

CHAPTER 1

THE GRIFTER AND THE MARK

He does not answer questions, or gives evasive answers; he speaks nonsense, rubs the great toe along the ground, and shivers; his face is discolored; he rubs the roots of his hair with his fingers.

—PROFILE OF A LIAR, 900 BCE

Whenever people ask me if I've ever been conned, I tell them the truth: I have no idea. I've never given money to a Ponzi scheme or gotten tripped up on an unwinnable game of three-card monte—that much I know. And there have been some smaller deceptions I've certainly fallen for—though whether they qualify as full-fledged cons is a matter of dispute. But here's the thing about cons: the best of them are never discovered. We don't ever realize we've fallen; we simply write our loss off as a matter of bad luck.

Magicians often resist showing the same trick twice. Once the element of surprise is gone, the audience becomes free to pay attention to everything else—and is thus much more likely to discern the ruse. But the best tricks can be repeated *ad infinitum*. They are so well honed that there is practically no deception to spot. Harry Houdini, the magician and famed exposé of frauds, boasted that he could figure out any trick

once he'd thrice seen it. One evening at Chicago's Great Northern Hotel, the story goes, a fellow conjurer, Dai Vernon, approached him with a card trick. Vernon removed a card from the top of the deck and asked Houdini to initial it—an "H.H." in the corner. The card was then placed in the middle of the deck. Vernon snapped his fingers. It was a miracle. The top card in the deck was now Houdini's. It was, as the name of the routine suggests, an "ambitious card." No matter where you put it, it rose to the top. Seven times Vernon demonstrated, and seven times Houdini was stumped. The truly clever trick needs no hiding. (In this case, it was a sleight-of-hand effect that is often performed by skilled magicians today but was, back then, a novelty.)

When it comes to cons, the exact same principle holds. The best confidence games remain below the radar. They are never prosecuted because they are never detected. Or, as in Demara's case, they are detected, but the embarrassment is too great. I wouldn't be surprised if Houdini had kept quiet about his inability to spot Vernon's trick, had the two men met in a less public setting. It's not uncommon, in fact, for the same person to fall for the exact same con multiple times. James Franklin Norfleet, a Texas rancher you'll meet again later on, lost first \$20,000, and then, in short order, \$25,000, to the exact same racket and the exact same gang. He'd never realized the first go-around was a scam. David Maurer describes one victim who, several years after falling for a well-known wire con—the grifter pretends to have a way of getting race results seconds before they are announced, allowing the mark to place a sure-win bet—spotted his deceivers on the street. He ran toward them. Their hearts sank. Surely, he was going to turn them in. Not at all. He was wondering if he could once more play that game he'd lost at way back when. He was certain that, this time, his luck had turned. The men were only too happy to comply.

Even someone like Bernie Madoff went undetected for at least twenty years. He was seventy when his scheme crumbled. What if he'd died before it blew up? One can imagine a future where his victims would be none the wiser—as long as new investments kept coming in.

In June 2007, *Slate* writer Justin Peters decided to be creative about his airfare to Italy. Short on money, he was nevertheless eager to spend a few months out of the country. And he had what he considered a pretty damn brilliant plan for solving the dilemma. He'd buy airline miles from someone willing to part with them, and then use them to purchase a reduced fare. He promptly started scouring the Internet for anyone with a mile surplus. He was lucky. Soon after he began his search, he found Captain Chris Hansen, a pilot with countless unused miles he'd put up for purchase on Craigslist. Peters quickly replied to his posting—god forbid the miles went to someone else. They talked on the phone. Captain Chris seemed knowledgeable and friendly. “Our conversation convinced me that he was on the level,” Peters writes. A deal was promptly arranged: \$650. A hundred thousand miles. PayPal. Simple.

Except PayPal rejected the transaction. How odd, Peters thought. He followed up with the captain about the error. The pilot was strangely silent.

Peters, however, was desperate. His scheduled departure date loomed ever closer, and still no tickets. So he returned to the hunt. Bingo. Franco Borga, ready seller of miles. Borga responded promptly and, of all things, included his driver's license in the reply. He was who he said he was, not some Craigslist scammer. A phone call later—a “very nice conversation”—and they were in business. Seven hundred dollars on a Green Dot card, and the miles would be his. (Green Dot cards, a favorite of the con artist, are gift cards that you can easily buy at any supermarket or drugstore. You can recharge them, and anyone with the account number can access the balance—a way to move funds without the hassle of a wire transfer.)

Four days later, still no miles. It was finally dawning on Peters that he might have been scammed. But then, lo and behold, his long-lost pilot resurfaced. He'd been abroad, he explained, with limited e-mail access. But he still had the miles for Peters's use. Victory. Of course Peters still wanted them—especially, he told the captain, after he'd been so

callously scammed. Captain Chris sympathized completely. The Internet was a predatory place. To put Peters's mind at ease, the captain then sent him a contract; he was, as Peters had always known, on the level.

PayPal still on the fritz, Peters quickly wired the promised \$650.

By this point, everyone but Peters can see how the story will end. Three days, no miles. Four, five, six days. No miles, no e-mails. He had fallen for the exact same scam twice in one week. In this case, he had clear proof of the deception: no miles. But imagine a situation where chance plays a bigger role. A stock market. A race. An investment. Who's to say it wasn't just bad luck?

P. T. Barnum may never have said, "There's a sucker born every minute." (He very likely did not.) But among the con men of the early twentieth century, there was another saying. "There's a sucker born every minute, and one to trim 'em and one to knock 'em." There's always something to fall for, and always someone to do the falling.

Who is the victim and who, the con man? What kinds of people are the Bernie Madoffs and Captain Hansens of the world? And do a Norfleet and a Peters share some underlying traits that bind them together? Is there a quintessential grifter—and a quintessential mark?

