

When characters from 20 short stories – some humorous, some poignant – meet at a “reunion,” they try to come to grips with who they really are and what they have become. Instead, they rail against the author for portraying them negatively.

Change and Delusion

By Steve Legomsky

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Change and **DELUSION**

A Collection of Short Stories
by **STEVE LEGOMSKY**

Can you ever truly change your fundamental nature?
If not, is self-delusion worth a try?
As a last resort, can you at least fool others?

See what happens when characters from 20 different stories
get together and rise up in unison against
their common author.



"This book isn't very good, but it's better than his other writing."
—The author's mother

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THE CHILDHOOD OF ISAAC NEWTON

Isaac Newton was born in 1642 in Tempe, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix. The son of Canadian snowbirds, he was overjoyed the day his parents, tired of their annual migrations, finally resolved to make the Sunbelt their permanent home. “Enough with the schlepping back and forth, already,” his father announced.

Isaac’s father, Josh, was a struggling hedge fund manager. His mother, Debbie, was an orthodontist. When confronted by his middle class suburban friends, young Isaac would often retort proudly that his parents, though not wealthy, were clean and humble. Pressed on this, he would inevitably have to concede that, by “clean,” he didn’t necessarily mean “squeaky clean,” like in the TV commercials, but “average clean.” “Humble,” on the other hand, was a perfectly apt description of his unassuming mother, though he had to acknowledge that his father, if anything, was a bit on the arrogant side. “How many men have fathered the inventor of gravity?” his dad would frequently ask, taunting his colleagues, neighbors, and fellow Walmart shoppers.

At the core of Isaac’s childhood was a ceaseless tension between his two fundamental passions. Even at an early age, he recognized his own mathematical and

scientific brilliance. But his heart was elsewhere. What he wanted more than anything was to become a Hall of Fame third baseman for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Sometimes Isaac's star third baseman fantasy took the form of excited radio broadcasts that portrayed Isaac electrifying the crowd with his swashbuckling style of play. In bed one night, in hushed but animated tones that he tried hard to prevent his parents from hearing, he announced, with appropriate urgency, "Peralta swings and lines one into right field! It's a base hit! Newton is rounding third! They're waving him in! Here's the throw to the plate! Newton dives! The throw is" – a dramatic pause, then a loud, piercing shout that escaped from his mouth like air from a punctured balloon – "NOT IN TIME!!!" Another dramatic pause, as he listened to the deafening noise of the delirious crowd. "There is pandemonium in Phoenix! This crowd is going berserk!"

As he lay in bed, basking in the bedlam that was washing over him, Isaac's fantasy was suddenly shattered by the sight and sound of his frightened mother bursting through the door. "Are you all right?" she asked him.

"What?"

"I heard you shriek."

"No, that wasn't me."

“Sorry, it must have been your father again. He’s watching another scary movie. Nighty night, little twinkie.”

Isaac grimaced. Ballplayers hate to be called “little twinkie.” And just for the record, he thought to himself, it wasn’t a “shriek,” but a manly exclamation.

There was just one problem with Isaac’s dream of baseball stardom: He sucked at sports. All sports. When it came time to choose up sides for a pickup baseball game, Isaac was always the last kid chosen and the one instantly banished to the graveyard known as right field.

Meanwhile, his intellectual horizons were expanding at the speed of light at the same time that his athletic mediocrity was careening toward humiliating new lows. Isaac’s destiny was coming into clear focus, for all to see. All except Isaac himself, that is. Everyone else knew early on that he was never going to play third base, or any position for that matter, with the Diamondbacks or any other professional team. They all knew he would be a mathematician and a scientist.

But for most of his childhood, Isaac was in fierce denial. Others could scoff all they liked, he felt. He was adamant that he would never give up on his dream. At times he could even be overheard rehearsing his future Hall of Fame speech. “They all told me I’d never make it as a ballplayer. They said I was no good, I had no

talent, I would never grow facial hair. But I never gave up. I plugged away, practicing hitting, fielding, throwing, base-running, autograph-signing, doing shaving commercials. I honed these skills from morning till night, 7 days a week, 365.25 days a year, till my hands were raw, my legs weary, and my face cut up from shaving miscues. And now, here I am, in Cooperstown. Dreams can come true, my friends! [Pausing for frenzied, thundering applause] DREAMS CAN COME TRUE!”

It was perhaps at his fourth birthday party that Isaac’s extraordinary mathematical talents first became obvious and his ultimate career path inevitable. When his aunt playfully asked him “How old are you, young man?” an annoyed Isaac replied “the cube root of 64” and proceeded to laugh contemptuously at her confused reaction. As answers like that started becoming routine, his aunt complained to Isaac’s parents that this habit had become “tiresome and, frankly, a bit disconcerting,” to which Isaac’s father replied, “Just wait. This kid is going to be another Einstein.”

Isaac’s aunt was puzzled. “The bagels guy?”

“No, the other one.”

At age 6 came Isaac’s visionary announcement to his friends: “Mark my words. One day, Arizona will be a state.”

“What’s a state?” asked one of his friends. “You mean like Spain, or Myanmar?”

“No, one of the 50 states of the United States. You know, like Michigan, or Ontario.”

Isaac was 9 years old on that now famous, fateful day when, sitting beneath an apple tree while munching on a peanut butter and jelly sandwich during recess, he watched an apple tumble to the ground. His revelation came suddenly. “Why,” he wondered, “do the apples always fall perpendicular to the ground? Why don’t they travel sideways, or even upwards?”

This question consumed Isaac for several days. His initial hypothesis was rooted in what he called his “theory of botanical instinct.” The tree, he speculated, did not want the Santa Ana winds that swept through the desert in the autumn to carry her apples to distant places. Thrusting her apples straight down to the ground would minimize their wind exposure and therefore the distance they would travel from home. Implicit in that theory was Isaac’s assumption that the tree understood intuitively what Isaac had long since proved mathematically -- that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.

But he was never really at peace with his “botanical instinct” theory. If the tree’s goal were to keep the apples close to home, he figured, why wouldn’t the tree

just wait a little longer and release them during the winter months, once the Santa Ana winds had passed?

It didn't take long for Isaac to lay his initial theory to rest and consider whether the answer might be found not in the world of botany, but in physics. So he set out to identify the physical forces that impelled apples to plunge headlong toward the earth. With the traumatic memory of having violently pushed away the bowl of borscht that his parents had once commanded him to eat, Isaac wondered: "Might it be that all objects have a natural inclination to push things away from them?" He hypothesized that the force with which they push objects away (F) is directly proportional to how revolting the object is (R) and to the square of its mass (M). The formula $F=RM^2$ quickly found its way into Isaac's notebooks.

But that theory too had a short life. A tree, Isaac realized, doesn't have arms, unless you count its branches, which at any rate don't have wrists. "A tree could no sooner fling an apple to the ground than an NFL wide receiver could spike a football," he scribbled furiously in his journal. "No, the apple must drop on its own when it's ripe. And since it always heads straight to the ground, it must be the earth attracting it, not the tree pushing it away like a bowl of borscht." It didn't occur to Isaac, brilliant as he was, that the earth didn't have arms either, so that his theory of gravitational pull

was no more logical than his rejected theory of gravitational push, a flaw that physicists at Princeton University would point out only centuries later.

