

mannals, were plucked from dens in Detroit. The boy is muttering something to himself. He says, "Air." He says, "Swallow." Despite all I have read and studied about being a bystander, I am still not at all sure what to do. The safest thing would be to report him, but how really ridiculous that would be! This is the problem with education. Step number one. You have to recognize that help is needed. In a world more shadow than sun, this is not easy to do. Instead, I go a little closer to the bad-looking boy, the neo-Nazi, or someone's kind rebellious son, and then all of a sudden, sensing my prying presence, he whips his head toward me, and I see his eyes are a cut-glass green, in liquid.

I smile at him, a little shaky smile.

He ponders me up and down and then smiles back.

We say not a word, but he knows what I am thinking: the fast, furious sketches, the military crouch, the baldness, the badness, everywhere.

The pencil he is using is short, with a thick charcoal nose, and it gives off lush fuzzy lines of design.

This I know because the boy now, understanding my thoughts (that we can hear each other sometimes without any words exchanged, yet at other times not even a scream helps us make sense—how odd this is, how confusing the multiple languages of life), turns his sketch pad toward me so I can see what he is up to, and on it there are no exit or egress routes or anything suspicious. There is just a drawing of the single tree on the statchouse lawn, its leaves in the picture so intricately rendered, so multiply veined. And then I see it, how inside every leaf there is the slightest suggestion of a human face, life at the very beginning or at the very end. It is not clear. But the picture is lovely. Now the boy rips it from his sketch pad and gives it to me. I take it home. I hang it here, above my desk, and sometimes as I type these words, I stop to stare into the branches where those half-born human faces hover, the leaves' webwork so loaded with message and mystery and multiple meanings. I know the five stages, and still the story swerves.

5

Quieting the Mind

THE EXPERIMENTS OF

LEON FESTINGER

Leon Festinger was born May 8, 1919, to parents of Russian descent. He studied psychology at City College of New York, and then pursued a graduate degree at the University of Iowa, where he was mentored by the well-known German psychologist Kurt Lewin. Eventually Lewin and Festinger moved to MIT, and in 1957, Festinger published his best-known work, A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, in which he writes, "The psychological opposition of irreconcilable ideas (cognitions) held simultaneously by one individual, created a motivating force that would lead, under proper conditions, to the adjustment of one's belief to fit one's behavior—instead of changing one's behavior to fit one's belief (the sequence conventionally assumed)."

Festinger was a rigorous researcher and experimentalist. In order to test his theory of "irreconcilable ideas," better known now as "cognitive dissonance," he constructed a series of small, strategically complex, and surprising experiments that were the first of their kind to illuminate the rationalizing machinations of the human mind.

Her name was Marion Keech. His name was Dr. Armstrong. They lived in Lake City, Minneapolis, a cold windy place where the winters were all white, where snow fell from smeared clouds, each flake like a little message, a design to be decoded.

And in this vast landscape Marion Keech, an ordinary housewife, received one day a letter from a being named Sananda. It came not in an envelope, but in a high-density vibration that caused her hand to shiver across the notebook page, and the words said this: "The uprising of the Atlantic bottom will submerge the land of the Atlantic seaboard; France will sink . . . Russia will become one great sea . . . a great wave rushes into the Rocky Mountains . . . for the purpose of purifying it of the earthlings, and creating the new order." The messages, after that, came to Marion Keech fast and furious. They warned of an impending flood, on midnight, December 21. But all who believed in a god named Sananda would be saved.

Marion Keech believed. Dr. Armstrong, a physician who held a prestigious post at a nearby college, and who met Mrs. Keech at a flying saucer club, also came to believe. So did Bertha and Don and Andrew and quite a few others. They became a cult and made their preparations. It was November and nights fell fast, darkness slamming down, as tactile as tar. The group put out a single press release to a news agency, but other than that they shunned publicity, for only a few were chosen by Sananda, and to spread panic seemed cruel. Nevertheless, word got out, and midwesterners from Idaho to Iowa were curious, bemused. Leon Festinger, a thirty-one-year-old psychologist at the nearby University of Minnesota, heard about the cult and decided to infiltrate it. What would happen, he wondered, when midnight on December 21 came around and no spaceship landed, no rains came? Would the group lose faith? How do human beings react, Festinger wanted to know, when prophecy fails?

