Talking to Strangers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MALCOLM GLADWELL

Malcolm Gladwell is a Canadian journalist, author, and public speaker. He was born in England to Joyce Gladwell, a Jamaican psychotherapist, and Graham Gladwell, an English mathematics professor. Gladwell's family relocated to Ontario, Canada, when he was six. He studied at the University of Toronto and graduated in 1984, after which he took a job writing for conservative magazine *The American Spectator*. Gladwell moved to the *Washington Post* in 1987, where he covered business and science. In 1996, he took a job at the *New Yorker* and has worked there ever since. At the *New Yorker*, Gladwell honed his quintessential writing style of adapting complex research to be easily digestible and entertaining for the average reader. Two of Gladwell's early *New Yorker* articles, "The Tipping Point" and "The Coolhunt," both written in 1996, would become the basis for his first book, *The Tipping Point*. Published in 2000, *The Tipping Point* saw enormous success and secured Gladwell's status as an in-demand public speaker. Gladwell's other successful books include *Blink* (2005) and *Outliers* (2008). In addition to his continued work at the *New Yorker*, Gladwell is the host of the podcast *Revisionist History*, which began in 2016 and has published six seasons to date.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Talking to Strangers draws from research and case studies from different points in history. The case that begins and ends the book, however, and to which Gladwell allots significant attention, is the 2015 altercation between Officer Brian Encinia and Sandra Bland, a young Black woman. Three days after Bland's arrest following what should have been a routine traffic stop, she died by suicide in her jail cell. While Gladwell takes a broader approach in his investigation of the tragedy, viewing Bland's death as the consequence of society's diminished ability to make sense of people whose perspectives, beliefs, and backgrounds differ from our own, it is difficult not to consider Bland's death within the context of systemic racism, police brutality against Black people, and the history of the Black Lives Matter movement. For many, Bland was simply the latest casualty of a corrupt policing system that disproportionately targets Black people. Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a civil rights movement formed to draw awareness to the racism, discrimination, and violence Black people face. The movement began in July 2013 as a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) posted to social media in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a Florida man who shot and killed Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager, in 2012. Black Lives Matter gained national recognition after followers participated in demonstrations in response to the 2014 deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. Both men were killed by police officers. Black Lives Matter continues to protest police brutality against Black people, with recent notable events including the 2020 George Floyd protests.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The form and argumentative style of *Talking to Strangers* resemble much of Gladwell's previous work. Gladwell's books draw on psychological and sociological research to explore and challenge widespread social phenomena. Gladwell uses various case studies to illustrate this research in action and develop his argument. *The Tipping Point* (2000), Gladwell's first book, explores how ideas, behaviors, and movements spread across populations. *Blink* (2005), Gladwell's second book, explores the psychology behind making spontaneous decisions, as well as the costs and benefits associated with making snap judgments. *Outliers* (2008), another of Gladwell's more famous works, explores the factors that influence high levels of success. Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011) explores how cognitive bias and overconfidence in intuition impact people's professional, business, and social lives. This subject matter bears similarities with *Talking to Strangers*'s exploration of how people's flawed and unexamined strategies for interacting with strangers can lead to conflict and misunderstanding. Kahneman's book also takes a similar form as Gladwell's, drawing on sociological and psychological research and presenting various case studies in an engaging, conversational style.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Talking to Strangers: What We Should Know About the People We Don't Know
- **When Written:** Late 2010s
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Nonfiction, Pop Sociology, Pop Psychology
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Talking About Talking to Strangers. The audiobook version of *Talking to Strangers* takes the form of an episode of Gladwell's podcast, *Revisionist History*. It includes the voices of people Gladwell interviews in the book, as well as re-enactments of

court case transcripts and other soundbites.

Steps Toward Change. Two years after Sandra Bland's death, in September 2017, the Sandra Bland Act (Texas Senate Bill 1849) went into effect. The act requires de-escalation training for police officers and provides special protections for defendants suffering from mental health and substance abuse issues. It also requires outside law enforcement agencies to conduct investigations into jail deaths.

PLOT SUMMARY

Gladwell begins *Talking to Strangers* with an overview of the death of Sandra Bland, which he sees as a tragic example of the misunderstanding, conflict, and tragedy that result from our inability to understand and interact with strangers. Each chapter of the book explores a different element of this "stranger problem," with the end goal of identifying ways we can adapt our behavior to engage more productively with the world's increasingly diverse population.

Chapter One opens with a story about the high-ranking Cuban spy, Florentino Aspillaga, who defected in 1987 after becoming disillusioned with Castro's Communist cause. During his confession to U.S. military forces, Aspillaga dropped a bombshell on U.S. intelligence when he revealed that many of the CIA agents stationed in Cuba were double agents who had been spying for the Cuban government for years. Gladwell uses the seeming improbability that such a massive security breach could go undetected by the CIA as the impetus for what he identifies as the first problem associated with talking to strangers: how do we know when people are lying to us?

Chapter Two explores cases involving people misreading others. Gladwell opens with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's unsuccessful negotiations with Adolf Hitler preceding World War II. He also investigates the seemingly counterintuitive phenomenon that a computer algorithm could more accurately determine which defendants are least likely to commit a crime if released on bail than a human judge, who can see the defendants in person and—one would think—discern their character on a more personal level. Gladwell also explores psychologist Emily Pronin's concept of "the illusion of asymmetrical insight," which describes the human misconception that we know other people better than they know themselves.

Chapter Three returns to the subject of espionage with the story of Ana Belen Montes, whose colleagues at the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) knew her as the "Queen of Cuba." Montes was the DIA's resident expert on Cuba who secretly worked as a Cuban spy. When Montes's treason came to light in 2001, everyone was shocked—even though Montes exhibited numerous questionable behaviors that should have raised red flags over the years. Gladwell draws on psychologist Tim Levine's work in deception detection studies, namely his Truth Default Theory (TDT), to explain how Montes's spy activities could go undetected for so many years. According to TDT, humans have a "default to truth," a bias toward believing that the person they're talking to is behaving honestly. Gladwell identifies this bias toward truth as the first problem that complicates our ability to make sense of strangers.

Chapter Four explores what happens when we try to combat our bias toward truth with extreme suspicion. Gladwell introduces the idea of the **Holy Fool**, an archetype whose position as a social outcast allows the "Fool" to observe the world from a more suspicious vantage point and question the things the rest of society accepts without question. As an example, Gladwell presents Harry Markopolos, the independent fraud investigator who saw through Bernie Madoff's lies and suspected his massive Ponzi scheme years before anyone else caught wind of the securities fraud.

Chapter Five explores how our bias toward truth can create negative consequences. Gladwell unpacks two sex abuse scandals of the 21st century: the Penn State child sex abuse scandal and the USA Gymnastics sex abuse scandal. Both cases center around men (Jerry Sandusky and Larry Nassar, respectively) who used their positions of power to sexually abuse children for years. Additionally, both men initially received the support and protection of powerful institutions that seemed unwilling to believe the allegations numerous victims and witnesses made against the men. The support of these institutions allowed Nassar and Sandusky to continue their abuse for years. It also delayed justice for victims. Gladwell expresses sympathy for the people who failed to stop the abuse, suggesting that their human instinct to dismiss doubt prevented them from believing the worst about the abusers.

Chapter Six focuses on what Gladwell identifies as the second major problem that negatively affects our interactions with strangers: the assumption of transparency. Gladwell focuses on the human instinct to believe that strangers are transparent: that their external behavior or demeanor can reliably reflect their inner thoughts or character. He argues that transparency is a myth created by the media we consume, using an episode of the TV show *Friends* as an example. Gladwell cites numerous psychological and sociological experiments to show how external behavior is often not the best gauge of internal feelings. Furthermore, our belief in transparency leads us to overestimate our ability to make sense of others.

Chapter Seven explores the case of Amanda Knox, an American college student whose outwardly suspicious behavior led to her wrongful conviction for her roommate's murder while studying abroad in Italy. Gladwell views the Knox case as an example of the negative consequences of believing that people are transparent. He establishes Knox as an "unmatched" person:

someone whose external behavior does not align with her inner feelings and fails to conform to society's expectations about how they ought to act.

Chapter Eight focuses on the 2015 trial of Brock Turner, a Stanford University freshman who was convicted of sexually assaulting a woman known in court as Emily Doe at a fraternity party while both Turner and Doe were allegedly intoxicated. Gladwell explores the "myopic" properties of alcohol to show how acute alcohol intoxication further complicates the already complex task of understanding and responding appropriately to the body language and signals of a stranger.

Chapter Nine focuses on the CIA's interrogation of the Al Qaeda terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM). In 2007, after years of subjecting KSM to sleep deprivation and waterboarding, James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen, two psychologists the CIA recruited to undertake the interrogation, compelled KSM to confess to many terrorism-related crimes. Alongside KSM's interrogation, Gladwell also explores psychologist Charles Morgan's research on the impact of trauma on memory. Morgan's research calls into question the veracity of KSM's confessions. Ultimately, Gladwell argues that the lesson we can learn from KSM's confession is to approach strangers "with caution and humility."

Chapter Ten focuses on another element of humanity's stranger problem: our failure to understand the context of the stranger. Gladwell introduces "Coupling Theory," which describes how certain behaviors are linked with a particular set of conditions and circumstances. A grasp of Coupling Theory allows us to understand how the behavior a stranger brings to their interaction with us is linked with a personal history of which we remain ignorant. Making an effort to understand a stranger's background and beliefs can help us to engage in more successful stranger encounters. Gladwell explores these ideas through the life and death of Sylvia Plath and an analysis of statistics on suicide in the 20th century.

In Chapter Eleven, Gladwell continues to explore the importance of context in stranger interactions through an analysis of criminologists' efforts to see whether preventative patrol could reduce crime. Gladwell describes criminologist George Kelling's experiments with the Kansas City Police Department in the 1970s. Kelling's experiments suggested that preventative patrol had little power to deter crime. Years later, in the 1990s, criminologist Lawrence Sherman conducted a second set of preventative patrol experiments to reduce gun violence. Sherman's experiments proved that preventative patrol worked—but only when applied to focused areas of the city, where crime rates were highest. For Gladwell, the different outcomes of Kelling's and Sherman's experiments show that context matters.

In Chapter Twelve, Gladwell returns to the Sandra Bland case that opened the book, revisiting the tragic incident with new insight into how and why Bland and Officer Brian Encinia's stranger encounter went awry. Gladwell argues that modern policing practices teach officers like Encinia to interpret many normal behaviors as suspicious. Problematic policing practices, the assumption of transparency, and humanity's misguided overconfidence in their ability to make sense of strangers came together to prevent Encinia from making sense of Sandra Bland. As a result, Encinia misjudged Bland's understandable irritation as a threat to his safety, pointlessly escalated the situation, and ordered an arrest that ultimately led to Bland's death.

In the end, Gladwell offers no concrete solutions for dealing with humanity's fundamental inability to understand strangers. Ultimately, our strategies to make sense of others are flawed, imperfect, and unpredictable. In light of this uncertainty, the best we can do, Gladwell suggests, is to approach strangers with more empathy, "restraint[,] and humility."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Malcolm Gladwell – Malcolm Gladwell is a Canadian author, journalist, and public speaker. He writes *Talking to Strangers* from the first-person perspective, presenting simplified explanations of psychological and sociological research in a conversational tone to create a story-driven narrative that appeals to a lay audience. The central thesis Gladwell puts forth in *Talking to Strangers* is that we are inherently bad at making sense of people, cultures, and perspectives with which we are unfamiliar. Furthermore, we consistently employ inadequate social strategies to combat our inability to talk to strangers, which can lead to conflict. These poor social strategies derive from fundamental misunderstandings we have about ourselves and strangers. Some of the main problems Gladwell identifies as complicating our ability to make sense of strangers include our bias toward truth (an idea Gladwell derives from Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory), our belief that people are transparent, and our tendency to dismiss the subjective perspectives every stranger brings to our interactions with them. Gladwell bookends *Talking to Strangers* with a discussion of the 2015 death of Sandra Bland, which he views as a tragic example of how mishandling a stranger interaction can elicit devastating consequences. While Gladwell doesn't conclude his book with a definitive answer about how we can solve our "stranger problem," he suggests that we should strive to approach our engagements with unfamiliar people, perspectives, and cultures with more introspection, empathy, and humility.

Sandra Bland – Gladwell begins and ends *Talking to Strangers* with an analysis of Sandra Bland's 2015 encounter with Officer Brian Encinia. The interaction began when Encinia pulled over Bland, a young Black woman, for her failure to signal before

switching lanes. What should have been a routine traffic stop ultimately escalated into violence, leading to Bland's arrest. Three days later, on July 13, 2015, Bland died by suicide in her jail cell. Bland had recently traveled from her hometown outside Chicago, Illinois, to Prairie View, Texas, for a new job at her alma mater, Prairie View A&M University, when Encinia pulled her over. While the interaction began cordially, tensions escalated once Encinia took note of Bland's visible irritation. Their subsequent conversation hit a turning point when Bland lit a **cigarette** in her car in an attempt to relax. Encinia demanded she put out the cigarette, but Bland said she was in her car and shouldn't need to. After Encinia ordered her to exit her vehicle, the situation escalated, with Encinia later threatening and physically harming Bland. Gladwell views this incident as exemplary of how wrong things can go when two people fail to make sense of each other. Gladwell points out that Encinia's police training taught him to regard many of Bland's reasonable behaviors, such as her irritation and anxiety at being pulled over and lighting a cigarette to calm her nerves, as signs of guilt or an intent to engage in violent behavior.

Brian Encinia – Gladwell begins and ends *Talking to Strangers* with an analysis of Encinia's 2015 encounter with Sandra Bland, a young Black woman. Encinia pulled over Bland for failure to signal before changing lanes. The routine traffic stop began unremarkably, with both parties behaving cordially. However, the tone shifted when Encinia returned to Bland's car after checking her license and registration and found that she had become visibly irritated by the situation. In reality, Bland's irritation was more likely a reasonable reaction to the frustrating situation of receiving a ticket for a minor traffic violation. However, Encinia's police training would have taught him to view Bland's behavior as suspicious and threatening, so he was immediately on guard upon his return to Bland's vehicle. When Bland lit a **cigarette** in an attempt to relax, Encinia further misinterpreted Bland's behavior, perceiving the lit cigarette as an additional threat. As such, he ordered her to put it out. When she refused, Encinia escalated the situation by ordering Bland to exit her vehicle and physically grabbing at her and threatening additional physical harm if she continued to refuse. The situation continued to escalate, and Encinia ultimately ordered Bland's arrest. Three days later, Bland died by suicide in her jail cell. For Gladwell, the encounter between Encinia and Bland illustrates the devastating consequences that can occur when a society is inadequately equipped to make sense of strangers.

Ana Belen Montes – Ana Belen Montes is a former U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) agent. She began working as an informant for the Cuban government in 1985. Upon joining the DIA, Montes quickly made her way up the ranks to become an expert on Cuba, earning her the nickname "Queen of Cuba." Counterintelligence analyst Reg Brown began to suspect that there was a Cuban informant operating within the DIA in the late 1980s. Brown's focus narrowed on Montes after discovering it was she who had arranged the February 23 meeting between Admiral Eugene Carroll and Cuban officials. During the February 23 meeting, Cuban officials strongly hinted at the possibility of an attack on the Hermanos al Rescate planes. The next day, the Cuban Airforce shot down two Hermanos al Rescate planes. When the public learned that the DIA knew about the possibility of an attack but had failed to act, it painted the U.S. government as incompetent and ineffective. In 1996, DIA counterintelligence officer Scott Carmichael investigated Montes, though he initially found nothing suspicious in her files. When Montes's counterintelligence activities ultimately came to light in 2001, the revelation shocked her colleagues. However, in retrospect, Montes made many mistakes over the years that simply went unnoticed. For example, she kept the codes she used to communicate with Havana dispatches in her purse. Ultimately, Gladwell attributes Montes's ability to avoid detection for over a decade to humanity's bias toward truth—not to her adeptness as a spy.

Tim Levine – Tim Levine is a psychologist at the University of Alabama, Birmingham. His research in deception detection studies led him to create the Truth Default Theory (TDT), which explains humankind's bias toward truth—our tendency to believe that people are being honest with us. Levine discovered this bias toward truth when subjects who participated in a deception detection study were consistently more successful in identifying people who were telling the truth than discerning between truths and lies. In other words, in situations where study participants were uncertain of whether they were hearing a truth or a lie, they "defaulted to truth." Gladwell uses Levine's ideas as a lens through which to analyze many of the case studies he presents throughout *Talking to Strangers*. Another important element of Levine's research that Gladwell emphasizes is the point at which doubt compels a person to stop believing. According to Levine, engaging in the truth-default mode requires a "trigger," or an action that compels a person to stop "gathering evidence" of deceit and accept the version of reality that allows them to cast their doubts aside. Levine's philosophy on deception theorizes that people believe not because they have *no* doubts, but because they "don't have enough doubts[.]"