At age 12, on most of the days that his young friends were outdoors playing baseball or basketball after school, Isaac's parents forced him to toil away in Hebrew school three afternoons a week. On those few afternoons when he was free to play baseball with his friends, he would regale them in between innings with fascinating tales, learned in Hebrew school, about the history of the Jewish people.

Mesmerized, they would listen with awe and rapt attention, even while skeptical about the part where Moses led the Jews across the Red Sea. "Oceans don't just suddenly dry up in minutes," they would point out, only for Isaac to remind them that the Red Sea is, as its name implies, a sea, not an ocean. This seemed to satisfy them.

As excited as they were to hear the many installments of Isaac's historical lecture series, they frequently taunted him. They quickly nicknamed him "Fig." Of course. "Hey, fig, having fun at Hebrew School? Ha, ha."

Truth be told, however, Isaac's elementary school friends were envious. Like most children today, they dreamed of one day becoming philosophers or

historians, while young Isaac could think only about baseball fame.

Although tales of his uncommon brilliance had already begun to circulate, it was not until his bar mitzvah that “young Isaac” became a household name and his destiny so obvious that even Isaac himself had no choice but to finally accept his future career path. For it was on that occasion that he recited his entire haftorah with his eyes closed.

And yet, those in attendance would remark later that that recitation was only the second-most dazzling element of his performance. The most memorable, they said, was his subsequent bar mitzvah speech. Removing an apple from his pocket, he held it dramatically above his head for several seconds and then released it. The spellbound crowd watched as it splattered against the oak floor of the bimah. In the finest Socratic tradition, he posed a rhetorical question to the bewildered congregation: “What was that?”

One person shouted “an apple.”

Smiling patiently, Isaac followed up: “Ah, but why did the apple fall to the floor?”

“Because you dropped it. Duuuuuh!”

Isaac was disappointed. Frustrated. Even a tad angry.

To Isaac’s delight, however, one member of the congregation understood perfectly. “Gravity,”

bellowed a gentleman with wild white hair and a thick German accent. “Bingo,” Isaac responded, pointing his right index finger at the gentleman while winking and making a clicking sound. Always the punster, he couldn’t resist adding “I’m glad you grasped the gravity of the moment. Get it?” The crowd roared appreciatively. “Ja, aber der moment ist relativ,” quipped the strange gentleman.

You know the rest. Isaac never became a professional ballplayer, but he did transform the fields of mathematics, physics, and even philosophy.

Isaac “Fig” Newton died in 1726, a bevy of tearful friends and disciples at his bedside. At his insistence, he was buried in his white lab coat with a Diamondbacks cap on his head, a wad of chewing tobacco in his mouth, and a baseball glove lovingly cradling his left hand. The last line of the rabbi’s eulogy succinctly captured Isaac’s life: “The world has lost the worst third baseman who has ever lived.”

HIGH ROLLER

You couldn't design a more fitting stereotype of a mid-level State Department functionary than Connor Kelly. Forty-one years old, just a bit on the paunchy side, physically nondescript, and with thinning grey hair and wire-rim glasses, he would barely have been noticeable on the sidewalks of Washington but for his pronounced limp, the result of a boot camp shooting accident that terminated his brief enlistment in the U.S. Army Reserves almost twenty years ago. The problem isn't that he is so exquisitely forgettable. The problem is how much that bothers him. He has neither expectation nor need of actual greatness, but he has a deep-rooted longing for others to perceive him as great, or at least as someone who is interesting and important - as someone who inspires *notice*.

It's not as if he has no life outside of work. He has been happily married to Lucy for the past fifteen years. She runs her own realty business out of their home, and their joint income has left them financially secure. They adore their two children, twelve-year-old Matilda and nine-year-old Scottie, both healthy and well-adjusted, except that extremely myopic Scotty is self-conscious about his thick eyeglasses. Connor and Lucy are perfectly content to spend quiet evenings at home

with the kids and to take annual three-week family vacations at their lakeside cottage in West Virginia, just a three-hour drive from their home in suburban Chevy Chase, Maryland.

It bugged him no end when his mother told him a year or so ago that she so admired his willingness to accept who he is. “So many men your age,” she had said, “spend years trying to achieve, achieve, achieve, when they really have no particular talent. You’ve always been perfectly happy in your own skin. You know your limitations. That’s a sign of true maturity.”

She was wrong, of course; nothing disturbs Connor more than being perceived by others as ordinary. “Ordinary” is just another word for “insignificant,” he feels. And the fact that his own mother thinks of him in that way has been especially hurtful. Deep down, he knows that is also how his wife and children, as well as his friends and co-workers, perceive him. And the deepest hurt of all is that in his honest moments he fully understands that they’re right. To be sure, they all like him; they just find him dull and unremarkable. Even though he accepts that he is who he is, he would at least like for other people to think there is something noteworthy about him.

He was always honest and transparent in his relationships with Lucy and the children – until the day he concocted the story that he had been promoted to an

exciting State Department position that would require top secret security clearance. His responsibilities will be so sensitive, he explained, that once he is cleared and has begun in his new position he will no longer be able to discuss his work externally, not even with his family. There will be times, he was sorry to say, that his work would require him to travel. On those occasions he will not be able to tell them where he is; he might be away for several days at a clip; and he will be incommunicado. There will be some danger, he acknowledged, but the risks are not extreme and this is something he feels obliged to do.

Except for a very small group, he said, even his State Department colleagues had no inkling of his new assignment. His wife and children were the only people outside the State Department and the White House who now knew about this, and they were never to reveal any of it to anyone. If a friend or neighbor were to raise the subject, the family was to insist that Connor is still in the same mid-level State Department position even though his work now requires occasional travel. And in case a State Department employee were ever to ask Lucy or the children, they were to claim that they know nothing about this, because, he said, he was under strict instructions to tell no one about this change -- not even his family. He was doing so anyway because he felt they had a right to know and to object if that was their

wish. He will turn it down, he told them, if any of the three of them ask him to do so, though he conveyed how important this was to him personally and to our national security, and how strongly “the people at the top” believe he is the man for this job.

After much discussion about the impact this would have on his family life (most days he’ll still be in DC and coming home at the usual time – it’s just that there will be instances when that’s not the case), they all consented, albeit reluctantly. Connor smiled appreciatively when Scottie told him that he was proud of him.

Connor knew that so grand a fabrication would require careful, elaborate precautions. He bought two new suits, explaining to Lucy that he would need them for those days when he meets with high-level U.S. or foreign government officials. He also conspicuously applied for and obtained a passport, even though he had never been out of the country except for a couple of childhood day trips to Canada with his family when they lived in Detroit and a single trip to Europe with his buddies shortly after college. His wife wondered why the government didn’t issue him some kind of diplomatic passport. He explained that that would be the fastest way to blow his cover. When he travels overseas, he would need to pass as a tourist or business visitor, not a U.S. government agent.

Connor's intention was to periodically take short trips overseas, both for the thrill of seeing new places and to maintain the story he had told his family about his likely overseas missions. Cash posed a hard problem to solve. The family income was clearly enough to finance occasional overseas travel, but access was an issue. He could not make sudden large withdrawals from his and Lucy's joint bank account without Lucy noticing.

