

**SO YOU'VE BEEN
PUBLICLY SHAMED**

JON RONSON

PICADOR



First published 2015 by Picador
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-4472-2979-7

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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BRAVEHEART

This story begins in early January 2012 when I noticed that another Jon Ronson had started posting on Twitter. His photograph was a photograph of my face. His Twitter name was @jon_ronson. His most recent tweet, which appeared as I stared in surprise at his timeline, read: *‘Going home. Gotta get the recipe for a huge plate of guarana and mussel in a bap with mayonnaise :D #yummy.’*

‘Who are you?’ I tweeted him.

‘Watching #Seinfeld. I would love a big plate of celeriac, grouper and sour cream kebab with lemongrass #foodie,’ he tweeted.

I didn’t know what to do.

The next morning I checked @jon_ronson’s timeline before I checked my own. In the night he had tweeted, *‘I’m dreaming something about #time and #cock.’*

He had twenty followers. Some were people I knew from real life, who were probably wondering why I’d suddenly become so passionate about fusion cooking and candid about dreaming about cock.

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I did some digging. I discovered that a young academic from Warwick University called Luke Robert Mason had a few weeks earlier posted a comment on the *Guardian* site. It was in response to a short video I had made about spambots. ‘We’ve built Jon his very own infomorph,’ he wrote. ‘You can follow him on Twitter here: @jon_ronson.’

‘Oh, so it’s some kind of *spambot*,’ I thought. ‘OK. This will be fine. Luke Robert Mason must have thought I would *like* the spambot. When he finds out that I don’t he’ll remove it.’

So I tweeted him: ‘*Hi!! Will you take down your spambot please?*’

Ten minutes passed. Then he replied, ‘*We prefer the term infomorph.*’

I frowned. ‘*But it’s taken my identity,*’ I wrote.

‘*The infomorph isn’t taking your identity,*’ he wrote back. ‘*It is repurposing social media data into an infomorphic aesthetic.*’

I felt tightness in my chest.

‘*#woohoo damn, I’m in the mood for a tidy plate of onion grill with crusty bread. #foodie,*’ @jon_ronson tweeted.

I was at war with a robot version of myself.

A month passed. @jon_ronson was tweeting twenty times a day about its whirlwind of social engagements, its ‘soirées’ and wide circle of friends. It now had fifty followers. They were getting a disastrously misrepresentative depiction of my views on soirées and friends.

The spambot left me feeling powerless and sullied. My

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identity had been redefined all wrong by strangers and I had no recourse.

I tweeted Luke Robert Mason. If he was adamant that he wouldn't take down his spambot, perhaps we could at least meet? I could film the encounter and put it on YouTube. He agreed, writing that he'd be glad to explain the philosophy behind the infomorph. I replied that I'd certainly be interested to learn the philosophy behind the spambot.

I rented a room in Central London. He arrived with two other men – the team behind the spambot. All three were academics. They had met at the University of Warwick. Luke was the youngest, handsome, in his twenties, a 'researcher in technology and Cyberculture and director of the Virtual Futures conference', according to his online CV. David Bausola looked like a rakish teacher, the sort of person who might speak at a conference on the literature of Aleister Crowley. He was a 'creative technologist' and the CEO of the digital agency, Philter Phactory. Dan O'Hara had a shaved head and eyes that were piercing and annoyed-looking. His jaw was clenched. He was in his late thirties, a lecturer in English and American Literature at the University of Cologne. Before that he'd been a lecturer at Oxford. He'd written a book about J. G. Ballard called *Extreme Metaphors* and another book called *Thomas Pynchon: Schizophrenia & Social Control*. As far as I understood it, David Bausola had done the actual building of the spambot, while the two other men provided 'research and consultancy'.

I suggested they sit in a row on the sofa so I could film

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them all in a single shot. Dan O'Hara gave the others a glance.

'Let's play along,' he said to them. They all sat, with Dan in the middle.

'What do you mean by "play along"?' I asked him.

'It's about psychological control,' he said.

'Do you think my having you in a row on the sofa is my way of psychologically controlling you?' I asked.

'Absolutely,' said Dan.

'In what way?' I asked.

