**Fish Stories**

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Every accomplished liar knows that craft trumps believability.

Your father could tell a whopper like he was delivering the news. First, he would toss out the bait. *You ever hear about . . . ? Did I ever tell you about . . . ?*  Like a fisherman, he would wait for a tug on the line. When his listener bit, he would lean forward, weathered hands on the knees of his faded Levi’s, look you dead in the eye, and play with you until he reeled you in. Hooking me, your child bride, was like sport fishing at a trout farm.

A skilled tall tale teller can weave fact and fancy together so seamlessly that even sworn skeptics are taken in.

First it was jackalopes—antlered jackrabbits with fierce yellow eyes and a taste for whiskey. What did I know? The Ozarks were full of creepy crawly things I’d never seen before. Then it was snipe hunting. For months he spun the instructions, explaining how you can only catch them when the moon is dark, how one person rustles a paper bag while the experienced hunters head out with flashlights to flush the snipes. When I asked what snipes looked like, he’d wink and say *You’ll see*.

He taught you the liars’ code of conduct: Even if you are caught in bed with another woman, look your accuser in the eye and deny it. A well-delivered lie can corrode perception. A lie repeated begins to sound like truth.

That night you said you fell asleep on the babysitter’s floor after you took her home.

The missing plaid shirt you said you forgot at the house of a friend’s wife when you helped her with something while he was out of town.

The girl you brought home while I was traveling. How you said you let her sleep in our bed while you slept on the sofa.

The money order you said you sent but maybe forgot to sign.

The tall tale is a test of gullibility. It also a test of willingness to play the game. Once duped into holding the snipe bag in the woods, you have a choice: patsy or part of the posse.

The first night you didn’t come home was a week after our baby was born. I laid awake all night planning your funeral in case you were dead. You spilled in with the morning light, oh so sorry but you fell asleep in your truck. How the fumes from the construction site where you worked must have made you woozy so you pulled over and didn’t wake until dawn. *I can’t believe I slept all night.*

A successful lie is customized to our hunger to believe. Or perhaps it is the other way around. Perhaps we swallow the lie because we find the facts inedible. Either way, the barb must snag flesh. A mouth must open on both sides of the transaction.

The second night you didn’t come home was the night of the barroom brawl. *You’ll never believe what happened . . . !* You were minding your own business, having a beer or two after work, when the fight broke out. Some kid got his arm broken in the scuffle, and you and somebody else drove him to the local hospital where they wouldn’t take him because he didn’t have insurance, so you drove him to the next town where you had to wait hours for a doctor.

Pathological liars tend to believe their own lies even as they embellish and embroider. They stitch sequins on a lie until it shimmers like a sun-struck fish.

When we met, you said that the Japanese mafia ran you out of Hawaii where you were selling LSD. That you could swim underwater when you were stoned. That you played bass with John Lee Hooker and Big Mama Thornton in Diamond Head crater. That you were maced in a civil rights riot on your first day in town, busted on your second. I don’t know for a fact that these things aren’t true.

The poisonous beauty of a lie is its audacity, its fool’s gold shine.

The fishline of a lie can take decades to untangle, one sinker at a time. To pick the knots is to fall out of our own story, like landing hard on the floor after a dream we wish we could swim back inside. The fluid suspension of disbelief. The shimmer of improbability. Jackrabbits with antlers, strange creatures in the woods, a fish so big it can capsize a boat. A partner who is true.