Harry Markopolos – Harry Markopolos is an independent fraud investigator known for his role as whistleblower in the Bernie Madoff securities fraud scandal. Markopolos began investigating Madoff's wealth management business in 1998 and found evidence that Madoff was operating a massive Ponzi scheme. Beginning in 2000, Markopolos repeatedly presented his findings to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), who either ignored Markopolos's concerns or failed to invest them thoroughly. In 2008, nearly a decade after Markopolos first brought his concerns to the SEC, Madoff's

sons turned their father in to the FBI. Markopolos testified before Congress in 2009, and Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in prison. Gladwell considers Markopolos's skepticism to be unusual—an attribute that makes him something of a contemporary **Holy Fool** whose position on the outskirts of society gives him the ability to speak aloud the inconvenient truths which nobody else is willing to admit.

Florentino Aspillaga – Florentino Aspillaga was a high-ranking officer in Cuba's General Directorate of Intelligence during the Cold War. He ran a consulting trading company called Cuba Tecnica out of Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, that functioned as a front for Cuban spy activity. Aspillaga grew disillusioned with Fidel Castro's Communist cause and defected to the U.S. in 1987. After debriefing at a U.S. Army base in Frankfurt, West Germany, Aspillaga met with a former Havana station chief named El Alpinista who now worked for the CIA and dropped the bombshell that many of the CIA agents stationed in Cuba were working as double agents for Cuban intelligence. The news shocked the CIA, who couldn't comprehend how the Cuban government had managed to trick them in such a major way. Gladwell presents Aspillaga's story in Chapter One to introduce the idea that people are bad at telling when a stranger is lying to them.

Montezuma II – Montezuma II was the Aztec ruler in power when Hernán Cortés and his army arrived in the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in 1519. Montezuma and Cortés did not speak the same language and had to rely on translators to communicate. An error in translation led Cortés to wrongfully believe that Montezuma believed Cortés to be a god and had gifted him the city. Cortés proceeded by capturing and killing Montezuma, leading to a bloody war that killed 20 million Aztecs. Gladwell presents this historical scene in the Introduction to show how misunderstanding strangers can result in deadly consequences.

Hernán Cortés – Hernán Cortés was a Spanish conquistador. When he and his people reached the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in 1519, they were the first Europeans to set foot in Mexico. Cortés ordered his army to execute Aztec leader Montezuma II after a series of poor translations between Cortés and Montezuma (who spoke only Nahuatl, an Aztec language) led Cortés to believe (incorrectly) that Montezuma deemed him a god and gifted him the city. Montezuma's execution resulted in a bloody war that took the lives of 20 million Aztecs. Gladwell presents this historical scene in the Introduction to show how misunderstanding strangers can result in deadly consequences.

Brian Latell – Brian Latell worked for the CIA for nearly 40 years. He formerly ran CIA's Latin American office. In *Talking to Strangers*, Gladwell describes a meeting Latell had with former Cuban spy Florentino Aspillaga, who has kept a low profile under an assumed name since his defection in 1987. During their meeting, Aspillaga gave Latell a manuscript of the memoir he wrote about his years as a spy. The manuscript contained shocking details about the high number of CIA agents stationed in Cuba who were working as double agents for the Cuban government. Latell thinks these agents were able to continue working undetected due to their skill, but Gladwell thinks the more accurate reason is that people—even trained CIA agents—are simply not good judges of whether someone is lying to them.

Neville Chamberlain – Neville Chamberlain was the British Prime Minister in the years leading up to World War II. In 1938, Adolph Hitler hinted at his interest in invading the Sudetenland (an ethnically German region of Czechoslovakia). Fearing that the invasion would culminate in a world war, Chamberlain traveled to Germany to negotiate with Hitler to keep the peace. Hitler ensured Chamberlain that his interest lay only with the Sudetenland, the men signed an agreement, and Chamberlain returned to the U.K. satisfied with the negotiation. However, Hitler ended up breaking the agreement and invading Poland only months later. Gladwell examines how world leaders like Chamberlain who met Hitler in person could misread him so badly while other leaders, such as Winston Churchill, who never met Hitler, saw through his deceit.

Adolph Hitler – Adolph Hitler was the dictator of Germany from 1933 to 1945. In 1938, Hitler met with British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain on three separate occasions to discuss Hitler's intentions to invade the Sudetenland, a move Chamberlain feared would lead to a world war. Hitler successfully convinced Chamberlain that he only wanted to invade the Sudetenland (an ethnically German region of Czechoslovakia) and had no interest in a world war. The men signed an agreement, and Chamberlain returned to the United Kingdom confident in the success of the negotiations. But in March 1939, Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, and in September 1939, he invaded Poland, which initiated World War II. Gladwell includes Chamberlain's failed negotiations with Hitler to explore the odd phenomenon that people can fail to recognize when someone is lying to their face.

Eugene Carroll – Eugene Carroll was a retired U.S. admiral who met with Cuban officials in Havana the day before the Cuban Air Force shot down two Hermanos al Rescate planes flying over Cuban airspace in February 1996. During the meeting, Cuban officials made comments that strongly hinted at the possibility of an attack. Carroll forwarded this information to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), but the attack proceeded the next day nonetheless. When word broke that the DIA had known about and failed to prevent the attack, the revelation portrayed the U.S. government as incompetent and ineffective. The coincidence of the timeline—Carroll receiving warning of the attack a mere day before it played out—heightened DIA analyst Reg Brown's suspicions that a DIA colleague was operating as a Cuban spy.

Reg Brown – Reg Brown was a counterintelligence analyst who worked on the Latin American desk of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) and began to suspect that his DIA

colleague, Ana Belen Montes, was working as a Cuban informant. Brown assembled a report in the late 1980s attesting to senior Cuban officials' involvement in international drug smuggling. Just days before the report was scheduled to be published, every official named in the report issued a public denial of their involvement, which proved to Brown that an informant had leaked the information. Brown began to suspect that Montes was the informant after discovering that it was Montes who had arranged the February 23 meeting between Admiral Eugene Carroll and Cuban officials the day before the Cuban Airforce shot down the Hermanos al Rescate planes.

Scott Carmichael – Scott Carmichael is the DIA counterintelligence officer who investigated and interrogated Ana Belen Montes in response to Reg Brown's suspicion that Montes was a Cuban informant. Initially, Carmichael found nothing unusual about Montes's files. In retrospect, Carmichael realizes that many of Montes's early statements and reactions should have raised his suspicions. Gladwell interprets Carmichael's initial lack of suspicion as evidence of Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory in action: Carmichael might have had minor doubts about Montes, but they weren't enough to convince him of the huge allegation that Montes was a spy.

Bernie Madoff – Bernie Madoff was an American financier who operated the largest Ponzi scheme in history. In 1960, Madoff founded the brokerage fund that would grow into Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities. He served as the company's chairman until his arrest in December 2008. Gladwell explores Madoff's Ponzi scheme in Chapter Four to illustrate Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory in action. While many investors had ample reason to suspect Madoff of fraud—and many did suspect him—they "defaulted to truth," choosing to believe that they weren't being lied to and that Madoff's fund was legitimate.

Michael McQueary – Michael McQueary is the former assistant coach for the Penn State football team. He was a key witness in the Penn State child sex abuse scandal after reportedly seeing Jerry Sandusky molesting an underaged boy in the locker room showers in February 2001. McQueary reported the incident to his immediate family, as well as his boss, head coach Joe Paterno. He was later criticized for his failure to intervene in the assault and report the incident to police.

Jerry Sandusky – Jerry Sandusky is a convicted sex offender and former assistant coach for the Penn State football team. Sandusky had just retired as defensive coordinator of the Penn State football team when Mark McQueary, who was then the assistant coach of the football team, witnessed him molest an underage boy in the locker room showers in February 2001. Sandusky founded The Second Mile, a nonprofit organization to aid Pennsylvania's underprivileged youth, in 1977, and he met his victims through their participation in the organization. Sandusky was a beloved figure in a community that took great pride in their football team, and the allegations shocked everyone when they finally came to light in 2011. Sandusky is alleged to have begun assaulting children as early as 1994. The court and the public blamed the delayed investigation and trial on Penn State's leadership, claiming they had willfully protected Sandusky, enabling him to commit further acts of abuse.

Larry Nassar – Larry Nassar is a former team physician for the USA Gymnastics national team. After years of sexually assaulting young women and girls under the guise of administering legitimate medical treatment, Nasar was convicted on federal sexual assault charges in 2017. Despite facing numerous allegations of abuse from patients over the years, USA Gymnastics' inaction allowed Nassar's abuse to continue. Nassar was a beloved doctor whose colleagues—and many parents of his victims—strongly believed in his innocence. Ultimately, it was the seizure of Nassar's personal computer, which contained tens of thousands of images depicting child pornography, that led people to believe the allegations. Gladwell argues that society should empathize with rather than condemn Nassar's enablers, citing humanity's "default to truth" to explain how well-meaning people weren't able to recognize Nassar's deceit.

Amanda Knox – Amanda Knox is an American woman who was wrongfully convicted of murdering her roommate, Meredith Kercher, while studying abroad in Perugia, Italy in 2007. Even though there was a distinct lack of evidence tying Knox to the crime, the Italian Supreme Court found Knox and her boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, guilty of the murder. Much of the prosecution's case against Knox rested on the allegedly strange, guilty behavior she exhibited after Kercher's death—behavior the public deemed not in line with typical responses to grief and trauma. Gladwell sees Knox as an example of a "mismatched" person, someone whose outer behaviors and demeanor do not align with their inner feelings or with how society expects them to behave.

Brock Turner – Brock Turner is a former Stanford University student who was convicted on three felony charges of sexual assault in 2016. Turner and the woman he assaulted, known in court documents as Emily Doe, met at a fraternity party in January 2015. Allegedly, they drank, danced, and engaged in consensual sexual activity together before exiting the party. At some point, Doe lost consciousness. Two Stanford graduate students spotted Brock on top of the unconscious Doe and confronted him. When Turner attempted to flee, the graduate students apprehended him until authorities could arrive. Gladwell sees the Turner case as an instance where alcohol's myopic characteristics make the already difficult chance of understanding strangers—and discerning their consent—more difficult.

James Mitchell – James Mitchell is a psychologist who worked for the U.S. Air Force's SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance,

Escape) program prior to being recruited by the CIA to interrogate KSM. Mitchell and Bruce Jessen's use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (EITs) to elicit responses from KSM led to KSM's first public confession to terrorism-related crimes in 2007. However, the traumatic manner in which Mitchell and Jessen compelled KSM to confess led some officials to doubt the veracity of KSM's statements.

Bruce Jessen – Bruce Jessen is a psychologist who worked for the U.S. Air Force's SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) program prior to being recruited by the CIA to interrogate KSM. Jessen and James Mitchell's use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (EITs) to elicit responses from KSM led to KSM's first public confession to terrorism-related crimes in 2007. However, the traumatic manner in which Mitchell and Jessen compelled KSM to confess led some officials to doubt the veracity of KSM's statements.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) – Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) is a senior Al Qaeda official who is currently imprisoned by the United States and held at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. In addition to other terrorism-related charges, he is considered the main organizer of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Gladwell explores James Mitchell and Bruce Jessen's use of "enhanced interrogation techniques" (EITs), which some consider to be torture, in their interrogation of KSM that began after KSM's capture in 2003. Gladwell sees KSM's interrogation as an extreme example of discerning whether strangers are being truthful with us. While KSM eventually confessed to his involvement in a long list of terrorism-related crimes in his first public confession in 2007, many officials doubt the veracity of his confessions due to the coercive techniques his interrogators used to obtain them.

Sylvia Plath – Sylvia Plath was an American poet and novelist known for her work in the genre of confessional poetry. She suffered from mental health issues for much of her life and died by suicide in 1963 at the age of 30. Gladwell uses Plath's suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning to launch into a broader investigation of suicide as a "coupled" behavior. He draws on the research of Ronald Clarke to show how suicide rates increased as "town gas," which contains high levels of toxic carbon monoxide, became more readily available in London residences. This positive correlation establishes suicide as a coupled behavior, since the behavior of suicide is coupled, or linked, with factors like motive and opportunity.

David Weisburd – David Weisburd is a criminologist who researched crime in Brooklyn's 72nd Precinct and found that crime occurs in concentrated areas. Weisburd applied these findings to his later research with fellow criminologist Larry Sherman. Weisburd and Sherman investigated crime statistics in Minneapolis years later. Weisburd and Sherman used their findings in the Minneapolis study to develop the Law of Crime Concentration, which suggests that "crime is tied to very specific places and contexts."

Larry Sherman – Larry Sherman is a criminologist who teamed up with David Weisburd to study crime in Minneapolis. Sherman and Weisburd discovered that crime was confined to roughly 3.3 percent of the city's streets. These findings led them to develop the Law of Crime Concentration, which suggests that "crime is tied to very specific places and contexts." Sherman is also responsible for his experiments with the Kansas City Police Department in the 1990s. Sherman successfully implemented preventative patrol techniques to reduce Kansas City's major gun problem in the 1990s, when Kansas City's crime rate was roughly three times the national average. The success of Lawrence's experiment rested on his emphasis on focused policing, only increasing patrolling in areas with heavy crime rates.

George Kelling – George Kelling was a criminologist whom the Kansas City Police Department hired in the 1970s to test whether O.W. Wilson's preventative patrol method of policing could effectively reduce crime. Ultimately, Kelling's experiment failed to establish preventative patrol as an effective means of reducing crime. Gladwell explains how this failure was due, in part, to Kelling's failure to account for *where* the majority of crime took place—his preventative patrol failed because he did not send additional patrol units to a focused area known for its higher rates of crime.

Charles Remsberg – Charles Remsberg is the author of *Tactics for Criminal Control* (1995), the unofficial guide to the Kansas City style of preventative patrol policing that emerged after Kansas City successfully implemented preventative control tactics to lower crime. Remsberg's book urges officers to "go beyond the ticket" and use routine traffic stops as a starting point for charging motorists with more serious offenses. He instructs officers to look for "curiosity ticklers," behaviors police officers can construe as "suspicious" to justify traffic stops. For instance, if a motorist looks down at their passenger seat while driving in a bad part of town, it could give an officer reason to suspect the motorist is looking at a firearm, which gives the officer cause for a traffic stop.

Joe Paterno – Joe Paterno was the head football coach at Penn State when Mike McQueary, his assistant coach, confided in him that he had witnessed Jerry Sandusky molest an underage boy in the locker rooms one evening in February 2001. Paterno passed along McQueary's admission to his boss, Tim Curley, Penn State's athletic director. When an investigation into Sandusky's behavior finally began in 2011, uproar over Paterno's alleged failure to take the allegations seriously forced him to resign.

Tim Curley – Tim Curley was Penn State's athletic director when Mike McQueary came forward with his report of witnessing Jerry Sandusky molesting a minor in the locker room showers. Curley and his colleague, Gary Schultz, were ultimately charged with "conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and failure to report a case of child abuse." Both men served time

for their crimes.

Allan Myers – Allan Myers is a former Second Mile participant who accused Jerry Sandusky of assault after initially defending him. Myers changed his position after speaking with a lawyer who was representing numerous alleged Sandusky victims. Myers's testimony was particularly important for the prosecution, since he claimed to be the boy McQueary reported seeing with Sandusky in the locker room showers in February 2001. Ultimately, the jury felt that Myers's account was too inconsistent for him to be a reliable witness, and he was not called to testify in court.

Jennifer Fugate – Jennifer Fugate is an American psychologist and expert in FACS (Facial Action Coding System), a system that assigns a number to each distinctive muscle movement in the face to assess and score different facial expressions. Gladwell has Fugate use FACS to analyze the facial expressions of the characters on an episode of *Friends* to test Gladwell's theory that the characters' transparent facial expressions carry the plot.

Sergio Jarillo – Sergio Jarillo is a Spanish anthropologist. Gladwell cites Jarillo and Spanish psychologist Carlos Crivelli's study on human emotions across different cultures to illustrate the limitations of transparency. The researchers tasked participants with matching photos depicting different facial expressions with corresponding emotions. While Spanish subjects excelled at the task, the Trobriand people whom the researchers tested next did not. These findings suggest that transparency is not universal.

Carlos Crivelli – Carlos Crivelli is a Spanish psychologist. Gladwell cites Crivelli and anthropologist Sergio Jarillo's study on human emotions across different cultures to illustrate the limitations of transparency. Crivelli and Jarillo tasked participants with matching photos depicting different facial expressions with corresponding emotions. While Spanish subjects excelled at the task, the Trobriand people whom the researchers tested next did not. These findings suggest that transparency is not universal.

El Alpinista – El Alpinista ("the Mountain Climber") was a former Havana station chief who defected to work with the CIA. He was a role model to Florentino Aspillaga, a Cuban intelligence officer who defected in 1987 and shared with el Alpinista the shocking revelation that many of the CIA spies operating within Cuba were really working as double agents for the Cuban government.