'I do that with students,' said Dan. 'I put myself in a separate chair and put the students in a row on the sofa.'

'Why would you want to psychologically control some students?' I asked.

Dan looked briefly worried that he'd been caught saying something eerie. 'In order to control the learning environment,' he said.

'Is this making you feel uncomfortable?' I asked him.

'No, not really,' said Dan. 'Are you uncomfortable?'

'Yes,' I said.

'Why?' Dan asked.

I spelled out my grievances. 'Academics,' I began, 'don't swoop into a person's life uninvited and use him for some kind of academic exercise and when I ask you to take it down you're, *Oh it's not a spambot, it's an infomorph.*'

Dan nodded. He leaned forward. 'There must be lots of Jon Ronsons out there?' he began. 'People with your name? Yes?'

I looked suspiciously at him. 'I'm sure there are people with my name,' I replied, carefully.

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'I've got the same problem,' said Dan, with a smile. 'There's another academic out there with my name.'

'You don't have *exactly* the same problem as me,' I said, 'because my *exact* problem is that three strangers have stolen my identity and have created a robot version of me and are refusing to take it down even though they come from respectable universities and give TEDx talks.'

Dan let out a long-suffering sigh. 'You're saying, "There is only one Jon Ronson,"' he said. 'You're proposing yourself as the real McCoy, as it were, and you want to maintain that integrity and authenticity. Yes?'

I stared at him.

'I think *we* feel annoyed with *you*,' Dan continued, 'because we're not quite persuaded by that. We think there's already a layer of artifice and it's your online personality – the *brand* Jon Ronson – you're trying to protect. Yeah?'

'NO, IT'S JUST ME TWEETING,' I yelled.

'The Internet is not the real world,' said Dan.

'I write my tweets,' I replied. 'And I press Send. So it's me on Twitter.'

We glared at each other.

'That's not academic,' I said. 'That's not postmodern. That's the fact of it.'

'This is bizarre,' Dan said. 'I find it really strange – the way you're approaching this. You must be one of the very few people who have chosen to come on Twitter and use their own name as their Twitter name. Who does that? And that's why I'm a little suspicious of your motives, Jon. That's why I say I think you're using it as brand management.'

I said nothing, but to this day it kills me that it didn't

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cross my mind to point out to him that Luke Robert Mason's Twitter name is @LukeRobertMason.

Our conversation continued like this for an hour. I told Dan that I have never used the term 'brand management' in my life. Language like that is alien to me, I said. 'And that's the same with your spambot. Its language is different to mine.'

'Yes,' the three men agreed in unison.

'And that's what's annoying me so much,' I explained. 'It's a misrepresentation of me.'

'You'd like it to be *more* like you?' Dan said.

'I'd like it to not exist,' I said.

'That's bizarre,' said Dan. He let out an incredulous whistle. 'I find something psychologically interesting about that.'

'Why?' I said.

'I find that quite aggressive,' he said. 'You'd like to *kill* these algorithms? You must feel threatened in some way.' He gave me a concerned look. 'We don't go around generally trying to kill things we find annoying.'

'You're a TROLL!' I yelled.

After the interview was over I staggered out into the London afternoon. I dreaded uploading the footage onto YouTube because I'd been so screechy. I steeled myself for comments mocking my screechiness and I posted it. I left it ten minutes. Then, with apprehension, I had a look.

'This is identity theft,' read the first comment I saw. 'They should respect Jon's personal liberty.'

'Wow,' I thought, cautiously.

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'Somebody should make alternate Twitter accounts of all of those ass clowns and constantly post about their strong desire for child porn,' read the next comment.

I grinned.

'These people are manipulative assholes,' read the third. 'Fuck them. Sue them, break them, destroy them. If I could see these people face to face I would say they are fucking pricks.'

I was giddy with joy. I was Braveheart, striding through a field, at first alone, and then it becomes clear that hundreds are marching behind me.

'Vile, disturbing idiots playing with someone else's life and then laughing at the victim's hurt and anger,' read the next comment.

I nodded soberly.

'Utter hateful arseholes,' read the next. 'These fucked-up academics deserve to die painfully. The cunt in the middle is a fucking psychopath.'

