groups interacted in some way with table size. The Mexicans always sat together, because there were exactly ten of them, so they filled a table. The Blacks were more numerous, so they had four tables, which then naturally split into the Black intellectuals, the Black sportsmen, the Black musicians, and all the other Black students who didn’t fit into those categories. If a group ever became too big, it would split into two along the line of some characteristic or other, and those subgroups would grow until they reached ten people and filled up a table. So while there were lots of tables with girls, there was only one with girls who were sporty and artistic and who had grown up in New Jersey.

I sat with the Europeans. We only had one table, and it hadn’t taken long to find it; after that, I felt at home there. It wasn’t as if the nine other Europeans all looked “European”—they didn’t wear wooden shoes or leather pants or berets. In fact, they did their best to look as American as possible, with jeans, t-shirts, and baseball caps. But somehow, in the first few days after I arrived, scanning the hall nervously looking for a welcoming place to sit while holding a tray full of food, I felt pulled to the European table by an invisible force. My legs were sending me to that part of the room even before my eyes had spotted that they somehow weren’t quite as perfectly American-looking as the Americans. Our capacity as human beings for categorizing things (especially people) is apparently so evolutionarily important, and therefore highly developed, that people are pretty good at working out exactly which social category (or dining table) they should

attach themselves to in any given situation, however subtle the membership criteria for the various categories might be. If you go to a soccer match and you don't want to be a troublemaker, you don't stand behind the goal. If you *are* looking for trouble, you know which goal to stand behind. Are you part of the real hard-core supporters? Then you go stand somewhere else. If you're hard-core and you have tattoos, then you know exactly where you stand (right behind goal, in the middle of the back section, with a clear view of the goalie).

So, this was America, but I still felt more at home with the Europeans. I barely talked to my American room-mate, Quentin. We lived in the same room, went to sleep a few feet apart every night, and knew most of each other's little personal habits and rituals, but we rarely exchanged a word. Maybe that was because Quentin had totally different interests to me. He liked drinking and hanging out. Back home in Scranton, he had a girlfriend with big hair with whom he spent every weekend, setting off on Friday afternoon and returning, exhausted, on Monday morning when he would crash out on his bed for hours. But our lack of communication might also have been due to the fact that Quentin didn't have very much to say. And talking was a bit of a problem for him anyway, because he walked around with chewing tobacco in his mouth all day.

I got on a lot better with Olaf from Iceland and his brother Arnor, whom I had met at the European table. Olaf was an angular Viking, who reminded me of Uncle Sam, the eagle from the *Muppet Show*. He was as tall as me, but twice as wide and strong. He had been living in the U.S. for a few years and taught me quite a bit about how college worked. We went to basketball and football games to cheer on ESU. We sat for hours in Pizza Hut, consuming endless plates from the salad bar and enjoying the novelty, for Europeans, of free coffee refills. We organized screenings of *The Sound of Music*, eating cheese and drinking French wine while enjoying the romantic European landscapes, and we went hunting for keg parties in places that were straight out of *Animal House*. There was a big barrel of beer in the middle room with a pile of plastic cups, and everyone was there with one aim, to drink to get drunk. We expected Jim Belushi to appear in a toga at any minute.

Back home, I'd been happy to have a beer or a glass of wine in the pub or at a party, and sometimes I unintentionally had a bit too much, but here the express purpose of the party was to get drunk as fast as possible. Whoever got the most drunk fastest was the

winner; that was the definition of a good time. Why? Probably because it was forbidden. You had to be 21 to drink alcohol (compared to 16 in the Netherlands) and we were all much younger than that. Alcohol was the irresistible forbidden fruit. Not everything that's forbidden is hard to resist, but if it's forbidden and tastes good, it becomes irresistible all by itself. Thank goodness for Dutch permissiveness.

Every so often, one of these parties would get raided. "Police!" someone would shout, and Olaf and I would run upstairs and hide in the attic. One time we were too slow, and they caught us, but when they discovered we were foreigners, they reluctantly let us go. After a raid, the party tended to go flat. It was as if the tension of not knowing whether or not the police would come was part of the reason to hold the party.

On the way back to our respective rooms, Olaf and I would hold what we considered to be deep conversations about philosophy and literature. Olaf was a big reader and a good storyteller, and he found in me a willing listener. He always had a book with him; he had acquired the habit of exchanging his book for a new one as soon as he finished it. If he was visiting or staying with someone and he finished his book, he would put it on his host's bookshelf and take another one, chosen more or less at random, with him. That way he was always surprising himself, and his friends, with new discoveries. In one way that's a pretty cool story, but from a psychologist's point of view, Olaf was messing with science. By replacing people's choice of books with his, he was creating noise in the research data that underlies one of the more remarkable findings of modern personality psychology, which is the extent to which the personality of the people who live in a house can be predicted from their choice of furniture, the color of the curtains, or the layout of the bedroom.

It turns out that if you let people walk around a room that they've never seen before, they are remarkably good at predicting how the inhabitant of that room measures up on the five major dimensions of personality that most psychologists use (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, and emotional stability). If the room looks unusual, maybe a bit messy as well, its owner probably has an open, flexible, and friendly personality. If everything is very structured, with pictures absolutely straight and symmetrically arranged, then you're probably looking at the room of a conscientious and stable person. As a variation on this theme, you could expect that the contents of

someone's bookshelves also give you an insight into their personality. Or, as the saying goes, "Show me your books, and I'll tell you who you are." Someone with shelf after shelf of books by authors like Andre Gide, Gore Vidal, Alan Hollingshurst, and Evelyn Waugh is probably quite different from someone who reads a lot of Paolo Coelho. A person who enjoys ambitious biographies and history books probably has little in common with someone like me, who reads books that explore themes such as realism versus idealism or truth versus fiction, by authors like J. D. Salinger, John Fowles, Philip Roth, or John McInerney.

So, every time Olaf finished a book and left it at someone's house, he was messing up the story that the contents of a bookcase are a good guide to personality. But maybe the way a room is arranged (fun, neat, messy, colorful, etc) is a better guide to personality than a bookcase, even without taking into account Olaf's addition of randomness, because in any case most bookcases have quite a few books in them that the owner didn't choose. People love to give books to their friends because they've enjoyed them so much themselves: "Here, you must read this. I loved it!" And because it's hard for people to imagine that others won't enjoy what they themselves do, there are lots of unread books in other people's shelves. In general, we overestimate how many of our preferences are shared by other people, especially those close to us. A lover of wine will always take a good bottle to a party, a student of Shakespeare will recommend his collected works to everyone, and a fan of Mozart will very often give a Mozart CD as a gift. Show me your books, and I'll tell you who your friends are.

While I discussed literature and philosophy with Olaf, I found that it was his brother Arnor who shared my love of watching movies, although as with every obsession, we talked about it more than we actually did it. I don't recall actually going to a movie theater with him, but I do remember our difference of opinion about the gay subtext in *Blazing Saddles* and our shared incomprehension of the playmates scene in *Apocalypse Now*. And of course we had endless discussions about what the best film of all time was. *Citizen Kane* was a contender, of course, but I hesitated and went for *Kaos*, the Taviani brothers' ode to Luigi Pirandello set in Sicily, the American-socialist *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the semi-improvised coming-of-age movie *Diner* by Barry Levinson. Show me your DVD collection, and I'll tell you who you are.

The worst movie of all time, of course, was Ed Wood's sci-fi lemon from the late fifties, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Arnor and I had the crazy idea of making an even worse film and calling it *Plan 10*. I spent many days and evenings in my room trying to come up with a storyline even more bizarre than that of *Plan 9* for our forthcoming cult classic of wrongness. I did manage to put a screenplay together and even got as far as borrowing cameras and recording equipment from the university's audiovisual department, but in the end our enthusiasm petered out and we never got round to filming *Plan 10*. In the end we decided that *Plan 9* couldn't have been all that bad; it turned out to be hard to make a really, really bad film that was also at least notionally about something. A film with a subject can't be completely worthless. Content always has some value.

However, our failure with *Plan 10* was by no means the end of my career as a screenwriter and director. After all, I was majoring in theater and taking courses in filmmaking and scriptwriting. I made two short films on 8mm: *The Kitchen in the Sea* and *Your Picture*.

The Kitchen in the Sea was a light but absurd drama about a husband and wife standing in their kitchen, throwing a beach ball to and fro between them, while reminiscing about their beach vacations when they were kids. Modeling the style of Pinter's play *Betrayal*, I set up the dialogue so that it gradually became clear that their memories weren't real, but rather a way for the wife to find out if her husband was having an affair. In the end, she got so caught up in the game that she ended up confessing her own adultery.

Your Picture was an even more blatant exercise in adolescent wisdom. With Debussy playing in the background, I wanted to tell the story of a boy who, in a fit of rage, tears up a photograph of his girlfriend and throws away all the pieces. Later, regretting his actions, he picks up the pieces and attempts to stick them back together in order to bring her back to life. He manages to reconstruct the photo, but now there's a different girl in the picture. In the final scene, he looks slowly up from the reconstructed photo and see, in the distance, the two girls, his girlfriend and the girl in the new picture, running away, hand in hand.

Back in the Netherlands, I had finally decided, after much agonizing, that I wasn't passionate enough about acting to devote myself to theater school. I didn't want it enough,

and I wanted to do lots of other stuff. But once I got to America, I decided to give myself another chance. Anyway, what else was I going to do? I threw myself into my theater major and spent hours at the college theater every day. I had breathing lessons, practiced movements, and followed every theater course that I could. Along with the other theater majors, I directed and played in short and long plays, which we performed in front of the students and faculty. I always enjoyed turning a script on paper into an exciting, entertaining production, and felt completely at home in my little corner of show business. In the dining hall I spent more and more time at the actors' table, and on Friday and Saturday evenings the theater gang would drive up to New York City to see how the professionals did it.

The challenge was to see as much as possible for as little money as possible. The easiest way to do this was to mingle with the crowds during the interval of a major Broadway show. Many New York theaters opened an outside door for the interval so that the audience could get some fresh air. We would discreetly mix in with the crowd outside and then follow them inside, waiting until they had all found their assigned place and then sitting in whatever seats were still free. So I saw a lot of second halves of shows; I know how a lot of Broadway classics end, but not how they begin.

But after a few months, my nascent acting and theater career came to a sudden end. I've never been able to put my finger on exactly where the turning point was, but I do remember getting bored with the repetitiveness of acting. I enjoyed writing and directing plays, but the idea of going on tour and playing the same part 10 or 20 or 350 times didn't fit in well with my rather short attention span. I remember when the class did a children's production of *Aladdin and the Magic Lamp*. I played Aladdin's uncle, which was actually quite a fun part; for once my thick Dutch accent was an advantage. But after we played the show four or five times in the college theater and a few more times at other theaters in the area, I knew this life wasn't for me.

Looking back, another factor in my decision to pull the plug on my acting ambitions was probably that I was missing the intellectual side of things. There was a lot of doing, but not much serious thinking. As a trainee actor I spent most of the day thinking about myself: my voice, my posture, my lines, my diction.

But probably the biggest reason why I stopped taking acting seriously was that I wasn't very good at it. That became clear in the "voice for performance" class. I was the only student in the class who couldn't manage to speak the same lines in different ways, varying the intonation or the accent or the timing. When I tried, it always sounded the same, and what I said was often hard to make out. The teacher tried everything he knew to improve my vocal technique and my pronunciation, but it was no good. Finally, in desperation, he asked me to read a poem, "In your own language." Maybe that would help. So I tried to read the Dutch poem "Geluk" ("Happiness") by Chris van Geel, while the rest of my class of American students listened politely:

I felt this afternoon
how it could be
The rocks turned to stone,
the water washed away.

A sun that just shines.

"No! Again. Pro-nun-ci-a-ti-on."

I tried again.

"No. No."

It was a humiliating experience, but the humiliation wasn't completely undeserved. After four or five months of hard uphill struggle, it was time to stop acting and start studying.

Leaving my theater class friends and their little world was difficult. Now that I wasn't working with them any more, I tried to stay as close as possible to them by taking classes like the history of theater, movies, and media, and reading up on acting and directing. One of the classes that I signed up for was called media ecology. I had no idea what that was, but it sounded like a reasonable alternative to my stillborn acting career.

Media ecology is the study of the psychological influence of the mass media. How is the way we observe, understand, feel, and communicate influenced by theater, movies, radio,

television, and the Internet? And especially: how does the dominance of one of these media over the others determine our identity, what we value, and how we interact with each other? How did our norms, values, and cultural expression change when the printing press was invented, when movies became popular, and when a TV appeared in every home? How is our mental and social existence changing now that everyone has an Internet connection and a Facebook account? Those are the kinds of questions that media ecology asks. The word “ecology” means that the media are studied as specific environments, as situations which affect human behavior and shape its form and content. Just like the neighborhood we grew up in, the house we live in, the college where we study and the company we work at, the presence (or absence) of the various media shapes everything we do. Media ecology is the study of the effect of the structure of the media on our culture, as in McLuhan’s dictum, “The medium is the message.” *How* we communicate (via telephone, typewriter, radio, TV, or Internet) determines *what* we communicate.

This opened up a whole new world to me. I was fascinated by the idea that human behavior could be subtly changed by apparently incidental environmental factors, such as whether you grow up surrounded by books or by TV programs. I wrote a rather clunky paper about how the technological developments that enabled the widespread availability of simplified printing presses and typewriters at the start of the 20th century led to important innovations in literature, with examples such as “Boem Paukenslag” by the Dutch author Paul van Ostaïjen and “A leaf falls, loneliness” by E. E. Cummings.

My teacher couldn’t fail to notice my new-found obsession with his subject. He gave me extra assignments and books to read, and I would often stick around after class to carry on discussing today’s topic. I went to visit him once in his apartment in Greenwich Village. It was tiny, but that was mostly because of the incredible number of books and papers with which he had filled an otherwise reasonably-sized place. They filled the bookshelves, the floor, the chairs, the couch. There was barely enough space for me to squeeze in between them.

Later that evening, as I walked toward the bus stop to head back to campus, I found myself in a scene that could have been taken from *Bonfire of the Vanities*. A group of yuppies, dressed in tuxedos and ball gowns and armed with bottles and glasses of champagne, were dancing and chasing each other in the street, laughing and shouting, next

to a high-end car whose alarm had gone off. As I walked past them as discreetly as I could, one of the men gave a firm kick to the door of another expensive-looking car, setting its alarm off too. Several others did the same thing further along, so that within a minute or so the whole street was filled with the screaming of discordant alarms. Every time one went off, the partygoers cheered, and sprayed champagne on the car. Later, I learned that this phenomenon, too, was explicable by media ecology: car alarms provoke extreme reactions because they are among the most irritating pieces of technology ever developed, worse than out-of-office replies to e-mail, CDs that jump tracks, flash photography, and computers that crash just before you save your work.

The absolute highlight of the media ecology course was a guest lecture by Neil Postman. He was my teacher's mentor, the guy who more or less invented the field. Postman was a star name. He was a great speaker and a formidable cultural critic, especially when it came to what he saw as the spiritually deadening effect of television. When I heard him speak, he was at the peak of his powers. He talked about his new book, the theme of which was "We are amusing ourselves to death." It was 1985, and Postman's case was that humanity was heading for trouble because our culture had given itself over totally to TV as the dominant medium of communication. TV in schools, TV in politics, sports TV, cookery TV—the whole of society was immersed in TV images and TV language. And because TV's primary function is to entertain, the whole of society was becoming fixated on amusement. Everything had to be fun; nothing was allowed to be boring, or subtle, or difficult, or profound. Bert and Ernie and fun learning games in education, snappy putdowns and glossy ad campaigns in politics: since the rise of TV, nothing was serious any more. According to Postman, we had lost our ability to value rationality and complexity, which had been the watchwords of the era of books and newspapers. In the nineteenth century, when the printed media dominated, important questions could be subjected to thorough, deep analysis. Postman cited the example of the debates between Lincoln and Douglas in the 1850s, which he described as political duels. Douglas got up on the podium and gave a three-hour exposition of his political ideas and plans. By the time Lincoln's turn came, it was 5 p.m., so he told everyone to go home, have something to eat, and come back later to listen to hear his side of the story. So that was what happened, and when everyone had returned, they were treated to four more hours of enthusiastic

readings of propaganda from political pamphlets, which Lincoln, like Douglas, had carefully prepared beforehand. In the 19th century, Postman said, sitting and listening to politicians for seven hours was a pretty normal thing to do. Why? Because people were used to reading books and newspapers instead of sitting in front of the television with their brains switched off.

Every era has—or maybe is even defined by—its dominant medium of communication. And even if the people of each era try their best to give an accurate account of what they see, hear, feel, and know, the medium through which they do that has its own specific strengths and limitations. What would Postman have to say about the impact on society of Facebook or Twitter, or the influence of trendy research methods on the kind of knowledge that comes out of the contemporary social sciences? Today, speed is the message.

Chapter 3

From my window seat (deliberately chosen, after deciding to put my fear of heights on hold for once) on the Boeing 747 that was bringing me back to Amsterdam to New York, I peered down at the Netherlands, which didn't seem to have changed very much in the year I'd been away. There was a queue of planes waiting to land, so we were circling over my compact, neat homeland while waiting for permission to land. The sun was shining brilliantly from a cloudless midsummer sky. I had kept the little plastic shutter in place over the window throughout the flight, but since I had chosen to sit here specifically so that I could see this view, I took a deep breath, lifted the shutter, and looked straight down at the squares, rectangles, occasional flashes of color from the flower farms, castles, roads, canals, rivers, and the sea. At one point the plane started to make a turn and the force pushed my nose into the plastic windowpane, so I pulled my head away and stared straight ahead for a moment, but the view was calling me back. I held on tight to the armrests, tightened my seatbelt, and braced my knees against the seat in front. Looking down, I saw a tidy, well-ordered country. Nothing spectacular: no dramatic ranges of snow-covered mountains with vast expanses of empty plain between them, just modern industrial estates fringed by asphalt-covered roads, areas of polder thinly sliced into strips of farmland, and new residential suburbs surrounded by innumerable traffic islands. I could see the point of all the town-planning committees and strategic land development plans. Nothing had been left to chance; everything was carefully thought-out and arranged. Of course, I knew that down below there were traffic jams all over the road network, that dirty factories were pumping out the gases that caused acid rain, that the cities were full of badly built, prematurely decaying social housing projects, that the schools were bursting with rowdy teenagers who spent their free time spraying graffiti ("No Future") on the walls, and that most of my fellow citizens were generally gloomy about the current economic situation and the threat of unemployment. I knew that it was chaotic and complex down there, but none of that was visible from my place in the sky, where all I could hear was the gentle noise of the jet engines, and the view was dominated by the sun shimmering on the North Sea, the IJsselmeer, and the lakes around Amsterdam.

I loosened my seatbelt a bit, allowed myself to breathe a little more easily, let go of the armrests, and formed a semi-circle out of my slightly sweaty hands which I pressed, as a sort of sunshade, against the window to get a really good look at everything. The incipient American side of me was highly impressed by all this, and wanted to describe it as “awesome”, a word that I thought was about right to describe the impression of regularity and efficient organization given off by the landscape below me.

I had first flown over the Netherlands about ten years earlier, although at the time I hadn't paid much attention to just how structured almost every square centimeter of the country was. I had come up with the winning slogan (well, actually, my Dad had) for a competition that a photographer had organized in the local newspaper. Since the photographer was also a keen pilot, the prize was a sightseeing flight over our town. We took off from Rotterdam airport and flew straight to Oegstgeest, where we made a few turns above the bulb fields, the football ground, my school, and our house. It turns out that it's not easy to spot your own house from the air, especially if it's a standard 1970s Dutch house pretty much indistinguishable from any other. Fortunately, my eldest brother had already anticipated this problem; he put on a yellow raincoat, climbed out of the attic window, and lay with his arms and legs outstretched on the roof of our house. I just about managed to notice this spectacular sight—I can still picture the tiles with a yellow blob on them—but otherwise I spent the rest of my first-ever flight concentrating on my breathing (and the barf bag with which the worried-looking photographer had issued me shortly after we had taken off). The plane in which we set off to explore the skies of South Holland had room for just four rather flimsy seats and was built around a poorly-disguised cage, covered with implausibly thin sheet metal and tightly-wrapped sailcloth, that shook and wobbled disconcertingly whenever the headwind became a little stronger and the engines had to work a little harder. I remember thinking, “Just exactly why is this fun?”

The exchange rate helped me feel a little better about my homesickness; at 3.17, the dollar was close to an all-time high against the Dutch guilder. During my year of liberal arts college I'd never really had the feeling that I was missing out on anything because of money, but during the last few months, when I had to decide whether I wanted to carry on studying in the U.S. or not, the likelihood that life as a student in the Netherlands would be

less financially constrained was definitely a factor; I'm not averse to a comfortable lifestyle. Plus, I was missing some familiar things from home. College was all about jeans, T-shirts, a Coke from the machine, and an occasional visit to Pizza Hut for the unlimited salad bar and bottomless coffee refills: all-American and thus inexpensive in Reagan's America in the 1980s, but that was about as impressive as it got. After a year of dining-hall food, featuring soggy PB&J sandwiches and greasy mac-and-cheese, I was hungry for familiar Dutch staples: *nasi goreng*, a proper meat-and-potatoes dinner, a *stamppot* or a stew, a cheese roll or salad sandwich.

I had written a long letter on multiple sheets of flimsy airmail paper to tell my parents that I wanted to come home; their ecstatic reaction came by return of post. Yes, they agreed, America was pretty expensive; you could study pretty much anything you wanted in the Netherlands; it's always nice to be near home. But what did I want to study? I wrote back (airmail paper was cheap back then, whereas transatlantic phone calls cost a fortune) that that was (still) a tough question. I'd become a little bit smarter, in that I'd discovered that I wasn't cut out for the life of an actor, but it wasn't clear what I wanted to do instead. At that point, I really didn't mind what I did.

In another letter I wrote about the courses in media ecology that I'd taken, and went on at length about the scenarios I'd thought up and the films I'd made.

After a bit of a delay, the next letter from my parents arrived. Instead of the usual few sheets of airmail paper, this one was a substantial package in an A4 envelope. I opened it to find a prospectus for the Amsterdam Film Academy and an application form. My mother had understood the meaning of my previous letter better than I had, and worked out what my extensive descriptions of my forays into the world of film really meant; and if that was what I wanted, that was what I should do. I filled in the application form, borrowed my roommate Quentin's new Brother electronic typewriter, spent a weekend typing up improved versions of my scripts and scenarios, and sent them all in a big envelope, via my mother, to the Academy.

To my surprise, a few weeks later I received, again via my mother, a reply thanking me for my application, which had been examined with interest, but they still had some questions and would like to interview me. Could I come along in person in four weeks time?

I wrote back to say that this would be a bit difficult. I was living and studying in America, the school year hadn't yet finished, the dollar had just risen to 3.37 against the guilder, and as a result, a return flight to Amsterdam would cost a fortune. What to do? Should I ask my parents to dig further into their savings so that I could make a quick trip to Amsterdam for an interview? I wrote back to ask if an interview was really necessary. Hadn't I sent them enough information? Couldn't they ask my current teachers for references?

Unfortunately, they wrote back, an interview is an essential part of the procedure. They regretted to inform me that without an interview, they would be unable to take my application any further.

Most companies and organizations, and an increasing number of schools and universities, use interviews as part of their selection procedures for employment or admission. However, it's not completely clear—in fact, it's completely unclear—whether interviews can reliably make any meaningful contribution to the process. In many selection procedures, the interview is seen as the most important source of information; we all want to meet and talk to the candidate before we take a decision. Interviews are mainly used to evaluate personality characteristics, such as motivation, perseverance, flexibility, self-confidence, and empathy, and to see if there's a “fit” between the candidate and the organization that she or he hopes to join. Yet, although it has been repeatedly demonstrated that personality traits are much better measured by questionnaires—either filled in with pencil and paper, or on a computer—and that when people try to estimate whether someone will “fit in”, they are almost always driven by assumptions and stereotypes (“He looks like a typical nerd”) or by irrational heuristics (“She won't fit in here ,because she reminds me of Elisa, who's useless”), interviews remain for many people the “gold standard” method to discover what someone is “really” like.

And there's the nub of the problem. People prefer to base their opinion on a “warm” personal discussion than on the “cold” scores of a personality test, a list of degrees and awards, or the findings of an assessment center. It's entirely natural that if you have to take a decision, you're going to do it on the basis of information that you've collected and assembled yourself.

However, that's unfortunate, because while people are very good—much better than a computer, for example—at deciding what the *criteria* to be included in a hiring or admission decision should be, they are pretty terrible—much worse than a computer, for example—at taking into account all the information needed to reach a *conclusion* based on those criteria. That probably shouldn't surprise us. To take into account all the information at hand requires you to remember it all, and to assign appropriate weight to each factor based on its relevance; and people just can't do that. Doctors know exactly what questions to ask patients in order to be able to work out what condition they're suffering from, but when it comes to giving an opinion and prescribing a course of treatment, they'd be better off feeding the answers into a computer. Judges are great at determining whether a specific piece of evidence is relevant or not, but if they want to have the best chance of arriving at the right verdict, they'd do best to feed that evidence into a computer-based decision-making system, which knows about all the relevant case law and can draw the most appropriately informed conclusions. Now maybe that all sounds a bit Orwellian, but the fact is that our capacity for judgment and decision making is so fallible, because of our limited memories and our susceptibility to expectations, emotions, and prejudices, that it probably wouldn't do much harm to allow ourselves the help of a checklist, database, or computer program from time to time.

It's easy to overestimate the value of interviews because they provide us with “warm”, “living” information. We like to conduct interviews because they feel “real”, although there's lots of research that shows that we don't know how to distinguish a good interview from a bad one. Which interview questions allow you to make a good prediction of future behavior, and which ones don't? You can find studies that show that interviews are good predictors of success in jobs that require social skills, but not those that require a stronger task orientation. Other studies show that interviews are good at predicting good performance, but not at weeding out potential underperformers. And there are (lots of) studies of interviews that show no relationship at all between the assessment of the interviewer and the subsequent performance of the hired employee or admitted student. There are lots of possible ways to interview, lots of possible effects, and almost anything can happen.

But what determines whether or not a specific interview has the ability to predict something or not? What does distinguish a good interview from a bad one? Right now, nobody knows. To complicate matters further, it's often the case that, following a (good or bad?) interview, the members of an interview panel have widely divergent opinions about the outcome (does this candidate meet our requirements, or not?). Things can go a little better if the interviewers have been trained and the interview proceeds along structured lines, following a specific protocol; at least, we know that the members of the interview panel are more likely to agree among themselves in such cases, than when the interviews are unstructured. Unfortunately, this improved likelihood of unanimity doesn't mean that they are more likely to come to the right conclusion, or that their carefully prepared and structured interview is somehow automatically a good predictor of how the interviewee will perform subsequently. If you want to know if someone will fit into your organization, the best approach is to obtain as many cold, hard facts as possible, and make an objective list of the pros and cons. A "warm" interview might then be useful to clarify a couple of points of uncertainty, but that's about it.

I don't know how my life would have turned out if the Amsterdam Film Academy had let the cold, hard facts speak for themselves, and been able to regard a nice "warm" interview in downtown Amsterdam as an optional extra that they could forego in my case, but in any case I decided to spend my precious dollars on something else and not to make the trip to Amsterdam. I'd sat down and thought hard about whether I really wanted to go to film school, and I'd decided—again—that I wasn't sufficiently obsessed to succeed. As with acting and directing in the theater, I found it fun and exciting to write scenarios and make films, but it wasn't the only thing in the world that I enjoyed. I wasn't a film nut, I didn't spend all day and most of the night thinking about films, I wasn't addicted to the cinema—and frankly, I wasn't going to be the next Martin Scorsese, Frank Capra, or Orson Welles. Plus, I wondered about whether it was possible to earn a living this way. Can you be a professional filmmaker if you're not all that good? How much fun is it to be a struggling director, living hand-to-mouth? You might be doing what you enjoy, but is it enough? On balance, I thought it probably wasn't.

But just occasionally, I wasn't quite sure. Like the ballerina who never quite made it and feels the pain in her feet every time she sees a dance show, I could feel the frustration in my eyes every time I went to see a film. If. Perhaps. Who knows. Maybe.

In the end there was some consolation for me when I went to study at the University of Amsterdam, because I was able to take a few classes in film studies there. They were taught by a real professor: an older, slightly unkempt man with a white beard and cheap silver spectacles, who wore a sort of dust coat over his street clothes and enjoyed talking in his rather archaic Dutch about the socialist films of the Russian avant-garde, Eisenstein's Odessa Steps scene from *Battleship Potemkin*, and the political engagement of the Dutch director Joris Ivens, but above all showed us lots and lots of films. Down came the venetian blinds, the curtains were closed, the projector rattled into life, focus, watch, observe, analyze. Another film, another dozen pages of notes.

It was the time of semiotics and postmodernism, of intertextuality and deconstructionism. Films were discursive spaces which were constructed through discussion (or, preferably, negotiation) with the viewer. I found it to be an intellectual challenge. I tried to work out what made a film more or less powerful, how long a build-up of tension could be maintained, and why both propaganda films and advertisements so often seem to be constructed in such a rhythmic, almost mathematical way. Impossible tasks, of course. Big questions with no answers.

What I did learn, when the same Professor Barabas gave his class entitled "Cinema and Utopia", was that every utopia (or dystopia) in a film is a reflection of the aspirations (or problems) of the society in which the film was made. That's why the study of science fiction films and other idealistic cinematographic representations is a good way to learn about another culture: "Show me your idea of utopia, and I'll tell you about the times in which you live."

In *Metropolis* (1927), the workers, who live and work in dark underground mines, rise up against their bosses, who live in beautiful, sunlit skyscrapers and fly through the air. In *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), a giant computer runs the show, and the visual experience of traveling through outer space is portrayed as an acid trip. And *Blade Runner* (1982) is a

somber, cyberpunk view of a vicious society where nobody can be trusted and everyone suffers from fear and anxiety.

For me, the best representation of Utopia comes in a scene from the Taviani brothers' film *Kaos*. In the last part of the film, the Sicilian writer Pirandello travels back in time by getting on a train to the village where he was born. There he has an imaginary conversation with his dead mother, who tells her son that she hopes that he can learn to be strong in two ways in times of sorrow: not just with a clenched fists, but also with calm, inquiring, open hands. She then goes on to tell, for one last time, what seems to have once been a bedtime story, about how as a young girl, her mother took her and her brothers and sisters in a small fishing boat across the sea to Malta, to visit her father, who was exiled there by the Bourbons after the revolution of 1848. In the middle of the long voyage, they stop for a few hours on an island covered with hills made of pumice.

While the other children go to play on the beach, the narrator stays with her mother, who is tired from the long voyage and wants to rest in the shade. She helps her tired, worried mother to sleep, allowing her mother to place her head in her (the girl's) lap. When her mother asks if she wouldn't rather be playing on the beach, her eyes well with tears and she shakes her head. Finally, she gives in to her childish desires and, leaving her mother in the shade of a parasol that they brought with them, takes off her hooped dress and runs to join her brothers and sisters. Together, the children, clad in classic white underwear, climb a steep hill at the sea's edge. When they have all arrived at the top, they pause for a moment and then, while Mozart's "*L'ho perduta... me meschina*" plays, stretch out their arms and dance and weave their way to the bottom, until they disappear as little black dots into the clear, sky-blue sea.

I wasn't an actor, a director, a scenario writer, or a film-maker; I didn't have the hunger or the courage. Because, if it turned out that I wasn't the Dutch De Niro or Scorsese, what then? I wasn't a performer, a writer, a cinematographer, or any other sort of "doer". I preferred reading and thinking to actually making or doing things. Frankly, I was a bookworm, and so not only was I afraid that I wasn't as good as De Niro; I was also afraid that De Niro didn't read very many books.

I've always devoured books, especially when I was a teenager. In my room in my parents' house, I gradually acquired quite a collection of books. Above my desk was a series of shelves where I kept them all in careful order. Sometimes this was alphabetical, but on other occasions I would decide to sort them by color, height, or subject, or some combination thereof. As long as it looked nice and orderly. From tall to short, light to dark, thick to thin.

But my love for books went beyond my own bookshelves. I was a big customer at the local library. When I was four years old I spent every Wednesday afternoon there with my mother, rummaging in the big wooden boxes with picture books. After that I graduated to the kid's corner, but my attention quickly shifted to "real", grown-up books. And in the first year of secondary school² I would hang around every day, during breaks and lunchtime, outside the school library, waiting for my friend Johannes Duivenbode. Together we would look for new books almost every day, which we would then try to read as quickly as possible. Before we went in to hit the shelves, we stood outside, eating our sandwiches and drinking our milk in nervous gulps.

After that, we would grab some books and then read and read and read. The whole of world literature was on our hit list. We read like American tourists doing Europe. Nescio and Marga Minco on one day, three days of J. D. Salinger or Kurt Vonnegut, a week with everything by Camus, and then a slog through James Joyce and Gabriel García Márquez. It became a kind of competition: whoever finished a book first was the winner. This encouraged us to read more and more, but certainly not better and better. We read quickly, but not deeply. Many of the stories of war, death, life, love, and the loneliness and meaninglessness of the human condition were exciting and intriguing for a while, but none left a lasting impression. When you're thirteen years old, reading Joyce is always going to be a slightly strange exercise in persistent incomprehension. But Johannes and I thought we were cool, interesting, and *real* as we sat side by side on the library benches, consuming great literature by the yard.

Reading was a brief but real moment of freedom from our chaotic teenage lives, which otherwise consisted of written tests, assignments, homework, soccer practice, and

² "Middelbare school", where students' ages typically range from 13-17.

attempting to understand the needs and desires of the opposite sex. The act of reading was more important than what we actually read. Reading was an escape from the dullness of the rest of our existence. When you're reading, for a moment you don't have to conform to the expectations of the rest of society.

Perhaps the same freedom from everyday existence that reading provides also explains the popularity of escapist TV soap operas such as *As the World Turns* or *Sons and Daughters*: they also take you away from boredom-as-usual at school or work, from nappies and laundry, from deadlines and demanding customers. A bit of time for yourself, a bit of time where you get to decide what you want and what you're going to do, a bit of time on your own. It's more about the freedom that reading or watching TV gives you, than the meaning of what you read or watch. It's the act of reading that counts, not what you happen to read.

I decided to give in. I'd spent years trying to decide between doing and thinking, between making and watching, between creating and studying, but now I had to admit defeat. I became a student. In Amsterdam. Not a drama school, not the Film Academy, not some lucky-dip liberal-arts college, but real academic study, with a solid program and clear objectives. It was about time; I'd spent long enough playing with ideas and trying stuff on for size. I'd had the opportunity to spend a year in America, messing about, discovering what I wanted and what I could do, and that hadn't helped much. (Well, I suppose I knew that I wanted, ideally, to do a bit of everything, and do it all really well: a bit of really good acting, a bit of making really good films, a bit of really good studying. Of course, it doesn't work like that. If you want to be really good at something, you have to be committed to it. Otherwise, you end up being mediocre at everything.)

Something had to give. It was time to find a way to earn back all the money that I'd burned through during my year in the U.S., and make up for lost time. But how could I do that?

I signed up for communications studies. This was a relatively new field, which seemed to bring together a lot of my interests: films, books, theater, TV, and especially Neil Postman's media ecology. Because I didn't think I had the talent to use plays or films to communicate whatever moved or impressed or upset me, I thought it might be a good idea

to study and analyze the art of communication itself. What is language? How does communication come about? How do people ensure that they understand each other? When is communication effective? When do people think something is good, or beautiful? How do propaganda, marketing, and advertising affect what people feel, say, and do? How do you get people's attention? Can you manipulate people? Can you make people do something that they don't want to? Communications studies looked like a terrific subject to me.

And that was pretty much how it turned out. Unfortunately, however, communications studies was a second-year major, so I had to do a year of psychology or sociology to qualify for my "real" course. I chose psychology.

Now that I'd made my choices, I felt free. I took my studies very seriously and worked hard. Sure, I had fun, went out with friends sometimes or to parties, but I kept it within limits. Occasionally I'd get good and wasted, but not every day or every week. If I went to a party, I tried not to be the last to leave (or first to arrive), and I kept an eye on how much alcohol I drank. At one point I gave myself the ironic nickname of "Captain Apple Juice", whose mission was to ensure that apple juice was available at the parties I went to. I would also go round telling everybody that you can have a fun time without alcohol (as long as there's apple juice), although whether or not that's true remains an open question. I do remember that in the summer of 1988, when the Netherlands won the European soccer championship (Euro 88), I wasn't much fun at all. The whole country was having a party, everyone was going crazy, and Amsterdam in particular was one big swinging carnival. And where was I? I was in my room, studying. I had an important psychology assignment and I wanted to get a good mark for it.

I lived in a large student house in the center of the city. It was an old canal-side house, beautiful to look at but actually rather run-down, with a separate building at the back, much like Anne Frank's hiding place. I had a small room on the third³ floor overlooking the courtyard. The ceiling was very low, which made it difficult to stand, but gave a cozy feeling. I'd put quite a bit of work into furnishing it: the bed in the corner, my work desk at the window, a bookcase, a large blue leather chair that had come from my

³ Using U.S. floor numbering

parents, and arty posters on the wall. When the weather allowed, I liked to study at my desk with the windows wide open.

In the roof space directly above me was another room. It was a bit more spacious than mine, and also had a room that overlooked the courtyard, which separated the main house from the building at the back. My upstairs neighbor had chosen to put his bed against the window. He told me that this allowed him to lie on his back and admire the stars in the night sky over Amsterdam.

One evening during the Euro 88 celebrations that had taken over the city, I was slaving away trying to master the esoteric ideas of some psychology book or other, when I heard an unmistakable combination of creaking and moaning coming from above me. I tried to concentrate on my book, which worked for a while until I noticed that it seemed to have started to rain. Looking up, I saw a stream of green vomit falling past me. I pushed my chair back and jumped up in disgust. A couple of yellowish-green, gunky splashes landed on my desk and book. What the hell? After a little thought, I decided that they were probably doing it doggy-style, and the jetsam that had landed in my room was the half-digested remains of her dinner, expelled during the throes of orgasm.

It was the summer of '88. The whole town was having a party, and I was sitting it out, reading endlessly about psychology instead.

I wanted to finish my first year of psychology quickly and with a good grade, so that I could move straight on to communications science. Get it over with, so I could move on to what I really wanted to do. But in the meantime I was starting to enjoy the study of the human psyche, and finding the relationship between our internal, mental existence and our external, social lives more and more interesting. I couldn't have stopped even if I'd wanted to. In the first few months it had been mostly about statistics and history, but it soon became more interesting, with subjects like developmental psychology, clinical psychology, and social psychology. I noticed a constant theme running through all of these: are we our brains, or are we our environment? In other words, is our behavior determined by our biological makeup, or by the way our social surroundings are arranged? In every book or journal article that I read, the answer was, of course: both. We are defined by our brains

and our environment. Our behavior is the result of the interaction between our personality and the specific situation in which that personality is located.

During my reading about this nature-versus-nurture debate, I couldn't help noticing that most psychologists seemed to have a subtle, unstated preference for one of the two explanations of human behavior. What I made out, reading between the lines, was this: whatever the nuances, reservations, and subtleties of the various arguments, there are only two types of psychologists: personality psychologists (including behavioral neuroscientists, psychonomists, and experimental psychologists) and social psychologists. Personality psychologists seek to explain human behavior in terms of the (more or less fixed) attributes of the individual being studied. Social psychologists, by contrast, seek explanations in phenomena that are external to the individual, which are typically variable and unpredictable. Both types know, deep down, that the other approach has some validity, and that both personality and situational attributes together determine behavior, but they differ in their ideas of what it's worthwhile to study. Personality psychologists prefer to start with the perspective of the individual, whereas social psychologists start from the situation. Just as some people like to drink beer while others prefer wine, you have personality and social psychologists—but the question is how they arrived at their current position, and whether they're always like that...

Is there a beer gene? Are there environments that favor wine-drinking? Can wine drinkers never enjoy a beer?

I preferred to drink wine, and I leant towards social psychology. It seemed to me to be a more optimistic way of looking at things. Social psychologists believe that small changes to the environment can cause much bigger changes in behavior. People are measurably happier when the sun is shining than when it's raining, and they reach agreements quicker when negotiations are held around a round table than a rectangular one. Social psychology emphasizes the importance of the situation, and thus opens up the possibility of improving society. "Show me your environment, and I'll tell you what you have to change in order to be happier."

Social psychology is upbeat. It's not about labeling people as "sick" or "healthy", innate personality disorders or sinister, rigid, clinical diagnoses from DSM-IV. In social psychology, nothing is set in stone, because environments and situations can always

change. Anything's possible. In social psychology it doesn't matter who you are, but how your environment has made you what you are, and what you can do to change your situation and become somebody different. Social psychology was a perfect fit for my interest in media ecology, the influence of propaganda, marketing, and advertising on our culture and our behavior, and other effects of the media.

