

## PART ONE: THE EXPERIMENT

Possibly you are late. You are running down a small side street in New Haven, Connecticut. It is June 1961, and ahead of you loom the spires of the Yale Episcopalian Church. The streets smell of summer, wet crushed flowers and spoiled fruit, and maybe, because of this, you already feel a little ill. In anticipation. Because of the odor. Something sweet and singed in the air.

Or perhaps you are not late. Perhaps you are the responsible type, with minutes to spare, and so you are strolling and there is no moon because it is raining, a summer rain darting down silver and sideways and making the streets smell strongly of sewage and cement. In this scenario, as well, you already feel a little sick, in anticipation, although of what you cannot say: There is that odor, something rotting in the air.

You are carrying the ad. Just two weeks ago you ripped it from its newspaper page: "We Will Pay You \$4.00 for One Hour of Your Time: Persons Needed for a Study of Memory." And because it was Yale, and because of the cash, enough to buy a new blender to replace the one that went kaput, and because, well, it's all in the name of science, you said yes. Now you are on your way. On your way! The side streets are so . . . sideways; they curve and tip, the bricks buckling, green weeds thrusting up between the pavers. You trip. You straighten yourself up. You come to the address—Linsly-Chittenden Hall, a gray door—and you are just about to open it when it opens itself and a man comes from the other side, his face all red—and could those be tears streaming down his cheeks? He hustles off into the shadows, and you, it's your turn. You go in.

First off, you are paid. You go into a room, which is in worse shape than the sidewalk that led you here, walls flaking, naked pipes in a complex meshwork on the ceiling, and a stern man in a white coat who gives you three fresh smackers and four quarters, cold in your palm. He says, "Here is your compensation. It is yours to keep regardless of what happens," or some such thing. What, you wonder, is going to happen?

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## Obscura

STANLEY MILGRAM AND  
OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

In 1961, a twenty-seven-year-old Yale assistant professor of psychology, Stanley Milgram, wanted to study obedience to authority. In a post-Holocaust world, people were struggling to understand how scores of SS officers had shot, gassed, noosed, and otherwise tortured twelve million people to death, supposedly on orders from their commanders in chief. The generally accepted explanation had to do with the then-popular notion of "the authoritarian personality," which hypothesized that certain kinds of childhood experiences of a strict, Teutonic cast produced people who would do anything to anyone if instructed. Milgram, a social psychologist, suspected that this explanation was too narrow. He purportedly believed the answer to destructive obedience lay less in the power of personality and more in the power of situation. In Milgram's view, any especially persuasive situation could cause any rational human being to abandon moral precepts and, on orders, commit atrocities. To test his hypothesis, Milgram set up one of psychology's grandest and most horrible hoaxes. He created a fake but convincing "shock machine." He recruited hundreds of volunteers and ordered them to deliver what they believed were lethal levels of electricity to an actor who feigned pain and even death. How far would people go under orders? What percentage of ordinary civilians would obey the experimenter's mandates to shock? What percentage would rebel? Here is what he found.

Another man comes into the room. He's got a round face and a silly grin and a straw hat sideways on his head. He's got blue eyes, but they're not the ice blue of intelligence or the cornflower blue of passion; they're a bland, boiled blue. Even before all that happens, you think, *This man does not look smart*. His name, he says, is Wallace something or other. Hi, you say, my name is Goldfarb, or Wentworth—pick a name, any name will do. Just remember, either way, whatever name, this is you.

The experimenter says, "We are interested in learning about the effects of punishment on learning. There has been very little systematic research into this subject, and we are hoping our findings will be of some help to educational systems." He says, "In this experiment, one of you will be the learner and receive shocks when you make a mistake in word pairs read to you, and the other one will be the teacher, who will administer the shocks when the word pair repetition is wrong. Now," the experimenter asks, "which one of you would like to be the learner, which one the teacher?"

You look at—what's his name?—Wallace. And Wallace shrugs. You shrug. The experimenter says, "We'll do a drawing." He holds out two pieces of folded paper. You pick one, Wallace picks one. You open yours: "teacher," it says. Thank god. Wallace says, laughing, "Looks like I'm the learner."

The experimenter motions for you and Wallace to follow him. You do. You go down a short dark hallway and into a room that looks like a cell. "Sit in this chair," the experimenter says to Wallace, and Wallace does. This is no ordinary chair. This is a goddamn electric chair, with a switch plate on the table and straps and strange suckers to put on the skin. "We've got to strap him down," the experimenter says, meaning strap Wallace down, and suddenly you're bending over this big man, buckling him into the seat as though he's just a baby, his skin, when you brush it, surprisingly soft. The experimenter takes a can of paste and says, "Rub this on his hands, for the electrodes," and before you know it, you are massaging grease into this loose-fleshed man, and you feel oddly ill and a tad aroused, and the experimenter says, "Tighten those belts," and so you do. You grease and tighten,

pulling the straps on the black belts so Wallace is harnessed and wired up, and just before you leave, you look at him, a captured man, his pale eyes a little scared, just a glint of fear, and you want to say, "Shhh. Nothing bad will happen here."

NOTHING BAD WILL happen here. Nothing bad will happen here. You repeat that to yourself as you follow the experimenter out of one cell-like room and into another cell-like room where there is no electric chair, but instead a huge generator with dime-shiny buttons, beneath which are printed the voltages—15, 30, 45, all the way up to 450. "Danger, Extreme Shock, xxx," it says on the top-level levers. Jesus H Christ. Who is *H*? Did Jesus have a middle name? Haley, Halifax, Huston? You are starting to think seriously about Jesus' middle name; sometimes that happens to you—you think about the wrong thing; so you won't have to think about the right thing. Halifax. Haley. Huston. And meanwhile the experimenter is saying, "You will read these word sequences to Wallace through the microphone. For each mistake he makes, you give him a shock. You start at the lowest, 15, and go up. May I give you a sample shock?"

Oh sure, you've always liked samples, sample spoons of ice cream, sample fabric swatches, miniature shampoo samples in drug stores, so why not a sweet little sample shock? You offer your arm. It looks white and floppy in the fluorescent laboratory lights. It is an ugly arm, with dark dots where the hairs spring up. The experimenter lowers some pronged device onto your very own skin and you feel a pair of hot fangs, the kiss of a stingray. You flinch away. "That was 45 volts," the experimenter says. "Just so you'll know what the punishment is like."

Okay okay.

You begin.

LAKE, LUCK, HAY, SUN. *Thee, loon, laughter, child.* The word pairs have a kind of poetry to them, and now you are happy, all these lakes

and loons, and Wallace, whose voice comes crackling at you through a tiny microphone, also seems happy. "Keep 'em coming boy!" he shouts, and you lob him *chocolate, waffle, valentine, cupid*, and that's when he makes his first mistake. He forgets the cupid, unlucky in love. You give the first shock, just 15 volts, a kittenish tickle, nothing to worry about.