Festinger organized a few cohorts to go under cover, posing as believers and gaining entry into the cult. They observed the members' intense preparation for the solstice event. Kitry, a cult member,

quit her job, sold her home, and left with her infant daughter to take up residence with Mrs. Keech. Dr. Armstrong, too, was so convinced of the imminent flood that he jeopardized his job as a doctor by preaching in the examining room, and so was summarily fired, left high and dry with a simple stethoscope and a reflex hammer—it didn't matter. Worldly goods, prestigious titles, they were irrelevant to the savior Sananda, and to the new planet where these people were going, far, far from here, invisible in the sky except for an occasional flash of light, like a red rent opening up and then sucked back into blackness.

On the eve of the actual flood, believers and the incognito researchers gathered in Marion Keech's living room for instructions, which came in the form of automatic writings and phone calls from spacemen posing as people playing practical jokes, but who really had coded messages to deliver. For instance, one caller said, "Hey, there's a flood in my bathroom, wanna come over and celebrate?" and this was so obviously a secret signal from Sananda's special assistant that the group expressed delight. A message came in the form of a mysterious piece of tin found in the weave of the living room rug. The tin was a warning that group members must remove all metal from their clothing before entering the spaceship, which would park at the street curb in just ten more minutes! Frantically, the women began tearing the eyelets and clasps from their brassieres; the men plucked out buttons; one of the researchers, who had a metal zipper in his pants, was hastily removed to a bedroom, where Dr. Armstrong, in a surge of panic, breathing heavily and eyeing the clock, cut out the crotch so there was a great gash where the midwestern wind seeped through.

It was 11:50 p.m. then, ten minutes to touch down. People had quit jobs, sold homes, alienated family members—they were heavily invested. The two clocks in Mrs. Keech's house clicked loudly, first a sound as steady as a heart and then a sound more and more ominous as midnight came, and went. Click click went the clock, the ticking of a tongue, not a drop falling from the frozen sky, the land outside as

parched as Canaan, as dense in its darkness. Some cult members, visibly shocked, wept into their hands. Others just lay on couches, staring blankly into the empty air. Still others peered between the curtains at the great spotlights sweeping the yard, spotlights not from a spaceship, as they had so hoped, but from news stations, come to have some fun.

PRIOR TO THE Great Event, the cult members had eschewed almost all publicity, save for a single warning in a press release, this despite the fact that news of the coming catastrophe had spread across the Midwest and members received many requests to speak on camera. Now, however, as the night wore on and the sky stayed dry, Festinger observed a strange thing starting to happen. The cult members swept open the curtains to the camera crews. They invited them in, gallantly, manically, offering them tea and cookies. Marion Keech, sitting in the living room chair, received an urgent message from a high-density being that said, once she had scribbled it out, to contact as many media stations as possible and report that the flood did not come because "the little group sitting all night long had spread so much light that god saved the world from destruction." Mrs. Keech called ABC, CBS, and the *New York Times*, and this was a complete about-face; now, she wanted to talk. Around 4 A.M. a newsmen phoned. He had phoned just a few days earlier and asked, with much sarcasm, if Mrs. Keech would like to come on his show and celebrate an end-of-the-world party, to which she had responded by slamming down the receiver, heated, furious. Now, when he called back to bait her over the failure of the prophecy, she said, "Come right out! This minute!" Cult members phoned *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*, and in the ensuing days gave dozens of interviews to reporters, all in an attempt to convince the public that their actions and beliefs were not in vain. They greeted news of a December 21 earthquake in Italy with joy and dancing. "The earth's skin [is] slipping."

Dissonance. A million rationalizations, fault lines in the earth, in the brain, and all sorts of ways to sew them up. We can only imagine

Festinger's fun, and also his sorrow, as he saw the way people leap to lies, overlook, sift through, sort out, tamp down. To Festinger, the dramatic increase in public proselytizing following such an obvious failure was completely counterintuitive and became the basis for a theory and a set of experiments he designed to test the theory: cognitive dissonance. What Festinger found, in his infiltration of the cult and in his readings of the history, was that it is precisely when a belief is disconfirmed that religious groups begin to proselytize, a sort of desperate defense mechanism. The disjunction between what one believes and the factual evidence is highly uncomfortable, like scratching on slate. Soothing can come only if more and more people sign onto the spaceship, so to speak, because if we are all flying this thing together, then surely we must be right.

IT SEEMS FITTING that a man like Festinger would discover cognitive dissonance. Festinger had a grumpy manner and wherever he went, he grated.

Elliot Aronson was one of Festinger's graduate students way back in the 1950s, when behaviorism still dominated the day. "Festinger was an ugly little man," says Aronson, "and most students were so afraid of him they wouldn't take his seminars. But he had a certain warmth about him. He was also the only genius I have ever met."