Winston Churchill – Winston Churchill succeeded Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, taking office in 1940. Churchill denounced Chamberlain's failed negotiations with Hitler as "the stupidest thing that has ever been done." Yet, Gladwell contends, Churchill never met with Hitler face-to-face and would have no idea how he would have responded to Hitler's lies in person, since humans are fundamentally bad at detecting when a person is lying to their face.

Nat Simons – In 2003, Nat Simons was a portfolio manager at the Long Island-based hedge fund Renaissance Technologies. At the time, Renaissance Technologies had stakes in a fund run by Bernie Madoff, and in 2003, Simons emailed colleagues expressing concerns over the possibility that Madoff's fund was engaged in fraudulent activity. Simons and some colleagues conducted an investigation that seemed to confirm Simons's suspicions. Despite their findings, Renaissance failed to cut ties with Madoff entirely, opting instead to decrease their stake in the fund by half. Gladwell views this decision as evidence of our bias toward truth and willingness to dismiss doubt.

Solomon – Solomon is the name Gladwell uses to refer to a New York State judge he interviews about the process of deciding which defendants should be released on bail and which should remain in prison. Solomon believes looking a defendant in the eyes is essential to determining their character, but much of the research Gladwell presents throughout the book, such as Sendhil Mullainathan's study, suggests otherwise.

Sendhil Mullainathan – Sendhil Mullainathan is an economist who led a study between 20082013 in which a computer program was created to assess the records of 500,000 defendants tried in New York State. The program then determined which 400,000 of the defendants were least likely to commit a crime if released on bail. The results of the study determined that the computer program was better at assessing which defendants were less likely to commit a crime than a human judge. Gladwell presents Mullainathan's study as evidence that humans are fundamentally bad at reading strangers.

Emily Doe – Emily Doe is the name by which the court referred to Brock Turner's victim during Turner's 2016 sexual assault trial. Doe and Turner met at a Stanford University fraternity party in 2015. Both were allegedly intoxicated when two graduate students intervened after noticing Turner on top of Doe, who appeared to be unconscious. Gladwell sees Doe's assault and Turner's trial as a case where alcohol's "myopic" qualities make the already difficult chance of understanding strangers—and discerning their consent—more difficult.

Brian Bree – Brian Bree is a software designer who was tried on sexual assault charges after a woman named "M" alleged Bree assaulted her after a night of heavy drinking, though Bree maintains that he had no idea that M hadn't want to engage in sex. Bree was originally convicted of rape and sentenced to five years in prison, though his case was later dismissed on appeal.

Dwight Heath – In the 1950s, Yale University graduate anthropology student Dwight Heath traveled to Bolivia with his wife, Anna, to conduct field work for Dwight's dissertation on the Camba people. Immersing themselves in Camba culture

alerted the Heaths to the fact that the Camba regularly drank 180 proof laboratory alcohol at weekly drinking parties. Heath published his findings in the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. Despite suffering acute intoxication, the Camba people didn't exhibit increased violence.

Rudy Guede – Rudy Guede is the man convicted of murdering British exchange student Meredith Kercher on November 1, 2007. Despite the wealth of evidence that suggested that Guede was the sole perpetrator of the crime, Kercher's roommate, Amanda Knox, and Knox's boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, were also charged and convicted of Kercher's murder, though Knox and Sollecito were later acquitted.

Gary Schultz – Gary Schultz was a high-ranking administrator at Penn State. He and colleague Tim Curley were charged with "conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and failure to report a case of child abuse" for their failure to properly investigate the claims brought against Jerry Sandusky. Schultz and Curley served time for their crimes.

Jonathan Dranov – Jonathan Dranov is the doctor to whom Michael McQueary confessed to seeing Jerry Sandusky molest a minor in the locker room in February 2001. In Sandusky's trial, Dranov claimed he hadn't reported McQueary's claims to authorities because, at the time, he didn't think Sandusky had done anything "inappropriate enough" to warrant reporting the allegations to Children and Youth Services.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Brett Swisher Houtz – Brett Swisher Houtz was molested by Jerry Sandusky when he was enrolled in Sandusky's Second Mile program. In trial, Houtz testified to having dozens of sexual encounters with Sandusky as a minor. Despite the allegations, Houtz remained friendly with Sandusky into adulthood—a detail that complicated his allegations.

"M" – M is a woman who pressed charges against Brian Bree alleging that he sexually assaulted her after a night of heavy drinking.

Emily Pronin – Emily Pronin is a psychologist whose word completion study Gladwell describes in Chapter Two. The study illustrates what Pronin calls the "illusion of asymmetrical insight," an idea that describes the fallacy wherein we think we know other people better than they know themselves.

Charles Morgan – Charles Morgan is a psychologist whose research on PTSD at a SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) school at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, established a link between exposure to traumatic experience and impaired memory.

Henry Laufer – Henry Laufer is a senior executive at Renaissance Technologies. He was involved in Renaissance's investigation into Bernie Madoff's fund.

Fidel Castro – Fidel Castro was a Cuban revolutionary and politician. He was the leader of Cuba from 1959 to 2008, serving as president from 1976 to 2008. Under Castro's leadership, Cuba became a communist state.

Renfro – Clive Renfro is the state investigator who interrogates Officer Brian Encinia in the investigation that followed Sandra Bland's suicide. Gladwell includes excerpts from the transcript of the interrogation in Chapter Twelve.

Anna Heath – Anna Heath is the wife of Dwight Heath. While in Bolivia conducting fieldwork for Dwight's anthropology dissertation, the Heaths immersed themselves in the culture of the Camba people, attending their weekend parties, which often involved drinking 180 proof laboratory alcohol.

Claude Steele –Claude Steele is a social psychologist. He and colleague Robert Josephs were the first scientists to propose the "myopia theory" of alcohol.

Robert Josephs – Psychologist Robert Josephs is a psychologist who conducts research on effects of acute alcohol intoxication. He and his colleague Claude Steele were the first scientists to propose the "myopia theory" of alcohol.

Peter Jonsson – Peter Jonsson is one of the two Stanford University graduate students who witnessed Brock Turner on top of an unconscious Emily Doe on January 18, 2015.

Carl-Fredrik Arndt – Carl-Fredrik Arndt is one of two Stanford University graduate students who witnessed Brock Turner on top of an unconscious Emily Doe on January 18, 2015.

Raffaele Sollecito – Raffaele Sollecito is Amanda Knox's former boyfriend. Sollecito and Knox were wrongfully convicted of the 2007 murder of Knox's roommate, Meredith Kercher, though the Italian Supreme Court later acquitted them.

Achim Schützwohl – Achim Schützwohl is a German psychologist. Gladwell cites Schützwohl and psychologist Rainer Reisenzein's study on the emotions of surprise to illustrate the limitations of transparency.

Rainer Reisenzein – Rainer Reisenzein is a German psychologist. Gladwell cites Reisenzein and psychologist Achim Schützwohl's study on the emotions of surprise to illustrate the limitations of transparency.

Meredith Kercher – Meredith Kercher was a British exchange student who was murdered in 2007 by Rudy Guede while studying abroad in Perugia, Italy. Kercher's roommate, Amanda Knox, and Knox's boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito, were wrongfully accused and convicted of the murder in a highly publicized, controversial trial.

Michael Ocrant – Michael Ocrant is a financial journalist who interviewed Bernie Madoff for an article after whistleblower Harry Markopolos tipped off Ocrant to Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme. Despite his knowledge that Madoff was likely guilty, Ocrant was so taken aback by Madoff's non-guilty demeanor that he dropped the story.

Anne Sexton – Anne Sexton was an American poet who was friends with Sylvia Plath and is famous for her confessional verse. Sexton died by suicide in 1974 at the age of 45.

O.W. Wilson – O.W. Wilson was a law enforcement officer who invented the policing technique of "preventative patrol" during his years as police chief of the Wichita Police Department between 19291939.

Ronald Clarke – Ronald Clarke is a criminologist whose pioneering research on suicide established a link between the availability of town gas in residences and increased suicide rates. Clarke used this link to argue that suicide is a coupled behavior.

Amadou Diallo – Amadou Diallo was a young African immigrant whom New York police shot after mistaking him for a rape subject. Gladwell covered Diallo's case in his second book, *Blink*, and briefly revisits it in the Afterword of *Talking to Strangers*.

Aldrich Ames – Aldrich Ames was a senior officer assigned to Soviet counterintelligence who was secretly operating as a spy for the Soviet Union.

Wendell Courtney – Wendell Courtney is a Penn State lawyer who testified at Jerry Sandusky's trial.

Rachael Denhollander – Rachael Denhollander is a former gymnast and survivor of Larry Nassar's sexual abuse. She came forward to press charges in 2016, which ultimately led to Nassar's 2017 conviction.

Kathie Klages – Kathie Klages is a former Michigan State gymnastics coach who defended Larry Nassar after a young athlete came to her with allegations against Nassar in 1997.

Graham Spanier – Graham Spanier was the president of Penn State when Jerry Sandusky was brought to trial for child molestation. Once a beloved figure at the university, Spanier was ultimately convicted of child endangerment in 2011 for failing to properly report the claims made against Sandusky.

Jonelle Eshbach – Jonelle Eshbach acted as lead prosecutor in the Jerry Sandusky trial.

Laura Ditka – Laura Ditka was the Deputy Attorney General for Pennsylvania. She was lead prosecutor in the Penn State child sex abuse scandal.

TERMS

Coupling Theory – Coupling Theory is the idea that certain behaviors are "coupled," or linked, with a particular set of circumstances. **Gladwell** introduces Coupling Theory in Chapter Ten in his analysis of **Sylvia Plath**'s suicide and suicide trends in the United States, England, and Wales across the 20th century. Drawing on research conducted by criminologist **Ronald Clarke**, Gladwell shows that suicide rates between World War I and the late 1970s correspond with the use of "town gas" (gas that contains high levels of deadly carbon monoxide) in household appliances. Suicide rates increased after town gas was introduced after World War II and decreased as London phased out town gas in favor of natural gas, which contains considerably less carbon monoxide. This suggests that suicide is linked with access to poisonous carbon monoxide gas. Gladwell later applies coupling theory to his analysis of the Kansas City experiments in preventative patrolling.

Displacement Theory – Displacement Theory is the idea that removing the opportunity for a behavior to occur will not prevent the behavior entirely; instead, it simply changes the conditions under which the behavior occurs. Displacement Theory differs from Coupling Theory because it assumes that a behavior will inevitably occur, regardless of circumstance. In contrast, Coupling Theory suggests that behaviors are linked with a particular set of circumstances and will not occur if those circumstances are removed. **Gladwell** primarily discusses Displacement Theory in relation to crime prevention, notably **Larry Sherman**'s Kansas City experiments in crime prevention in the 1990s.

Hermanos al Rescate – Hermanos al Rescate ("Brothers to the Rescue") was a nonprofit air force founded by Cuban emigres who settled in Miami after fleeing **Fidel Castro**'s regime. The organization patrolled the Florida Straits in search of Cuban refugees attempting to travel to Florida aboard crudely fashioned boats. They would then forward the refugees' coordinates to the Coast Guard to ensure that they reached land safely. In 1996, the Cuban Air Force shot down two Hermanos al Rescate planes, resulting in the deaths of all onboard. The event was a major scandal, and the public eventually learned that Cuban counterintelligence agents positioned within U.S. security were involved in the mission.

Mismatched – "Mismatched" is the term **Gladwell** assigns to people whose external behaviors and demeanor do not align with their inner character or state of mind, or who do not behave the way society expects them to behave. His primary example of a mismatched person is **Amanda Knox**, whose bizarre behavior in the aftermath of her roommate's 2007 murder made her appear outwardly guilty when she was in fact innocent.

Myopia Theory – Myopia Theory was first suggested by psychologists **Claude Steele** and **Robert Josephs**. "Myopia" is the official term for nearsightedness. Correspondingly, Myopia Theory proposes that alcohol "narrow[s] our emotional and mental fields of vision." People under the influence of alcohol, therefore, are more likely to engage in risky behaviors because they have a diminished sense of long-term consequences. **Gladwell** draws on Myopia Theory to argue that acute alcohol intoxication makes the already complex task of making sense of strangers even more difficult.

Preventative Patrol – Preventative Patrol is a theory of policing developed by **O.W. Wilson** that proposes that having police cars patrol an area in a "constant, unpredictable motion" can reduce and prevent crime. **Larry Sherman**'s experiments with the Kansas City Police Department in the 1990s proved that preventative policing can effectively reduce crime—but only if it is applied aggressively to a focused area where crime is known to occur at higher rates. In contrast, preventative patrolling is ineffective when practiced indiscriminately across unconcentrated areas.

Reid Technique – The Reid Technique, developed by psychologist and former police officer John E. Reid in the 1950s, is a method of interrogation that teaches law enforcement "to use demeanor as a guide to judge innocence and guilt." Around two-thirds of U.S. state police departments employ the technique. **Gladwell** criticizes the system for its reliance on the myth of transparency—the notion that one can judge another person's character or motivations by observing their external behavior and demeanor.

The Second Mile – The Second Mile was a nonprofit organization that provided help for underprivileged and at-risk youth in Pennsylvania. **Jerry Sandusky** founded The Second Mile in 1977 and met many of his underage victims through their participation in the program. The Second Mile disbanded after Sandusky was found guilty of child sexual abuse.

Transparency – Transparency is the idea that the way people behave or appear on the outside provides reliable, accurate insight into how they feel on the inside. While much of the media we consume might suggest that people are transparent—that surprised people look surprised, happy people look happy, and guilty people act guilty—**Gladwell** argues that transparency is a myth. In reality, facial expressions are not universal. Additionally, we have less control over how we react to stimuli than we'd like to think we do. Gladwell believes that the transparency myth creates problems in our interactions with strangers, causing us to believe that we know more about strangers' thoughts and motivations than we actually do.

Truth-Default Theory – Truth-Default Theory (TDT) is a theory developed by psychologist **Tim Levine** to explain how humans have a bias toward truth. Levine believes that we are better at detecting truth-telling than deception because we instinctually believe that people are being honest with us. To stop believing in something or someone, a person must receive a "trigger," or something that provides definitive, unquestionable proof of deception. People don't stop believing in something because they have doubts—they stop believing if and only if they have amassed *enough* doubts. **Gladwell** sees our bias toward truth as another factor that contributes to our inability to make sense of strangers.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

DEFAULT TO TRUTH

Gladwell's primary purpose in *Talking to Strangers* is to explain why we are so bad at understanding and engaging effectively with people we don't know. Each chapter of *Talking to Strangers* explores a different interaction between strangers that ends badly due to our fundamental inability to know others as well as we know ourselves, and the ineffective social strategies we deploy to combat this inability. Gladwell discusses the first of these social strategies in Chapter Three. "Truth-Default Theory," or TDT, is a theory developed by psychologist Tim Levine as he sought to understand why humans are bad at identifying deception. Through a series of experiments that tasked participants with determining whether a stranger was lying or telling the truth, Levine discovered that humanity has a bias toward truth. Levine's findings suggested that we tend to take things at face value and assume that the people we interact with are behaving honestly. Gladwell adapts Levine's theory to form the phrase "default to truth," which becomes a refrain he evokes throughout the book to designate when people—for better or for worse—choose to believe in the honesty of the stranger they are trying to understand. On one hand, this bias toward truth invites the opportunity for us to be deceived by strangers and even complicit in more devastating betrayals of trust, such as the Penn State scandal, where an administration's collective default to truth allowed Jerry Sandusky's serial abuse of young boys to continue for years without repercussion. Yet, on the other hand, Gladwell argues that "assum[ing] the best about another is the trait that has created modern society." While defaulting to truth requires a certain degree of risk, Gladwell suggests that this risk is the price we pay to experience the privilege of living as social beings among other social beings, familiar and otherwise.

LIMITATIONS OF TRANSPARENCY

Gladwell defines transparency, the second of two key strategies people use to make sense of strangers, as "the idea that people's behavior and demeanor—the way they represent themselves on the *outside*—provides an authentic and reliable window into the way they feel on the inside." Like default to truth, transparency is an assumption we make about other people in order to make sense of them—*not* a reflection of their actual character. While

every strategy we use to make sense of other people is imperfect and leaves room for conflict and misunderstanding to develop, Gladwell is particularly critical of transparency: "When we don't know someone, or can't communicate with them, or don't have the time to understand them properly," he explains, "we believe we can make sense of them through their behavior and demeanor." The assumption of transparency is a social strategy that requires us to show little empathy or humility in our interactions with strangers. It is a one-sided engagement that enables us to manipulate a stranger to fulfill an expectation that reaffirms our worldview without making any inquiry into theirs. The problem with this strategy is that it ignores our ethical obligation as members of a diverse global community to move beyond our preconceptions and extend empathy toward those who are different from us. Ultimately, Gladwell regards the devastating encounter between Sandra Bland and Officer Encinia that begins and ends the book as a tragedy born of the limitations of transparency. When Bland lights her **cigarette**, Encinia's assumption of transparency causes him to read the behavior as confrontational while remaining ignorant of the anxiety that has prompted her actions. In his closing remarks in the Afterword, Gladwell offers advice for dealing with these kinds of misunderstandings, urging us to "accept the limits of our ability to decipher strangers" and strive, instead, to move forward with "restraint and humility."

