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Word Count: 4600

## Theory of Mind

What follows is the story of how I became a Lying Machine, and then, because of *Mind-Reading*, Maddy's memoir, became human again. It all started with a Craigslist advertisement for a "Virtual Reviewer" from a company called Millennial Media. I'd been out of college for over six months and had yet to receive a call-back from an interview. I was living mainly with mom, after Maddy broke off our engagement because I cheated on her, or crashing on friends' couches. Maddy was staying at our old apartment alone, my boxes of books and video games and exercise equipment in the guest room's closet, along with her little brother Ernie's toys, although he was still in the institute, recovering from the incident with his father.

The interview was conducted by Ms. Dulminer, a slim, tall woman whose steel face betrayed no emotion, as if working there had erased her humanity.

"This interview has only one main question," she stated, "with a few subordinate follow-ups." She motioned me to sit without looking at me. "Not do you lie," she asked, "because everyone does, but do you believe your lies?"

"Is that a trick question?" I asked. "Like if I tell the truth I'm lying?"

"Just answer the question," Ms. Dulminer said. "This isn't philosophy class."

I thought about the question. I'd certainly lied before, but I always thought they were merited lies, or what mom called "God's white lies." There were times, though, I remembered, like with Maddy before she broke off our engagement, that I actually

believed in the lies the more she didn't, like *in the moment* I believed myself sincere in saying I hadn't fucked Valerie Canessa at Maxton's bachelor party. I thought of the terrible stories I had written at Penn State, thinly fictionalized exploits of my sex life, dad's cancer, war stories based on movies from the seventies. In my creative writing class, we'd discussed Hemingway's dictum that a made-up story can be truer than fact, if told right.

"I don't see a difference between fiction and non-fiction," I started, preparing to elaborate upon Hemingway's theory and things Maddy, whose major was Cognitive Psychology, had told me about how narratives, whether fictive or non-fictive, affected our social skills and understanding of others. She said this was based on something called Theory of Mind, which was a little like mind-reading, and it was because of a deficit of Theory of Mind that her little brother Ernie was so low on the autism spectrum.

I don't know if it was because of her academic training, or just in her innate disposition, but Maddy was the kindest and most empathetic girl I'd ever met. I'd been with sexier girls and kinkier girls, sure, the kind of girls you do anything to flaunt in front of your frat brothers, but by the time I had matured and graduated I'd realized that there were more important things than sex, like compatibility, generosity, and trust. I admired her most because she instantiated these qualities even though her home-life was a disaster: her mother had died of breast cancer when she was nine, her father was an alcoholic, and her little brother Ernie had autism, although her father just called him a "retard" and beat him on a regular basis.

“So you believe your lies, yes?” Ms. Dulminer checked off something on her e-tablet. “And would you say then also that other people believe your lies, that you’re a good liar?”

“It’s not something I’m proud of, but yeah sure,” I said, motioning with my hand like it was obvious.

She nodded. “Everybody thinks that. And then,” Ms. Dulminer asked, making more notes on her e-tablet with a stylus, “how do you feel about lies, in terms of things like morals or ethics?” She made scare quotes with her fingers when saying morals and ethics.

I didn’t understand what she meant at first, so I just said what came to my mind. “I think mainly when I lie I’m trying to figure out if the person knows or not. Like trying to figure out what’s going on in their mind, if they know what I’m doing. Usually I end up thinking that if it’s so easy for me to lie to people they’re probably lying to me too, which sucks but whatever.” I shrugged.

“So no guilt, just wondering if you’re an effective liar?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And you consider yourself a good one?”

I looked her in the eye and tried to sound confident, like I’d practiced with my mom. “I get the feeling that you think I am,” I stated.

“We think you could be.” She pulled my resume from a binder and placed it on the table between us. Clearing aside various trade magazines—*Brain and Language*, *Cognitive Psychology*, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*—she pointed to items on my resume. “Like this here, where you write that you were editor for a student magazine and

oversaw all aspects of design, submissions, advertising and so forth. This is what we call a *plausible lie*.” She pointed with her tapered finger, like a sword. “Nobody believes you did all those things, but then nobody doubts it enough to investigate. The essence of this job will be to use your writing ability to compose plausible lies: lies that you believe, lies that humans believe, lies that bypass computer algorithms. Reviews, to be technical, not lies.”

“Reviews of what?”