But that first shock changes things. You can just tell. Wallace's voice, when he repeats the next word pair, is somber, serious, but, goddamn it, he makes another mistake! You give him 30 volts. Next try, good boy, he gets it right, and then again, he gets it right. You find you're rooting for him, and then he screws up *tree house*. Then he screws up *dahlia* and *grass* and before you know it, you're up to 115 volts; you watch your finger land on the press-pad, the nacreous nail, the knuckle, which is the hardest part of the hand. You press down. Through the microphone comes the sound of a scream. "Let me out, let me out! I've had enough, let me outta here!"

You're starting to shake. You can feel wet crescents under your arms. You turn to the experimenter. "Okay," you say. "I guess we gotta stop. He wants out."

"The experiment requires that you continue," this poker face says. "But he wants out!" you say. "We can't continue if he wants out."

"The experiment requires that you continue," he repeats, as though you're hard of hearing, which you're not, you're not! Your hearing's fine, and so is your vision, twenty-twenty. You have the absurd desire to tell this man all about your clean bill of health and your excellent eyes and your good grades in college and your recent promotion at work. You want to tell Mr. White Coat that you're a decent person who has always wanted to help, who would do anything not to disappoint, but you're so sorry, so sorry, you cannot continue the experiment, you hate to disappoint but—

"Please continue," he says.

You blink. Sometimes the sun blinks in and out, on days when clouds scuttle across the sky. That is the best kind of day, fresh blue sky, clouds as white as bandages, a crisp flag snapping at the tip of its

pole. You continue. Somewhere between the cloud and the flag you found yourself going on. You don't know why, you hate to disappoint, and this experimenter seems so sure of himself and as you continue, you recall how once, when you were a child, there was an eclipse, and the sun and the moon merged in a golden burning minute.

Wallace makes a mistake. He makes three, four mistakes, and now you're up to 150 volts, and he's screaming, "I have a heart condition. Let me out of here! I no longer wish to be in this experiment," and the experimenter is standing right next to you and saying, "Go on, please, the shocks are painful but they are not harmful. There will be no permanent tissue damage."

You are fighting tears. Your name is Goldfarb, or Winegarten, or Wentworth. What is your name? You're not so sure. "But he has a heart condition," you say, you think you say, or is your mind just whispering to itself? "There will be no permanent tissue damage," he repeats, and you shout, "For god's sake, what about temporary damage?" and he says, "The experiment requires that you continue," and you say, you're crying now, or you're laughing now, your stomach's laughing hee-hee-haw while your eyes are dribbling tears, you say, "Why don't we just go in there and check on him? Let's just make sure he's okay," and Mr. White Coat shakes his head, you can hear the bones click in his neck—click click, no no, go on, you touch your own neck and you are shocked, no pun intended, you are shocked to feel how slippery wet it is, from sweat, and also how oddly boneless it is, you press and press, but you cannot find any scaffolding in your neck. Is this experimenter a doctor? "Are you a doctor?" you ask. "Are you convinced there will be no permanent tissue damage?" He seems so sure of himself, just like a doctor, which you're not, even though you got good grades in school, he knows what he's doing. You don't. He wears a white coat. So you continue up the ladder of levers, reading word pairs, and something strange has happened to you. You concentrate totally on your task. You read each word pair carefully, carefully, you press the levers like a pilot at his panel. Your



range of vision narrows to the mechanics at hand. You are flying into something. You are flying through something, but what it is you cannot say. You have a job to do. This is not about the sky outside. This is not about sun, bones, blinks, flags. You have a job to do, and so flesh fades away, and Wallace fades away, and in his place, a gleaming machine.

At 315 volts Wallace gives one last, blood-curdling scream and then stops. He falls silent. At 345 volts you turn to the experimenter. You feel very odd. You feel hollow, and the experimenter, when he speaks, seems to fill you up with his air. "Consider silence a wrong answer," he says, and that seems so funny you start to sneeze and laugh. You just laugh and laugh and press those levers, because there is no way out, no way to say, "No! No! No!" In your head you can say it, but in your hands you can't, and you understand now how great the distance between the head and the hands—it is miles of unbroken tundra. With your head you say no and with your hands you tap-dance up and down the shock board, in and around the words—*skirt, flair, floor, swirl, goose, feather, blanket, star*—and all the while there is just this eerie silence punctuated by electric skillet sizzles, and no man. There is no man here.

IT IS LIKE waking up. It is like falling asleep and dreaming of loons and sharks and then waking up, and the whole thing is over. The experimenter says, "We can stop now," and through the door comes Wallace, his hat still sideways on his head, not a hair out of place. He looks fine. "Boy, you really shook me up in there," he says, "but no hard feelings." He pumps your hand. "Wow," he says, "you're sweating. Calm down. Geez I'm known for my melodrama, but I'm fine," and the experimenter echoes, "Wallace is just fine. The shocks weren't as bad as they seemed. The danger, lethal level, that's only for small laboratory animals, which is what we usually use the generator for."

Oh, you think.

Wallace leaves. A spry little man named Milgram enters the room

and says, "Do you mind if I ask you some questions?" Then he shows you a picture of a schoolboy being flogged and takes down your education level and whether you've ever been in the army and what religion you are and you are so numb—you answer everything—and you are also so confused. So the shock generator was geared for mice, not men? Are you a mouse or a man? If Wallace really wasn't hurt, then why did he scream so loud? Why did he holler about his heart? You know about hearts. You know about bones and blood, which you happen to have on your hands. A rage rises up. You look at this nimble little Milgram and you say, "I get it. This wasn't about learning at all. This was an experiment about obedience, obedience to authority," and Milgram, who is only twenty-seven years old and terribly young to be pioneering such a controversial, damaging, illuminating, and finally famous setup, Milgram turns to you. He has green eyes, the color of lollipops, and a little red scribble of a mouth. "This was about obedience," you repeat, and Milgram says, "Yes, it was. If you hadn't guessed it, I would have told you later, in a standard letter I mail to my subjects. Sixty-five percent of my subjects behaved just as you did. It is totally normal for a person to make the choices you did in the situation we put you in. You have nothing to feel badly about," but you, you won't be taken in. You won't be reassured. He fooled you once, but he won't fool you twice. There are no reassuring words for what you've learned in his lab tonight. *Lake. Loon. Swan. Song.* You have learned you have blood on your hands. And a body built for the words of other men.

OTHER MEN. Maybe that one across the street or in the house next door, but not you. This is what *you*, the reader, may be thinking. Should *you* have had the outrageous luck to have found yourself in Linsly-Chittenden Hall at Yale University on a limpid June night in 1961, *you* would not have done such a thing. Your name, after all, is not Goldfarb or Winegarten or Wentworth. You are, perhaps, a Buddhist. A vegetarian. A hospice volunteer. You work with troubled



youth, or donate money to the Sierra Club, or cultivate the most amazing phlox, purple-pink clusters of miniature flowers in a city garden. Not you. But yes, *you*. For Stanley Milgram proved it to be true, in Linsly-Chittenden Hall, and then later in a lab in Bridgeport, and then still later in replications all around the world. Sixty-two to sixty-five percent of us, when faced with a credible authority, will follow orders to the point of lethally harming a person.