I preferred to drink wine, and was inclined to totally embrace social psychology, but I did drink beer from time to time, and deep inside I felt that social psychology had a pretty optimistic view of the degree to which human behavior could be influenced. It seemed to suggest that you could get people to behave in the way you wanted just by engineering the right environment. Hadn't social psychologists learned anything from all the failed attempts of the past to build the ideal society? Didn't they know about all the failed hippy communities, communes, sects, and kibbutzim? If those had taught us one thing, it's that you can't construct a society from scratch. Thinking about it, the idea that "you are your environment" was ridiculous. In any given situation—a school, a church, a neighborhood—you'll always find lots of different people, behaving in lots of different ways. So where did those differences come from? How could social psychology explain them, if not by reference to personality factors? Somewhere, deep inside each of us, doesn't there have to be some core element that accounts for these differences? In the end, aren't we all just, simply, our... selves?

I thought I might find an answer to these questions during the classes on personality studies. In the social psychology classes that I'd taken, a series of teachers, all social psychologists themselves, had enthusiastically promoted the "situationist" viewpoint, explaining how behavior is principally affected by environmental factors, and so I was expecting the same kind of thing in the personality classes, with personality psychologists mounting a vigorous defense of the idea that personality factors were the main determinants of behavior. So I was rather shocked when this didn't happen.

During the personality studies classes in Amsterdam, we were introduced, somewhat ironically, by our lecturer (usually dressed in a flowing coat and with a carefully-combed curl in his blond hair) to Benjamin Kouwer's book *The Game of Personality*. In this book, Kouwer puts forward the proposition that there is no such thing as personality. What we call personality is, according to Kouwer, an empty and meaningless concept, that

we have been attempting to catch in our hands with any number of useless theories, because things would be so much nicer and more convenient if it actually existed. This was the first and only time that I heard a teacher spend an entire series of classes defending the position that what he was supposed to be teaching us about didn't exist. It was a refreshing way of putting things into perspective, which of course raised the question of how valid the concepts that were studied by all the other types of psychology were too.

Kouwer wrote his masterwork about personality theories in 1963. The book, which opened with the ominous sentence "Man doubts nothing so much as himself and his fellow men," is written in a hilariously sarcastic tone; Kouwer's fellow psychologist, Barendregt, described it on its publication as a "critical examination of the chaos that reigns over everything that can be described by the term 'personality'". Kouwer describes, step by step, from the ancient Greeks through to modern American experimental psychologists, everything that has been written, claimed, and theorized about personality. He looks at the insights of psychologists, physicians, philosophers, sociologists, astrologers, and other types of characterologists. Theophrastus, Schopenhauer, Skinner, Freud, Jung, Sartre: nobody is safe from Kouwer's pithy analysis. His book describes and critiques the dozens (perhaps hundreds) of theories about "the true self" that people have cobbled together over the last few thousand years, and concludes, in a withering final chapter, that The True Self simply doesn't exist. There is no core personality, no kernel of human existence. If you have a personality test that measures "honesty", it turns out not to be very useful for predicting whether someone will cheat at cards, crib in an exam, or invent fake data for a research project. Nobody is always honest and does the right thing; nobody is always dishonest and does the wrong thing. Nobody behaves the same way all the time.

This account fits well with an evolutionary perspective. In order to survive in constantly changing circumstances, people have to keep adapting. In fact survival is, more or less, the same as adaptation. People play different roles; as they do so, they change, and grow, and their personality takes on new facets. Although the physical body that seems to contain the personality may remain recognizable, the personality itself cannot be fully grasped, because it's always changing with the context. It's like the ship of Theseus: when all the wooden parts of the ship have been replaced over time, is it still the same ship?

Nothing is left of the original ship that Theseus first sailed out of the harbor, but it's still his ship.

According to Kouwer, a person is like an onion. As we peel off the layers of our public self, our private self, our ideal self, our moral self, our sense of self-confidence and our feelings of self-esteem, all of the layers and depths and identities and roles that we recognize in ourselves... then at the end, there's nothing left. We *don't have a core*. "Our deepest essence is emptiness, our hidden truth nothingness," was Kouwer's conclusion. (Rumor has it that he committed suicide a few years after the publication of his somewhat unsettling book. Apparently, his own insight that personality is just a game and the true self doesn't exist, was too heavy a spiritual load for him to bear.)

For me, however, this conclusion was liberating. If it's really the case that the self doesn't exist, then there's nothing to worry about. If there's no such thing as your own "I", then you're freed from the need to find answers to questions like "Who am I?" and "What do I want?" Reading Kouwer's *The Game of Personality* brought me a sense of relief. All the time that I'd been trying to discover who I was and what I really wanted, I'd been asking myself questions that had no answers. And now that I knew it, I could leave those questions behind without regret.

Chapter 4

I am—or rather, I was—a social psychologist.

After I'd allowed myself to be convinced by Benjamin Kouwer that we can't really understand people's true selves, there wasn't much choice left other than to embrace social psychology and immerse myself in the science of how people's feelings, thoughts, and behavior are influenced by their social environment. If Kouwer was right, if "personality" is indeed just a game that people play to adapt to the social situation that they happen to find themselves in at the time, then the logical conclusion was that the psychology of different situations was where the action was, rather than the psychology of different personalities.

So, rather ironically, it was Kouwer, the personality psychologist, who drove me into the arms of social psychology. I was pretty grateful for that, because it saved me from having to make a choice. I got a short break from the stress of choosing between options: no for and against columns, no ifs and buts. Acting? Directing? Making films? Writing? Studying? Psychology? Communication science? Kouwer pushed me firmly in the right direction: social psychology. That firm push felt great, because it saved me from a lot of hassle. Free at last.

I felt free, because I had less choice. Is it possible to be freer with fewer choices? "Being free" means free to choose what you want, free to go your own way and be the master of your own fate. With no choice you have no self-determination, no say in what course your life takes. The more choice, the better. Right?

Well, if you live in a country where there's almost no choice, where all the houses (or more likely, concrete apartment blocks) look the same, where everyone drives the same car, where all the stores are full of the same products, where you can only buy one kind of bread or jam or peanut butter, then chances are that you don't feel very free (or very happy). People want to be able to be individuals, different from each other. They want the freedom to choose the lifestyle that suits them. And this desire for as much choice as possible is also the philosophy of the free market. A free market is an economy in which the supply and demand for products and service are left to people's desire for freedom, which manifests itself as an infinite number of choices. In a free market economy, being

rich is defined as always being free to choose. Sleep? Eat? A Ferrari? A house? Another one? And another?

But total freedom of choice has a downside: you spent your whole life making choices. If anything and everything is available, you have to check out all the options before you make a choice. If you have more choices, you have to make more decisions. And making decisions takes time and effort. It's sometimes hard just to choose between smooth or crunchy peanut butter, but just think what it's like when you could also choose a low-sugar variety, an extra-creamy version, big and small tubs, one with cashew nuts, a small tub of the extra-creamy kind with cashew nuts, etc etc. Once you get beyond a certain number of possibilities it becomes essentially impossible to choose, because our brains aren't up to the task of processing all the relevant information. How far can you have fun with ever more choices?

"What's for dinner?"

"Pork, potatoes, and beans."

"OK"

"What's for dinner?"

"Whatever you want, as usual, you know we have everything in the refrigerator."

"OK then, let's have pork, potatoes, and beans."

"What cut of pork? Potatoes done how? What kind of beans?"

"What have you got?"

"Everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"Then I won't have anything."

As I dug deeper into social psychology, I found myself increasingly convinced by the idea that people's feelings, perceptions, and behavior are principally influenced by the present situation. To use the jargon, I became a *situationist*, as opposed to a *personologist*. Apart from the idea that behavior is largely driven by situational factors, another thing that social psychology taught me is that it's human nature to greatly underestimate the influence of the situation and overstate the effect of personality traits. Even though it's often very clear from their behavior that people are always adapting themselves to

different situations, contexts, and environments, we still tend to feel that behavior is actually a function of someone's personality or motivation. Why? Because it gives us a feeling of control and certainty, of understanding. John does something. Why? Because he's John.

"Why did Brandon fall off his bike?"

"Because Brandon wasn't paying attention, as usual."

"Not because the wind was blowing so hard?"

"No, because he wasn't paying attention."

"But when the wind blows so hard, anyone could fall off their bike."

"Yeah, which is why he should have been paying attention."

If you grow up in a housing project, your chances of having a rich and successful life are considerably less than if you grow up in an upscale suburb. If you're feeling tense about the exam that you're just about to take and an attractive course mate gives you a lingering look, you're more likely to fall in love than at some other time when you're more relaxed. You can't tell for sure, just by looking at a successful banker on Wall Street, that he grew up in a rich suburb and went to Harvard; any more than you can tell by looking at the hobo a few blocks away that he grew up in the Bronx with no father and a mother addicted to heroin. And if you think you're falling in love, it's easier to imagine that it's actually because someone (who's standing right in front of you) has feelings for you, and not because of the weather (people fall in love more easily when the sun is shining, because they're happier), or because of nerves (when people are under stress they fall in love more easily, because they confuse the signals of stress and love), or because of alcohol (when people have had a few drinks they fall in love more easily, because they mistake light-headedness for love). All you can see is the person in front of you, not their social environment or background history. You see a successful businessman, a bum, or a cute classmate. You don't see Harvard, or the ghetto, or the nerves.

Actually, it would be great if people's behavior were to be always determined by their personality, because then you'd have something you could rely on. If you are what you do, then you're a hero if you do something good and a zero if you come off second best. But Kouwer, and the whole field of social psychology, teach us that this is a difficult position to justify. In many cases we only feel or think or do what the context suggests to

us. That's why lukewarm water feels different depending on whether you just got out of a hot bath, or came inside on a freezing day. It explains why people in Toronto go out in T-shirts when the temperature hits 60F on a mild January day, while someone in Miami would be reaching for a sweater in the same temperature. And that's why a B feels different when you see that the rest of the class got an A, compared with when most people only got a C.

Social psychology's interest in the influence of location means that it's a psychology of the streets. It's about ordinary, everyday phenomena. We don't talk about ions, herpetology, intertextuality, P300 potentials, or Pareto optimality. Social psychology studies relations and opinions, stereotypes and attitudes, feelings and emotions. But that's not to say that it's just a dressed-up form of journalism. Social psychology attempts—although it isn't always easy—to study everyday happenings with precision, and to make predictions about what will happen in a given situation. It's this combination of the ordinary and the scientific that causes social psychology to occupy a rather special (and difficult) place among the sciences. There's a fine line between stating the obvious on the one hand and going into ridiculous detail on the other.

In my classes on clinical, developmental, and organizational psychology, it gradually became clear that social psychology's preoccupation with describing the obvious in ridiculous detail was an exception within the field. Clinical psychology (also sometimes called "abnormal psychology") is the study of psychopathology. In the classes I took, this was mostly about making the correct diagnosis of strange or deviant behavior, and how to treat complicated psychological disturbances. The developmental psychology classes were pretty big on sickness and abnormality too. In theory, developmental psychologists are interested in all mental changes across the lifespan, but because those changes happen much faster in the first few years of life, most of the classes were about developmental problems in young children, or learning difficulties at school; the emphasis was on kids who showed either exceptionally good or exceptionally bad development, not on the regular development of normal, healthy people. In organization psychology class, I learned a lot about how people behave in organizations, but here too I had the impression that the principal focus was on what could go wrong and how toxic combinations of personality style and organizational structure lead to stress, burnout, abuse of power, misconduct,

ineffective leadership, and problems within and between teams. Compared to these other areas with their emphasis on what's sick or wrong or abnormal, social psychology is much more interested in regular, everyday behavior; it's about the daily lives of ordinary, healthy people. Of course, that doesn't mean that social study doesn't study some terrible things. Ordinary, healthy people can do some terrible things in their daily lives.

In fact, two of the most famous studies in all of psychology—the Stanford prison experiment and Milgram's obedience experiment—are social-psychological experiments that looked at how ordinary, healthy, normal people can behave in “bad”, “evil” ways. In the Stanford prison experiment, a group of volunteers were brought to the basement of Stanford University, which had been transformed into a simulated prison. The purpose of the experiment was to see how people would fulfill a “role” that had been assigned to them. The volunteers were split into two groups: one group became “guards” and the others became “prisoners”. Within a very short time, and (according to the first write-ups of the study by Zimbardo) “without any significant prompting from the experimenters,” the two groups started to behave in the way their roles suggested. The prisoners became submissive and the guards started to abuse their power, verbally abusing the prisoners and giving them bizarre tasks to perform. The original intention was for the experiment to run for two weeks, but after just five days weeks it was stopped—at the instigation of the lead experimenter's fiancée, who turned up one evening and was shocked by what she saw—because the abuses had become so extreme. For example, prisoners were being made to strip naked repeatedly in front of the others, and those that refused were beaten with fire extinguishers.

In his famous obedience experiment, Milgram demonstrated that ordinary, healthy, normal people were prepared to follow the orders of an authority figure (a doctor wearing a white coat marked “Yale University”) even if those orders were in direct conflict with their personal values. Milgram got his idea from Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. In the experiment, ordinary, healthy, normal people were instructed to give an electric shock to what they believed was a subject sitting in the next room taking a psychological test, every time that subject gave a wrong answer. Every shock was shown as being 15 volts stronger than the previous one. The participants didn't know that the “subject” was an actor, and no shocks were really being delivered. As the voltage became higher and the “subject” began

to groan or scream with pain at each shock, every participant questioned the procedure and made it clear that they wanted to stop. But the “doctor” in charge merely told them “Please continue”, escalating to “The experiment requires that you continue” if they queried him further. Two-thirds of the participants went to the highest point of the dial, marked “lethal”, delivering 450-volt “shocks” to the subject even after the screaming stopped and he fell silent. Ordinary, healthy, normal people turned out to be capable of doing some terrible things.

The more I learned about social psychology, the more fascinated I became. I took every class that was going, read a lot more than was expected, and sat at the front of seminars and discussion groups whenever I could. I was sold. Good social psychology was like a good play or movie: by looking at everyday life through a magnifying glass, it made the ordinary into something interesting, even exciting. But because social psychology was about accurate, reliable insights— rather than clever, sharp observations—it was actually better than a play or a movie, I thought. Milgram’s experiment is weirder than an evening of Absurdist Theater and the journal article of the Stanford prison experiment was better than the movie version, I thought.

But what really makes social psychology a science is its use of simple, elegant experiments that allow everyday phenomena to be studied in minute detail. I felt like a kid in a candy store when I realized what an amazing variety of research was being done.

When you fall in the river, why do you get helped more quickly if there’s just one person on the bank than when there’s a group of people? It’s called “diffusion of responsibility”: when there’s a crowd, everyone expects someone else to take charge.

Why do people continue to smoke, even though they know it’s bad for them and they don’t particularly want to die? Because we’re all very good at dealing with “cognitive dissonance”. Smoking isn’t so bad, I don’t smoke all that much, we’re all going to die anyway, I work out, bad things happen to other people, non-smokers are boring, I can stop when I want, in fact I’m going to stop tomorrow. Seriously.

Why do people use stereotypes, no matter how inappropriate, to explain and judge how others behave? Because we’re lazy, and social categories (gays, Mexicans, Muslims) and the stereotypes that go along with them (effeminate, lazy, terrorists) help to make the

world seem simpler. We like our shortcuts. We know that “chair” goes with “sit”, so it’s nice to be able to put together other pairings like “woman/emotional”, “man/competitive”, “child/innocent”, “soldier/tough”, or “professor/smart”, even if they’re not always (if at all) correct.

Want to know if internet porn leads to underage kids getting drunk and having sex in the broom closet? Get a bunch of kids, and show them half of them some porn and half something else. Ask them about their levels of desire, measure their norms and values, and see how far they go. Is that proposed education reform a good idea? Will this new form design reduce tax evasion? Do Keynesian stimulus measures help the economy? Experimental social psychology, I was discovering, could answer almost any question.

In the final year of my course, I got to do my own experiments. Finally. After doing some exercises in workgroups and research seminars, and watching the masters at work during internships and placements as a lab assistant, I was allowed to design, create, and run some experiments of my own. Any subject, any model, anything I wanted, nothing was off limits. So what should I do? Help. Too much choice.

I still had Neil Postman’s book on my bedside table and my heart was still set on media ecology, the idea that the medium is the message and that media structures are what shape and maintain cultures. Combining that with what I’d learned about social psychology, I tried to subject this big, broad idea to a series of experimental tests

I looked into which types of media messages have the greatest influence on behavior. What’s the difference between a good mass-media campaign aimed at getting people to change their habits, and a bad one? I was pretty ambitious. I spent days, then weeks in the library, reading everything that might even be crucial, or vaguely connected, or completely irrelevant, to my research question. I read the classical and more recent literature on the effects of the mass media until I knew it backwards and wrote research proposal after research proposal, but I couldn’t pin down a solid topic. My wishes were stronger than my ability to carry them out. There were too many theories, and mini-theories, and meta-theories. I didn’t know where to start or how to go about the process. Help. Too much choice.

Fortunately, I had an excellent supervisor, patient yet insistent. He helped me out of the vast swamp at the intersection of social psychology and communication science by showing me something called the impersonal impact hypothesis. Now here was something I could focus on.

It was a revelation. It felt like I'd been authorized to search for the Holy Grail. The literature about the effectiveness of mass-media information campaigns was a big mess. Some studies showed that these campaigns could be very effective; others showed that they almost never had any effect at all; and still others showed that they sometimes had an effect on some groups of people. But there was no study that showed convincingly what the principal difference was between effective and ineffective campaigns.

However, the impersonal impact hypothesis provided a simple and elegant answer: whether or not a campaign appears to have an effect depends on what you look at. Look at the right sort of things and you'll see an effect that you won't find if you look elsewhere. Studies that investigate the effect of the mass media on society as a whole tend to find effects, whereas studies that examine whether the same media change the opinions of individuals tend not to. So if you run a series of TV ads to tell people about the risk of AIDS and how important it is that they should use condoms, they may well become more aware of the general problem ("We have to do something about AIDS," "It's important that more people practice safe sex"), but there's probably no corresponding effect at a personal level ("I don't need to use condoms because I don't go to bed with the kinds of people who have HIV"). If you show people a film about traffic safety and the importance of speed limits, almost everyone will agree that "There would be fewer accidents if all drivers kept to the speed limit," but almost nobody is going to feel the need to adjust their own driving style ("I'm always a safe driver, even when I drive fast"). People feel relatively invulnerable to bad events and so they tend to be unrealistically optimistic about the chance that something bad will happen to them. We all think that we're well above average and that accidents happen to other people; not to me, not to you, but to "them."

So, the impersonal impact hypothesis basically states that large-scale public information campaigns don't help much to fix wider social problems. They can make people aware of the existence of the problem, but they're not very good at getting people to change their behavior. The mass media have convinced most of us that our climate is

changing, but not many of us have started cycling to work, reduced our consumption of meat, shortened our showers, or gotten into the habit of putting on a sweater instead of the central heating when the weather gets a little chilly.

The impersonal impact hypothesis was a clear and elegant summary of the literature on the effects of the mass media, but was it true? Taken to its extreme, the hypothesis suggested that it was impossible for the media to have sufficient influence on individuals to produce behavioral change. But that clearly wasn't true. Some information or advertising campaigns clearly had personal effects as well as social ones. I drank the Swiss soft drink, Rivella, because I wanted to be, in the words of their slogan, "a little crazy, a little different"; I took account of food groups when deciding what to eat; I gave to the Dutch disaster relief organization using their easy-to-remember account number when an earthquake or tsunami struck.

I decided to go back to the literature one more time. And of course, I found quite a few studies that seemed to refute the impersonal impact hypothesis. I guess it was too good to be true; there's always an exception to everything. Not all communication campaigns are limited to influencing social attitudes; some of them touch people personally. But what do those campaigns have that the others don't? What causes the exception? What determines the rule? How do campaigns that successfully influence individuals differ from the others?

I went back to the library, looking for an answer. What sort of information speaks to people the most? What kinds of messages get people to change their habits? The more I delved into the subject, the harder it became to find definite answers. I read about the effects of colors, atmospherics, sounds; about the influence of tension, fear, and happiness; about the role of storylines and the importance of role models that people can identify with. There were all kinds of factors that might mediate the impact of the mass media at a personal level, but what was the common factor?

It made me dizzy. Every day, the pile of articles and papers full of notes that I took to the library in search of an answer grew bigger. By now I was working in the deepest corners of the literature of communication science, right at the point where it meets psychology. And that was where I found the answer.

In fact, it was pretty obvious: if you want to have an effect on people at a personal level, you have to speak to them at that level. If you want to touch people personally, you have to communicate with them in a way that they can relate to, that fits with their own experience. Think about it: why do people change their behavior? When do they decide to turn over a new leaf? When they've seen or heard or experienced something directly. People become more cautious when they've had first-hand experience of the consequences of a lack of caution. People behave in more moral ways when they've been exposed to the dangers of immorality. Unsafe sex? Catch a nasty disease and you won't do that again. Driving too fast? If you escape having a fatal accident by a couple of inches, you'll slow down on that bend next time.

Now, for a mass media campaign it's pretty much impossible by definition to speak to individuals, to get close to their own experiences, because of the sheer scale of the undertaking. But how could it be that some campaigns did manage to change people's attitude and behavior, where others failed? How did some messages get through to make a deep impression on the audience as if they had had a personal experience?

The answer was almost childishly simple, and I was frankly a little ashamed that I'd spent weeks or months looking for it when it was right in front of me all the time: successful media campaigns are copies of direct, personal experience. To influence people, you have to get to them on a personal level, and to do that, you have to mimic their experiences. Effective influencing means simulating those experiences.

I took an even bigger pile of articles and notes to the library and checked out all the research that I'd read and summarized over the past few months, in the light of this new insight. Suddenly, everything was clear. In fact in some cases, it was written there in so many words in the text. I'd just been missing it all this time.

What sort of information has a personal impact? Living, emotional, storytelling, compelling information about people like you. What sort of information has the most effect? Information that makes you a part of the story, so you feel like you're a part of it. It sounded so true, so logical, it was almost trivial.

With some help from my supervisor; I set up some experiments to test this idea. We had students read (suitably doctored) newspaper articles about hospital infections or auto accidents and then asked them to describe the risks of these bad things happening in either

general (“It’s a problem for society”) or personal (“I’m worried that something like that might happen to me”) terms. And we found what we expected: the articles with vivid, graphic descriptions, and those in which the victims were described as students, were seen as being more “real” and “personal” than the others. The mystery was solved.

The mystery was solved. Or, to put it another way: by reading the literature on mass communications and social psychology over and over, I’d rediscovered an old, forgotten piece of knowledge that I’d dusted off, cleaned up, given some water and put out in the sun. I’d brought a little bit of order to the chaotic world. It was just old wine in a new bottle, but if you’re too young to have drunk old wine, that’s no big deal. I was ecstatic. For the naïve beginner, reinventing the wheel, every step feels like an amazing new discovery.

Discovery—even if, in my case, it was mostly rediscovery—tasted of satisfaction. I was fascinated to see how small, subtle changes of a few words in a text could get people to change their thoughts and perceptions about themselves and society. Give students a newspaper article that’s written in a more or less attractive way, and bang, their estimation of threats to society changes, and they see themselves differently. Fine-tuning the control knobs of language makes the difference between winning people over and having them walk away. And that all happens unconsciously, without them knowing that it’s happening. The participants in my study had no idea that the way in which the news was presented was what was driving their feelings and opinions. Most of them didn’t believe that one could influence the other.

I had found something that worked. It was trivial and dumb, too simplistic for words, but I’d managed to dig a straightforward method out of the literature that enabled me to determine what type of information had an effect on people and what didn’t. I knew which experimental dials I had to adjust to make effects appear or disappear. The possibilities seemed endless. I could look into whatever I wanted.

During my research on the impersonal impact hypothesis, I saw a TV movie about a lonely boy who lived somewhere near the sea in Italy. I can still remember one scene in particular. There’s a group of kindergarteners sitting on the floor of the gymnasium with their teacher. They are spread all around the room, all concentrating on what they’re doing, which is drawing on the ground with colored chalks. It looks like a complete mess,

with none of the kids seemingly paying attention to what any of the others is doing. When they've all finished, the teacher climbs to the top of the climbing frame at one end of the room and looks down. Below him, we see that what we thought was just random scribbling has become a fantastic picture of colorful suns, moons, stars and planets.

Scientific research is a bit like solving a jigsaw puzzle. You think up how the puzzle should look, find the pieces, identify the holes, cut new pieces, and see if everything fits. At the level of millimeters all this fine detail can sometimes feel a bit pointless, but the aim is to have each larger section of the puzzle, an inch or a few inches across, look good. When you've finished all the cutting and trimming and fitting, when you take a step back and look at the whole picture, you don't see which pieces are original and which you had to improvise. All you see is a single, coherent picture. It's a nice feeling to see something that you imagined come to life before you. It's great to come up with an idea, develop it theoretically, and validate it empirically. It's absolutely fantastic when you discover—perhaps after a bit of trial and error—that your idea works.

But sometimes it doesn't work. Sometimes an experiment goes wrong. Sometimes—in fact, pretty often—the results don't come out the way you hoped. Sometimes reality just doesn't want to go along with your theoretical analysis, no matter how logical and carefully formulated that might be. It's frustrating, but that's how it is. Sometimes you're just wrong; you have to go back to the drawing board and try again, a bit harder this time. But if you don't find what you were expecting, while everybody else seems to have no trouble, it's even more frustrating. Let's say the literature is full of discussions about effect X—for example, if you have people read a text in which the word “friendly” occurs a few times, their opinions of others become more positive, but if you replace “friendly” with the names of individual people who are perceived to be friendly, like “Gandhi” or “Mandela”, their opinions of others become more negative. You'd like to show this “X effect” yourself. So you read the literature on X very carefully, you do exactly what the “Methods” section of the article says you should do, and you get... Y. Not X. Oh. Now what? Well, let's run it again. Nope, still Y. Now what? Back to the literature, read it again twice, check everything, change the materials a bit, run it again. Y. Now what?

I was doing something wrong. Clearly, there was something in the recipe for the X effect that I was missing. But what? I decided to ask the experts, the people who'd found the X effect and published lots of articles about it. Maybe they could send me their materials? I wrote some letters. To my surprise, in most cases I received a prompt and comprehensive reply. My colleagues from around the world sent me piles of instructions, questionnaires, papers, and software.

Now I saw what was going on. In most of the packages there was a letter, or sometimes a yellow Post-It note stuck to the bundle of documents, with extra instructions:

"Don't do this test on a computer. We tried that and it doesn't work. It only works if you use pencil-and-paper forms."

"This experiment only works if you use 'friendly' or 'nice'. It doesn't work with 'cool' or 'pleasant' or 'fine'. I don't know why."

"After they've read the newspaper article, give the participants something else to do for three minutes. No more, no less. Three minutes, otherwise it doesn't work."

"This questionnaire only works if you administer it to groups of three to five people. No more than that."

I certainly hadn't encountered these kinds of instructions and warnings in the articles and research reports that I'd been reading. This advice was informal, almost under-the-counter, but it seemed to be a necessary part of developing a successful experiment.

Had all the effect X researchers deliberately omitted this sort of detail when they wrote up their work for publication? I don't know. Perhaps they did; or perhaps they were just following the rules of the trade: You can't bore your readers with every single detail of the methodology you used. That would be ridiculous. Perhaps.

While you're designing and developing an experiment, you take a lot of decisions. Where will we do the research? On a computer, or with pencil and paper? Do we have to consider the gender of the principal investigator? What color paper should we use for the questionnaire, which typeface, how much space between the lines? How many real questions and how many control questions? When do you ask each question? How much time do you allow per question? How many choices for each answer? Are participants

allowed to go back and change their previous answers? And so on and so forth. You take innumerable decisions, most of which seem completely innocuous, but later you find that some of them had an influence on the results, for reasons you often can't fathom.

Whether you make people wait for three or five minutes before you start the next phase of the experiment isn't trivial. Deciding to administer the tests via computer or on paper can lead to substantially different results.

Would it help to write up the method in more detail than we currently do in the report of the study? I doubt it. The problem is working out which details matter. Should we list everything we can think of? The weather? The physical dimensions of the laboratory? The brand of computer we used? The time of day when the experiment was performed? The skin color of the principal investigator? The color of her clothes? Her height? The length of her hair? How attractive she is? Her eye color? If you tried to cover everything, you'd never finish.

One of the most popular and successful research areas in modern social psychology is called Terror Management Theory. This suggests that the single biggest factor affecting people's behavior is the fear of death. People use religion, culture, positive self-image, stereotypes, preconceptions, and imagined enemies to keep this fundamental dread in check. According to Terror Management Theory, the conflict between the human instinct to stay alive for as long as possible and the conscious knowledge that life is finite leads to a continuous confrontation with the overwhelming fear of dying. We're all going to die, and that's a scary prospect. Although we're not always conscious of this fear, it's always there, ticking away in the background of our lives. People have developed a large number of ways to reduce the effect of this terror. Because the human fear of death is so powerful and dominant, simply thinking about the idea of death is sufficient to cause the defense mechanisms to swing into action and reduce the anxiety. If you ask people to write a few sentences about their own death, as if by magic, they become more religious, display more preconceptions, more emotions, more pride in themselves ("I'm a fantastic person") and their culture ("U-S-A! We're number one!"), and more aggressive towards others ("You're just a loser") and other cultures ("Screw those A-rabs").

In the last few decades, a considerable number of elegant experiments have demonstrated the effects predicted by Terror Management Theory. There have been a few negative results, but only a few, because it's one of the most robust theories in social psychology. And yet, thinking about death doesn't always cause you to behave in the way the theory predicts. Social reality is capricious, and conducting experiments is a difficult art.

For example, consider this story about a group of Dutch researchers who were interested in investigating the psychological mechanisms behind the effects of Terror Management, but couldn't reproduce even the most basic "what happens when you think about death" results. They tried everything. They ran their experiments with students, with "normal" people, in small groups in large lecture halls, on the computer, on paper, but nothing made a difference. Whatever they did, they couldn't get "thinking about death" to produce the desired effects.

In desperation, the researchers made a visit to another university that also did a lot of work on Terror Management Theory and seemed to have no trouble in reproducing the basic effects at will. They couldn't find any noticeable difference between the two labs. The successful research group did everything in exactly the same way as the team that couldn't find any effect. But there was one difference between the two groups: the successful researchers were all young, liberal men from the grunge generation who looked like they didn't enjoy life much, and always wore black jeans and black rock band T-shirts to the lab.

Experimenting is an art. You have to catch the right behavior at the right moment with the right people. To learn about what makes people tick, to be successful and get the plaudits that go with that success, you have to put a lot of work into the "theater" of the psychological experiment. All the props and scenery, all the actors and actresses have to be brought together just so.

I found myself getting better and better at it. Every time I wanted to test a new research idea, I wrote to my colleagues in other universities and asked them exactly how they'd done it. Thanks partly to the packages of materials that they sent, but especially to the accompanying letters and Post-Its, I was able to put the experiment together. I didn't have access to a lot of sophisticated resources—a simple computerized test, reading

newspaper articles, some clever language tricks—but I began to develop a sense for what would work and what wouldn't. I had fun tweaking details to get to the right experimental setup. I enjoyed investigating the right methodologies for each different case. I took a lot of pleasure in doing a thorough, professional job. I found it exciting to become part of the Grand Fellowship of Secret Procedures and to become part of the guild of successful researchers who put that extra care and detail into their experiments to ensure the greatest chance of getting the anticipated results. "A-ha... so you have to wait three minutes before asking the crucial question." "OK, so it only works if you do it on a computer."

Every experiment is custom-made. One extra word or one fewer measurement, and the effect can disappear. What does that mean in reality? Is it a form of craftsmanship, requiring the experimenter to master the contents of the toolbox, or is it a juggling act that demands more and more clever tricks? And what does this tell us about the scientific value of the effects that we find? How specific or subtle are the situational changes that make the difference between finding an effect or not? Does it only work if you do it exactly the way as the other experimenters before you? Is the influence of the situation really so strong? If I change the typeface of the questionnaire, will the effect really disappear? (Yes.) If you punch someone in the face then their nose will bleed, but in social psychology research the effects are a lot more subtle; you have to have a precise combination of the right manipulation (the punch) and the best possible measurements (the bloody nose).

When you design an experiment, you try to do it in such a way that the chances of an informative result are maximized. You develop studies that fit the specific research question that you're trying to answer. You can test your idea against a competing theory, but you do it so as to get a useful answer. If you think that people will prefer soup A to soup B, although everyone else believes that they will prefer B to A, you get a bunch of people to taste the two soups, and you use a spoon, not a fork or a tea strainer. You could use those other utensils, but the results would be messy.

When you have a theory about how the world works you try to use the best available tools that can test that theory to see if you're right. That way, if you don't find what you were expecting, you know that at least it wasn't the fault of the tools. If you do find a positive result, you have an indication that your theory is correct—at least, as long as

you use your own tools. In any case, you're a little bit right. You're at least right in your own world, with your own theory and your own tools. Which isn't bad to be going on with.

Chapter 5

In Chicago, I lived in the International House. I'd decided that I wanted to continue solving behavioral mysteries and devising successful experiments, and I reckoned that the best place to do that was in one of the academic Valhallas of the U.S. America was the epicenter of all that was good in the modern social and behavioral sciences, and most of my scientific heroes were Americans. After my graduation in social psychology and media sciences, the University of Chicago (UofC) admitted me to its PhD program. I would spend two years being taught theory and techniques, then be let loose to do research and write a thesis on a subject of my choice. It was planned to take five or six years.

But only a little more than a year after I left for Chicago, I was back in the Netherlands. I was homesick for my girlfriend, for the society that stood for social democracy and solidarity and against excessive individualism, and for the high level of social psychology that was to be found in Dutch universities. Chicago was great at a lot of subjects, but not social psychology.

I lived in a small room just below the square tower of the gigantic International House. Every day I had intense discussions with the other international students who were enrolled at Chicago and lived in the same building. I spent most of my meals and other precious spare time with students of literature, sociology, and anthropology. We read Shakespeare and Nietzsche, debated politics and Reaganomics, and talked endlessly about Rodney King, the construction worker who had been violently arrested in Los Angeles in March 1991—a little more than a year before I arrived in Chicago—after a high-speed car chase. King was on parole from a jail sentence for robbery and was afraid that he would have to return to prison if caught while driving under the influence of alcohol, but the police thought his erratic behavior was consistent with his having taken PCP. During his arrest, the police used tasers and batons to subdue him, as well as kicking him several times, and he ended up in hospital. The incident made the national and international news because a local resident filmed it and sent the tape to a local TV station.

A year later, in April 1992, while I was in Chicago, the officers who had arrested and beaten Rodney King were found not guilty of the charges of excessive force against them. This caused a huge outcry. Rodney King was an African-American, but the trial had been

moved to the overwhelmingly White city of Simi Valley because the intense media coverage of the case in LA might prejudice a fair trial. The jury in Simi Valley that acquitted the officers consisted of ten White people, one Hispanic and one Asian. Immediately after the verdict, riots broke out in Black areas of LA and other U.S. cities. Shops were looted, cars set on fire, and there were outbreaks of inter-ethnic violence.

The International House was in Hyde Park on the UofC campus. Although the campus itself consisted of a number of beautiful buildings that exuded elegance, it was surrounded on all sides by a poor, mostly Black ghetto. During the day I could look out of the window of my room and see Nobel Prize winners in their kitchens in the luxurious faculty accommodation across the road, but at night I could hear the gunfire between rival gangs a few blocks away. I thought it was pretty likely that the riots in South Central LA would spread to Chicago, specifically Hyde Park. Back in 1968 when Martin Luther King was shot on his motel balcony in Nashville, Tennessee, riots erupted immediately in several cities with large Black populations, including Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington. During the 1968 unrest in Chicago, 11 people were killed, 48 seriously injured, and 2,150 arrested.

This time things didn't spread as far. The riots were mostly limited to LA, plus a few other cities in the South and West. They lasted for six days, caused over a billion dollars in damage, and resulted in the deaths of 53 people.

During our discussions in the International House, we tried to work out why the riots were so extreme, dominating even the international news outlets for days, and yet barely spread outside LA. Why didn't we have any trouble in Chicago? Obviously the fact that King had been arrested in LA was a major factor, but the secondary conclusion—especially among the anthropologists in the group—was that South Central was in a worse state than Hyde Park: higher unemployment, worse schools, more poverty and fewer stores, parks, and sports and recreational facilities.

One of my Black friends, Tyrone, didn't agree with this analysis. He was a militant student of politics who believed that all the Black ghettos in the U.S. were in an equally bad way due to the consequences of Reaganomics, and that the (White) power elite were continually doing all they could to keep Black people in poverty to preserve their own wealth. As he put it, "It's all about Black suppression and White supremacy." I used to smile when Tyrone went into one of his conspiracy theory rants about the hopeless

existence of people in the Black ghettos of America. His wide-ranging yet fascinating theorizing reminded me of the rickety logic of Oliver Stone's ultimate conspiracy movie, *JFK*: "It is a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key."

That was until Tyrone decided to take me for a drive around the ghettos of Hyde Park and the surrounding neighborhoods. "Take that grin of your face. You think this is funny? I'll show you funny." His theory was that White city officials and other people in power were ensuring that there was a liquor store every couple of blocks, and nothing else. The idea was to keep the Black population quiet with cheap booze and bad food; that would delay the revolution indefinitely.

We got in his car and set off. For two hours we drove past empty parking lots, burned-out cars, boarded-up buildings, abandoned streets and desolate concrete apartment blocks. There weren't many people on the streets. And I didn't see a single supermarket or shopping mall, which I'd assumed were just everywhere in the U.S. But sure enough, there was no shortage of liquor stores, some with shutters across the windows even though they were open, all dark and depressing. A liquor store every couple of blocks.

While the Rodney King riots were raging in LA, I decided to investigate how the Los Angeles Times and the New York Times had written about the case from March 1991 until now (April 1992). My hypothesis was that in the first days after King's violent arrest, the papers would be dominated by highly emotional pieces that would assign the blame to individuals (because of people's tendency to explain others' behavior in terms of personality characteristics), with Rodney King being portrayed as a convicted felon under the influence of drugs and the LAPD officers who arrested him as racist thugs. But as time went on, there would be more nuanced, reflective articles with situational explanations: King was a victim of the poverty in LA, or the police were badly trained and equipped. Because it was literally harder for the Los Angeles Times to take a view from a distance, my prediction was that the emotional, personal pieces would appear for longer in that paper than in the New York Times.

I hadn't learned much about deconstructing texts and I hadn't been trained in the scientific approach to content analysis, but it seemed to me that my ideas about the role of

distance, emotions, and the passage of time in the way that newspapers report extreme events were at least logical and deserved to be investigated. I was excited to find out if I was right.

I spent days in the UofC library going through edition after edition of the two newspapers, looking for reports about Rodney King's arrest, and noted, interpreted, and categorized what I found. And I found what I was looking for: as time went on, the descriptions and analysis changed from "personal" to "situational," and this process took longer in LA than in New York.

I breathed a sigh of relief and satisfaction. This finding gave me an enormous feeling of satisfaction, of closure. I pushed all the newspaper articles and notes to one side, took a quick look at the other students who sat bent over their own articles and notes, and then looked up and across to the little window. What seemed to be logical was true. It started to rain.

A few days later, when I looked through the relevant literature to try and gauge whether my discovery might also be of interest to other researchers in social psychology or communications science, it seemed as if what I'd found didn't really fit in anywhere. There was plenty of theory about how major issues become part of the news and then disappear again, and there were a couple of obscure papers comparing more or less nuanced explanations of things that had hit the headlines, but nothing suggested that there was a systematic, scientific interest in what I thought I'd found from my modest analyses of two major city newspapers. What seemed to be logical was true, but perhaps it was also rather trivial.

Apart from intense discussions at mealtimes, my days in the International House were mostly filled with reading, writing, and working on research ideas. To help with the last of those, I bought myself a computer at the UofC campus store. I chose an Apple Macintosh Classic II, because it was the best-looking computer in the place and also because it seemed to me to be the easiest to use. Physically, it was a compact plastic box with a small, bright screen. In use, it was a collection of windows and icons that you could open and close with a mouse click and drag around to arrange them however you wanted. Most of my fellow students had IBM-compatible PCs (this was before Windows, remember) and gave me

slightly pitying looks as I enthused over all the cool things that my Macintosh could do: “What are you gonna do with all that shit?” I didn’t know, but it was just cute and fun. Fortunately I soon found a couple of other Apple diehards with whom I exchanged tips, diskettes, and software.

Nowadays it seems like everyone uses Apple products, like PowerBooks, iPhones, iPads, and iPods, and Apple diehards are everywhere. The rest of the world has finally woken up to what some of us knew decades ago about how easy to use Apple’s products are. My computer is no longer something exotic and as a result, neither am I: Apple users don’t stand out from the crowd like they used to. Apple became normal, so I became normal—too normal, I sometimes think. I’m going to have to find some way to stand out from the crowd, but then again, not too much; I wouldn’t want to become some kind of crazy loner either. Some psychologists believe that one of the most fundamental human desires is the need to belong, but others argue that the opposite is true: everybody wants to be special. As usual, the truth is somewhere in between. People are constantly making tradeoffs between the need to conform and the need to be different. We have our place in society, but we try to occupy it in our own specific way. We play a number of roles, and we define ourselves by how we choose to fulfill each one. I might be a father, psychologist, husband, friend, Cubs fan, but I do it in my particular way. Hundreds of actors and actresses have played Martha and George in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, all speaking the same lines, but each of them has brought their unique approach to this tale of lies and desires, of fear of the big bad wolf and a life lived without illusions.

“Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf, Virginia Woolf?”

“I am, George, I am.”

People want to be the same and different at the same time. In the summer we wear sandals, but not the same sandals that everyone else is wearing. In the winter we wear faux fur coats, but not the same model that everyone else has. We do something a little crazy with our hair, but not too crazy, because then people will laugh at us. And somewhere in this delicate dance between being the same and different, we find a balance. As you might have guessed, psychologists have a name for this sweet spot between conformity and isolation; they call it “optimal distinctiveness”.

Unfortunately, finding the sweet spot is a never-ending process, because the line between what's hot and what's not is constantly moving. Leggings? Pointy-toed shoes? Highlights? Smoking? Shoulder pads? Keeping that balance between similarity and difference requires constant attention, because today's quirk is tomorrow's trend, and last year's high fashion is just so, well, last year. It never stops. Crocks, Birkenstocks, Ugg boots, Gap jeans, Moleskine notebooks, square plates, Mini Cooper, Nespresso, granite counter tops, Apple computers, iPhones: what used to enable you to stand out from the crowd is now everyday. If you don't want to be too normal, it seems like you have to do something a little bit weird every day.

I'm 6 feet 5 inches tall, which is way taller than most people. That's handy, because I can go to a concert or a soccer game and see the action from almost any seat. And tall people are more popular: others attribute all kinds of attractive qualities to them, such as intelligence, charisma, and power. If you're tall, it's more likely that you'll be chosen as a leader, even if you're not really up to the task. As a tall person, you get people's attention more easily and keep it for longer, even if what you say doesn't actually make much sense. On the downside, it's hard to fit into airline seats, and you bang your head against things. A lot. Basically, tall people stand out (literally) from the crowd, which is mostly a good thing, except when it isn't. When I was a kid, I was afraid that I would grow to be ridiculously tall. I was the tallest in my class, a head above everyone else, and I felt gangling and clumsy. When I was in first grade, we made a play about a group of jolly elves whose laughter and songs bring joy to the inhabitants of an old folks' home. Initially—probably as an early manifestation of my latent desire to be an actor—I was assigned the role of "Elf #1". But after a couple of rehearsals, the teacher and the moms who were helping her with this theatrical *tour de force* realized that I wasn't quite right for the part, and I found myself recast as "Old man #6".

I was too tall, and afraid I might turn into a giant. My distress was such that I lay awake at night worrying about it. My parents decided to take me to a pediatrician whom they knew. He talked to me for a while, measured my height, examined my posture, and gave special attention to the size of my hands and feet. After measuring the bones in my extremities, he announced that I would end up being 6 feet 2 inches tall, plus or minus two

inches. I was reassured. 6 feet 2 felt like a good size for an adult male: not too long, not too short. I ended up 6 feet 5.

The International House was for eating and sleeping, the library for studying, but the real work was done in a building called Rosenwald. This neo-Gothic temple to the glory of academia stood in the middle of the UofC campus and was full of economists, psychologists, and business school professors, who were trying to understand the consequences of Reaganomics and to determine the effects of economic policy on the behavior of ordinary people. Along with a number of other PhD candidates, I worked in the windowless cellar of Rosenwald. Deep inside this grey, isolated bunker I had a cubicle with my own enormous, ugly IBM computer. That was where I worked on my research ideas and developed questionnaires and computer-based tests. Five or six days a week, the PhD students would drift in around 9 or 10 a.m., and eleven or twelve hours later we would drift back out. Whoever got to turn the light out was the winner.

To avoid going completely crazy in our world of deep thoughts and exciting ideas, we would leave the cellar a few times during the day, for a quick coffee or a sandwich or a few hasty drags on a cigarette. If the weather was nice, these breaks might even take us outside into the fresh air, where we would lean against Rosenwald's limestone walls near the cellar entrance. Here, at eye-level, a sculpted plaque had been fixed into the wall. It depicted a spade standing in freshly turned-over soil, with the message "Dig and Discover" underneath. It was an effective and inspiring metaphor for scientific research: digging into the world, looking for hidden treasures.

Metaphors are an ideal tool for explaining something, to make an idea clearer, but they're arguably more often used to persuade people of something. (Or is explanation always a type of persuasion?) Metaphors are subtle instruments of influence which can (mis-)direct people's thoughts and evaluations by bringing particular images to mind. When you describe your neighbor's new girlfriend as being a bit like Ann Coulter, it makes people think differently about her than if you'd compared her to Marilyn Monroe or Hillary Clinton. That's why politicians, journalists, spin doctors, and propagandists spend so much time and money trying to influence public opinion by the use of clever metaphors. It makes a difference whether you talk about prisoners or hostages, terrorists or freedom fighters, surgical strikes or carpet bombing, conflict or war, or over an economic crisis that's

comparable to the Thirties (bad) or the Eighties (not so bad). A careful strategic choice of metaphor lets you set the agenda and show you in the best light. That's why conservatives refer to President Obama's policies as "socialist" or "European-inspired"—words which have negative associations for Americans—while liberals try to portray those conservatives as out-of-touch religious zealots who want to take the country back to the McCarthy era and can't find Denmark on a map.

Metaphors are generally deployed in the hope that, when the audience reflects a little deeper on an issue, they will include the meaning and, especially, the emotional impact of the metaphor in their thinking. For example, by adding the suffix "-gate" to a scandal of any size (Irangate, Bushgate, Bridgegate, and even—in the Netherlands, or in the world of social psychology—Stapelgate), you make it more reasonable for people to conclude that this is, indeed, an affair of Watergate-like proportions.

However, sometimes a metaphor is too obvious, the strategic intent too in-your-face, so that not only does the desired effect not occur, but the whole thing backfires on the initiator. Consider the 1988 Vice-Presidential debate between Dan Quayle and Lloyd Bentsen. Quayle had apparently decided that, as a young and inexperienced politician running for very high office, people might think better of him if he seemed to have something of President Kennedy about him, and so he had frequently invoked JFK's name during his campaign speeches. Anticipating that this might come up in the debate, Bentsen had prepared a devastating response. When Quayle noted that he had been in Congress for the same amount of time as Kennedy had when he ran for President, Bentsen riposted with the famous line, "Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy. I knew Jack Kennedy. Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." By making the purpose of the metaphor explicit, Bentsen had killed it, and exposed his opponent to ridicule in the process.

Perhaps inspired by the plaque on the wall of Rosenwald, I decided to test my theoretical ideas about the effectiveness of subtle, implicit metaphors—as opposed to the blatant, in-your-face variety—in a questionnaire-based study. I'd noticed that during the preamble to the Gulf War (Operation Desert Shield), supporters and opponents of—possibly long-term—military intervention by the United States had been engaged in a battle of metaphors. Opponents of military action tended to invoke memories of the

Vietnam War, which was widely regarded as a military and even a moral failure. Supporters of armed intervention tried to steer the discourse towards World War II. Thus, for example, on October 15, 1990, President George H. W. Bush declared: “Every day now new word filters out [of Kuwait] about the ghastly atrocities perpetrated by Saddam’s forces [...] of a systematic assault on the soul of the nation, summary executions, routine torture, newborn babies thrown out of incubators [...] dialysis patients ripped from their machines [...] Hitler revisited.” (U.S. News & World Report, May 6, 1991, page 9). Bush was attempting to get the American people on his side, in favor of military intervention in Kuwait, by subtly reminding people of the historical victory over the Nazis. It worked. Opinion polls taken directly after Bush’s speech in October 1990 showed that support for American military action was rising, and his popularity continued to rise during the war itself in 1991.

I was doing my research more than a year later, when the Gulf War had long disappeared from the front pages of the newspapers, but it still wasn’t clear how the aftermath would work out. I asked UofC students to complete a very short questionnaire, while they were waiting in line for a lecture hall. There was only one question which was about the extent to which they thought that American military success in the Gulf War had been based on a carefully worked-out political and military strategy. However, the question was phrased in four different ways, with each student answering just one version. In two cases, the “subtle metaphor” versions, the introductory paragraph of the test mentioned, briefly in passing, either the Vietnam War or World War II. In the other two cases, the “explicit metaphor” forms of the questionnaire, I asked the students to make an explicit comparison between the Gulf War and one of the earlier conflicts: “To what extent do you think that the success of the U.S. forces in the Gulf War was based on a well-defined political and military strategy, compared to the Vietnam War / World War II?”

What emerged was similar to the effect that we saw in the Bentsen–Quayle debate: metaphors work best when they’re not too obvious. Students were more positive in their evaluations of the U.S. Gulf War strategy when they’d just seen a brief mention of World War II (compared to Vietnam), but this effect was reversed when the comparison was made explicit. Make it too in-your-face and it can boomerang on you.

I was pleased with my shovel and bucket in Chicago. Down in the cellar near the “Dig and Discover” plaque I thought up one study after another, and then went round the UofC campus pestering students, teachers, employees, and passers-by into filling out questionnaires or doing tests on the computer. Sometimes the study failed, usually because I’d gotten hold of the wrong end of the stick, but over time I got better at filling my bucket with useful insights and cool results that I’d extracted from the earth of social psychology with a great deal of digging, turning, and poking. I was becoming good at transforming logic into truth. It was great to be able to see ideas and practice intertwined, to confirm that theoretical analyses and thought experiments were aligned with the raw truth of everyday reality.

But was that enough? Was I just looking for a collection of insights? No. It took a while, but after a couple of years being a happy little kid playing in his sandbox, and occasionally making a really good sand pie, I found myself wanting to put those pies in the shop window. I wasn’t just some nerd in an ivory tower, happy to spend my time solving scientific puzzles; I was also a failed actor and a would-be filmmaker, and I wanted to show others what I’d done. Was my work stupid, or smart? Was it relevant? Had it been worthwhile?

Science is about communication. You can think of all kinds of cool ideas standing in the shower, you can philosophize all you want on the bus, but if you never take the time to sit down and write up your ideas and thoughts, work them out thoroughly, test them, and—most importantly—share them with others, you’re left with nothing. Science only exists because someone wants to read it.

Science is about the sharing of knowledge; without sharing, it would just be a pastime for well-meaning amateurs. Scientists want to know if they’re right. They do that partly by careful reasoning and argument, logical thought, and the search for empirical support for their ideas, but also by exposing their theories and discoveries to other scientists. That’s how they learn about what their ideas are worth, if anything. Does what I’ve come up with make sense? Is it consistent with other findings? Is it innovative enough? Will people find it interesting and relevant to them?

Science is about impressing the judges. There isn't just one net into which everyone is trying to throw their ball. There isn't just one question that everyone's trying to answer, or one answer that everyone's looking for. Everyone thinks up their own question and sets out to find their own answer. That's why science has a lot of questions and even more answers. Scientific discussions (and fights) take place not just about the quality of a particular method or the plausibility of a specific result, but also—or perhaps, especially—about whether or not a given question even means anything. It's impossible to determine with any degree of objectivity how “good” a question is, and what the “best” answer to it might be.

There's no clearly marked finishing line in science, with everyone racing towards it. Science is meant to be a collaborative, mutually-judged effort, with scientists publishing their own, original work, reviewing other scientists' work, studying each other's reviews, designing new studies, publishing new papers, writing new reviews, etc., and communicating about all this with each other.

I discovered that publishing your work is difficult. More specifically, publishing your work *well* is difficult. It was four years before I got my first study published in a well-respected international journal. You can always publish somewhere—if necessary you can self-publish, or put it on your personal Web site—but if you want your colleagues to take it seriously, you have to make sure you get your work published in the journals that they respect.

Every scientific discipline has a well-established pecking order of journals, from good to poor. There's the highest-status journal where everyone wants to have an article published, the close contenders, the good-but-not-great, the middling, the fun-but-not-serious, the dull-as-dishwater, and the trash compactor. The status of a journal is determined by a number of factors, one of which is how difficult it is to get an article published in it. There are some ritzy, high-end journals in psychology that reject 90% of submitted articles. Other relevant considerations are the number of people who subscribe to the journal, and the number of times that its articles are cited by other authors in their books and articles (the so-called “impact factor”). The more readers and citations a journal has, the higher its status.

Publishing is difficult and often takes a long time. First, you have to formulate a theory, or at least a neat new idea, on the basis of the existing literature or your own observations. Then you have to design a study to test whether your theory is right. You conduct the experiment and analyze the results, and frequently you run some more experiments to exclude alternative explanations. Then you sit down to write, rewrite, and rewrite again, until you've built a good, readable story that represents the best possible description of the study that you devised and carried out. You show your story to some colleagues, rewrite it again, and finally you're ready to send it to a journal. Preferably a leading, high-status international journal.

After a few months you get your article back. The editor-in-chief—or perhaps an “action editor” assigned by him or her—and between two and five “peer reviewers” have read it, and each has written an evaluation report (often many pages long, sometimes longer than the original article). Sometimes they think it's good, more often they think it's bad (and reject it), but in any case the verdict is usually that you have to go back to the drawing board: you have to sharpen up your theory, do some more research (perhaps better or more carefully than the first time), you have to show how you excluded these alternative explanations, and you have to show how your ideas follow logically from the existing literature and why your results represent a breakthrough in a new direction.

You go back to work, starting at square one. You do everything that the reviewers asked for and send your article off to the journal again. Back it comes with new comments. You do everything they asked for, again. And again. And again. Until they either accept your article, or finally reject it. In the latter case, you lower your sights and send it off to a lower-status journal. Then you go through the same procedure. And again, and again, until your article finally finds a home and gets accepted somewhere. In the trash compactor, if necessary.

That might sound like a pretty terrible process, and it is. All the waiting for the verdict of the jury of your peers, holding up numbers like it's the Olympic figure skating, is particularly nerve-wracking. Does it make sense? Will they find it sufficiently novel, interesting, important, provocative, intelligent, relevant? Today all this takes place over the Internet, but it used to be an endless back-and-forth procession of overstuffed envelopes. After a few weeks had gone by since I'd sent in an article, I found it difficult to sit still. I

would walk from my room to the mail delivery area several times a day to see if a big fat letter with *The Verdict* was sitting there. The problem was that it was hard to predict when the Fat Letter Day would be. After eight weeks? Ten? Three months? Four? Sometimes I would make that nervous walk every day for months on end, becoming increasingly convinced that today, finally, must be the day. You couldn't send impatient letters demanding news, because you had to be nice to the reviewers. After all, they were the ones determining what your work was worth. Including the work you hadn't done yet.

Science is about convincing people. The first few pieces I wrote about research that I'd done were rather pallid and boring papers based on literature reviews and research reports that I'd made. Although carefully written, they were rather rambling, semi-literary expositions that lacked cogency because I was trying to include every last thing that I'd read on a given subject, typically accompanied by some clever comments using way too many words. My first serious attempt at an article caused one of my teachers to comment, "A little less Henry and a little more William James, please." I felt that I should provide a step-by-step description of how I'd come to develop my ideas, but after a few stubborn attempts I finally understood that that wasn't what was required. Nobody was interested in what Reichenbach called the "context of discovery" of my ideas. Nobody cared about what I'd read or how I'd arrived at my research question. My articles needed to focus, with a persuasive and well-constructed line of argument and without too much beating about the bush, on the "context of justification." What was needed was to describe the significance and plausibility of what I'd imagined and found, not on how and when I'd come up with it.

Journals can choose from tens of thousands of articles, so why should they publish mine? Readers can choose from thousands of published articles, so why should they decide to read mine? Because it's convincing, well-written, and pushes the right buttons.

When I was in high school, there was a rumor that one of the history teachers had been working on a doctoral thesis in his spare time. Every evening after dinner, he would go to his study to read, write, and type (this was back in the days of books, ink pens, and typewriters). One fine day, his thesis was finished, and he set out to take it to his

supervisor at the university. He placed the pile of papers on the back seat of his car and drove into town. As he pulled into the university parking lot, he discovered that he'd been driving with the rear window open, and most of his masterpiece had flown out. From that day on, his life revolved around his attempts to remember what had been written on those hundreds of pages that the wind had carried away. He never finished a new version of his thesis. Meanwhile, the university was full of people who did nothing but research, and were even paid to write their theses! So went this particular, rather cynical hard-luck story.

At least, that's how I remember it.

This recollection certainly seems to chime with the view that many people have of academic life. While regular people in the real world wear themselves out with the daily grind, those in universities sit in their ivory towers, think their deep thoughts, look out the window, and pick their noses.

The popular image of the university as a collection of half-asleep, out-of-touch scholars might have had a grain of truth during the rapid expansion of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, but since the 1980s universities have become highly professional organizations, where everyone knows what's expected from them: teaching, research, and publishing. There's no room for anyone who's half asleep or out of touch. Been working for ten years on that thesis? These days you get three, four years, tops, and then it's got to be finished. Are your lectures dull? Off to remedial teaching classes you go. Want to spend your days looking out the window and thinking deep thoughts? Get writing, get publishing, otherwise you know where the door is. Got a crazy, creative idea? Forget it. Everything gets measured, everything has to be evaluated. Your idea has to be useful in some way.

The importance that the modern university attaches to evaluation and measurement has certainly made the academic world more professional, more efficient, more effective. Whereas, back in the 1970s, you could have long discussions about whether it was really necessary to write and publish, or if that wasn't a threat to the individual's imagination and academic freedom, now even the most junior researcher knows that you have to be a great teacher and produce excellent research. Everyone knows that they have to publish, and everyone knows the hierarchy of the journals that they're aiming for.

The downside of the trend towards measuring and controlling everything is that it becomes easy to lose sight of the goal of providing high-quality education and doing truly cutting-edge research. Quality is always going to be harder to evaluate than quantity. But as soon as quantity is what you measure, then quantity is what you're going to get, because that's what's incentivized; and quality very quickly takes a back seat. When universities receive their funding on the basis of the number of students who graduate, questions get asked of teachers who give out failing grades. It's simply better economics to give out a B—than the C or D that the work actually deserved. And when funding bonuses are based on the numbers of publications and theses produced, then producing as many as possible—more or less regardless of quality—becomes the aim of the game.

The goal of research (give or take a couple of subtleties from the philosophers of science) is to produce knowledge, and the goal of teaching is to transmit that knowledge. Publication counts and teaching evaluation scores are indicators of how well that process is going. But the mechanics of human and organizational psychology ensure that these indicators rapidly acquire the status of formal criteria. Once people have worked out which outcome leads to the greatest reward, they will automatically focus their energy on achieving that outcome. By rewarding large numbers of publications and high ratings of teaching, you put a premium on churning out papers and being considered a fun and popular teacher, not on doing insightful research and challenging students to think. Over time, this changes the intrinsic satisfaction of writing and teaching into an extrinsic pursuit of the rewards that follow for people who write a lot and teach in the approved manner. “Dig and Discover” has morphed into “Dig and Deliver.”

I enjoyed practicing scientific craftsmanship. I loved solving my social-psychological puzzles, asking questions and looking for answers. With time, I also found that I could get a lot of pleasure from the careful assembly of a scientifically rigorous argument that communicated my questions and answers with conviction. And when that story went down well with the readers, that was the best feeling of all. Every time I received a letter saying, “We are happy to accept your paper for publication in our journal” was party time. And every time the message was, “We are sorry to reject your paper,” I felt a combination of anger and sadness that could put me in a bad mood for days on end.

Applause is nice. Success feels good. Not just in the trenches of the publication war, but also in the lecture hall. I got a kick out of explaining something and seeing that my explanation made sense to people. Teaching, like research, is all about communicating and convincing people. There are few things more satisfying than taking a group of students who are all absolute beginners and seeing how, over the months and semesters that turn into a year, they pick up on the basics, but also a good part of the fine detail, of the subject. But giving that sort of course requires a lot of faith. As a teacher, you only really find out if you're succeeding when you get to the end. If you want to score on a weekly basis, you have to approach things a little differently. Your lectures not only have to be strong and form a logical pedagogical sequence, but they also have to be fun and entertaining. Ideally those two would go together, but the danger is that the laughter and tears of your "cool" delivery style become a goal in themselves. That might be good news for your evaluation forms, but not for actually helping people to acquire knowledge. We're amusing ourselves to death.

One of my former American colleagues once found himself in front of a freshman psychology class, trying to explain the difference between explicit and implicit norms. Explicit norms are easily described, understood by everyone, and generally clearly described in laws and rules. We're reminded of explicit norms every day by traffic signs ("Speed limit 35"), stop lights (especially red ones!), and expressions from our culture ("Thou shalt not bear false witness"). Implicit norms are invisible; you only really become conscious of them when they're violated.

The hall was silent. The lecturer looked out at bored faces, heard the rustling of newspapers and candy wrappers. He decided to illustrate his point about implicit norms only being obvious when they're flouted ("Dude, you can't do that!") personally. He stood down from the podium and walked into the audience, ascending the gentle slope through the rows of seats in the lecture hall. Halfway to the back, he stopped, turned right, and climbed up onto the desk area in front of a row of students. He crawled on hands and feet along the row until he reached the middle. There he stopped in front of an attractive female student. She looked at him nervously, eyes wide. "Hi," he said. Then he bent forward and kissed her carefully on the lips. He pulled his head back, looked around at the

rest of the audience, and then started to kiss the woman passionately. After about thirty seconds he made his way back to the podium and resumed the lecture.

The students went nuts. An intense discussion broke out. “How the hell can you do that, man?” What norms had been broken here? Was it such a problem? The female student hadn’t resisted. But how could she, given the position of power held by the teacher? Nobody was going to forget this particular lecture in a hurry.

At the end of the discussion, my colleague apologized. But maybe, he said, that’s not entirely necessary, because the woman he’d kissed was his wife. The whole thing was a carefully planned setup. Implicit and explicit norm violations illustrated in a way nobody could forget. Fun and games in the service of learning.

I tried to make my own lectures and seminars as amusing and attractive as possible. During my first few years of teaching I spent a lot of time on things that interested me personally, such as the philosophical background to major theories and the apparently endless attempts to find conclusive empirical evidence for them. I was a passionate storyteller and my students were reasonably content. But I wanted more. I didn’t just want to deliver learning, I also wanted the fun and games.

I used a lot of different media in my lectures: books, mini-plays, films, and with the arrival of the Internet, any number of relevant video clips. For one course, I made a CD with pop songs that reminded the listener of the subject matter. And I used plenty of amusing cartoons, provocative questions, and cool anecdotes.

As a result, my courses became more fun, more exciting to attend, but also more superficial. I found myself spending more time giving cute explanations of minor points and less on teaching the major ones well. Where earlier I could cover the entire history of philosophy in two hours, now I was spending the same amount of time on a single phenomenon or effect in social psychology. I didn’t want to try to teach and explain everything under the sun; that took too long, and went in one ear and out the other. I wanted to tell a story that stayed with the listener. I wanted to convince and entertain at the same time. “Tell one story,” was the advice I took from an expert in persuasion. “If you want to tell more, control yourself.”

My multimedia classes went down pretty well. My teaching evaluations got better and better, which was nice. I was successful, and I got applause. That made me want more.

After all, I loved the theater. The actor in me was reawakened and I started to set up my classes so that by the end, the students in “the house” would be so under the influence of the performance that after the last, carefully-planned silence from the stage, all they would be able to do was break out in emotional applause. Sometimes that worked. It worked best during my time as a junior associate professor when, due to a shortage of lecture halls, I had to give classes in the local movie theater. The semi-darkness allowed me to walk up and down between the rows of red velour chairs, the cordless microphone lending an oracular tone to my voice and bringing an extra level of authority to my words, films, photos, and songs about Milgram, the Stanford Prison Experiment, cognitive dissonance, stereotyping, and other classic pieces of social psychology.

Social psychology in a movie theater.

I felt right at home, but I’d thrown out the baby with the bathwater. I no longer talked very much about my passion for problems in the philosophy of science, comprehensive analyses, and remarkable theoretical innovations. I didn’t think that anyone would find that particularly entertaining, and I didn’t bother to find out if I was right or not. Education as entertainment.

Applause is nice. If you have doubts about your ability and you’re not sure if what you’re doing is right or worthwhile, applause can maybe become addictive. It’s a nice experience, it makes you feel good, you get used to it, you want it more and more often, you start to look for it. And you have a very bad time when you don’t get it one day. The deal in psychology—and probably in other disciplines, too—is that people applaud at the end of a lecture. It doesn’t matter how many are in the audience: at the end, everyone claps. You can criticize the speaker during the lecture, or ask awkward questions, but at the end, you applaud. The longer and louder, the better.

Fairly early in my career, but already thoroughly programmed with that particular implicit norm, I set out to give a lecture on my work in a small town in Germany. Everything was prepared. I’d made a good PowerPoint presentation. I had a good anecdote to open with, great graphs and a clear message. I’d thought of all kinds of stuff that I could have included, but I exercised some restraint and kept it simple and to the point.

But when my presentation came to an end after 45 minutes of communicating, persuading, and entertaining, nothing happened. Silence. After what seemed like an eternity, my host—the leader of the research group who had invited me to speak—began to bang his fist rhythmically on his desk. I was suddenly very scared. I must have said something really stupid, although I couldn't figure out what that might have been. My nervous exhaustion was such that I could barely keep myself from tears. I started to shake and held on to the lectern to steady myself. They'd hated it.

The rest of the audience started to bang on their desks. They drummed with their fists, and nodded their heads in time. I didn't understand what was going on. I felt down and excluded. I wanted applause. I'd done a good job.

Fortunately my German host turned out to be a good psychologist. He saw my obvious discomfort and replaced his fist-banging with tentative clapping. I later learned that in Germany, the belief in academia is that applause belongs in the theater, not in school.

Applause is a sign of recognition. It means that your class was worth coming to, but unfortunately that effect only lasts until everyone has left the hall. After that, you're on your own again.

As a young researcher, I was always keen to give lectures at conferences and seminars. I enjoyed talking about my research, and exchanging ideas with colleagues. At the end of a conference lecture, after the obligatory applause has died down, there would always be a few people hanging around with whom I would grab a coffee or go into town. Then, one day, I noticed that at the end of my lecture, after the applause, everyone left the room rather quickly. Nobody waited for me, nobody made eye contact, nobody asked if I wanted to get some lunch or if I had plans for the evening. A few people stayed long enough to finish writing a sentence in their notebooks, but after a minute or so they too were gone.

I didn't think that everyone had departed in a hurry because my lecture had been toe-curlingly bad. As far as I could tell, the audience had listened attentively and applauded sincerely. Something else was going on.

A few minutes later, I wandered out of the conference center into the languid sunshine, looking for somewhere to drink my coffee. Across the street, I could see a large group of delegates, apparently on their way to a bar or café, talking intensely among themselves. In the middle of this hastening crowd, I could see two researchers of about my age happily answering questions and fielding comments from the group that was surrounding them. It was the very picture of an exciting scientific discovery, a new inspiring trend, and the buzz that goes with it.

I was reminded of the scene in Norman Jewison's film *Jesus Christ Superstar* where Jesus is greeted by a large crowd waving palm fronds and singing Hosannas. In the scene that was taking place opposite the conference center, however, there were two messiahs bringing a fantastic new message that everyone wanted to hear. I was part of the old religion, standing to one side on my own, with just a cup of weak coffee in place of festive vegetation.

Scientific conferences consist of a variety of lectures and other session formats. Some lectures get big audiences, others far smaller. There are always a couple of keynote speeches, where the heroes of the discipline get to tell their story to hundreds, sometimes thousands of their admiring colleagues. During the parallel sessions, researchers in several different rooms present their work simultaneously, often grouped together by subject area. There might be four or five lectures per session, each lasting twenty or thirty minutes. The size of the room assigned to each session depends on how popular the organizers expect each subject or group of speakers to be. The best (or most entertaining) speakers and the most interesting (or trendy) subjects are put in the largest room. Those lectures, naturally, get the most applause.

I often presented my research at meetings and conferences, but rarely in a really big room, even when I was young and "full of promise". Most of my presentations were assigned to the medium-sized or small room, and they were rarely full.

Science is about marketing. If you can't get enough people interested in your ideas and discoveries, the value of a scientist's career stock drops substantially. In contemporary science the message is not just "publish or perish"—which perhaps isn't so unreasonable,

since we expect everyone to produce something in our society—but also, increasingly, “sell or sink.” Science is a business. Research costs money, and (especially in the Netherlands) money for research is harder to come by than regular money. This constant shortage of resources means that scientists spend a great deal of their time chasing after subsidies, grants, and lucrative gigs with the private sector. Just like other marketing professionals, they do this by presenting their work in the best possible light and keep up to date with what their target audience demands. Yesterday that might have been technology, the free market, and a multicultural society; today that’s become sustainability, health, and the economic crisis. Tomorrow it could be chaos, China, and living in the here and now, or perhaps something else entirely. But successful scientists aren’t just good at selling their work; they also sell themselves. They have to bring both their work and themselves into the spotlight to get one of those rare tenured faculty positions, or to change their current mediocre job with mediocre pay at a mediocre school into a better job with better pay at a better (or more prestigious) university.

The ideal place to promote yourself and your work is at scientific conferences, which are a lot like the NBA transfer market. Discussions take place about “buying” and “selling” players. Senior and junior players get talking about jobs with each other, with “coaches” (professors) and with “owners” (deans). Conferences also have quite a lot in common with beauty contests, with speakers and their presentations being judged on originality, eloquence, methodological shelf life, and theoretical importance. That’s a shame, because what started out as a forum for intellectual exchange of knowledge, questions, and criticism, has become a series of exercises in self-promotion.

These days, conferences are basically one big job fair. Everyone and everything is nicely dressed up. Lectures and presentations are prepared and rehearsed to perfection before they’re delivered. Nothing is left to chance. Every claim, every result is scrubbed clean and polished until it shines. Any hint of doubt, questioning, uncertainty, or any kind of criticism is ruthlessly swept under the rug. Because so much is at stake— “Will they like me? Will someone offer me a job?”—it’s very rare to see anyone display any form of self-doubt or uncertainty. Nobody dares to present anything that isn’t quite clear or entirely ready for prime time. As a result, scientists often play it safe at conferences, presenting work that has already been published in a journal, or is about to appear in one. If you’re up

to date with the literature, you rarely hear anything new at a conference. Researchers rarely throw interesting, fresh, new ideas into the mix. The risk of public shaming and consequent damage to your reputation if it turns out you got something wrong is too great.

Another non-trivial consideration is that a competing researcher might steal your idea and get it published before you do. This isn't just a figment of the overactive, paranoid imaginations of academics. I know plenty of scientists who can cite examples of half-finished work presented at conferences that later turned up as someone else's groundbreaking published paper. Science is just as tough an environment to work in as any other, maybe even one of the toughest.

I have a good friend who is a brilliant social scientist with a Ph.D, but because he dislikes all the politics and other stuff that dominates the world of science, he spends most of his time teaching scuba diving on a small island in Thailand. From time to time he flies back to the Netherlands to earn a few extra bucks doing a few small (scientific) jobs. A couple of years ago, he spent a few months as a temporary researcher at a large university. He shared an office with a young, ambitious colleague who spent every waking hour preparing and giving classes and seminars, and writing papers.

"When are you going to get tenure?" asked the diving instructor.

"I'm almost there," replied the ambitious scientist. He continued: "I need to have 120 publications. I'm currently at 103. So it won't take long."

It's a strange idea that having exactly 120 publications to your name, almost regardless of their quality, means that you are qualified to be a professor. Good scientists—and please don't get me wrong, there are many of them—will always try to see through the numbers of articles, lectures, editorial board positions, and grants that someone has on their résumé, and look for signs of real quality. After all, the whole point is how good whatever you've found is, and not how often you've found it. But even if you want to concentrate on quality rather than quantity, it's hard to get away from the idea that more is better. Quality is subjective, it depends on people's opinions, and that makes it harder to rely on. Counting is objective and easier to explain, and also easier to strive for.

"When can I become a professor?"

"When you're good enough."

"But how do you determine that? I have to know what I need to do."

“You’ll become a professor when we think that you’re ready for it.”

“But that sounds way too subjective and... unscientific.”

“Hmmm. How many publications do you have right now?”

“103.”

“OK, you can become a professor when you have 120.”

In the wonderful world of science, it isn’t just all the hard digging and excavation work, hoping for the occasional “Eureka!” moment of discovery, that matters. Nor is it just the way you line up all your newly-discovered nuggets of knowledge for others to admire. What’s also important—in fact, probably most important of all—is to assemble as many “products” as possible. Not because scientists really love the process of writing and the thrill of scoring another published paper, but because they’re not very good at dealing with their own subjectivity, the consequence of which is that any attempt to measure quality is likely to be highly unreliable. That’s why scientists like to salami-slice the same piece of research work into as many different articles as possible, instead of writing it up as one big fat bologna.

“Danielle got another article published.”

“What’s it about? Is it any good?”

“No idea, but it’s her sixth this year.”

Using numbers to evaluate progress makes everyone feel safer. Decision-makers like to count things because it makes comparisons easier. And the subjects of those decisions like knowing where they stand, and having a clear goal to attain.

“Who’s going to judge the quality of my work?”

“A committee of experts.”

“Which experts?”

“We were thinking of asking A, B, C, and D.”

“X, Y, and Z would be better choices. At least they understand my work. They’re the real specialists in this area.”

“But they’d be biased. They like your research because they’re working in the same field.”

“No—in fact they’re my competitors.”

“But didn’t you write an article with one of Y’s students?”

“Exactly. In one of the major journals. And it gets lots of citations.”

“You call that a lot? That’s not a lot round here. And while we’re on the subject, I’ve never heard of that journal. Is it really that good?”

“Absolutely. In my area, it’s number one.”

Today’s scientists aren’t just treasure hunters looking for hidden jewels; they’re also sales managers with objective publication targets to meet. Over time, the idea that I was a sales manager became a part of my thought processes and left an indelible trace on my mind. Like a junkie, I knew that I had to score. I’d gone into science out of a fascination for the content of the subject, but I found myself more and more often in situations where the content wasn’t the most important thing, or in some cases wasn’t important at all. I was an enthusiastic scientist and I wanted to do my research as well as possible. But “as well as possible” is difficult to be objective about, and like a lot of people, I need objective, “honest” feedback about my performance. “Good? Is that A-minus good, A good, or A-plus good?” So over time, my need to score and my quest for applause came to dominate. Scoring gets you applause, and an objective high score gets you loud applause. And loud applause is great, because it drowns out some of the doubts you’re having about whether what you’re doing and who you are is really worth anything.

I had a lot of ideas for research and I tried to do as many experiments and studies as possible. I worked day and night. I loved getting to work early, or staying late, or coming in at the weekend, being almost the only person in the building while working on my plans and ideas. I taped sheets of paper together and drew diagrams that summarized the literature in blue and black ink. A pencil and a yellow marker pen helped me to note where the gaps were, and how they could be filled through research. Every day, I filled several pages of a large notebook with my observations and ideas about what I’d read and what I’d seen around me. As I wrote, I was in a state of what psychologists call “flow.” I was completely focused on the task in hand and lost all sense of time and place. Sometimes I would sit for eight or nine hours at my desk, thinking, writing, erasing, and writing some more, without any idea of where I was. I didn’t eat, I didn’t drink, I was lost in the world of my thoughts. That felt great. It was as if I was somewhere else entirely, floating in my own universe of ideas, concepts, and connections.

This process of developing ideas about social-psychological concepts by writing gave me a high that was a lot like the feeling you get from alcohol, sex, or marijuana. Usually I found that when I went back and read everything that I'd produced in the course of several long sessions of thinking and writing, 95 percent was garbage. In contrast, the research ideas that sometimes came to me while I was walking along the street, or taking a shower, or having a completely unrelated conversation with somebody often turned out to be pretty good. I often found myself unable to sleep for most of the night when I was unable to shake off an idea or a sudden flash of insight, and tried to work out how to turn it into a worthwhile experiment.

Often I reasoned that I'd better write this up now, otherwise I'll have forgotten it by morning. Unfortunately, having a good idea in the middle of the night is like feeling the need to pee in the middle of the night: you know you won't be able to sleep until you do it, but you don't want to get out of your nice warm bed. I thought maybe it would help if I had a dictation machine by the bed, but it didn't. Sitting there in the middle of the night speaking what seemed like flashes of brilliance into a little black machine just felt weird. "Perhaps evaluative judgments are more readily influenced by activated information than descriptive judgments, even if the match is congruent." I was embarrassed by my rigid tone of voice and my rather vague descriptions. I turned to look at my girlfriend (now my wife), who seemed to be fast asleep. Had I woken her up? Whispering didn't help, because when I played the tape back the next day, all I could hear was heavy breathing and the rustling of sheets.

I was always on the lookout for opportunities and places to do research, to give out questionnaires or get people to sit in front of a computer. We had regular data collection days in the laboratory, where students would fill in a few questionnaires or take some tests on the computer in return for a small sum of money, but I wanted to go beyond that. Wherever I was, whoever I was with, I was always looking for ways to conduct my research. I visited my old high school, I handed out questionnaires in the train, on the bus, at the station, in university dining halls, in schoolyards, at receptions, in libraries, at the start or end of classes or workshops, during conferences, in shopping malls, in the cinema, on the beach. Anywhere there was a group of people with a couple of minutes on their

hands, standing in line, enjoying a moment's rest, I would be there to pester them to answer some questions.

I didn't always manage to get people to participate in my research, but I didn't do too badly either. I kept my questionnaires as short as possible, and I played the role of a poor researcher, looking for help from people who didn't have much else to do anyway, to the hilt. Plus, my research was usually about interesting topics that people could relate to: politics, advertising, fashion models, racism, job interviews, purchasing decisions. It was mostly a question of clever marketing. If you called your questionnaire something like "Context effects on perception of others" then you weren't going to get much of a response, but change the title to "Who's hot and who's not" or "What do you think of yourself and other people?" and suddenly a lot more people are prepared to take part. Sometimes I'd bribe people with candy or a small amount of money to get them to cooperate. Generally that came out of my own pocket. Officially I was only allowed to do that with the university's money, but the bureaucracy could take months to authorize payment and I was in a hurry. I wanted to see what my research would reveal, and I wanted to score. I'd do anything to get an answer, to succeed. I should have asked all of my participants to sign an "informed consent" form, explaining what I wanted them to do, what sort of questions they could expect to be asked, and letting them know that they could withdraw at any time, but that took time that I didn't want to lose. My research wasn't going to harm anyone psychologically. It was about everyday stuff: opinions, choices, and decisions, nothing sensitive or risky. I also knew that at the end of the questionnaire or whatever the task was, I was supposed to debrief them about what the point of the study was and how it worked, and ask them if they had any questions. But, sorry, no time for that. I was in a hurry. I wanted to move on, to score again.

I was an urban research warrior, doing hit-and-run studies. I collected data anyway I could, and enjoyed it. It was fun and challenging to find new ways to get hold of data. I would often fit three or four research ideas into the same questionnaire, which made things go even faster. Because I realized that some of my data collection methods were perhaps not 100% legitimate, and might not meet with official approval (although of course I'd been too busy to actually go and find that out), I didn't always tell my colleagues exactly what I was doing. And they never asked me. I sat in the laboratory on the outskirts of Amsterdam

and ran experiments there, or I went off somewhere and handed out questionnaires. I just did my thing. We all did.

I wanted to do as much as possible by myself. Experimentation is a skilled craft that I wanted to master, so I needed to keep everything under my own control. Even when I worked on a project with colleagues or students, I took the lead and made sure that things were done my way. I wanted things to be done the way I'd designed them, which meant that I wanted to do them myself. I modestly imagined that this gave the highest chances of success, but more importantly, it also meant that if it went wrong, I would only be able to blame myself. And I definitely didn't want anything to go wrong. I wanted to do everything I could to ensure that every study I did, alone or with others, would succeed. From a didactic point of view I thought it was best to let students get the impression that they had come up with the ideas themselves, but I still made sure that they were in fact following my recipe to the letter. During research group meetings I tried to be laid-back, a helpful coach sharing ideas with the other people working with me, but when I was alone with the project plans, I went through every detail and made sure that nothing had been left to chance.

Once the basic design of an experiment had been decided, I would spend hours or days on end going through it, making improvements and refinements. Then I would present the theory and the research concept to my colleagues and doctoral candidates. We would discuss everything in the minutest detail, and then I'd take their helpful comments back to the drawing board with me, to improve things even more. And so on, until it was as close to perfection as I could get.

A senior researcher, with whom I worked in the U.S., told me that I went way too far. I nailed down every last corner of my experiments so that they could only produce one result, and sometimes that wasn't what was needed. "Your experiments need air. They need to breathe. If they can't breathe, they can't live."

I did a lot of experiments, but not all of them worked. Sometimes I didn't quite get the result I'd expected, and sometimes I got nothing at all. When the latter happens, the best thing to do is to cut your losses and walk away; it didn't work, never mind, on to the next idea. But when I really believed in something—when I really wanted what I'd thought

up, or dredged up from the bowels of the literature, to be true—I found it hard to give up, and tried one more time. If it seemed logical, it must be true.

An experiment is never perfect. You can always make another couple of little adjustments to improve the results. When an experiment didn't work, meaning that the participants hadn't done what I had expected, I would sit and stare at the data for hours. I switched on my computer, opened the data file, and scrutinized every last number to try and make sense of what they had actually done. I ran some extra statistical analyses looking for a pattern that would tell me what had gone wrong. When I found something strange, I changed the experiment and ran it again, until it worked. In some cases I did this four or five times.