“You’ve heard of the Turing Test,” she said, as she powered off her e-tablet and returned my resume to her binder. I couldn’t tell if it were a statement or a question. “The test is about what we recognize as human and computer,” she said. “Follow me. We’ll see what Turing thinks.”

We walked through modular halls, fluorescently lit, the walls curving into and out of open atrial lounges, vast spaces where workers sat before terminals with headphones, dressed in everything from jeans to work-out gear to pajamas. An older man with an unbuttoned paisley shirt and sandals stalked along a treadmill as he dictated into a CPU slotted into the unit’s head module. There were muscle balls and climbing walls, and a Kiddie Funhouse with Ping-Pong tables and rows of Wii Consoles, above it a sign that said “Words Don’t Lie, They Express: Express Yourself.”

“They’re the reviewers,” Ms. Dulminer said, motioning to the young professionals. “They call themselves Lying Machines, not sockpuppets, they hate that name. This is where you’ll start.”

Then she stopped and waved me into a room the size of a prison cell or large bathroom, empty except for a laptop on a table and a chair. She gave me a business card with my login credentials for the computer.

“Does this mean I have the job?” I asked.

“Probationally,” she said.

“But I get paid?”

“Let’s get started,” she said. “Take some time to look around the various sites bookmarked under the ‘Review Test’ Folder,” she directed me. I saw Yelp, Amazon, Google Local, and a number of other social media and local review sites.

“These are test reviews,” she said. “They’re meant to decipher how persuasive and plausibly you can lie. For the Yelp product, give it a 1-star rating and explain in the review what was so bad about it; for the Amazon product, give it a 3-star rating and explain what was so average about it; for Google Local business, give it a 5-star rating and explain what was so great about it. Write uniquely, in detail, not too positive or negative. You need to avoid detection by the site algorithms, that’s where Turing comes in. Use your creative writing training—lie, tell stories, narrate, come up with something so believable you yourself think it’s true. We will evaluate these to see if you are a Pro or Con.”

“Pro or Con?”

“Means are you better at lying and saying things are good or lying and saying things are bad. Everyone’s different.”

“Which is better?” I asked.

“Wave when you’re done,” she said, and pointed at the camera. “I’ll be watching.”

It turned out I was a Con. I was stationed in a cubicle next to Klova, a square-shaped woman in her early thirties who was also a Con. She wore square red-and-black mirrored glasses that reminded me of Terminator’s eye. We became friendly, laughing over smoothies and wraps at lunch over the negative reviews we had composed during the day. She’d also graduated with an MFA in English, and showed me how to not just write reviews, but described how to embed reviews into stories and larger, more humanistic, narratives. “If you think about it,” she explained, the two of us walking on treadmills at the office gym, “a typical story, a literary story, is a *review* of the world, or of your life. So these reviews, whatever they are regarding, can be as literary and stimulating as the best stories.”

As proof of this, she showed me reviews she had gotten published as microfictions in *McSweeneys* under the pseudonym Minda Harraway. She continued: “What sucks about most jobs is the reality of them. They lock your brain into one task and say repeat. Which kills people. Literally. Especially creatives like us. But this job, Kenny, this job we invent something new every day, and since we’re Cons we can be negative and never get shit for it, like in the real world. People don’t like when you tell the truth, that’s why I like it here.” It didn’t take me long to understand what she meant.

Maddy had always said that I was too negative, that I saw the worst in everything, leading to her nicknaming me “Half Empty,” as in a glass being half empty. “Coming from where I did, I had to fight for everything, nobody was on my side, nobody helped,

it's always been a struggle, but I don't complain because I know there are people who've had it far worse," she'd once told me. We were fighting because I didn't want to go to her cousin's wedding because they'd probably just be divorced in a year anyway. "You though, you're so smart, you have a great mom, your health, your scholarships, and it's like everything's a bother for you, nothing is good enough." For most of our time together, Maddy would just roll her eyes when I was being negative and make an affectionate joke that I secretly enjoyed, but would never tell her.

After six months, the company officially hired me, assigning me to work on a campaign for Dyskordia Press. The campaign's Con agenda was to locate competitors' book releases on sites such as Barnes and Noble, Amazon, Goodreads, and Powell's, and write reviews about how bad they were, whereas the Pro agenda was to perform the opposite for books releases by Dyskordia Press. I began to write long, elaborate reviews about how bad Dyskordia's competitors' books were, which I enjoyed because I was 25 and still hadn't had a story published myself, and was frustrated because everything I saw that was published and winning awards and receiving acclaim sucked (I thought then). Being a Lying Machine helped me express my resentment at constant rejection, which I suppose was therapeutic. However, being paid to be negative turned out to have certain unintended circumstances, which is that I became even *more* negative and disconnected than before.