This seems improbable, impossible, especially because you are—I am—a humanist at heart.

So were his subjects, many of them.

"I am a good worker. I provide for my family. . . . The only bad thing about me, I do get tied up in my work—I promise the kids to do something, take them somewhere, and then have to cancel because I get called out on a job."

"I enjoy my job. I have an enjoyable family, three children. . . . I like to grow flowers around my yard. I like to raise a vegetable garden primarily because I like fresh vegetables."

These were self-descriptions given by two of Milgram's fully obedient subjects after the testing. Fresh vegetables. Flowers. Those purple-pink phlox in our gardens.

Prior to beginning his experiment, Stanley Milgram, an assistant professor at Yale, took a poll. He asked a group of eminent psychiatrists how they thought subjects would behave in his simulated situation. He also polled Yale undergraduates and a handful of regular New Haven folks. All came up with the same prediction. People would not administer the shocks all the way. They would break off at 150 volts, maximum, save for the pathological fringe of crypto-sadists who would play every lever as the victim screamed. Even today, forty years after the lesson of Milgram has supposedly been learned, people still say, "Not me."

Yes you.

The power of Milgram's experiments lies, perhaps, right here, in the great gap between what we think about ourselves, and who we frankly are.

MILGRAM WAS CERTAINLY not the first psychologist to experiment with obedience, nor the first psychologist to deceive his subjects (the shock machine was utterly fake, the learner and the experimenter paid actors Milgram had hired to do the job), but he was the first to do so, on both accounts, systematically. However, before Milgram, there was a mysterious experimenter by the name of C. Landis, who in an unnamed laboratory in Wales in 1924 found that seventy-one percent of his subjects were willing to decapitate a rat at the experimenter's insistence. In 1944 a psychologist by the name of Daniel Frank realized that he could get his subjects to perform the oddest acts just because he wore the white coat when he made the request: "Please stand on your head," "Please walk backward with one eye closed," "Please touch your tongue to the window."

It is unlikely that Milgram was influenced by these peripheral blips of research. For one thing, Milgram, who had aspired to become a political scientist, had not taken a single psychology course in his four undergraduate years at Queens College, so he was by no means intimate with the literature of the field. For another, Milgram, a voluble little man, gave credit where credit was due. He points to the social scientist Solomon Asch as being the man who made him, if any one man can make another. While obtaining his graduate degree, Milgram served as Asch's research assistant at Princeton. Asch was hard at work on an experiment involving group pressure. In a study using lines of different lengths, Asch found that his subjects would capitulate to the group's perceptions, so if the group said line A was clearly longer than line B, even when it obviously wasn't, the baffled subject would say so too, abandoning his own beliefs in an effort to conform.

Back then, and still now, Asch was a giant in social science research, but Milgram, inches shorter than he and smaller in stature in all sorts of other ways, would soon outpace his mentor. Milgram admired Asch. But lines, well, lines lacked lyrical power, and Milgram, like Skinner, was a lyricist at heart. He wrote librettos and children's stories, quoted Keats and Rilke. He saw his fifty-one-year-old father die of heart failure and always believed he too would go early, so he was

powered by a bright light. "When we married," says his widow, Alexandra Milgram, "Stanley told me he wouldn't live past fifty-one, because he looked just like his father. He always had a sense of his future as very short. Then, when Stanley developed heart troubles in his thirties, he knew, we both knew, his days were numbered."

And perhaps it was for this reason he didn't want lines, something straight and narrow. He wanted to devise an experiment that would cast such a glow, or a pall, over the earth it would leave some things simmering for a long, long time. He wanted something huge with heart. "I was trying to think of a way to make Asch's conformity experiment more humanely significant," he said in an interview with *Psychology Today*. "I was dissatisfied that the test of conformity was judgments about lines. I wondered whether groups could pressure a person into performing an act whose human import was more readily apparent, perhaps behaving aggressively towards another person, say by administering severe shocks to him."

Milgram was no stranger to shocks. Even before he'd seen his father die, he knew about fear. He had spent his childhood years in the South Bronx, where wildflowers grew in gutters and cockroaches scuttled across buckled linoleum. In his family's living room, heavy curtains clamped out sunlight and the radio was big and boxy, with a piece of bubbled glass protecting the channel pad. Milgram was fascinated by that radio. He was fascinated by its tiny plastic pores, its ser-rated dials that moved the white wand up and down, so there was music, now laughter, now weeping, now waltzing—so many sounds, but they always resolved into this: It was 1939 and Stanley was six. It was 1942 and he was just on the cusp of a certain sort of deepening. Through the radio, which his family listened to every day because they had relatives in Europe, came the death reports and the sounds of the SS and shovels on hot concrete. He grew into adolescence with this as his background music—bombs and burns—and meanwhile his body was doing its own detonations. How confusing: sex and terror. We can only guess; it says so nowhere.

IN 1960 MILGRAM left Princeton and his mentor Asch to take an assistant professorship at Yale. Soon after his appointment he began submitting expense reports for switches and electrodes; in the Yale archives are mock-up scripts and notes dared around that time in Milgram's handwriting: "audio cable through ceiling . . . sparks, practice electrode application procedure. James Justin McDonough, excellent victim, A+ victim, perfect as victim, mild and submissive." Reading these notes it is difficult to avoid the sense of Milgram as part imp, a little Jewish leprechaun, his science soaked in joke. In fact, Milgram did have a keen sense of comedy, and it may be he, more than any other scientist, who has shown us how small the space between art and experiment, between humor and heartlessness, between work and play. "Stanley loved, LOVED what he did," says Mrs. Milgram. How could he not have? He used to address letters, drop them on the New York City sidewalks, and then observe who would pick them up, who would mail them, how and why. He developed a technique called "queue barging," a kind of guerrilla social science in which Stanley sprang from a hiding place and darted into a queue, all the while observing the reactions of those he had cut in front of. He went outside, into a bright blue day, pointed at the sky, and timed how long it took to amass a crowd, all of whom stood there, staring at nothing. He was ingenious, subversive, absurd. But, unlike Sartre, or Beckett, Milgram measured absurdity. "He bottled it," says psychology professor Lee Ross of Stanford University. "He bottled absurd behaviors in his lab, so we could see them. Study them. That's what makes him . . . him."

SO MILGRAM PUT in orders for electrodes, thirty switches, black belts, and audio equipment—all the props for the dangerous play he was about to enact, the play that would, quite literally, rock the world and put such a dent in his career he would never quite recover. He started with Yale students, and, much to his surprise, every one of them complied, shocking their way blithely up the switchboard.

"Yales," his wife Alexandra told me he said. "We can't draw any conclusions from Yales."