Quite early on in my career, I mastered a few research techniques that made a big difference to the success rate of my experiments. Because I did so many studies, I developed some strategies that worked more often than not. When I got an experimental setup that worked and produced good results, I would try to develop a whole series of similar experiments with just a few small variations in the topic and questions. That allowed me to write three or four articles; lots of thin slices of salami, earning me lots more applause.

I also became increasingly skilled in the use of techniques that could put a healthy-looking shine on otherwise mediocre results. If I didn't get the effect I wanted across all the different measures I'd used or the questions I'd asked, I would use the ones that did show that effect. If an effect was present in an experiment, but not strongly enough to be tapped by all of the types of measurements I'd used, I would make it stronger by combining the measures where the effect seemed to be only partly working. If I'd designed a study for six groups of people who'd all been given slightly different tasks or shown different things and one group gave a strange result that I couldn't explain, I would change the design so that the strange result disappeared, but the whole setup still appeared coherent. Then it became a three- or four- or five-group design, instead of six. The inexplicable results went into the trash. If an experiment didn't work out, I would go hunting in the dataset for outliers (strange cases where individual participants have unexpected answers or measurements that are wildly different from the average), and look for reasons why it was OK to throw them out. If they were a little older, or younger, or slower, or faster, or in

whichever way not quite “normal,” then maybe it was OK to eliminate them, to bring the results more in line with what I’d been expecting.

I knew that this was at the outer limits of what was acceptable, or even beyond those limits in some cases, but... I wanted the results so badly. Plus, it worked in an earlier study, and the results were really almost, almost right, and it must be true because it’s so logical, and it was such a great idea, and I surely wasn’t the only person doing this sort of thing. What I did wasn’t whiter than white, but it wasn’t completely black either. It was grey, and it was what everyone did. How else did all those other researchers get all those great results?

Science is a wrestling match. You’re constantly wrestling with your expectations. If you can’t come to terms with that, then you’re not cut out for science. You can be right and have success. You might discover something that’s true and useful. But there will come a time when you’re wrong. There will be a day when all your philosophizing, analysis and logic leave you a long way from the truth. Then you have to be strong. When you’re a scientist, you have to be able to cope with being wrong as well as being right. You have to be prepared to surprise yourself, every time. You have to accept another defeat. The world isn’t always the way you think it is. The world isn’t always the way you’d like it to be.

As a scientist, you have to keep your sticky fingers out of the world you’re trying to measure. And if you do accidentally touch something, you have to report it immediately. You can look, maybe carefully feel your way around if it’s too dark, but you can’t change the world to suit you. There are unwritten rules about which dubious practices are allowable and which aren’t, even though both kinds ultimately lead to the same distortion of the results. You can turn your back and pretend not to have seen something that you did in fact see (this happens all the time). You can design your very own rose-tinted spectacles to see exactly what you want to see (plenty of researchers do this, too). But you can’t pretend to have seen something that wasn’t there.

After years of balancing on the outer limits, the grey became darker and darker until it was black, and I fell off the edge into the abyss. I’d been having trouble with my experiments for some time. Even with my various “grey” methods for “improving” the data, I wasn’t able to get the results the way I wanted them. I couldn’t resist the temptation to go

a step further. I wanted it so badly. I wanted to belong, to be part of the action, to score. I really, really wanted to be really, really good. I wanted to be published in the best journals and speak in the largest room at conferences. I wanted people to hang on my every word as I headed for coffee or lunch after delivering a lecture. I felt very alone.

I was alone in my tastefully furnished office at the University of Groningen. I'd taken extra care when closing the door, and made my desk extra tidy. Everything had to be neat and orderly. No mess. I opened the file with the data that I had entered and changed an unexpected 2 into a 4; then, a little further along, I changed a 3 into a 5. It didn't feel right. I looked around me nervously. The data danced in front of my eyes. When the results are just not quite what you'd so badly hoped for; when you know that that hope is based on a thorough analysis of the literature; when this is your third experiment on this subject and the first two worked great; when you know that there are other people doing similar research elsewhere who are getting good results; then, surely, you're entitled to adjust the results just a little?

No. I clicked on "Undo Typing." And again. I felt very alone. I didn't want this. I'd worked so hard. I'd done everything I could and it just hadn't quite worked out the way I'd expected. It just wasn't quite how everyone could see that it logically had to be.

I looked at the door of my office. It was still closed. I looked out the window. It was dark outside. "Redo Typing." And again. For a moment I had the feeling that someone was standing behind me. I turned round slowly, fearfully. There was nobody there. I looked at the array of data and made a few mouse clicks to tell the computer to run the statistical analyses. When I saw the results, the world had become logical again. I saw what I'd imagined. I felt relieved, but my heart was heavy. This was great, but at the same time it was very wrong.

Chapter 6

My parents have four children: three sons and a daughter. When my brothers were teenagers, my sister was already living away from home as a student, while I was still young enough to sometimes sit on my mother's lap with my thumb in my mouth. There's ten years between my sister and me. I used to enjoy going to visit her: we would go to the market together, or the museum, or sit and draw and paint. She was a student at the Amsterdam Fine Arts Academy in and lived in a small room with lots of windows on the top floor of a 1920s tenement building in the south side of town. Her room was full of canvases and piles of watercolor paper, and she had hung museum posters and portrait photos of famous artists on the walls with pins and tacks. Back at home, in my bedroom, I tried to do the same, but I used poster putty. The walls were harder and I couldn't push the tacks in.

My brothers were reasonably OK teens. They argued, slammed doors, refused to listen, came home too late from parties, made a mess of their room, and threw oranges at each other which splattered all over their 22-part Winkler Prins encyclopedia, but things never really got out of hand. The house didn't burn down and the neighbors didn't call to complain. They were good kids. One was outstanding in math and science, the other in history and economics. They were both gifted in terms of their verbal ability, which became a problem for my mother when adolescence enhanced their vocabulary with a never-ending supply of bad language.

Everything was bullshit or fucked-up; everyone was a prick or an asshole or a cocksucker. My eldest brother sent a postcard home from summer camp that said simply, "This place sucks ass." My prim mother was very upset by her sons' potty mouths, but she couldn't do anything about it. My brothers enjoyed it; they found it an excellent way to wind her up. Many of their ritualized, passive-aggressive conversations ended with one of them calling her a "dumb bitch."

After a couple of years of being exposed to this constant verbal violence, my mother finally grasped that her attempts to inculcate good manners in her teenage sons weren't working. Punishing bad behavior ("Go to your room!"), rewarding good behavior ("Did you just say, 'Please'? Why, thank you!"), pointing out shared norms and values ("You can't seriously expect to...", "How would you like it if..."), inspiring creativity ("Can't you think of

something else for a change?”), emphasizing her own suffering (“It really hurts me when you...”)—nothing made a difference. She decided to try a radically different approach. She decided to show my brothers how upsetting it was to be listen to “bullshit” and “fuck” all day, and be called an “asshole.” This creative and inspired didactical insight led to some hilarious scenes. Here was my polite, well-spoken mother, in a nice, middle-class home in a high-end suburb in the mid-1970s, referring to her two sons as Dickwad and Shithead, and trying to copy their use of obscene language at every opportunity.

“Hi, mom. How was your day?”

“Fucked-up.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Bullshit and cheese.”

Sadly she didn’t keep this up for long, so I was never able to gather enough empirical evidence to measure the effect of this paradoxical intervention, but I don’t think it worked very well. The labored way in which the word “asshole” emerged from my mother’s mouth sounded so weird that, when my turn came to play the role of the disaffected teenager, I made a special effort to find other ways to irritate her. She had turned the word “asshole” into something mildly amusing, so I looked for other means to my adolescent ends. Her creative attempt to erect a stop sign in front of my brothers (“Listen to how terrible this all sounds! Stop it!”) ended up having a boomerang effect, pushing me to be extra-creative with my insults (“old prune,” “slave driver,” “dinosaur.”)

That’s often (perhaps by definition) what happens with educational or correctional interventions that are focused on externally visible behaviors rather than the underlying cause. Treating the symptoms is ineffective as long as the root cause of those symptoms isn’t addressed as well. Like in a chase scene from a movie, an attempt to block the road just results in a creative way to get around it. The key to a successful upbringing is to eliminate undesirable impulses, not to try and block the way to their fulfillment.

Sometimes an impulse is so strong that it’s pretty much impossible to eliminate it. Some impulses just have to be given in to. If you’re hungry, you have to eat; if you want candy, you have to treat yourself; if you want to score, you have to get yourself some recognition. But parents and educators aren’t completely powerless, because there are different ways to satisfy any desire. You can eat a Snickers bar or an apple when you’re

hungry, and you can drink Coke or water to quench your thirst. And if you're after recognition, then genuine attention, deep interest, and a sincere pat on the shoulder can give as much satisfaction as a standing ovation or an award from a committee.

Our cookie jar lived in the cupboard above the refrigerator. I had a big sweet tooth and the jar was more often empty than full. The other members of the family weren't far behind me; to this day, my father eats cinnamon cookies for breakfast. My need for sugar tended to come in waves. Sometimes I couldn't resist eating the whole contents of the cookie jar, or a whole package from the cupboard. I remember one time, when looking in the cupboard for something nice to eat, I came across a box of After Eight chocolate mints, still in the cellophane outer wrapper. My mother had obviously bought these for guests, but I was couldn't resist. I opened the package and took one piece, then put the box back on the shelf, exactly where it had been before. Nobody would notice. I removed the cellophane, which seemed logical. A box of After Eight is pretty well filled, so nobody would notice if one was missing. Or two. Or three. I couldn't stop. I ate the whole box in a few minutes, hoping that nobody would come in and catch me.

A few days later, when my parents had friends round on a Friday evening, I was summoned from my bed at about 9 p.m. I came downstairs in my pajamas and entered the smoke-filled living room. My mother looked at me inquiringly. She held the After Eight box in her hand. The lid was open. She showed me the contents. I had carefully replaced the individual paper wrappers after eating each chocolate, because I thought it looked nicer. From a certain distance away you couldn't tell that the box wasn't full.

"What are we going to do with you?" she sighed.

A few days later, my father got his drill out and installed a good, solid lock on the cupboard above the refrigerator. Only my mother had the key.

After many years of research into the ways in which volatile situational factors have a readier and deeper influence on how people feel, think, and behave than supposedly stable personality attributes, I had concluded that social psychology is full of ifs and buts, exceptions and boundary conditions. This conclusion was strengthened by the fact that I'd filled my scientific box of tricks during those years with all kinds of statistical and

methodological tricks that allowed me to apply fertilizer and water to my experimental results and turn them towards the light at the right moment. Everything had a lot of critical dependencies and the final result could depend on thousands of little things. It was a science of “on the one hand, on the other hand” models and theories, which were successively refined to specify in what situations, under what conditions, at what moment, using what measurements certain effects could be detected. Nothing was always true; everything was conditional on something, and there were always exceptions. For every “rule,” it turned out that there was some kind of qualification, some “but” or “perhaps” or “sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.”

The best example of this “principle of specificity” is the Theory of Planned Behavior, which states that somebody’s expressed opinions, preferences, or attitudes will only predict their behavior if the time, place, and context are comparable with the conditions under which you tested them. Knowing the general answer to the question of whether Joe likes beer isn’t going to help you predict whether he’s going to buy a Heineken (not a Budweiser) in his local bar (not at the liquor store) this coming Saturday (not Tuesday). And those are the facts that the brewers, the bar, the liquor store, and Joe himself would all like to be able to predict.

The further I got into social psychology, the more my research came to be dominated by this principle of specificity. It was unavoidable. I became increasingly convinced that if you want to understand and predict behavior, you have to specify the situation in which that behavior is expected to occur very precisely. This principle probably found its best expression in my ideas about the question of when a specific situation will lead to assimilation, versus when it will lead to contrast.

How we see ourselves and others is principally influenced by the specific situation in which we find ourselves. It shouldn’t make any difference, but when the sun is shining we think we’re more intelligent, and when we’ve just eaten we feel happier. Those are known as assimilation effects. But sometimes a positive memory leads to sadness in the here and now (“I was so happy back then!”) and sometimes observing success can make you feel incompetent (“I’ll never be able to do that!”); those we call contrast effects. A lot of my research was about filling in the meaning of “sometimes” as specifically and accurately as possible. One of the things I discovered was that the degree of realism of the activated

memory, experience, atmosphere, person or emotion was a key factor. Abstract information tends to lead to Assimilation, whereas Concrete facts lead to Contrast; that was my idea, which I shortened to “AA-CC”.

What this means is that when the abstract adjective “intelligent” is in your awareness—for whatever reason—you’re more likely to evaluate someone else as “smart” than when the adjective “stupid” is on your mind. But when you think of a specific, real individual—Albert Einstein, say—then there’s a contrast effect. When you think of Einstein, you’re going to feel less smart. Actually, you’re also going to *become* less smart. Numerous studies—including ones that ostensibly had nothing to do with this subject—have shown that if you’re primed to think of the abstract category “professors”, you’ll score better on a general intelligence test; maybe you’ll finally win at Trivial Pursuit—a game which, incidentally, is still surprisingly popular with a certain type of social psychologist. But if you think about Einstein, your chances of winning the game go down.

So, I had found that the concreteness of the activated information determined to a large extent whether a specific situation will lead to assimilation or contrast. I thought this was an important finding, because the majority of my colleagues believed that this kind of automatic process could only lead to assimilation. Contrast, in their model, was an exception and only occurred when people consciously corrected their behavior for what they saw as the influence of the situation (“I feel a bit down today. But that’s probably because it’s pouring with rain. Actually, I’m probably quite happy”).

I found many demonstrations of the opposite of this in the classical and modern research literature. Contrast effects were everywhere, and also appeared when there was no possibility of conscious adjustment of behavior. Even more interesting was that not only the concreteness of the activated information, but also factors such as how extreme or ambiguous it was or the timing of it determined whether information would lead to assimilation or contrast. The principle of specificity dictated that it was all very complicated. There was a large number of specific attributes of each situation that all played a part. It was a complicated puzzle with a very large number of pieces.

Reality is fickle. Whatever the world throws at it, modern experimental social psychology has the job of dealing with this fickleness, defining and specifying all the ifs and buts of

social reality. That was how I saw it. That was how I saw it in my own research and in the literature. Social psychology was like a confetti factory after a tornado, with tiny colored fragments of theories and mini-theories, effects and mini-effects floating around in the air. The challenge was to bring some structure to the whole, while not neglecting any of the important details.

That wasn't a popular message. I was frequently accused of making things needlessly complicated. All those ifs and buts, conditions and exceptions: it was unexciting and difficult to follow. I regularly heard, via the rumor mill, that a senior Dutch academic regularly mocked in his classes what he called my "pinball psychology", because it needed a ridiculous amount of crazy features to keep the ball rolling. A famous American psychologist—one of my heroes—called me a "grinder", by which he meant that I put all the relevant, reliable, robust effects in a pot along with all the edge cases and exceptions, and ground them to a featureless, incomprehensible pulp. He considered that my theories and models were highly sophisticated, but also too complicated to understand. My reaction was that I couldn't do it any other way; I couldn't close my eyes to all the complexity and apparent contradictions that I encountered. "OK, but the fact that reality is so complicated doesn't mean that you have to write it up in a complicated way? There's a knack to making complicated things appear simple. The aim of science is to make the world smaller, not larger. Leave that to the artists."

I did what I could. I philosophized and analyzed until my head hurt, and I tried to produce even better, more incisive and smarter descriptions of what I'd developed or discovered, but I kept getting the feeling that it wasn't enough. Everything was just too complex. My stories weren't elegant enough, and my results weren't exciting enough, to get published in the top journals. Even after I'd deployed all my favorite statistical and methodological tricks to pimp my studies, they weren't good enough. Even my best efforts were seen as mediocre. Not impressive enough, not interesting enough, not innovative, much too complicated. I wasn't good enough.

When it comes to deciding if something in science is worth paying attention to, the balance between innovation and precision is always an important factor. If you've found something genuinely groundbreaking, people will forgive you a little inaccuracy. When you say something surprising, you can get away with a little sloppiness on the details. But

when your results aren't exactly earth-shattering, when they're more or less what you would logically expect, then clarity and accuracy become particularly important. Unexciting news can be worthwhile, if it's unambiguous and free from error. I found myself increasingly being told that my research was too complicated and that there were a lot of loose ends. It wasn't simple or elegant enough.

The arrival of the Internet seemed only to increase the demand for simple, elegant analyses that depicted social reality with couple of swift brush strokes. Over the last few years, the number of psychological journals that prefer to publish short, hard-hitting research reports instead of long, ponderous treatises has increased considerably. And everyone wants to publish in those new journals. The aim is no longer to publish a grand theoretical model that takes dozens of pages to explain, but to show an intriguing effect that takes everybody by surprise. The shorter and more amazing, the better. We are simplifying ourselves to death. Internet music, Internet TV, Internet politics, Internet science, Internet sex, Internet dating, Internet car showrooms, Internet grocery shopping. The Internet is the fastest thing ever invented. People surf from one site to the next in a matter of seconds looking for interesting, novel things to satisfy their constantly changing need for information. News consists of a few words, and a text is rarely longer than what will fit on a single computer screen. That's how it's become with science too. The whole world summed up in a cool catchphrase. The medium is the message. The Internet is the message. Simplicity is the message. The message has no meaning if it ain't simple.

I wrote what I could; as a young postdoctoral researcher I set myself the task of digging deeper into the complexity of my own ideas and other people's theories, but it didn't help. Whatever I dug or poked or turned over, it didn't get any simpler. Up to now the stars of social psychology—who had been my heroes—had been a source of inspiration for me, but now they were just sources of jealousy and frustration. I couldn't stay young and full of promise for ever; it was time for me to delight the field of social psychology with my own important, elegant, and (especially) simple discovery. Otherwise, what was I here for? I wanted to emulate my heroes, for whom it seemed to be child's play to sum up humanity in clever one-liners such as "Altruism doesn't exist," "Human behavior is 94.6% automatic," "Expressing anger makes it worse, not better," "Fight or flight are the male reactions to threat; the female reaction is caring and offering help," "Everyone wants to be

the same and different at the same time,” “What makes people human is their struggle with death anxiety,” and “We’re all racists because we’re all confronted with cultural stereotypes every day.”

I’d never found anything that even remotely resembled these amazing discoveries.

Reality was fickle, and that was exhausting. The thing that drove me early on—the principle of specificity—started to be an obstacle. In my articles, I returned to explaining how everything was complicated, relative, and contextually determined. I confronted those theories and models whose images of reality were too glib and simple for my taste. I didn’t want to look away. I didn’t want to close my eyes to the immense complexity of everything, but I was starting to get bored, not least with myself.

I started to be unhappy with my complicated and not particularly elegant message. I was bored with the unimpressive assortment of tiny effects and barely significant results that I’d assembled over time. My work received plaudits, but always in terms such as “professional,” “conscientious,” “interesting.” What I produced was never described as beautiful, brilliant, elegant, powerful, or fascinating. I built on what others had discovered, but I was never at the start of the chain of research; I was always at the back end.

I showed how you could take the big multicolored ball of wool that others had made, and sort it into lots of individual threads, sorted by color. All very commendable, but also very dull, and not of much use to anyone. “OK, so now we know it’s more complicated than we thought. Thanks.”

I published all kinds of things, but for whom? My minor artisanal discoveries were too trivial to make it into textbooks, while my theories were too dry for anyone to want a chapter on them in the handbook they were editing. At conferences I was still in the small-to-medium rooms off to one side. I’d never been invited to be the keynote speaker. I was bored. I wanted to come up with a line of research that everyone would want to follow. I didn’t want to clear up after other people any more. I wanted to stop picking balls of wool apart and start making some of my own. I wanted to get out the spinning wheel and weave my own research. I wanted to do something really important and sensational, to really make a contribution. I wanted to be one of the stars.

I was fed up with my own inability to produce anything interesting from my research. I was going round in circles, each study much like the previous one. They were

just variations on a theme. Complex mediocrity. A small effect here, another one there. I'd had enough of the grind.

My youngest daughter is in the 5th grade, and loves going to school. Every week, a different student in her class has to give a talk. The subjects are very varied. Some kids play it safe and talk about their rabbit, or soccer, or horses, or the police. Others are a little more adventurous and use their talk to tell the class about their birthday, the July 14th holiday in France, their uncle (because he's in the Army), or apples (because there are so many different kinds to talk about). My daughter's talk is about dancing, just as her sister's was two years ago. She's a fanatical ballerina and jazz-ballet dancer, and gives an enthusiastic presentation about the history of dancing and various styles of dance, with clips of Nureyev and *West Side Story*. She's been practicing her talk for weeks, so she deserves the A that she gets.

As well as the talks, there are book reviews and a weekly discussion of the newspapers. She's always a little worried about preparing for that, because she doesn't read newspapers; they're full of bad news and people in difficult situations. During the weekly discussion, someone takes in a newspaper article, reads it out and explains it, and then everyone gets to ask questions.

"Can't I make it about you, Dad?" she asks, slightly cheekily.

"Of course. Why not?"

A few weeks ago I was in the paper—in fact, I was in all the papers. I had published a study which showed that messy streets lead to greater intolerance. In a messy environment, people are more likely to resort to stereotypes of others because trash makes you want to clear it up, and the use of stereotypes lets you feel like you're clearing things up. Stereotypes bring clarity to a messy world. Women are emotional, men are aggressive, New Yorkers are in a hurry, Southerners are hospitable. Stereotypes make the world predictable, and we like that, especially if the world currently looks dirty and unkempt.

The publication of this study caused a sensation. It was published in the most prestigious journal of them all, *Science*, and it made headlines around the world. The idea that physical disorder activates the need for mental order and so leads to stereotyping and intolerance was innovative and exciting. It might explain why there's more interpersonal

conflict in run-down neighborhoods and it suggested an elegant way to combat racism and other forms of discrimination: clear up the mess, throw out the trash.

The coolest aspect of the study was the way in which it combined careful laboratory research with field studies that people could relate to. In the lab we had students sit in front of a computer and look at photographs, words, and symbols that depicted greater or lesser degrees of disorder, before asking them to fill in some questionnaires. In the field, we stood in clean or dirty railway stations, or on messy or neat street corners, and interviewed unsuspecting passers-by about their opinions on immigrants, gay people, foreigners, men, and women. The idea was very simple, the lab work was impressive, and the field studies were models of cunning design.

What made this research especially attractive was that it followed logically from decades of research into stereotyping. Every social psychologist knows that the need for structure is one of the driving factors behind the human tendency to stereotype and discriminate against others. There were already dozens of studies showing that the need for structure (“I want certainty”) is directly coupled to the use of stereotypes. The more structure you need, the more likely you are to judge people based on preconceptions. So it was only logical that this would still hold if the need for mental order was caused by physical disorder. Anyone could have thought of that. Maybe. But I was the one who had actually come up with the idea. In fact, I hadn’t just come up with the idea; I’d come up with all the data myself. It was a clever, simple, logical, and obvious idea, but the empirical tests were completely imaginary. The lab research hadn’t been carried out. The field studies never happened.

My daughter could barely sit still as she read proudly from the newspaper to her fellow students about her Dad’s world-famous research. Her presentation was a great success. And only I knew that I’d sent her to school with a pack of lies.

The article in *Science* didn’t just happen one day. I’d been working on the idea for more than five years. I had always been interested in the origins of stereotypes, prejudices, discrimination, and racism. The dominant idea in contemporary social psychology was that there’s a potential racist inside all of us. Everyone uses stereotypes; we can’t help it. We grow up in a society where we’re confronted every day with stereotypical associations

between social groups and characteristics: blonde–dumb, Mexican–lazy, Asian–hardworking, professor–smart. Because these associations are ubiquitous, over time they acquire the status of near-truths. This leads to what I call the Laurel and Hardy effect. Say one half, and the other pops up by itself. Laurel? Hardy. Tom? Jerry. Wyoming? Cowboy. Used car seller? Untrustworthy. Lawyer? Slippery. Everyone does it, because once you’ve heard a stereotype enough times, it becomes an unavoidable part of the culture. Right?

Some people use stereotypes more than others. There are hardened racists and tolerant people, ones, and sometimes even the racists can manage to behave in a civilized way for a while. How does that work? According to the Laurel and Hardy principle, everyone tends to deploy stereotypes the first time they meet somebody new (An academic? Out of touch. A politician? Always chasing power. A nurse? Someone who cares). But some of us are able to suppress this initial, instinctive reaction. Tolerant people are, more or less by definition, those who are better able to do this. Racists let their automatic incontinent reactions get the better of them.

But what determines whether or not you can suppress your instinctive reactions? What determines whether you react in a tolerant or a racist way to someone you’ve just met? I was a social psychologist, so it was natural for me to look for the answer in the heat of the moment, in the power of the situation over the participants. There are some situations where you become tolerant and others that bring out the racist in you. Some situations demand structure; you want a quick, straightforward answer. In those situations, it’s probably harder to suppress your initial, instinctive, “racist” need for stereotyping. That feels like it helps make sense of the situation, because it makes for a logical explanation of what’s happening.

People are more prone to use stereotypes in the presence of uncertainty. They make more use of their prejudices when they’re in a hurry or under stress. This led me to the idea that people are more likely to resort to stereotypes when the stakes are high; it might not be a good idea, but the need for a clear and definitive answer is probably higher than normal. The ironic consequence is that stereotyping and prejudice are more likely to appear just when they’re least welcome: at a job interview, or when a difficult decision needs to be taken, or when a cool head is required in a crisis.

I got the idea that physical disorder might create the need for structure when, by chance, I came across “broken windows theory” in the literature. This theory argues that there is a relationship between the bad state of repair of housing in poor neighborhoods and the other social problems to be found there. Because I knew that the need for structure is one of the main motivations for people to stereotype each other as undesirables, I immediately saw the connection. It was only logical that neighborhoods with lots of broken windows, liquor stores, empty homes and dilapidated buildings would have social problems. All that urban decay pushes people to use stereotypes and other forms of prejudice to “clean things up” in their heads, thus restoring some structure. It was a brilliant idea.

I asked one of my students, a good photographer who I knew lived in a disheveled squat, to take some pictures of houses with and without broken windows, neat streets and disorderly ones, walls with and without graffiti, and any other contrast between trash and non-trash she could think of. A few days later she brought me dozens of photos. I selected a few of them and devised a questionnaire. We showed people a set of photos—showing either orderly or disorderly scenes—and then had them answer questions about different social groupings.

There was a measurable “chaos leads to stereotyping” effect—the people who had seen the disorderly photos gave more prejudiced answers—but it wasn’t very strong.

I decided to try another approach. Instead of a succession of photos, I made a collage with a house, a tree, a car, and some people where everything looked normal, and another one where everything was out of place. That worked as well, but the effect was still very small. It worked for some stereotypes, but not for all of them.

I tried again with photos of walls and houses, but this time there was no difference at all between the groups. I had lost the effect, and I couldn’t bring it back. Such a beautiful, obvious, logical, and (especially) simple effect, and I couldn’t find it. I decided to give up. I obviously had no talent for simplicity.

It wasn’t until several years later that I dug the subject up, and solved my problem by inventing everything about the experiment. Science is a solitary business, and that’s OK by me. As a young researcher I preferred to sit on my own in my room and work on research

ideas and experiments. It was a lot easier without someone looking over your shoulder all the time. It allowed me to relax and gave me a feeling of freedom. I could think and analyze whatever I wanted. It also gave me a feeling of being in control. When I was alone, I didn't have to answer to anyone and I was the one pushing the buttons. I could shut myself away for weeks to work on an idea for a series of studies and experiments. Nobody else got in the way, which meant that I could have all of the phases and every little detail done the way I wanted them. Having other people around made everything so complicated, so I did everything myself.

But this way of working led to a kind of professional isolation. I spent most of my time alone with my research. I had a full social life, went to parties, had plenty of friends, but I kept my research for myself. I could talk for hours about science, about social psychology, and other people's research. I had a lot to say when it came to critiquing my colleagues' work, but I tended to be rather reticent when it came to talking about my own. I only really liked to discuss it when it was finished. If I was going to talk about my work, then it had to be really good, which didn't happen very often. I wanted to talk about great discoveries, not a bunch of half-baked ideas. I found it hard to talk about work in progress, about ideas and plans that I hadn't completely worked out yet. I preferred to keep quiet about my work and join in other people's conversations. I was a nice guy to be around, but when working I preferred it when it was just me on my own. On my own, with the cookie jar.

So when I started to fake my studies, it was very, very easy. I was always alone. Nobody checked my work; everyone trusted me. I did everything myself. Everything. I thought up the idea, I did the experiment, and I evaluated the results. I was judge, jury, and executioner. I did everything myself because I wanted to be one of the elite, to create great things and score lots of major publications. I did it all myself, with a big cookie jar right next to me. No mom, no lock, not even a lid. And full. I worked day after day, with the cookie jar full of goodies sitting, open, right there with me—and nobody watching. I could take whatever I wanted. One cookie. Nobody noticed. One piece of candy. Mmm, nice. Another one. That's enough for now. Another one. I should stop, but I can't. Just one

more. And all this time, the serpent of temptation, of desire for fame and success and applause, was whispering, hissing softly in my ear:

Trust in me, just in me. Shut your eyes and trust in me
You can sleep safe and sound, knowing I am around
Slip into silent slumber, sail on a silver mist
Slowly and surely, your senses will cease to resist

There are lots of ways to make the world a better place. Every psychologist has a toolbox of statistical and methodological procedures for those days when the numbers don't turn out quite right. Like everyone else, I was adept at using these tools to erase the less attractive findings and polish up mediocre results. But all that erasing and polishing got me addicted to perfection. And like an alcoholic or a heroin addict, I began to use the object of my addiction to cope with every problem, whether that was some really bad results, or months without finding an effect, or a year without a publication, or not being able to see how to make the world a better place. I started to build a new world, my own world, from my own imagination. I twisted some of my results, and just invented some others. I did three experiments, and made up the fourth. The next time, I did one experiment and made up the other three. Then I did a whole study where I made up all of the experiments. I made up everything. I carefully designed the idea, the research method, the experiment, the data, and the results, to suit my agenda of publishing in the top journals. I became a junkie—not suddenly, overnight, but one stage at a time. I progressed through the equivalent of dope, speed, shrooms, coke, LSD, heroin, crack, and crystal meth, but the high I got was never good enough. Science became pure fantasy. Science was an acid trip. I ate my way to the bottom of the cookie jar.

Picture yourself in a boat on a river
With tangerine trees and marmalade skies.

When you're alone, it's harder to stay in contact with your feelings. You need other people around you to feel them with you, to recognize them, to offer help if you're getting

overwhelmed by your emotions. When you're alone, the social signals that your emotions send out get lost in the background. You want to cry, you want to be angry, you make yourself feel sick, but if there's nobody around to notice it, then feeling the way you'd like to feel just seems like a waste of effort.

I was always working. I'd started working alone because I preferred it that way, being able to keep control over everything I was doing, but the more I turned inward on myself, the more unfeeling and unprincipled I became. Maybe I did want to cry, or be angry, or throw up, but I'd spent years arranging my professional life so that there was nobody around to feel those emotions. In my solitude the emotions just ebbed away.

We need to have other people around, to help remind us of not just what we're feeling and experiencing, but also what's right and wrong, moral and immoral. People are more easily disposed to break social rules and conventions if there's nobody else nearby. When you don't think anyone can see what you're doing, your social conscience is easier to ignore. You're alone, and you don't have to take into account what anyone else thinks. That's why people more readily commit crimes and misdemeanors in empty parking garages after closing time or deserted industrial parks at weekends, than when those places are busy with people.

One of the emotions that underpins morality is disgust. People experience disgust when they encounter something that offends their deepest moral principles. Sex with animals, cannibalism, genocide, and child abuse make us feel sick because they're immoral, but they're also immoral because they make us feel sick. A good way to get someone to express moral indignation is to mention something disgusting or nauseating. You can tell someone that they made a big fat stupid mistake, but if you call the mistake "repulsive" and say that it makes you want to throw up, you communicate the message that not only is that mistake a big deal, but that you're morally outraged by it.

In the privacy of my office or my study room at home, I did some things that were terrible, maybe even disgusting. I faked research data and invented studies that had never happened. I worked alone, knowing exactly what I was doing, and my solitary drive to achieve led to me becoming ever more detached from myself and my emotions. I didn't feel anything: no disgust, no shame, no regrets. Any time a drop of emotion seemed to be about

to come out, it was quickly wiped away by the sponge of my continual desire for cocaine and crack, for success and applause.

I preferred to do it at home, late in the evening, in fact at the beginning of the night, when everybody else was asleep. I would make some tea, put my laptop on the kitchen table, get my notebook from my rucksack, take my fountain pen out, and make a careful list of all the results and effects I needed to create for the study I was doing. Neat tables with the results I expected based on extensive reading, theorizing, and thinking. Simple, elegant, comprehensible. Next I started to enter the data, column by column, row by row. I tried to imagine how the participants' answers to my questionnaire would look. What were some reasonable answers that might be expected? 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 4, 5, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 4, 3, 3, 2. When I'd input all the data, I ran some quick preliminary analyses. Often these didn't show what I was expecting, so I went back to the matrix of data to change a few things. 4, 6, 7, 5, 4, 7, 8, 2, 4, 4, 6, 5, 6, 7, 8, 5, 4. And so on, until the analyses came up with the results I was looking for. That is, until the data showed what was logical, and therefore true. I always worked as fast as possible. It was a terrible, nauseating experience that I wanted to be over quickly. I wanted to stop, but I couldn't. I could have stopped, but I didn't want to. Quick, panting for breath, stumbling as I approached the finishing line, I typed in the last of the data, hoping I wouldn't have to stop and throw up into the bushes by the side of the road.

When I'd finished, I saved a copy of the data and shut down the computer. I slept badly, although in fact I've always slept badly. There were only a few years in my life when I found it easy to sleep. I must have been 14 or 15 years old, and my parents had redecorated my room. I wanted everything to be white and light blue. White curtains, a grey-blue carpet, and light blue striped wallpaper. And I got a new bed, an extra-long high-end model from the department store. From then until I left my parents' home I always slept really well. After that, never again.

Once I'd faked my datasets, I tried to avoid looking at them again. When I had to discuss research results with colleagues or students, I only brought handwritten tables to the meetings, and we talked about those. I did everything I could to avoid having to sit in front of a computer with someone, hunting through the matrix of data for connections and relationships; it was too close for comfort.

When I had to share a dataset with a co-author or a student with whom I was working on a project, I tried to send it out by e-mail on a Friday evening. That way they could spend the weekend analyzing the data and working out any problems for themselves without me having to be around. I didn't want to get involved in any discussions. On Monday morning I'd usually get an e-mail back saying how great the results were. Not everything turned out exactly as we'd hoped, but it was always pretty good. Which was logical, given how much effort we'd put into analyzing the literature and devising the questionnaires.

I found myself stepping further away from people: from my colleagues, from my students, from everybody. I wanted to be alone in my own little world with my dirty little secret. I couldn't tell anybody. I had to keep away from people. I couldn't get too friendly with anyone and risk revealing too much. I had to be alone. I had to do as much as possible by myself and keep everything under control. I couldn't let anyone give me any meaningful help. I couldn't allow anyone else into my world. I shut myself away, from everyone including myself, and started to work even harder. Being alone was no problem as long as I was working.

Any time the discussion turned to one of my faked experiments during a research group meeting, I was terrified. After every question or comment I could feel sweat running down my back. Maybe I'd got something wrong and the theory I'd wanted to test was completely ridiculous. Then I'd be caught out, because where could I have come up with those tables and graphs proving something that couldn't possibly be true?

"Diederik, in order for your data to be correct, the earth has to be flat. Something has gone wrong here."

But that never happened. I never made up anything shocking or weird that simply wasn't plausible. What I made up was logical and not earth-shattering, and I was very good at making a solid case for it. There was rarely even a hair's breadth of uncertainty. And on those occasions when somebody did come up with an alternative explanation for a set of results, I always managed to quickly make up another experiment which excluded that alternative as a possibility: "No, that can't be right, because we've also done some research showing that ..."

When students gave presentations of research that I knew was based on my fake data, I could barely wait for them to finish. Maybe someone would burst the bubble, pointing out a fundamental error that would show that the whole thing was completely fictional. I sat and watched a great show, but I was the only one there who knew that it was just an illusion. I watched students, doctoral candidates, and research assistants talking enthusiastically about their work, and I knew that the data they were presenting were all fake. It was hard to keep up the pretence. What they were presenting was fantastic, as coherent as anyone could hope for. They had the results they'd hoped for, they'd passed the test, they were full of self-confidence, they believed in themselves and in the reliable structure of science, but I knew that their faith was built on sand. It was all a mess, just a street full of uncollected garbage and broken windows.

Why did I decide to bring other people into my world of imaginary data? Because I thought it would make them happy to give them a fabulous source of truth that didn't really exist? Because I wanted them to have the clarity and simplicity that I'd not been able to have myself? Because I wanted to help them succeed? Don't be so naïve. Isn't there a much simpler explanation? Didn't I abuse their trust for my own ends? "Stapel's published another great article. There's a guy who really knows how to look after his students."

After one of those group meetings, I made sure I got away, left the campus and walked around town for a couple of hours. If that wasn't possible for some reason, I'd tell my assistant that I had to prepare for an appointment with someone and sit in my office, alone, with the door closed. That was my way of trying to wipe away the feelings of shame, the guilt, the desperation ("How the hell am I going to stop this?"). Quick, focus on something else, let's make a start on the next project right away. Come on, don't hang around. It's considered a good habit for professors to show up in person to their students' discussion groups or readings, to give them some encouragement. Whenever possible, I made sure that I was busy and had to be somewhere else. I was always somewhere else.

Anywhere but here.

I'm standing with a colleague in a corridor of the psychology building. We're looking at a poster presentation made by one of my doctoral students.

"What fantastic results!" he says.

Junior researchers don't often get to give lectures at conferences, but they are often invited to present their work in the form of a poster. A big room is set aside for poster sessions, full of boards on which these graduate students get to display their mini-masterpieces. When they get home, the poster generally gets pride of place in their research team's corridor.

My colleague is clearly impressed. He starts to ask me quite detailed questions about the methodology behind the experiments. I try to change the subject and talk about the theory, the big ideas behind the whole piece of work, and how well everyone in the group is doing. I don't want to talk in detail about the experiments and the results. I try to avoid talking about the specifics of my research. That's my job, but I prefer not to do it.

I'm stuck at home. I'm convalescing from an awkward operation to fix a hernia and I can't move very far or get much done. I've had to give up my role of junior professor and research group leader for now. I can barely sit or lie down. I walk around the house, getting bored. I can still stand up, so I can get some work done if I put my laptop on the breakfast bar in the kitchen.

Work is not going well. I'm not getting along with a few of my colleagues, and I'm having trouble getting my work published. I haven't scored for a year. A whole year without publishing a single article. I have some ideas and I run some experiments from time to time, but the results are disappointing and the ideas aren't really very inspiring.

I've come up with a nice idea for a series of experiments with an American colleague, but that project isn't making much progress. Here's how it works: people sit at a computer screen and we show them brief flashes of either very attractive or very ugly faces. The images show up for such a short time that the participants can't really make out the faces, but they know that they've seen something because of the flash. Every flash occurs in a different corner of the screen, and the subjects have to press a button to say whether they saw it on the left or the right. After that, we tell them that the task is finished, but we ask them just to sign a piece of paper, "for the record." The idea is that seeing

pictures of ugly people, even unconsciously as the image is flashed in front of them for a fraction of a second, will make people feel good about themselves, which will make their signature larger, whereas flashes of attractive people will make their signature smaller—in other words, there'll be a contrast effect. The size of someone's signature is a subtle, implicit way to measure how positive their self-image is. If your signature becomes bigger after seeing the flashed images, you see yourself in a more positive light, and if it becomes smaller, your self-image has become more negative.

The initial results were very promising, but the last experiment I ran to try and demonstrate this automatic, unconscious social comparison effect failed completely. That's incomprehensible, and it still hurts. It was an elegant idea, and everyone expected it to work, given the number of comparable effects in the literature.

In the only way my painful back will allow, I stand in front of my computer in the kitchen and start to write. It's a great story, with lots of experiments, all of which turn out fine. After just four days, the article is written. All the failures are behind me.

I was a magician. I created my own reality, and everyone thought it was real. Magic is a combination of technical ability and distraction. I was pretty good at the technical aspects of my work, which made it easy to hide what I was doing with smoke and mirrors. The research I did was never too extreme, too weird, or too flashy. It was usually completely logical; sometimes even a bit dull.

I was always the bringer of good news, the guy who could be relied on to make things better. When I collaborated on research with students or colleagues I would take part in the planning, make sure there was a solid and logical theoretical framework, help design an elegant set of experiments, and... provide some great data. I arranged for the study to take place along with a bunch of others to save time on recruiting participants. I made sure that the data were entered into the computer. I supervised the logistics to make sure everything went smoothly. If anything went wrong, I stepped in to fix it. And if it all started to take too long, I made it up—if necessary, I made everything up. Just as long as I could bring some more good news, and avoid the pain and disappointment of failure.