After the cult study, Festinger and his colleagues set out to explore cognitive dissonance in all its dimensions. In one experiment, they paid some people twenty dollars to lie and other people only one dollar to lie. What they found is that those who had lied for one dollar were far more likely to claim, after the fact, that they really believed the lie, than those who'd earned the twenty dollars. Why would that be? Festinger hypothesized that it is much harder to justify lying for a dollar; you are a good, smart person, after all, and good, smart people don't do bad things for *no real reason*. Therefore, because you can't take back the lie, and you've already pocketed the measly money, you bring your beliefs into alignment with your

actions, so as to reduce the dissonance between your self-concept and your questionable behavior. However, those folks who were paid twenty dollars to lie, they didn't change their beliefs; in effect, they said, "Yeah, I lied, I didn't believe a word of what I said, but I got paid well." The twenty-dollar subjects experienced less dissonance; they could find a compelling justification for their fibs, and that justification had double digits and a crisp snap.

Dissonance theory took American psychology by storm. "By storm," says Aronson. "It was THE THING. It was so elegant. It offered such elegant explanations for such mysterious behavior." Dissonance theory explained, for instance, the long baffling fact that during the Korean War, the Chinese had been eerily efficient at getting American POWs to espouse communism. The Chinese did this, not through torture or through big gilded bribes, but merely by offering the prisoners a bit of rice or candies for writing an anti-American essay. Subsequent to writing the essay and getting the prize, many soldiers came to convert to communism. This is odd, especially because we tend to believe brainwashing is accomplished through a series of fierce scrubbing with caustic soap, or piles of glittering prizes. But dissonance theory predicts that the *more paltry the reward* for engaging in behavior that is inconsistent with one's beliefs, the more likely the person is to change his or her beliefs. It makes a kind of crooked sense. If you sell yourself for a piece of candy, or a single cigarette, or a scatter of rice, you had better come up with some convincing reason why you did this, lest you feel you are, just simply, a schmuck. If you can't take back the essay, or the lie, then you change your beliefs so they no longer scrape and scratch and you are saved from schmuckdom. The Chinese were masters at intuitively understanding cognitive dissonance; they held tiny trinkets in their palms and, from the force of these, got grown men to open and change their very moldable minds.

Festinger and his students discovered several different forms of dissonance. What he observed in the cult, he called the Belief/Disconfirmation Paradigm. What he observed with the lying for money, he called the Insufficient Rewards Paradigm. Another type,

the Induced Compliance Paradigm, is best illustrated by an experiment in which college freshman, attempting to get into a fraternity, went through severe or mild hazing rites. Those who went through the severe hazing rites claimed much more allegiance to the group than those who hadn't. With these simple experiments, Festinger turned all of psychology on its head. He turned Skinner hard on his head. After all, Skinner had said rewards reinforce and punishment extinguishes, but this little man Leon, this shedding sloppy scholar, had, with a few swift strokes, shown behaviorism was wrong. Wrong! We are driven by punishment and paltriness; at the center of the human universe sits not a big chunk of cheese but a tiny scrap of something, and there are no pigeons, no rats, no boxes. There are only human beings motivated by minds that must be made comfortable. Skinner took mentalism right out of the picture, leaving us with just our mechanistic conditioned responses, and then along came Leon, cranky, acerbic Leon, and he handed us back our complex brains, and he said, in effect, *human behavior cannot be explained by reward theory alone. Human beings THINK. They engage in the most amazing mental gymnastics, all just to justify their hypocrisy.*

Festinger did not have a happy view of human nature. He smoked two packs of unfiltered Camels a day and died of liver cancer at age sixty-nine. It is no surprise that Festinger's tastes ran to the existentialists: Sartre with his hollowed universe; Camus, who believed man spends his entire life trying to convince himself that he is not absurd. Man, thought Festinger, was not a rational being, but a rationalizing being. He lived with his second wife, Trudy, in a village apartment, where, I imagine, his cigarette glittered orange in the low light, where books lined the study walls, where a single mezuzah was pinned to the door frame, a tiny silver scroll, inside, some story.

I KNOW A story. It's one Festinger would probably like. Not far from me, in the small city of Worcester, Massachusetts, lives a walking talking epitome of rationalization. Her name is Linda Santo. Fifteen years

ago, her three-year-old daughter, Audrey, fell into the family swimming pool and was discovered floating face down, in the deep end. She was rescued and resuscitated, but her brain had been blotted out, just a few electrical squiggles at the base, where the heartbeat is controlled, where the sweat glands send their signals, that sort of thing. The base.