So he secretly opened a bank account in his own name, got a credit card in his own name, and arranged to pay his credit card balances via automatic monthly withdrawals from this new account. To access the money he would need, he began making larger and more frequent cash withdrawals from his and Lucy's joint savings account, being careful not to increase the amounts or the frequency so drastically as to attract notice. He would then spend as little as possible and deposit the remainder into his private account. When the savings became sufficient to pay for an overseas trip, he would travel on what he would tell his wife was secret government business. He arranged paperless transactions so that neither bank account nor credit card statements would be mailed to his home.

Physically receiving the credit card was tricky. He had to specify a home address that the card would be sent to – an address he would also need for credit card

online transactions. But he could not risk Lucy seeing it when she opens the mail.

He mulled his options. He thought about using the street address of the State Department building in which he works, but that too seemed risky. The bank that issued the credit card might realize that this was a government office rather than a residence, and even if they didn't, the mail room might well send it back rather than check the directory to see whether there was a Connor Kelly working somewhere in that massive building. He could reduce the latter risk by specifying "5th floor" in the address, but that would signal the bank that this was not a personal residence.

He settled on a better option. Knowing that Lucy would soon be visiting her parents in San Diego, that she would be away for a week, and that it would take 10-14 days to receive the card, he timed his online credit card application so that the card would arrive during her absence. Luckily for him, it did.

One day, a few weeks after Lucy's return, he dressed for the first time in one of his new suits. Lucy told him he looked good. "So today's the day, huh?"

Connor's sole reply was a wry smile.

It took three months for Connor to accumulate enough money for his first overseas trip, a three-day jaunt to London. He told Lucy and the kids that he was about to embark on his first foreign "mission," but that

it was a very safe project for which they had no cause to worry.

Matilda asked him where he was going.

“I can’t tell you, sweetheart. I’m sorry. But I don’t expect it to take more than 3 or 4 days at the most. And remember you can’t tell a soul about what I’m doing. If anyone asks about me, just tell them I’m in New York for a few days for my job.”

He allowed his wife to drive him to the airport for his overnight flight, and he began his new life with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Upon arrival at Heathrow the following morning, he took a taxi to his relatively modest hotel and was miffed when told that his room wasn’t ready yet.

“Check-in time is 3:00, sir.”

“It’s only 9:30 a.m. What am I supposed to do in the meantime? I didn’t sleep a wink on the plane and I really need a nap.”

“I’m very sorry, sir, but you’re welcome to sit in the lobby or visit our restaurant. I’ll keep checking with the maids, and I’ll try to get you into your room as soon as it’s ready. There’s very likely to be something available well before 3:00; I just can’t guarantee it. I can take your mobile phone number if you’d like me to call you.”

With that, Connor hung out in the restaurant, wondering whether this whole ruse was worth it. The

turbulent plane ride had not been fun, and neither was sitting alone in a restaurant, bored and exhausted. Happily, his room was ready just two hours later and he was able to take a much-needed nap. He woke up after 3 hours, feeling groggy and disoriented, but after a cup of coffee his spirits and his energy returned and he spent the rest of the afternoon on a joyous bus tour of London's most famous attractions. The next day he summoned the courage to start exploring London on his own. He even managed to figure out how to navigate the Tube. The adrenaline was flowing, and he was proud of himself for having done so well on his first-ever solo overseas trip.

When he returned home, tired but exhilarated, he was bursting at the seams with a desire to tell Lucy all about his trip and his independent exploration of a foreign city. Of course he could not do so, and when she asked him how his trip was, all he could muster was that "it was very satisfactory. Things went quite well."

It took another several months for Connor to save up enough money for a second trip. This time he wanted to try a non-English-speaking city, though his natural timidity confined his search to western Europe. He settled on Madrid, because he had taken Spanish in high school. Upon arrival at Madrid-Barajas Airport after a direct overnight flight, he repeated his London routine – a short nap, a bus tour of the highlights, and

then two days of independent sightseeing that included several hours at the Prado. He was developing a growing confidence in his travel capabilities and a resolve to branch out next time to a more exotic place outside his comfort zone.

His third overseas venture came only after six more months, because this far more expensive trip required more time to build up his secret travel fund. He booked a whirlwind one-week Southeast Asia tour that took him to Bangkok, Vientiane, Ho Chi Minh City, and Hanoi. He decided to forgo the included boat tour on Halong Bay for fear of getting a sunburn that would betray his secret when he returned. Staying behind in Hanoi, and while sipping a cup of tea at an outdoor café, Connor was approached by an attractive young woman who asked to join him. He was delighted, especially so when, after just a few minutes, the woman made clear that she would enjoy sleeping with him. His ego deflated quickly, though, when it developed that she was a prostitute and that her price was 500 U.S. dollars. He declined.

On one cold January evening, a few days after returning home, Connor sat in his living room still buzzing from the excitement of his Southeast Asian adventure and mentally re-living the titillating experience of being solicited by a prostitute for the first time in his life. It was quiet, the kids were in bed for the

night, and Connor began daydreaming about his next trip. He could not have been more content.

That is, until Lucy walked over and handed him two unopened envelopes addressed to him. “These came for you today.” One envelope bore the words “Important Tax Information” and, for the return address, the name of the bank where Connor had his secret savings account. The other envelope displayed the name of the bank that had issued his secret credit card.

Lucy was curious; Connor was furious. His very purpose in opting for paperless transactions for both the credit card and the bank account had been to prevent exactly this scenario – information arriving at his house. Speaking in a dismissive tone, he told Lucy how much he hates these annoying solicitations from banks that want his business, and he conspicuously tossed both envelopes, unopened, into the recycling bin.

The moment Lucy left the room, Connor retrieved both envelopes and took them to the bathroom, where he opened them. The one for his bank account was a 1099 form. Fortunately, the annual interest earned had been minimal enough that he would not be required to include the information in his upcoming tax return. The other envelope contained a detailed listing of all his credit card transactions for the just-concluded calendar year. He tucked both envelopes and their contents into his pockets, flushed the toilet, ran the water in the sink

for a few seconds, waited a few more seconds, and stepped out of the bathroom.

At work the next day Connor fed both envelopes and their contents to his office shredder. He knew how lucky he had been that Lucy hadn't opened them, because she often does. He had dodged a lethal bullet. Still, he would have to figure out how to avoid the same problem next year. He couldn't count on her never opening these letters in the future. During his lunch hour, he found a private spot outdoors and called both banks to complain about their having sent written letters when he had specifically requested, and until then had been receiving, only wireless communications. But both banks insisted that these annual notices were the one thing that they needed to send by mail, even to customers who had otherwise elected paperless transactions. And they wouldn't budge. "Our computers are programmed that way," one agent explained. "That's our policy," she added.

A second year went by. There were more exotic overseas trips, more subterfuge. Connor was meticulous about storing his passport, with its telltale entry visas and other stamps, in his office desk rather than at home.

It was bound to happen. Connor's big mistake was that he completely forgot about, and thus never got around to solving, the problem of the banks sending

their annual mailings to the house. After two years of clever, intricate subterfuge the next year's annual list of credit card transactions arrived in the mail. They were grouped by type of expense – airfare, hotels, restaurants, etc.