I wanted everyone to make progress, as quickly as possible. I wanted everyone to be able to feel the satisfaction of doing well-designed research that led to positive results. It had felt so good when I'd experienced it, and I didn't want anyone else to miss out. I wanted science to be all about good news, and everyone welcomed my good news with open arms. Research takes an enormous amount of time. Everyone is so keen to ensure that their investment delivers something that they're always happy to see the guy who brings the good news. That makes for a great feeling for the bringer and for the receiver.

I invented entire schools where I'd done my research, teachers with whom I'd discussed the experiments, lectures that I'd given, social studies lessons that I'd contributed to, gifts that I'd handed out as thanks for people's participation. I invented friends who were teaching or preparing science classes, acquaintances who were school principals and had offered to help me conduct my research. I invented everything, and everything remained a secret. Schools didn't like having outsiders around, because then they got trouble from the inspectors. It was all borderline illegal and it had to be done in double-quick time. And I had to do it all, because I was the contact person, the only one they trusted.

"Can't I come along with you to one of these schools, to help you out a little?"

"No, they wouldn't want that."

I traveled all over the country and I returned bringing good news, in the form of beautiful results.

"Can't I just see the questionnaires?"

"No, they kept them and then probably threw them away, I think. That's part of their rules."

Everyone knew that it was impossible to find enough space to keep hundreds or thousands of paper questionnaires in storage for years. And anyway, when we did research directly on the computer there was no second copy that could be checked. So what would be the logic of having that extra level of verifiability just for research conducted on paper?

"Next time I want to input the data into the computer myself. I don't want the people at the school to do it."

“OK, no problem.”

A month later, I’m sitting at home late at night, filling in two hundred or so paper questionnaires, using different colored pens and pencils. I’m writing in the results from a computer data file that I made up earlier. I’m a veritable question-answering machine.

It was a secret recipe, but it worked, and so it grew. It became a pattern. When the cookie jar was empty, I filled it up again. When somebody wanted to work with me, we’d start with some preliminary discussions about what was worth investigating, what we were interested in, what we were passionate about. My interests were pretty broad, and I enjoyed the challenge of finding a subject that would really interest and energize my new research partner. Once we’d found a subject, there would be a phase of reading, summarizing, and analyzing the relevant literature. Next, we would try to devise some clever, elegant experiments. After three or four months we would be ready to actually start doing the real research work. We could ask psychology undergraduates to be our participants, but they were always being asked to be guinea pigs and as a result they tended not to take things very seriously. Psychology students knew the theory of cognitive dissonance and the fundamental attribution error, they’d all been to classes about the basics of psychological research, they knew all about Milgram’s studies and the Stanford Prison experiment, and they were pretty skeptical and mistrusting about the real purpose of any particular questionnaire that might be put in front of them. I had a better idea: school kids.

I became increasingly cavalier and careless. I was tired of sitting at the dining table for long evenings on end, typing data into the computer. I made spreadsheet after spreadsheet to present my research ideas to the world as clearly as possible, and I made spreadsheet after spreadsheet with the data for the studies that I did with my colleagues and students. I was in a hurry, and in my haste I made mistakes. I copied rows of data from one study to another, which meant that the second dataset looked suspiciously like the first. I forgot to save before exiting the program, so that I’d have to type everything in again. I got hypotheses mixed up between studies. I forgot to create answers for some of the items on the questionnaires. When somebody noticed and asked about it, I tried to act nonchalantly

and fob them off with a promise to look into it. A week or so later I'd gone back and corrected all the mistakes, so I could send out a new version of the dataset, wrapped in a thick smokescreen of vague explanations. The problem was generally due to inattention on my part while I was recoding and twisting the data to fit the conclusions I wanted. I was really very clumsy.

The best part, though, was that it always worked out fine in the end. What seemed to be logical was true. That gave me a sense of quiet satisfaction. If I'd been a little smarter, I would have allowed a regular stream of studies to fail, next to all the successes. That would have looked more realistic, and been the smarter, more rational choice. But I couldn't do that, because I'd become a junkie for success. I wanted everything to be chrome-plated and gleaming; the shinier, the better. The stuff I was making up became better and better, and I even started to believe in it myself. What a wonderful world, with everything neatly ordered just for me. The more complicated the web of lies became, the more I became convinced that it was all true. That was the only way to keep going.

I left the campus and drove onto the highway, on the way to the high school where the teachers had agreed to let me have the students fill in the questionnaires that lay in boxes on the back seat of my car. I drove around for a couple of hours, stopped at a gas station for a cup of coffee, and drove back. It had all gone really well, and the students had done a great job; I had another nice set of data to work with. When I got home, I put the boxes of untouched questionnaires in the recycling.

A week later I drove to Rotterdam. This time, I was going to ask people who were out shopping some questions about their political affiliations and their reactions to a number of imaginary proposals by the city to increase economic activity and reduce unemployment. I parked my car on the southern edge of town and walked into the center. I sat for a few hours in the malls, absent, detached, watching the crowds of shoppers go by, my mind elsewhere, without feelings, without emotions, demoralized. Then I drove home.

What I'd faked was true. All the events that were purely the work of my imagination, had really taken place. I went out and bought some weights and thermometers for a study into the effect of people's moods on the degree to which they're influenced by their environment or the specific context in which they find themselves. My idea was that if you

feel good, that touch of euphoria can cause you to not notice the context as much as when you're not in such a great mood. Everyone knows that lukewarm water feels colder if you've just taken your hand out of hot water, and that a medium-sized rock seems lighter if you've just had to lift something very heavy. But if you're in an upbeat mood, the lukewarm water doesn't feel quite as cold, and the rock doesn't seem quite as light. In a positive mood, your body takes less account of the context of the hot water or the heavy weight.

I had a large shopping bag full of chocolate bars in my garage for months on end. Some were from regular brands and others were fair trade certified. We were researching ways to encourage people to make sustainable consumer choices. We thought that if we gave them word puzzles to solve with words like "we" and "together" and "future" in them, that this would make them more likely to choose the fair trade products. If we gave them the choice between a regular chocolate bar and a fair trade one as a reward for filling in the questionnaire, they'd be more likely to choose the fair trade one if they had "we, together, in the future" in their heads, rather than "I, on my own, now." This could have been groundbreaking work with implications for advertising, public information campaigns, and environmental causes, but I just left the chocolate bars and the questionnaires that we'd designed and printed sitting in my garage, week after week. In the end I got scared. One rainy Friday evening I got on my bicycle, rode a few streets away, and threw all the chocolate bars into a dumpster. On the way home I felt relieved, for no good reason.

I drove round for weeks with a large bag in the trunk of my car. It was full of packages of M&Ms, and cups with either the word "capitalism", or an anagram like "acitamspl." The hypothesis was that capitalism is associated with "more is better," or "greed is good," and less with rules telling you that you need stop. That means that capitalism leads to overconsumption and obesity. When people are forever being told "Thou shalt consume," they get out of the habit of noticing that they've had enough and need to stop. I wanted to test this idea by having people fill out a dummy questionnaire, while sitting next to a cup full of M&Ms from which they could take as many as they liked. People sitting next to the "capitalism" cup would find it harder to stop eating candy than people whose cup said "acitamspl."

In the end I ate the M&Ms myself—by taking a package from the trunk and putting it in the glove compartment every day—and so I got to live out my own capitalist tendencies. More is better. Greed is good. Can't get enough.

I made up research, and wrote papers about it. My peers and the journal editors cast a critical eye over it, and it was published. I would often discover, a few months or years later, that another team of researchers, in another city or another country, had done more or less the same experiment, and found the same effects. My fantasy research had been replicated. What seemed logical was true, once I'd faked it.

I made people happy. I could give them what they were looking for. I showed them that the world was logical and predictable. I gave them the ammunition they needed to publish before other researchers—because there were always lots of people chasing the same effects—and so enter the job market with more impressive résumés. I played at being God, making up so much that I could only keep going by keeping everything to myself and believing in what I was doing. It was all true.

I became more and more isolated, more and more detached from reality, because I couldn't be myself. I was accumulating secrets and had more and more to hide. I talked less and less, partly because I didn't want to let anything slip out in conversation, but also because I didn't think that I had anything to say. What I thought and felt was based on lies and fantasy, on nothing. I wanted to put everything behind me and blot out the memories. Sweep it all away and carry on as if nothing had happened.

I'd stopped enjoying my work. After my wife had sent the kids off to school and left for work in the morning, I would get back into bed or lie on the couch, wearing my suit, and close my eyes for a few minutes, until I really had to leave or be late. The university was close by and I could easily have cycled to work, but if I took the car, that allowed me to leave five minutes later.

I started taking the car a lot more often.

I used to suffer from “normal” vertigo. I had to avoid going up towers, and I used to hate looking down from a tall apartment building. But in the last few years, this has gotten worse. Much worse. I get nauseous if I see a picture in the newspaper of a bridge being built across a deep gorge. Looking up at a helium balloon is enough to get my heart racing. I’ve become more afraid. Not just of heights, but of big waves on the ocean and long roads where you can’t see where they lead. Fear is everywhere. Fear of the dentist, of needles and syringes and blood. Fear that I’m going to get found out. Fear that my wife will leave me. Fear of the mail carrier and letters containing bills. Fear of flying, floating, and crashing. Fear of making a mistake, so that people won’t like me any more. Fear of not thinking anything about anything. Fear of opinions and positions. Fear of other people. Fear of company and finding myself in heated discussions that turn against me. Fear of people who want to help me. Fear of arguments. Fear that what I love will prove lethal to those I love. Fear of myself. I’d like to just agree with everyone. Everyone is right.

Sometimes I have to go to a conference because it’s expected. Everyone’s going, so I have to go too. I set off before everyone else and I come back on a later plane. That lets me be alone for a while, so I can avoid talking about research. I check in to a hotel somewhere else in town, not the hotel where the conference is being held. That way I can be alone more of the time. I give my lecture and disappear. I do the absolute minimum necessary.

Everything to do with my research makes me nervous. People are impressed, but I’m not. I show my face briefly at the reception on the first day, I wander around the poster sessions, and exchange some encouraging words with whichever of my doctoral candidates and other students have also come along. But as soon as I can, I’m out of there. I lie in my bed in the hotel and watch movies. Please do not disturb. Five or six films per day. I don’t eat or drink. I sleep and watch movies.

I don’t want people to make the same mistakes as me. I want to warn them. I’m the teacher for the research ethics course, in which I get to discuss all the dilemmas with which I’m confronted every day, and for which I always make the wrong choice. I give classes about the pressure to publish, coping with unfulfilled expectations, and the disappointment of discovering that the world isn’t was wonderful as we’d all like it to be.

As dean of the psychology department, I get to write a big, important document about our collective vision, in which I introduce my MERIT model. We have to get away from “Dig and Deliver,” from “publish or perish.” We have to stop keeping score and checking boxes, and start working as a small, tight-knit community, taking a genuine interest in each others’ work, and constantly striving to deliver quality. It has to be about the content of the work, and team spirit, and concern for each other, not just on getting published. All that individualism is just holding us back from making real scientific breakthroughs. Every one of us has to show commitment to better Management, leadership, and vision, to Education, to Research, to working in the Interest of society, and to Team spirit. Hence: MERIT. Just churning out publications without worrying about everyone else doesn’t cut it any more. Giving great lectures but not being able to manage means you’re stuck in the last century.

I want to be rid of myself and my weaknesses. I want people to tell me that what I’m doing is interesting, that it’s got something to offer society, and I want to be surrounded by colleagues who recognize my talents and can protect me from my faults. I’m afraid of myself.

I’m afraid. I’m afraid of contact. I keep everyone at a safe distance. I become colder and colder. I build a wall around myself and become a hermit. During classes and meetings I notice that provocation is often the best defense. That’s one of the things I’m good at. I’m spontaneous, good at changing direction in a hurry, and quick to come up with something unexpected or provocative. That makes it look as if I have “great communication skills”, as they say in the job vacancy notices, although in fact it’s just a crude way of avoiding the subject. As long as I’m surprising them, I don’t have to expose myself to them. The person doing the provoking just has to stick with it. The person being provoked has to try and deal with it. “You’re not going to let him get away with saying that to you?” I tempt people into showing their hand, but I can sit safely behind my wall and don’t have to reveal what my feelings.

I hate myself and project that hatred onto others. I’ve become a misanthrope. I don’t find anything or anyone interesting or worth talking to or about. Social psychology is garbage,

just a collection of pseudo-effects. Everyone is just building their career running stupid little experiments that nobody cares about. It's got nothing to tell us.

When guest speakers come from another country, I'm somewhere else. When someone organizes a research colloquium, I take my own work along, so I have something to do while I pretend to listen.

I don't answer the phone any more. If the doorbell rings, I don't answer it. I want to be alone. I don't like surprises, anything unexpected. Everything has to be under control.

Nothing relaxes me any more. I lie in the bath, listen to music, watch a movie, but I feel stressed and restless. I want everything, and everything has to happen now. I want out. I don't want to have to write papers any more. I want to start over, get away from this fantasy world I've created, get out of this system of lies and half-truths, to another city, another job.

But I can't do it. I can't escape from myself. I'm addicted. I'm a junkie. Whatever I try to get me back to regular, honest, step-by-step research, it doesn't work. I keep wanting to go faster and farther. I only want the very best. For me and for everyone around me. I'm my own little god, sitting on my throne in the depths of my soul. I can't stop; it's become automatic, a part of me. I've become conditioned by my own lies. There's no rationality, no intention, no thought process involved any more. I'd like to change, but I can't. I'm always going to need my regular hit of easy answers and perfect structures. Even if we move to another city, even if they make me the boss of a prestigious new research institute, even if I become dean of faculty, even if everyone else turns a blind eye to it.

Laurel? Hardy. Research? Lies.

I'm driving my car at 120 miles per hour through the center of town. I know I'm going too fast, I know something bad is going to happen, but what the hell: it's dark, the top is down, the stars are shining in the sky, and I'm just cruising silently down the road.

Chapter 7

I'm a lucky kind of guy. Things always work out for me. If I open my bank statement to find that my account is in the red, it'll turn out that I paid too much for something and the money will come back. If I fail a test, the pass mark gets adjusted and I scrape through. If I wake up on my birthday and it's raining, the sun will come out later in the day and I can play outside. If I can't find my wallet, it'll turn up in the outside pocket of my briefcase. If I get lost, I'll discover that I'm nearly home. If I take a wrong turning, I'll end up somewhere nicer than where I was heading. Things always work out. I'm a lucky person. Until now. Until August 2011. Then my luck suddenly ran out.

I'd decided that the best way to round off my time in Chicago was to make a five-week road trip with my good friend Jurgen. He had been studying in Minneapolis and, like me, was about to return to the Netherlands. We hired a slightly clunky Pontiac and set out, aiming to take in as much as possible of the culture and nature of the West in the time we had. We followed Route 66 where we could, and visited every National Park that we came across. We had almost nothing with us. We slept in the open in a small tent (borrowed from friends), and we ate off Frisbees. To avoid discussions about money, we decided that one of us would pay for everything for a week at a time, and then we'd swap over. Jurgen paid for everything in week 1, I paid for everything in week 2, and so on. Simple.

We were somewhere in Northern Arizona when my week began. We had stopped at a gas station in the blistering heat, filled the tank, and grabbed a couple of cans of soda from the refrigerator.

"You're paying today, right?" asked Jurgen.

"Sure."

But where was my wallet? I looked in the glove compartment. Nope. I looked on the back seat. Not there either. I looked in the pocket on the side of the passenger seat, in my bag, inside the Rand McNally road map, under the seat, in the trunk. I couldn't see my wallet anywhere. Of course, I hadn't needed to use it in a week. Where was it?

Jurgen and I cleared the car out. The tent, the Frisbees, our bags; we got everything out and laid it on the melting asphalt of the gas station. Nothing. And where was my

passport? And my walkman? Where was that little backpack with all my important papers in it? Trying not to panic completely, I started to pull everything apart. Toothbrushes, towels, cassette tapes, sweaters, pants, books, sunglasses; everything was piled up on the ground. Jurgen tried to stay calm, but he couldn't suppress a deep, slightly exasperated sigh.

During our drives, his conversation had consisted mostly of comparing the relative merits of various female singers, while mine focused on how incredibly clumsy and disorganized I was, and how that led to my extreme needs for order and regularity. That was why I always had my keys on a string attached to my pants, why I was always losing money and notes and fountain pens and books, and that was why I loved the work of Bach, Fra Angelico, and Raymond Carver.

"Come on, think. Where did you last need to use that backpack?"

I placed my hands on top of my head and pressed firmly down. Closing my eyes, I tried to send all of my mental energy in the direction of my memory. Yellowstone. 900 miles north of here.

"Then we'll drive back there."

Two days later, we showed up at the entrance of Yellowstone National Park for the second time in less than a week, and asked for directions to the lost property office. This turned out to be a huge building, rather like an aircraft hangar, somewhere in the middle of the park, not far from Old Faithful. There were hundred of bags, suitcases, tents, strollers, children's car seats, wheelchairs, bikes, canoes, inflatable boats and prosthetic limbs, all neatly arranged and classified. It's amazing what people can lose without noticing that it's missing.

In the backpack section, among dozens of others, there was my blue Jansport. With all the contents. My passport, visa, guidebook, walkman, and wallet. I opened the last of these with trembling fingers and found that all my money was still there: a big wad of traveler's checks and \$260 in twenties that I'd taken out of the bank before we set out.

"You are the luckiest bastard alive. Unbelievable."

The rector has been informed, and invited me to his home to discuss the situation. He and I know each other well; during the summer, we play each other at tennis every Wednesday

morning. He's quite a bit older than me, but faster and stronger, and very determined, chasing after every ball. You have to hit three winners to score a point. When we change ends, we talk about the future of the university, and I discuss some of the issues that I face as dean of psychology. Today's subject, however, is going to be very different. The summer's over.

I ring the bell; he opens the door and shakes my hand gently. His palm seems to be sweating. I take a deep breath and step into his simple, informal modern living room.

I try to put off the moment of reckoning by talking about my vision of the modern university. The government plans to make big cuts in the education sector and has told every university to make concrete proposals to reposition themselves and redistribute their work. Higher education is going to have to become more professional, start functioning more like a business.

The rector listens to this from the kitchen, where he's making us each a cup of coffee. I stand in the living room and look outside. Two painters are up on the roof, working on the wooden surrounds of the rain gutters. I'm filled with admiration for the calm and competent way they go about their work. I'd like to do that: sanding, undercoat, sanding, first coat, sanding, top coat. They're working in silence; I can't hear a radio, just the steam from the coffee machine.

The modern university is a sort of cloister where senior professors, early-career researchers, doctoral candidates, and students can quietly and freely work on their ideas and theories. But it's also a hive of activity where teachers, students, and other members of society are buzzing in and out, sharing and imparting and adapting knowledge. Tilburg is a small university with law and economics as its greatest strengths. By using that strength and incorporating its other activities under that brand, it could become one of the best universities in Europe. Tilburg School of Economics and Law, with its research rooted in the social sciences.

It's an attempt at self-defense. I'm hoping that by coming up with these strategic ideas for the future, I can demonstrate that I deserve to remain part of the team. If I can show how passionate I am as a manager and leader, if I can show that that I've got a vision for the future, maybe my sins as a scientist won't count so much against me. I'm hoping to compensate for my misdeeds by saying things that show me in a good light. I'm a nice guy.

I have good ideas. I want the best for everyone. Although I know it's futile, I find myself making this frantic attempt to get him to see the good side of me in the hope that the bad side will disappear in its shadow.

I talk non-stop. The plans, ideas, visions, and perspectives pile up. I describe my view of the Dutch university scene, comparing the relative positions and future plans of the other major schools with what we're going in Tilburg. I just want to keep talking about this subject. I want to show how much I've got to contribute on this. And I don't want the interrogation, the cross-examination—which is what I've come here for—to start.

The rector asks me to stop talking. He speaks slowly, precisely, but he's obviously tired. We sit and drink our coffee. His hands are shaking. As he speaks, he looks at me, a little inquisitively but mostly in despair. The usual friendly gleam in his eyes has gone. He's worried. His white hair is whiter than ever.

He's discussed my case with a number of colleagues and it doesn't look good. He'd like to be able to do something for me—he'd like nothing better, he says—but he doesn't see how that's possible. He has to take the stories he's heard, and the facts that have been put before him, seriously. They've been keeping tabs on me for a while and they've got very strong suspicions that everything is badly wrong.

But he also wants to hear my side of the story. Maybe something can be salvaged from the situation, maybe it'll turn out OK, maybe I have an explanation for everything. He hopes so.

"I hope so, Diederik. Sincerely."

I look at him. He's sitting on the edge of his chair, leaning forward, his hands clasped together. Shaking. The collar of his white shirt presses into his neck. The top button is undone; he prefers to dispense with a tie. I can see the seams of the t-shirt that he's wearing under his shirt. His Adam's apple bobs up and down. He swallows. He's hoping against hope, with his hands clasped, praying for a miracle.

I stare at the floor. I'm like a spider that has fallen asleep in the middle of its web (of lies), and I still haven't woken up yet. He has to believe me. In my unconscious state, I pull the threads of my memories, colored over time by my desires, together in a tight ball. He has to believe me. But I can't prove anything, because I never kept any evidence; I knew perfectly

well at the time that I was breaking the rules in almost everything I did. Whenever I did field work, in schools or at bus stops or on train stations or in cafés or sports clubs or wherever, I always covered my tracks, because I didn't want anyone to know exactly what I'd done. I paid participants with my own money. Of course I preferred not to pay anything, but if the only way to get people to take part was to give them some kind of reward, then so be it. A Snickers bar, a buck, a few bucks. I never told them what the purpose of the research was; that would take too much time, and might make them reconsider. I misled everyone as far as possible. I had to, because I couldn't tell them what I was really up to. That would have been just too complicated. I misled my participants, my research subjects. I had to. Anyway, I was the respectable professor, in a suit, doing his own fieldwork. It's kind of suspicious for a tenured full professor to be giving out questionnaires; that's why I did it on the sly. I didn't have a choice. I wanted to be in control, so that nothing could go wrong. I'd never done it any other way. It had always been like this. I'd always worked on my own. Isn't that how everything gets done? When do we really work as a team? It's everyone for himself and God help us all. It's a lonely world, with everyone beaver away at their own personal computer on their own personal research. I'd always worked alone. And I did it for the benefit of my colleagues, too: we'd always had a problem getting enough participants. Everyone was always trying to come up with new ways to increase the sample size of their studies. So my officially dubious way of going about things was in fact doing everyone a favor, meeting a need. I'd tapped a source of naïve, eager participants; just what everyone had been looking for. Recruiting study participants is a pain. Psychology students are difficult to work with; they know too much and tend to guess what the point of the study is, which means they then alter their answers. You need people who've never read anything about psychology. Fortunately, there's an endless supply of high school kids who are keen to help. They think it's fun, interesting, something different, cool. It's in the cause of science, so they're happy to do their bit. You have to convince them initially, but as long as you keep the questionnaires short and the noble cause of science front and center, they'll happily answer anything you want. Mostly for no reward. I didn't tell my colleagues, because I was ashamed of what I was doing. Going out into the street, in all weathers; what the heck were you thinking? I was a cowboy, or maybe a pimp, always looking to hustle a little research

here or there, wherever I could. But I didn't do all the recruiting myself; that would have taken too long. I just walked into the middle of a city and started looking, for data, for people to give me the data. Data, my dear Watson, data. I'd find a city I knew well and go to where the schools were clustered together. I'd find a group of kids—on their school break time, or playing hooky, or just hanging around—and ask them if they wanted to help with some scientific research, like a dealer might ask if they wanted to score some weed. I tried to get a kind of snowball effect going, to get as many people involved as possible. I'd give two or three kids a big pile of questionnaires each, and they'd give a chunk each of their friends, who'd pass them on in turn to others, and so on. A week later I'd come back and meet the kids at a café or just on the street, and collect the filled-in questionnaires that had been sent back up the pyramid of this informal distribution system. I'd take the forms and a few of the kids inside the café, sit with a cup of coffee and a snack, and enter the results into my laptop. Some of the kids would go outside to smoke from time to time. We had fun; I liked doing things this way. I paid a few of the kids five or ten bucks for their help. I called them my "research paralegals." They thought that sounded pretty grown-up. An hour or so away from tests and stupid assignments. Doing research is interesting. Everyone enjoys it. And I cut an imposing figure in my suit. I love talking about my job. It's the best feeling. I never got a phone number from any of the kids, though. If I had done, I'd have been nervously calling or sending text messages the whole time, because I was often afraid that someone would just take all the papers and trash them, and that would have meant a lot of wasted effort. They gave me their numbers, and I wrote them down, but I threw them away as soon as they were out of sight. I didn't keep anything. I made sure that everything happened very quickly, without leaving a trail that could be followed. I didn't want any hassle. I didn't want to be reminded of what I'd done. I can't explain that. I knew it wasn't right. I always had to tell a few small lies to my colleagues about how any particular trip had gone. I did all the fieldwork, I collected all the data, but not really in an ethical way. I knew that. Terrible. What a mess. The feelings of guilt are gnawing away at me. I'm getting fatter. I'm up to 250 pounds; three years ago I was 215 tops. I keep everything to myself. My colleagues don't know what's going on. Nobody knows anything about what I'm doing. Nobody. Just me. I'm leading a double life. It's as if I've been having an affair all these years and nobody's found out. I've got a second family and I switch

effortlessly between them. Six days a week I'm a solid, normal professor, and on the seventh day I turn into a kind of guerilla scientist, a research hustler. Two identities in one person. I'm like an onion: peel off another layer and there'll be something else weird underneath, every time. I'm disgusted with myself. It's good that this has happened, because I want it to stop. Doing anything to get my data, absolutely anything, whatever it takes, is hardly normal behavior. I threw the questionnaires away as soon as I'd entered the data into the computer. It was infected, a used hypodermic needle, contaminated, like radioactive waste, with that scary yellow and black symbol with the triangles. Dangerous. Not something you'd want to have around. Sometimes I'd let a group of kids use my laptop, and enter the data from the questionnaires themselves. They enjoyed that. I'd pay them 10, 20, 30 bucks for their time. All in the name of science. I doubt if you'd still be able to find my paralegals today. They were all seniors, so they'll have left by now. I didn't keep their phone numbers either. Sometimes I would stand around for hours, handing out questionnaires. In the rain, if necessary. I was busy at work, my calendar was usually full of appointments, but sometimes I'd plan a day off. I'd write "Study day" in my diary and set out to gather data, by train or by car, with my laptop and a few plastic shopping bags full of questionnaires. Apart from my suit, I must have looked like some kind of homeless junkie, wandering round trying to score. I never took anyone else along with me, because I felt it was my job to do everything. I didn't want anyone looking over my shoulder, and I didn't want to freak anyone out with my eccentric behavior, my obsessive need to collect data. It was very strange. I think I've gone a bit crazy. Really weird. I can't prove any of this. I don't know who any of the people were who took part in my research. There must be hundreds, but I don't remember any of them. All the questionnaires were anonymous, and I never asked for anyone's address. They have to live somewhere, there'll be walking around out there, but I don't know where. Sure, I suppose it must be possible to find some of them. The people who helped me a few months ago in Zwolle and Groningen, they ought to be around still. Yeah, they'll still be there. I can go and look for them, although I'm not sure exactly where. I don't know where they're likely to hang out, but they'll be somewhere. For sure. There must be people in Zwolle and Groningen who remember being part of my research. Maybe most of them moved away to go to college by now. But even then, they can't have disappeared off the face of the earth. If you put an ad in the

paper, some of them will reply. Mmm. Right. But then again, who reads papers any more? Nobody, huh? It's not your standard way of doing research, that's for sure, I know that. I'm probably the only person who does things that way. I have an unorthodox technique. It pushes the boundaries, I know. Sometimes it goes a little way past the boundaries, I suppose. It's not how things are supposed to be done, it's not ethical, I know, but I wanted to get results so badly. It's all so beautiful. It's all dreadful. It keeps me awake at night, most nights, has done for years. I hardly sleep, ever. I always seem to be awake. I know that what I did was terrible. I shouldn't have done it, but I did. It shouldn't have been that way, but that was how it turned out.

Hours have passed. The cup of coffee has been replaced by a glass of wine. The rector listens carefully to my story, and asks a question from time to time. I try to keep going. I keep talking, because I'm afraid of what will happen when I stop. I have to keep this up. I have to keep on telling my story, like Scheherazade, because whatever is going to happen when I stop, it isn't going to be good. As long as I can keep talking, describing, explaining, excusing, breathing in and out, I can postpone my fate. If I can just keep going, I can push time out ahead of me. I don't want to move from here. I'm afraid. I want time to stop. I want everything to stop. Let time come to a halt, just this once. Let it stop its inexorable march, here and now. I want to fall to the ground from the twenty-first floor and never have to get up again. A thump, a squelching sound, and then silence. I want to be held prisoner by a wall of time, just kept right here for eternity.

"Do you find all this believable?"

"Frankly, no."

I get in my car and drive out of town. The roads are quiet and the sun is shining. I start to accelerate onto the highway, but then a thought comes to me. I pull over into the emergency lane and turn off my cellphone. I clear the previous destinations from the GPS and turn it off too. To be extra sure, I reach into the glove compartment and remove the map DVD that goes with the GPS. I don't want anyone to know where I am. I pull away, back onto the highway. I want to go fast now. I push the gas pedal to the floor and leave it

there. My foot is a brick. The Subaru's boxer engine roars with pleasure at this chance to show what it can do. Faster, faster. The speedometer needle moves up to the top of the dial, then over to the right, and drops down towards the horizontal. At this speed, I have to grip the steering wheel tightly with both hands to keep control. Racing along in the left-hand lane, I put on my high-beam headlights and my left turn indicator, signaling to everyone in front of me that I'm coming through, whether they like it or not. I slalom around a big Mercedes Benz that refuses to get out of my way. The speedometer stops moving as the car hits its maximum speed. All I can hear now is a constant, gentle whooshing sound. I'm flying and the rest of the world has become frozen. Nothing is moving; everything has stopped, apart from me. For the thousandth time in my life I'm taking a crazy risk, but it isn't helping. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes. I can't do it. I don't want to go on, but I'm too cowardly to drive myself into a wall or jump from the twenty-first floor. I take my foot off the gas, allow the car to slow down, and drift over to the right-hand lane. The speed limit here is 75. That's more than enough. You have to follow the law. The big Benz overtakes me, but as it passes it slows down a little. The driver, a business type in a double-breasted suit, looks at me, his eyes wide with astonishment, and throws his hands in the air to express his incomprehension. I answer him with the same gesture. I don't know either. I've lost the plot. I don't know what's happening to me any more.

I drive to Zwolle and then to Groningen. I can picture the scene, a few months ago, at the start of the summer, just before the last day of school. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of students, their faces showing their concentration but also smiling, filling in my questionnaires. They're wearing summer dresses or shorts, with thongs on their feet. They're sitting in silence, at white tables laid out in rows of five, working hard in the name of science. Some have their tongues sticking out of their mouths, others are pressing their pencils so hard into the paper that they nearly snap, but they're all trying their very best. I can see them: circling answers, shading boxes, making crosses. I can see it with my own eyes. I didn't have to come here today, because they're all here. All here, answering questions in the name of science.

Chapter 8

I've got to tell my parents. Before the news becomes official and the media circus gets going, I've got to tell my parents. I'm going to be fired. I faked my research data. I made up studies. I wrote about research that never happened. I'm going to be called in, fired, and escorted from the campus, never to return. There's nothing to be done any more. My scientific career is over. I'm not entitled to anything: no compensation, no unemployment assistance, nothing. I've lost everything.

We spent the last weekend of August celebrating my parents' achievement in getting to 80 and still being in good health; they've had 55 years of happy marriage. They'd rented a big house near Ghent so that all their children, with partners, and grandchildren could spend a few days walking, eating, and catching up with the news. We don't all get together very often—someone's always off on a trip, or busy with something more important—so my parents were really pleased that everyone could make it this time. The whole family was there, and everyone was flourishing; the younger ones were studying at school or university, the older ones were doing well in their careers, feet firmly planted in the solid ground of the mainstream of society.

Of course, for the last few days, that last bit hadn't been true any more. I'd officially admitted my misdeeds in person to the rector, and it was only a matter of days before I was going to be officially fired. I wasn't firmly planted anywhere any more. I'd slipped and fallen face-first into a pile of my own filth, but I couldn't bring myself to tell anyone about it at this happy family gathering. Of course, I'd already told my wife; I'd confessed everything to her in a couple of emotional evenings. She was appalled. I'd taken a wrong turn in my work and carried on driving regardless. Plowing on without looking back, until I got lost and confused, and finally hit a tree. And I'd never told her anything about what I was doing. I'd ruined her life, our family's life, and she couldn't do anything about it; all she could do was to watch from the sidelines as our lives slid down an inevitable slope to an uncertain bottom. She'd got pretty angry and done a lot of shouting, but now she was mostly sad. Sad, but also determined. She loved me, and we had to go on. While I sat, dumbstruck, and picked self-pityingly at the scabs of my situation, my wife started to organize the financial, legal, and communications help that we knew we would need; some from people whom we

already knew, the rest from others who were recommended by friends of friends of friends...

“We’ll need them, in the next few weeks.”

“The next few months, more like.”

“The next few years, probably.”

I didn’t want to spoil the festive atmosphere of my parents’ celebration with my nightmare. I wanted to let them continue to believe, for just a little longer, that they had brought up four children who had all done fantastically well. Let them have that feeling that everyone they cared about had found themselves a place in society, for a couple more days at least.

“You’re so quiet.”

We’re all sitting outside at the big table. My mother is standing behind me, her wrinkly old hands on my shoulders. Her hands have always been a lovely brown color, but of late they’ve had more and more spots of white pigment on them. Over time, the skin stops adjusting to the passing of the seasons. She leans forward and places her face against mine. Her soft cheeks touch my stubble; I haven’t shaved since yesterday. She whispers: “Are you okay? I worry about you. You work too hard.”

I don’t know what to say. I stretch a bit and find myself half-smiling, half-yawning as I look at her. I’m tired. I haven’t had a wink of sleep in several nights and my brain has been racing 24 hours a day. My head is ready to explode. I can’t think about anything apart from the mess I’ve made of my life, and the damage I’ve done to other people. My family, my students, my supervisees, my colleagues, the whole field: everyone’s reputation will be infected, everyone will be scarred by my years of egocentric misbehavior. I’m about to face a veritable tsunami of misery. But I can’t say anything, because this is a family celebration.

The next day, my brothers and I get up early to play tennis. We looked on the Internet and found a place nearby where we can knock a few balls about. I’m curious about what will happen. My oldest brother used to play barefoot; he was junior champion of the local club. My other brother was runner-up. (Or was it the other way round?) I never understood why he couldn’t wear shoes like everyone else. Maybe he had a pair and they were too small? Gravel is pretty painful to run and slide about on. Still, this was the middle

of the 1970s, so maybe going barefoot was a form of protest. Barefoot to school, barefoot to play tennis. These days he's to be found in regular footwear; usually sandals, but as of a few years ago he also puts on proper black leather shoes to go to work. He's over fifty now; even he's adjusted to the demands of life. Today he's wearing white tennis shoes. I'm curious about what will happen today. I want to tell my brothers. Let's play our game of tennis, and then I'll tell them.

I'm having trouble concentrating. I can hardly hit the ball at all. The rallies go too quickly and I can't get into my game. But what does it matter? It's a sunny Sunday morning, I'm on a tennis court somewhere in the Belgian countryside with my two brothers, and I feel safe. In a few days, I'll be all over the papers and the TV news, and all hell will break loose; but whatever happens, my brothers will be there to look after me. I'm the tallest of the family, but also the youngest. I'm their little brother. They used to help me with my homework. Now they're here with me on the tennis court, and very soon they're going to get the shock of their lives. They're going to be stunned beyond belief at what I've done, they won't even pretend to understand, but they won't leave me on my own like a pig stuck in its own mess. The rest of the world will reject me, but these are my brothers. Why didn't I do this earlier? Why haven't I once played tennis with my brothers in the last thirty years? Why did I never have time for that?

After an hour or so of knocking the ball rather aimlessly back and forth, I tell them I want to stop. While we're collecting the balls and zipping up the covers of our rackets, I say, "I've got something to tell you. Something important."

There's a white plastic bench at the side of the court, next to the net. I sit down there and tell them everything. I've committed fraud. I've got myself fired. I've caused irreparable hurt to my students and colleagues. I've screwed up their work. My life has gone to hell.

They listen. They've had the shock of their lives. But they're still my brothers.

The whole family makes a trip into Ghent to visit the cathedral of Saint Bavo and admire its wonderful altarpiece dating from 1432, *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb* by Jan and Hubert van Eyck. The central panel depicts Christ as a lamb, being offered for sacrifice to

atone to God for man's sins. The blood that flows during the sacrifice will be used to cover our faults and sins from the eyes of God.

The tiny chapel that houses this immense painting is overflowing with people. I'm tall and can see over most of the people in front of me, but I can't take the whole thing in very well, so I shuffle forward as best I can as the crowd moves slowly onwards. Once I get to the front of the line and position myself facing the middle of the painting, I can begin to imagine the impact that this highly symbolic masterpiece must have made on the devout people of Ghent in the 15th century. I wish I was a Catholic. I wish I believed in something. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

A few days later, I'm driving with my oldest brother through the south of the Netherlands, on the way to my parents' house. They live at the southern tip of the country, near the town of Maastricht. Their house stands on a small hill, surrounded by a beautiful floral garden which they still tend every day. From the terrace at the back of the house, you can see Belgium in the distance at the end of a series of gently rolling hills. I'd told my parents I was coming, but not that there'd be two of us. We park the car down on the street and walk up the path to the house. My father is waiting in the front yard. He's obviously a little uncertain why we're here.

"You've brought your brother. Couldn't you manage on your own?" he asks, with unintentional perceptiveness.

"No. This is important. I'm glad to have him here."

My mother asks if she should make tea and maybe something to eat. It's lunchtime, we've come a long way, we must be hungry. It's only a bit more than an hour from Tilburg to Maastricht, but she's right, we're hungry.

"I have to tell you something important." Mom looks scared.

"Oh, really? What? What is it, son?"

"Let's go and sit down."

"Don't you want some tea first?"

"No, let's get this done. This is important."

So we go and sit down.

They don't want to believe it. They don't understand. They hope it'll all turn out OK. It can't be that bad, surely? I can't have done this on my own? Isn't it crazy that something like this could be allowed to happen? Didn't anyone notice anything? So there must be something wrong with the system then?

I explain that I've confessed, that I've admitted to faking research data, and so I have to face the consequences: I'm going to be fired and I'll be entitled to nothing.

My father sits there, not saying much. He can't really take it all in. He's sitting in a corner of the couch, leaning backwards a little, with his right arm over the armrest and his left hanging over the seat back, like a marionette whose strings have gone slack. He's a tall, imposing man, but now he looks small and defeated.

My mother sits on the chair next to him. She's wearing a pretty long skirt, leaning forward on the chair with her elbows on her knees, holding her face in her hands. From time to time she bites her nails. Her eyes are moist. She's a beautiful woman. Her face is an ever-changing collection of wrinkles. Her skin is soft. I used to like to sit on her lap while she read to me; I would nestle my head against her chest, stick my right thumb in my mouth, and play with her earlobe with the fingers of my left hand.

"It's good that you both came. Really good," says my father to my brother.

"Never forget that we love you, son. We love you," says my mother to me. They don't understand. My mother begins to cry. She'll be doing a lot of that in the next few months. Not because what I've done is so terrible—although it is—but because it's so hard to understand.

My mother will spend the next few months dredging through her recollections of every one of the 365 days in every one of my 45 years, trying to find an explanation for what I've done. 365 times 45, and maybe one will lead her to a revelation. My first step in the park; my wild behavior in the first grade; my innocent romance at age 8 with the girl next door; the theater scripts that I wrote in high school; my somewhat obscure love life; the effect of the cities where I worked, whether that was the stress of Amsterdam, the sheer unending flatness of Groningen, or the conviviality of Tilburg; my friends from way back, who phone my mother to say that they can't believe what's happened, because I was always way better at everything than they were; the modern art exhibition in Rotterdam that she complained

she didn't understand, leading me to reply, "Mom, you don't have to understand; all that matters is whether or not you like it;" the time when my parents thought that I was spending too much time home alone and mentioned that they were thinking about adopting another boy, to which my reply was, "No way; other kids are all so different to me;" the time when I slammed the door too hard; all the sleepless nights; changing soccer club for no obvious reason when I was seventeen; that morning when they phoned and I didn't answer, although they knew I was home; and, especially, that time that I mentioned, during dinner, how I was glad that life didn't have any meaning.

"I don't understand it, son. What was missing all those years? Why did it go wrong? Why? You were always so good at everything. You took everything seriously. Everyone else was out partying, but you'd be reading. You wrote such wonderful essays in elementary school. About wine, and bridges, and beavers. You were always working, always enthusiastic, and you loved to talk about what you were doing. You lived for your work, from waking to bedtime. You were a fantastic teacher. Your colleagues were always full of praise. I just don't understand. Son? You know what you were doing was wrong? Why did you do it, then? It must have all gone to your head. It all became too much for you. You have to be strong to live with so much status. It takes strong legs to carry the weight of all that success."