* * *

Eighteen State Street. A small, two-window-wide cream house. Teal-and-white trimmed shutters. Grass sprouting in between slabs of surrounding concrete. A small teal-and-cream garage, a basketball hoop affixed to the top. This is where the Great Impostor once made his home. Although he would do his best to have you forget it.

Ferdinand Waldo Demara, Jr.—our old Korean naval surgeon friend, Dr. Cyr—was born on December 12, 1921, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, the first son and second child of a prosperous local family. His mother, Mary McNelly, was an Irish girl from Salem, Massachusetts, a product of the strictest of Catholic upbringings. His father, Ferdinand Senior, was French Canadian, the first generation to have made it south of the border. He'd come in search of wealth, and, by the time young

Fred was born, had found some semblance of it, from the movie business. He'd started as a simple projectionist in Providence, Rhode Island, but over the years he'd saved enough that he dreamed of owning his own theater. In Lawrence, he'd met a local backer, and before long, the Toomey-Demara Amusement Company was running its first cinema: The Palace. It was a success, and Fred Senior seemed born to it. He was, Demara's mother later recalled, "one of the few men who could carry a cane and sport spats and not look foolish doing it."

Fred wasn't born in that modest State Street house. No, sir. He was a product of the fashionable Jackson Street. Where his classmates at the Emily G. Wetherbee School were mostly the sons of mill workers, he stood out. He was a class above. And a head above, too; even then, Fred was a giant.

Fred wasn't particularly popular, what with his constant better-than-thou-ness. But nor was he particularly disliked. That is, until another boy thought that he'd ratted him out to the teacher. "We're going to get you at lunch," he and a newly formed posse promised. Fred promptly went home at recess. But before lunch, he returned. When the boys surrounded him, he pulled out a dueling pistol. "I'm going to shoot your guts out," he threatened. Two more guns were found in his bag, and Fred was suspended.

His behavior soon grew so out of control that he was placed in a Catholic school, St. Augustine's. And it was there that he swapped flat-out violence for a slier sort of approach.

St. Augustine's had a Valentine's Day tradition. Each eighth grader would give a seventh-grade boy a small gift. It was a simple ceremonial exchange to symbolize a "turning over" of the class to the rising eighth graders. By the time Fred was in eighth grade, though, the family's fortunes had taken a sharp downward turn. Shortly after his eleventh birthday, the Toomey-Demara Amusement Company went bankrupt. Good-bye, Jackson Street. In its stead, an old carriage house on the outskirts of town. State Street.

Demara desperately didn't want to be poor. "Please, Little Jesus and

Mother Mary,” he would pray. “Please don’t make us poor. If you don’t I’ll say a rosary every night of my life.” His prayer went unanswered.

That February morning, he wanted to be sure to make an impression, show those poor Catholic kids how a real gentleman behaves. And so, he made his way to the bakery and candy shop off Jackson Street, close to the house that was no longer theirs. The family, he knew, still had an account there. He arranged for the largest heart-shaped box of chocolates to be delivered to the school at three sharp.

The box never came. Somehow the order had gotten lost in the mix—or perhaps the confectioner had grown suspicious that the Demaras’ account wasn’t what it once was. Whatever the holdup, if there was one thing Fred hated more than being poor, it was the humiliation of being called a liar. He’d promised the biggest gift the school had ever seen, and he had come up empty-handed. He vowed to make it right. He returned to the store in a huff. This time, he ordered not only the large heart but smaller boxes for every child in the grade. To put on his account.

This time, there was no mix-up. If the boy had the nerve to order up such a storm, clearly the family could pay. You wouldn’t do something like that, and do it so confidently, unless you could back it up. The boxes promptly arrived, wheeled to St. Augustine’s in a large cart overflowing with chocolate. The Demara family, of course, had no way of paying for them.

From then on, until, at fifteen, he dropped out to join the first of a string of religious orders, Fred Demara was known as the Candy Butcher. And from there, it was a stone’s throw to his first full-on con: stealing an unsuspecting student’s credentials to try to get a commission in the navy.

Was the life of an impostor always his destiny? Was he born to be a grifter?

* * *

Con artists are evil human beings, with malicious intentions and no conscience. Would that it were so. It would make the world a much

easier place to be in. We'd ferret out the bad guys and be on our merry way. The reality, however, is far messier.

In his essay "Diddling," Edgar Allan Poe describes the features of the swindler: "minuteness, interest, perseverance, ingenuity, audacity, *nonchalance*, originality, impertinence, and *grin*." Modern psychology agrees with him on one particular point: the nonchalance. For the most part, humans have evolved as cooperative animals. We can trust one another, rely on one another, walk around with a wallet full of cash not worrying that every single stranger will rob us, and go to bed with the certainty that we won't be killed in our sleep. Over time, our emotions have evolved to support that status quo. We feel warm and fuzzy when we've helped someone. We feel shame and guilt when we've lied or cheated or otherwise harmed someone. Sure, all of us deviate now and then, but for the most part we've grown to be quite decent—or, the opposite of nonchalant. For the most part, we care about others and know that they care to some extent about us. Otherwise, much of society would collapse.

But there's an exception. A very small number of people may have evolved to take advantage of the general good of others, fueled by the nonchalance that makes many a con artist what he is. These people don't care; they remain perfectly indifferent to the pain they cause, as long as they end up on top. It makes perfect sense. If the vast majority of the people who surround you are basically decent, you can lie, cheat, and steal all you want and get on famously. But the approach only works if few take advantage of it—if everyone did the same, the system would self-destruct and we would all end up doing worse. Calculated nonchalance is only an adaptive strategy when it's a minority one. Or, as Adrian Raine, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania whose research centers on antisocial behavior, puts it, "Persistent immoral behavior can be thought of as an alternative evolutionary strategy that can be beneficial at low rates in society. By lacking the emotional experiences that serve to deter immoral behavior, and by using deception and manipulation, individuals may be able to successfully cheat their way through life."