This time, Lucy happened to open the envelope. She was surprised to discover that Connor had his own personal credit card and especially puzzled by the multiple charges for his overseas travel expenses. She wondered why he had had to pay for these expenses out of his own personal account when they were supposedly for government travel. Maybe the arrangement was that he would lay out the money and that the government would later reimburse him, but if that's the case, where did those reimbursements go? Not to any of their joint bank accounts, because she would have seen them when she received the monthly statements for those accounts. She always inspected those statements or at least glanced at the individual items, so government reimbursement deposits this large would have stood out. Nor did this private bank account statement contain any mention of large deposits into that account – just a long series of small cash deposits that sure didn't look anything like government reimbursements.

She wondered whether Connor was having an affair, but she could see that the airfare charges were

on different airlines that served different parts of the world. It seemed unlikely that his trips would take him to different world regions if there were one woman somewhere whom he was seeing on a repeat basis. Then again, perhaps that woman was flying out to meet him in these various locations. Or perhaps there were multiple women. She had never before suspected him of infidelity, but these transactions were suspicious.

When Connor returned home from work, she showed him the statement. “What’s going on?”

As she stood next to him waiting for her answer, Connor was thinking “I am fucked. I mean, I am like totally fucked.”

But he had an inspiration. He said “I can see why that looks strange, but it’s nothing, trust me,” while raising his finger to his lips and motioning to her to step outside with him. Once outside, he whispered “I don’t think the house is bugged, but I can’t be sure. OK, here’s the thing. There’s a limit to what I can tell you, I’m sorry. Let me just say this. This account is all part of my cover. There are some dangerous people who are capable of accessing government records and who absolutely must not know where I’ve been. So my travel has to appear to be for tourism or personal business. Remember, I told you right at the beginning that this would be my cover, which is why I had to get

a personal passport rather than a diplomatic passport. Do you remember that conversation?

“Yes.”

“All right. I shouldn’t even have revealed that much to you, but now that I have, please promise me you won’t breathe a word of this to anyone. I’m not trying to be melodramatic, but your safety and possibly even that of the kids depend on secrecy. To say nothing of what would happen to me personally if those above me at the agency were ever to find out that I’ve been sharing these secrets with you.” As he mouthed these words, Connor was feeling his oats. The line between reality and fantasy was beginning to fade ever so slightly. He found himself momentarily forgetting that he was not really a spy. The delusion lasted only a few seconds, but even as he was returning to Earth he found himself thinking “Huh! I really am cut out to be a spy.”

Now, though, Lucy was alarmed. “You said ‘the agency’. Are you with the CIA?”

“I can’t answer that. I’m sorry.”

“Do I need to worry? Should the kids and I be looking for another place to stay?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. Really. As long as you don’t share any of this with anyone, there’s no problem. You know I would never put any of you in danger.”

“What about your own safety?”

“I won’t lie to you. There are risks. But I’m taking all the essential precautions. I’m not doing anything reckless. I know I have responsibilities as a father and as a husband. It’s just that sometimes we can be called upon for a higher purpose. Sometimes a man must do what a man must do.” He grimaced semi-dramatically as he said this, mimicking what he imagined would be the mannerisms of a macho spy.

“This is scaring me, Connor. I won’t share any of this and I won’t ask you any other questions about your work. But there’s also the money part. We don’t have huge savings. Where are all the reimbursements for your travel? Are they all in this secret account of yours? Will we be able to access those funds when we need them?”

“Of course. They’re perfectly safe. The secret account is a private account in my name. I can’t make large sudden withdrawals from it without the risk of calling personal attention to myself, but one day when this is all over, we’ll have this nice retirement fund to draw from. In the meantime, I’m expecting to receive a 1099 form for the bank account that pays for these credit card charges. When it arrives, do not open it! We can’t afford to have your fingerprints on the 1099 form in case someone from the agency decides to investigate. That’s very important. OK?”

At this point, Lucy's suspicions were returning, but she didn't want to challenge him as to whether he's having an affair. So she just nodded.

Connor began to think the crisis was over. "OK, should we go back in?"

Lucy said nothing. She just nodded again.

Connor could see now that she had some doubts about his story. That made him nervous because, of course, no such reimbursements existed. They never did. The money he had spent on his travels was gone. Moreover, now that her suspicions had been aroused, the excessive amount of cash he had been taking from their joint account for what he had been pretending were just his normal daily expenses were suddenly far less likely to escape notice.

He decided he would have to begin drawing less cash than before, but still enough to permit regular deposits into his private account. Eventually, he assured himself, he would be able to build up his balance to a point where it might plausibly resemble the fictional accumulated reimbursements that they could one day withdraw. Realistically, this would also require deferring overseas travel, at least for the short term.

For several months he continued taking as much cash out of their joint account as he thought would not arouse suspicion, spending as little of it as possible and

pouring the rest of it into his private account. But it was building up way too slowly.

What to do? He thought about investing his newly accumulated savings in high-risk, high-reward stock instead of leaving them in his low-interest bank account. If the investments paid off, he figured, he might soon be able to restore his balance to something that looks credible. And if the investment failed, he figured, he could confess to his wife that he had invested their money in what looked like a solid stock that very unexpectedly went bust. He would be embarrassed, and she would be livid that he had effectively gambled away their savings, but at least he would be spared having to reveal his double life and the fact that for two years he had been lying to her about it. Plus, she would still be impressed with his seeming to be a secret government agent.

But when it came time to transfer the money into a high-risk stock, Connor lost his nerve. Better and safer, he thought, would be to continue building up his bank account, albeit slowly, and hope Lucy forgets about the whole thing. If she questions him again at some point, and he doesn't have the money, he would lie and tell her then that he had taken a chance on a high-risk investment and had lost everything. As would have been the case had he actually made that investment and lost everything, she would be angry and he would be

humiliated, but it would not be as bad as admitting to her that for two years his total existence had been one giant fraud.

As he feared, Lucy brought up the subject again one evening after the children were in bed. And as planned, he told her he had blown the entire sum in a foolish high-risk investment. She was aghast. That much he had expected. What he hadn't expected was that she just plain didn't believe him.

"I want to know the details of this stock transaction. And I don't mean from your mouth. I want to see the actual documents. That's our money, not yours alone, and I have the right to see this in writing. And since these are your own private financial dealings, there's no way that my seeing these documents will somehow threaten our national security, which is the excuse you usually give me."

Connor feigned indignation. "So you think I'm lying to you, yes?"

"Connor, this affects our future lives together. It affects our entire family. I want to see them so that I can better understand this."

"Bullshit! You don't believe me, do you? You think I'm lying. Why don't you just say so?"

"OK, Connor. No, I don't believe you. I believe you've been having an affair. I believe it's been going on now for two years, ever since you were promoted to

this secret new job. You're not a good liar. Who the fuck is she, and how serious is it?"

"Oh, my God, no! No, no, no, no, no! I promise you I'm not having an affair. I've never once been unfaithful to you. Never. Not once. I swear."

"I want to see the stock documents."

"I don't have them."