Says Mrs. Milgram, "Stanley was sure if he went beyond the college community he would get a more representative sample, and more defiance," so he did. Milgram put an ad in the *New Haven Register*, an ad calling for able-bodied men between the ages of twenty and fifty, "factory workers, skilled laborers, professionals, cooks." He recruited a young Alan Elms, then a graduate student at Yale, to help him find and keep a steady supply of volunteers. Elms, who is now sixty-seven and teaching at the University of Davis, clearly remembers his work with Milgram. Elms's voice is slow, tired. I cannot help but think it is the voice of a man who has been shocked himself, seen something bad. "Are you glad you were there?" I ask him. "Oh yes," Elms says. He sighs. "It was a very, very powerful thing. It is not something you would forget." He pauses. "I will never regret being involved."

And so started the experiments, that summer of 1961, the summer of abnormally warm weather, of a bat infestation in the church's bell-fry, the summer you went stumbling down the side streets, ad-clutched in your hand. All together, Milgram recruited, with Elms's help, over a hundred New Haven men. He tested them almost always at night. This gave the whole thing a ghoul-ish air, which it did not need, for there were mock screams and skulls on the generator. Milgram alerted the area police: You may hear of people being tortured. It is not true. It is an act.

An act, apparently, that was quite convincing to the subjects, who sweated and squirmed their way through at the experimenter's prodings. Many were visibly upset at being told to continue administering the shocks; one subject had a laughing convulsion so severe the experiment had to be stopped. Laughing? Why laughing? The odd thing was, there was a lot of laughter going on, a lot of strangled heehaws and belly-aching bursts. Some have said the laughter indicates that everyone knew Milgram the Imp had struck again, that this was just a frivolous joke. Some say his subjects were laughing *at* him, such

an obvious bit of trickery. Elms disagrees. "People were laughing out of anxiety. We were laughing, Milgram and I, out of discomfort." Milgram and Elms observed the subjects behind a one-way mirror, and in between filming the unbelievable obedience they themselves could not have predicted, they dabbled at their eyes with hankies, for something here was horribly, horribly funny.

That scholars and writers have used the laughter present during the experiment as a sign of its essential frivolousness shows little about the experiment and a lot about the rather simplistic notions we hold in regards to comedy, tragedy, and the connections between the two. Comedy and tragedy are inextricably intertwined, in sign, in symbol, in etymology. Milgram himself laughed one moment, and said in another that what he had discovered was "terrifying and depressing." Alexandra Milgram reports, "The results, which he did NOT expect to be so high, made him cynical about people." Of course they did. Milgram had expected compliance, but not at the astounding rate of sixty-five percent of subjects willing to deliver what they believed were lethal shocks. No, he had not expected that. In an attempt to coax more defiance out of his subjects, he varied the conditions. He moved the learner into the room with the subject, removed the microphone, and had the subject deliver the shocks by forcing the learner's hand onto a metal plate. Compliance did drop then, but not by much. Terrifying. Depressing, yes. A full thirty percent of subjects were willing to repeatedly slam the learner's hand onto the shock plate, endure the sound of his screams, and watch him slump over, all under orders from the experimenter.

Milgram's experiment was funded by the National Science Foundation. The monies came in June, July and August passed in a sizzle of blue sparks. In September, only three months into the experiment, Milgram wrote to his backers, telling them of his results: "In a naïve moment some time ago, I once wondered whether in all of the United States a vicious government could find enough moral imbeciles to meet the personal requirements of a national system of death camps, of the sort that were maintained in Germany. I am now



beginning to think that the full complement could be recruited in New Haven."

Imagine what it must have been like for Milgram, as he was making these discoveries. Was he up at nights? Did he touch his children's faces and feel how they were not so soft, the jutting ridge of his daughter's cheekbones, the tiny white teeth? Did the normal New Haven streets take on shadow and curve? Milgram's discovery was not that people will hurt or kill one another; we have always known that to be true. Milgram's discovery was that people will do so in the absence of aggression; he effectively disentwined murder from rage, for his subjects were not angry; they were quiet folks with phlox in their gardens and children in cribs.

Milgram was a social psychologist, which means he had to understand his findings primarily in terms of the situation, for that is social psychology's clarion call. In the eyes of social psychology, personality—*who you are*—matters less than place—*where you are*—and Milgram said he was demonstrating this, how any normal person can become a killer if he finds himself in a place where killing is called for. He used his experiments, to greater and lesser degrees over the years, to explain the appalling behavior at My Lai in Vietnam, and in Nazi Germany, where his work is inextricably hitched to Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil, the beaurocratic Eichmann blindly taking orders, propelled by forces external to him. Today, years and years after Milgram's experiment, social psychologists still sound this bell, proclaiming that what matters is context, not psyche. Says Lee Ross, coauthor of *The Person and the Situation: Perspectives of Social Psychology*, "I wouldn't say there are no stable character attributes in a person that contribute to moral or immoral behavior, but they are far outweighed by where the person is, and at what time, and with whom." In other words, Ross and his colleagues claim that our behaviors do not result so much from a stable set of internalized preferences or beliefs, but rather from external influences that change, like wind and weather.

Milgram ascribed to this general worldview, yet on closer inspec-

tion there are glitches that suggest he was not so sure. For instance, if he believed it was all, or mostly, situation that propelled his volunteers, then why did he administer a personality test at the end of each shock session? Why did he gather data on education, religion, military service, and gender? Why did he later, as a professor at City College of New York, chair a doctoral dissertation that took as its subject the individual character traits of nonconformists, by a young Sharon Presley? Something in the subject must have interested him.

Not long after the initial experiments, Milgram and Elms went on a hunt for personality traits that correlate with obedient or defiant behavior. They did follow-up studies of their subjects, scrutinizing their lives and psyches for clues as to who did what and why. This, understand, is a no-no in the field of social psychology. Snorts Ross, "It's personality stuff, and we don't DO that. Milgram didn't DO that." But he did. He went with Elms and measured individual men, and wrote a paper or two. And he could only have done this because he knew the situation was not a total explanatory factor. Listen, if it had been, if Milgram had created a situation so all embracing and solidly persuasive, then he would have achieved one hundred percent obedience. But he achieved sixty-five percent, which means that thirty-five percent defied the experimenter and the situation. Why? WHY? This is a question no social psychologist can answer. It is at this critical juncture that social psychology breaks down. It can tell you about aggregate behavior, but it can tell you nothing about the naysayers, the exotic tendrils that curl off the main frame and give sprout to something strange. Here, Milgram had devised a study in which thirty-five percent of his plants, to extend the metaphor, came up crimson, hybrid—it was not the soil; it must have been something in the seed.

In the mid-1960s, Milgram and Elms called subjects back to the lab and administered batteries of personality tests. One was called the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), another the Thematic Apperception Test. Elms did extensive one-on-one interviewing, asking obedient and defiant subjects about their childhoods,

their relationships with their mothers and fathers, their earliest memories. They found very little.