COUPLING THEORY AND CONTEXT

In Chapter Ten, Gladwell introduces the notion of "coupling theory," which describes behaviors that are "coupled," or tied to a specific context or set of circumstances. Coupling theory is the basis for what Gladwell describes as the third mistake we make with strangers: "We do not understand the importance of the context in which the stranger is operating." In other words, when we interact with a stranger, we fail to realize that their behaviors are linked, or coupled, to a specific set of circumstances and life experiences. When we fail to recognize the stranger's behaviors as coupled to a context that exists beyond our limited encounter, we inhibit ourselves from understanding the motivations for their actions and the complexity of their perspective. Our failure to see the full context of their world also prevents us from seeing the person that exists beyond our encounter, and we reduce their identity to a one-dimensional shell that exists only to fulfill the prescribed role they play in our interaction. Gladwell explains how this phenomenon has affected perceptions of Sylvia Plath. In failing to look beyond her suicide to see the broader context of her life, we imply that "her identity was tied up entirely in her self destruction" and erase the experiences of the woman who existed beyond this singular event. Gladwell summarizes his advice on avoiding the same mistake when talking to strangers: "Don't look at the stranger and jump to conclusions. Look at the stranger's world." If we can broaden our understanding of the stranger to encompass the fuller context of their life, we can better connect with the people around us in a meaningful way.

SELF VS. STRANGER

In *Talking to Strangers*, Malcolm Gladwell suggests that one of the reasons our interactions with strangers go awry is because we fail to enter into the interaction as equals in the first place. While we consider ourselves to be nuanced and to contain multitudes, we often have a tendency to believe that strangers are straightforward and uncomplicated. This misguided assumption corrupts our interactions with strangers in multiple ways, causing us to simultaneously underestimate the complexity of strangers while overestimating our own ability to understand them. These complementary misunderstandings, in turn, create an environment primed for conflict. This fallacy plays out in Chapter One when Gladwell describes the confession of Florentino Aspillaga, a former Cuban spy who defected in 1987. Aspillaga shocked the CIA with his admission that nearly all U.S. secret agents posted in Cuba were double agents working for Cuban intelligence. Even an agency as dedicated to espionage as the CIA had trouble imagining that their Cuban counterparts would be just as cunning and dedicated to their craft. Gladwell presents further evidence of this fallacy in Chapter Two with a psychological study headed by Emily Pronin. Pronin asked participants to fill in the blanks of partially spelled words and then describe how their choices reflected on their personalities. Most participants didn't consider the word completions to be "a measure of [their] personality." However, when Pronin redirected the question and asked participants what they made of other people's word completions, they more freely attributed word choice to personality traits. In both of these examples, people think of themselves as inscrutable, complex, and hard to predict while failing to extend that view to others. *Talking to Strangers* suggests that when we enter into interactions with strangers with the preconceived notion that we are fundamentally different from them, we establish an implicit "us vs. them" dynamic that dooms our hopes for finding mutual understanding.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE HOLY FOOL

The Holy Fool archetype symbolizes the complex social role of doubt. A Holy Fool, or *yurodivy*, is an archetype from Russian folklore portrayed as an eccentric social outcast. While the Holy Fool's antisocial behavior can often be the source of ridicule, their position on the outskirts of

society affords them the power to see and speak truths that otherwise remain unspoken due to people's desire to adhere to the social norms of their culture. Gladwell sees whistleblowers like Harry Markopolos, the independent fraud investigator who testified before Congress about the Bernie Madoff securities fraud scandal, as contemporary Holy Fools.

While Gladwell admires Markopolos's unwavering commitment to the truth, he does not believe that Markopolos's extreme skepticism is conducive to a functional, happy life. On the one hand, Markopolos's suspicious nature allowed him to recognize Madoff's fraudulent behavior while others dutifully brushed aside their doubts, choosing to believe a simpler, less problematic version of the truth. On the other hand, it's neither enjoyable nor practical to be constantly on high alert for deception. It's true that humanity's bias toward truth—a bias Markopolos actively disavows through unwavering skepticism—can and does lead to negative consequences. However, Gladwell argues that occasional deception is the price humans must pay to exist within society, which "cannot function" unless we agree to trust our friends, neighbors, and communities. Ultimately, the antisocial, ostracizing effects of being a Holy Fool outweigh the benefits of avoiding the rare threat of deception.

SANDRA BLAND'S CIGARETTE

Sandra Bland's cigarette represents the transparency myth and the way our inability to make sense of strangers can lead to conflict, misunderstanding, and—in Bland's case—tragedy. Gladwell sees Bland's action of lighting a cigarette in the middle of a traffic stop as the point of no return: the moment at which the encounter between Bland and Officer Brian Encinia morphed from a tense but routine traffic stop into a full-fledged conflict. The situation progressed the way it did because of Encinia's fundamental misunderstanding of Bland and overconfidence in his ability to assess her behavior.

When Officer Brian Encinia pulled over Bland for failure to signal a lane change in July 2015, their encounter began cordially. However, the situation changed once Encinia returned to Bland's car after reviewing her license and registration. Bland grew irritated, impatient, and frustrated as she waited for Encinia to return. Encinia viewed Bland's visible irritation as evidence that she was hiding something and posed a threat to his safety. In reality, Bland's irritation was a perfectly reasonable response to receiving a ticket for the minor offense of failure to signal. However, Encinia's reliance on the transparency myth—the misguided overconfidence that he could accurately discern Bland's intentions and inner feelings based on her behavior—caused him to misinterpret Bland's demeanor. When Bland lit her cigarette, a situation that had already escalated beyond what was reasonable went completely awry, resulting in a heated exchange, Encinia making physical threats against Bland, and, ultimately, Bland's arrest, imprisonment, and death.

Bland's cigarette distills the consequences of misunderstanding strangers into a simple action. Bland lights the cigarette to diffuse her understandable irritation at receiving a ticket. Encinia, whose police training has conditioned him to regard normal behaviors as signs of guilt and deception, misinterprets the lit cigarette as an act of aggression and a precursor to violence. At this critical moment, Encinia's failure to look beyond the context of the traffic stop and see Bland as a person whose behaviors are more complex than his police training would suggest causes him to misjudge her character. As a result, Encinia further escalates a situation that would have been over already had he not made this fundamental mistake. Bland's cigarette thus represents the moment in Bland and Encinia's encounter when the failure to make sense of a stranger opens the door to misunderstanding, conflict, and devastating consequences.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Little, Brown & Co. edition of *Talking to Strangers* published in 2019.

Introduction Quotes

❝ Today we are now thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own. The modern world is not two brothers feuding for control of the Ottoman Empire. It is Cortés and Montezuma struggling to understanding each other through multiple layers of translators. *Talking to Strangers* is about why we are so bad at that act of translation.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Hernán Cortés, Montezuma II

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11-12

Explanation and Analysis

In the Introduction to *Talking to Strangers*, Gladwell identifies the key difference between conflict of the old world and conflict of the modern era. "Today we are now thrown into contact all the time with people whose assumptions, perspectives, and backgrounds are different from our own," states Gladwell, drawing on the ways our increasingly globalized, diverse world forces us to engage with people who are strangers to us, personally and culturally.

Gladwell invokes the story he described earlier in the Introduction of Aztec leader Montezuma II's flawed encounter with Hernán Cortés, the first European to set foot on Mexican soil. "The modern world is not two brothers feuding for control of the Ottoman Empire. It is Cortés and Montezuma struggling to understand each other through multiple layers of translators." Gladwell frames Montezuma and Cortés's conflict as a stranger interaction gone awry. What is significant about their conflict is how it was predicated on misunderstanding each other's differences. A poor translation led Cortés to wrongly believe that Montezuma believed he was a god and entrusted the city of Tenochtitlan to him. This misinterpretation led Cortés to order Montezuma's capture and execution, culminating in a devastating, bloody war.

In a globalized world, our conflicts are not waged between "two brothers feuding for control of the Ottoman empire." Instead, they are waged between strangers: people whose cultural and ideological differences can sometimes prevent them from discerning what they disagree about in the first place. However, Gladwell believes we can navigate these differences by honing the "act of translation" to understand, communicate, and make peace with strangers.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ This is what makes no sense about Florentino Aspillaga's story. It would be one thing if Cuba had deceived a group of elderly shut-ins, the way scam artists do. But the Cubans fooled the CIA, an organization that takes the problem of understanding strangers very seriously.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Florentino Aspillaga, El Alpinista

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter One, Gladwell describes the bombshell information Florentino Aspillaga, a defected Cuban spy, revealed to the American intelligence community: most of their agents in Havana were working as double agents for the Cuban government.

This information was a significant blow to American intelligence, but it seemed utterly unbelievable. After all, as Gladwell states, "the Cubans fooled the CIA, an organization that takes the problem of understanding strangers very seriously." It makes sense when inexperienced people, such as "elderly shut-ins," become victims of deceit. However, the CIA were trained experts. Surely, Gladwell implies, if there were anyone we could rely on to detect deception, it would be them. And yet, for years, Cuban agents hand-fed false information to unsuspecting American intelligence agents.

In this passage, Gladwell shows how even trained professionals can fail to detect deception. This ironic situation illustrates one of *Talking to Stranger*'s central points: we are notoriously bad at telling when someone is lying to our face, even if we're supposedly trained to identify lies for a living.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ "Yesterday afternoon I had a long talk with Herr Hitler," he said. "I feel satisfied now that each of us fully understands what is in the mind of the other."

Related Characters: Neville Chamberlain (speaker), Malcolm Gladwell, Adolph Hitler

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell quotes from a 1938 speech Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain delivered at Heston Airport in England the morning he returned home from his first negotiation session with Adolph Hitler.

Chamberlain's remark exhibits the flawed logic that often inhibits us from understanding strangers. First, Chamberlain assumes that meeting with Hitler face to face has given him a better sense of the dictator's political aspirations and plans for military conquests. Not only this, Chamberlain boasts of the "long talk" he and Hitler shared, suggesting that the men spoke intimately, at length, and as equals. This, of course, is blatantly false: Hitler went back on his promise to Chamberlain and invaded the entirety of Czechoslovakia and Poland less than a year after he expressly promised not to do either of these things. In light of this later betrayal, Chamberlain's confidence makes his misjudgment of Hitler almost embarrassing.

Chamberlain continues, declaring his confidence that he and Hitler have benefited equally from their negotiations: "I feel satisfied now that each of us fully understands what is in the mind of the other." Chamberlain's remark implies a failure to separate his own consciousness from Hitler's.

Chamberlain employs a flawed logic whereby he assumes that his personal feelings of confidence and "satisf[action] about the negotiation are an indicator that Hitler feels this way, too. In retrospect, Chamberlain's enthusiastic confidence seems naive and shortsighted. However, as Gladwell makes clear throughout the book, Chamberlain's fundamentally flawed strategies for making sense of Hitler aren't all that different from the mistakes many of us make when forced to make snap judgments about a person whose demeanor and perspective are unfamiliar to us.

> The conviction that we know others better than they know us—and that we may have insights about them they lack (but not vice versa)—leads us to talk when we would do well to listen and to be less patient than we ought to be when others express the conviction that they are the ones who are being misunderstood or judged unfairly.

Related Characters: Emily Pronin (speaker), Malcolm Gladwell

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell quotes Emily Pronin's explanation for a concept she refers to as "the illusion of asymmetric insight." Pronin developed this concept based on the findings of her word-completion study. Pronin's study asked participants to insert letters into blank spaces to form complete words. Afterward, she asked them to speculate on what their completed words said about their personalities. Her findings suggest that we have a fundamental "conviction that we know others better than they know us."

While most of the study's participants believed themselves too complex to be analyzed in this reductive manner, they took a different stance when Pronin asked them to analyze *other* participants' words. When Pronin asked participants to analyze other people's—strangers'— results, participants eagerly attached all manner of neuroses and characteristics to the completed words. For instance, one participant speculated that another person's decision to spell "CHEAT" signified their inner dishonesty.

Pronin's findings suggest that we simultaneously underestimate strangers and overestimate ourselves. She believes we approach stranger interaction with overconfidence that "leads us to talk when we would do well to listen and to be less patient than we ought to be when others express the conviction that [the strangers] are the ones who are being misunderstood or judged unfairly." Moreover, when we assume that we know more about strangers than they know about themselves, we deny ourselves the opportunity to understand the complexity and nuance of the stranger's perspective. Pronin, like Gladwell, believes we need to approach stranger interactions with more openness and humility. When we take a step back and respect the stranger's right to speak on their own behalf, we open the door to effective communication.

> We think we can easily see into the hearts of others based on the flimsiest of clues. We jump at the chance to judge strangers. We would never do that to ourselves, of course. We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Emily Pronin, Neville Chamberlain, Adolph Hitler

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell summarizes the key takeaway of two case studies he explores in Chapter Two: British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's failed—and later, publicly criticized—negotiations with Hitler, and psychologist Emily Pronin's word completion study. Gladwell believes these cases illustrate our tendency to overestimate ourselves and underestimate strangers.

When Pronin asked participants in her study to speculate what the words they formed during a word-completion task said about their personalities, many felt themselves too complex to be reduced to the results of a psychology experiment. However, when Pronin asked them to judge other participants according to their completed words, participants had no qualms about oversimplifying or misjudging other people's personalities. This mismatch, Gladwell suggests in *Talking to Strangers*, is one of the root reasons why people are so bad at talking to strangers.

Not only is this overconfidence that people can effectively judge others unearned, but it's also one-directional. "We would never do that to ourselves, of course," confirms Gladwell. "We are nuanced and complex and enigmatic. But the stranger is easy." This passage isolates a significant flaw

in the way we talk to strangers. We enter stranger encounters on uneven ground, in that we believe that we are fundamentally complex, and the stranger, fundamentally simple. For Gladwell, this reductive and incorrect belief opens the door to all manner of conflict. When we assume that other people are straightforward and transparent, we disregard the possibility that we could ever be wrong about them, and we run the risk of misjudging, offending, or even harming them.

Chapter 3 Quotes

The issue with spies is not that there is something brilliant with *them*. It is that there is something wrong with *us*.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Ana Belen Montes, Tim Levine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter Three focuses on Ana Belen Montes, an agent who served the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) while secretly working as a Cuban spy for years. When the truth about Montes eventually emerged in 2001, her colleagues couldn't understand how she had managed to deceive them for so many years. One explanation for how Montes was able to keep her secret for so long was that she was simply a "brilliant" spy who was very good at her job. This position redirects blame away from the colleagues Montes fooled, attributing full responsibility to her skillfulness and none to the colleagues' gullibility. However, Gladwell takes issue with this logic. After all, he notes at various points that Monte was an objectively subpar spy. For instance, she was not a meticulous handler of sensitive information. Gladwell describes how investigators later discovered that Montes kept the codes she used to communicate with her handlers right in the purse she brought to work at the DIA office, and the radio she used to contact them in a shoebox in her closet.

Gladwell concludes, "The issue with spies is not that there is something brilliant with them. It is that there is something wrong with us." In other words, a spy doesn't have to be particularly discreet for their secret to go unnoticed. According to Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory, humans have a fundamental bias toward truth—an instinct to trust that the people we interact with are being honest with us. This bias toward truth meant that Montes could remain confident that her colleagues would not doubt her allegiances, even if she occasionally slipped up in a way that raised some eyebrows.

We fall out of truth-default mode only when the case against our initial assumption becomes definitive. We do not behave, in other words, like sober-minded scientists, slowly gathering evidence of the truth or falsity of something before reaching a conclusion. We do the opposite. We start by believing. And we stop believing only when our doubts and misgivings rise to the point where we can no longer explain them away.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Tim Levine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell summarizes Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory. Levine's theory argues that humans are biased toward truth and will continue to believe in a person's honesty, even if they have occasional doubts about them. Here, Gladwell describes Levine's concept of a "trigger," an event that must occur for a person to "fall out of truth-default mode."

Essentially, our bias toward truth allows us to accept a certain degree of doubt while still being able to believe that something is true. Put another way, faith in truth and honesty can exist despite doubt. For a person to stop believing, in contrast, "the case against [their] initial assumption [must] become[] definitive." In other words, we are willing to give truths about which we are uncertain the benefit of the doubt. In contrast, to *stop* believing in the truth, something must happen—a trigger—that makes us wholly and completely convinced that the truth is no longer valid. States Gladwell, "we stop believing only when our doubts and misgivings rise to the point where we can no longer explain them away." While we're willing to believe in the truth based on assumptions and incomplete information, we require irrefutable evidence to stop believing in the truth. As Levine explains in a later passage, belief and doubt can coexist. However, non-belief requires complete conviction.