There's another word for this calculated—inbred, even—nonchalance. Psychopathy, or the basic absence of empathetic feelings for your fellow human beings. It's nonchalance brought to a biological extreme. But do con artists actually fit that bill? Is it fair to say that the Demara-like grifters of the world are more likely than not clinical psychopaths—or are they just slightly more devious versions of our more conniving selves? Is it a qualitative difference between our small daily deceptions and the wiles of the confidence man, or is it just a simple matter of degree?

Robert Hare's Psychopathy Checklist-Revised, the most common assessment tool for antisocial, psychopathic behavior, looks for things like responsibility, remorse, pathological lying, manipulateness, cunning, promiscuity and general impulsiveness, superficial charm, grandiosity, and the like. Score high enough, and you are labeled psychopathic, or "suffering soul," for the many such you leave in your wake. One of the defining marks of the psychopath is the inability to process emotion like other people. To a true psychopath, your suffering means nothing. There's no empathy. There's no remorse. There's no guilt. When psychopaths experience something that would shock most people—disturbing images, for instance—their pulse stays steady, their sweat glands normal, their heart rates low. In one study of clinical psychopathy, psychopaths failed to engage the same emotional areas as non-psychopaths when making difficult moral decisions—for instance, whether or not to smother a crying baby if doing so would save the entire village while a failure to do so would condemn everyone, baby included. For the overwhelming majority of people, it's a draining choice. The emotional areas of the brain fight it out with the more utilitarian ones for an answer. In psychopaths, the battle is absent: they exhibit nonchalance in its most extreme form.

Psychopaths, according to Hare, make up an estimated 1 percent of the male population; among women, they are almost nonexistent (though still present). That means that out of every hundred men you

meet, one will be clinically diagnosable as a psychopath. But will he also be a born con man?

On one level, the data seem to suggest a direct affinity between the two, grifter and psychopath developing hand in hand. One tantalizing piece of evidence: when people acquire the neural deficits associated with psychopathy later in life, they start behaving remarkably, well, psychopathically—and remarkably like a con artist. In lesion studies, people who experienced early life lesions in the polar and ventromedial cortex—areas implicated in psychopathy—begin to show behaviors and personality changes that very closely mimic both psychopathy and the grift. Two such patients, for instance, showed a newfound tendency to lie, manipulate, and break the rules. Others described them as “lacking empathy, guilt, remorse, and fear, and . . . unconcerned with their behavioral transgressions.” Psychopathy, then, is a sort of biological predisposition that leads to many of the behaviors we expect from the confidence artist.

But that’s not exactly the whole story. Psychopathy is part of the so-called dark triad of traits. And as it turns out, the other two, narcissism and Machiavellianism, also seem to describe many of the traits we associate with the grifter.

Narcissism entails a sense of grandiosity, entitlement, self-enhancement, an overly inflated sense of worth, and manipulateness. It sounds, in short, like someone much akin to our Fred Demara, someone who can’t stand to be seen as inferior, who needs to be the center of attention, and who will do what it takes to get there. A narcissist will do everything necessary to preserve his image. It’s Fred lying to the candy store to avoid embarrassment—not the greatest of cons, but one driven by that kind of self-centric tendency.

But perhaps even more relevant is Machiavellianism—a characteristic that is almost predicated on the ability to deceive, as ruthlessly and effectively as Machiavelli’s most ideal of princes and the most famed of confidence artists, both.

In the psychology literature, “Machiavellian” has come to mean a specific set of traits that allows one to manipulate others to accomplish one’s own objectives—almost a textbook definition of the con. Writing in 1969, Richard Calhoun, a marketing professor at the University of North Carolina, described the Machiavellian as someone who “employs aggressive, manipulative, exploiting, and devious moves in order to achieve personal and organizational objectives.” And, indeed, the so-called high Machs—people high on the Machiavellianism scale, a measure first developed in 1970 by two psychologists who wanted to capture leaders’ manipulative tendencies, Richard Christie and Florence Geis—tend to be among the most successful manipulators in society. In one series of studies, when a high Mach was placed in a situation with a low Mach, he tended to emerge ahead in most any scenario. The low Mach would let emotions get in the way. The high Mach, however, wouldn’t be as easily disturbed.

In one early review, the Machiavellians among eleven distinct samples, including students, academic faculty, parents, children, athletes, the staff of a mental hospital, and business employees, were more likely to attempt to bluff, cheat, bargain, and ingratiate themselves with others. They were also more successful at doing so. In another study, the Machiavellian-minded among us made for more convincing liars than the rest: when people were taped while denying that they had stolen something (half were being honest, and half lying), those scoring higher on the Machiavellianism scale were believed significantly more than anyone else. In a third, business school students had to decide whether or not to pay someone a kickback, a behavior that is largely considered unethical (and is against the law). They were all given a rationale for why, in this case, the kickback made sense. Those who scored higher in Machiavellianism were more likely to take the bait when the rationale made it more cost-effective to do so.

Machiavellianism, it seems then, may, like psychopathy, predispose people toward con-like behaviors and make them better able to deliver on them. Delroy Paulhus, a psychologist at the University of British

Columbia who specializes in the dark triad traits, goes as far as to suggest that “Machiavellian” is a better descriptor of the con artist than “psychopath.” “It seems clear that malevolent stockbrokers such as Bernie Madoff do not qualify as psychopaths,” he writes. “They are corporate Machiavellians who use deliberate, strategic procedures for exploiting others.”