"Catholics were more obedient than Jews. We did find that," Elms tells me. "And the longer one's military experience, the more obedient. We also found that defiant volunteers measured higher on the MMPI's social responsibility scale, but," sighs Elms, "that scale supposedly measures not only greater concern for social and moral issues, but also a tendency towards compliance and acquiescence, so what do we learn from that? Not much? That could describe either an obedient or a defiant subject."

It was very difficult for Elms and Milgram to find any consistent character traits in defiant versus obedient subjects. They did find that obedient subjects reported being less close to their fathers during childhood than defiants did. As children, they found obedient recipients either spankings or very little punishment, whereas defiants had been punished by severe beatings or by some kind of deprivation—dinner, perhaps. Slightly more obedient recipients had served on active military duty. Most obedient recipients admitted to shooting at men; most defiants denied it.

When you look at this information, what do you get? Not a whole lot. A defiant is beaten, an obedient is spanked. A defiant is close to his father, an obedient distant. A defiant scores high on a social responsibility scale that measures, among other things, acquiescence. Either the scale is wrong, or the defiant and the obedient have so many strands in them we cannot cleanly sort it out.

I, FOR ONE, want to sort it out. I clearly remember the first time I heard about the Milgram experiments. I was at Brandeis University, where I did my undergraduate work. I was sitting on the lawn on a May day and all the cherry trees were in bloom, petals of the palest, membranous pink. We were having class in the spring air, and the sociology professor said, "So they shocked and shocked," and a shiver went through me, because I recognized the situation. I knew intuitively,

immediately, that I would have done it, obedient soul that I am. I could understand perfectly how you get bound into a situation, how you lose your own eyes, your own mind, how you empty out and just obey, obey, because who are you anyway? I remember looking at my hands, then, on the lawn, with the cherry trees all fluttery above. My hands are like your hands, three lifelines and tiny cross hatchings, and I said to myself, "What would I need to have within me in order to disobey?" I was skinny then, my hips sharp, my eyes shiny. I did what I could to fit in. I always have. Zap zap. I wanted to know what it would take to change me, grow me, up, away, an exotic tendril curling off the main frame, *no, No*. Such a simple word. So hard to hold in the mouth.

THAT WAS YEARS ago, but still today I want to understand. Elms says to me over the phone, "We didn't find any strong stable personality traits in either obedient recipients or defiants," and I ask, "Are there any subjects from the Milgram experiments I can speak to, any that are still alive?" He answers, "The archives are sealed until 2075. The names are confidential."

I may be obedient, but that doesn't stop me from being nosy. I called this person, that person, who led me to this person and that person. Weeks went by. I called priests and rabbis and Milgram scholars, and during this search I read, in some reference I cannot relocate, that one of the defiant Milgram volunteers later turned up at My Lai and refused to shoot. I pictured this man, now sixty, now seventy, living in a clean simple house with pots of basil by his front door. I had to find him.

He called.

#### PART TWO: THE PEOPLE

I never saw the basil. I never saw his house. And he was not, it turns out, the My Lai man. But he was, this seventy-eight-year-old named Joshua Chaffin, in the Milgram experiments way back then, and he

was, he promises me, defiant. The first thing he says to me over the phone is, "Yeah, I was there. I was in that lab, and I only went to 150 volts. If I'd gone any higher, believe me, I wouldn't be talking to you right now. That would be between me and my psychiatrist."

A defiant subject, and a funny one at that! Even before I meet Joshua in person, I can tell he's affable, a real sweetheart, his voice with a slight yiddishy lilt, his eyes, which I can just imagine, soft and sweater-gray.

Joshua keeps me on the phone for a long, long time. It's as though he's been just waiting for a reporter to call and ask him about his fateful role in those long-ago, now much-maligned experiments. He says, "You young people today just don't have an appreciation for how convincing the situation was. I didn't doubt it for a moment. Never crossed my mind it was a hoax. The generator had a gold plate on it that said 'Made in Waltham Massachusetts,' which is just the kind of place equipment like that would be made, if you see what I mean. And if you think the obedience had to do with Yale, like Yale's prestige, think again because Milgram moved his whole act to a storefront in Bridgeport and people still shocked. I shocked. I feel bad about that. I shocked but I only went to 150, I broke off at 150." He keeps repeating this, as though to reassure himself, and it is strange how fresh the whole thing is in his mind—the lab, the blue stutters of sparks, the learner's screams, all perfectly preserved in the bottle of this old man's body. He ages; the experiment stays still in time.

We make arrangements to meet. He lives, still, in New Haven, and many days he walks by Linsly-Chitenden Hall. Sometimes he even goes down to the basement, where it all took place. "It was a real mess then," Joshua says to me, "but I can see the scene just perfectly as it was, this gray door, and pipes. Pipes everywhere."

I drive up to see him on a beautiful summer day. The air and sky are incredibly soft, and the gulls' screams have the saddest sound. New Haven looks vacant, emptied of college students but littered with mattresses and trunks piled by the crumbling curbs.

We meet at a restaurant. Outside the light is bright and blinding.

And then there's the close dimness of the interior, where candles flicker on tiny tables in a perpetual evening. Everyone here is old, and eating fish. Joshua, who has described himself for me, waits at a table way in the back, where napkins are folded into the shapes of swans. I sit.

Our food comes. Joshua forks up a piece of breaded fish, pops it in his mouth, and chews vigorously.

"I was an assistant professor of environmental studies," Joshua says, "and I saw this ad, and I thought, why not? Back then, four dollars was some substantial sum of money, and I needed money. So I did it." He proceeds to tell me what the "it" consisted of, the story we now already know—how he rubbed electrode paste onto the learner's skin, how he heard the first grunt of pain somewhere around 75 volts, how the grunts got louder, how the scream was sharp and came cracking through the microphone, how Joshua turned to the experimenter and said, "This isn't right," and the damn experimenter, "The damn experimenter!" Joshua says, little flakes of fish flying from his mouth, his liver-spotted hands trembling with the memory of it, "The damn man tells me to continue."

"And you?" I say, leaning forward, although toward what I am not sure. Morality? As though that is a single concrete construct one can grasp.

"I said to that experimenter, 'No.'"

I watch Joshua's mouth as he forms the word *no*, the word I have such trouble uttering, tongue to the pink palette, spit it out. *No*.

"I said," repeats Joshua, "I said, 'I've been in a few experiments before and this isn't right,' and I was getting all wound up, hearing the learner's screams and I was getting sweaty and my heart was going really, really fast, so I stopped and I announced, 'Enough.'"

"And why did you do that?" I say. "I mean, what enabled you to break off, when so many others couldn't?"

I really want to hear his answer. I have driven all these miles to hear how a man makes himself autonomous. To hear how a man severs the strings that make our lives a performance of pure puppetry. Joshua is not a puppet. He moves his own muscles.