My mother likes to tell stories about my amazing imagination as a child. I invented all kinds of stories, with such passion and conviction that I began to believe them myself—and so did my friends, who would go home and tell all kinds of tall tales. Their mothers would phone my mother to complain, or to express their concern about what a bad influence I was being. My mother thought it was all pretty harmless; she wasn't one for keeping small kids strictly in line.

"Maybe I should have done something then. You had too much imagination. I should have put a stop to it, or at least got you to tone it down a bit."

"No, Mom. I'm pretty sure that wouldn't have made any difference, and the world's a dull enough place as it is. Imagination is a great thing, just not the stupid way I did it. There's a place for creativity in science, but you can't pretend that what you wish were true, actually is."

We sit down to eat. Everyone's hungry; powerful emotions take up a lot of energy. My mother has cooked for us: soup and fried mushrooms. My parents talk about the past. My father tells how his father, during the Depression, lost his job and couldn't find anything else, so he sold cans of paint door-to-door. Most of the time he got pretty short shrift; he wasn't the only guy going round trying to sell whatever he could find, whether people needed it or not. My mother remembers that they could only ever afford to keep one room heated at home; everyone gathered around the one stove to eat, do the housework, drink coffee, or play cards, and when everyone was out at work or school, the clothes would be hung in front of it to dry.

A few months later, I'm driving with my mother through the countryside. She's still looking for answers—just one would do, for now anyway—but that's not why I'm here today. We're on the way to the hospital in Maastricht, where my father was admitted a few days ago. We take the pretty way along the back roads, driving past big fields with long rows of fruit trees. It's wintertime. The trees are bare and small, supported by poles and wires so that they grow just the right way, so that they not only produce as many apples and pears as possible, but also that the fruits can be picked with minimal effort. Not a single tree is allowed to grow the way it wants to.

"Do you see that?" says my mother, surprisingly forcefully. "They're trapped. They can't go anywhere."

I look out of the driver's window. Every field contains the same rows of neat trees, all propped and wired up, all the same distance apart, all the same height. I look at my mother. Although she's lived here for twenty-five years and drives this way every day, she always seems to find something new. Even if nothing changes, she sees something different each time. I'm glad to be her son. "Mom?"

While we roll along the lanes of the Limburg countryside, she sits with her bag on her lap, staring out of the window. What's she seen?

"Mom?"

She doesn't hear me; she's not really here with me. Is she thinking about me? Will I be OK?

It takes strong legs to carry the weight of all that success. My legs were too weak. I slipped to the floor, while others—maybe wobbling, maybe with a stick to lean on—managed to stay upright. I wanted to do everything, to be good at everything. I wasn't content with my averageness; I shut myself away, suppressed my emotions, pushed my morality to one side, and got drunk on success and the desire for answers and solutions. And that led to me falling off a cliff, taking many of my colleagues, supervisees, and students with me. If only it had just been me who was affected, the only one in this pool of pain. But no, I'd let myself get so carried away that I'd been making up the answers and inventing solutions for the questions and problems that others had come up with, showing them that life is full of amazing structures that fit together beautifully, and that I was better than anyone else at revealing those truths, that amazingly clear reality.

I've been exposed as a fraud. But it's a double revelation: at the same time, I've torn away my own illusory truth with which I'd surrounded myself. Yet, in doing so I've also trashed the truth of "situationism" that I cherished in social psychology. I'm the one to blame, not the situation.

I was the one who made up experiments and falsified data; it wasn't the environment I worked in that did it. I can cite Benjamin Kouwers' *The Game of Personality* and demonstrate, almost philosophically, that the whole concept of "personality" is meaningless. I can show you any number of pieces of research to prove that personality tests are terrible predictors of specific behavior (and there's no other kind of behavior). It's no trouble at all to find hundreds of studies showing that what people do is far better explained by the situation that they're in, than by their so-called personality or by the bag of genes they've carried around with them since birth, but in the end I, and not anyone else, was the one who did what I did.

I'm not the only fraudster in science, I'm not the only fraudster in psychology, I'm not the only fraudster in social psychology, that's something I know for sure.

But my fraud is mine alone, and nobody else's. If I want to understand my own stupidity, I have to learn from Gibson, the ecologist, not from an existentialist like Kouwer, and certainly not from the extreme situationists whom I worshipped for years, like the worst kind of fundamentalist. People never all react the same way to a situational

stimulus; there's always some variation. People are different from each other (duh!); sometimes just a little, sometimes a lot. There may not be such a thing as a recognizable personality, but there are certainly individual differences. People react to stimuli from the environment in their own way. If those stimuli are very strong, their reactions will tend to be quite similar; if the stimuli are weaker, there's more room for variation.

What I did wrong happened in a specific environment. If the environment had been different, things would probably have turned out differently. If the cookie jar had had a lid, and hadn't been placed deliberately on the table in front of me each morning, I would probably have avoided temptation better. But I—not some “non-I”, not a negation of myself—couldn't resist. Other people, in the same situation and with the same cookie jar in front of them, might have been able to (or at least, to succumb less badly, less often). Perhaps. We don't know. It's an unanswerable question—perhaps by definition. But what we do know is that the interaction between *me* and *my* environment had a unique chemistry, which slowly but surely became more dangerous, more toxic. I saw the cookie jar, and everything became possible. Others didn't see it, or if they did, they thought about the problems and the risks, acted differently, were smarter, were wiser, felt the moral pressure to conform.

I, me, always me.

It's not the environment. It's me. I don't like games. I think they're stupid. They're boring, and take too long. I'll play if I have to, but it's always a little against my will. As a father you can't really avoid playing one occasionally—Sorry!, Monopoly, Chutes and Ladders—but I always try to put it off as long as possible. When my daughters ask me to play a game with them, I try to get them to come and paint or draw with me, or go and kick a ball about: “Come on, it'll be fun outside, in the fresh air, and good for you too.” If that doesn't work, and I have to sit at a table to play some board or card game, I find it hard not to cheat. I can't stand losing. Even if I don't enjoy the game, I always want to win. I've had to teach myself not to demolish my beloved small daughters at some game designed for children aged from 2 to 5.

“There. Your turn.”

“Mom!”

When I was a student playing Trivial Pursuit with friends, I would always try to sneak a couple of extra cards out of the pile when it was my turn, and quickly memorize the answers on the back. When I play tennis, I prefer not to count the points. I love hitting the ball as hard and as accurately as possible; I’m happy to chase the ball around and wear myself out. I might play a couple of games and even enjoy serving sometimes, but I can’t play a whole set or match. I know myself too well: if there’s too much at stake, I get nervous, I get cramps, I miss easy shots, and it’s no fun any more.

I’ll do anything to avoid losing. I’m a terrible flirt and I can be very charming, but I have a problem actually making a move. Imagine that she said no. I have a good sense of humor, I’m a great conversationalist, I’m a good listener who asks the right questions, but I hate the idea of actually turning my desires into reality. I long ago lost count of the number of times I’ve buzzed around a potential girlfriend like some kind of hyperactive bee, without actually moving in to do what bees are meant to do. Let’s go out, to the pub, we can talk for hours about films, fashion, us, nothing—but no action. A lot of words, but no deeds. I didn’t dare. I was afraid of being rejected. There was a lot of talk about sex, but not much actually doing it. And when it did happen, it was rarely—meaning, basically, never—at my initiative.

I knew that this wasn’t very cool. As a man, I was meant to be self-assured. Men—and not women—are expected to stop hesitating and get on with it. If I wanted something, I was the one who was supposed to make it happen, not her. In the first year of my psychology studies, I spent a lot of time with a female student (whom I would have loved to get into bed, which of course never happened, however much it was clearly on both of our minds) writing a long, literary essay about flirting and courtship behavior. We spent whole days, running into the evenings, in her room, going through the biological, psychological, and—especially—anthropological literature. Finally we came to the conclusion that, despite several waves of emancipation, up to and including Madonna, it was still cool for a boy to have as much sex as possible, while a girl who went with him was likely to be called a slut. Boys have to score, as often as possible; girls are meant to wait. That took away any

remaining desire I might have had to take any sort of initiative. Every evening, after we finished work on the essay, I got on my bike and pedaled home.

I hate sickness. I always feel acutely depressed when I step into a hospital. All that suffering, all those people with something wrong with them, all those sick, scared faces, the beds, bandages, blood, wheelchairs, and those trolleys with a stick that looks like a street light with a bag of water hanging from it—I can't stand it. Being sick means losing control of your life; you have to hand yourself over to someone else who can help.

In the winter following my downfall, I took my daughters along to visit my father in the hospital in Maastricht. He looked in bad shape, drained and clearly having lost weight. The operation had gone well, but he was in a lot of pain and didn't understand what the doctors were telling him. Every time it was someone else, and every time he got a different story. You could see on his old face that my father was scared. He didn't know what was happening to him, or whether things would turn out OK. Of course we thought it would all turn out fine, but you can never be sure.

I thought about my students. I hadn't wanted anything bad to happen to them. I didn't want them to become sick; I wanted them to keep control over their lives. I wanted to show them how nice and predictable the world was. I wanted them to trust in reality, so that they could make progress. I wanted everything to work out. No hassles, no complaints, no conflict or uncertainty. I didn't want to let them down.

I'm insecure. I see myself as a trash chute: everything falls into a deep hole. If someone gives me a compliment, I might hear it, but I don't really take it in. I can feel a pat on the shoulder, but I don't really register what it means. There is no fertile soil in me where the seeds of positive feedback can land, settle, and grow.

When I gave my inaugural speech as full professor in Groningen on September 11, 2001, the room was full of family and friends. I guess they probably applauded loud and long after I finished speaking, but what I mainly remember about that day—apart, of course, from the coincidence with the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon—is the criticism of my speech from a few colleagues, which I found about later via the grapevine. Apparently, they found my portrayal of contemporary social psychology, as a

fantastic combination of everyday experiences with scientific precision, far too philosophical and pretentious. I'd reviewed the field in the manner of some old, wise, emeritus professor, which my critics found pretty arrogant from someone in his early thirties who'd just arrived. I was too young to be doing this kind of blue-sky theorizing and philosophizing; that was the job of retired academics, who had long careers to look back on. I should stick to my own research, my own experiments, and stop daydreaming about the way things ought to be. The day after my address, I asked my wife about every 15 minutes what she thought about it. "Great. Really." she answered patiently each time. She knew about my self-doubt, and how I would often set the bar so high that I couldn't help but be disappointed in myself. The next day I asked her about once an hour. After a week I was down to three or four times a day. After a month, every other day. "Great. Really, I thought it was a great speech. Don't worry." But I couldn't really believe her.

Social psychology is an empirical science. Everything you propose has to be supported with empirical observations, preferably from a new and exciting experiment. One of the decades-old rules of presenting your work is "ten minutes to data"; you have to get the results of your first experiment, with a nice clear graph showing an unambiguous result, up on the screen within ten minutes of starting to give your speech or lecture. Even if you're going to be talking for fifty or sixty minutes, you only get a maximum of ten minutes to present the theoretical preamble; the facts, the data are everything. This means you don't get much time to talk about theory, because you first have to introduce yourself, explain what the subject of your research is and why it's so important. That leaves seven minutes to talk about your theory, and to describe how your first experiment works. That last bit takes at least three minutes, so you've got four minutes—four minutes!—to present your theory.

I was the youngest of the family. The baby. Long after my brothers and sister had left home, I still had to go through puberty and start high school. When I got there, their reputation was waiting for me. "Ah, one of the Stapel clan," said the teachers. I thought: Since I'm one of the Stapel clan, I guess that means I have to do my best. Since the faculty had apparently filed their collective recollections of the wonderful achievements of my brothers and sister under the single word "Stapel," their expectations of me were pretty

high. I'd have to be good at languages and drawing, like my sister, excel in math and physics like my oldest brother, and master the social sciences like my other brother. At least, that was how I saw it. That was how I interpreted "Ah, one of the Stapel clan." Maybe "Stapel" actually meant something else to the teachers, but I didn't think about that. My sister could be a bit flaky, my oldest brother was a bit introverted, and my other brother couldn't hold a discussion without being deliberately provocative. Maybe. I thought my siblings were fantastic, and wanted to be like them. That was hard, because the gap between us was substantial and they were all good at different things.

I used to always be the last one to finish eating. That was understandable; I was the youngest and the smallest, and just couldn't eat as fast as the others. Soup, meat, dessert: I was always the last to have an empty plate. Sometimes I asked for smaller portions, but I had to grow, so I got served as much as everyone else. And whatever I tried, my mouth was too small and my coordination wasn't good enough to get any sort of rhythm going. It was very frustrating. Every mealtime became a competition—which I knew in advance I was bound to lose—with the aim of not being the last to finish. I was always the one everyone else was waiting for. "Come on, eat up. We want to leave the table. We want to go watch TV."

One evening, when I was about eight years old, I made a breakthrough. I finished my soup before my father. While we were eating, I asked him all kinds of questions about his work. You could see that it made him happy to have his youngest son take an interest in what he did for a living. He took the time to think about a clear and patient answer for each question. While he talked away, looking at me from time to time to check if I'd understood, I was spooning my soup down as fast as I could.

I got bored very easily. I didn't want to keep doing the same thing, telling the same story. I finally decided that I didn't want to be an actor when I realized that it meant reciting the same lines, the same way, two hundred times a year. Even if you're performing something as exciting as *"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"* it's going to get stale very quickly. That didn't sound like much fun. But I quickly discovered that repetition is a big part of science as well. It's too expensive and too risky to constantly be reaching into the unknown. When you've found something, you have to milk it for all it's worth. To survive, you have to turn

your discovery into an industry, to keep the money rolling in. A good scientist discovers something, writes it up for publication in a journal, conducts a few variations of the same experiments and publishes them, gets research grants to demonstrate the same thing in a different way, and gets a bunch of students and research assistants to run a bunch of other studies that all demonstrate the same thing. If the discovery is in an area that the general public might find interesting, there might be an opportunity to make money from a popular book (“Top-notch research reveals ...”), maybe even some TV appearances.

That wasn’t for me. I didn’t want to be telling the same story, over and over again. Plenty of my fellow psychologists spent years traveling the world presenting two or three research programs that they were involved in, tops. If you phoned or e-mailed them to ask if they could come and give a lecture at your university, or a speech at the conference you were organizing, they’d typically answer with something like, “What do you want me to talk about? This year, I’m mainly on the road with A and B.” Scientists as traveling circus performers, with a slightly different version each year of the same perfectly-honed act.

That wasn’t going to be my thing. I hadn’t walked away from acting for nothing. I wanted to present something new, something fresh in every lecture. I didn’t want to be a one-trick pony, telling the same story all the time. I wanted people not to expect anything from me, except the unexpected. I thought it was exciting to be exciting. That made things difficult for me. Nobody should be bored. I wanted to come up with a new subject, or a new series of experiments, every time. In the end, the only way I could manage that was to transform my scientific presentations into self-penned theatrical entertainment, in which I played the role of The Great Illusionist.

Chapter 9

It's the middle of winter, and people are getting excited. It seems to have gotten even colder since it snowed last night. Everyone's outside skating on the frozen lakes, rivers, and canals. People are all talking about one thing: the possibility that it might stay this cold long enough to run the *Elfstedentocht*, the once-a-decade, 120-mile amateur skating race that lasts all day and unites the entire Netherlands in a way that no other event can match, apart perhaps from a victory at soccer over Germany or some other excuse to celebrate the defeat of a common foe.

I'm not much of a skater. I love watching other people's swirling movements as they glide effortlessly between the fields and rows of trees, but I have trouble with those long cross-country skates. I'm afraid of falling over, I have trouble getting into the right rhythm, and my legs just feel too long. So I'd rather stay home.

I've put on an extra sweater and made a cup of tea to keep warm, and I'm sitting on the sofa re-reading Douglas Coupland's *Life after God*. My wife and daughters have gone out; they're probably skating or shopping or something. I'm not too sure where they are. I didn't ask when they went out. I haven't been paying too much attention to detail recently.

The thermostat is set to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Since I confessed to my crimes a few months ago and was fired on the spot, it's been a daily challenge to spend as little money as possible. Because I was fired for cause, I didn't get any compensation, and I'm not entitled to a dime from the various social "safety nets" of what some people outside the Netherlands still probably imagine is a welfare paradise. We're more or less bankrupt, but we're struggling on with help from family and friends. I'm not complaining, however. This is not Syria, or Yemen, or some other war zone. This is a small, peaceful country in north-western Europe. We'll be fine. We've cancelled our newspapers and magazine subscriptions, turned the heating down, shortened our (no longer daily) showers. We've gotten used to turning the tap off when shaving or brushing our teeth, hanging out the washing instead of using the dryer, and shopping at the discount supermarkets where none of the brands are "as seen on TV". We've said goodbye to the babysitter, the cleaning lady, and my car. Restaurant meals, trips out, candy, drinks, a quick stop for coffee, new clothes,

forget it. A bath—a whole tub full of hot water—is an unimaginable luxury. Still, we're getting used to it.

The doorbell rings. Shall I get it? I really don't want to speak to anybody. I turn back to Coupland for a moment while I decide.

And then sometimes I think the people to feel saddest for are people who once knew what profoundness was, but who lost or became numb to the sensation of wonder – people who closed the doors that leads us into the secret world – or who had the doors closed for them by time and neglect and decisions made in times of weakness.

Oh well. I put the book down, climb out from under the blanket, and walk to the living-room door, which opens onto the entrance hall. Opening it carefully, I look down the hallway towards the front door. Normally I can see who's there through the glass without being seen myself, and decide if I want to answer; I've been doing that quite a lot lately. But today, strangely, I can't see anyone.

I walk down the hallway and open the door. A wave of cold greets me. A few meters away, a man is standing in the middle of the front garden, wearing a short, dark winter coat and a trendy scarf. He's trying to get some shelter from the cold, and the wet snow that's just started to fall, for his head by raising his shoulders and lowering his neck. He steps forward carefully. He tells me that he's slightly surprised that I opened the door; he's rung the bell several times in the past few months, but nobody ever opened up. In fact he was just on the way back to his car after what he thought was yet another failed attempt to contact me.

Although he's obviously very keen to speak to me, the words don't seem to be coming to him very easily. He wants to know how I am and how I'm coping. "It must be terrible for you," he says.

I'm not sure what it is about this particular guy, this particular day, but something about him touches me.

It's freezing, I'm standing in the doorway in my socks, and he's outside in the cold. I ask if he wants to come in. When we're both inside with the door shut, he apologizes for

the dirty puddles of half-melted snow that his shoes have left on the floor. But it's nothing compared to the mess that the kids have been making in the last couple of days with their skates and boots. I needed to get the mop out here anyway.

So, it turns out he's a writer for one of the largest Dutch newspapers, and wants to tell my story. He tells me that he's been following the reporting of the "Stapelgate affair" closely since the story broke six months or so ago, and he thinks that the real story is probably a bit more complicated than what's been told so far. All that attention from the media, the huge press conferences at the University, speeches from the Vice-President (one made while he was on a trip to the U.S.!) and the Chair of the Committee of Inquiry—while the inquiry itself is still in progress—and I haven't said anything; surely there's more to it than that?

As I listen to him, I find myself getting worried. Why did I open the door? I've *let a journalist in the house*. Just like that. What should I say? I've got a piece of paper with the statement that I've carefully prepared for situations like this: "I understand that you're keen to speak to me, but I'm unable to give you any information at this time. Please address any questions to (etc). Thank you very much." Why didn't I just tell him, politely, to get lost? How hard would that have been?

Then, "I've been a complete dick. I hate myself" slips out, just like that. He doesn't react; just lets me carry on. I tell him what I do all day (pretty much nothing), how my wife and kids are (it's been so tough on them, but they've been amazing), and that I don't feel it's appropriate for me to get involved while the inquiry is ongoing (although I'm not very happy about how the way in which they apparently felt they needed to portray my character, and how they're going about the inquiry generally). I have no idea how long the inquiry is going to last; the committee has clearly chosen to give me as little information as possible. Occasionally there's something in the newspaper, or we get a bit of gossip through a friend of a friend, about what they're discussing at the moment. I find this rather hard to take; it was always likely to be a pretty polarizing process, but by totally excluding me they're running the risk of making things even worse. That isn't going to help me (not that I imagine they care), but it isn't going to help my former colleagues either. They want an inquiry that's seen to be completely clean, fair, and impartial, and that's not what they're

going to get. And I'm fairly sure why: the committee members hate me. They don't know me—in fact, only a couple of them have ever met me—but they hate me anyway.

The man listens attentively, and nods from time to time. Why the hell am I doing this? I can already imagine the headlines. Anything I say, can and will be used against me in the court of public opinion.

Why am I talking so much? I guess I just have such a need to tell somebody how crap I feel, how ashamed I am of what I've done, that I can't stop myself.

Meanwhile, he listens and looks at me sympathetically. He doesn't really know what to make of me and my monologue. His shoes are leaving dark patches on the floor and an occasional drop of melted snow emerges from his coat from time to time. He can see that I'm tired and not thinking straight, and reassures me that what I've said won't appear in the paper. He would like to come back, and leaves me his cellphone number.

For months, that piece of paper telling me exactly what to say when I open the door and have a camera or a microphone or a notebook shoved in my face has been taped up next to the front door. For months I've been keeping a low profile, going out as little as possible: once or twice a week to the shops, and otherwise I've been invisible. For months I've been like some kind of cartoon spy, not leaving the house until I've checked that nobody's following me. For months I've been practicing what to say if someone stops me in the street: "I understand that you're keen to speak to me, but I'm unable to give you any information at this time." And now, despite all that preparation, all those precautions, here I am, pouring my heart out to a journalist, on a miserable winter afternoon. Why? Because it's so damn cold outside.

The shit hit the fan in September 2011. News of my misdeeds went round the world, and discussion and speculation continued almost daily for months in the Dutch media. It was described as "scientific fraud on an unprecedented scale". For years I'd been faking research data, making up entire studies, and generally lying to people. Shortly after I confessed what I'd done, the University of Tilburg held a huge press conference, launched a Committee of Inquiry, and wheeled out its President for a succession of interviews. The Committee of Inquiry made a few reports to the media about its progress, brought out an interim report, and kept the eager public up to date with its discoveries of evidence of the

scale of the fraud via its own website. All of this helped to keep my name, and my story, prominent in the minds of the Dutch public. For more than a year I was in the news, several times a month, sometimes for days on end. Every time something was posted on the Committee of Inquiry's website, my story was dug up and recycled. You remember that Stapel guy, from Tilburg? Looks like the inquiry's still running.

In November 2012 the Committee at last published its final report. I'd been counting the months, weeks, days, and hours waiting for this, while rumors circulated that it would be out by Easter, or definitely by May, or before the summer for sure, next month, the month after, probably before the end of the year. First the report itself would appear, to be followed by the appendices. Now it was finally out. Finally. I received an official letter saying that I could have a look at a draft of the report on October 30, to check it for factual errors. October 30, 2012 was a Tuesday. The children set off for school in the near-dark, and my wife set off for work as optimistic as ever. "Good luck, darling. You stay strong, OK? This day will pass, too, like all the others. Will you call me when it gets here? Just let it go. It'll be like water off a duck's back, quack, quack. You know what you did, and you know better than anyone else that it wasn't right. All that's going to happen is that they write that down on paper, with a lot of other stuff that doesn't matter. Stay strong. Every day, especially today." I nodded and tried to smile. I've got one more day to wait. Beckett's words in *Waiting for Godot* came to mind: "The tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep somewhere else another stops." That's a nice way of looking at it. My tears are saving someone else from suffering.

I wait, and wait, and wait, and at 6 p.m. I get an e-mail from my lawyer, with the inauspicious subject line of "Delay". The Committee has just discovered some new information and so the report isn't ready yet. That's it. I'm just going to have to wait longer. But the website has been updated, with the list of all the publications that the Committee has examined, so once again Stapelgate is back in the media. Yeah, that Stapel guy, from Tilburg, the inquiry's still running. On Friday November 2, I get an e-mail telling me that they have finished drafting the final report (apparently they've decided that they no longer needed me to check it for factual errors). The Committee's work is done. Before we sit down at the dinner table to start our exciting family weekend, I flick through the pages of the report. How bad is it? Well, in many ways it's basically just a rehash of the

interim report. For example, in the first report, the Committee had attempted to psychoanalyze me and enumerate the deficiencies in my character, and the final report reprised their non-factual, non-evidence-based, non-scientific opinions of me. However, there was a new section in which the Committee examined the culture of research in social psychology and related disciplines. The report paints a picture of a world of “sloppy science” (using those exact English words, even in the Dutch version), where people are often left on their own to get on with their research with little or no supervision, where data are handled in ways that will almost inevitably lead to errors, and where “creative” design, analysis, and reporting techniques are frequently used to give a better match between the real world as described by the data, and the ideal world that the researchers would like to exist. The Committee declares itself to be shocked by these discoveries. Frankly, so am I.

Most universities, confronted with cases of scientific misconduct such as fraud or plagiarism, or other unethical conduct such as abuse of funds or sexual harassment, would want to keep the news as quiet as possible, or perhaps wait until their internal inquiry was finished and then let the press know in writing. But during “Stapelgate”, the whole sorry mess was regularly dragged out and warmed over at a succession of large-scale press conferences, with coffee and sandwiches laid on in case the nation’s journalists felt in need of an incentive to show up.

About all I could do while the inquiry continued was to keep quiet. Nobody—especially not my family members or former colleagues—would benefit if I were to start appearing on TV or making statements to the press and causing the inquiry to get bogged down in distractions. There was a Committee, and it had to be allowed to do its work in as neutral and objective a manner as possible; until it was ready with its conclusions, I had to wait. Maybe they would ask me to take an active part in their proceedings; maybe they would want me to take part in long, painful sessions in which the students I supervised could tell me exactly what they thought of me. Maybe they’d even ask me to think of ways to stop something like this happening again. But probably not. I was untrustworthiness personified. My scientific life was over. I would just have to sit quietly and wait for the Committee’s verdict.

Could it really be true that I was the only one who'd done something like this? And if it turned out that I wasn't, what then? Should there be a massive housecleaning operation, or should they just turn the lights out and close the whole place down? I realized how much damage I'd done, and what terrible dilemmas I'd ended up imposing on my colleagues. What I really wanted to do was to call, personally, every one of my students, doctoral supervisees, and academic colleagues whose work I'd messed up, and say how sorry and ashamed I was, but that would probably just lead to more problems. I couldn't help anyone any more. Anything I did or said would make things worse. Anything I touched, or even just went near, would end up contaminated. But then again: I ought to apologize to them. I wrote each of them a personal e-mail, in which I said how sorry I was and that they could contact me if they wanted to. Several did. I think that helped.

I'd made some terrible mistakes and caused a lot of anguish. I'd fallen into a bottomless pit of my own creation and, sat way down there, could only ask myself how I could have been so reckless, thoughtless, and senseless as to drag so many other people down with me. Did I really think that all my cheating and lying was going to actually be of use to anyone? How blind and deaf and stupid can you be?

Although I'd decided to keep quiet as far as possible, there was one occasion when I couldn't avoid entering the discussion. When the first provisional report appeared in October 2011, I released a short written statement in which I admitted to having failed as a scientist, offered an unreserved apology to my colleagues, my supervisees, and the whole academic community for the hurt and damage that I'd caused, and concluded by saying that I was going to have to look deep inside myself to try and work out why I had getting so badly lost. One of the most important things that we know from psychology is that human behavior is overdetermined: There are many reasons why people do anything, and so any attempt to understand someone's failures, however extreme, is going to require patience and an open mind.

Once the Committee had finished its work and presented its final report, it was time for me to react for the second time. I prepared a statement in which I tried to convey, as honestly as possible, how, a year on from the revelation of my guilt, my emotions were still dominated by confusion, sorrow, self-hatred, shame, guilt, and especially regret towards

the others who had been involved. What I had done was terrible and almost impossible to understand. There was no rhyme or reason to it. So once again I felt the need to emphasize that my downfall couldn't be explained away with a couple of glib theories, sound bites, or one-line summaries. You could come up with a whole list of possible explanations: a desire to achieve something, naked ambition, laziness, nihilism, a lust for power, status anxiety, the urge to find solutions, the need to feel whole, pressure to "publish or perish", arrogance, emotional flakiness, loneliness, disappointment, low attention span, addiction to answers, etc etc etc, but none of these *constructs* had sufficient *explanatory power* to reveal why I'd done what I had. You'd need the whole set, and then a whole lot more. I'd spent years trying to find simpler and more concise explanations and theories to describe human behavior, but all the time that I'd been looking for order, structure, and simplicity, I'd been keeping my eyes more and more tightly shut to reality until the inevitable happened, and I'd crashed and burned. And in so doing, I'd rather neatly proven the opposite of what I'd been looking for. If you want things to be extremely clear and simple, just close your eyes.

At the start of November 2011, my wife got in her car and drove to the University of Amsterdam, my beloved alma mater and former employer, to hand in my PhD diploma. The interim report had observed that my various acts of fraud were incompatible with the obligations of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy; I'd thought about it, found that to be a reasonable conclusion, and decided to surrender my title of PhD voluntarily. Just as a bricklayer has to be trusted not to take shortcuts when mixing cement, because then your house will fall down, you can't allow people with the academic rank of doctor to mess about with research data, because then the whole edifice of science becomes shaky.

It took quite a while to find the big red tube with my diploma in it, but in the end it turned up in a corner of the girls' playroom, among the dolls, strollers, Playmobil figures and Lego bricks, along with another tube full of swimming certificates, my old school diplomas, and other vital official documents. I found my old certificate that confirmed that, after a year's study and practical sessions every Wednesday from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m., I was officially qualified as a Basic Level Soccer Trainer. I even remembered the guy from the national soccer association who'd come along to present it to me in person.

When my wife extracted the red tube from among the toys and carefully opened it, she discovered that a particularly elegant Barbie with her arms raised had been keeping my diploma company for the last few years, presumably having climbed in there to hide from the attentions of our daughters during their “experimental phase” (cutting hair, painting nails, twisting legs) when they were in kindergarten.

A couple of hours later, my wife was politely received at the University of Amsterdam and handed my doctoral diploma, still in its red tube, over to the President. There was little in the way of conversation. The President acknowledged what my wife was going through: years of hard work, all unraveling. A short time later, the newspapers and TV got hold of this story as well, and I was trending worldwide on the Internet again: “Diederik Stapel, the professor who cheated, hands back his doctorate.” Barbie stayed at home, with a firm grip on the other tube, the one with my certificate as a Basic Level Soccer Trainer.

From the day that the story first broke, journalists were constantly trying to find me. I felt like I’d become their collective prey. Fortunately, one of my wife’s friends was a communications consultant, and she put an enormous amount of effort into helping us manage our relationship with the media. She spent weeks being called by newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV reporters, and doing her best to deny some of the wilder rumors that started to circulate (“Diederik Stapel has been admitted to a psychiatric clinic”, “Stapel’s children are being bullied at school”, “Stapel is getting divorced”). However, some journalists wouldn’t let themselves be limited to our “official channel”, and managed to get hold of our home address, landline phone, and cellphone numbers. It’s amazing what you can find on the Internet these days.

We received long letters, both handwritten and typed, dozens of text messages, and phone calls from unknown numbers with Amsterdam (press) or Hilversum (TV/radio) area codes. We answered politely that we couldn’t make any statements, especially while the inquiry was still ongoing. It wouldn’t be appropriate. (Not that that stopped the University’s President, as well as various members of the Committee of Investigation, from regularly taking the opportunity to comment extensively on the whole affair.)

But journalists are a persistent bunch. They tried to get in touch via our friends and family members whom they happened to know because they'd been at school together, or lived in the same street. One neighbor was called by the producers of a leading TV show. They'd found her number on the Internet because she operated a small business out of her home. Maybe she could have a chat with me and see if she couldn't get me to call them? She took their number. I called them back and told them sorry, but we weren't interested. Going public with my side of the story wasn't an option, no matter how much I would have liked to. It wouldn't be appropriate. Still.

The urge to say something, to tell it the way it was, became almost unbearable when, in October 2012, more than a year after the Stapelgate story first broke, rumors started to circulate in various newspapers and on the Internet that I'd been misappropriating research funds for personal ends, and that my financial records had been taken away for examination. It caused yet another sensation, and it was completely wrong. I'd voluntarily handed my computer and smartphone over to my investigators, but all my bank statements and other financial records were still sitting in their usual place in my desk drawer at home. But it was too late to put these particular (non-existent) worms back in the can. Friends phoned me up and asked me pointedly if there wasn't something going on. A couple of people who had agreed to give me a bit of consultancy work—a chance to finally be of use to someone after a year—changed their minds. Where there's smoke, there's fire, was what people seemed to want to believe. But really, there wasn't even any smoke; it was just someone beating an old duster.

We're sitting drinking coffee in the living room. The children are at school and my wife's at work. The man and I are just acquaintances; we met briefly at a drinks party a few months back. He wanted to come and see me, because he's worried about how I'm coping. Someone who's fallen so hard can probably use a little help. He's on his way to work and looks pretty good: freshly shaven, Hugo Boss aftershave if I'm not mistaken, nice suit, neatly ironed white shirt, and a conservative tie.

I'm wearing jeans and a casual shirt with long sleeves. I'm tired. It's October 2011, the news has been out for a few weeks, and I feel like I'm waking up in the same nightmare

every day. It's like *Groundhog Day*, with me instead of Bill Murray and some kind of emotional hell instead of Punxsutawney, PA. What have I done? And why?

I tell my visitor about my dream from last night. I'm leaving a big party at the Venice Carnival, with no idea where to go. I'm walking down one of the huge marble stairways of the castle where the party was held. It's early in the morning, around 4 o'clock. There's a thin mist everywhere. In the distance I can just make out that the band is still playing the last number of the evening, as they have been for hours now: "Brazil, my Brazilian Brazil." I'm wearing a big black cloak, like a toga of some kind. My hair is grey, or white, or some combination, and I'm holding a golden mask in my hand. Other guests are heading the same way, down the stairs towards their cars and bicycles and horses to take them home; there are even two silver aircraft. Some of them are still wearing their masks, other are holding them in their hands like me. I know that I know these people, but when I try to look at them, they turn their heads away. Everyone is in a pair or a group, except me. I'm on my own.

They all look tired and disheveled. The men's shirts have one button too many undone, and the women's mascara is messy. The women are often tripping over their high heels and having to be saved from falling over by their partners. Nobody's talking.

I'm the first to get to the bottom of the stairs, where I discover that I don't know where I am, and it's snowing. I look around hoping someone will come to my help, but don't dare to actually talk to anyone. I'm shivering from the cold and pull my black cape firmly around me. The other guests get quickly into their cars, onto their bikes and horses, and head off. I'm left on my own. The music has stopped. Silence descends, and I have no idea where to go.

The doorbell rings. Loudly, twice. I get up from the table. "I'll tell you the rest in a minute," I tell him.

I go to the door that opens onto the hallway and open it gingerly. Through the crack I can see the front door. I can see two men outside. The taller one has a microphone and the shorter one has a camera on his shoulder. The lens is aimed right at my front door. I close the living room door carefully.

"TV," I whisper.

The doorbell goes again, loud and insistently. I go back to the table. We look at each other, wondering what's going to happen next.

"TV? You can't be serious. Leave it, they'll go in a minute."

There's the doorbell once more, followed closely by hard knocking on the window. I find myself cowering involuntarily. The glass shakes and rattles in the 1920s window frame. It sounds like someone's trying to throw a stone through it.

"Jesus... Quick, let's go into the kitchen!"

As we leap up and run the few steps to the kitchen, I can just see the head of the taller journalist peering in through the window.

"Hallo! I can see you, professor. I. Can. See. You. Hallo?" he calls, before banging hard on the window again.

From the kitchen, I can't see what's going on, but I'm starting to worry that he's going to smash his way in.

"Hallo? Hallo-o!" he shouts. He's clearly getting irritated by now. "I know you're there."

My visitor and I look at each other. We haven't a clue what to do here. What's going to happen? How long can this go on for? Will they come back every day until they finally wear us down?

"They'll go soon. This happens quite a lot," I say in a tone of voice that I hope will reassure my guest, who is looking quite shocked. It's sort of true: this kind of thing does happen quite a lot, but then my wife or one of my daughters opens the door, speaks politely to the people standing there, and then the camera gets switched off and they leave.

Actually, it's amazing how good they've become at getting people to go away. Last week my younger daughter got rid of an entire camera crew in a couple of minutes. I stayed curled up in the living room and she went to the door. They wanted to speak to me. Sorry, you can't. Why not? Because you can't. So you're home alone? No, my sister is here with me. How old are you? Nine. So young, and home alone—that doesn't sound very good. Well, we're fine. Now will you please go away? I'm playing Sorry! with my sister.

So, here we are in the kitchen, not sure what to say to each other. The coffee is finished and it doesn't feel like we need to make more. Two big guys in their forties, trapped in a kitchen because they're afraid of a couple of bozos with a camera and a

microphone. I daren't go back to the living room—they can see me sitting in there from the street if they want to.

We wait. After twenty minutes my guest sneaks out of the house, gets in his car, and drives off. After a few minutes he phones, sounds relieved. He's driven around the neighborhood, down every street, and there's no sign of an unfamiliar car, or two guys walking around with prominent audiovisual equipment. He reckons the coast is clear.

Exactly a week later, they're back, same day, same time. They ring the doorbell once, twice, three times, long and loud, all the time standing right up against the door with their camera and microphone ready for action. I'm not answering. I'm afraid that I'll forget my lines, or say something stupid, or maybe that they'll come inside the house, uninvited. There's no escape. I have to stay in and sit quietly. Sit quietly until they decide that I've been punished enough. When will that be? Will this ever end? Did I bring this on myself? It's as if I'm hiding out in the basement, with just an occasional glimpse of the world through a tiny window. I've been in a dark cellar for over a year now, looking fearfully outside, at what's happening above me.

The newspapers and TV shows are just loving my fall from grace. I'm a scientific criminal mastermind, put out on show to be pelted with metaphorical rotten eggs and tomatoes for the gratification of the audience. Day after day, week after week, I'm getting spat on, insulted, and tarred and feathered in news reports, feature columns, background stories, human interest pieces, editorial comments, and readers' letters. I've sullied the name of science, sinned against the holiest of holies, and now my name is being dragged through the mud of the mass media, sometimes with the faces of my entirely innocent daughters clearly visible in the background of whatever photo they're using today. The legal system in this country gives "regular" criminals—scam artists, unscrupulous bankers, murderers, child rapists—some protection from the press: their photos have to have a black strip across their eyes, and their last name is replaced by its initial letter. No such luck for super science fraudster Diederik Stapel; the papers print my photo, full face, as often as they can (sometimes in color), and my house—*our* house, where my wife and kids live too—is right there on TV, with close-ups of the front door and the number. Extra, extra, read all about it,

Wonderboy becomes Supercheat. The Lord of the Lies. The Lying Dutchman. And I've just got to sit here and take it.

It's the peak of the media storm, around the beginning of November 2011. I'm becoming rigid with fear of this non-stop barrage from outside, and I'm still numb from the realization of my own stupidity. It's really getting to me, so I take a plane to see my brother in Budapest, to escape from the constant bombardment to a world with no Dutch newspapers, or radio, or TV. A little over a week later, I fly back to Eindhoven, perhaps a bit less rigid but no less numb. My wife calls to say that she can't collect me from the airport because she's afraid of being followed by journalists if she leaves the house in her car. While I've been away, an assortment of journalists have been keeping our house under pretty much constant surveillance, ringing the doorbell incessantly to ask about me. She'd rather stay home. She's exhausted.

A good friend picks me up at the airport and brings me safely home. As I get out of the car and drag my case towards the door, I look around me, furtively. The sun isn't shining, but I feel a great need to put sunglasses on.

It feels like the only way to escape from this without going nuts—sorry, undergoing some kind of permanent psychological damage—would be to join some kind of witness protection program. Get plastic surgery, color my hair, and start over in Costa Rica. Just a shame we don't have any money.

I wait until it's dark, tie some sheets together, and climb out the window in the middle of the night. I quickly knock together a wooden horse on wheels and allow myself to be pushed out of town past rows of unsuspecting journalists. I get hold of a cannon and fire myself out of it, a human bullet entering another universe. I call a second-hand book dealer and tell them that there's a huge pile of books that they can pick up from my house, then climb in the box among the discolored paperbacks and wait until they unpack me in a shop, in a friendly country, far, far away.

During World War II, my father, then a child, lived in the small town of Schiedam, just around the corner from the Wilton-Feyenoord shipyard, which was the target of an Allied bombing raid in March 1943. A combination of poor visibility and high winds led to a number of bombs falling on a nearby residential area. The house of my father's best friend,

Wim, was also in this part of town. Fortunately, when the sirens sounded and the air raid began, Wim was playing at my father's house and the two boys were able to shelter in the closet under the stairway.

When the last bomb had fallen and silence had returned to the town, they ran as fast as they could to Wim's house. It was a total mess. One of the bombs had just missed the house and exploded in the garden. Most of the windows were blown out, and there were bomb fragments everywhere; hardly anything in the house had escaped being damaged. Fortunately, Wim's parents had found a safe place to shelter during the raid.