So wherein lies the truth: is the con artist psychopath, narcissist, Machiavellian? A little bit of all? Demara seems to be proof of the “all of the above” choice. Doctors are often accused of playing God. Demara took that criticism to a grotesque extreme. What ego, what blithe disregard for the lives of others and overconfidence in oneself, can lead someone to not only pose as a surgeon but perform multiple surgeries without any of the requisite qualifications to do so? To place oneself in a position where one is the only medical recourse for hundreds of men? It seems not only the height of narcissism, but, too, the most psychopathic of behaviors: the power to kill who knows how many others. And what a dose of Machiavellianism that must entail, to convince a nation’s army and manipulate other doctors, a captain, soldiers, the whole lot that you’re the real deal.

Demara wasn’t humbled by his stint in Korea. Quite the contrary. He was emboldened. When Robert Crichton set out to write his biography, the impostor spent days convincing him to let him deliver his pregnant wife’s baby. He could, he assured him, do it better than anyone else. Why rely on a hack when you could get a real medical expert? Crichton, of course, knew, rationally, that Demara had no training to speak of. But he had saved those soldiers. And he had read all those textbooks—probably more closely than your average doctor. The more Demara cajoled, the more Crichton’s resolve to tell him, once and for all, that his wife was off-limits weakened. It took Crichton’s wife, Judy, to put a lid on the plan: he had put the proposal before her in all earnestness.

Now that’s a true artist.

Actually, here’s the true artistry: even after this mishap, as we’ll call it, when Judy told Bob that Fred wasn’t to set foot in their house again,

her resolve, too, eventually melted away. It was only a few years after the Great Impostor went away—and after he'd sued Crichton and Random House for allegedly withholding funds—that that same Judy let him babysit their toddler daughter.

Now *that's* a true artist.

* * *

But the Demaras of this world are only part of the picture. It is possible, it turns out, to possess all the tenets of the dark triad, and then some, and still not turn to con artistry. Psychopaths, narcissists, and Machs may be overrepresented in the grift, but they are also overrepresented in a number of other professions that line the legitimate world. As Maurer puts it, "If confidence men operate outside the law, it must be remembered that they are not much further outside than many of our pillars of society who go under names less sinister." Leadership and high-profile roles. Wall Street. Politics. Law. Test most any of them, and you'll find a percentage of psychopaths and dark-triadists that makes Hare's 1 percent estimate look naïvely low.

When Shelby Hunt and Lawrence Chonko gave the Machiavellianism scale to one thousand professional marketers, they found that over 10 percent scored in the highest possible range—and far, far above the population average. In other words, they were among the highest possessors of traits that hinged on manipulation and deception. And yet, they engaged in a legitimate business. None of them were criminals. None of them were even aristocrats of crime.

The dark triad pushes people in the direction of manipulation—Christie and Geis found that the highest Mach scorers among doctors had consistently chosen to be psychiatrists, a field where manipulation and mental control are central, while, in a separate study, Machiavellian students were more likely to specialize in business and law than any other areas—but it does not compel them to push that manipulation beyond a point that's generally socially accepted.

And while some would doubtless argue that I've just made my own

point—what are politicians, lawyers, businessmen, admen, and marketers but thinly veiled con artists?—the truth is that real con artists aren't simply born. They are, as is usually the case, made as well. As the popular saying among scientists goes: genes load the gun; the environment pulls the trigger. The exact same traits could easily be put to use in more or less devious ways. The choice is not predetermined. And the presence of Machiavellianism or psychopathy or narcissism no more marks someone as a grifter than the presence of charisma or nonchalance.

James Fallon discovered he was a psychopath by accident. He'd been running two projects simultaneously: a large imaging study of Alzheimer's patients, where his own family served as "normal" control brains, and a small side project on the brains of psychopaths. As he was going through the Alzheimer's scans, one brain popped out. It had all the markings of the psychopath. Hmm. Clearly, someone had made a mistake and mixed one of the psychopathic scans in with the Alzheimer's data.

Normally, results in typical lab studies are anonymized so that nothing tips the experimenter off to the identity of the subject. In this case, Fallon decided to make an exception. The scan would need to be deanonymized so that they could determine where the data belonged. He asked one of his technicians to run the numbers and find the identity of the scan owner.

The end of the story is the subject of Fallon's subsequent book, *The Psychopath Inside*. There was no mistake. The scan was in fact his own.

Fallon had been a vocal proponent of the genetics of psychopathy. It, and many other conditions, he'd argued, were largely determined by the luck of the draw. If your brain was psychopathic, you'd simply drawn the short straw. Now that his own brain was at stake, however, he decided to dig deeper. Was it as predetermined as he'd always assumed?

Today, Fallon believes that the genetics are there, true, but that certain critical periods in your childhood can nudge you more or less

toward full-blown clinical psychopathy, so you exhibit some signs, for instance, but not the whole arsenal. Luck out, you become a high-functioning psychopath, like Fallon, and, perhaps, some of the con artists in this book. Get the bad draw, you become a violent psychopath, like the ones who fill up jails and sit on death row.

Apart from the period in utero, a time that we now know is crucial for the development of your genome's epigenetic markers—that is, the methylation patterns that will determine how, precisely, your genes will be expressed—Fallon believes that the first three years of life play a crucial role in determining your psychopathic future. In that period, a child naturally develops so-called complex adaptive behaviors, like the ability to deal with fear, to smile, to react to those around her. But sometimes that process is interrupted, usually by something particularly stressful. A single traumatic event or a baseline of stress at home or in school could both, in theory, interrupt normal development and make the psychopathic traits you were genetically predisposed to more likely to assert themselves—perhaps in much the same way as they surfaced in Demara after his family's sudden fall from grace and the total uprooting of his childhood home. But in its absence, a would-be cunning deceiver becomes a respected neuroscientist instead.