Joshua dabs his mouth with the starched white napkin. He pulls at the napkin's peak, the swan collapses, and he cleans his lips. He looks toward the ceiling, pauses, and then says, "I was worried about my heart."

"About your heart?" I echo.

"I was worried," Joshua says, lowering his head and looking at me, "that the experiment was causing me so much stress that I might have a heart attack, and also," he adds, almost as an afterthought, "and also, I didn't want to hurt a guy."

I nod. It is impossible not to notice that "the guy" came second, Joshua's heart first, although who could blame him? Still, this was not the answer I was expecting from my moral man. I was expecting something coated with Judeo-Christian gloss, something high-minded like, "There has always been a deep ethical imperative within me to do unto my neighbor as . . ."

No such luck. Joshua, it turns out, was worried about his heart, and his defiance came from this concern, at least in his retrospective rendition. He goes on to tell me how after the experiment he was so outraged that the next day he burst into Milgram's office at Yale and found the professor calmly behind his desk, grading papers. Joshua said, "What you are doing is wrong! Wrong! You are upsetting naïve subjects. You don't screen people for medical problems. You could give someone a heart attack, that experiment's so stressful."

Joshua recalls Milgram looking up at him. Milgram seemed unperturbed. He said, "I am sure we will not be giving any subjects heart attacks," and Joshua said, "You almost gave me one," whereon the two had a long talk. Milgram essentially calmed Joshua down and praised him for his defiant performance, and then, before he left, Milgram said, "Mr. Chaffin, I'd appreciate it if you, you know, kept it quiet."

"Kept what quiet?" Joshua said.

"The experiment," Milgram responded. "What it's really about. I'm still testing subjects and I don't want them, obviously, to know we're looking at obedience, not learning."

"Well," Joshua says to me, "I thought about that one for awhile, I mean, keeping it quiet. I thought maybe I should go to the police. Because I was really, really mad. I thought about it."

"And did you?" I say, "go to the police, or otherwise blow Milgram's cover?"

Chaffin's eyes flutter oh so briefly. The waiter comes over and whisks our plates away, so between us now there is just a white expanse of tablecloth and a candle in a pool of wax. "No," says Joshua.

"No what?" I say.

"No, I kept the real nature of the experiments a secret," says Joshua. "I didn't tell on Milgram." I think it odd, how he is so proud of defying Milgram, when at some other, larger level, he obeyed Milgram's most essential mandate. And now my eyes flutter, for it is confusing, the moral center I cannot find. I find, instead, a regular, charming, contradictory, complex man with liver spots on his hands.

I ASK JOSHUA about his life. The surprises keep tumbling out. There is absolutely nothing to suggest that Joshua's defiant laboratory behavior carried over in any way to his choices outside the lab. A corporate man, he spent many years working for Exxon. He calls environmentalists "tree huggers." At age twenty-five he joined the service and was shipped to the Philippines. "I was an excellent soldier," Joshua says. "We took those SOB Japs and locked them up."

"Did you kill anybody in the war?" I ask.

"It was World War II," says Joshua. "It was a different kind of war." "I know," I say. But the SOB comment, the caging of Japs, the tree huggers, the military man, the choice to keep Milgram's cover—it just doesn't fit with the otherwise low-voltage behavior Chaffin seems so proud of.

"Did you kill anybody in the war?" I ask again, and as I do, I recall Elms's comments, that obedient almost always shot at people during military service, defiants hardly ever.

"I don't know," says Joshua. He shifts uncomfortably. "Did you do anything in the war you wished you hadn't?" I ask. "I don't know," says Joshua. "I . . . Waiter!" he says, "I'd like some coffee," and so then comes coffee, and crème brûlée, which he eats too fast, his mouth full of sugar, and silence.

I CALL ELMS. "So," I say, "I found a defiant subject and it turns out he talks about locking up SOB Japs and being a good soldier, and overriding his own values to keep Milgram's cover" and Elms, whose voice today sounds more tired than ever, says, "Well, how people act in one situation is not necessarily how they act in another." I speak to a few other social psychologists who repeat that same idea to me, using phrases like "lack of cross-situational consistency." Lee Ross says, "Chaffin just proves that it's not personality that defines behavior, it's situation," but, frankly, that comment seems entirely unilluminating. To say that Chaffin behaved defiantly in one situation and obediently in another simply because people are a hodgepodge of unpredictable responses is a pretty piss-poor explanatory model, and I'm not going to accept it. Chaffin's case in no way proves that there are no personality traits associated with defiance and its opposite, obedience, but what it does prove, if a sample size of one could ever prove anything, is that how a subject acts in the laboratory does not necessarily generalize to how he or she will act in situations outside the laboratory, which is a whole different issue.

This issue, called external validity in the field of psychology, and better understood as generalizability, presents a serious problem for laboratory psychology. For what good does it do to demonstrate findings that cannot be replicated outside the clean white walls of a decidedly small scientific room? Picture a scientist discovering a new antibiotic that works amazingly well on male rats in super-sterilized cages with one testicle only. That discovery lacks external validity, for most men have two testicles and, as a general rule, keep their living conditions less than sterile.

Questions of external validity have plagued the Milgram experiments from their very inception. People have criticized the experiments for creating a situation that lacks any mundane realism, meaning a situation so unlike the conflicts of real life that the human drama it portrays is, in fact, irrelevant to the world in which we live. While the general public seized on the findings with fervor—going so far as to publish them in the *New York Times*, "65% in Test Blindly Obey Orders to Inflict Pain," and to incorporate them into an ABC televised movie called *The Tenth Level*, starring William Shatner as the wry-haired, slightly mad Milgram—the smaller circle of psychology looked askance at the experiment. Scholar Bernie Mixon claimed that Milgram had not necessarily studied obedience at all; rather, he had studied trust, for the subjects that had "gone all the way" had every reason to believe in the experimenter's goodwill. Still others quibble with the trust hypothesis, and say, no, it's not trust that Milgram studied; what he did is create this entirely staged situation that tells us little about the decidedly unstaged lives in which we find ourselves. Some say the Milgram experiment "does nothing but illuminate itself," which is harsh criticism, essentially casting the complex setup as a piece of solipsistic theater that keeps eyeing its own machinations and murmuring, in the words of Henderikus Stam, "Aren't we clever?" Ian Parker, who wrote about the experiments for *Granta* magazine, eventually dismisses them as a piece of tragicomic theater, a view that the distinguished scholar Edward E. Jones upheld earlier when he rejected Milgram's first obedience paper for his journal because "we are led to no conclusions about obedience, really, but rather are exhorted to be impressed with the power of your situation as an influence context."