Fifteen years ago Linda Santo—about whom I have read many articles and who has appeared many times on local television as half-hero, half-oddiy—fifteen years ago she brought her baby Audrey home, hooked up to life support, a tracheotomy hole drilled in her throat, and she bathed the child and turned her ten times a day so her skin stayed rosy and not a single bed sore puckered, and she propped her girl's head on white satin pillows, shaped like hearts, and she surrounded her girl with religious relics, because Linda's Catholic faith had always been strong. Audrey lay in bed while on a ledge above her, Jesus held his heart and Mary looked on in an attitude of ecstasy—tiny statues, huge statues, stigmata on porcelain palms, the blood beet-red and dried.

A few months after the accident, according to various newspaper articles, her husband left her. Now she had no money. She had three other children. The religious relics around Audrey's bedside began to move. They would, of their own accord, turn and face the tabernacle. Real blood oozed out of Christ's cracked wounds. Strange oils began to track the faces of the saints. And Audrey herself, well, her eyes opened and ticked back and forth, back and forth, and every Lent she screamed in pain, and then fell into a deep, deep sleep, on Easter.

People began to come to Audrey, people with multiple sclerosis and brain tumors and heart disease and depression. They began to come and take home with them some of the miraculous holy oils dripping from the relics. In the Santo household, miracles occurred fast, one after the other, as the ill pilgrims kneeling by the girl's bedside went from blindness to sight, as Audrey herself began to bleed from every orifice as though she were suffering the sins of the whole world. Linda claims that she was not mystified. She knew her daugh-

ter was a saint, that God had chosen Audrey to be a victim soul, to take on the pains of other people so that they could be healed. Linda had seen it with her own eyes. Furthermore, the date of Audrey's drowning was August 9, at 11:02 in the morning, and only forty years before that, on August 9, at 11:02 in the morning, the United States had dropped the bomb on Nagasaki. One incident, according to Linda, had shamed all of humankind; now this incident was to redeem it.

The Santo story is classic Festinger, the way the mother's mind twists to turn a terrible tragedy into something of salvage, consolation achieved through a series of rapid rationalizations. How, I wonder, would a person who so embodies Festinger's theory actually react to its explication?

LINDA'S VOICE ON the phone is hoarse and slow; something in its sound surprises me. I'm a writer, I tell her. I've seen her on TV. I'm exploring belief and faith and a man named Festinger—

"What is it you want to know?" Linda asks. Perhaps what I hear is simply celebrity fatigue. One more interview in the thousands she's given, but she'll do it again if she has to—for Audrey, to spread the word.

"If you're a journalist who wants to come photograph my girl, I can tell you right now, you have to ask the church—"

"No," I say. "I want to know if you know of a man named Festinger, and his experiments . . ."

"Festinger," she says, cackling, and then she doesn't say anything else.

"There was once this group," I say, "and they believed a savior would come for them on December 21, and Festinger, a psychologist, studied what happened when December 21 came around and they weren't saved."

There's a long pause on the phone. What I'm doing seems suddenly cruel. *When they weren't saved.* In the background I can hear mysterious sounds, a knocking, the screech of a crow flying skyward.

"Festinger," Linda says. "Is that a Jewish name?"

"Absolutely," I say.

"Jewish people ask good questions," she says.

"And Catholics?" I say.

"We can question. Faith in our God," Linda says. "It isn't always absolute. Even if you have a direct email to Jesus, the line goes down sometime." She stops speaking; I can hear something clotted in her voice.

"For you?" I say. "Has the line gone down?"

"I have breast cancer," Linda continues. "I've had it for the last seven years. I just found out I'm in my fifth recurrence, and I'll tell you, today I'm tired!"

I lift my hand to my own chest, which has its own chiseled spots from multiple biopsies, the cells beneath the skin squirming recklessly.

"Can Audrey, would you ask her to heal—"

Linda interrupts me. "You want to know the truth?" she says, her voice sharp. "Do you and Festinger want to know what's what? On a bad day, a day like today, I doubt whether suffering has meaning. Write that down," she says.

WHAT FESTINGER WROTE: the seeking of consonance is a "drive state." We spend our lives paying attention only to information that is consonant with our beliefs, we surround ourselves with people who will support our beliefs, and we ignore contradictory information that might cause us to question what we have built.