Lucy is a petite woman, 5 feet 1 inch at the most, and slender. But when she senses evasion, she becomes a bulldog who projects intimidating strength, power, and focus. Normally Connor liked seeing her razor-sharp mind and tenacity in action, but not when he was the target of her interrogations. In those settings his admiration turned into fear, especially when, as was the case here, he knew his shaky story could easily crumble under her questioning.

"How can you not have them?"

Connor sighs, as if in resignation. "OK, the truth. After going behind your back to make this stupid high risk investment, and then finding out that I had blown practically our entire life savings" He paused.

"I'm listening."

"I was too afraid to tell you. I was also too humiliated to tell you. I shredded the documents. I didn't ever want to see them again, and I certainly didn't want you or anyone else ever to see them either. I'm so sorry."

“You’re telling me that you destroyed the papers you knew you would need to document a huge capital loss that would save us thousands of dollars when it comes time to file our tax returns? I’m expected to believe that?”

“I don’t blame you. I did a really stupid thing. I was insane. Here I am, at the center of high-level national security crises that people in high places are entrusting me to be responsible for, and I make a horrific rookie mistake on my own family finances. And I do this without consulting you. I know I acted badly. But I promise you I’m not having an affair. And never have. Please forgive me. That’s all I can ask.”

She was relentless. “OK, you say you’ve destroyed the stock documents. Surely your broker keeps a copy.”

“I didn’t use a broker. I did all this myself.”

“There must at least be a digital record. You must have an online account, right?”

“No, it was purely a paper transaction.”

“Then tell me the name of the company. I’m going to look them up online and call them.”

Connor paused a long time. He knew his story would not hold up. She would find it implausible that there was literally no available record of the transaction anywhere. The company would have to have kept records for tax purposes if nothing else, and of course

its stock history would be a matter of public record in any case. So he shifted gears.

“There is no company. I lied to you – again -- about investing in stock.”

“I knew that. What I still want to know is what happened to the money?”

“I’m out of excuses, Lucy. I’ll just come right out and tell you. I have a gambling addiction. The government reimbursed my travel expenses, just like I’ve been telling you. They deposited them directly into my private account. Whenever I traveled overseas, as soon as I finished my day’s work, the first thing I would do is go to the casinos. I would play blackjack and the roulette wheel, sometimes craps. Some days I would do really well, but my addiction kept pushing me to bet more and more, and of course in the end you’re not going to beat the casinos. I couldn’t help myself. The dealers could see I was out of control, and they kept taking my money. What kind of bastards would do that? But I can’t put all the blame on them. I’m accountable for my own actions, and the fault lies mainly with me. You have to understand, addiction makes you do desperate things, even lying to your wife. I’m going to enroll in a program for gambling addicts. I want to get better, and I will. I’ll just need your forgiveness and your support.”

Connor thought he'd put on a pretty good act. He'd even managed to tear up a little as he was confessing this.

Lucy still wasn't buying it. "You say the government was depositing the reimbursements into your private account?"

"Yes."

"I want to see the monthly statements for this account."

"God, she's good," Connor was thinking. But he wasn't ready to give up just yet. "I don't have any. They're all online."

"OK, we're going to go to the computer right now and look up your account."

"Fine. You can see every statement."

As they walked toward the computer, Connor suddenly stopped. "Oh, shit, I don't remember my password. I hardly ever bother to check my account."

"There will be a 'forgot my password' link. No more bullshit. Let's go. Now."

If it wasn't evident before, it was evident now. The game was up.

Connor took a deep breath and said "The government didn't reimburse my travel expenses. I made that up."

"You're lying to me. Again. Obviously the government would reimburse you for your government

travel expenses. What did you do with that money? I want a truthful answer once and for all.”

Connor felt like a witness who had been lying on the stand and was being cross-examined by a brilliant pit bull of a lawyer. He remembered his high school English teacher reciting “Oh, what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.” There was a long pause, as the reality that it was over sank in.

“Well?”

“Believe it or not, that last thing I said was actually true. The government didn’t reimburse me.”

“Why not?”

“Because this was personal travel. I wasn’t on government business.”

“What was the purpose of this ‘personal’ travel?”

“Tourism. Plain and simple. I wanted to see the world. I wanted to wander aimlessly around city centers and rural villages, hear the different languages spoken, stay at hotels, go to restaurants and cafes, the whole thing.”

“And you didn’t want me to come along? Even though you were spending our joint funds?”

“Lucy, I would have loved to have you there with me. But I couldn’t.”

“Because you were having an affair, weren’t you?”

“No, I keep telling you I wasn’t having an affair. I’ve never had an affair. I never would. I never will.”

“Then why did you say I wouldn’t have been able to join you?”

“You know, because of the kids. Who would have stayed home with them?”

“What’s the real reason?”

“You couldn’t come because that would have blown my whole story.”

“What are you talking about?”

He just sat there, feeling utterly defeated.

“Connor, what are you talking about? What do you mean my being there would have blown your whole story? Answer me!”

Connor paused again. “My story was that I’d been promoted to a super-important government position that required top secret clearance and overseas intrigue. I made all that up. There was no promotion. I’m still just a mid-level bureaucrat with no special talents. That’s who I am. And that’s what I’ll always be. I’m not proud of the person I am, so I wanted you to think I’m someone who I’m not. Nor am I proud of what I’ve done. I just can’t sustain the lie any longer.”

At that, Connor felt a surge of relief and burst into tears, the real ones this time. Lucy was stunned. For the first time in the conversation, she believed him. After a few seconds, she took his head in her hands and held it against her chest as he continued to sob.

He suddenly sat up and asked her “Are you going to leave me?”

“No.”

“Are you going to tell the kids?”

“Not right away, but I suppose we’ll have to at some point. They’re going to be disappointed in you, and I don’t know how they’re going to react, but eventually it will all come out, and the longer we deceive them, the harder it will be. In time they’ll forgive you for lying to them and love you for who you are, not the person you want to be or the person you want others to think you are. What I can’t understand is why you would feel such a desperate need to pass yourself off as someone you’re not. I didn’t marry you because I thought you were James Bond. I loved the person you were. I still do. If that’s enough for me, why wasn’t it enough for you?”

“I don’t know, Lucy. I really don’t.”

“There must be something. Why on earth would you want to pose as someone you’re not?”

“Don’t we all? Maybe not to the extremes that I took this, but doesn’t every single one of us create a veneer specifically designed to project an external image of ourselves that we know isn’t real? Be honest now. Can you truly say that you are exactly the person you present yourself as?”

There was a long pause.

He repeated the question. “Come on. Can you truly say that you are exactly the person you present yourself as?”

Lucy gazed off to the side of the room and remained silent.

“Lucy?”

After another pause, she turned to face him again and said “My name is Theresa.”

“Hah, hah, very funny.”

“It’s not a joke.”

“What are you talking about?”

She smiled. “Let’s get ready for bed, Connor. Tomorrow’s a work day for you.”

“Wait, you can’t just drop a comment like that and not tell me what you mean.”

Her expression had suddenly hardened. She said “We’ll talk about this some other time.”