My mom informed me, her arms folded, that I could cook my own meals from now on because I was too critical of her cooking. The friends I had been staying with said they didn't want me around their kids because of my foul language and bitter attitude. Worst of all, Maddy, whom I had started talking to again, stopped responding,

saying she needed to focus on positive things for her and Ernie, especially after what her father did to him.

“I told you, you need to change,” she’d said over the phone. I was in my bedroom at mom’s house, changing the TV channels because nothing was on. “I’m sorry to say that, like I think I’m *all that*. Believe me, Kenny, I know I’m nothing special, and I don’t want it to sound like an ultimatum, but I can only let you in again if I can trust you and you work on your attitude. You keep saying you’ve changed and I believe it because I love you but then then you always go back to same old Half-Empty Kenny.”

“I know but,” I said. I sighed. “Look I’m not being negative here I’m just saying that I wouldn’t be negative if you’d take me back, like it’s not fair for you to demand I change without allowing for the circumstances of my life to change, which would affect my attitude obviously. I can only prove things have changed if you take me back, live with you, spend time with you and Ernie. Not just texting or talking once in a while, like how could that work? It’s a relationship, there are two people involved, right?”

“I don’t know, Kenny.” She sounded sad. “I don’t think I can.”

Ultimately, I didn’t have intense feelings about any of these developments, even Maddy, because lying for a living, especially in a negative way, affected what I referred to above as my own Theory of Mind, my ability to actually connect with and understand other human beings. (I guess I should admit here that I had just entered therapy to learn to how to become more connected and human.) So this was what I was experiencing when I arrived at work one rainy Thursday in summer and sat down to write a review of the memoir *Mind-Reading*, published by Andora Press, a division of Knopf, authored by my ex-fiancée, Madeline Haddstra.

Normally, we didn't actually *read* the books we reviewed. At least the Cons—I think the Pros tended to, because longer reviews correlated with positive emotion. It was enough for us Cons normally to read the beginning and end, skim the middle, check out some other reviews and Wikis, and then construct everything from there, like how I pretended to read boring books in college.

“Check this out,” Klova said. She swirled her chair into my cubicle's space. She wore her cyborg sunglasses and had her bare feet with black toenails on her desk, her keyboard balanced on her lap. We'd been spending more and more time together, talking about how stupid and inferior other people were—that and our ambition as writers were our only commonalities. I'd started sleeping over her place to avoid my mom, but only on her couch, because she said she was scared to sleep next to someone, she thought they would stab her in her sleep. She was probably my best friend at this point, which didn't say much about my social life. Nothing romantic was happening between us, she had a sort of asexual vibe.

“There's this cheesy memoir about autism,” she said, “so I'm reviewing it as an autistic person. Pretending to be on the autism spectrum, whatever. It's really an effective writing exercise. We should have done it for the MFA, like pretend you have a disability and write like Artaud or Helen Keller. Except how would the teacher grade that I guess?”

She flash-mapped her file onto my monitor and said “I'm going to play that new video game, the one where you can be anyone in history. I want to be Gertrude Stein.” I watched her limp (she had a screw in her knee from an accident) down the long rows of Lying Machines, all laughing and typing, J.T. and Marcus playing Ping-Pong, the Plasma

TV's on the walls showing cartoons, sports shows, reality shows. I spun back around and read what Klova'd written:

this story mind-reading says it is about autism but it is not about autism what the human being says makes no sense to me especially when the human being talks about her brother her brother has autism too the human being says i don't understand him or the human being why would the human being publish a book about autism if the human being doesn't understand autism I am glad I am not the human being's brother do not waste your time or money i wish i had more money to buy video games with do you have some money

I thought then of Ernie. He wasn't one of those people with autism you see in movies or documentaries, like *Rainman* or Temple Grandin or those pre-pubescent chess grandmasters. He was in no way an *idiot savant* or gifted. He was just a normal kid with autism who was always alone, taking apart and putting back together his Transformers, but never making them interact the way most children would. He used to bang his head against the wall, wailing *It's Not, It's Not* until someone restrained him.