And yet, Linda Santo points to the flaws in this theory, and the experiments designed to test it. Somewhere, not far from me, right this minute, sits a woman in semidarkness, and she can cling to nothing. Her cancer, and her daughter's failure to heal it, are dissonant with her prevailing paradigm, but instead of seeking consonance through rationalization, as Festinger, and I, predicted, Linda seems to be in some suspended place, where beliefs break up and form new

patterns we cannot yet quite see. Who knows what new shapes of faith might emerge from Linda's willingness to withhold rationalization for real revision? Festinger never explored this phenomenon—how dissonance leads to doubt and doubt leads to light. Nor does he explore why some people choose rationalization as a strategy, and others choose revision. I think about Linda. I think about others. What allowed Isaac Newton to exchange the palm of god for gravity, or Columbus to come away with a curved rimless world? Throughout all of history there have been examples of people who, instead of clapping their hands over their ears, pushed into dissonance, willing to hear what might emerge. Festinger, actually, is one of those people. His ideas and experiments were highly dissonant with the Skinnerian wisdom of his day. And he pursued it. Why?

"Dissonance," says Elliot Aronson, leading dissonance researcher and Professor Emeritus at University of California, Santa Cruz, "dissonance is really not about looking at how people change. The theory just didn't concern itself with that."

"Don't you think that's a shortcoming to the theory?" I ask. "Understanding why some people resolve dissonance creatively, while others duck and cover, could illuminate a lot."

Aronson pauses. "In Jonestown," he says, "nine hundred people killed themselves as a way of resolving dissonance. A few people didn't kill themselves, that's true, but nine hundred did and that's remarkable. That's what the theory focuses on, the vast, vast majority who hang onto their beliefs even until death."

I am not a great psychologist, like Leon, but after talking to Linda, I have an opinion, and it is this: Dissonance theory falls a little short because it accounts only for the way we reify narratives, and not for the way we revise them. In doing so, dissonance is presented as a unidimensional state, a kind of senseless clanging, when, in fact, the sound of something out of tune can also sharpen our ears and seed new songs.

"Don't you think," I say to Aronson, "that in failing to explore the people who respond to dissonance by creating new paradigms to

incorporate new information, the theory misses an important aspect of the human experience?" Why, I ask Aronson, does he think some people rationalize, while others more deeply revise? And more importantly, how do those people in the midst of a major paradigm shift deal with the long days, weeks, months of grating, and what can their ability to tolerate such sounds and sensations teach us about how we might do the same, in search of a wider life? "Has anyone studied these types of people?" I ask.

"That's human growth stuff," Aronson says to me. "I would speculate that the types of people who respond to dissonance with honest introspection would have high, well-grounded self-esteem, or they might also have really low self-esteem, so they've got nothing to lose by saying, 'Geez, I guess everything I invested in really doesn't make much sense; I'm really a jerk.'"

"But have you actually done any experiments where you've looked at who these people are, and how they experience the dissonance? Do you have any data?"

"We don't have any data," Aronson says, "because we don't have people. People like you're talking about are few and far between."

I GO TO visit Linda. Worcester, Massachusetts, is about an hour from my home. An old sooty mill city, it houses hollowed-out factories and decrepit stores. If Linda were to revise her narrative of the saint daughter, of the suffering in all its supreme sense, what would she have left? What new narrative could possibly bring comfort in her situation? I've been asking how dissonance leads one deeper, but depth is dangerous; it's where the octopi live, where the sharp shark teeth are buried.

The Santo home is on a cheery side street. The modest ranch house is painted the color of flesh, each window sporting a pair of plastic shutters. I ring the doorbell, which chimes merrily inside the house, and then a voice calls out, "Meet me next door, in the chapel."

I assume that was Linda's voice. For a moment I press my ear to the door and hear guttural breathing sounds, the clanging of a bedpan—Audrey. She is eighteen now. She bleeds monthly. Her mother is dying.

I find the chapel in the garage. It is damp and everywhere I look are statues dripping oil with tiny Dixie cups tied to their chins to catch the royal runoff. A woman comes in with strangely unfocused eyes, in her hands a container loaded with cotton balls. "My name's Ruby," she says, "I volunteer here." She presses the cotton balls to the wet saints and then drops each swab into a Ziplock bag. "People order these," she says. "It's holy oil. It can cure just about anything."

I want to ask Ruby how she justifies the startling fact that the holy oil cannot cure its keeper, Linda, mother of the saint, but I don't. I watch Ruby walk around the chapel dabbing up oil with swabs of cotton and then I say—I just cannot help myself—"How do you know someone doesn't come out here at night and put oil on these statues when you can't see?"

She spins to look at me.

"Like who?" she says.

I shrug.

"I've seen it myself," she says. "I was standing by Audrey's bed the other day and one of the religious relics just started gushing oil, *hemorrhaging* oil, so I know."