The impact of the misdirected bomb on the family lasted a long time. It took months before everything in the house had been cleaned up and repaired (as far as was possible under the German occupation); when, a few weeks after the raid, Wim's father took his smartest jacket from the closet to wear on a trip downtown, he found the pockets full of bomb fragments, that had found their way through the front door, up the stairs, into the wardrobe, past the other clothes, and into his Sunday best jacket.

I've never felt "above average". I think I was a reasonably good professor at a small, ambitious, but still principally regional university in the south of the Netherlands. I had several colleagues who were better, more successful, and more famous than me. I published a lot of papers, and I was pretty good at inventing experiments, but my work wasn't considered to be especially influential or innovative. It was nice, sometimes even fun, but that was about it.

But as soon as I was exposed, all that changed. As soon as my scientific suicide came to public attention, my life story was rewritten. My jump from the cliff was suddenly the demise of a genius, a *wunderkind*. Up till now, everything I'd touched had turned to gold, and now I was just a pile of unrecognizable fragments. I'd been "one of the high-flyers of the Dutch psychology scene" (really? No, not true), who was "a regular commentator on television" (really? No, not true at all), and now I'd crashed to earth and exploded (OK, that bit was true). At least, that was how I read it in the papers, and on radio and TV, for days on end after the news first broke. Before my fall I had been a reasonably good researcher, but after the crash, my past suddenly underwent a mysterious transformation.

If you fall from a tenth-floor balcony, you make a bigger impact than if you just jump from a second-floor window. There's a lot more blood, and your chance of survival is reduced to almost zero. Jumping from the second floor isn't all that exciting. Everyone would rather see a sequoia crash to the ground than a lilac tree being chopped down with barely a sound. That's the nature of sensationalism: the more extreme, the better. I think that's one of the reasons why, once the scale of what I'd done was clear, my scientific reputation suddenly became so high (just in time for me to lose it). "I didn't know you were so famous," a friend texted me. I didn't, either. I wasn't. Fame had been attached to me, like a concrete block to the feet of a Mafia victim, as soon as I started falling. Fame makes for a bigger splash.

Another reason is probably the mass media's keen interest in meeting the general public's insatiable desire for *schadenfreude*. We love to laugh at the misfortune of others, because it makes our own imperfections easier to bear. And the most satisfying targets are people with high power, status, and reputations, because we're jealous of them. We laugh harder when somebody famous slips on a metaphorical banana skin than when one of our neighbors does the same. That is why I had to be made to appear extra special, extra famous, extra important. The suffering of the privileged gives us a feeling that some sort of justice has been meted out to them. It gives us the feeling that we live in a just world, where good and evil are spread among everyone in roughly equal measure. After all, it would be discomfoting to think that bad things only happen by chance, to ordinary people like us. A world where that happened would be a worrying place to live. So, we tell ourselves and each other, if you got raped, it was because your skirt was too short; if you got beaten up, you were probably asking for it being in that part of town; and if you got stoned in broad daylight by an angry mob, well, there was probably a good reason for that too.

My mother wakes up every morning with tears in her eyes, and goes to bed each evening still trying to fight them back. She can't cope with seeing every day how her youngest son is being denounced as a cold, calculating, heartless bastard. Was I, or am I, the only scientist ever to have committed fraud? All those people queuing up to condemn me, or at

least not to defend me: were they all, are they all squeaky-clean? Was I, am I, really such a bad person?

She calls a retired former colleague of mine, whom she knows I respect a lot. She spends more than an hour talking to him on the phone. He doesn't believe that I'm evil. Maybe I even fundamentally had good intentions, but just got tempted to use my abilities in the wrong way. Of course, he's appalled to learn what I did, and he completely understands why I've been punished for it—that's how these things work—but he also finds the hysterical reaction of the media unsettling. Because he and I did a lot of work together, he's getting regular calls and e-mails from journalists asking to comment on what I did. Each time he hopes he'll be able to give some background, to put the story in some form of context, but it's no good. Nobody's interested in the background, he tells my mother; nobody wants a complicated story, nobody wants to hear that—although I'm clearly responsible for my own actions—I'm not the only bad guy, there's a lot more going on, and I've been just a small part of a culture that makes bad things possible. A story with just the one bad guy is always neater. "They just want to finish him. Finish him."

Worse: I'm not the only person to have been impacted by my fall. My home life, and the lives of my parents and siblings, will never be the same again. It's a constant struggle to stay afloat, financially and in other ways. My kids can barely cope with what's happening, and make it clear that they want their former lives back. My wife is forever marked out as "The wife of", and I have to go through life as a sort of Elephant Man, fighting every day to justify my existence: "I am not an animal. I am a human being!"

Meanwhile, all the way down the scale, science, academia, psychology, social psychology, the University of Tilburg, my close colleagues, co-authors, students, and supervisees, have all taken a substantial hit. Colleagues, students, and supervisees have worked for years on experiments and studies whose empirical basis now turns out to be nothing more than dust. Dozens of published papers are going to have to be retracted, removed from their CVs, and apologized for. Some of their best insights and discoveries are revealed to be no more than mirages. The pride with which they defended their theses has gone, shriveled, replaced in many cases with feelings of guilt and shame. "It's unfair!" I

want to shout. “I did it. They didn’t do anything wrong. They couldn’t have known. They worked really hard, in good faith. It’s me, only me you should blame.”

I’d spent years secretly assembling a big lump of junk, that finally got too big, slipped from my hands, and fell with a huge splash into a pool of water. A lot of people got wet, and the waves reached further than anyone could have imagined. I’d abused the trust of all my closest colleagues. Everyone is shocked, the whole profession is angry, everyone who has been even peripherally involved with me is seething. “What are you doing to us?!” Some of them don’t want anything more to do with me. From one day to the next, I’ve been thrown out of their world, losing a big part of my social circle in the process. Suddenly there are people, with whom I’ve been working for years, to whom I’ll never say another word. I’m the Bad Apple, lying exposed in the sun, and they don’t want to know me.

One or two people send a text message or an e-mail. They can’t understand what happened. “Why? You didn’t have to do that, surely? How could you let this happen?” As the media’s attention continues, week after week, month after month, they start to show some concern for me, hope I can keep my head above water, hope that it doesn’t all get too much for me. Four or five of them take to writing to me weekly, although I’m in no state to reply: I’m just too ashamed, and don’t know what I should say. They’re all young, but smart. I worked pretty closely with them. They’re also angry, and sad, and feeling a lot of pain. They’re great psychologists. They ask some questions, answer some others, reflect on what’s happened, and confront me with my desires, and my weaknesses, and my mistakes. Their words make me take an honest look at myself, like a kind of internal therapy. I’m not (just) a monster; I’m also just some guy.

Some other colleagues send me well-intentioned e-mails, often with a rather irritated tone. They know this sort of thing happens. What I did was a bit extreme, but I’m not the only person massaging their data. It happens quite often. “Just your luck that it was you who got caught.” They’ve seen this sort of thing going on with other researchers. They’d like to think that my case will result in someone cleaning out the stable, leading to a better future for psychology, but they’re not optimistic. In fact, they’re afraid. Everyone’s afraid. There’s too much at stake.

There’s a story in one of the news magazines about a researcher who claims to have suspected me of fraud years ago. Apparently he confronted me with his allegations, and I

fired him. That sounds strange to me. I don't remember anything like that happening. I do remember this one brilliant researcher with wonderful ideas and a persuasive way of writing them up, who disappeared from view after a period in which some very strange things happened. I wonder what happened to that guy?

One morning, I wake up to an e-mail from an older colleague, sent in the early hours of the morning. He informs me that there are many people who used to work with me who would be pretty happy to see me dead, and in fact would probably give me a nudge in that direction if by some chance they were to come across me alone in a dark alley. It's a veritable epistle, several pages long, with long, rambling sentences full of anger and frustration, pouring vitriolic hate by the bucketful over me. Even if it reads like the ramblings of a drunk, it hurts. Not only because this guy is a well-respected scientist who's written beautiful, subtle articles about the mysteries of the human spirit, but also because I suspect that he isn't the only person who feels like that.

I know that I'm not allowed to comment about all the attention that the Stapelgate affair has been getting in the press for weeks, or rather months. After all, who am I to have an opinion about the media steamroller that is slowly, deliberately crushing me? Do they expect me to sit up briefly, a flattened cartoon character with my body bent in the curve of the roller, raising a shaky hand to ask if this can all stop now please, before collapsing in a heap? No, I can't do that; anything I say will be like the battered old pot calling the shiny new stainless-steel kettle black. If I dare to complain about the assortment of jackals, hyenas, and vultures that are circling around waiting for some tasty piece of me, I'm no better than a hired assassin complaining about the prison coffee. When you've done something really, really bad, it's difficult, if not impossible, to be allowed to express an opinion about anything, ever again. You just get to shut up, because what you did is way worse than whatever it was you wanted to say something about.

"But, I..."

"Yeah. Sure."

The sinner who dares to point an accusatory finger at anyone else is always likely to be on the receiving end of the ultimate *tu quoque*: "Look who's talking!" I don't get to speak anymore. I've forfeited that right. And it's my own stupid fault.

But. But. There are still some limits.

For me, one of those limits was reached in October 2011 when I read the intermediate report of the Committee of Inquiry that was looking into the nature and extent of the scientific fraud that I'd committed. I feared the worst. Although it had been a long time since I'd been able to remember which label ("perfectly legitimate", "mostly legitimate", "borderline", "junk", and "total junk") applied to each of the studies that I'd published—I honestly can't separate them in my mind—I was at least fully aware in October 2011 that I'd "enhanced" the data in a lot of studies, and simply made the numbers up entirely in many others. I assumed that the report would go through the studies and list what the problems were with each one. I also expected that it would describe what I did, how I deceived people, how I made up my cover stories about schools, research assistants, and gifts to be given to helpful teachers, and how my web of lies had gotten bigger and bigger until it collapsed under its own weight. And indeed, all of that was in the report; my errors were described in meticulous, excruciating detail. And that was OK.

But I was shocked to discover that the members of the Committee had decided to wrap their analysis of the facts with an emotional, psychologizing description of the deficiencies in my character that, according to them, were the principal factors underlying my crazy behavior. They didn't give any indication of what basis they had used to come to these conclusions about me. It was gut-wrenching to read. I was appalled that—despite this being the first principle of social science research—they hadn't apparently considered any other possibilities: that different motives, different character traits, or any other psychological, social-psychological, sociological, or cultural factors might have led someone to do the same things. They'd taken a one-sided, one-dimensional view of how my psychological profile had to be, and written things that really hurt. The Diederik Stapel described in the report was someone I couldn't recognize. I'd never seen this guy, close up or from a distance. The Commission had decided that I was a creepy, power-crazed man, a serial killer of science who coolly and rationally sneaked into the lab in the middle of the night to strangle research projects, and other researchers' careers, in their beds. Their version of Diederik Stapel was a man with a vicious and evil personality. And they

provided not a scrap of data to back up their view. How was this possible? How was this helpful? How was this good for the advancement of science?

I was in a state of confusion. I was desperately unhappy with myself and had problems coming to terms with what I'd done, I was saddened every time I opened a newspaper or turned on the TV news by what they were saying about me, I was ashamed of my immoral behavior, and I was aware of the hurt that I'd brought to others and the consequences that that would have for their rest of their lives and mine, but the psychoanalysis that the Committee had included in their report felt like pure character assassination.

After reading the report, I spent days in shock, and fell deeper into a state of depression (which couldn't exactly have been described as "fleeting" in the first place). I was reduced to a thousand-yard stare and a constant thumping headache. I was afraid of everything: the doorbell, the telephone, boiling milk, the Internet, the neighbors, my kids, my wife, myself, the future, darkness.

The October report felt to me like an attempt at an exorcism. What I discovered in it was not just a description or an explanation of something evil; it was an attempt to destroy that evil, root and branch. I saw myself portrayed as an arrogant, manipulative con artist, an evil genius, a wicked researcher who, very deliberately, following a nefarious master plan, had set out to deceive as many people as possible. *Really?* Sure, I'd told a whole load of lies, and I'm going to have to accept the punishment that goes with that for the rest of my life. But did I really have a plan? If I had, wouldn't I have gone about it in a more careful, smart, calculating way? My fraud was a mess, my fake data always put together in a hurry, full of statistical errors and little quirks that made it easy to spot, if you looked even moderately carefully at it. Wouldn't a thoughtful, rational person make a better, neater, and less obvious job of it? Apparently I'd deliberately surrounded myself with weak, easily-manipulated research students so that I could make them extra-dependent on me and get them to go along with my evil little schemes. *Really?* In fact, all students had to go through an intensive, "any doubt—out" selection process, with three or four other people besides me, and only the best few making it through. They'd suggested that I'd managed to surround myself with poor-quality researchers. *Really?* Many of the people I'd published with were senior academics and leading psychologists, some of them world-famous. They

said I'd gotten rid of people who'd dared to criticize me. *Really?* Who? Who did I get rid of, and when? What was their complaint? Did they leave because of me or for some other reason? Sure, not everyone ended up with a paid gig, but was that because they'd criticized me, or vice versa? The fact that I'd invited my colleagues to dinner at our house, organized drinks receptions or barbecues, or an occasional trip to the theater, was cited as evidence of my manipulative behavior. *Seriously?* We worked hard together, sometimes we let our hair down, and sometimes we tried to do a bit of team-building. Was I the only person doing this with my team? Doesn't anyone else ever go out for the evening with people from work? Don't other groups of researchers like to have a good time occasionally? But in my case, it seems I was doing it to butter up my colleagues, to get them on my side, and especially to get them to keep quiet if they found out that anything sketchy was going on. *Really?* Was I really so calculating? Did I do all that just to maintain my web of lies? Apparently so. I found out later that one of the members of the Committee, in a discussion with some of my former colleagues, had become somewhat emotional and described me "just like any other criminal".

The Committee wrote the October report without having spoken to me. Thumbing through it again a few months after reading it for the first time, I wondered if they hadn't perhaps made a classic "Stapel error": a great story, but not much data to back it up. What had they based their characterizations and insinuations on? The Committee had spoken to various colleagues of mine, but you couldn't tell from the report who had said what, how the interviews were conducted, what questions had been asked, whether they had been recorded electronically or by a trained note-taker, whether the interviewees were satisfied with how their statements had been interpreted in the report, and whether there had been any use of triangulation (neutral and independent checking that multiple sources of data corroborate each other). Nor was it clear what information from the interviews was in the report and what had been left out. Who said what, and how often did they say it?

When I asked, I was told that the Committee was unable to tell me about the interview methods or protocols, or to give me a list of standard questions that had been used. There were no standardized reports of the discussions, and no qualified note-taker had been present. There was no attempt at triangulation. Only a few of the interviews had been recorded. They couldn't show me transcripts of the interviews, even though I would

have accepted to see them in anonymized form. Nobody was sure exactly who had said what in the report, and if, or how often, anyone had had the same opinion. The Committee had held its discussions behind closed doors. The data from their research was no longer available and couldn't be checked. That's just the way it was. Oh, the irony.

Later I learned that in a few cases, committee members had made transcripts of some of the interviews with a group of former PhD students. Reading these excerpts made it even clearer. At the start of the interviews, the students talked about a world of interesting lab meetings, lively discussions, and an open, non-hierarchical atmosphere, where the focus was on learning and sharing information. Then the committee members interrupted. "No, no. Stop. That's not what we are interested in. We are not interested in hearing good things. We want to hear about the bad things, what went wrong." The students went on listing things that went well. "No, no. We want to hear negative things."

Nobody likes to find a rotten apple in the middle of the fruit bowl. Before you know it, everything's ruined. Throw it out. And then ask: how could this have happened? Are all apples like this? What about pears? Maybe the fruit bowl needs to be emptied and given a thorough clean. But that means a lot of work and disruption. And if you take the bowl away, the fruit falls to the ground and before you know it, you've got apples and pears and kiwis rolling under the chairs. Then the whole system is open to question, and nobody feels safe any more. And you might discover that the fruit bowl has some nasty chips in the enamel, which can't be cleaned and are always going to be full of bacteria and bugs. Then what? What do you do if you discover that the system, the culture, the fruit bowl itself is what sets the rotting process in motion and keeps it going? Then you end up with chaos, and you can't control what might happen. It's a lot easier and safer to decide that there was just this one apple that was different from the others. That's the only way to keep control of things. The rotten apple got that way because it fell at some point, got a few bumps, and ended up bruised. The rotten apple comes from a different tree. The rotten apple is in fact a strange bastardization of an apple and a pear. The rotten apple isn't really an apple at all. The rotten apple is a hideous pile of crud, dredged up from the sewers. In comparison, every other piece of fruit, without exception, is a perfect specimen, with absolutely nothing wrong with it at all. Whatever you do, don't ask questions about the others.

What was happening was pretty much what social psychology teaches about the unremarkable nature of social exclusion: in the presence of something bad, the easiest and safest course of action is to pretend that the representative of that badness is “not one of us”. If it’s different from us, it can’t be blamed on us. So we try to demonize badness, which lets us dehumanize it and throw it out like a piece of trash. This means we don’t have to treat it like a human being any more; it also means that we don’t have to wonder whether we, too, might be capable of being just as bad. The idea that evil might be innate to humans, rather than some kind of monster from outside, threatens the core of our belief in a just world. If to be evil is human nature, that means it’s everywhere and can strike anybody at any time, not just bad people, but good people like you and me as well. Evil becomes a possibility for everyone. It’s sitting at the table with you, and it goes to bed and falls asleep with you. “No, no. Stop. That’s not what we’re interested in. We want to hear negative things.”

The intermediate report has been published and the facts, as well as the psychologizing that is intended to make sense of them, have found their way into the public domain. I’ve spent a week in hiding with my brother on the banks of the Danube and another week in tears at my wife’s aunts’ farm in the north of the country. Now I’m back home and standing in the bedroom, staring out of the window. I’ve stopped answering the doorbell or the telephone, stopped reading the newspaper, stopped watching TV.

It’s a beautiful November day, with a real feel of the fall to it. An older man walks slowly past our house. He’s wearing a faded old raincoat and limping a little. When he’s level with the front door, he looks around furtively and then walks up the path. Is he going to ring the bell? I step carefully forward and press myself against the bedroom window so that I can see across and down to the front door.

The man looks at our mailbox and the number of our house. He seems to be looking for a nameplate. He peers through the glass of the front door, then takes a step back.

So do I.

He looks up, but he hasn’t seen me.

When I tentatively look outside again, I see that he's moved off. He looks round again and takes in the view of our house. The trees have lost nearly all of their leaves. My heart is empty and my head is full. It's always raining. My head is always full.

The next time I look out of the window, there's a Mini Cooper approaching along our street at quite a clip. Behind the wheel I can see an attractive woman, with her blonde hair done up and a pair of designer shades. In the passenger seat is her equally attractive girlfriend, who had long curly brown hair and feels able to dispense with sunglasses in this weather. They're deep in conversation. As their car approaches me, they slow down. The brunette bends forward a little and looks out of the car, then lowers her window and, while still talking, points with her index finger in the direction of our house. The car stops for a moment. She looks up. We make eye contact. I see her look of surprise. Quick, drive on, that's him!

My younger daughter is into tennis. She rides her bike every Tuesday afternoon at 5 p.m. to the local tennis club for lessons. The club is in a suburb that was built in the 1970s, on the other side of the ring road that goes round the main part of the city. It's barely ten minutes away by bike.

Today, she's a little early. She parks her bike and goes to sit on a bench to await the arrival of the other kids. Close to her, two men are sitting having an energetic discussion. It sounds like something significant has happened. Then she hears my name. They're talking about me, about her Dad. She knows what it's about, and she doesn't want to hear it. She stands up and marches over to them.

"Diederik Stapel is my father," she says deliberately, while trying to look at them.

"Oh, that must be awful."

When she gets home after her lesson, she proudly tells me about her little adventure in extensive detail. I'm lying on the sofa.

Three days later, just before bedtime, she starts to cry, very loudly. She doesn't know why. She says: "Everything around me is dark. It's as if I've been dropped into a big pot of black ink and someone has screwed the lid on tight."

My older daughter is in her first year of junior high school. Despite all that's going on, she's doing well. She enjoys her schoolwork and she's getting good marks. Half way through the first semester, one of her teachers decides that he's going to make a real effort to learn the names of all the kids. The last names are the hardest part.

"Stapel. Stapel? Ha-ha, you must be the daughter of Diederik Stapel, that professor who cheated on his research and made up his results?"

"Yes, that's right. Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Surely not? Ha-ha... you're joking, right?"

"No, I'm not joking. Diederik Stapel is my father. Can I go to the bathroom now?"

"Nah, you can't be serious."

My daughter walks out of the classroom, but as soon as the door closes behind her she runs to the bathroom so she can shut herself away for a while. Door closed, light out, completely dark, black, with the lid screwed on.

My wife is guilty by association. She didn't know more than anyone else, and I had been lying to her for years too, but she is "the wife of" and therefore guilty. That makes it difficult for her to lead a normal life in the outside world. At home she's my rock and regularly pulls me out of the pit of despair and back to life, but once outside she'd just like to be allowed to do her job properly. No chance of that, though. The journalists have gotten hold of her number. They send her text messages, phone her, and turn up at her office. One of them asks her a few lame questions, while secretly filming her, and puts the result on TV. Then he puts the film on YouTube with her name and job in the title, and adds a few gratuitously snarky comments. My wife is one of the top people in her field, the personification of emancipated independence and strength, but since my downfall, what sticks to me has been sticking to her. There's mud on her boots, and a couple of flecks of blood on her coat. Most people think that's disgusting, although they know where that stuff comes from: she's pulled me from the wreckage of my crash and hauled me up from the mud that I was stuck in.

How does she cope? I've been lying to her for a big part of the time we've been together, so why does she stick with me? Aren't I a terrible man? She's often asked all of these questions, either directly or implicitly.

We love each other. We made a total commitment to each other and we want to stay together, however difficult and stressful the situation is that we find ourselves in. For better and for worse. My wife is sad and angry with me—I've turned her tranquil life into a weird, risky white-knuckle ride—but she tells me she loves me more than ever. She can see what a state I'm in and how I'm suffering. She wants to help me. Nobody's perfect. People make mistakes. One cheats on his wife, another gets addicted to gambling, the third goes bankrupt and the fourth burns out. She didn't fall in love with the scientist, the professor, or the dean; we were high-school sweethearts. She fell in love with the cute boy who knew everything about literature and was crazy about films, art, theater, and philosophy, and who had these big ideas, a slightly bizarre sense of humor, and strange romantic plans over how things could be. That's the boy she wants back.

A female friend says that she thinks it's all awful, and she's worried about me. Will you be OK? Barely. I hate myself. But I'm not alone. Fortunately, my wife and I still have each other. She sounds relieved. A few weeks ago she was sitting in the train, on the way to work, when the train screeched to a halt in the middle of a meadow close to our house. She thought of me. She thought I'd thrown myself under the train.

Quite a few of our friends are wondering if we wouldn't do better to move. What can I ever do in the Netherlands from now on? Wouldn't it be better to start again somewhere else? America? China? Senegal? Maybe, but the Internet is everywhere and my sins would follow me wherever I went. My wife works here, my kids have their friends here, and I actually really love this country. I feel at home here, with my family, our friends, people who look after us and give us some courage. Maybe I've become a drop-out, a pariah, untouchable, but I'm still a Dutch citizen. I'm a Dutchman looking for a small, preferably not too dark place in this society, and no other.

At school, one of the mothers is worried for our kids. She suggests to my wife that it might be better for them if we changed their last names. Instead of Stapel, wouldn't it be better for their future if they took my wife's last name? When my wife tells this story that evening, the children are indignant. They're proud of their name. They don't want to change it just because their father made some mistakes.

I tell them about the name-letter effect. People have a slight preference for the letters that make up their name, over the other letters of the alphabet. If you put the 26 letters of the alphabet in front of people and ask them how attractive they find each one, they'll generally tell you that they like their "own" letters a little bit better, although they don't know why. Actually, you're only likely to prefer your own letters if you're happy with yourself, if you feel good today, or if you've just done well on a test. If you feel bad or you've done something stupid, you find your own letters uglier. S. T. A. P. E. L. "Beautiful!" shout my two daughters in perfect unison. I think about how ugly D and I and E and R and K are, and suddenly remember that the signature, which I just wrote on my new debit card, is smaller than it's ever been. For the first time ever, I managed to fit it neatly into the little rectangle that you're meant to stay inside of.

I'm like Lance Armstrong. A pretty good performer, up there with the best of them, but I wanted to go faster, do better. I'm like a bodybuilder who's tried anabolic steroids and now can't imagine how he managed without them. I'm like a stressed-out manager who used to do everything by himself, but now can't do anything without a whole bunch of external consultants. I'm a junkie. I'm Nick Leeson's scientist cousin, speculating with worthless theories instead of big piles of cash. I'm the Bernard Madoff of social psychology. I get more pleasure from a fake Rembrandt than from my own, properly done but unremarkable, watercolors and etchings. I've wasted my talent and missed my chance. I used to be a winner, someone for whom things always went right, someone with ideas, insights, status, and common sense, someone to be listened and looked up to. Doctor, professor, dean. Now I'm a loser and on society's scrap heap. I've been written off.

It's January 2012, and my wife is sitting at the dining table reading a big feature in the paper about a large real estate scam. I see the word "fraud" in the headline and can't resist reading over her shoulder. A large diagram, full of photos and arrows and little bubbles of text, explains how it all worked. Using money from large investors and pension funds, the scammers bought property for more than it was worth, and sold property that they already owned for less than it was worth. A number of buyers and sellers, who should have been looking out for the interests of their clients, were in on the scam. More than \$250 million

was skimmed off into the fraudsters' bank accounts. One of the main suspects is identified as "Diederik S." For a moment I think it might be me: fraud, check; Diederik, check; last name starting with S, check. I'm not sure, anything's possible these days. Did I do it? (If so, then where the hell is the money?) Did I steal a few million and hide it somewhere? I don't know. I'm Diederik S. Who is Diederik S? Am I Diederik S?

My wife looks up from the paper, pushes her reading glasses up into her hair, and takes my hand. She holds me tight and looks at me reassuringly with her big brown eyes and her wonderful soft round face. She gives a little smile. "You're Diederik Stapel, not Diederik S."

I have to get on with my life. I can't stay at home waiting for this storm to blow itself out, just sitting idly by while the trees of my life are blown down, one by one. The storm might never end. Via friends, and friends of friends, I try to get in touch with people who might have something for me to do, or who might know somebody who does. Maybe I can be of some sort of use to society, have some sort of economic value, even if it means remaining in the background, anonymous. We're running up horrific debts. I've got a family to look after. I don't want us to sink any further. I have to do something. But what?

My daughters have some ideas. "Dad, you could become a fashion designer."

I love high fashion, *haute couture*, all of that world. I took a course once: every Wednesday evening, I would sit and sketch, cut out, and sew elegant coats and jackets. They're in the cellar now, gathering dust next to the old pots and pans that we don't use any more.

"Or you could bake cupcakes. You're good at that. And then sell them."

A few years ago, I would spend whole evenings in the kitchen, sometimes until the small hours of the morning, making cupcakes for the daycare center. Sometimes I'd leave them in the oven for a little too long, but they were pretty good anyway.

"You could draw cartoons! With that funny little man with the scarf that you always draw for us."

I do these little cartoons, about this guy with a beanie and a scarf. Sometimes there's a house with a vase of flowers in the window, someone cycling into the wind, a little

boy playing in a sandbox. But that's about the extent of my drawing talents, and I need to use my eraser a lot. Just occasionally it ends up looking quite nice.

I may not be a professor any more, or a doctor, but I'm still a well-trained academic, with twenty years experience in big, complex organizations, where I learned how to teach, how to think, how to lead, coach, run things, and inspire people. Maybe I don't have a beautiful mind, but I like to think I have an interesting brain, ready to be picked.

That thought is in my mind as I get on the train. It's a sunny day in early spring. I have a rendezvous with a headhunter who's been recommended to me. From the station, I walk through a superb neighborhood with big, classy houses and lawns to match to my destination. It's a smart villa, recently painted and exuding an air of success in the sunshine. On the driveway there are several flagpoles and a row of high-end cars. I ring the bell and get shown, with a cup of coffee, to the waiting room. The reading material of choice here is, naturally, the *Financial Times*. A former director of Goldman Sachs reveals what he calls the "toxic environment" of the bank, where senior managers refer to customers as "muppets", to be taken for as much money as possible, as fast as possible. Goldman's top executives, naturally enough, are dismissing his claims as vexatious; the director has no credibility because "he never earned more than \$750,000 per year and so he doesn't know what he's talking about." We've ended up in a worldwide financial crisis due in no small part to the knockabout antics of Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, and other unscrupulous bankers.

How will I ever get back on my feet, back to work? Why—for crying out loud, why?—did I do what I did?

The interview with the headhunter confirms what I'd feared. He seems like a nice, open, honest guy. He's wearing a smart jacket and washed-out jeans with a big, cowboy-type belt, fastened with a huge silver buckle that presses against the base of his slightly too round stomach. As he talks, he leans back in his chair.

I'm tense, nervous. For the first time in months I've put on a proper shirt and a jacket. I'm wearing the cufflinks with a picture of my daughters. They're smiling encouragingly at me. Come on, Dad.

The headhunter sighs and leans forward. I lean back a bit. He looks at me apologetically. I'm probably a nice, intelligent guy, but I don't have a chance. Not now, probably not ever. What I did was pretty terrible, after all. Sitting there, looking at me, listening to me, he can't understand. Why? Why did I do it? Nobody's going to want to hire me. Nobody will dare take the risk, whatever I might be able to offer them. It's tough, but that's how it is. There is no place left for me in this society. He's read the papers, he knows what people are saying about me. I'm just going to have to keep my mouth shut. "Did you hear yet? Stapel's got a job working for X." Nobody wants to have their name associated with me. He tells me he's being honest with me, because there's no point in lying.

I nod. He's right. I'm grateful to him for giving me his honest opinion, for not holding anything back. I'm going to have to find a way to keep out of the spotlight for as long as I can. I have to avoid drawing attention to myself, because then they'll just knock me down and crush me again. I have to keep myself hidden away until this is over. In a jar, on a dusty shelf, in a corner of the cellar. Until everyone has forgotten about me.

Where there's smoke, there's fire, even if the fire went out long ago and even if it should never have been started in the first place. "Didn't that Diederik Stapel guy disappear with millions of dollars in research grant money? No?" "No." "Well, that was what I read in the paper." "Well, it's not true." "But they wouldn't print it if there wasn't something to it." "Are you serious?" "Of course I'm serious."

Suppose you see an article in a newspaper, or on a website, with the headline "Shakira does not use marijuana". The article goes on to explain at great length that the rumors that the singer holds weekly pot-smoking sessions with her girlfriends were just made up by a group of students who wanted to see how fast they could get a sensational story to spread. Despite that, there's a good chance that the—completely false—link between Shakira and marijuana is going to stick in your memory somewhere, and come back as "fact" at some point in the future. Shakira? Wasn't she caught doing drugs? The effect that leads to these spurious insinuations comes about because our brains handle denials differently from the way in which they treat the initial statement. In our media-driven society, this can have far-reaching consequences. Is President Obama, who seems so confident when giving a speech, really just a bunch of nerves who can't string a sentence

together without an autocue? Bono from U2 is not a jealous sex maniac. Barbra Streisand is not dead. When, in the middle of the Watergate affair, President Nixon felt the need to say “I am not a crook”, his fate was sealed. Why deny something that isn’t true?

Every denial suggests the possible truth of what the speaker or author is trying to deny, because the central association (*I-crook*) can only be denied (*I-crook-not*) after it has first been comprehended and registered. To understand a denial, you first have to understand what is being denied. To understand what it means to say that Shakira doesn’t use drugs, you first have to envision what it would mean for Shakira to be using drugs. If someone says to you, “This is not an apple,” you can only begin to understand what they mean if you first bring to mind an apple, that you then mentally cross out, from apple to apple.

To remember a denial (this is not an apple), you first need to know what it is you need to deny (an apple). For the human memory, “nothing” (zero) is subtly different from “not something” (not an apple). As a result, denials often acquire the status of an innuendo that confirms the original (erroneous) claim. It’s the same when a statement is something other than black and white. “He made some mistakes, but he’s not a bad person who can never do anything right again” is quite a complex statement, requiring a degree of tolerance of ambiguity, which is why there’s a good chance that over time it will become “He’s a bad person.”

Your memory has its work cut out all the time. It has to file away and bring back too much information to be able to take account of every little detail, every qualification, every “it’s a bit more complicated than that.” Over time, the nuances and subtleties of the things we remember fade, leaving just the basic idea. The non-apple becomes an apple, the rumors about marijuana parties become “Shakira uses drugs”, Nixon is definitely a crook, and the professor who cheated with his research data is a pathological liar who has fantasized every detail of his life, career, and knowledge. “Wasn’t he also into drugs—cocaine and LSD, I heard? It was in that book he wrote. (And why did he write it? Did he need the money? Did he want to blame everything on someone else?) Oh, and it even turns out that he’s Nick Leeson’s cousin.”

Why were the reactions to my scientific downfall so extensive? That's easy. For a long time, I hadn't just been cheating with the data; I'd also invented entire experiments, and I'd lied to and betrayed many students and colleagues who, acting in good faith, had been taken in by my various deceptions. What I'd done was terrible. That's clear. That's OK.

But why were the reactions also so emotional, so extreme, so vile, and why did they go on for so long? Why did the Committee of Inquiry insist on giving their non-informed opinion on my allegedly terrible character so much in its interim report? Why did the Stapelgate affair turn into a massive exercise in media hype that seemed to go on for ever? Why was my case discussed for days and weeks in the newspapers, with bold headlines and huge photos, opinion pieces and commentaries, not to mention all of the blogs, forum discussions, and activity on Twitter? Why did journalists, photographers, and TV camera teams seem to have taken up residence in our front yard? Because people found my fraud shocking.

But where did that shock come from? Were they shocked because my behavior has been so weird and horrific, or precisely the opposite—because it had been so ordinary and unremarkable? I was a regular target in the media, but what were they throwing at me? Stones? Rotten eggs and tomatoes? Or were the projectiles being aimed at my head really... projections? Maybe the real reason that Stapelgate was getting so much attention was because people recognized, in my misdeeds, their own recklessness, their need to score cheap points, their insecurity, their need for answers and certainty? Was what I'd done really so incredible? Yes, of course! It was...*shocking*! But didn't it maybe also point up something very human, very recognizable? Wasn't it perhaps just a screen onto which people could project their own weaknesses? Could the intensity of the media bombardment possibly have anything to do with the need to smash the mirrors that my case was holding up, in which people were recognizing themselves, into the smallest possible pieces? Did Stapelgate become such a big deal because it magnified and reflected a lot of fears and fantasies that people recognized in themselves? Working under stress, always presenting the best side of things, hiding your failures, pleasing your boss, your customers, your clients, competing, living in a winner-takes-all society, white lies that slowly become darker.

Maybe. Who can tell? The people who recognized their fears and fantasies?

But maybe it was all just much simpler. The news desks had plenty of old photos of me lying around. And I did fun-sounding, “easy to explain” research into everyday things that people were interested in. And I looked like an arrogant, know-it-all type. I was an easy target. For a whole year.

A year? How did that happen? Because the university and the Committee of Inquiry kept feeding new information to the media, all the time the inquiry was still ongoing. Appearances on the radio by the President, in which he discussed my personality. Pronouncements in the media by members of the Committee. Monthly press releases on the Committee’s own website. All this while the inquiry was still ongoing. Presentations about me at conferences and meetings of research interest groups and service clubs, *while the inquiry was still ongoing*.

Lying, cheating, making up data, all these things are unforgiveable, especially if you pull others in with you. And especially if there’s no obvious higher purpose to which you can point to explain your dishonesty. Lying for money, or to save lives, or to prevent your own death is understandable, and in some cases even heroic. All’s fair in love and war, as they say. But who or what had I helped or saved with my lies? Who had I helped with my deviousness? Who, apart from myself? In the end, it was just about me. And I dragged other people along, so that they would like me and look up to me. There was no military-industrial-political complex conspiring against me, forcing me to produce good-looking results. There was no pressure, no power politics, no need to produce patents or pills, to compete in the marketplace or make a pile of money. It was always purely academic, scientific research, which makes any form of cheating even harder to understand. I wanted to make the world a nicer place and get some recognition for it. I wanted to play God and be praised. Look how well-ordered the world is. Look how neatly everything fits together.

Society gives money to researchers so that they can have the freedom they need to do their work. In return, there are high expectations about transparency and integrity. Society invests in science and trusts scientists researcher to do their best to...well, to do science, whatever that means. If you break that trust, you’re in big trouble. That’s maybe what makes science so special compared to most of the other institutions in our society: science is expected to be absolutely neutral and free from conflicting interests. People have higher

expectations of scientists, in terms of having clean hands and consciences, than probably any other group of people. Greedy bankers who move their bonuses to a safe haven just before the financial crisis strikes? Terrible, but what else did you expect? Politicians who will do anything, even lie outright, to win votes? Terrible, but we're used to it. Doctors who divide treatments into as many individually-billable items as possible? Terrible, but the system encourages it. Law enforcement officers who take bribes? Terrible, but they're under a lot of pressure. Priests who sexually abuse children? Terrible, but there are so many of them doing it that it would be *unfair* for the media to single out and castigate any individual, making him into a scapegoat for the whole group. And anyway, didn't we always know that the Church was a dreadfully corrupt institution and that expecting priests to remain celibate is asking the impossible?

Science is holier than the Church. Science should be a social anchor that everyone can rely on. We invest in science so that we can better describe, understand, and predict ourselves and the world we live in. We lock scientists up in ivory towers so that they can get on with thinking, looking, listening, feeling, observing, studying, and experimenting, in the hope that one day—maybe not all of them, but hopefully quite a few—will emerge shouting “Eureka!” And maybe we'll even be able to do something with their discoveries.

And that's where the theory goes wrong. It's as sad as it's true: science is not neutral or disinterested. Indeed, it's precisely the high expectations that society imposes on science—higher than its expectations of the Church or of politics—means that there's a lot at stake. Increasingly loudly, explicitly, and impatiently, society is demanding to see the return on its investment. Science is a business that has to produce useful knowledge. Like any other business, science is political: somebody has to decide what's important, what knowledge will bring the greatest benefits to society and so deserves to be supported, and what knowledge isn't important and can be abandoned and forgotten about. Science is an ongoing conflict of interests. Scientists are constantly defending their own positions, their research topics, their insights, and their theories, against other scientists. They're all in competition with each other to try and produce as much knowledge as possible in as short a time, and with as little money, as possible, and they try to achieve this goal by all means possible. They form partnerships with business, enter the commercial research market,

and collect patents, publications, theses, subsidies, and prizes. Science is just a business, and scientists are just people.

But does that matter? Does it my scientific downfall any less awful if I say that scientists are just people? Does that make my cheating less wrong? Is my fraud less serious if I note that the competitive, output-driven nature of the modern scientific “business” isn’t much different from that of other organizations, be they commercial, political, or social?

No, it doesn’t make anything less bad. But maybe it explains the shock waves that the mass media coverage of my fraud caused, because it suggests that science has (at least) two faces: the special place at the top of the mountain from where the high priests of science, clad in long white gowns, sing forth the truth, and the quagmire down below, where ordinary people work their butts off day after day, looking for some nugget that might be of value. The revelations of what I’d done brought this profane rummaging and sifting into focus, relegating the sacred singing to the background. My deception made it painfully clear that for some people, certainly for me, it’s not possible to sing the beautiful truth and root around in the dirt simultaneously, and that the truth may be less beautiful and more mud-spattered than we might like to imagine.

Through my scientific cheating, I violated the trust that society in general and science in particular had placed in me, and torn away the veil of purity with which science covers itself. My behavior revealed that behind the respectable white-robed gentleman lurked a con artist, and suggested that maybe the revered status that society accords to science is sometimes based on quicksand. Is nothing sacred any more?

No, nothing here on earth is sacred any more. The sacred, the holy, that’s for heaven, not here. You can look for them on earth, but all you’ll find is hypocrisy. The earth is full of people, and people make mistakes. However much we would like to imagine that judges, doctors, priests, and scientists are somehow holy, sorry, they’re just people too. However much we look for solid anchors to attach ourselves too in our struggle against the immeasurable emptiness and absurdity of existence, sorry, we’ll have to look elsewhere. We can try to convince ourselves of the illusion of holiness, but then we’re just kidding ourselves. Judges aren’t blind, doctors have a business to run, priests have impulses and

desires, journalists have audience figures to meet, and scientists have interests. Scientists have interests and sometimes they have trouble dealing with them. It's a sad reality. It's a sobering, profane fact of life. Nothing is sacred any more. And it never was.

I'm a scientist, but first and foremost I'm a person, who went wrong. It took a combination of circumstances: being driven by success, the fear of failure, an insatiable desire for elegant solutions to complex problems, the inevitable wish to make the world a better place for oneself and others and to create meaning where it seemed to be missing, and a toxic environment that allowed all this to happen. As a result, I took a wrong turning and got lost for ever. Sometimes I dream that maybe the intense media attention was the result of my (legitimate) research having a human side to go with its sad side. Am I a monster or a human being?