I frowned slightly. 'I hope nobody's going to actually hurt them,' I thought.

'Gas the cunts. Especially middle cunt. And especially left-side bald cunt. And especially quiet cunt. Then piss on their corpses,' read the next comment.

I won. Within days the academics took down @jon_ronson. They had been shamed into acquiescence. Their public shaming had been like the button that restores factory settings. Something was out of kilter. The community rallied. The balance was redressed.

The academics made a very big meal of eradicating the

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spambot. They wrote a *Guardian* column explaining that their wider aim was to highlight the tyranny of Wall Street algorithms. ‘It’s not just Ronson who has bots manipulating his life. It’s all of us,’ they wrote. I still didn’t understand why pretending I eat wasabi dumplings might draw the public’s attention to the scourge of Wall Street algorithms.

‘*I have been asked to retire you – do you understand what that means?*’ tweeted David Bausola to the spambot. And, ‘*You have a few hours left. I hope you enjoy them.*’

‘Just press the off switch,’ I emailed him. ‘Jesus.’

I was happy to be victorious. It felt wonderful. The wonderful feeling overwhelmed me like a sedative. Strangers all over the world had united to tell me I was right. It was the perfect ending.

Now I thought back on the other recent social media shamings I’d enjoyed and felt proud of. The first great one happened in October 2009. The Boyzone singer Stephen Gately had been found dead while on holiday with his civil partner, Andrew Cowles. The coroner recorded a verdict of natural causes but the columnist Jan Moir wrote in the *Daily Mail*, ‘Whatever the cause of death is, it is not, by any yardstick, a natural one . . . it strikes another blow to the happy-ever-after myth of civil partnerships.’

We were not going to tolerate a resurgence of old-time bigotry, and as a result of our collective fury Marks & Spencer and Nestlé demanded their advertising be removed from the *Daily Mail*’s website. These were great times. We hurt the *Mail* with a weapon they didn’t understand – a social media shaming.

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After that, when the powerful transgressed, we were there. When the *Daily Mail* mocked a food-bank charity for giving a food parcel to their undercover reporter without running an ID check on him, Twitter responded by donating £39,000 to the charity by the end of that same day.

‘This is the nice thing about social media,’ one tweeter wrote about that campaign. ‘The *Mail*, which relies primarily on lying to people about their neighbours, can’t cope with people communicating amongst themselves, forming their own opinions.’

When LA Fitness refused to cancel the gym membership of a couple who had lost their jobs and couldn’t afford the fees, we rallied. LA Fitness hurriedly backed down. These giants were being brought down by people who used to be powerless – bloggers, anyone with a social media account. And the weapon that was felling them was a new one: online shaming.

And then one day it hit me. Something of real consequence was happening. We were at the start of a great renaissance of public shaming. After a lull of 180 years (public punishments were phased out in 1837 in the United Kingdom and 1839 in the United States) it was back in a big way. When we deployed shame, we were utilizing an immensely powerful tool. It was coercive, borderless, and increasing in speed and influence. Hierarchies were being levelled out. The silenced were getting a voice. It was like the democratization of justice. And so I made a decision. The next time a great modern shaming unfolded against some significant wrongdoer – the next time citizen justice prevailed in a dramatic and righteous way – I would leap

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into the middle of it. I'd investigate it close up and chronicle how efficient it was in righting wrongs.

I didn't have to wait long. @jon_ronson was put to death on 2 April 2012. Just twelve weeks later, in the middle of the night on 4 July, a man lying on his sofa in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, was looking for ideas for his blog when he made a very unexpected discovery.

2

I'M GLAD I'M NOT THAT

In the middle of the night on 4 July 2012, Michael Moynihan lay on his sofa. His wife Joanna was asleep upstairs with their baby. They were broke, as they always were. In journalism everybody seemed to make more money than Michael did. 'I can never turn it into money,' as he'd later tell me. 'I don't know how to do it.'

They were anxious times. He was thirty-seven and scraping by as a blogger and a freelancer in a walk-up in a not great part of Fort Greene, Brooklyn.