The door to the chapel opens, a wedge of bright afternoon sunlight in the dim damp space, and in steps Linda. Her hair is brittle, purposefully curled, and she wears large hoop earrings set against a pale lined face.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me," I say. "Thank you for agreeing to discuss your faith with me in this difficult situation."

Linda shrugs. She sits, one leg swinging back and forth, like a child. "My faith," she says, "my faith started when I was in utero. If I didn't have my faith, I'd be a turnip in a padded cell right now."

"What does your faith mean?" I ask her.

"It means," she says, "it means I have to turn things over to God, which is hard, because I'm short and so are you—we're both Napoleonic types—so it's hard." She cackles, this Linda.

I study her face. There is, to be sure, glitter in her eyes, but behind the glitter, a flat pool of fear.

"Well," I say, "you told me over the phone that maybe you were starting to question your faith, question your understanding that your daughter is a saint, that sort of thing . . ." I trail off.

Linda raises her eyebrows, each one tweezed into a perfect peak. "I didn't put it quite like that," she says.

"You told me you were having some doubts, and I wanted to talk about how you—"

"Those were inconsequential. Essentially, I have no doubts." She sounds angry.

"Oh," I say.

"Listen," she says. "I know who I am and I know who my daughter is. Audrey, she has a direct email line to God. Audrey goes to God with requests from sick people, and God takes away the sickness. It's not Audrey who takes away the sickness," Linda says. "It's God, but Audrey has his fax number, if you see what I mean."

I nod.

"Let me tell you," Linda continues. "Once we had a chemo patient come to see Audrey. A few days later Audrey developed an intense red rash, like she was on fire. Where could this rash have come from? We called a dermatologist to the house. He was Jewish, but a very nice man. And he says, 'This is a rash that a chemo patient gets,' and when we contacted the chemo patient, her rash was gone. You see," says Linda, "Audrey took the patient's painful rash, that's what my daughter does."

Linda goes on to tell me another story, about a woman with ovarian cancer who, after visiting Audrey, had a sonogram that showed a shadowy angel on her ovaries and all the cancer gone. I don't believe these things. Linda goes over to the tabernacle, lifts up a covered cup, and shows me what's inside. Oil, and floating within the oil, a bead of

blood. "We've had this oil analyzed," she says, "by over thirty different chemists. And it's of no variety known to mankind."

"Why?" I say softly, "then why, Linda, can't the oil or Audrey's intercessions to God, why can't they heal you?"

Linda is quiet. She is quiet for a long time. I see her eyes move back into her head, into some very private place I cannot get to. I don't know where she is, if she has died a small death, if she is sitting in senselessness, if she's making new sense—the weaving wheels are turning and turning. She looks up at the ceiling. Ruby, who is still in the chapel, looks up at the ceiling too. Then at long last Linda says, "It's spread to the bone."

"There goes Jesus," Ruby says, and points to a relic in front of us, and sure enough, I see it: Jesus is weeping grease, two tiny drops sliding down his figured face, collecting in the creases of his neck.

I stare at this phenomenon. I have my own little fit of cognitive dissonance right there: (1) I do not believe in the Catholic faith or its rather cheesy-looking miracles, but (2) that statue is oozing, although of course it could be butter someone put on it that's now melting, but how am I to know for sure? I observe my own mind, to see if it leaps to cognitive closure. Butter. Butter. Butter. According to Festinger's theory, I will reduce this dissonance by explanation. But I don't really have an explanation. It's probably butter. But it might not be butter. Who's to say how god appears, in what signs, what symbols? Who's to say for sure? We three stand in the chapel watching Jesus cry. From inside the house I can hear the moan of a brain-dead girl, a nurse shushing, and I imagine Linda's horror, fifteen years ago, seeing her three-year-old drifting in the deep end. I don't know if there's a reason these things happen, or if there are saints who can see into heaven, or if pain has a divine purpose. I don't know why the statue weeps, why the bead of blood is in the chalice. I came here looking for Linda's willingness to tolerate dissonance, but what I have found, in some very small sense, is my own, for my mind right now is open, and all I can do is ask.

"It's in my bones," Linda repeats, "and I don't know how long I have left."

"You're her mother," I say then. "You've taken care of her for eighteen years. She has healed thousands upon thousands of people. She should heal you."

Linda smiles wanly. "Lauren," she says, "Audrey hasn't healed me because I've never asked her to. And I never would. She might be a saint, but she's also my girl, my baby. I would never ask her, or allow her, to take on my pain. A mother doesn't ask that of a child. A mother doesn't give suffering. She takes it away."