This was long ago, when I first met Ernie. Maddy and I had begun dating during junior year and she'd taken me home for fall break to meet her dad and Ernie, who was eight then. She'd warned me that Ernie was protective of her, especially from men, and capable of extreme violence, or "retard strength" as my coarser friends called it. My intention had been to leave in the morning and return to campus to spend the weekend with Valerie Canessa. Although I didn't consider the thing with Maddy anything special, I knew being nice to her brother would get me in her pants, and during all the activities

I'd shared with him that day (I remembered now sitting at my Lying Machine cubicle), I'd been thinking of precisely that, fucking her for the first time.

Her house was like something from a horror movie. It was at the end of a deserted lane, its paint chipped, planks stacked on the sagging front porch, dismantled cars around the abraded yellow lawn that featured no toys, no bicycles or footballs or jump ropes. I'd expected to see them, considering a little boy lived there.

"Thank God," said, Maddy, parking in front of a huge plastic container overflowing with compacted Budweisers, the way you do it by stepping on an empty can.

"What?" I asked. The door of her 2001 Volvo screeched as I got out.

"My dad's not here."

"Good," I said. I wasn't looking forward to meeting her dad, especially after she'd described him as a temperamental alcoholic with violent tendencies.

"Let me go inside first to see Ernie," Maddy said. "I want to prepare him." We hugged in front of the car. "Stop worrying, Kenny, I just want my little man to myself for a second."

"I'm not worried, I'm confused. You mean you're Dad leaves him home alone? What is he, seven?"

"Yeah well it is what it is. He's a selfish prick but he's my dad."

When Maddy finally opened the door with its ripped screen, she was holding a skinny boy with tiny wrists and hair cut in tufts in her arms. His knobby knees and his body half turned, hugging her, avoiding eye contact with me. He wore a faded Nascar T-shirt and brown wrinkled slacks that were too big for him, almost covering his the Velcro straps of his Keds.

“Come in!” Maddy said, in one of those vintage dresses she used to wear. She looked so maternal holding Ernie. “Ernie can’t wait to meet you.”

I didn’t believe this, but it really wasn’t that bad. I had never hung out with an autistic child before, but really it was no different than any of the other younger brothers of girls I’d dated: Ernie was shy, he loved his older sister, he wanted to play. At first he wouldn’t make eye-contact or respond to my comments or jokes, but when we were playing Monopoly we both wanted to be the thimble and, after some encouragement from Maddy about the virtues of sharing, he put the thimble in my palm and I clasped, our hands holding, making a monster sound before giving the thimble back to him, and he sort of giggled.

We sat cross-legged on the floor in the living room. After we let Ernie win at Monopoly, he wanted us to play with his Legos. When he stumbled down the hall to get them, Maddy stretched and said, “I’m going to take a shower and make dinner.”

“Is he cool alone with me? What if your dad comes?”

She cradled my head with her hands and kissed me in a vertical progression: forehead, nose, lips. “He likes you, Kenny. You’ll be fine.”

Ernie and I played Legos and he showed me his favorite video games. I overheard Maddy arguing on the phone with her dad and dinner kept getting pushed back. Ernie and I were snacking on Goldfish and watching an old episode of *Inspector Gadget* when Maddy, wearing an apron, announced dinner was finally ready.

“Without him?” Ernie asked.

“He’ll be late buddy. It’ll just be us three.”

“Can we eat out here?” he asked, excited.

She skipped into the room and tousled his hair. “Anything you want, little man.”

I was doing the dishes when headlights appeared in the yard and a pickup lurched to a stop right behind Maddy’s Volvo, blocking her in. She was in the bathroom with Ernie, fixing his hair. It was like ten. I turned off the faucet and turned, drying my hands on my jeans, when her dad lumbered through the door drinking a beer, holding the remaining five of the six-pack in his right hand with his keys. He raised the dangling beers and said, “You a drinker?”

“I’ll have one,” I said. The last time I’d had a Budweiser was when my dad let me sip from his watching Phillie Phanatic games, before his cancer.

He tossed one to me, finished his, crinkled it in his massive hands, and opened another. “You Ken?”

“It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

“Of course it is,” he joked. “I’m king of the county.” He drank half the beer and looked around the kitchen.

I guessed he was wondering about dinner and said, “There’s spaghetti in the fridge. We waited but Ernie was hungry.”