THE WORST DATE EVER

Victor is a straight, white, lonely, 24-year-old, Capricorn male who can't understand why women find him off putting. He has never had much success with romantic relationships. Actually, he's never had one.

He really can't figure out why. Granted, he doesn't have movie star looks, but it's not as if he's physically repulsive either. Nondescript at worst. He stands 5 feet, 10 inches tall, maybe just a smidgeon on the flabby side, certainly nothing extreme. And he considers himself bright, interesting, witty, and highly sophisticated, someone any intelligent woman would enjoy spending time with. He's also a mechanical engineer, respected and well-paid in his professional world. Most importantly, he rightly sees himself as a kind and decent person who would be generous to, and supportive of, a woman with whom he could have the meaningful relationship that he craves.

Yet he has never found a partner, and not for lack of effort. He's tried many online dating sites, and on several occasions his postings had enough initial appeal that women agreed to get together for coffee or lunch. In many of those cases he asked them out on second dates, usually for dinner or a movie. Most of the women offered flimsy excuses and politely declined. Two

accepted dinner invitations but opted not to see him after that.

Victor remains baffled by his uncanny ability to repel women. Actually, as he thinks about it, men don't seem to care much for him either. He often finds himself wondering whether perhaps the pain of virtually certain rejection is reason enough to stop trying. Maybe the healthiest course would be to resign himself to a solitary life. When he gets these thoughts, he tries to hold back the tears if he's in a public place but indulges himself if he's at home.

Yesterday, though, Victor's outlook changed. In the checkout line at the supermarket, he found himself admiring the new cashier. She was short and thin, with light brown shoulder-length hair. She smiled at the customer in front of Victor and advised her to "have a good one" when they were finished. She then turned to Victor and smiled at him as well, greeting him with "Good morning – how are you today?"

Victor was smitten. He loved the way she smiled at him. He muttered something like "Very well, thank you" and looked at her name badge. It said "Madeleine."

There followed about 30 seconds of silence as she began ringing up his groceries. At some point Victor interjected "How are you today, Madeleine?"

“Doing great, thanks for asking,” she said without looking up from the groceries she was running through the scanner. She said this with a measure of cheerfulness that Victor thought might indicate that she liked him, and he suddenly felt emboldened. There’s something about consistent failure that can make you reckless. It’s not so much frantic desperation as it is the cool, calculated recognition that, in the immortal words of Janis Joplin, “freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.”

“Do you like Indian food?” Victor blurted out. She calmly said yes.

Victor then continued, in a confident voice, “I’d like to have dinner with you tomorrow evening at the Jaipur Kitchen. Do you know where it is?”

“It’s the one right around the corner here, isn’t it?” She gestured over her left shoulder.

The cash register spit out the receipt. As Madeleine was placing it in Victor’s bag, he replied “That’s right. Meet you there at 7:00 tomorrow evening?”

“Um, OK, I guess.”

And that was that. Victor picked up the two grocery bags and said “see you tomorrow.” He strode off feeling rather pleased with himself, albeit surprised at his newfound confidence.

By 7:00 the next evening, though, Victor had lost some of his swagger. Would Madeleine actually show

up? He arrived at the restaurant ten minutes early and waited at the table.

He felt a surge of relief when she walked through the door a few minutes after seven. As she made her way to the table, he stood up awkwardly and kissed her on the cheek just as she was extending her arm for a handshake, inadvertently slamming his stomach into her hand.

“Sorry,” he said, “One never knows what kind of greeting is appropriate, does one?”

“No worries,” she assured him as she took her seat.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, she asked “So, do you come here often?”

“No, this is my first time at this establishment, though I make it a practice to dine frequently at Indian restaurants because I enjoy the cuisine immensely. I guess I’m what you call your cosmopolitan type. ‘Safe,’ ‘ordinary,’ ‘traditional’ – those words aren’t part of my vocabulary. I don’t care to follow the crowd.” Using air quotes, he added “They say I’m kind of a ‘rebel,’ or that I ‘follow the beat of a different drummer,’ so to speak.”

“It looks like a very nice place.”

“Yes. The décor isn’t as authentically Indian as I had hoped, but it has a certain “je ne sais quoi” that I frankly find rather appealing.”

She nodded. “Um, yes.”

The waiter approached. “Good evening. Welcome to the Jaipur Kitchen. Have you been here before?”

They both said this was their first time.

“Well, I’ll give you a moment to look over the menu, but in the meantime would you like anything to drink? Some wine, perhaps?”

Madeleine immediately deferred to Victor. She liked wine, she said, but wasn’t really a connoisseur.

Victor smiled wryly, saying “That won’t be a problem, Madeleine. I know a thing or two about wines.”

The night before, Victor had taken the time to google and study a list of fine wines so that he could impress Madeleine with his knowledge and sophistication. He had carefully rehearsed his wine request. But while waiting for her to arrive, he’d discovered that the restaurant’s wine list didn’t include any of the ones he had read about in his Google search.

He turned to the waiter. “I’m frankly a tad disappointed in the wine list. I was hoping you’d have La Mission Haut-Brion or something comparable. But since it’s not available this evening, please bring us a bottle of the Cabernet Sauvignon.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once the waiter had left, Victor turned back to Madeleine.

“I didn’t want to be rude to our waiter, but I was so craving La Mission Haut-Brion. It’s delightful. It’s a Bordeaux red, with bright aromas of blackberries and a hint of cherry, among other fruits, long and silky, perfect for a full-bodied palate.”

Victor wasn’t sure what all those words meant, but that was what the website said.

Madeleine wondered how best to respond. “So you were saying you like Indian restaurants?”

“Yes, indeed. But not yet having dined here, I thought ‘Why not give it a try?’ I don’t mind taking chances. And you?”

“Yes, I love Indian food too. I’m glad you suggested it. But I think I’ll need a moment to look over the menu.”

“Of course.”

When Madeleine put the menu down, the waiter returned. Turning first to Madeleine, he asked “Would you like more time, or are you ready to order?”

“I think we’re ready. I’d like the vegetable biryani. And could we have an order of raita, please?”

“Certainly. Sir?”

“I’d like the matar paneer, please. And would you bring us chopsticks?”

“I’m sorry, sir, we don’t have chopsticks.”

“Well, that’s surprising. The finer Indian restaurants always offer them to make the diners’ experience more authentic.”

“Sir, I believe you’re thinking of Chinese restaurants. We don’t use chopsticks in India.”

“I’m afraid you’re mistaken. I use them all the time at Indian restaurants all over the world.”

“Sir, I’m from India, and I assure you we don’t use chopsticks.”

“I know they use them in most regions of the country. You must be from a different part.”

“I’m from Delhi, Sir.”

“Ah, yes, that explains it. I seem to recall they don’t use chopsticks in Delhi, unlike the rest of the country. No worries. I’ll make do with American utensils.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Victor watched the waiter leave and then whispered to Madeleine. “That was unfortunate. I apologize for the unpleasantness. I hope I didn’t embarrass the poor fellow.”

“I take it you’ve been to India?”

“Yes, many times when I was younger, but not recently. It’s possible things have changed since my last time there. But let’s talk about you. First of all, I don’t believe I know your last name.”

“French. I’m Madeleine French. And yours?”