For most people to go from legitimacy to con artistry, three things need to align: not just the motivation—that is, your underlying predisposition, created by elements like psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism—but alongside it, opportunity and a plausible rationale. In corporate fraud, for instance, few people choose to con in a vacuum. Instead, according to one study, about a third of perpetrators aren't simply willing to go one step beyond what's technically legal (predisposition); they also perceive an aggressive sales environment (opportunity) and feel they must do something to stand out (rationale)—a question of company culture and atmosphere meeting a willingness to cut corners and the chance to rationalize away that cutting as a matter of necessity.

Grifters are made when predisposition and opportunity meet. That's one of the reasons, according to some sources, that insider trading—when businessmen turn con artist—flourished at Steven Cohen's now infamous hedge fund, SAC Capital Advisors, for as long and as widely as it did. “You self-justify that it's not so bad because everybody is trying to get an edge,” a source close to the fund explained over lunch one day. “And it's less likely that I'm going to get caught because, clearly, somebody would've been caught by now.” At SAC, he continued, “There was no evidence that people ever stood up at the top of the firm and said in words that a third grader would understand, ‘By the way, don't break the law. Don't cheat, don't steal—we don't do that here.’” Take the indictment of the hedge fund itself. “One prospective employee was rumored to have engaged in insider trading at his prior place of employment. And he was hired. Over the objection of the compliance officer. And, shockingly, he started engaging in insider trading within a couple of weeks of joining.”

The experimental literature could have predicted that outcome. One study of marketers found that the ethical structure of the organization where they worked affected whether or not those high in certain con-like skills (specifically, Machiavellianism) would act on their propensities. Those who worked in more highly ethical organizations, with greater structure and less flexibility for making decisions according to one's own whims, were significantly less likely to act in con-like ways than those who worked in more loosely structured organizations with less of a clear-cut ethical direction.

The behavioral norms of a company, culture, or setting—how it is and isn't acceptable to act—must be communicated clearly and unequivocally. When they aren't, it becomes too easy for those on the cusp of fraud to take the next step. “It's a cliché to say this,” says Preet Bharara, a U.S. attorney for the Southern District of New York, who has gained a reputation for aggressive pursuit of fraud. “But it's true. The tone at the top really does matter.” While at the extremes, people create the opportunity themselves—they will con their way through life no

matter where you place them—for a significant percentage of the conning population, the surroundings matter. The same trader who commits fraud at a fund that looks the other way might be a straight shooter elsewhere.

We care how we're perceived, and if we think that most people will frown upon our actions, we become less likely to contravene the norm. It's not so much "monkey see, monkey do" as "monkey *think* someone might see, so acts accordingly."

The pattern isn't altogether uncommon. USIS, the contractor that used to supply two thirds of the security clearances for much of the intelligence community, appears to have spiraled from a few faulty checks to thousands. At first, it seemed like one rogue employee had submitted sixteen hundred falsified credit reports; one bad apple does not a rotten tree make. But by January 2014, it had become clear that it wasn't a bad apple. According to the Department of Justice's suit, that was but the tip of a much larger scandal: the company had faked well over half a million background checks between 2008 and 2012—or 40 percent of total background checks. (The extent makes the Royal Canadian Navy's hire of Demara pale in comparison.) It wasn't one bad apple. It was a tree that allowed such apples to flourish.

The grifter's rationale for what he does, in a way, is the culmination of predisposition and opportunity: if you have the predisposing traits, and you sense a good opportunity, you will find a way to rationalize it. About half of those who commit fraud also cite intolerable competitive conditions, be they market or corporate; they want to somehow level the playing field and convince themselves that a bit of deception is one of the only avenues open to them.

Time and time again, Demara explained away his deceptions as good intentions gone astray. He wasn't a grifter; he was someone caught up in bad circumstances, but who would always try to make good. He didn't con hapless members of various religious orders by pretending to be a high-achieving academic in search of life's meaning; he wanted to spread teachings of the faith. Donning the identity of Ben W. Jones to

be a prison warden in Texas? It was because the prisoners needed someone like him. And the stint in the Canadian navy as surgeon? They needed professionals. He was only trying to save some lives. So good was he at rationalizing away his escapades that Crichton ended up depicting him as more victim than perpetrator, someone to whom the grift just happened because of a bad twist of fate.

It's not just opportunity that breeds rationalization and actions. Globally, some cultures may also be more accepting of the types of behaviors and rationales that we would consider con-like. In one study, foreign students were more likely to pay a kickback than American ones, no matter the incentives. They had simply grown up in societies with different norms and different resulting standards of behaviors. What to Americans seems ethically dubious may seem to others a fact of how the world works. In Russia, a plagiarist wouldn't get a second look—and even a data falsifier might get a free pass, as long as the data was falsified in the appropriate direction.

For some people, the rationalization might seem almost benign. Just over 20 percent of fraudsters say they simply want to hide bad news: their performance isn't what it ought to be, they feel ashamed, and they truly believe that, with just a little wiggle room, they can get back on their feet and no one ever needs to know. Of course, that doesn't usually happen.

At the beginning of his career in private practice, one local lawyer represented the CFO of a small computer start-up. It was the late nineties. The economy was seeing a bit of a downturn. And the CFO decided to "cook the books" one quarter. "He was a very decent guy, a little bit of an ingénue," he recalls. "He was the guy that went to his kids' basketball games, and when he started being investigated, he was the guy that would sit in the conference room—I felt bad for him—looking like he was going to cry. He was very upset." The CFO had reasoned that he'd only cheat that one time. And then the next quarter would be better, and he would go back and fix his misstatement. "And then it didn't get better. And then the third quarter didn't get better. And now you're in, in a

major way.” One bad statement led to the next. It wasn’t inevitable. But it happened just as inevitably.