One of the most vocal Milgram detractors is Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, a former professor at Harvard University and author of the book *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. Goldhagen has serious doubts about both the generalizability of Milgram's specific obedience experiment and the resulting obedience paradigm as an explanation for why genocides occur. "The

Milgram experiment makes more mistaken assumptions about the Holocaust than just about anything else ever published," says Goldhagen. "His obedience theories just don't apply. People disobey credible authorities all the time. The American government says x. We do y. Even in the medical world where people assume benign motives on the parts of their physicians, patients still all the time neglect to follow orders. Furthermore, the situation Milgram set up, where subjects didn't have anytime to reflect on what they were doing, is not how the real world works. In the real world, SS officers were killing during the day and going home to their families at night. In the real world, people have plenty of opportunities to alter their course of behavior. When they don't, it's not because they're scared of authority, but because they choose not to. The Milgram experiments illustrate nothing about this factor of choice."

Well, this is a mouthful. And much of it was hard for Milgram to take, on the one hand, but on the other hand, it was fun. He got a lot of attention. Scholars puzzled over the meaning of his dark-hearted white-walled lab while Peter Gabriel composed a song for Milgram called "We Do What We're Told."

NO ONE, HOWEVER, could tell just what the Milgram experiments meant, what they measured or predicted, or how much meaning to ascribe to their findings. Was it obedience, trust, external compulsion, or something else? "Really," says Lee Ross, "the meaning of the experiments, what, exactly, they illuminate about human beings is profoundly mysterious."

Meanwhile, alongside the methodological critiques that were tumbling in, another sort of fervor was brewing. Milgram published his findings in 1963. In 1964 Diana Baumrind, a child psychologist, published in the field's leading journal a severe reprimand of Milgram on ethical grounds; he had deceived his subjects, failed to get informed consent, and caused trauma. A colleague at Yale tipped off the American Psychological Association and Milgram's membership

application was upheld for a year, while he was investigated. "You have to understand," says Lee Ross, "this whole ethical thing was happening in the 1960s, the 1960s," he repeats, "when people were primed for it. The Tuskegee experiment of withholding treatment for syphilitic black men had just come to press, and the horrible Nazi experiments, and the general anti-scientism; it was in this light that Milgram was investigated."

Investigated he was. Held under the bright laboratory lights of his colleagues and found wanting. He squirmed and struggled. At parties, people recoiled when they heard who he was. Bruno Bettelheim, paragon of humanism, called Milgram's work vile. When it came time for tenure, Milgram was denied the ivy halls of Yale and Harvard; "Who would have him?" says his widow Mrs. Milgram. "In those days you needed to have unanimous approval for a tenure candidate and Stanley was so controversial."

Stanley, it seems, wanted it both ways: he wanted to be a maverick and he wanted acceptance; he wanted to shock the world and then be taken in to its forgiving embrace. University after university turned him down. He—not his subjects, not Joshua, but he, Stanley Milgram—began to have heart troubles. The thick blue aortal stem got clogged with grease; the flap muscles faltered. At thirty-one he was hired by the City College of New York as a full professor, not a bad move for such a young man, but at thirty-eight he had already suffered the first of five myocardial infarctions, his hand going up to his closing throat, a shooting ache in the shoulder, knees buckling under, revived, revived again, each time the pump a little weaker.

What killed Stanley Milgram is what kills all of us: life itself. The wear and fear, the tamp of time, the inevitable decay egged on by too many eggs, too much meat and fear and loss. He had a lot of loss: the loss of his father at a young age, a man who looked just like him and was a baker and every morning came home with two challas, and then he lost his father, and then he lost the prestige of Ivy League tenure, and then he lost an unvarnished reputation as he was attacked, and attacked again, for his inhumane



laboratory practices. "It was awful for Stanley. Just awful," says Mrs. Milgram. I press her to say more, but she won't. In 1984, when he was fifty-one years old, he felt a wave of nausea while listening to a student's dissertation defense. "He hadn't eaten lunch that day," says Mrs. Milgram, "I'm just sure of it, and he had a real women's libber for an office assistant. She wouldn't even get him a glass of water if he asked," and so he sat there, parched and nauseous. His good friend Irwin Katz accompanied him home on the subway, and Milgram must have felt how the steady rhythm of the rails contrasted with the flopping of his own starving heart. Alexandra Milgram picked her husband up at the train station and drove him right to the emergency room. He was still walking at that point. He was pale in the face, and his hands shook. He went straight to the nurse's station and said, "My name is Stanley Milgram and I am having my fifth heart attack," and then he dropped to his knees. "He was gone," Mrs. Milgram explained to me, taken to another room, where his shirt was ripped open and suckers, electrodes, and paste were pressed onto his chest. *The experiment requires that you continue, continue, continue.* They shocked him once, twice, who knows how often his body rose into the air, flailing like a fish's, *shock shock*, the black cardiac cuffs beating down. But he was gone, and could not be shocked back into being.

HIS NAME IS *not* Jacob Plumfield; he *does not* have blue eyes or live in a part of Boston called Jamaica Plain. He is not seventy-nine, but he is somewhere near there. I will give him a beard, I think, silver-white stubble, and I will say, for the sake of the story, that his lover's name is Jim.

Jacob Plumfield will speak with me on the condition of one hundred percent anonymity. He was in the Milgram experiments and, unlike Joshua, was obedient to the end of the shock board. He says his hands still hurt with what he did.

People question what Milgram created: a false situation, an unethical situation. One thing is for sure: his situation made some powerful

memories, for both Joshua and Jacob speak of it as though it were yesterday, their eyes ignited. If the laboratory is not a real situation, as many Milgram critics have cited, then why or how has it managed to stamp itself so solidly into these men's undeniably real lives, to take up residence alongside anniversaries, children's births, first sex?

"I was twenty-three," says Jacob, "a postdoc." He goes on to tell me a tale with Oscar Wilde flourishes. He was having a secret affair with a roommate, struggling with a burgeoning homosexual identity. "In high school and college I'd done everything to fit in," says Jacob. "Everything! I was the golden boy. I got great grades. I had a gorgeous girlfriend. All the while, though, I kept looking at boys' backs when we went swimming, their backs. I don't know why."

Finally, in his postdoc year, Jacob acted on his impulse, falling in love with and consummating a relationship with his roommate, who, it turned out, was just experimenting with homosexuality and soon left him for a girl. But Jacob remembers those nights of lovemaking, the room hot, the sucking sounds of their puddled chests coming together, the unbearable excitement. And then, the suite mate left him for a girl, and Jacob was devastated. "I felt it in my body, the shame of being gay. Why couldn't I like a girl?" He masturbated compulsively, picturing "awful things." And then he saw the ad. He answered it. "God knows why," he says to me. He went to Milgram's lab three days after the breakup, his appendages hurting and bruised, semen-sticky hands, and when the experimenter said, "There will be no permanent tissue damage, please continue . . ."

"Well," says Jacob, "I just continued. I was so depressed I almost didn't care, and I was thinking, 'No permanent tissue damage, he's got to be right, I pray he's right, I don't want any permanent tissue damage, do I have permanent tissue damage?'" He describes a scene where the screams of the learner merged with his own self-loading, a joint pain, and up he went, utterly without a center, having spurted it all out in secret shames.