But he'd just had a job offer. The *Washington Post* had invited him to blog for them for ten days. Not that the timing was so great: 'It was July 4th. Everyone was on vacation. There were no readers and there wasn't a lot of news.' But still. It was a break. And it was stressing Michael out. The stress had just spoiled a vacation in Ireland visiting his wife's family, and now it was stressing him out on his sofa.

He began hunting around for story ideas. On a whim he downloaded the latest number-one *New York Times*

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non-fiction bestseller from the young, handsome and internationally renowned pop-psychology author Jonah Lehrer. It was a book about the neurology of creativity and was called *Imagine: How Creativity Works*.

The first chapter, Bob Dylan's Brain, piqued Michael's interest, as he was a keen Dylanologist. Jonah Lehrer was reconstructing a critical moment in Dylan's creative career – the thought process that led him to write 'Like A Rolling Stone'.

It was May 1965 and Dylan was bored, weary from a gruelling tour, 'skinny from insomnia and pills', sick of his music, thinking he had nothing left to say. As Jonah Lehrer wrote,

The only thing he was sure of was that this life couldn't last. Whenever Dylan read about himself in the newspaper he made the same observation: 'God, I'm glad I'm not me,' he said. 'I'm glad I'm not that.'

So Dylan told his manager he was quitting the music business. He moved to a tiny cabin in Woodstock, New York. His plan was to perhaps write a novel.

But then, just when Dylan was most determined to stop creating music, he was overcome with a strange feeling.

'It's a hard thing to describe,' Dylan would later remember. 'It's just this sense that you got something to say.'

It was no wonder *Imagine* had become such a bestseller. Who wouldn't want to read that, if they're creatively

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blocked and feeling hopeless, they're just like Bob Dylan immediately before he wrote 'Like A Rolling Stone'?

Michael Moynihan, I should explain, hadn't downloaded Jonah Lehrer's book because he was blocked and needed inspirational advice about how to write a *Washington Post* blog. Jonah Lehrer had recently been embroiled in a minor scandal and Michael was considering blogging about it. Some columns he had written for the *New Yorker* had, it turned out, been recycled from columns he'd published months earlier in the *Wall Street Journal*. Michael was considering blogging on how 'self-plagiarism' was considered less of a crime in Britain than in America, and what that said about the two cultures.

But now Michael suddenly stopped reading. He went back a sentence.

'It's a hard thing to describe,' Dylan would later remember. 'It's just this sense that you got something to say.'

Michael narrowed his eyes. 'When the fuck did Bob Dylan say *that*?' he thought.

'What made you suspicious?' I asked Michael. The two of us were eating lunch at the Cookshop Restaurant in Chelsea, New York City. Michael was handsome and fidgety. His eyes were pale and darting like a husky's eyes.

'It just didn't *sound* like Dylan,' he said. 'In that period every interview Dylan did he was a total asshole to the interviewer. This sounded like a Dylan self-help book.'

*

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And so, on his sofa, Michael scanned back a few paragraphs.

Whenever Dylan read about himself in the newspaper, he made the same observation: ‘God, I’m glad I’m not me,’ he said. ‘I’m glad I’m not that.’

In D. A. Pennebaker’s documentary *Dont Look Back* (the missing apostrophe was the director’s idea), Dylan reads an article about himself: ‘Puffing heavily on a cigarette, he smokes eighty a day . . .’ Dylan laughs. ‘God, I’m glad I’m not me.’

How did Jonah Lehrer know that Dylan said this *whenever* he read about himself in the paper, Michael thought. Where did ‘*whenever*’ come from? Plus, ‘God, I’m glad I’m not me,’ is verifiable. But ‘I’m glad I’m not *that*’? When did he say, ‘I’m glad I’m not THAT’? Where did Jonah Lehrer get ‘I’m glad I’m not *THAT*’ from?

And so Michael Moynihan emailed Jonah Lehrer.

‘I picked up your book and as an obsessive Dylan nerd eagerly read the first chapter . . . I’m pretty familiar with the Dylan canon and there were a few quotes I was slightly confused by and couldn’t locate . . .’

This was Michael’s first email to Jonah Lehrer. He was reading it to me back home in his Fort Greene living room. His wife Joanna sat with us. There were baby toys scattered around.