You should have known. There were all kinds of red flags. You had doubts. Levine would say that's the wrong way to think about the problem. The right question is: were there enough red flags to push you over the threshold of belief? If there weren't, then by defaulting to truth you were only being human.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Jerry Sandusky, Tim Levine

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell further explores Levine's Truth-Default Theory, focusing specifically on the fact that doubt can coexist with belief. Gladwell addresses the common criticism people tend to direct toward others who fall for scams and other forms of deception: "You should have known. There were all kinds of red flags. You had doubts." According to Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory, criticisms like these miss the point, as they ignore the reality that belief and doubt can and do often coexist.

Levine believes that people can acknowledge red flags and still end up "defaulting to truth." Ultimately, it's not a matter of whether red flags or doubts exist, but whether "there [were] enough red flags to push [a person] over the threshold of belief." Truth-Default Theory states that people will default to truth under a wide array of conditions and circumstances, including in the presence of doubt and suspicion. To stop "defaulting to truth," we need definitive, unarguable evidence. This is because truth is the default, while disbelief is the exception.

Levine believes a bias toward truth and a tendency to give others the benefit of the doubt is not a sign of gullibility but simply part of "being human." Gladwell agrees with Levine and brings this perspective to each of the case studies he explores in subsequent chapters. For instance, in Chapter Five, he argues that we should refrain from condemning the Penn State administration for failing to act on the inconsistent, messy allegations made against Jerry Sandusky, as they were only "being human" when they chose to believe that there was nothing nefarious going on between Sandusky and his sex abuse victims.

Chapter 4 Quotes

The difference between Markopolos and Renaissance, however, is that Renaissance trusted the system. Madoff was part of one of the most heavily regulated sectors in the entire financial market. If he was really just making things up, wouldn't one of the many government watchdogs have caught him already? As Nat Simons, the Renaissance executive, said later, "You just assume that someone was paying attention."

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell, Nat Simons (speaker), Bernie Madoff, Nat Simons

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Four, Gladwell introduces the archetypal Holy Fool, a social outcast whose position on the outskirts of society allows them to see truths that others who are too steeped in social norms fail to recognize. The Holy Fool doesn't default to truth because they take nothing for granted.

To further explain the Holy Fool's role within society and within Levine's Truth-Default Theory, Gladwell compares Harry Markopolos, the independent fraud investigator who was a whistleblower in the Bernie Madoff securities fraud scandal, to Renaissance Technologies, a hedge fund that suspected but failed to act on their suspicions about Madoff. "The difference between Markopolos and Renaissance," explains Gladwell, "is that Renaissance trusted the system." As Nat Simons, a Renaissance executive, explains, "You just assume that someone is paying attention." Renaissance Technologies defaulted to truth due to human instinct and their faith in "the system" to look out for them. They assumed that if something were wrong with Madoff's securities fund, someone else would have caught on to this discrepancy first.

In contrast, Markopolos, a modern-day Holy Fool, had no blind faith in Madoff or the system. His position at the periphery of society fuels a degree of skepticism that inhibits him from taking anything for granted. This radical skepticism gave Markopolos the initiative to come forward with his suspicions about Madoff. He didn't assume Madoff's innocence, and he didn't assume that someone else would come forward to discredit Madoff if he didn't do it first.

> What sets the Holy Fool apart is a different sense of the possibility of deception. In real life, Tim Levine reminds us, lies are rare. And those lies that are told are told by a very small subset of people. That's why it doesn't matter so much that we are terrible at detecting lies in real life. Under the circumstances, in fact, defaulting to truth makes logical sense. If the person behind the counter at the coffee shop says your total with tax is $6.74, you can do the math yourself to double-check their calculations, holding up the line and wasting thirty seconds of your time. Or you can simply assume the salesperson is telling you the truth, because on balance most people do tell the truth.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Tim Levine, Bernie Madoff

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 99-100

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell ruminates on the costs and benefits of being a Holy Fool, a person with "a different sense of the possibility of deception." Unlike most people, who assume that people are fundamentally honest and trust social systems and institutions to protect their interests and maintain a basic sense of integrity, the Holy Fool is constantly on guard against deception.

While one might be inclined to believe that the Holy Fool has the advantage over the gullible masses, Gladwell shows that this isn't quite the case. Tim Levine argues that "lies are rare" and "told by a very small subset of people." For this reason, "it doesn't matter so much that we are terrible at detecting lies in real life." The rarity of lies also means that Holy Fool's skepticism about other people and social systems doesn't give them a discernable advantage over the gullible masses.

What's more, being overly skeptical of the world puts the Holy Fool at a distinct disadvantage. Gladwell concludes with an example about double-checking that the cashier at the coffee shop has told us the correct price to show how illogical it would be if everyone were as discerning as a Holy Fool. Technically, double-checking the cashier's math would ensure that we aren't shorted a few cents on the rare occasion that the cashier's math was off. However, the relative rarity of deception combined with the massive inconvenience it would be for us and everyone around us to be so meticulous about the truth, it's both preferable and understandable to default to truth in most situations.

> If they came for him, he concluded, his only hope would be to hold them off as long as possible, until he could get help. He loaded up a twelve-gauge shotgun and added six more rounds to the stock. He hung a bandolier of twenty extra rounds on his gun cabinet. Then he dug out his gas mask from his army days. What if they came in using tear gas? He sat at home, guns at the ready—while the rest of us calmly went about our business.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Harry Markopolos, Bernie Madoff

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

After the news broke that Bernie Madoff had been found guilty of securities fraud, Harry Markopolos, a whistleblower in the scandal, initially believed that he could stop tormenting himself about the case. However, he immediately reversed course and convinced himself that the important people who knew that Markopolos had repeatedly warned the SEC about Madoff would come after him to protect their reputations. As a result, Markopolos "load[s] up a twelve-gauge shotgun," "h[a]ng[s] a bandolier of twenty extra rounds on his gun cabinet," and straps a gas mask against his face. Then he sits in his house, armed and ready to face the attackers that are less a legitimate threat than a figment of Markopolos's extreme skepticism and paranoia. As Markopolos waits, paranoid about nothing, "the rest of us calmly [go] about our business."

Gladwell ends Chapter Four with this dramatic description of Markopolos holding down his house against hypothetical attackers to show the cost of being a Holy Fool. Like the archetypal Holy Fool of Russian folklore, Markopolos exists outside mainstream society. He questions the things the rest of us take for granted and is constantly on high alert against the possibility of danger or deception. Markopolos's extreme skepticism sometimes works out for him, such as when it allowed him to see through Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme well before the rest of the world caught on to the scandal. More often, however, Gladwell shows that it only serves to diminish his quality of life. His perpetual distrust for others leaves him paranoid and alienated from the world. Meanwhile, the rest of us who trust the system "calmly [go] about our business."

Chapter 5 Quotes

The fact that Nassar was doing something monstrous is exactly what makes the parents' position so difficult.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Larry Nassar, Tim Levine

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Five, Gladwell delves into two child sex abuse scandals involving parents, colleagues, and institutions that failed to believe or act on allegations against the abusers. When these scandals came to light, many people were quick to condemn authority figures for not doing more to protect and seek justice for the victims. Gladwell takes issue with this position.

Invoking Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory to support his argument, Gladwell suggests that it was only logical for the parents of Larry Nassar's victims to doubt that Nassar was capable of something so "monstrous." Larry Nassar was a beloved, longtime doctor for USA Gymnastics who abused young female gymnasts under the guise of providing legitimate medical treatment. When the public finally learned of the allegations against Nassar in 2016, people were shocked and outraged. Yet, incredibly, many parents of Nassar's victims initially defended him against these allegations. While one might be inclined to condemn parents for failing to recognize that their children were being abused, Gladwell argues that these parents weren't actively turning a blind eye to abuse. In fact, they exhibited the rational, human instinct to seek out the harmless, more logical explanation for someone's behavior.

"The fact that Nassar was doing something monstrous is exactly what makes the parents' position so difficult," explains Gladwell. One of the main points of Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory is that people default to truth because trusting someone is often the more rational option. Parents of Nassar's victims weren't conspiring against their children to protect an abuser: they were simply following their human instinct to doubt that somebody they knew and trusted could be capable of something so "monstrous."

If every coach is assumed to be a pedophile, then no parent would let their child leave the house, and no sane person would ever volunteer to be a coach. We default to truth—even when that decision carries terrible risks—because we have no choice. Society cannot function otherwise. And in those rare instances where trust ends in betrayal, those victimized by default to truth deserve our sympathy, not our censure.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Larry Nassar, Jerry Sandusky

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell concludes Chapter Five by urging the reader to have empathy for people who failed to recognize symptoms of abuse in convicted pedophiles Larry Nassar and Jerry Sandusky. Critics who condemn these people seem to believe that they would have been more aware of any signs of potentially suspicious behavior in the abusers. Gladwell questions this belief, arguing that it's neither logical nor beneficial to live life in a constant state of paranoia and suspicion.

Truth-Default Theory argues that it's far more logical to assume that our friends, colleagues, and authority figure are honest people. Furthermore, "society cannot function" if we were to take the opposite approach and assume that everybody is a potential abuser. "If every coach is assumed to be a pedophile," argues Gladwell, "then no parent would let their child leave the house, and no sane person would ever volunteer to be a coach." Assuming the best in everyone can occasionally lead us to trust someone we realize in retrospect we should not have trusted. In these rare instances, we become "victimized by default to truth." However, if everybody took the opposite approach and started to view everybody as a potential criminal, abuser, and liar, Gladwell insists that society couldn't function. Indeed, society can only operate if we collectively agree to trust the people around us. Most of the time, this trust pays off, affording us the support and protection of our communities and the fulfillment of human relationships. On very rare occasions, we may encounter somebody who abuses our trust, and, by no fault of our own, we become "victimized by default to truth." Recognizing trust as both a social responsibility and a fundamental human instinct helps us understand that people who are "victimized" by trust "deserve our sympathy, not our censure."

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ When we don't know someone, or can't communicate with them, or don't have the time to understand them properly, we believe we can make sense of them through their behavior and demeanor.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Sandra Bland, Brian Encinia

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Six, Gladwell introduces the concept of transparency, or the idea that a person's observable traits (such as their facial expression and behavior) provide reliable insight into their inner life. Gladwell considers transparency one of the main problematic social strategies we use in our interactions with strangers, as believing in transparency can result in misunderstandings and more serious consequences.

Gladwell believes we resort to transparency for efficiency's sake. "When we don't know someone, or can't communicate with them, or don't have the time to understand them properly," explains Gladwell, "we believe we can make sense of them through their behavior and demeanor." Our belief in transparency is predicated on the fallacy that other people behave in straightforward, predictable ways that align with society's ideas about how someone ought to behave in a given situation. But in reality, other people are complex and unpredictable. Their behaviors may or may not align with the emotions they feel internally, as every person's emotional range and body language are unique to them and take time to understand. When we assume that the strangers we interact with are transparent, we risk misunderstanding them, misinterpreting their actions, and escalating conflict. For Gladwell, this is why Sandra Bland's encounter with Officer Brian Encinia went awry: because Encinia thought he could assume certain things about Bland's state of mind based on a handful of arbitrary actions, and he assumed incorrectly.

❝ The transparency problem ends up in the same place as the default-to-truth problem. Our strategies for dealing with strangers are deeply flawed, but they are also socially necessary. We need the criminal-justice system and the hiring process and the selection of babysitters to be human. But the requirement of humanity means that we have to tolerate an enormous amount of error. That is the paradox of talking to strangers. We need to talk to them. But we're terrible at it—and, as we'll see in the next two chapters, we're not always honest with one another about just how terrible at it we are.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 166-167

Explanation and Analysis

By Chapter Six, Gladwell has introduced two of the primary flawed social strategies that create conflict in our interactions with strangers: our bias toward truth and our belief in the myth of transparency. While Gladwell contends that these strategies "are deeply flawed," he argues that "they are also socially necessary." These strategies are necessary because there is no way to live in society and avoid interacting with strangers. And when we interact with strangers, the imperfect nature of language and communication means that we will occasionally misunderstand others, and others will occasionally misunderstand us.

This sentiment forms the basis for what Gladwell identifies as "the paradox of talking to strangers." Even though we are bad at talking to strangers, living in society requires us to talk to and make sense of people whose backgrounds, perspectives, and mannerisms are unfamiliar. It goes without saying that humans aren't as accurate or discerning as computers. We have various cultural and internalized biases that prevent us from seeing people objectively. We're also hardwired to believe that people are being honest with us. Sometimes, these biases cause us to get people wrong.

However, Gladwell is adamant that "the requirement of humanity means that we have to tolerate an enormous amount of error." He suggests that we can't and shouldn't want to rely on computer algorithms to assess every person we encounter in our professional and private lives. Instead, we need to be able to rely on the criminal justice system to maintain the order of law, and we need to be able to trust our instincts about the babysitters to whom we entrust our children. If the entire world existed in a state of perpetual suspicion and paranoia, society would crumble, and life wouldn't be meaningful or fulfilling.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ We think liars in real life behave like liars would on *Friends*—telegraphing their internal states with squirming and darting eyes.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell returns to an episode of *Friends* to emphasize how society teaches us to believe in the myth of transparency. Gladwell argues that a person could understand the basic plot of an episode of *Friends* with the sound turned off by simply watching the characters' faces and making educated guesses about what they are feeling and thinking. Our belief in transparency allows us to match distinct facial expressions to specific emotions.

However, while TV characters might be transparent, real people are not. States Gladwell, "We think liars in real life behave like liars would on *Friends*—telegraphing their internal states with squirming and darting eyes." Society conditions us to believe that there are universally recognizable ways that people respond to different emotions and situations. For example, when a person looks physically uncomfortable and avoids eye contact, we assume they must be guilty. This is because society has taught us to recognize certain behaviors as universal signs of guilt.

However, Gladwell shows that outer behavior is not a reliable indicator of internal character. Facial expressions are learned traits that vary across cultures. Individual people's mannerisms are complex and unique, and we have to spend time with them to understand how they work. When we assume that people behave the way they do on TV or in other media forms, we risk misunderstanding them, which can sometimes lead to devastating consequences.

❝ "There is no trace of me in the room where Meredith was murdered," Knox says, at the end of the Amanda Knox documentary. "But you're trying to find the answer in my eyes....You're looking at me. Why? These are my eyes. They're not objective evidence."

Related Characters: Amanda Knox (speaker), Malcolm Gladwell

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell concludes Chapter Seven with a quote from a documentary about Amanda Knox's wrongful conviction. In the documentary, Knox addresses how the media and the Italian justice system fixated on her demeanor to implicate her in her roommate's murder—even though there was no physical evidence that tied Knox to the crime. "There is no trace of me in the room where Meredith was murdered [...]. But you're trying to find the answer in my eyes," states Knox.

Investigators fixated on aspects of Knox's behavior that they believed to be signs of guilt and lack of remorse. Knox criticizes this approach, arguing that "trying to find the answer in [her] eyes" is unjust and impossible. Knox's remarks point to the justice system's belief in the myth of transparency. They misguidedly believed that Knox acting the way they thought a guilty person is supposed to act could be a legitimate substitute for "objective evidence," such as DNA or a witness who could place Knox at the crime scene.

Gladwell shows in *Talking to Strangers* that in reality, people are simply not transparent: we can't reliably learn anything about them by looking them in the eyes. Human behavior is complex, nuanced, and subjective. The notion that people reliably and predictably respond a certain way to certain stimuli is false, and the interpretation of facial expressions are mannerisms can vary from person to person and between cultures. When we choose to believe that people are transparent, we open the door for misunderstanding and, in Knox's case, the possibility of committing grave injustices against innocent people.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ The lesson of myopia is really very simple. If you want people to be themselves in a social encounter with a stranger—to represent their own desires honestly and clearly—they cannot be blind drunk.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Eight, Gladwell uses the concept of alcohol

myopia to consider how alcohol can complicate a stranger encounter. Previous ideas about acute alcohol intoxication maintained that alcohol has a primarily disinhibiting effect on the brain, ridding the drinker of their ability to constrain and regulate behaviors they would otherwise keep in check. In this old theory, alcohol causes the drinker to become a stripped-down and uninhibited version of themselves, so while the drinker might be uninhibited, they remain more or less themselves.

Myopia theory, in contrast, suggests that alcohol narrows the drinker's cognitive abilities, compromising their ability to see beyond their present context and prohibiting them from understanding the long-term consequences of their behaviors. Because our values and behaviors comprise such a significant part of our identity, the drastic shift in those values and behaviors when we become intoxicated effectively transforms us into a wholly different person. This transformation of the self poses a significant problem to the stranger interaction. States Gladwell, "If you want people to be themselves in a social encounter with a stranger—to represent their own desires honestly and clearly—they cannot be blind drunk." Because alcohol myopia changes our character on such a fundamental level, it also compromises our ability to approach a stranger encounter with the openness and care Gladwell believes is required of successful stranger interactions.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ [W]e need to accept that the search to understand a stranger has real limits. We will never know the whole truth. We have to be satisfied with something short of that. The right way to talk to strangers is with caution and humility. How many of the crises and controversies I have described would have been prevented had we taken those lessons to heart?