“They call me Groninger – Victor Groninger. Out of Chicago. But tell me - who *is* Madeleine French? A penny for your thoughts.”

She paused, then suddenly blurted out “OMG! I just noticed that my ex-boyfriend is sitting alone at that table against the wall. He must have been here a while, because I can see he’s almost done with his food. I can’t believe I didn’t see him until now. I hate to ask you this, but he was devastated when I broke up with him a couple months ago. I feel very bad about it and am actually a little worried about him. Would you mind if I just go over there for a moment to see how he’s doing? I’ll be right back.”

“Of course.”

Madeleine picked up her purse and walked over to her ex-boyfriend’s table. They were directly in back of Victor, so he couldn’t see them without turning around. Victor waited patiently, but after about five minutes he heard laughter coming from their direction. He turned his body and glanced over. He saw what looked like a happy reunion, complete with smiles and laughter. They were absorbed in conversation and didn’t notice him looking at them. Victor tried to listen, but between the other customers’ conversations and the restaurant’s background music, it was hard to hear what Madeleine and her ex were saying.

A few minutes later Victor turned around and looked again in their direction. This time Madeleine caught his eye. She smiled and waved to him, raising her index finger in the air and mouthing the words “One minute.” Victor nodded.

But several more minutes passed, and the waiter brought Victor’s and Madeleine’s orders to their original table. As Victor turned to get Madeleine’s attention, he saw her motioning to the waiter. He watched the waiter make his way over to her. She put her hand on the waiter’s arm and whispered something to him as he leaned down. The waiter nodded and returned to Victor’s table.

“Sir, the lady has asked me to tell you that she needs to finish her conversation with the other gentleman, and she’s asked me to bring her food over to her so that it doesn’t get cold in the meantime. But she said to tell you she would be back momentarily.”

Victor was now becoming annoyed, but he didn’t say anything. Using his American fork, he started eating his own food while it was still warm. Dinner was not going as he had planned it.

Minutes later, now having progressed from annoyance to outright anger, Victor looked over to their table once again. This time, he saw the ex-boyfriend sign the credit card bill and begin to stand up. Madeleine was standing up as well, and Victor was

both relieved that their conversation was finally over and focused on deciding how best to express his displeasure to her when she returned.

He faced forward again to think this over. He decided he would make clear to Madeleine that he was not pleased. He began to practice exactly what he would say. He wanted his message to be dignified but not unmanly. His words would need to strike just the right balance.

He thought about saying “Madeleine, it was kind of you to make sure your former boyfriend was OK, but I have feelings too, and your leaving me and spending the entire dinner with him was hurtful.” But then he thought “No, that’s too wimpy. Maybe something like ‘That was rude. You owe me an apology.’” Then again, he decided, “Maybe that’s going too far in the opposite direction. After all, I really would like to keep going out with her, so I don’t want to burn any bridges. There must be some middle ground, where I’ll come across as sophisticated and understanding but still firm.”

Victor shot a final glance at their table, but now he didn’t see them. He then turned toward the door, where they appeared to be in the process of leaving the restaurant together. He heard the ex-boyfriend say “My name is Jeremiah, by the way.” Madeleine said “I’m Madeleine,” as they stepped outside and disappeared from view.

THE CASE OF THE MISSING SOCK

My name is Harold. I'm a dentist. And yes, I am fully aware there are bigger problems in the world. But this is exasperating. I do the laundry, bring it up from the basement to my second-floor bedroom to sort it and put it away, and find an odd number of socks.

It's not just the missing socks. These days the slightest setback triggers disproportionate rage – a leaking pipe, an ant invasion in the kitchen, the credit card that I had to cancel and replace because of a perfectly legitimate transaction that the bank found “suspicious,” my wireless connection constantly being lost and then having to spend *hours* on hold during my multiple phone calls to the provider, only for them to fail to solve the problem and for me to have to call them again, repeatedly.

I never used to be like this. I was always able to take these minor irritations of modern life in stride. Now I can't. Too often I'm out of control, screaming pointless obscenities at the nonexistent culprits in my big old empty house and the injustice of the hand I've been dealt.

I don't know how to account for my new hair trigger temper. There's been no recent traumatic life experience that would explain it. Now 44 years of age,

I've been single all my life, in and out of relationships, and lucky enough to have several good friends. I live alone, but loneliness isn't the problem. I just know that I always feel tense. I mean, like literally every waking moment.

I fully understand how ridiculous it is to let something as trivial as missing socks take such a toll. I understand that my extreme reaction is just a symptom of deeper problems that I need to address. I'm not delusional.

It must be a cumulative thing. The aggravation, the anxiety, the fury, the self-doubt -- they're all feeding my growing recognition that I am becoming less and less tethered to anything dependable and concrete.

The first time the sock thing happened, it was no big deal. I assumed the missing sock had been left behind when I last emptied either the washer or the dryer. Surely it would show up in the next batch.

So before starting the next laundry, I carefully inspected the insides of both the washer and the dryer. The missing sock wasn't there. I got down on my hands and knees and surveyed the cold, hard, concrete floor areas around both machines. No luck.

This was annoying. No more annoying than the daily frustrations everyone else has to put up with, but that's not the point. Distress isn't relative. It's no

comfort to me that other people have it worse. The point is that this is what I'm feeling. It's real.

I started my new batch of laundry. When I eventually got around to hauling it upstairs to my bedroom and sorting it, I was surprised – and agitated – to discover an odd number of socks yet again. What the fuck is going on?

I'm a rational person, so I knew there had to be a rational explanation and therefore a solution. I hadn't kept track of what I'd done with the odd sock from the previous week's laundry. That meant there were two possibilities. One scenario was that I had tossed the orphaned sock back down the laundry chute instead of putting it away somewhere. Under that assumption, it would make sense that I again ended up with an odd number of socks. There would still be no explanation for a sock disappearing last time, but at least there wouldn't now be a second sock disappearing. The other scenario is that I had indeed put the odd sock away somewhere last time and that yet another sock had now disappeared, presumably pilfered by the same ghostly thief who had made off with my first sock.

The latter scenario shouldn't have been hard to substantiate. If I had stored the missing sock somewhere, it should have been easy to find. So I combed through my crammed sock drawer, pulling out the few remaining clean socks that I had previously tied

together in nice tidy pairs. There was no odd sock in that drawer. Had I put it somewhere else, perhaps in one of my other drawers, figuring it would stand out more easily when I later found its mate and went to look for it? Apparently not -- a thorough search of all my dresser drawers and every other conceivable storage place in my bedroom turned up no additional socks. I then looked under my bed and even between the grey wool blanket and the white cotton sheets. Still nothing.

That didn't necessarily mean I hadn't put the odd sock away somewhere. Maybe I just can't remember where I put it. Even so, if I never do find the odd sock from the previous laundry, I will then be down two pairs of socks. I will already have lost a full pair from last time -- the original missing sock and its runaway mate -- and now I end up with another odd sock that effectively destroys a second pair. These are expensive socks. Besides that, I don't have that many pairs of socks without holes, and sock-shopping is the last thing I have either the time or the inclination to do.

This is maddening. The combination of failing to find the lost sock from last time, losing another one this time, and being unable to solve the puzzle is leaving me frazzled.