Is he a con artist? Most people would likely say not. He is just someone who made a bad choice, whose luck ran out, who made an ethical misstep, true, but without some greater malice. Many might, like his lawyer, even sympathize. Bad break. But he’s a fundamentally decent guy. He just wanted to make it work.

And yet, the exact same case shows the opposite side of the story: that no con is ever as innocent as it might appear. The company had gone over everything in minute detail to try to determine the extent of the CFO’s malfeasance. “It showed that he had used the company credit card for his own personal use to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars starting some point after he first started cooking the books,” the CFO’s lawyer says. “My opinion of him changed a little bit. Here’s a guy that’s trying to do a better job, and doesn’t want to lose his job, and then, well, once he made that first mistake, then it was just easier to make the next mistakes.”

Thus is a grifter born. There’s no such thing as an innocent cutting of the ethical corner. Once you’ve decided to get on the sled, and have eased yourself over the edge of the hill, it’s too late to break. It starts with a small thing. A credit in a candy store. A fudged line in a financial statement. A rogue quote massaged ever so slightly to make your case more compelling. And lo and behold, nobody notices. And even though you thought it was just the once, because the circumstances were so extreme and you were in such a tight corner, those circumstances somehow never get any better. You’re always pressed for time, for money, for energy, for mental space. Always needing to do just a bit too much with a bit too little. And once you do it once, and successfully at that, the temptation to do it again, do it more, do it differently, grows. Rather than a cut corner, it becomes another tool in your arsenal. It’s like in the Mafia movies: the only one that matters is the first one you kill. After that, piece of cake.

Who, then, is the con artist? He displays a dark triad-influenced bent, and he acts when the opportunity arises, for unlike other, less sinister-minded counterparts, he can rationalize away just about any behavior as necessary. And yet, despite this seeming underlying commonality, con artists can still surprise us and resist easy classification. Some conform to expectations, others do not, and there may be significant divergence from the profile that emerges from one study to the next. One review of just under six hundred cases of company fraud in seventy-eight countries between 2011 and 2013 managed to capture some of the personality characteristics of the perpetrators—and not all of them, it turns out, fit the dark triad mold. Some did, it's true—one fifth admitted to having committed fraud, they said, “Just because I can,” a pure dark triad response if ever there were one. Over 40 percent were motivated by greed—but even more, just under half, by a sense of superiority, the hallmark of narcissism. They were simply better, they felt, and so they deserved more. Many reported being motivated by a sense of anger, of being underpaid and undervalued. Who are you not to appreciate me? I'll show you.

But others seemed both less sinister and less cold-mindedly rational in pursuit of profit. A third were seen as extroverted, and 35 percent as quite friendly. About 40 percent were also highly respected by their colleagues—though only one in five had impressed anyone as a great intellectual or substantive businessman.

And then there are those who are downright compassionate. In March 2015, Sarah Carr received a phone call from the IRS informing her she was liable for payments on one of her businesses. She broke down crying. She was nine months' pregnant, she explained, and didn't know how she could get the money. “Calm down,” the voice said, now seeming agitated himself. It was all a scam, he bluntly explained. In fact, as we know, this is one of the most common scams come springtime: the fake IRS agent. People are scared, they panic, and they hand over the cash. This time, however, the mark's sob story was enough to make the

grifter veer from the script. Since she was pregnant, she was off the hook. She'd chanced upon a con artist with a conscience.

* * *

The truth is, the grifter may be more difficult to capture accurately because, to some extent, we all have the capacity for deception: if you're a sentient being, you've almost certainly deceived at some point in your life. From reptiles to humans, the animal kingdom is full of liars. Some snakes can even fake their own death for their own sinister purposes. Or take the cuckoo finch—a venerable brood parasite that tries to pawn off its own eggs on hapless mothers about to do the heavy labor of incubating. One egg would be a simple swindle, someone trying to pull one over on you. But the cuckoo finch is a true con artist, leaving multiple eggs in a nest. That way, the mother can't tell the parasites from her own.

In 2009, a group of scientists at the University of Turin, led by Francesca Barbero, found that a certain interloper caterpillar reliably received more food, better care, and more thorough protection than the ants whose home it invaded. The caterpillars simply pretended to be queen ants: they had learned the distinction between worker and queen sounds, and now their pupae and larvae had evolved to make queen-like noises. Even when the ant colonies were low on food, the impostors would receive preferential treatment. After all, they were potential queens. Since then, the researchers have learned that at least twelve other species of butterfly employ the same technique. Mimic a queen, and let yourself be carried into the ants' nest without raising so much as a foot or a wing in labor.

Impostors permeate the animal kingdom. The stick insects that look like twigs you wouldn't think twice about; the leaf insects that take on the contours of a flowering plant: phasmids, or what the Greeks called "apparitions." Now you see them, now you don't. Disappearing acts are as old as nature.

And in the human world, deception is no less common. According to psychologist Robert Feldman, who has spent more than four decades

studying the phenomenon, we lie, on average, three times during a routine ten-minute conversation with a stranger or casual acquaintance. Hardly anyone refrains from lying altogether, and some people report lying up to twelve times within that time span. I might open a conversation, for instance, by saying how nice it is to meet someone—when I'm really not at all happy about it. I might go on to say that I grew up in Boston—a lie, technically, since I really grew up in a small town about forty minutes outside the city. I could say that the person's work sounds fascinating, when it's no such thing, or compliment him on his (drab) tie or his (awful) shirt. And if the person mentions loving a certain downtown restaurant where I've had a terrible experience? I'm likely to just smile and nod and say, Yep, great place. Trust me: we often lie without giving it so much as a second thought. Or in the words of Paul Ekman, a psychologist who studies emotional expression broadly and lying in particular, "Lies are everywhere."