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Nine, Gladwell describes the CIA's extreme interrogation methods to coerce a confession out of KSM, a high-ranking Al Qaeda official involved in planning the 9/11 terrorist attack. While the CIA's efforts eventually coerced KSM into confessing to a string of terrorism-related crimes, many officials questioned the veracity of KSM's statements, arguing that the trauma of the interrogation process may have compelled him to confess to crimes he hadn't committed.

Through this case, Gladwell explores the potential for stranger interactions to run awry when we become overly fixated on "know[ing] the whole truth" about the stranger. Instead, Gladwell urges the reader "to accept that the search to understand a stranger has real limits." While we can learn a lot about strangers through careful, thoughtful communication, it's impossible to "know the whole truth" of another person's inner experiences.

In their efforts to know the full extent of KSM's crimes, the CIA pushed too hard and potentially ruined their chances of understanding his actual involvement in terrorism-related crimes. Gladwell believes we can learn from the CIA's mistakes. He proposes that we should refrain from talking to strangers with the express purpose of "know[ing] the whole truth" about them. Instead, we should approach them "with caution and humility," being mindful of how the interaction impacts the stranger instead of focusing on what we want to gain from the interaction.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Like suicide, crime is tied to very specific places and contexts. Weisburd's experiences in the 72nd Precinct and in Minneapolis are not idiosyncratic. They capture something close to a fundamental truth about human behavior. And that means that when you confront the stranger, you have to ask yourself where and when you're confronting the stranger—because those two things powerfully influence your interpretation of who the stranger is.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), David Weisburd, Sandra Bland, Brian Encinia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Ten, Gladwell introduces Coupling Theory, which argues that certain behaviors are "coupled," or linked, with a specific context or set of circumstances. Gladwell illustrates the theory by highlighting a link between increased suicide rates and the use of "town gas" to power home appliances, and then describing the relationship between crime and location. David Weisburd's research on crime in Minneapolis, for instance, revealed that 50% of police calls came from just 3.3 percent of the city's streets.

Knowing that certain behaviors like crime and suicide are connected with specific contexts allows us to understand and respond to these behaviors more productively.

Gladwell believes we should also apply this idea of context to our interactions with strangers. Weisburd's research on crime in Minneapolis revealed that context matters. Gladwell insists that this "capture[s] something close to a fundamental truth about human behavior." Human behavior doesn't happen in a vacuum: it's the consequence of the experiences and perspectives a person has acquired over the years. If you want to understand a stranger, argues Gladwell, "you have to ask yourself where and when you're confronting the stranger—because those two things powerfully influence your interpretation of who the stranger is."

For example, Officer Brian Encinia confronted Sandra Bland during an unexpected and irritating traffic stop. His position of authority created an uneven power dynamic that injected tension into the atmosphere. Encinia's failure to acknowledge how the specific context of his encounter with Bland contributed to her visible irritation and discomfort caused him to misinterpret Bland's irritated demeanor as aggression, which escalated a situation that didn't need to be anything more than a routine traffic stop.

> Don't look at the stranger and jump to conclusions. Look at the stranger's world.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

In these closing remarks to Chapter Ten, Gladwell summarizes how we can apply the principles of Coupling Theory to help us with the complicated task of making sense of strangers. Coupling Theory argues that certain behaviors are linked with a particular context or set of circumstances.

Gladwell argues that we should apply this same logic to stranger interactions, understanding which outside factors influence a stranger's behaviors to communicate more effectively and knowledgeably with them. When we find ourselves having to interact with people we don't know, it can be tempting to make snap judgments about them based on superficial details, such as the stranger's behavior, demeanor, or status. Personal and systemic bias can influence the way we think about a stranger, as well.

However, when we "look at the stranger and jump to conclusions," we ignore the fuller context of the stranger. We fail to acknowledge the unique experiences that inform the stranger's perspective and influence their behavior. When we only assess the stranger within the limited context of our encounter with them, we deny ourselves the opportunity to "look at the stranger's world" and understand all the circumstances, such as race, class, and personal history, that have created the person that stands before us.

Considering the stranger within the broader context of their past experiences forces us to take a step back and assess the stranger with more humility and understanding. When we do this, we put ourselves in a better position to communicate effectively with the stranger, which reduces the possibility of conflict and misunderstanding.

Chapter 11 Quotes

> There is something about the idea of coupling—of the notion that a stranger's behavior is tightly connected to place and context—that eludes us. It leads us to misunderstand some of our greatest poets, to be indifferent to the suicidal, and to send police officers on senseless errands. So what happens when a police officer carries that fundamental misconception—and then you add to that the problems of default to truth and transparency? You get Sandra Bland.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Sandra Bland, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Brian Encinia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 311-312

Explanation and Analysis

In the closing remarks of Chapter Eleven, Gladwell invokes the tragic death of Sandra Bland as a cautionary tale. He urges the reader to apply the principles of Coupling Theory to our stranger encounters to heighten understanding and guard against the kinds of misunderstanding that colored Bland's encounter with Officer Brian Encinia and, ultimately, resulted in her death.

When we fail to recognize that "a stranger's behavior is tightly connected to place and context," Gladwell insists that we compromise our ability to understand the stranger as a complex person with unique views and behaviors that may not be transparent to us. To emphasize this point, Gladwell briefly recalls the case studies he explored in the previous two chapters, such as the deaths of Sylvia Plath and Anne

Sexton. He also highlights the idea that suicide is a coupled behavior, and several studies from the 20th-century that established a link between place and crime. In each of these case studies, taking a step back to examine the broader context of the situation led to greater understanding and increased empathy, two factors that Gladwell believes are crucial to a successful stranger encounter. The rhetorical purpose of this passage is to prime the reader to revisit Sandra Bland's case, newly equipped with the wealth of knowledge we now carry about how and why our stranger altercations end badly.

Chapter 12 Quotes

To Encinia's mind, Bland's demeanor fits the profile of a potentially dangerous criminal. She's agitated, jumpy, irritable, confrontational, volatile. He thinks she's hiding something. This is dangerously flawed thinking at the best of times. Human beings are not transparent. But when is this kind of thinking most dangerous? When the people we observe are mismatched: when they do not behave the way we expect them to behave.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Sandra Bland, Brian Encinia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

Gladwell dedicates Chapter Twelve to a close reading of Sandra Bland and Officer Brian Encinia's 2015 altercation—the tragic stranger encounter that begins and concludes Talking to Strangers, and which inspired Gladwell to write the book. In this passage, Gladwell analyzes what he considers the turning point in the encounter: when Bland lights her cigarette. Gladwell sees Bland's action as a highly intentional attempt to calm down. It should have, he suggests, prompted a de-escalation of the tensions that steadily grew between Bland and Encinia as the traffic stop lagged on.

However, this de-escalation doesn't happen. Encinia's police training instructs him to view many normal behaviors as symptoms of guilt, irritation, and precursors to violence. As a result, he views Bland's irritation at being pulled over for a simple failure to signal as a symptom of something more sinister. "To Encinia's mind, Bland's demeanor fits the profile of a potentially dangerous criminal," explains Gladwell. Interpreting her body language as visibly "agitated, jumpy, irritable, confrontational, [and] volatile" would be understandable if Encinia took a step back to consider the specific reasons Bland is behaving this way. But he fails to do this. He sees Bland as "transparent," and believes her external irritation reflects her internal intentions to harm him.

Encinia's "dangerously flawed thinking" illustrates the three main problems Gladwell has identified as reasons our stranger interactions end so badly: Encinia fails to consider the context in which Bland's irritation occurs, and he misguidedly believes that Bland is transparent. Encinia's logic is especially dangerous when applied to Bland because Bland is "mismatched": her external irritation does not reflect an inner intent to harm.

Brian Encinia's goal was to go beyond the ticket. He had highly tuned curiosity ticklers. He knew all about the visual pat-down and the concealed interrogation. And when the situation looked as if it might slip out of his control, he stepped in, firmly. If something went awry that day on the street with Sandra Bland, it wasn't because Brian Encinia didn't do what he was trained to do. It was the opposite. It was because he did exactly what he was trained to do.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker), Sandra Bland, Brian Encinia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 334

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gladwell places himself inside the mind of Officer Brian Encinia as he assesses Bland's car for "curiosity ticklers," or indications of criminal wrongdoing. Gladwell proposes that the encounter went awry due to systemic flaws in modern policing rather than any personal malice on Encinia's part. "If something went awry that day on the street with Sandra Bland," argues Gladwell, "it wasn't because Brian Encinia didn't do what he was trained to do. It was the opposite. It was because he did exactly what he was trained to do." Modern policing teaches officers "to go beyond the ticket," using an initial routine traffic stop as an entry point to search for signs of a more serious crime. Thus when Encinia pulled over Bland on that fateful day in 2015, "he [was doing] exactly what he was trained to do." He initiated the traffic stop, conducted a "visual pat-down,"

assessed Bland's appearance and car for signs of guilt, and then initiated a "concealed interrogation" to identify aspects of her demeanor that could signify guilt.

When Encinia interpreted Bland's irritation at being pulled over for a minor traffic violation as an indication of her guilt and intent to harm him, he wasn't behaving unreasonably: he was doing his job. Gladwell sees Bland's heated altercation with Encinia and ultimate death as consequences of broader, systemic issues. Throughout *Talking with Strangers*, Gladwell describes how our society has flawed ideas about talking to strangers, and we inject these bad ideas into our communities and institutions (i.e., law enforcement). Until we come to terms with our stranger problem and learn to regard strangers with more caution and humility, Gladwell insists that tragedies like Bland's death will continue to happen.

❝ Because we do not know how to talk to strangers, what do we do when things go awry with strangers? We blame the stranger.

Related Characters: Malcolm Gladwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 346

Explanation and Analysis

These are the closing remarks of *Talking to Strangers*. Gladwell doesn't offer any definite answers about how we can modify and improve the way we approach the complex task of understanding people whose backgrounds and perspectives are different from ours. The imperfect nature of communication means that there will always be some degree of uncertainty about how fully we can know a stranger and understand their intentions. But he acknowledges that while it's important for us to approach stranger interactions with humility, empathy, and patience, sometimes, due to this fundamental uncertainty, we will fail to understand and relate to a stranger despite our best efforts.

When we fail to make sense of a stranger, we must change how we react to this failure. For Gladwell, our "not know[ing] how to talk to strangers" stems from a failure to recognize strangers as equals: as nuanced people who are neither transparent nor straightforward, and whose lives and behaviors deserve the same level of respect, consideration, and empathy as our own. While it's easier to "blame the stranger" and walk away, Gladwell asserts that we will only improve our ability to talk to strangers if we approach them with more empathy, openness, and humility.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION: "STEP OUT OF THE CAR!"

1. Gladwell begins by recounting the 2015 arrest of Sandra Bland, a young African American woman who was apprehended by the police outside Houston, Texas. She was on her way home from a successful job interview at Prairie View A&M University, the school from which she'd graduated a few years prior. She posted regular inspirational videos to her YouTube channel, Sandy Speaks.

Bland's altercation with a police officer establishes the stranger encounter at the heart of Gladwell's book about how humans approach the daunting task of talking to strangers. The ways Bland's traffic stop goes awry will outline the core flaws in people's methods for interacting with people they don't know.

The officer, Brian Encinia, a 30-year-old white man, told Bland she had failed to signal a lane change. He was initially polite with Bland but became hostile after she refused his order to put out her **cigarette**. From there, Encinia and Bland engaged in an increasingly heated altercation that was recorded on Encinia's bodycam and subsequently viewed on YouTube millions of times. Tensions escalated, with Encinia repeatedly attempting to reach inside Bland's car to forcibly remove Bland from the vehicle and threatening bodily harm. Ultimately, Bland was arrested and jailed, and she committed suicide in her cell three days later.

Gladwell frames Bland's cigarette as the turning point in the encounter between Bland and Encinia. In lighting a cigarette, Bland seems to ignite some anger in Encinia. The hostility about the cigarette isn't about the cigarette at all—it's about some unspoken misunderstanding about power dynamics, body language, and respect that has occurred between Bland and the officer. Because they don't know how to make sense of each other, they fail to deescalate tension, which indirectly leads to Bland's death.

2. Gladwell explains Bland's controversial arrest and suicide within the context of the birth of Black Lives Matter, a civil rights movement that was formed in response to the death of a Black teenager, Michael Brown, who was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, for allegedly stealing a pack of cigars from a convenience store. Gladwell also references the cases of Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, and Walter Scott. Bland even gave Scott his own episode of "Sandy Speaks." In the episode she talked about her upbringing in a predominantly white community and stated that learning to work with white people was essential to being "successful in this world" as a Black person.

Bland's tragic and senseless death made waves nationally. People expressed outrage at what they saw as yet another instance of police abusing their power and acting on racist assumptions at the expense of Black people. Gladwell references other officer-involved deaths many consider to be unjust and racially motivated to illustrate one common way the public has made sense of Bland's death. Bland herself publicly expressed outrage at the unequal treatment of Black people in the U.S., emphasizing the need for Black people to conform to white social norms and expectations to be "successful in this world."

Next, Gladwell explains the purpose of his book within the context of Bland's arrest: to discover why what should have been a routine traffic stop escalated the way it did. In the debates that arose in response to these cases of officer-involved deaths, there have emerged two predominant sides. The first side identifies racism as the cause of these deaths. The other side attacks the individual officer's incompetence, considering how their personality and training might have contributed to the altercation going awry. While both sides have their merits, Gladwell argues, they also fall short of diagnosing a way to prevent future instances of social dysfunction.

Gladwell takes a different approach to understanding Bland's case, suggesting that what went wrong in Bland's encounter with Encina had more to do with the broader issue of making sense of strangers—people whose backgrounds, body language, and perspectives are unfamiliar—than with race specifically. However, it's worth noting that issues of systemic racism and the dissemination of racial stereotypes creates and perpetuates a sense of unfamiliarity and otherness between people of different races.

According to Gladwell, one characteristic of the many wars waged in Europe over the course of the 16th century is that they were fought between neighboring countries: between people who shared similar beliefs and customs. However, one major conflict departed from this trend. The conflict between Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and Aztec ruler Montezuma II in 1519 was between two peoples who knew nothing of each other's cultures. When Cortés and his people approached the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, they were awestruck by the city built atop water. Until then, no European had set foot in Mexico. The city would have seemed miraculously clean to a man coming from plague-ridden Europe.

Encountering people of different ethnicities, backgrounds, and cultures creates a new source of conflict. It makes wars between nations a matter of ideology and perspective in addition to geography and borders.

Gladwell explains how a series of poor translations between Spanish and the Aztec language of Nahuatl led Cortés to misinterpret Montezuma's coded language, believing that the Aztec ruler had deemed Cortés a god and gifted him the city, when in reality, Montezuma had intended to say no such things. Nevertheless, the misunderstanding led Cortés and his men to capture and kill Montezuma, leading to a bloody war that killed 20 million Aztecs through battle or the transmission of deadly diseases.

Cortés is said to have believed that Montezuma believed Cortés was a messenger of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl or the god himself. A number of historians have challenged this claim, however, including Camilla Townsend, whose research Gladwell cites in his endnotes. Gladwell proposes that Cortés's failure to understand Montezuma's coded, figurative language shows how an overconfidence in one's ability to understand different languages and cultures leads to grave consequences.

Gladwell sees human history as a series of people being thrown into social interactions with people whose differing beliefs, customs, and mannerisms make it difficult to understand each other. Gladwell's book, therefore, explores what he refers to as "the stranger problem," in which a simple misinterpreting of words and actions can elicit devastating, unintended consequences.

Gladwell believes that Montezuma and Cortés's misunderstanding happens to varying degrees of intensity in every stranger interaction. The "stranger problem," the way interacting with strangers forces us to confront unfamiliar cultures, perspectives, and behaviors, unites all stranger encounters across geography and time. As such, Gladwell sees Sandra Bland's tragic death as yet another devastating consequence of not understanding or addressing the stranger problem and letting unchecked misunderstanding lead to conflict.

CHAPTER ONE: FIDEL CASTRO'S REVENGE

1. Gladwell begins by telling the story of Florentino Aspillaga, a high-ranking officer in Cuba's General Directorate of Intelligence. In 1987, two years before the Iron Curtain fell, Aspillaga was running a consulting trading company called Cuba Tecnica out of Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. In reality, Cuba Tecnica functioned as a front for Cuban spy activity, and Aspillaga was a lauded official whom Fidel Castro had named intelligence officer of the year in 1985. Despite his achievements and status, however, Aspillaga grew disillusioned with the Communist cause and planned to defect in 1987.