"Afterwards," said Jacob, "when I was debriefed afterwards, explained what had happened, I was horrified. Really, really horri-

fed. They kept saying, 'You didn't hurt anyone, don't worry, you didn't hurt anyone,' but it's too late for that. You can never," says Jacob, "really debrief a subject after an experiment like that. You've given shocks. You thought you were really giving shocks, and nothing can take away from you the knowledge of how you acted. There's no turning back."

I recall, while speaking with Jacob, the words of Boston College sociology professor David Karp, who said to me, "Just imagine what it must be like for those subjects, to have to live their whole lives knowing what they were capable of . . ."

"So," I say to Jacob, "I would guess you think the experiments were essentially unethical, that they caused you harm."

Jacob pauses. He strokes his dog. "No," he says. "Not at all. If anything, just the opposite."

I look at him.

"The experiments," he continues, "caused me to reevaluate my life. They caused me to confront my own compliance and really struggle with it. I began to see closeted homosexuality, which is just another form of compliance, as a moral issue. I came out. I saw how essential it was to develop a strong moral center. I felt my own moral weakness and I was appalled, so I went to the ethical gym, if you see what I mean."

I nod. I see what he means. "I came out," he says, "and that took a lot of strength and built a lot of strength, and I saw how pathetically vulnerable I was to authority, so I kept a strict eye on myself and learned to buck expectations. I went from being a goody-two-shoes golden boy with a deep secret headed straight for medical school, to a gay activist teaching inner-city kids. And I credit Milgram with galvanizing this."

Argot, the dog, has laid his wet nose in Jacob's lap. Jacob strokes and strokes the snout. The room we are in has a bay window, a maple floor, a built-in hutch with a silver clasp. It's a lovely, peaceful room. I could sleep in a room like this. So much has been settled, stilled, in a room like this. It is painted white, with white sailcloth curtains and a

passionflower plant on the windowsill. Jacob lives simply. Nearing the end of his life, he has minimal money saved, although his long-term partner, Jim, a lawyer, has more. Jacob shows me the first pink triangle he ever proudly wore.

Everywhere you look in this condominium, you can see signs of Jacob's alternative life—the inner-city teaching awards, the active resistance to material goods. He, the obedient one, has lived by far the more defiant lifestyle than Joshua, the defiant one, who worked as a top officer for Exxon, and then the army.

So what are we left with? Again, questions of validity, for if the experiment does little to predict how a man's choices in the lab will translate into choices outside the lab, and if we accept prediction, and generalizability, as one of the main goals of a scientific experiment, then, indeed, are not Milgram's critics right?

Douglas Mook, a social scientist, wrote an article called "In Defense of External Invalidity," in which he questions the whole notion of using generalizability as an indicator of an experiment's worthiness. "Unless a researcher's purpose is of a specifically applied nature . . . the representativeness of the laboratory in terms of mundane realism may be irrelevant." In other words, if you don't plan on using your findings in the real world, then who cares whether or not the findings are relevant to it. Well, I guess that's okay. But where, in terms of the mysterious Milgram experiments, does an argument like Mook's actually leave us? A person, say, a critic, comes to an experiment the same way a reader comes to a novel; there are similar aesthetic demands in terms of structure, pacing, revelation, lesson learned. You cannot close *The Brothers Karamazov* and say, "Very interesting, although I've no idea what it was about," because you just can't. A piece of literature makes its way into canon based largely on the meaning it imparts in our lives. Milgram's experiments are indisputably in the canon. And yet, no one can agree on the theme—a story of obedience? No. A story of trust? No. A piece of tragicomic theater? No. An example of ethical wrongdoing? No. What message has Milgram sent us, in what sort of bottle, on which seal?

Perhaps the best thing to do, then, is to turn to the subjects themselves, for they are, more than even Milgram, the bearers of his bad or good news. And when you do that, when you turn to the subjects and ask, "What was this all about for you?" you start to hear a similar story that may finally pull the conflicting threads together: Did he measure obedience or trust? Was his situation real or false? Did his subjects know it was a hoax or were they fooled? Was this the work of an imp or a scientist? Does generalizability matter or not?

Says Jacob, "The experiment changed my life, caused me to live less according to authority." Harold Takooshian, a former student of Milgram's and a professor at Fordham University, recalls a binder of letters on Milgram's desk: "It was a big black binder filled with hundreds of letters from subjects, and many, many of the letters said how much the obedience experiments had taught them about life, and how to live it." Subjects claimed the experiment caused them to rethink their relationship to authority and responsibility; one young man even said that as a result of his participation in the Milgram experiments, he became a conscientious objector in the war.

So this, perhaps, is what we're left with: an experiment that derives its significance not from its quantifiable findings, but from its pedagogical power. Milgram's obedience experiments had the ironic effect of making his subjects, at least some of them, less obedient. And that is pretty stunning—an experiment so potent it does not describe or demonstrate, so much as detonate, a kind of social psychology equivalent of the atom bomb, only this time in the service of creation, not destruction, for as Milgram himself said, "From these experiments comes awareness and that may be the first step towards change."

As for the personality variables associated with obedience and defiance, I cannot locate them, much, I'm sure, to the social psychologists' glee. Nevertheless, I believe they are there, for we are not simply the situations in which we find ourselves. Milgram, himself a great believer in the power of the situation, went looking for traits—so how great a believer was he?—and he wrote in an often over-

looked statement, "I am certain there is a complex personality basis to obedience and disobedience. But I know we have not found it."

But I remember on that late spring day at Brandeis, when I first heard of the Milgram experiments, how I felt a shock of recognition, and the immediate knowledge that I could do such a thing, unsteady as I am. And I knew I could do such a thing, not because some strange set of circumstances propelled me to, no. The impetus lay within me, like a little hot spot. It was not external. It was internal. A little hot spot. Up the shock board. How often had I, have *you*, heard a racial slur and said nothing in order to keep the peace? How often have I, have *you*, seen something wrong at work, maybe a mistreated colleague, and done nothing so your own job stays steady? The little hot spot travels inside us. Certain situations may make it glow brighter, and others dimmer, but the moral failing that lies at the heart of so many humans, well, there it lies, at the heart, which cannot, after it has failed one too many times, be shocked back into being. I feel my own heart, clippety clop, and I see my own hands, and I'd like to think, now that I've made such an intimate acquaintance with Mr. Milgram, with Joshua and Jacob and you, yes *you*, I'd like to think I'd do the dance a little differently when my number is called. I look at my hands, here, on this midsummer day, and I see how the lines go every which way, up and down, good and bad—there is no way to know for sure. Sixty-five percent did. Thirty-five percent didn't. And then the good are bad and the bad are good. It's all mixed up. My hands hurt, and are huge with possibility. Now it is evening. My two-year-old daughter has learned a new word in Spanish. "*Obscuro! Obscuro!*" she keeps shouting, which she says means "darker! darker!" She comes up to me, and with my hands, my hugely possible hands, I hold her.