I know I need to stay calm. Socks don't disappear into thin air. They obviously have to be somewhere in the house. I just can't figure out where they could be.

Worse, I can't figure out why I can't figure it out. My cognitive skills are noticeably slipping. Maybe it's not just a loss of cognitive skills, but the onset of some mental illness. Have I just imagined that socks were missing, or perhaps was it just a dream that in my tattered state I can't distinguish from reality? This is leaving me quite disoriented. And resentful. Between work and home, I'm taxed to the limit. Every one of these hassles robs me of my already scarce down time.

My stress must be visible to others, because some of my patients have been looking at me strangely. I can't articulate exactly what it is in their expressions that's giving them away, but there is definitely something different about the way they talk to me. I'm quite sure of it. I fear that some will decide to stop seeing me. I also fear the loss of my reputation as a dentist if word gets around that I'm "losing it," which I suspect they're thinking and saying.

The next time I did the laundry, my heart began pounding the moment I started. It continued beating loudly until I had finished sorting the socks. To my relief, there was an even number. I wanted to think my problem was finally behind me, still inexplicable but at least over. I knew, however, that I couldn't be sure of that. How do I know two more socks – or, for that matter, two or more pairs of socks -- hadn't disappeared? I hadn't thought to count them before

dumping the load into the washer, so I really had no way to be certain. And although this wasn't my first bout of laundry stress, it was the first time I had noticed such a heavy pounding of my heart. On top of everything else, have I suddenly become a candidate for a heart attack?

When it came time for another laundry, I resolved to be methodical. The socks I wear to the office, five days a week, are all black. On weekends I wear white sweat socks. When I do a laundry, I separate the light colors from the dark ones. But there is a single laundry chute that all my clothes travel down, so I have to sort the colors before I begin the wash. To this point, both of the socks that I knew to be missing were dark socks. And even if two additional socks, or for that matter four additional socks, had disappeared the third time – as to that, I still couldn't be sure – they too would have been the black ones. That I knew, because on each occasion I was able to account for all four white socks that I'd worn the previous weekend.

So this time, the first thing I did after sorting the laundry into light and dark was to dump the light laundry onto the floor and inspect each individual item to make sure I hadn't accidentally mixed in any of the dark colors. I hadn't. I then dumped the dark laundry onto the floor, pulled out all the socks, and counted them. There were ten. An even number. So far, so good.

The Case of The Missing Sock

I started up the washer and carefully loaded the dark clothing. I inspected the floor to make sure I hadn't dropped any socks. When that wash finished, I pulled out each item one at a time and threw it into the dryer, keeping a careful mental count of the socks as I went along. There were still ten.

OK, this was good. I was narrowing down the possibilities.

I started up the dryer. When it finished, I emptied all its contents into a laundry basket and again inspected the floor around the dryer to make sure I hadn't dropped anything. Then I scrutinized the inside of the dryer to confirm there was nothing left inside. Satisfied that every item in the dryer was now tucked into the laundry basket, I carried the basket up the two flights of stairs to my bedroom and emptied its entire contents onto my bed.

This time I knew there would be no missing sock, because I had accounted for each one at every stage and had investigated every possible escape route. So I began separating the socks from the rest of the dark laundry, again counting them as I went along. I got up to nine but didn't see the tenth. Somehow I remained relatively calm, assuring myself that the tenth one must have been just clinging to or inside one of the other dark clothing items, perhaps a shirt or a pair of shorts. But as I examined each of the remaining items without

success, my anxiety started to return. It deepened as the number of unexamined items dwindled. By the time I got to the last item – a dark blue sweatshirt – my heart was pounding just as severely as the last time. And sure enough, the tenth sock wasn't there.

What the fuck! I re-counted the dark socks. Still only nine. Then I frantically but meticulously picked through each of the other items yet again, turning every solitary one of them inside out. Nothing.

I figured a sock must have fallen out of the laundry basket on my way from the dryer up to my bedroom, so I physically retraced my steps. My eyes swept the floor at each point. I must have been concentrating too single-mindedly on the floor, because I lost my footing halfway down the basement staircase and fell to the hard floor below. It all happened so fast. One moment I was walking down the stairs, and the next thing I knew, I was lying on the basement floor. An instant later I felt sharp pain in my right arm and right shoulder and an ache on the side of my head.

I lay there for a couple minutes or so and then used my left hand and arm to push myself into a sitting position. A little later, I was able to stand.

I should probably have gone straight to the ER, but there was no way I was leaving the house without finding the missing sock. I picked up the laundry basket and slowly resumed walking back to the dryer,

The Case of The Missing Sock

continuing to search every square inch of floor for sock # 10. When I got to the dryer, I re-inspected its inner chamber and every square inch of the floor area around it. Still nothing.

Wait! Could socks be getting stuck in the laundry chute? Slowly, and in great pain, I made my way upstairs to the kitchen to get my flashlight. I then walked back down to the basement, shined the beam up into the laundry chute, and looked for any sign of blockage. None was visible. I managed to get all the way upstairs to the second floor hall and peered down through the top opening of the chute with the aid of the flashlight. There was still no visible blockage. I dropped a t-shirt down the chute and listened for anything that might have blocked its way. From the sound, it was clear that it had gone the distance.

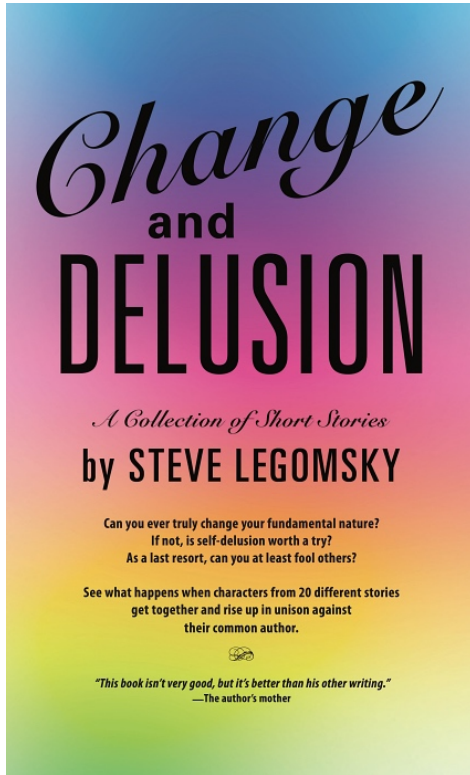
After doing this, I realized the chute couldn't be the problem anyway. By the time I counted the ten black socks, they had already traveled down the chute.

I don't know whether it was delirium from the pain, the emotional anguish that had taken over my life, or simply stark reality. But having eliminated every other explanation for how the missing sock had disappeared between the time I put it in the dryer and the time it should have arrived in my bedroom, I had to accept that only two possibilities remained. Either I was truly

losing my mind, or there was some mystical force operating outside the boundaries of our natural world.

The pain in my shoulder was now intensifying, a kind of stabbing pain, particularly with certain movements. I slowly made my way back to my bedroom to lie down. But the dark-colored laundry was still piled on my bed. So I methodically put away each item, one at a time.

When I got to the end of the pile, I noticed that my dark blue sweatshirt was no longer there.



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