THE WOMEN LEAVE. Linda tells me she will be going to Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center soon. I sit for a little while longer in the chapel, by myself. Clearly, whatever doubts Linda expressed on the phone were so fleeting she can barely acknowledge them. Now, I want to pray. But no prayers come. "A mother doesn't request that of her child," Linda said, "A mother doesn't give suffering. She takes it away." This might be a rationalization, a way for Linda to avoid her daughter's falling her by simply never asking her, and thus the story stays intact. But it's more than that. It's also an act of deep caring. From inside the house I hear Linda now, crooning to her daughter, and someone gurgles in return, and for almost two decades now, she's done this, day in, day out, ministered. Did Festinger ever consider how our justifications are to save not only ourselves, but others too? Did he ever consider how lies and love are intertwined?

I LEAVE LINDA. The day is extravagant, backward, summer in winter, buried bulbs spearing upward through the ground, flaunting their purple flags.

When I was in graduate school studying psychology, I once worked on the neurological unit of a large hospital. There were a few people there like Audrey, curled into comas, their limbs stiff and cold.

Sometimes I'd stand over these people—a boy I particularly remember—and I'd say the alphabet, wondering if the letters would wend their way in, if there are parts of us deep underground that nevertheless still stay awake, watching the world while buried.

It was in graduate school that I first learned some scientists are actually studying the neural basis of dissonance theory. V. S. Ramachandran, one of the most well-known neurologists of this century, is investigating the neural substrates responsible for denial and revision. He claims we have a neuronal "devil's advocate" device located somewhere in our left lobe. The devil's advocate signals a little neurotransmitter alarm when it detects jabs at our sealed belief systems, and that's what allows us to even experience dissonance. In our right lobe, however, we have a Scheherazade of synapse and cell, a gleeful and powerful confabulator that often overrides its horned opponent.

"But not all brains," says Matthew Lieberman, assistant professor of psychology and social psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, "not all brains engage in rationalizations, in such intense single-themed storytelling." Lieberman has repeated Festinger's lying-for-one-dollar-versus-lying-for-twenty-dollars experiment with East Asians, "and East Asians engage in far fewer rationalizations than Americans do." Lieberman is pretty sure that the East Asian brain, based on years and years of Zen practice, or simply because it has matured in a culture that can tolerate paradox (what is the sound of one hand clapping?), has a different "neural signature" than the American brain. "It's not that East Asian people don't experience dissonance," Lieberman says, "but they have less of a need to reduce it, probably because the structures that seek linear thought patterns have been rewired through spiritual exercise." Lieberman wonders if the anterior cingulate gyrus serves as the human "anomaly detector," or "devil's advocate," and if, in East Asian people, that brain part has fewer pathways to the prefrontal cortex, where we make our game-plans. "If this is the case," says Lieberman, "then East Asians experience the same amount of cognitive dissonance that we do, but they

feel less compelled to act on it." In other words, East Asians may be better able to sit with it, hold in their cupped hands a thing that makes no sense—a carp without water, a tree without roots, a beautiful brain-dead girl.

I AM WORRIED about the weather. It is December 3, and the temperature is sixty-two degrees. The sky looks melted, the single rose blooming in our garden is apocalyptic. My husband carries my daughter outside, his feet sinking into the damp loamy lawn, and they pick the rose, breaking it off and bringing it to me. Festinger claimed that, ironically, worry could be a way of reducing cognitive dissonance. You feel afraid for no good reason, so you create a reason, and thereby justify your worry. How can one tell the difference between the just and the justifications? Perhaps if I were East Asian, I wouldn't even try. But the fact of the matter is, the planet appears to be warming. It is early December, and the wind smells like rot, and I find a beetle on the ground, its jointed hooked limbs waving in the warm air, a clear pool of ooze flowing from its segmented belly.

Linda has gone to the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and is back home by now. Since my visit with her a week ago, I've thought a lot about her—or perhaps I should say, my anterior cingulate gyrus has thought a lot about her. I've done some sleuthing, and there are serious medical experts who claim Audrey is, indeed, a rarity. The Jewish dermatologist said, "I cannot explain her skin condition in any way except to say it was caused by chemotherapy, a chemotherapy the mother says she never had." Audrey's pediatrician says, "I don't know. I have seen crosses on her palms, crosses of blood, what you could call stigmata, but they are under a layer of skin, so they couldn't have been cut there. I don't know. Medicine wants to put round things into round holes, but in Audrey's case, it's a square thing and it doesn't fit."

Currently, according to Linda, the Catholic Church is formally investigating Audrey for possible sainthood. "Oh, I hope she makes saint," Ruby says to me, like it's a cheerleading squad.