By the time Michael emailed Jonah on 7 July he’d pinpointed six suspicious Dylan quotes, including ‘It’s just this sense that you’ve got something to say’, ‘I’m glad I’m not *that*’, and this angry retort to prying journalists: ‘I’ve

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got nothing to say about these things I write. I just write them. There's no great message. Stop asking me to explain.'

Dylan did once verifiably say in *Dont Look Back*, 'I've got nothing to say about these things I write. I just write them. There's no great message.'

But there was no 'Stop asking me to explain.'

Michael mentioned to Jonah his deadline – he was blogging for the *Washington Post* for ten days – and then he pressed Send.

Jonah emailed Michael back twice the next day. His emails sounded friendly, professional, businesslike, maybe a little superior. His air was that of a smart young academic understanding Michael's questions and promising to answer them during an appropriate moment in his schedule. Which would be in eleven days. He was on vacation in Northern California for ten days. His files were at his home, a seven-hour drive away. He didn't want to disrupt his vacation by driving fourteen hours to his house to check his files. If Michael could wait ten days Jonah would send him detailed footnotes.

Michael smiled when he read out that part of Jonah's email to me. Eleven days was quite the convenient vacation length given the duration of Michael's *Washington Post* contract.

Still, Jonah said he'd try to answer Michael's questions off the top of his head.

'And this,' Michael said, 'was where it all began to unravel for him. This is where he makes his first underplayed lie. He's hesitating. "Do I make this lie?"'

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Jonah made the lie.

‘I got a little bit of help,’ he wrote, ‘from one of Dylan’s managers.’

This manager had given Jonah access to hitherto unreleased original transcripts of Dylan interviews. If there were any discrepancies with common references on the Web, that was why.

Jonah’s emails continued in this vein for several paragraphs: Dylan had told a radio interviewer to ‘stop asking me to explain’ in 1995. The interview was transcribed within the pages of a rare multi-volume anthology called *The Fiddler Now Upspoke: A Collection of Bob Dylan’s Interviews, Press Conferences and the Like from Throughout the Master’s Career*. And so on. Then Jonah thanked Michael for his interest, signed off, and at the bottom of the email were the words, ‘Sent from my iPhone.’

‘Sent from his iPhone,’ Michael said. ‘A rather lengthy email to send from an iPhone. Slightly panicky. Sweaty thumbs, you know?’

Who knew if Jonah Lehrer really was on vacation? But Michael had to take him at his word. So they had a lull. The lull made publication in the *Washington Post* blog impossible, given the digging Michael would need to do. *The Fiddler Now Upspoke* was a nightmare source: ‘Eleven volumes, twelve volumes, fifteen volumes. Individual ones cost \$150, \$200.’

Jonah Lehrer presumably thought Michael hadn’t the wherewithal to trace, purchase and scrutinize an anthology as epic and obscure as *The Fiddler Now Upspoke*. But he

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underestimated the nature of Michael's tenacity. There was something about Michael that reminded me of the Cyborg in *Terminator 2*, the one that was even more dogged than Arnold Schwarzenegger, running faster than the fastest car. As Michael's wife Joanna told me, 'Michael is the guarder of social rules.' She turned to him. 'You're a nice guy as long as everyone else . . .' She trailed off.

'When I go out in the world,' Michael said, 'if someone throws some garbage on the street, it's the most senseless thing to me. I lose my mind. Why are you doing this?'

'And it's for hours,' Joanna said. 'We're out on a nice walk and it's a half-an-hour rant . . .'

'I see things collapsing,' Michael said.

And so Michael tracked down an electronic version of *The Fiddler Now Upspoke*. Well, it wasn't an actual electronic version, 'but a complete archive of all known Dylan interviews called "Every Mind-Polluting Word",' Michael told me, 'basically a digital version *Fiddler*, that a fan put together and dumped online.' It turned out that Bob Dylan had only given one radio interview in 1995 and at no time during it had he told the interviewer to 'Stop asking me to explain.'

On 11 July Michael was in the park with his wife and daughter. It was hot. His daughter was running in and out of the fountain. Michael's phone rang. The voice said, 'This is Jonah Lehrer.'