We lie in most any context—Feldman's work has turned up frequent lies in relationships ranging from the most intimate (marriage) to the completely casual. Some lies are small ("You look like you've lost a bit of weight") and some bigger ("I did not have sex with that woman"). Sometimes they are harmless, and sometimes they are not.

And we lie from a very young age. In a series of studies with three-year-olds, developmental psychologists asked each child to stay in a room with a new toy, by herself, without turning around to peek at what that toy might be. Hardly any child could resist the temptation to look (four out of thirty-three, to be precise), and over half proceeded to lie about having done so. In a follow-up with slightly older children, the five-year-olds fared even worse: all of them looked, and all of them lied.

As we reach adulthood, many of the same habits remain, and at times they take on a more pernicious guise than "You look great in that dress!" According to the Insurance Research Council, a quarter of adults feel that it's fine to increase an insurance claim when they felt they were making up for the deductible. It may seem fine, but it's actually fraud—soft fraud. And what about a slight fudge here or there on a tax return?

You might say you're sticking it to the man, and you're certain others do far worse—just look at those corporate tax loopholes!—but each time you knowingly misreport so much as a dollar, you've committed fraud.

Even some legitimate professions find it difficult to escape the image of playing a bit loose with the truth. Each November, Santon Bridge, a small rural town in Cumbria, England, holds a contest: the world's biggest liar. From all over the UK and beyond, people gather in a tavern in the center of town to try their hand at the tallest, yet still somehow believable, tall tale they can muster within a five-minute time span. The most convincing of the lot gets the crown for the year. But there's an exception to the generally democratic enterprise: lawyers, politicians, salespeople, real estate agents, and journalists are not allowed to participate. Presumably, they would be at an unfair advantage. They are simply too well versed in the art of stretching the truth to offer a level playing field to the laypeople.

Would you be a grifter—even a mild one—if given the chance? Try this short test. Take your index finger, raise it to your forehead, and draw the letter Q.

Done? Which way is your Q facing—tail to the right, or tail to the left? The test, described in detail by Richard Wiseman, a psychologist and famed skeptic, is a way to gauge your “self-monitoring” tendency. If you drew the letter with the tail to the left, so that others could read it, you are a high self-monitor. That means you are more concerned with appearance and perception—how others see you. To achieve the desired effect, you are likely more willing to manipulate reality—even just a bit—to make a better impression. Con artists, in some sense, merely take our regular white lies to the next level. Plagiarists. Fabulists. Confabulists. Impostors. They take that desire to shine, to be the best version of something, and they fly with it.

* * *

So could you spot the grifter in a sea of faces, pick him up out of your daily interactions? Are there signs that will give the confidence artist

away by virtue of who he is and what he's up to—namely, taking advantage of you? Given that we all have the capacity to deceive, and have all done so at some point in our lives, you'd think we'd be experts in spotting lies in others, at picking the grifter out from the crowd. Just as when we're little we're certain our mothers know whenever we're stretching the truth—I was sure mine could read my mind and so tried to hide behind pieces of furniture or books, so that her mentalist rays couldn't penetrate inside—so, too, do we grow up believing that we're fairly decent when it comes to spotting someone else's deceptions.

Over the years, a folklore has developed around the facial and physical cues that can give someone away—a folklore that has, in recent years, been put to the empirical test. In 2006, Charles Bond, a psychologist at Texas Christian University who has studied lying since the 1980s, assembled a team of researchers spanning seventy-five countries and forty-three languages. His goal: to determine whether there are any universal theories of lying—signs that, to most people, signal deception no matter the culture. In one study, conducted in fifty-eight countries, over twenty-three hundred people were asked to respond to a single question: “How can you tell when people are lying?” One sign stood out: in two thirds of responses, people listed gaze aversion. A liar doesn't look you in the eye. Twenty-eight percent reported that liars seemed nervous, a quarter reported incoherency, and another quarter that liars exhibited certain telltale motions. Just over a fifth thought facial expressions and narrative inconsistencies betrayed lying. And just under a fifth thought that liars used filler words like “uh” and made frequent pauses, and that their skin would flush to signal their betrayal.

A second study flipped the process around. This time, people saw a list of possible behaviors. Which of these, they were asked, did they associate with lying? Now nearly three quarters of the responses signaled gaze aversion, two thirds noted a shift in posture, another two thirds that liars scratch and touch themselves more, and 62 percent said that they tell longer stories. The answers spanned sixty-three countries.

There are universal folk beliefs, true. The only problem is, they are

just as universally wrong. “The empirical literature just doesn’t bear it out,” says Leanne ten Brinke, a psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley whose work focuses on detecting deception. They persist because they fit our image of how a liar *should* behave. We *want* liars to exhibit signs of discomfort, like fidgeting, hemming and hawing, being inconsistent, flushing. We *want* liars to avert their gaze. They should feel shame and want to hide. Children as young as five already think that shifting your eyes away is a sign of deceit. In fact, if we are told beforehand that someone is lying, we are more likely to see them turning their eyes away from us. But that desire is not grounded in what liars actually do. Just because we want someone to feel ashamed, it doesn’t mean they do—or that they aren’t perfectly capable of hiding it in any event.

The mismatch between our conception of a liar and the reality—that there’s no “Pinocchio’s nose,” as ten Brinke put it—is surely one reason that, despite our confidence, our ability to tell a lie from the truth is hardly different from chance.

Paul Ekman doesn’t just study the prevalence of lying. His more central work focuses on our ability to discern deception. Over more than half a century of research, he has had over fifteen thousand subjects watch video clips of people either lying or telling the truth about topics ranging from emotional reactions to witnessing amputations to theft, from political opinions to future plans. Their success rate at identifying honesty has been approximately 55 percent. The nature of the lie—or truth—doesn’t even matter.