I'm just back from a long bike ride. I had to get out, down the paths and lanes. Over the fields and roads, dunes and woods of Brabant. When I get home, there's a plastic bag hanging on the door with a note from the neighbors across the street. Freshly fried fish, so we'll have something nice to eat this evening. A week later there's a nice bottle of wine from friends who live in another part of town and wanted to give us a little treat. A female friend who, like us, moved to this part of the country a few years ago comes by with chocolates. She's been talking to her elderly father, who was a leading professor way back when. He told her that they had fraud in his time, too, and it was dealt with quite severely, but was kept in-house so that the perpetrator still had some sort of a future.

People are looking after us and thinking of us. Every week I get a visit from good friends who go with me for a walk, share a cup of coffee, and discreetly check that I'm not getting any worse. On the counter there's a silver-colored tray with all the cards and letters we've received from family, friends, and acquaintances who want to let us know they're thinking of us.

"That's the tray with the nice people," says my older daughter.

I lift her up and give her a long, intense hug. I try to catch the warmth that's coming from her and store it inside of me.

In moments of crisis, it can suddenly seem as if a powerful light is illuminating everything. When rules and procedures don't apply any more and nothing works the way it should, people fall back on their intuition and instinctive responses. I've been found out, and now I'm standing naked in the medieval stocks, in the middle of the town square, lit up by bright white lights, as if I'm in a TV studio. But when I push the rotten tomatoes and eggs from my eyes, and start to pick the tar and feathers from my body, I can see that the same bright lights are shining on the audience who are watching me, and the people who have gathered close around me. They're also naked, and in this weird situation they can only follow their instincts, because they don't know what the rules ought to be. The lights are on them too, because they have to work out how to react to something new and unfamiliar. Who will throw the first stone? Who's going to look for rotten eggs to throw? Who's going to wait until the dust has settled? Who's looking around? Who's looking away? Who's looking at themselves? Who's shut their eyes? Who takes responsibility, and acts on it?

At the start, there are three different sorts of reaction. First, there are the people who think what I've done is appalling and that I'm a terrible man. They don't distinguish between what was done and who did it; I shouldn't expect any compassion from them. Their verdict follows their intuition, and it won't change no matter how long you give them to think about it. That's the biggest group of people by far.

Second, there are the reactions from people who at least attempt to separate the act (bad) from the person (perhaps not all bad). This type of reaction has both an immediate, intuitive component and a reflective, conscious component, and comes in two versions, which I think can be classified as "Protestant" and "Catholic". Although the end result is the same (the act is bad, the person not quite so), there's a difference in the order in which the two judgments are presented. In the Protestant version, the intuitive, "What he did was really bad" is followed by the conscious, "But he's a nice guy." In the Catholic version it's the other way round: the intuitive reaction is, "He's a nice guy," and that's followed by the conscious reflection, "But what he did was really bad." The overall result appears at first sight to be the same, but in the Protestant version the bad act is the most important thing, whereas in the Catholic version it's the goodness of the person that dominates. For the Protestant, then, goodness is less central than for the Catholic. And because belief in the

basic goodness of the person (“He’s not all bad”) and in the ability of people to become better (“He’s learned his lesson”, “Once a thief doesn’t mean always a thief”) are important conditions for successful forgiveness and reconciliation, it’s more likely that forgiveness will follow what I’ve chosen to call Catholic reactions rather than Protestant ones—which is why they’re named that way.

An American colleague sends me a worried e-mail. She’s shocked and thinks what I’ve done is terrible, but she can imagine how it could have happened. We’re all constantly fighting the temptation to make things seem a little bit neater than they actually are. Everyone leaves things out, or does a little selective “cleaning” of their data. We’re under pressure, we want to carry on being able to pay the mortgage, and we want our kids to go to good school and have a carefree life, not wanting for anything. Does that justify what I did? No, of course not, but it doesn’t mean I’m a bad person, she writes. Quite the opposite, in fact: “Love the sinner, hate the sin.”

She tells me that she’s put me through what she calls her elevator test. She imagined with whom she’d rather be stuck in an elevator: with me, a fallen dreamer who naively refused to think about the consequences of his actions and hence caused a huge pile of trouble, but is otherwise a nice person who tries to be a good father and, she thinks, didn’t mean to hurt anyone; or one of her numerous colleagues who are maybe a bit more scrupulous in their treatment of research data, but who are rarely home, have trouble restraining themselves at conferences, and cheat on their spouses repeatedly. She’d rather be in that elevator with somebody who’s made professional mistakes, but who’s still an OK person, than with somebody whose work is just fine, but whose personal life is an immoral mess.

It’s September 2011. The bomb has just exploded. The first reports, describing my fraud in detail, have started to appear. Big photographs of me in the paper and on TV.

We’re having a party. It’s a beautiful fall Sunday and our older daughter is celebrating her 12th birthday. We’ve put some chairs out in the yard and there are snacks, chips, and drinks in the kitchen. My daughter’s friends are already here. Some are running around the yard; others, on the cusp of puberty, are lying around on the grass. Our

daughter wants to forget about what's about to happen to us, and is trying to act as if nothing has happened.

Gradually, our friends, neighbors and family members arrive. It's busier than in previous years. The atmosphere is tense, but we're doing our best. There's an elephant in the room, but it's my daughter's birthday. Life has to be celebrated, whatever else happens. One of our friends has just gotten the all-clear after a brush with a particularly nasty type of cancer, and gives me a big hug as he enters. A little later, when I go into the garage to look for some more cold beer, I find him on his own, among the washing, the old shoes, the paint cans, and the boxes of tools, crying his eyes out. I look at him apologetically. "I don't understand either."

I still don't, in fact.

A little later, when I'm sitting in a corner of the yard trying to enjoy some time with the children, who have all gathered on the grass and are excitedly discussing their plans for the new school year which has just begun, I feel a warm hand on my shoulder. I look up and turn round.

It's a friend whom I know will always stand by me. He's holding a cigarette in his right hand and a bottle of beer in his left.

"You've been an ass. But you're not an asshole."

I think I understand what he means, but I can't be sure.

"You've made a mess of everything. You betrayed the trust of your colleagues. You wasted your talents. All those studies, all those ideas and insights—all for nothing. What a waste."

He takes a drag on his cigarette, followed by a long gulp out of the bottle, looks at me intently and says, pronouncing each word slowly and deliberately: "But your most important research project starts now."

Chapter 10

It's close to Easter. My mother is in the kitchen, getting a meal ready. I'm sitting at the dining table, doing my homework. Algebra, French verb declensions, and the Russian revolution. Normally I prefer to do my homework in the quiet solitude of my bedroom, but today my mother and I are alone in the house, so I want to be as close as possible to her. My father is out of the country on a business trip. The kitchen door is open and from time to time a draft of warmer spring air makes a feeble attempt to enter. It's one of those days where nature doesn't know if spring has arrived yet and everything should start growing, or whether it's still winter and best to wait a bit longer. A few optimists are walking around outside in blouses, t-shirts, or short skirts, but most people left the house this morning in long pants and a thick winter coat against the early spring cold.

The Bolshevik uprising started in the night of October 25, 1917. The starting shot for what would go down in history as the "October revolution" was a shell fired at the Tsar's palace from the cruiser *Aurora*.

It's difficult to study with music playing, but my mother likes to have the classical station on in the background while she works. I try to close my ears and keep my focus on my homework. I try to imagine how a revolution would happen. Lenin and Trotsky, making impassioned speeches in front of the masses yearning for freedom. Angry workers and brave intellectuals armed with old rifles and wooden sticks, storming the Tsar's palaces and running around town with red flags. Was that how it went? Russia at the start of the twentieth century. A population that gradually rises up, organizes itself, and becomes an unstoppable force that overthrows the old regime. Ambitious ideals, everything must change, huge social reforms, worldwide revolution, fighting, complete chaos.

In my imagination, I'm somewhere on the wide Russian steppes, while the revolution is unfolding in Petrograd. I'm standing in the middle of a gigantic field of slowly waving rye. I'm alone, but in the distance I can see an imposing white farmhouse with wagons coming and going with sacks of grain. Everything follows the same pastoral, relaxing rhythm: the rustling rye, the trundling wagons, the straining farm workers. As I look at the pictures in my history book, I drift further away. Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Red

Russians, White Russians, the Black Guards and the Green Army. And then I realize that my fantasizing and daydreaming has been accompanied, for some time, by slowly building classical music. I turn to the bookcase where the stereo is and try to listen more closely. The radio is playing Bach, and it pulls me away from the Russian revolution, eases me out of my history book.

As a young adolescent, my favorite listening is Pink Floyd and The Specials, but this is something else. I can't keep my eyes off the stereo in the bookcase. This is something like I've never heard before. It's as if an angel has come down to earth to sing, sadly but with kindness, about the pain and suffering that she's found here. I'm not sure exactly what she's singing—it's in German, which I'm not very good at—but this woman's voice, accompanied by violin, viola, and cello, touches and moves me. It's as if everything has come to a halt for a moment, as if the Russian revolution, the French verbs, and the algebraic formulae have ceased to matter, as if the chaos in my teenage brain that normally runs at 100 miles an hour has taken a break, and for a moment—just one, short moment—time has become manageable, forgiving, gentle even.

I look into the living room as the music progresses. The open fire, the TV, the thick carpet with the leather four-seat sofa: everything gives off an air of calm. I turn back to look at my mother in the kitchen. My wonderful, always thoughtful, concerned, worrying mother. I feel right at home. Everything's paused. She doesn't move. She's wearing a red and white striped apron and peeling potatoes, but I can't see that. I look at her back. She's standing stock still, beautifully lit by the rays of the low spring sun coming through the kitchen window. She's holding her head at an angle. Like me, she's listening, enchanted, wanting the only thing to bring sound to the silence, the only thing to bring movement to the stillness, to be the sound of "*Erbarme dich*" swelling forth from the loudspeakers.

I didn't want to go on. The self-hatred went too deep. There was no point in carrying on. What can you do with your life when you've made such a huge mess of it that all you can think of is ways to blame yourself? How could I ever begin to try and fix everything that I'd destroyed? I'd been kicked out of the city into the wilderness, carrying my sins on my back, and I didn't think it was very likely that I'd be able to return, knock on the door, and ask to be let back in. Disappearing for good seemed like the best solution. This simple, clear

insight came to me one Saturday morning, and stayed with me, relentlessly for months. I didn't want to go on, I couldn't go on, I didn't have to go on.

We were spending a few days at the house of some friends to try and distract ourselves. The day before, I had read the intermediate report from the Committee of Inquiry. I was still lying in the guest bed in the attic, although everyone else had been up for hours, finished their breakfast, had some more coffee, cleared everything away. It was already the afternoon. I had to get out of there. From time to time my wife came up to ask, rather half-heartedly, if I didn't want to get dressed and come downstairs.

But getting up would mean facing up to the world and carrying on with life, and I wasn't up to that. As long as I stayed in bed, I was in charge of the time, and didn't have to do anything. I didn't have to take any decisions. I could put that off for just a bit longer. As long as I stayed in bed, I didn't have to take a shower, or jump out of the third-story window. As long as I stayed in bed, I didn't have to display any guts by taking the decision whether or not to stop breathing. I didn't have to be strong, or at least try to appear to be strong. I felt weak and useless. I wanted to do all sorts of things—specifically, to jump off a bridge or hang myself—but I didn't have the courage. I was too useless even to do that. I hated myself.

The kids came up a couple of times to see if I was still asleep. They were worried about me. I always used to be first out of bed in the morning, but that was a million years ago. When I stopped pretending to be asleep and sat up in bed, my younger daughter jumped on the bed and pressed herself against me, while the older one stayed in the doorway. I decided that I had to tell them. They needed to know that their lives would probably be a lot better without me. No more angry people, no more disappointments, no danger, no uncertainty. I had to tell them. Everything would be so much better, so much easier and nicer if I wasn't there any more. No more lies, no more stress or hassle. I pushed the bedclothes to one side, got out of bed and went to sit, my back bent in resignation, on the chair by the attic window. My younger daughter followed me and stood next to me. She put a hand on my head and tentatively ruffled my hair. Her sister sat on the edge of the bed and looked at me, expectantly. I wanted to tell them everything, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. My head was ready to explode. Any minute now, everything was going to fall apart. I pushed myself back on the chair, moved the clothes that I'd taken

off the previous evening to one side, and took my younger daughter on my lap. She curled herself up against me and held on tight. And, alternating my gaze between my younger daughter's little warm body and my older daughter's beautiful, intelligent face, I told them that it was better if I wasn't there any more, that I couldn't look after them, that I couldn't go on living, that things were terrible and that we had to say goodbye, they had to be strong and look after each other and be good for Mom when I wasn't there any more.

They looked at me with utter incomprehension as I said it. They didn't understand, and I couldn't explain. I couldn't explain because they were holding me so tight. And that's why I'm writing this.

A few days later, I'm swimming and wading through a big spa complex in Budapest with my brother. My brain is still working overtime, still thinking about checking out permanently, but I can't bring myself to do it. I'm trying to think of ways to make it easy, but something's holding me back. My creativity is letting me down, for once. I can't come up with anything more original than jumping out of a high window, throwing myself under a train, or hanging myself, but all of those require the kind of courage that I won't find in myself. I don't understand it. I want nothing more than to just dissolve, to disappear for ever, but I can't bring myself to do anything about it. I've been without feeling, lifeless, not just since I was caught but for years. I'm not good for anything much any more. I'm useless.

It's late in the afternoon, and it's starting to get dark. In the middle of the extra-hot bath that we're currently walking through stands a neoclassical fountain.

My brother has lived for quite a few years in this great city, full of historical splendor. He's quite a bit older than the last time I saw him in swimming trunks, but he still has that sharp, boyish, inquisitive look about him. And a big nose. From time to time he checks that I'm still there, and doesn't let me get too far away from him. He's worried. He phoned up and found out that the attic window was wide open. As we walk through the water, I put my arm around him, put my head on his shoulder. It's busy. You could easily get lost. I take his hand.

The older Hungarians, with their weatherbeaten, dark faces, are sitting at marble tables playing chess in the water. The younger people have extensive tattoos and pierced noses and navels, and can't keep their hands off each other.

The baths, which used to be reserved for the aristocracy, are wonderfully warm. I float around like a big, comatose sea lion and try to relax. The air above the water is full of clouds of steam, turned yellow by the light from the lamps around the edge of the bath. I put my head under the water and try to stay down for as long as possible. I close my eyes; all I can hear is the gentle rumbling of the motor that powers the fountain. Finally, I come back up, gasping for breath. I lie on my back and hook my feet under the round rail that runs around the bath at the level of the water. My blue swimming trunks swell up with air that has been freed from somewhere. My ears are under the water, but my eyes, nose, and mouth are just out of it. Surrounded by damp mist, I look up at the Hungarian clouds.

The sun goes down, but I'm still lying here. I'm going to float here in this ocean of safe, warm water for as long as I can. I lie there until everyone else has gone, the lights are turned off, the fountain has stopped, and everything is quiet. I lie there until my brother eases me out of the water, dries me off, and puts me to bed, for ever and ever.

I used to want life to be more like the movies. I thought everything was pretty dull and could do with more drama, excitement, tragedy. I would watch, in jealous admiration, French or Italian films in which people on the edge of madness, or a crisis, or society, were nonetheless able to love one another intensely, or get into passionate shouting matches, or bash each other's brains out. I wanted some of that. When I was home alone, I liked to put on the most melancholy records I could find, so that I, too, could become an expert in heartache and suffering, although they were light years away from my real experience. Now my life has become one of those films—a blockbuster tragedy, if ever there was one—and the heartache and suffering have reached a level where even the French and Italians might think I'm overdoing things a little. Smashing yourself into a wall like I've done goes beyond the dramatic. There's no melancholic angle to it.

When I was studying in Chicago, I fell in love with Gertrude Kilton, and she fell in love with me. At least, that was what I thought at the time. In fact I was—as I always had been—in

love with the woman who would become my wife, but I mistook the continuous agitation of my brain for feelings of love for another, and thought I would have to abandon her. I thought that you could only choose to be with someone if you were a hundred percent sure that it was the right choice. Since then I've learned that 52 percent is already way better than you're entitled to expect.

Gertrude was still in shock over her boyfriend, who'd stayed on at Harvard instead of following her. On the day Gertrude left to study cultural anthropology in Chicago, he hopped into bed with her best friend. But I didn't know that at the time.

I used to like going along to see Gertrude. We drank tea and studied together. We had complex discussions about the (f)utility of the distinction between the natural sciences and other scientific disciplines (aren't all sciences social, by definition?) and deep conversations about the (im)possibility of true love (isn't all love just projection?). But once it became clear that the only way she could speak about The Harvard Adultery was with tears in her eyes and balled-up fists, I began to realize that for her I was just there to console her, a stopgap who was invited along occasionally to wave some party favors to brighten up her confrontation with the pain that her ex and her girlfriend had engraved on her heart. But my decorations couldn't reduce her suffering. I wasn't fun or colorful enough, or perhaps—as she herself concluded after a few months—time just doesn't heal all wounds.

Sometimes, the pain is too great, the anguish too strong for anyone to overcome them. First you think about them every second of the day. After a few weeks that might go down to every two seconds, after a few months maybe every five or ten seconds. After half a year you maybe only think about it every thirty seconds. After a year it's down to once a minute, and after a few years maybe every ten, fifteen minutes. After six or seven years you think about the pain perhaps every half an hour, after ten years you might have it down to once an hour. That's much less pain than in the beginning, but lesser pain that hangs around like that is perhaps worse than greater pain that eventually goes away. The pain that sticks around reminds you, every day, every hour, just for a moment, of the loss or regret that happened, once, in a previous existence. Time heals many wounds, but a few can't be fixed no matter how many hours, months, years go by.

I have no talent for seeing meaning in things. No talent for clear answers to life's little questions. I don't see meaning anywhere, don't see the value of anything. I'm a nihilist. I'm a social psychologist who has internalized his job, and taken the idea that everything depends on its context, that every perspective on something is different and so everything is relative, far too seriously. If everything is relative, then everything is possible. If everything is relative, then it doesn't matter exactly what you observe, because every time you look, it'll be in a slightly different color. If everything is relative, nothing is black and white. Everything runs into everything else; seeing means selecting some things and filling in the gaps. If everything is relative, then observing is just a form of painting, and you can make reality so much prettier by covering it in your favorite color.

Everyone is out. My wife is at her office, the children are at school. I'm vacuuming. It's one of the few things I enjoy right now. You have this plastic and steel tube, with a flat rectangular block at the end, which you wave around over the floor, doing something invisible that, shortly after, turns out to have been useful after all: the floor is clean, and all the dust and crumbs, which are individually invisible but make quite a mess when you put them all together, have been rounded up and removed by your magical arm movements.

I clean the whole house. When I've finished downstairs, I move upstairs. I do an extra good job in the spare room, because my mother-in-law is staying here tonight. I clean under the bed and the bedside table. I push the blue leather chair, which we were given by my parents some time in the last century, to one side.

When I try to vacuum behind the curtain that is meant to hide the ugly radiator and the rather grimy white wall, the end of the vacuum cleaner bumps into something large and flat, which moves a little. I put the hose down, pull the curtain aside, and remember that this is where I put the reproduction of the *Annunciation of Mary* by Fra Angelico, with its beautiful thick wooden frame. I had this copy of the famous fresco from the monastery of San Marco in Florence hanging above my desk at work for years. When they let me sneak back onto campus to empty my office, late on a Monday evening a few days after I was fired, I took the huge frame down from the wall and hid it away here, behind the curtain of the spare room. Out of sight.

Mary sits on a wooden chair in an austere loggia with classical pillars. The garden is filled with cypress trees and white flowers. The angel who has come to tell Mary that God has chosen her to bring the Messiah to earth has beautiful, pastel-colored wings, but otherwise is remarkably understated and devoid of symbolism. It's as if the wings have been sewn on to her, just for a moment, and she could take them off whenever she wants to. The angel is an angel and Mary is Mary, but above all they're two people, leaning towards each other, sharing some important information in the silence of this garden. Wearing a sober, dark gown, Mary listens attentively to the message, which she knows that she can't do anything about. She looks ahead, a little surprised but perhaps also a little absent. It's as if she's trying, unsuccessfully, to make out what the angel's words mean for the way in which the rest of her life will unfold.

The *Annunciation of Mary* is the moment when the realm of heaven makes its appearance on earth. The spirit of God takes up its place, in a pure and perfect way, in Mary's lap. In Fra Angelico's early Renaissance style, this is depicted in a modest setting, without the usual blasts of trumpets, bolts of lightning, and other heavy symbolism. This *Annunciation* is an intimate discussion in a garden between two pious individuals who have no choice but to accept their roles, and to accept the logic of what is to come. The message is delivered, loud and clear, and then silence returns.

When I saw this fresco for the first time in the San Marco monastery in Florence, more than twenty years ago, at the top of the great wooden stairway that leads up from street level to the second floor, it made an enormous impact on me. I'd already seen it many times in photographs and knew that I would love it when I saw the real thing. And this was it—the real thing. My mother had a shoebox at home, containing a collection of postcards of various works of art depicting the Annunciation and its consequence, Mother Mary and Her Newborn Son. Every so often, generally near Christmas, the shoebox would come out and my mother would spend days going through her collection of cards and reproductions. Sometimes she would make a little exhibition of a few of them on the telephone table in the hall. The Annunciation that Fra Angelico had printed on the wall of the monastery, where he lived for many years, was for me by far the most beautiful. It showed, in the simplest and most intimate way, what happens when the higher plane meets the lower, both literally and figuratively. Literally, because that's the subject of the

painting, and figuratively, because the way in which Fra Angelico set down this scene on a simple monastery wall is of an almost transcendent, divine beauty. Almost, because in every simple brushstroke, the cracks in the wall, the peeling paint, the primitive perspective, the unintentional white spots on Mary's blue gown, and some rather sloppy strokes in the background, it's clear that this is the work of a fallible human. Fra Angelico's fresco shows us, in different ways, that although people are capable of amazingly beautiful, almost god-like achievements, they remain grounded in ordinary daily existence on earth. Mary, the angel, Fra Angelico: they're all people, trying to understand and make space for the miraculous. That's why I find this picture so moving.

The world is chaotic; reality is a big complicated mess. The goal of science is to bring some clarity to this disorder, and provide some insight. When that works, it brings the same emotions as a painting like the *Annunciation*, and the perfection of heaven touches the broken incompleteness of earth, if only for a moment. Science moves people when it causes the turmoil of the world to stop briefly and brings a moment of peace. Science moves people when it catches the apparent lack of order in the world in its net of explanation and structure, bringing relief and understanding. Science moves people when it shows them how things are, how they were, how they will be, or if necessary—because that's often all that's needed—how they could be. The world is moved, the rocks have turned to stone, the water has been washed away, the sun just shines.

Social psychology moves me at a deep level. Phenomena such as cognitive dissonance, the fundamental attribution error, the automatic nature of cultural stereotyping, the unconscious impact of the environment on behavior, optimal distinctiveness, Terror Management Theory, the tending instinct, Milgram's studies, the Stanford prison experiment; all of these are descriptions of our mental lives that seem to provide (yes, only for a while, and certainly not perfectly) elegant explanations and structures to describe the chaos of human existence, and so bring a bit of divine clarity to everyday life.

From my first contact with social-psychological analyses and theories, from my first encounter with Neil Postman's media ecology and Benjamin Kouwer's teachings on personality, right up until today, I have had the feeling that social psychology is the right

way to go about capturing, understanding, and beginning to change the contrariness of social reality. It's better for this than sociology (too abstract), economics (too prescriptive), or cultural anthropology (too much emphasis on description).

In the last couple of decades, I was always deeply impressed when I watched my colleagues in social psychology chopping some or other complex social phenomenon into pieces, laying those pieces out in a row, and putting them out on display in the sunshine for everyone to admire. That was what I wanted to do, too: chop, split, saw, put in order, and orient towards the light. But as I went along, I started to doubt whether the pieces I chopped up, and the rows into which I arranged them, were worth bothering about. Sure, they were neatly chopped pieces, in neatly arranged rows, but they didn't give anything like the penetrative insights of my role models. I began to feel like Salieri in the film *Amadeus*: a good pianist and composer, well-respected by his peers, who nevertheless, frustrated by his own unexceptional talent, becomes obsessed with the genius of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:

On the page it looked nothing. The beginning simple, almost comic. Just a pulse—bassoons and basset horns—like a rusty squeezebox. Then suddenly—high above it—an oboe, a single note, hanging there unwavering, till a clarinet took over and sweetened it into a phrase of such delight! This was no composition by a performing monkey! This was a music I'd never heard. Filled with such longing, such unfulfillable longing, it had me trembling. It seemed to me that I was hearing the very voice of God.

In a discipline that shone with brilliant insights and razor-sharp analyses of social-psychological phenomena, I hadn't been able to contribute more than pinpricks, tiny ripples, and meaningless peripheral observations. Why couldn't I do any better? Why wasn't I able to contribute something more substantial to the literature of social psychology? Why was everything I did so difficult and complicated? With my tortuous literature reviews and complex models where "sometimes this happens, sometimes that, sometimes nothing," I ended up making reality more complicated and messy, rather than

simpler and clearer. Why couldn't I think of ways to make the world better, simpler, more efficient and more elegant?

Well, of course, everything was relative. Some people did this, but if you twiddled the knobs a little, they did the opposite. Life, it turns out, is not unlike a pinball machine. Who wanted to hear that message? I wanted to make something that made the world smaller, something easy, something that was divinely clear and humanly simple at the same time, just like the great social-psychological discoveries that I'd always found so fascinating.

But I couldn't do that. I wasn't another Mozart. I wasn't even close to being another Salieri, not by a long way. I couldn't even read music. I'd never sat down at a piano. I improvised a tune from time to time on a recorder, or twanged the strings of a badly-tuned guitar. I knew two or three chords, at best. That was it.

When I was very young I slept well, but from the age of about eight or nine onwards, I would toss and turn in bed for longer and longer, more and more often, because I couldn't get to sleep. When that happened, my father or (usually) my mother would tuck me in and give me a goodnight kiss, while in a room above me my oldest brother practiced on his violin. If I looked at just the right angle, I could see the ceiling moving to the time of his foot as it beat out the rhythm. For weeks, or months, I listened every evening to the same lesson, the same passage, the same exercise. I lay there listening because I couldn't sleep.

I was wide awake and didn't dare fall asleep. I was afraid. Not of the strangely swirling curtains or the lion under my bed, not for the tree branches just outside the window or the shadows on the wall, but of the dark emptiness of the night. I was afraid that if I shut my eyes, I would never wake up again, or find myself waking in a different world. What actually happens when you close your eyes and go to sleep? Are you all still there, or do you disappear? Does your head go silent and your brain stop working until you wake up again? How do you know that you'll wake up again? Is this a dream, right now?

I was afraid because I didn't have answers to any of my questions, but also because I didn't know what life was for. God didn't exist. If He did exist, it would be weird. There's nothing divine about chaos. Why did I have to go to school? To learn? But why? To get

into the next school, and learn some more. Why? To live independently, to earn money, to have something to do. To have something to do, before you die.

I always believed—although later that changed to just hoping—that those thoughts would go away one day. Later, when I was big, the answers to all my questions would turn up, just like that. When I got to be a teenager, about sixteen or something like that, everything would probably become a lot clearer.

But in fact, things just got worse. Under the influence of my adolescent hormones, the questions just became deeper, and more numerous. Occasionally they disappeared for a while in the general fog of my desire for sex, but once that was fixed they came right back into view again. Maybe when I was eighteen? Nope. Maybe when I was twenty-one and a real grownup, they would start to go away? Nope. Maybe they'll go away when I have a real job, when I'm really much older, a man in a suit, with a career? Maybe then everything will become clear. I'll go to work every day and do useful things. Maybe when I get older, I'll slowly learn to accept that the purpose of life, if there is one, isn't something we can know. Maybe I'll just get used to the idea and discover that it's not so terrible if life doesn't have a particular goal. All the others, the thousands and millions and billions of others, they seem to manage OK, don't they?

I was looking for answers to questions that don't have them, and even the questions to which I did manage to find an answer, with little half-studies and clever experiments, became more problematic. My results made only marginal progress, full of complicated exceptions and limitations. I wanted to do things bigger and better, my desires became deeper, but I didn't know how to go about it, and I was afraid of losing what I already had. I was good at thinking up small, neat experiments and carrying them out. I didn't have the courage to change myself. I wouldn't know how to go about it. I was afraid of my own insufferable inflexibility. I'd become addicted to the rhythm of digging, discovering, testing, publishing, scoring, and applause, however insignificant the discoveries were. I was addicted to the outward shine of so-called discoveries and answers, and I'd stopped caring about the inner need for understanding that had once so moved me.

Once, I was a little kid who could spend hours in his sandbox, admiring the elegant way that the warm, powdery sand ran down through his little fingers. I took a handful of sand, made a ball of my fist, and watched in surprise and wonder at the stream of sand that appeared from nowhere, as if from an invisible wellspring, out of my hand. And one more time. One more time. One more time.

I've lost that sense of wonder. I thought that there must be more: more and nicer sand, deeper and bigger wellsprings. And when I couldn't find anything, when reality turned out to be more chaotic and incomprehensible than I'd hoped, I was too afraid, too lazy, and too spoiled to admit it.

My desire for answers became bigger than the wonder that I was able to experience when I looked the messy truth square in the face. My desire for clear, simple solutions became stronger than the deep emotions that I felt when I was confronted with the ragged edges of reality. It had to be simple, clear, beautiful, and elegant. It had to be too good to be true.

I forgot how it felt when I looked at the pictures of Ger van Elk, the Van Eyck brothers' *Lamb of God*, Fra Angelico's *Annunciation of Mary*, the Taviani brothers' *Kaos*, or a ballet by Hans van Maanen. I forgot how it felt when I listened to Mozart, Bach, or Pink Floyd, or when I read Cummings, van Geel, Postman, Carver, or Kouwer. I played hide and seek. I held my breath and closed my eyes while I invented study after study, and made up column after column of data. Everything was permissible, as long as it enabled me, in my addicted state, to move on at full speed to the next made-up answer. Only a wall could stop me. Only a wall could teach me the true value of truly being moved.

Chapter 10½

For M.

(

This morning there is snow everywhere. We've just woken up and we lie in bed, looking at each other, slowly, carefully, silently listening to the snow. Everything sounds muffled. "It's been snowing overnight." You tell me you didn't sleep well. I say I didn't either. You had a terrible night. "Me too." I didn't sleep a wink. I lay awake for hours, staring at the ceiling, my mind turning in circles. Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general all over the Netherlands. It was falling softly upon the pastures in the north, invisibly upon the rivers in the middle, and quietly upon the bare hills in the south. But it doesn't matter. It never does. It snowed here last night. Snow was falling faintly, faintly falling. I lay and stared at the ceiling, listening to the snow falling from somewhere in the universe, hoping that it would somehow slowly dissolve all of my desires and fears. But of course, that wasn't to be. We're extraordinarily calm and tender with each other, as if sensing the other's rickety state of mind. We don't, of course. We never do. No matter. It's the tenderness I care about. It's the tenderness that moves me. That's the gift this morning that moves and holds me. Same as every morning.

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Notes, thoughts, and apologies

This book is a snapshot of a moment in time. This is how I see things today. Maybe in ten years time, when I'm older and wiser and can look back on my downfall from a safe distance, I'll think differently about everything. Maybe everything will be clear then. But I doubt it. I'm afraid that my fear of the dark unconsciousness of the night simply is what it is; it isn't going away any time soon, any more than the question of the reason for my existence. After all, I've been asking myself that question since I lay in bed as a boy, listening to my brother practicing the violin, and I ask it of my wife every morning, when she looks over to me and brings me a moment of calm.

Motto

The quote from Edward Albee's *Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) is a condensed version of an exchange between Martha and George from the last scene of the play as their world falls apart.

Chapter 1

Although the study described at the start of this chapter (testing whether looking at a picture of meat made people more self-centered) never took place, the subsequent description of the measurement of the phenomenon known as Social Value Orientation (how people split a hypothetical sum of money between themselves and an unknown other) is well-established in the literature. See for example Van Lange, P. A. M., Otten, W., De Bruin, E., & Joireman, J. A. (1997). Development of prosocial, individualistic, and competitive orientations: Theory and preliminary evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 73, 733–746.

The idea that people's thoughts, attitudes, and feelings can be gently steered in a particular direction by "priming" them with a picture (of a cow or a tree, say) or a spoken or written word ("cow", "tree"), so that they follow the associations that this picture or word evokes in them, has also been demonstrated in many studies. See for example Bargh, J. A., & Williams, E. L. (2006). The automaticity of social life. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15, 1–4.

Maarten is not the real name of the colleague who asked me if I had been faking my data. The names of all the people who appear in this book who are not public figures have been withheld or changed.

Chapter 2

For more on “The medium is the message” (page 46), see Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding media: The extensions of man* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964). The phrase “We are amusing ourselves to death” (page 39) is from Neil Postman’s *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business* (Viking Press, New York, 1985).

The idea that the medium or methodology has a crucial influence on the process and outcomes, not just of cultural phenomena but also of scientific processes, is described in Gigerenzer, G. (1991). From tools to theories: a heuristic of discovery in cognitive psychology. *Psychological Review*, 98, 254–267. For a wider discussion of the influences of the external, human world on the scientific method, see Thomas Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962).

Chapter 3

The liberatory power of the act of reading—more or less independent of what one chooses to read (page 49)—is beautifully described by Janice Radway in *Reading the Romance* (The North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1984).

“There is no core personality, no kernel of human existence.” (page 55): The correlation between dimensions of personality (such as extraversion or neuroticism) as measured by psychometric tests, and behaviors that are reasonably closely related to those dimensions is consistently around 0.3, on a scale that runs from –1 to +1. That kind of correlation is considered quite small by psychologists; it means that personality factors explain around 9% of the variance in behavior. The other 91% remains to be explained by something else.

Chapter 4

The most inspiring argument that I’ve seen for situationism, the theoretical perspective that I introduced at the start of this chapter (page 57), is provided by Lee Ross and Dick

Nisbett in their 1991 book *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology* (McGraw Hill).

Barry Schwartz's book, *The paradox of choice: Why more is less* (2003, Ecco) is a highly readable discussion of our obsession with choice and the paralyzing effects of the stress of having too many choices (page 58).

Recent work has cast doubt on some of Zimbardo's conclusions from the Stanford prison experiment (page 61) as well as Milgram's research into obedience (page 61). See for example <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201310/why-zimbardo-s-prison-experiment-isn-t-in-my-textbook> and <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/crux/2013/10/02/the-shocking-truth-of-the-notorious-milgram-obedience-experiments/>

The impersonal impact hypothesis, which I discuss quite extensively in this chapter (starting at page 64), was first proposed by Tom Tyler and Fay Cook in an article that never made the impact that I think it deserved: Tyler, T.C., & Cook, F.L. (1984). The mass media and judgments of risk: Distinguishing impact on personal and societal level judgments. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, 693–708.

Hundreds of articles have been written about Terror Management Theory (TMT) in the last couple of decades. A non-specialist book in which this theory plays a leading role is *In the wake of 9-11: The psychology of terror* (2003, American Psychological Association), written by Thomas Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg. These three researchers are the founders of TMT; they are sometimes referred to in professional circles as “the death brothers.”

Chapter 5

On Wikipedia, I found a quote from Edward Albee, the author of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (see page 78) in which he explains the meaning of the title of his play. It's worth repeating here: “I was in there having a beer one night, and I saw ‘Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?’ scrawled in soap, I suppose, on this mirror. When I started to write the play it cropped up in my mind again. And of course, who's afraid of Virginia Woolf means who's afraid of the big *bad* wolf ... who's afraid of living life without false

illusions. And it did strike me as being a rather typical, university intellectual joke.”

It turns out that the meaning of the plaque on the University of Chicago’s Rosenwald building (page 80) was less metaphorical than I had wanted to believe. A little research on the Internet revealed that Rosenwald was originally built to house the Geology department, so the phrase “Dig and Discover” was meant to be taken literally. Frankly, I’d rather not.

The idea that constant measurement and the desire for tangible rewards can defeat people’s intrinsic motivation (page 88) is an important theme in a number of popular books about psychology and human behavior, but their message doesn’t seem to be having much impact at the level of decision makers. See for example Timothy Wilson’s *Redirect: The surprising new science of psychological change* (2011, Little, Brown, and Company) and Daniel Pink’s *Drive: The surprising truth about what motivates us* (2009, Riverhead), but especially Alfie Kohn’s *Punished by rewards: The trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A’s, praise, and other bribes* (1999, Mariner Books).

For an excellent description of the psychology of injunctive and descriptive norms, and what I’ve called here (page 89) explicit and implicit norm violations, see Cialdini, R. B., Kallgren, C. A., & Reno, R. R. (1991). A focus theory of normative conduct. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 24, 201–234.

“Tell one story” (page 90) is the advice of Daniel Gilbert in a chapter from Brett Pelham and Hart Blanton’s *Conducting research in psychology: Measuring the weight of smoke* (2013, Wadsworth).

Chapter 6

The ideas about assimilation or contrast effects and the influence on people’s behavior and performance of things like thinking about Einstein (page 108) were investigated in Dijksterhuis, A., Spears, R., Postmes, T., Stapel, D. A., Koomen, W., van Knippenberg, A., & Scheepers, D. (1998). Seeing one thing and doing another: Contrast effects in automatic behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 75, 862–871. I was one of the co-authors of this article, but I wasn’t involved in collecting or analyzing the data.

The serpent of temptation whispering in my ear (page 117) was Kaa, the python from Disney's adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*. The lines accompanying my acid trip through the cookie jar shortly afterwards are, of course, lyrics from *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* by The Beatles.

The idea that "if you feel good, that touch of euphoria can cause you to not notice the context as much as when you're not in such a great mood" (page 126) is derived from the work of Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, who have demonstrated support for their idea of "psychological distance" in a number of experiments. See Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review*, 117, 440–463.

The section beginning with "Fear is everywhere." (page 129) is a homage to Raymond Carver and his poem, *Fear*.

The MERIT model (page 130) was scheduled to be distributed in book form to everyone in the social sciences faculty at the University of Tilburg in September 2011. On the day that the news of my fraudulent behavior emerged, the book ("*Being here: Introducing the MERIT model, How to improve yourself and your team on 5 dimensions*") was just coming off the printing presses, with its cover photograph of racing cyclists battling wheel to wheel. A few days later, all the copies were destroyed.

Chapter 7

The structure for the last part of this chapter was modeled on the story entitled "*The first seven years*" (1950) by the American writer Bernard Malamud.

Chapter 8

The idea that behavior emerges from individual reactions to environmental stimuli (page 149) is at the core of James Gibson's Theory of Affordances. For more on this, see his book, *The ecological approach to visual perception* (1979, Psychology Press).

Chapter 9

The quote that starts with "*And then sometimes I think ...*" (page 156) is taken from page 50 of the story *My hotel year* in the collection *Life after God* by Douglas Coupland (1994,

Simon & Schuster).

I want to emphasize that the comments after “But. But. There are still some limits.” (page 174) represent my memories of my reactions to reading and interpreting the Committee’s report, which in turn is just a collection of “signs, signifiers, and signifieds.” See for example *Mythologies* by Roland Barthes (1957/1972; New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

The name–letter effect (page 182) was investigated by (among others) Jozef Nuttin in Nuttin, J. M. (1985). Narcissism beyond Gestalt and awareness: The name–letter effect. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 15, 353–361, and by Brett Pelham and his colleagues in Pelham, B. W., Mirenberg, M. C., & Jones, J.T. (2002). Why Susie sells seashells by the seashore: Implicit egotism and major life decisions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 469–487.

In his book, *The price of truth: How money affects the norms*. (2006, Oxford University Press), David B. Resnik explains how the continued striving for status, subsidies, money, and other material rewards (page 189) has turned science into a commercial business and how this process has changed the norms and values of science.

Chapter 10

It’s a long time since I last visited the San Marco monastery, so I’m not entirely sure if my memories of the wooden stairway and other details of the layout of the place (page 202) are completely accurate. Judging from the pictures I can find on the Internet, the staircase is made of stone, and it can be closed off at the top with a pair of large wooden doors. See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/profzucker/6358603919/>.

Some of the jargon used in the paragraph beginning “Social psychology moves me” (page 203) is explained in earlier chapters of this book. For further reading, I suggest: Aronson, E., Wilson, T. D., & Akert, R. (2006). *Social psychology* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

The quote about the music of Mozart (page 204) is taken from the character of Antonio Salieri in Milos Forman’s 1984 film *Amadeus* (based on Peter Shaffer’s 1979 play of the same name), who delivers these lines in a moment of intense admiration and

astonishment.

Chapter 10½

This last chapter is my own reinterpretation of some of the final lines of Raymond Carver's poem *The Gift* (from the collection *Ultramarine*, 1986, Random House), into which I have also woven a couple of lines from the ending of James Joyce's story *The Dead* (from *The Dubliners*, 1990/1914, Bantam Classics). The title of the chapter is a reference to the chapter entitled *Parenthesis* in Julian Barnes's novel *The history of the world in 10 ½ chapters* (1989, Jonathan Cape).

Afterword

I want to thank everybody who made this book possible, and whose contributions, remarks, and frank criticism made it much better than it would otherwise have been. You know who you are.

I wrote this book for the three women in my life, with whom I share the good and bad times every day. You, too, know who you are.

Diederik Stapel, January–September 2012