I know Jonah Lehrer's voice now. If you had to describe it in a word, that word would be 'measured'.

'We had a really nice talk,' Michael said, 'about Dylan,

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about journalism. I told him I wasn't trying to make a name for myself with this. I said I'd been grinding away at this for years and I'm just – you know – I do what I do and I feed my family and everything's OK.'

The way Michael said the word OK made it sound like he meant 'barely OK'. It was the vocal equivalent of a worried head glancing down at the floor.

'I told him I'm not one of those young Gawker guys going, "Find me a target I can burn in the public square and then people will know who I am." And Jonah said, "I really appreciate that."'

Michael liked Jonah. 'I got along with him. It was really nice. It was a really nice conversation.' They said their goodbyes. A few minutes later Jonah emailed Michael to thank him once again for being so decent and not like one of those Gawker guys who delight in humiliation. They didn't make them like Michael any more.

After that Michael went quiet so he could dig around on Jonah some more.

These were the good days. Michael felt like Hercule Poirot. Jonah's claim that he'd had a little bit of help from one of Dylan's managers had sounded suspiciously vague, Michael had thought. And, indeed, it turned out that Bob Dylan only had one manager. His name was Jeff Rosen. And although Jeff Rosen's email address was hard to come by, Michael came by it.

Michael emailed him. Had Jeff Rosen ever spoken to Jonah Lehrer? Jeff Rosen replied that he never had.

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So Michael emailed Jonah to say he had some more questions.

Jonah replied sounding surprised. Was Michael still going to write something? He assumed Michael wasn't going to write anything.

Michael shook his head with incredulity when he recounted this part to me. Jonah had obviously convinced himself that he'd sweet-talked Michael out of investigating him. But no. 'Bad liars always think they're good at it,' Michael said to me. 'They're always confident they're defeating you.'

'I've spoken to Jeff Rosen,' Michael told Jonah.

And that, Michael said, is when Jonah lost it. 'He just lost it. I've never seen anyone like it.'

•

Jonah started repeatedly telephoning Michael, pleading with him not to publish. Sometimes Michael would silence his iPhone for a while. Then he'd return to find so many missed calls from Jonah he would take a screenshot because nobody would otherwise have believed it. I asked Michael at what point it stopped being fun and he replied, 'When your quarry starts panicking.' He paused. 'It's like being out in the woods hunting and you're, "This feels great!" And then you shoot the animal and it's lying there twitching and wants its head to be bashed in and you're, "I don't want to be the person to do this. This is fucking *horrible*."'

Michael got a call from Jonah's agent, Andrew Wylie. He represents not just Jonah but Bob Dylan and Salman Rushdie and David Bowie and David Byrne and David

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Rockefeller and V. S. Naipaul and *Vanity Fair* and Martin Amis and Bill Gates and King Abdullah II of Jordan and Al Gore. Actually Andrew Wylie didn't phone Michael. 'He got in touch with somebody who got in touch with me to tell me to call him,' Michael said. 'Which I thought was very *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. He's thought to be the most powerful literary agent in the United States and I'm a schlub, I'm a nobody. So I called him. I laid out the case. He said, "If you publish this you're going to ruin a guy's life. Do you think this is a big enough deal to ruin a guy's life?"'

'How did you reply?' I asked.

'I said, "I'll think about it,"' Michael said. 'I guess Andrew Wylie is a bazillionaire because he's very perceptive, because I got a call from Jonah who said, "So Andrew Wylie says you're going to go ahead and publish."'

On the afternoon of the last day – Sunday, 29 July – Michael was walking down Flatbush Avenue, on the telephone to Jonah, shouting at him, "I need you to go on the record. You have to do it, Jonah. You have to go on the record." My arms were going crazy. I was so angry and so frustrated. All the time he was wasting. All his lies. And he was simpering.' Finally something in Jonah's voice made Michael know that it was going to happen. 'So I ran into Duane Reade, and I bought a fucking Hello Kitty notebook and a pen and for twenty-five seconds he said, "I panicked. And I'm deeply sorry for lying." And there you go,' said Michael. 'It's done.'

*