Over time, Ekman did find that one particular characteristic could prove useful: microexpressions, or incredibly fast facial movements that last, on average, between one fifteenth and one twentieth of a second and are exceedingly difficult to control consciously. The theory behind microexpressions is relatively straightforward: lying is more difficult, theoretically, than telling the truth. And so, with the added strain on our mind, we might show “leakage,” or these instantaneous behavioral tells that seep out despite our attempts to control them.

Microexpressions, though, are too fleeting and complex for any

kind of untrained expert to spot: out of Ekman's fifteen thousand subjects, only fifty people could consistently point them out. About 95 percent of us miss them—and if we're in the world of virtual con artists, or ones that strike over the phone, no amount of microexpression reading will do us any good. And as it turns out, even if we could read every minute sign, we would not necessarily be any better equipped to spot the liars among us—especially if they are as masterful at their craft as that prince of deception, the grifter.

Last summer, I had the chance to talk to one of Ekman's original fifty human lie detectors, so to speak. She goes by Renée; her work, she explains, is too sensitive for any further identification. These days, she consults for law enforcement and trains others to spot lies. But, she admits, she is not infallible when it comes to the practiced deceivers she now deals with—not the liars of the videotapes in a psych study, but the people who lie as part of who they are, the real masters of the game. “Those people aren't always an open book,” she told me. They don't lie like the amateurs. They are craftsmen. For them, lying isn't uncomfortable, or cognitively draining, or in any way an anomaly from their daily routine. It is what they do and has, over time, become who they are. Take psychopaths, she says. “The smart, intelligent psychopath is a super liar.” Someone like Ted Bundy, say. “He scares me and makes me uncomfortable,” she says with a shudder. “People like him seem to have the ability of the truth wizard, but they have no conscience. A superintelligent psychopath is my match.” She names a few more, among them serial killer Richard Kuklinski, better known as Iceman. “If you watch him in his interviews, he is cold to the core.” Normally, Renée says, she trusts herself. But the best liars are a difficult match for even the best truth-seers.

Even then, it's not a skill that can be easily learned. “I don't think my ability is trainable,” Renée admits. “If we could, we'd be doing it already. I can give others tools, but they won't be at the same level.”

What's more, Ekman says, cognitive load may come from many areas, not just deception. Even with microexpressions, there is no surefire

way of knowing whether someone is actually being untruthful. We can read signs of extreme pressure, but we don't know where that pressure necessarily comes from. We might be worried, nervous, or anxious about something else. It's one of the reasons lie detectors are also notoriously unreliable. Our physiology is just as subject to minute pressures as our physiognomy, not necessarily from the strain of deceiving. Sometimes this signals lying. Sometimes it signals other types of cognitive load, like stress, fatigue, or emotional distress. And in all cases it is impossible to be absolutely certain.

With con artists, lie detection becomes even trickier. "A lie," Ekman says, "is a deliberate choice to mislead a target without any notification." Plus, the more you lie, the fewer identifying signs, even tiny ones, you display.

Even professionals whose careers are based on detecting falsehood are not always great at what they do. In 2006, Stefano Grazioli, Karim Jamal, and Paul Johnson constructed a computer model to detect fraudulent financial statements—usually, the purview of an auditor. Their software correctly picked out the frauds 85 percent of the time. The auditors, by contrast, despite their professional confidence and solid knowledge of the typical red flags, picked out fewer than half—45 percent—of the fraudulent statements. Their emotions, it turns out, often got in the way of their accuracy. When they found a potential discrepancy, they would often recall a case where there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for it, and would then apply it there as well. Their assumptions probably gave people the benefit of the doubt more generously than they should have. Most people don't commit fraud, so chances are, this one isn't, either.

In fact, even when you know exactly what you're looking for, you may find yourself further from accuracy than you would like. In August 2014, Cornell University researchers David Markowitz and Jeffrey Hancock analyzed the papers of social psychologist Diederik Stapel. They had chosen Stapel for a very specific reason. Three years earlier, in September 2011, it was revealed that he had perpetrated academic

fraud on a massive level. By the time the investigation concluded, in November 2012, it was evident that data for fifty-five papers had clear evidence of fraud; they either had been massaged or, in the egregious cases, were completely fabricated. Stapel had never even run many of the studies in question; he'd merely created the results that would support the theory that, he was sure, was accurate.

When Markowitz and Hancock tested whether the false publications differed linguistically from the genuine ones, they found one consistent tell: the deceitful papers used far more words related to the nature of the work itself—how and what you measure—and to the accuracy of the results. If there's not much substance, you “paper” more: you elaborate, you paint beautiful prose poems, and you distract from lack of substance. (Who doesn't remember doing a bit of the same on a college essay, to hide evidence of less than careful reading?) But however useful these tools of linguistic analysis may have been, they are far from perfect. Close to a third of Stapel's work eluded proper classification based on the traits Markowitz and Hancock had identified: 28 percent of papers were incorrectly flagged as falsified while 29 percent of the false papers escaped detection. A real grifter, even on paper, covers his tracks remarkably well, and as much as we may learn about his methods, when it comes to using them to ferret out his wiles, we will often-times find ourselves falling short.

But why would this be the case? Surely it would be phenomenally useful to have evolved to be better at spotting liars, at protecting ourselves from those who'd want to intrude on our confidence for malicious ends?

* * *

The simple truth is that most people aren't out to get you. We are so bad at spotting deception because it's better for us to be more trusting. Trust, and not adeptness at spotting deception, is the more evolutionarily beneficial path. People are trusting by nature. We have to be. As infants, we need to trust that the big person holding us will take care of