I call Linda Santo. She has had her breast operation by now and should be recovering. Her voice sounds weak, wavering. "Stage four," she tells me, "they cut out my breast and found it everywhere, everywhere." I picture it, the cancer, eel-black, beetle-black. I picture it. They cut it out. Now she is home, and hobbling, nursing herself on the one hand and her small saint on the other.

I drive back out to see her. It is nearing the solstice; already the sun is sliding down the sky when I arrive, and my shadow is long on the gold ground. Fifty years ago, Marion Keech and Dr. Armstrong and Bertha and Don and all the rest waited for Sananda and his silver rains, and when they didn't come, they found a way to explain it. Fifteen years ago, Audrey Santo fell into her pool, and when she never recovered, they found a way to explain it. Now, approaching the Santo home, I don't go to the front door or the chapel door. Instead, I creep around to the side and peer in one of the windows, and then I see her, Audrey herself, lying in a bright pink bedroom, her hair, so long and full of shine, massed across the satin pillows, falling to the floor in a single black sheet. Her eyes are fixed, open. She looks radiant, except for her mouth, where a single string of drool drops down.

To tell the truth, I don't know why I'm here. I came to Linda because I wanted to observe someone entering dissonance and putting together a new paradigm because of it, but she didn't show me that. She clung, instead, to her justifications, her rationalizations, but with so much love! Is it the love I am drawn to, this mother and daughter woven together by years of breath and touch? Or is it that I am drawn by the dissonance I am experiencing, the fact that the weird things happening here, in this house, rankle against my notion of how the world works, and I want to figure it out? I see a shadow to my left and I turn. I swear it is Leon himself in the dusk of this December day, scampering around, scowling and leprechaun-like at the same time. What would *he* say about the Santo miracles? He'd remind me that all of Christianity is the result of cognitive dissonance and its subsequent rationalizations. Writes Festinger in *When Prophecy Fails*, the Messiah was not supposed to "suffer pain," so the

followers experienced great distress when they saw him crying out on the cross. It was at this moment, Festinger speculates, that followers quelled their doubts by beginning to proselytize.

I think this is funny, Christianity recast as cognitive dissonance. I also think it's a little sad. It speaks only of constriction, defensive people with blinders on their eyes. But, in fact, Christianity was also an opening, a doorway that millions upon millions streamed through.

Now, I ring the Santos' doorbell and then wait for Linda in the chapel. It is dark in the chapel, and the walls reek of saturated oil, of old clothes and incense. I go to the chalice, lift up the cup, and stare down into it, where the oil with the bead of blood sits just as it did weeks and weeks before. Who will take care of Audrey if Linda dies? When Linda dies? I touch the tiny, pointed face of a Jesus and my hands come away glossy and wet. I stare at my hands. The light is really going now, the day is so short, but my hand is glowing and glossy with this oil. I lift up my pant leg and rub the oil on a razor nick I got the other day, while showering. My skin soaks it up and the cut closes over, so there is no mark there anymore, or is it just too dark to really see? Perhaps I am seeing things, but the nature of those things I cannot quite tell. Who knows, maybe God makes himself known through a cheap plastic relic, in a ranch-style house. I really, really cannot say for sure. I am between stories, pending a paradigm, without justification or rationalization, a rich and profound place to be. Here, for this moment, hanging between dissonance and consonance, I am quiet. I am peaceful. This is what Festinger's experiments missed, what it's like to live in the gap between consonance and dissonance, where new theories take shape, new beliefs are about to be born, or something much smaller, just a person, just me, with my hands held out, my body held high, wide open—no ending.

6

Monkey Love

HARRY HARLOW'S PRIMATES

Harry Harlow's experiments with wire monkeys are central demonstrations in the psychology of attachment. Harlow was able to show that infant monkeys cared more for a soft surrogate mother than a metal milk-bearing one, and with this finding, a whole science of touch was born. His experiments, many captured on film, are chilling and underscore the power of proximity in our lives.

Obedience. Conformity. Cognitive. Cuing. These were the words and Harry Harlow didn't like them. He wanted to talk about love. He was at a conference one day, speaking about love, and every time he used the word, one of the scientists would interrupt and say, "You must mean *proximity*, don't you?" until at last Harlow, a brash man who could also be strangely shy, said, "It may be that proximity is all you know of love; I thank God I have not been so deprived."

That was just like him, to make such a statement, in public no less; he was prickly, impolite, a man who is remembered by some with real distaste and by others with fondness. "My father," says his son James Harlow, "I remember how he took me on all these trips; he