“She always over boils spaghetti. I mean Ken, who can’t boil spaghetti? Just between us.” He walked closer, I could smell strong liquor on his breath. “Her mother couldn’t either, I don’t know how to pick ‘em, I tell you Ken. Where is she?” He started to shout her name, “Madeline!” and lurched out of the kitchen with his Budweiser.

“That game's fuckin crazy,” Klova said, bouncing back in her chair. “It was like I was really fucking Alice Toklas. Most experience I’ve had in years,” she laughed. She

trawled her chair next to me to rest her head on my shoulder and look at the monitor.

“Maybe I’ll publish that too and then reveal it’s a hoax. I hate all these memoirs and self-help books, y’know?”

I didn’t say anything. I was starting to feel bad thinking about how things had gone wrong with Maddy, how I’d cheated and lied and took her capacity for forgiveness for granted. I wondered whether Ernie was still in the institution he’d been placed in after his father held Ernie’s face in the toilet, causing brain damage. I pictured Maddy alone in the apartment, looking through photo albums or writing in her diary with the pink clouds. Despite her brother’s disabilities, her mother’s death, her father’s alcoholism, she was the most optimistic and positive person I’d ever met.

“This is off,” I said to Klova.

“I know, right?” she laughed. She was so critical and negative it was impossible to insult her, even though I meant it then. *Off* meant cool to her.

“Autistics don’t write like that.”

“Oh, right, like you’re Mr. Autistic. Killjoy.”

That night ended with Maddy’s dad berating her in front of Ernie for the B she’d gotten in Advanced Calculus. “I bet even Ernie here could get better than a B, right Ernie?”

We were all in the living room together, her dad finishing off his six-pack. Maddy had just given Ernie a bath and he sat in her lap while she combed his hair. He looked like the happiest boy in the world.

“Ernie?” her dad knocked on his own head with the empty can. “You understand anything? I asked you a question.”

“Dad,” Maddy said, “just stop. He’s never even heard of calculus.”

“According to this,” he flicked the registrar’s Grade Report, “neither have you.”

Maddy sighed. “I did the best I could,” she said. “I’m happy with it.”

“I’m not, I’m not happy about it at all. It was bad enough with one retard, now I have two.”

“Don’t use that word.”

“I’ll use whatever words I want in my house.” He crushed the can on the table strewn with Hustlers and Nascar magazines and ripped Ernie from Maddy’s hands. “Bed time, bub.”

Ernie reached back for Maddy, but his dad threw him over his shoulder and staggered down the hallway, telling at him to grow up and act like a man, Ernie screeching “*Ken Stay, Ken Stay.*”

Maddy and I spent that night on the floor in Ernie’s room, watching him sleep. He was remarkably quiet, but clenched his fists, and had some metal-thing strapped into his jaw to prevent his teeth from grinding. At one point she started removing my jeans and bent her head down but I whispered, “We don’t have to, let’s just hold each other.”

“No. Let’s,” she said. “I really want to.”

“With him in here?” I kissed her. “Believe me I want this more than you can imagine, I guess you can tell that,” I laughed, and she did too.

“Kenny?”

“I’m here.”

“I really like you,” she said. “You’re not like the others.” She kissed me and tucked her head under my chin. “I love watching him sleep, it’s like I know he’s okay then at least.” Maddy fell asleep before me. I stayed up most of the night looking at the two of them, comparing their sleeping faces, looking around the room with its chipped wall paint, dusty furniture, the bed shaped like a racing car.

The cover of *Mind-Reading* was almost an exact copy of my memory’s image of her standing in that dank house’s doorway, wearing a dress, holding Ernie in front of her. Even though I could have acquired it for free by looting the Dyskordia Press slush pile, I purchased it and mailed it to our old apartment with a note saying, “I loved this book and I love you and Ernie!!! I’m ready to change...Please check your Amazon review☺.” I disliked exclamation points and emoticons, and hoped that by using them I was demonstrating to Maddy that the book had really affected me, which it had. Klova was saying something in that snarky voice of hers but I wasn’t paying attention; I was done with people like her. I began to write a review of the book based on my recollections of Maddy, of Eddie, and the three of us. I wrote it under my own name, not a sockpuppet. If they were lies, they were positive ones, not negative ones. I ended the review by writing “this author is just the type of woman who excels in all her roles because of her vitality: as a sister, as a daughter, as a student, as a caretaker, as a fiancée, she models the best possible characteristics. Any man lucky enough to have her as a wife would be the luckiest man in the world. I hope that man is me, Maddy.”