During the Cold War, the Iron Curtain was the dividing boundary between Soviet-affiliated countries on the east side and NATO-affiliated (or neutral) countries on the west side. Czechoslovakia was on the east side. Cuba, under Fidel Castro's communist rule, was aligned with the Soviet Union (USSR) and was a point of contention between the USSR and the United States. Gladwell introduces Aspillaga's story to show how the "stranger problem" that incited conflict between the Spanish and the Aztecs in the 16th century plays out in more recent history.

When it was time to go through with his plan, Aspillaga smuggled his Cuban girlfriend, Marta, over the border to Vienna, Austria. From there, the couple headed to the United States Embassy and turned themselves in. Aspillaga's high rank gave him access to information about Cuba and the Soviet Union that was so sensitive that his former employers have twice tried to assassinate him. Since then, Aspillaga has lived a low-profile life under an assumed name. He has only been spotted once, by Brian Latell, who ran the CIA's Latin American office. Latell's meeting with Aspillaga occurred after Latell received a tip from Aspillaga's go-between, an undercover agent. During the meeting, Aspillaga gave Latell the manuscript for his memoir that described an unbelievable story.

Spy activity hinges on deception—on tricking strangers into not realizing that a misunderstanding has occurred between themselves and a person they don't realize is a spy with foreign allegiances.

2. After Aspillaga arrived at the American embassy in Vienna, Austria agents sent him to a U.S. Army base in Frankfurt, West Germany, for debriefing. Before the debriefing could begin, Aspillaga requested that a former Havana station chief known only to Cuban intelligence as "el Alpinista," the Mountain Climber, be flown in to speak with Aspillaga. El Alpinista had served the CIA all over the world and was a role model to Aspillaga. Aspillaga's request puzzled El Alpinista, but he traveled to Frankfurt to meet with him, nonetheless.

Austria and Vienna were on the west side of the Iron Curtain. Aspillaga's desire to talk to el Alpinista suggests that he has insider information about Cuban intelligence he wants to share with el Alpinista. If this is the case, it supports Gladwell's premise that humans are innately bad at making sense of strangers, since one would assume that el Alpinista, a renowned CIA officer and expert in counterintelligence, would be well-equipped to discern suspicious behavior or deception.

Aspillaga and El Alpinista connected immediately, and it wasn't long before Aspillaga shared his big secret: the CIA had a network of spies operating within Cuba to influence America's perception of Cuba. Aspillaga began to list off dozens of CIA spies who operated as double agents for Cuba. Aspillaga's list of double agents included nearly the entire force of U.S. soldiers inside Cuba, and their job was to give the CIA information especially curated by the Cuban government. El Alpinista tried to keep calm, but Aspillaga's words alarmed him, since they implicated El Alpinista's own people.

Aspillaga's confession is a huge blow to el Alpinista, showing that Cuban double agents were so skilled at their job that they could fool a seasoned veteran in counterintelligence. But was it the double agents' skill that allowed them to fool el Alpinista, or was it simply a matter of el Alpinista falling prey to the simple fact that people are bad at detecting deceit—even those, like el Alpinista, who are trained to detect it?

El Alpinista and Aspillaga flew to Andrews Air Force Base outside Washington, D.C., to talk with higher-ups in the Latin American division. When Fidel Castro heard about Aspillaga's betrayal, he assembled the double agents for a victory tour around Cuba, even releasing a documentary film about them featuring shockingly clear, high-quality footage the double agents had secretly filmed over the past 10 years. When the head of the FBI's office in Miami received a copy of the documentary, the reality of the situation was clear: the Cuban government had completely duped the CIA.

Cuban double agents achieved the seemingly impossible feat of deceiving the CIA, one of the leading counterintelligence agencies in the world. Gladwell introduces this ludicrous scenario to make a broader point about how common misunderstanding is in stranger interactions. It's not only people who speak different languages, like Hernán Cortés and Montezuma II, who misunderstand each other. Even CIA agents whose training prepares them to detect deceit and discrepancies fell victim to misreading double agents' allegiances and intentions.

3. One aspect of Florentino Aspillaga's story that doesn't track is how the double agents were able to fool the CIA, which should be hypervigilant to such a threat. Looking back on Aspillaga's unbelievable story, Latell can only speculate that Cuban double agents must have been very good at their job. El Alpinista argues that the CIA's Cuban section had simply made "sloppy" work of monitoring Cuban intelligence. However, Gladwell reveals, the CIA's East German division was just as compromised by spy activity as the Cuban Division. According to East German spy chief Markus Wolf, by the time the Berlin Wall fell, there wasn't a single CIA agent who'd ever worked in East Germany who *hadn't* been turned into a double agent.

Latell believes the Cuban double agents' skill allowed them to evade detection. El Alpinista takes an opposite stance, suggesting that the CIA simply wasn't as vigilant as they should have been. Gladwell disagrees with both positions, suggesting that nothing the CIA or double agents did or didn't do would have changed the outcome of the situation, since agents failing to detect spy activity is a widespread occurrence that happens all the time. This implies, perhaps, that humans are fundamentally flawed at detecting when some is deceiving them.

Aldrich Ames, for instance, was a senior officer assigned to Soviet counterintelligence who secretly worked for the Soviet Union. El Alpinista knew Ames personally, and while he admits to disliking Ames for being lazy, he insists that nobody could have suspected that he was a traitor. All this leads Gladwell to state Puzzle Number One: "Why can't we tell when the stranger in front of us is lying to our face?"

Even Ames, who was thought of as a sloppy, lazy agent, was able to evade el Alpinista's detection, which contradicts Brian Latell's earlier claim that the double agents' skillfulness was what allowed them to conduct their spy activity without attracting the CIA's attention.

CHAPTER TWO: GETTING TO KNOW DER FÜHRER

1. On August 28, 1938, Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, met with his advisor to discuss the crisis of Adolf Hitler's threat to invade the Sudetenland, a German-speaking area of Czechoslovakia, which likely would lead to a world war. Complicating matters was the fact that in the late 1930s, Hitler's intentions—and Hitler himself—remained largely unknown to most of the world's leaders. Furthermore, hardly any world leaders had been able to meet the man in person.

Despite very publicly transforming Germany into a one-party dictatorship since his election as chancellor in 1933, Hitler's secrecy makes him a stranger to other world leaders like Chamberlain. Here, Gladwell introduces another example in which failing to make sense of a stranger has dire, far-reaching consequences.

Chamberlain was determined to learn more about the elusive Hitler and determine if he could be trusted or reasoned with. On September 14, Chamberlain sent a letter to Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, to request a meeting with Hitler. Hitler agreed to meet, and polls across Great Britain showed that 70 percent of the country believed the meeting would help avoid a war.

Like the CIA, Montezuma II, and Officer Encinia, Chamberlain believed he could rely on a combination of intuition and logic to determine whether he could trust a stranger.

Chamberlain arrived in Munich on September 15 and met Hitler at his retreat outside Berchtesgaden. Hitler voiced his enthusiasm to seize the Sudetenland but made it clear that this was all he wanted. Chamberlain returned to England, satisfied with the meeting and confident that he could trust the man's word. He would return to Germany to negotiate with Hitler two more times.

Something about Hitler's demeanor convinced Chamberlain that he could trust Hitler's word. Chamberlain seems to believe that a link exists between a person's external behavior and their internal motivations. As history will reveal, Chamberlain was woefully misguided in trusting Hitler.

2. History sees Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler as having been completely botched by Chamberlain's misreading of him. How such a misreading could happen is a mystery, since Chamberlain insists that he kept meticulous track of Hitler's mannerisms and found him to be "rational, determined," and trustworthy. Gladwell argues that in believing he could trust Hitler, Chamberlain fell victim to the common misunderstanding that we can trust the information we glean from personal interactions with strangers.

History blames Chamberlain for failing to detect deceit in Hitler. Gladwell is sympathetic toward Chamberlain, however, suggesting that his misreading of Hitler as a "rational, determined" person is less a consequence of Chamberlain's gullibility than it is a natural human instinct to trust that people are being truthful. Essentially, nobody wants to believe everyone is lying to them.

While one might blame Chamberlain's misreading of Hitler on his naivete and inexperience in foreign affairs, Gladwell counters this with the argument that Hitler deceived many other foreign officials as well. Lord Halifax, an aristocrat who would become Chamberlain's foreign secretary, fell prey to Hitler's deception, too. And Halifax had ample political experience, having successfully negotiated with Mahatma Ghandi as Viceroy of India. Halifax travelled to Berlin in 1937 to meet with Hitler. Their meeting began on an odd note, with Halifax mistaking Hitler for a footman. In the five days Halifax spent in Germany, he also met with two of Hitler's top ministers, Hermann Göring and Joseph Goebbels. When Halifax returned to England, he was satisfied with the relationships he developed in Germany and confidently believed that Hitler had no intentions of going to war.

Lord Halifax's failure to detect deceitfulness in Hitler shows that Hitler was capable of fooling political figures with considerable negotiation experience. This implies that it was something other than Chamberlain's lack or experience that compromised his ability to read Hitler accurately. Gladwell is suggesting that Hitler's success, much like that of the Cuban double agents, was less a consequence of his skill or Chamberlain's naivete as it was humanity's fundamentally lacking ability to detect deceit.

One interesting feature of Hitler's deception, argues Gladwell, is that not *everybody* fell for his tricks. Rather counterintuitively, Hitler seemed to fool people who engaged with him closely. In contrast, those who had no relationship with him remained unconvinced. Winston Churchill might have deemed Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler "the stupidest thing that has ever been done," yet Churchill never met Hitler in person. Duff Cooper, one of Chamberlain's cabinet ministers, immediately saw through Hitler's performance when Chamberlain relayed the details of their meeting to him afterward. Yet Cooper, like Churchill, never met Hitler in person. Gladwell uses this counterintuitive pattern to conclude that the people who judged Hitler most accurately were the people who knew him least well, and the people whom Hitler fooled were the people who should have known him best. Furthermore, argues Gladwell, such a pattern exists beyond Hitler.

The trend of Hitler fooling people he met in person and failing to fool people who only heard about Hitler's strategizing secondhand suggests a correlation between the face-to-face encounter and the failure to detect deceit. In other words, something about engaging directly with another person makes us more inclined to trust the words that come out of their mouths than if we were simply to hear those words indirectly, from another person or in writing. Gladwell seems to think that something about the literal act of encountering and interacting with a stranger poises us to want to trust the stranger and our intuitions about the stranger.

3. Gladwell shifts focus to Solomon, a New York state judge. He describes a scene in which Solomon sits in his courtroom and observes a series of cases involving defendants arrested over the past 24 hours on suspicion of committing a crime. As each defendant approaches the stand, it's Solomon's task to determine if a perfect stranger is deserving of freedom or not. Cases with kids are the hardest, admits Solomon, and they're even harder when he can see the accused's mother sitting in the gallery. Gladwell compares Solomon's predicament to that which Neville Chamberlain faced with Hitler in 1938: figuring out how to make sense of a stranger.

Determining whether or not a defendant deserves to be released on bail requires a judge not only to consider the defendant's legal history, but also to ascertain their trustworthiness. Solomon's task requires him to read a stranger's mind and ascertain their trustworthiness and motives based on their outward demeanor. As Gladwell has shown the reader through his analyses of Neville Chamberlain's misreading of Hitler and the CIA's misreading of the double agents, such a task leaves considerable room for error.

One of Solomon's cases involved an older, Spanish-speaking man accused of assaulting his girlfriend's six-year-old grandson. If Solomon set the man's bail high, he would go straight to prison—despite his pleas of innocence. Furthermore, the man's record was virtually unblemished, and he had an ex-wife and 15-year-old son he was supporting. Solomon also considered how unreliable young children can be as witnesses. Faced with an incredibly difficult decision, the best Solomon could do was look the man in the eye and try to determine what kind of person he was. But, asks Gladwell, is such a strategy truly productive?

For Solomon to make a "correct" decision about the Spanish-speaking man, he must reconcile the discrepancies between the young grandson's accusation, the man's unblemished record, and the ethical ramifications of depriving the man's ex-wife and teenage son of financial support. Faced with so much conflicting information, the best Solomon can do is trust that his intuition will tell him whether or not the man will return for trial if released on bail. But, as Gladwell has shown before, our intuitions are subjective and not as reliable as we'd like to think they are.

4. To answer this question, Gladwell consults a study conducted between 2008 and 2013 by a Harvard economist named Sendhil Mullainathan. Mullainathan and his research team assembled the records for over 500,000 defendants tried in New York State and found that the state had released just over 400,000 of them. Next, Mullainathan programmed an AI system to analyze the same records and curate its own list of which 400,000 people it deemed most worthy of release. In the end, Mullainathan found that the computer's list of people was 25 percent less likely to commit a crime if released on bail than were the people that human judges deemed safe for release. In fact, human judges released 50 percent of the 1 percent of defendants the computer considered highly likely to commit a crime if released on bail.

The main difference between the computer program's methods and a human judge's methods for determining which defendants deserve to be released on bail is the additional independent variable of human intuition. The findings of Mullainathan's study—that the computer was overwhelmingly more accurate in determining which defendants were likely to commit a crime if released on bail than a human judge—reveals human intuition to be an obstacle *rather than an* asset *to determining bail worthiness. Once more, Gladwell shows how bad humans are at judging strangers.*

How can human judges be so wrong? And how could a computer, which has no access to anything uttered in the courtroom during the arraignment trials, judge the defendants more accurately? Gladwell cites a case study he explored in his second book, *Blink*, in which orchestras made better recruiting decisions when hiring committees assessed applicants' auditions from behind a screen. The practice prohibited the committee from forming biases based on applicants' appearance or race, for example.

In Blink, Gladwell tells the story of Abbie Conant, a professional trombonist who won a position with the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra via a "blind" audition in which judges sat behind a screen and were not aware of her gender, race, or general appearance. Although her playing impressed the judging panel enough to hire her, she experienced gender discrimination throughout her tenure with the orchestra. Conant's experience is a situation where a face-to-face interaction explicitly diminishes a person's ability to judge a stranger accurately and fairly.

There are more factors to consider in making a bail decision, however. For instance, a judge can factor mental illness into their decision, refusing bail for defendants whose illness might cause them to commit future crimes before their trial can take place. While some information contained in the defendant's records—such as previous hospitalizations—can provide insight into potential mental instability, however, Solomon argues that one can only ascertain other clues, such as a defendant's inability to make eye contact, *in person*. All this leads Gladwell to present Puzzle Number Two, which asks why meeting a stranger makes humans *worse* at judging their character than not meeting them at all.

Solomon argues that observing a defendant's mannerisms is a better indicator of trustworthiness than the objective facts contained within their medical records. The findings of Mullainathan's study suggest, however, that Solomon is overconfident in his personal ability to make an objective, informed judgment about a defendant.

5. Neville Chamberlain's final visit with Hitler occurred in September 1938. After Hitler verbally agreed to limit his conquests to the Sudetenland, Chamberlain asked him to sign an agreement attesting to this claim. Hitler enthusiastically signed the paper, and Chamberlain returned to England satisfied that Hitler would honor his promise. Yet, in March 1939, Hitler invaded all of Czechoslovakia. Less than six months later, he invaded Poland, which led to World War II.

Not only did Chamberlain catastrophically misjudge Hitler's intentions to start a world war, but he also walked away from the negotiation feeling confident about his success in judging Hitler's character. Gladwell offers this example of Chamberlain's botched negotiation with Hitler to demonstrate that humans are monstrously unskilled at judging strangers, as well as an ignorance about their lack of skill.

Gladwell describes a psychological study, led by Emily Pronin, which asked its subjects to do a word completion task. When Pronin asked the subjects to comment on what the words they formed said about their personalities, one subject objected to such arbitrary decisions having anything to do with who they were as a person, and many other subjects agreed. However, when Pronin gave the subjects *other* people's words, the subjects enthusiastically offered their judgment about what these completions said about the personalities of complete strangers. For instance, one subject surmised that another person's failure to complete B_ _K with "BOOK" was an indication that they didn't read much. None of the subjects seemed to realize that they had been tricked into applying a double standard to the way the word completions revealed truths about themselves versus complete strangers.

Pronin's study reveals that people are overconfident in their ability to judge the inner thoughts of others. At the same time, however, they fail to believe that other people can use the same technique to judge them. These findings suggest that people view themselves as complex and unreadable compared to other people, who are straightforward and easy to read. This double standard could explain why humans are fundamentally bad at reading strangers: because we fail to regard strangers with the same level of nuance and complexity that we project onto ourselves.

Pronin calls this double standard the "illusion of asymmetrical insight," and attributes it to the fallacy that we think we know other people better than they know themselves. Gladwell believes the illusion of asymmetrical insight is the problem at the core of the CIA's inability to identify the Cuban double agents, Chamberlain's inability to discern Hitler's deception, and judges' inability to determine whether a defendant should receive bail. Each case involves a grave overestimation of our ability to know things about a stranger. The purpose of the remainder of this book, explains Gladwell, will be to convince the reader of the fact that "Strangers are not easy."

Pronin's "illusion of asymmetrical insight" suggest that misreading strangers is a more complex issue than simply letting personal racist or sexist biases cloud one's opinion of another. Instead, misreading strangers is the result of the fundamentally flawed way we regard other people.

CHAPTER THREE: THE QUEEN OF CUBA

1. Gladwell resumes the Cuban spy story he began in Chapter One. The early 1990s ushered in a wave of Cuban refugees who fled from Cuba to the U.S. to escape Fidel Castro's regime. They traveled the 90 miles of the Florida Straits on crudely fashioned boats, and up to 24,000 died while trying to complete the journey. In response to the refugee crisis, Cuban emigres living in Miami formed Hermanos al Rescate ("Brothers to the Rescue"), an air force of single-engine planes that patrolled the Florida Straits to look for refugees and forward their coordinates to the Coast Guard.

The Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, thus ending the decades-long Cold War and leaving Cuba without its primary source of political and economic support. While the U.S. authorized for aid to be sent to Cuba initially, it reinforced its long-standing embargo in October 1992, which limited trade with Cuba. This increased tensions between the U.S. and Cuba, which sets the stage for the spy activity Gladwell details in Chapter Three.

Over time, Cuban emigres expanded their territory into Cuba, flying over Cuban airspace and dropping down political leaflets that urged the citizens of Havana to rise up against Castro. Tensions brewed between the Cuban government and the emigres, culminating in Cuban Air Force fighters shooting down two Hermanos al Rescate planes, killing all four people onboard. At a press conference, President Bill Clinton and the U.S. government condemned Cuba's actions.

An investigation conducted by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) concluded that Cuba had informed the U.S. government of multiple invasions into their airspace since 1994. The U.S. also issued a public warning about the dangers and potential consequences of U.S. residents gaining unauthorized entry into Cuban airspace. Yet, at this point in time, it's not known if U.S. officials had knowledge of the February 1996 shoot down.

However, coverage of the story changed after a retired U.S. rear admiral named Eugene Carroll revealed that he and some military analysts had met with Cuban officials the day before the air strike. On the visit, the Cuban officials asked what would happen if they were to shoot down one of the Hermanos al Rescate planes. When Carroll's group relayed this concerning information to the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), CIA, and NSA, all three agencies failed to act on the threat. When Carroll's admission went public, it was a huge embarrassment for U.S. intelligence, since the shoot-down had happened on February 24, a mere day after Carroll's people had made the U.S. government aware of the threat.

The timing of Carroll's visit with Cuban officials, during which Cuban officials implicitly warned Carroll of the attack, is suspicious. The implication is that Cuban officials somehow knew the Hermanos al Rescate had a mission planned the following day and wanted to ensure that the U.S. government knew about the possibility of an attack, but not well enough in advance to do anything about it. The logical explanation for this coincidence is that, once more, U.S. intelligence agencies had failed to notice the presence of a double agent among their ranks who was operating as an informant for Cuban intelligence.

2. Gladwell draws attention to some of the air strike's unsettling coincidences. For instance, isn't it odd that a prominent Washington insider (Carroll) just so happened to disclose Cuba's hypothetical plans to shoot down the Rescate planes the day before the air strike occurred? Furthermore, is it also a mere coincidence that Carroll went public with his claims on CNN the day *after* the attack?

Gladwell presents these coincidences as painfully obvious proof that U.S. intelligence had been compromised by a Cuban informant. Yet, as Gladwell has shown in his previous examples, hindsight is 20-20, and it's more difficult for people interacting with deceitful people face-to-face to detect deceit and compromised loyalty than it is for somebody examining the situation from a removed, objective perspective.

A counterintelligence analyst named Reg Brown shares Gladwell's suspicions. When the incident took place, Brown worked on the Latin American desk of DIA, and he was immediately suspicious that the Cuban government had orchestrated the entire crisis. One piece of evidence pointing to this conclusion was that Cuba had a source inside Hermanos al Rescate, a pilot, Juan Pablo Roque, who suspiciously disappeared before the attack, only to later reappear in Havana. Since it was likely Roque had informed his superiors of the Hermanos del Rescates' plans to undertake a mission on February 24, it wouldn't quite click that the date of Carroll's briefing in Cuba had been selected by chance.

Brown's determination that Roque must have been an informant make sense in the aftermath of the attack, yet this still leaves the problem of how Roque was able to operate as an informant and remain undetected until after the attack on the Hermanos al Rescate planes. Surely, Gladwell implies a U.S. intelligence agency like the DIA, whose agents have received special training to detect deceit, should have been able to place a finger on Roque before his work as an informant resulted in tragedy.

Brown's investigations suggested that it was most likely one of his DIA colleagues—a Cuban expert named Ana Belen Montes, whose glowing reputation among the intelligence community earned her the nickname "Queen of Cuba"—who had picked February 23 as the date of Carroll's briefing. This information troubled Brown, who was reluctant to accuse such a revered colleague of treason, but he finally came forward with his findings to a DIA counterintelligence officer named Scott Carmichael. Brown's most damning evidence included a report he had compiled in the late 1980s attesting to senior Cuban officials' involvement in international drug smuggling. A few days before Brown's report was set to be published, every official he mentioned in the report issued a public denial of their involvement, and it was clear there had been a leak.

That it was Montes who picked February 23—the day before the Hermanos al Rescate shoot down—suggests that she and Roque were both serving as informants for the Cuban government. Even though Brown eventually approaches authorities about his suspicions, it is striking to note that he waited around a decade after the confidential details of his late-1980s report on drug smuggling to request a formal investigation. It seems as though Brown needed to see a certain number of red flags before he felt it was a reasonable time for him to come forward with his suspicions. Once more, Gladwell presents an instance in which a person's desire to trust the people they work with results in deceit remaining unnoticed.

In 1994, two Cuban intelligence officers who defected confirmed Brown's suspicion that there was a high-ranking informant inside American intelligence. In his report to Carmichael, Brown also revealed that Montes had worked at the DIA's office on Bolling Air Force Base. Given Montes's status as an expert on Cuba, she should have been at the scene to investigate the incident. Yet when Brown called the evening after the shoot-down occurred, he was informed that Montes had left the office after receiving a phone call that made her "agitated." Brown became paranoid. His suspicions increased upon discovering that it was Montes who had arranged for Admiral Carroll's meeting with the Cuban officials.

Again, Gladwell shows that Brown had accumulated ample evidence that one of his colleagues was working as an informant for the Cuban government. Yet it's not until the aftermath of the Hermanos al Rescate shoot down in 1996, which cost four people their lives, that he believes his suspicions warrant a careful investigation. If it was Montes's involvement in the plan that made her appear "agitated" after receiving a phone call the evening after the shoot down, it's logical to infer that she had exhibited other outward signs of deceit in the years before, yet these signs, as far as we know, went unnoticed.

Months later, Carmichael investigated Montes's file and learned that she had passed her lie detector test and had no unusual activity in her bank account. Carmichael recalls believing that Brown must have been mistaken about Montes. After investigating Montes's file, Carmichael met with Montes. He immediately took note of her intimidating demeanor. When Carmichael asked Montes about arranging the meeting with Admiral Carroll, Montes claimed that she'd only accompanied Carroll to Cuba and hadn't arranged the meeting herself. When Carmichael asked Montes if the officer she claimed *did* set up the meeting would corroborate her story, she assured Carmichael that he would. Finally, when Carmichael asked about the troubling phone call Montes reportedly received the day of the shoot-down, Montes claimed not to have received the call. She insisted that she left work early due to a food allergy.

When faced with substantial evidence pointing toward Montes's guilt and Montes's innocence, Carmichael's instinct is to believe she is innocent. As Gladwell has shown in previous examples, humans appear to have a fundamental trust for the people they know well and interact with face-to-face. If we assume that Montes really did receive the suspicious call the evening after the air strike, her insistence that she hadn't receives a call seems to attack this fundamental trust: in insisting that the call never took place, Montes is attempting to use Carmichael's inclination to trust her to make him second-guess the suspicions of people who aren't there to defend their testimonies.

After Carmichael corroborated Montes's information, he was convinced that Reg Brown's concerns were unfounded. The investigation faded into obscurity until 2001, when it finally came to light that Montes had been operating as a spy all along.

Montes's strategy appears to have worked: her mere presence was enough to convince Carmichael that the accusations against her couldn't possibly be true.

3. In spy novels, double agents are clever and elusive. Gladwell argues that this trope explains why CIA agents attributed Florentino Aspillaga's admissions to Castro's genius, for instance. In reality, however, villains are rarely so impressive or meticulous. For instance, Aldrich Ames was a lousy worker with a drinking problem, and Ana Montes kept the codes she used to communicate with dispatches in Havana *in her purse*. Brian Latell, a CIA Cuba specialist who worked closely with Montes, described her as strange and observably tense whenever he would ask her about Fidel Castro's motives or other subjects concerning Cuban intelligence. Furthermore, when the CIA accepted Montes into their Distinguished Analyst Program and granted her the freedom to take a research sabbatical anywhere she chose, she opted to go to Cuba. In short, Montes made a number of sloppy decisions that should have raised red flags.

Real-life spies are far less impressive than fiction would have us believe. In reality, Gladwell suggests, the reason spies deceive the people they work with boils down to the fact that humans have a fundamental difficulty doubting the people they interact with face-to-face. For people like Brian Latell, who worked closely with Montes for years, it's easier to believe that Montes is a basically honest person who occasionally exhibits quirky behavior than to believe she has been lying to him for years. Gladwell is gesturing toward the idea that it's not Montes's impeccable secrecy that made her good at her job—it was the fact that people were willing to ignore any doubts they might have had about her over the years.

And yet, even Montes's brother—an FBI agent—had no suspicions about Montes. Montes's boyfriend, who worked in Latin American intelligence in the Pentagon, also had no idea. Montes's arrest shocked everybody. It shouldn't have, though, given the signs that were all around them if they'd only chosen to look. In short, Gladwell concludes, there's nothing special about spies—about "*them*." Rather, there's something flawed in "*us*."

That Montes could fool even her family and boyfriend, who should have been closer to her than her DIA colleagues, speaks to the degree to which humans are fundamentally biased toward trusting others. This is what Gladwell means when he attributes the problem to "us" rather than "them." It's not that some people are better or worse at keeping secrets from others—it's that we are all equally suspectable to believing that people are being honest with us.

4. Tim Levine has dedicated much of his career to conducting variations on the same experiment. In this experiment, Levine invites students into his lab and asks them trivia questions to win a cash prize. An instructor assigns each student a partner who, unbeknownst to them, is working with Levine. Partway through the study, the monitoring instructor leaves the room. Then, the partner points to an envelope that contains the answers to the trivia questions. Arguing that they could really use the cash prize, the partner urges the test subject to cheat by looking at the answers in the envelope. About 30 percent of test subjects end up cheating.

At a first glance, Levine's experiment seems to test subjects' willingness to behave deceitfully. It also shows how readily subjects are willing to trust and collude with their partners. The 30 percent of subjects who opted to cheat not only behaved deceitfully themselves, but they also failed to suspect that their partners could be part of the experiment. Again, Gladwell shows an example of people treating themselves differently than the people with whom they interact. The subjects who cheated failed to account for the possibility that their partners were in on Levine's experiment and behaving just as deceitfully as they were by withholding this critical piece of information.

Gladwell includes a transcript of the interview Levine's test subjects undergo after completing the trivia portion of the experiment. When the interviewer asks one subject, Philip, if he cheated, Philip mumbles noncommittal responses before stating "I guess. No." Most people who watch Philip's interview—Gladwell included—identify Philip as the cheating partner. Yet, as Levine shows additional subjects' interviews to viewers, it becomes harder to discern which subjects are lying and which are telling the truth. Another subject, Lucas, appears more confident in his responses. The impulse for most viewers is to believe that Lucas is telling the truth. In reality, however, Lucas is lying.

This second component of the experiment presents another study of deception detection. That most viewers cannot tell that Lucas is lying reinforces the idea Gladwell has presented numerous times over the past few chapters: that humans have a hard time detecting when somebody is lying to their face. That viewers swap the liar for the truth-teller presents a new idea, however, which is that we have prescribed ways we believe that honest people and dishonest people act (i.e., dishonest people act uncertain and fidgety, like Philip) that don't always align with reality.

After hours of watching taped interviews with Levine, Gladwell can no longer tell who is deceptive and who is truthful. One would think that years of evolution would make us better at identifying human deception, laments Gladwell, yet Levine's study proves otherwise. On average, viewers are able to correctly discern between liars and truthtellers just over 50 percent of the time.

Levine's experiment reaffirms the idea Gladwell has been gesturing toward over the past three chapters: that we're remarkably bad at detecting deceit. This low success rate has concerning implications when one considers how readily we believe that a person "acting guilty" is a sign of legitimate guilt.

Levine attributes people's inability to detect deception to what he calls the "Truth-Default Theory," or TDT. Levine's theory was inspired by one of his graduate students, Hee Sun Park, who pointed out that the 54 percent deception-accuracy statistic "was averaging across truths and lies," which is very different from how frequently people can identify truths and lies *independently*. While a person averages a 54 percent chance of discerning between truth and deception, they are considerably *better* at picking out truths than they are picking out lies. This is because humans have a "default to truth," or an "assumption [...] that the people we are dealing with are honest."

Levine's Truth-Default Theory differentiates between our ability to differentiate between liars and truth-tellers versus our ability to isolate liars independently. Levine's theory suggests that when we aren't sure if someone is lying, we give them the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are telling the truth; that is, we "default to truth," believing the best of a person.

Levine's experiment is an apt example of the "default to truth" phenomenon. One assumes that the students Levine invites to participate in his experiment aren't that gullible. After all, they're invited to partake in a psychological study for money, only to have a partner coerce them into cheating the moment the supervising instructor *just so happens* to leave the room. One would think that college students would catch on to this string of coincidences and recognize them as scripted components of the study. And yet, they don't make the connection. While some students recognize that certain elements of the study must be a setup, they never suspect that their partners are in on it—that their partners would lie to them.

Truth-Default Theory explains why the students who participate in Levine's study fail to consider that the supervising instructor and their partner are colluding with Levine. While plenty of the students who cheated on the trivia questions were capable of deceit, they never considered the possibility that their partners, too, could deceive them. As Emily Pronin's experiment revealed in the previous chapter, we fail to see other people as the nuanced, complex, and unreadable beings we believe ourselves to be.

According to Levine, engaging in the truth-default mode requires a "trigger." A trigger is an action that compels a person to stop "gathering evidence" and start accepting the version of reality that lets them forget the initial misgivings they might have had about a potentially deceptive situation.

One might think of a "trigger" as an anti-doubt: it's a behavior or change of circumstance that allows a person to dismiss any lingering doubts they might have had about a situation and embrace a version of reality that minimizes doubt and maximizes trust.

As an example, Levine cites Stanley Milgram's infamous 1961 obedience experiment, in which subjects were assigned the role of "teacher" and asked to deliver increasingly powerful shocks of electricity to a "learner" named "Mr. Wallace." The "teacher" would give Mr. Wallace memory tasks, and each time Mr. Wallace would fail, an experiment supervisor would order the teacher to administer increasingly powerful shocks as punishment. Teachers were under the impression that they were administering shocks to see whether receiving threats impacted a person's memory. As the shock voltage increased, Mr. Wallace would cry out in pain. If the teacher hesitated, the monitoring instructor would urge them to continue, prompting them with commands like, "You have no other choice, you must go on." In the end, most teachers complied with the instructor's commands, and 65 percent administered the maximum voltage of 450 volts.

Milgram's experiment is understood to suggest that people are more likely than not to obey authority figures, even if doing so forces them to perform morally dubious actions. Milgram created his experiment to research the psychology of genocide, wondering whether Nazi authority figures who committed unspeakable acts at concentration camps during the Holocaust were simply following orders. Milgram's finding would suggest that this is the case. It's worth noting, however, that modern investigations of Milgram's experiment question the legitimacy of his findings. A 2012 study by Australian psychologist Gina Perry suggests that Milgram intentionally manipulated his findings to present the outcome he wanted. Additionally, many subsequent attempts to replicate Milgram's findings have been unsuccessful. This calls into question the legitimacy of Milgram's findings.

In addition to the Milgram experiment's implications about compliance, Levine also believes the experiment offers compelling insight into human gullibility. In reality, the experiment was entirely staged. "Mr. Wallace," the "learner," wasn't really administered electric shocks—he was an actor who was paid to cry out in agony to make subjects believe they were inflicting pain on another human. What's more, Wallace wasn't a particularly good actor. In fact, Gladwell notes, the whole production was "a little far-fetched" and unbelievable. Even so, many subjects fell for it and "defaulted to truth."

Levine's interpretation of the Milgram experiment draws on similarities the experiment has with his own study, namely subjects' willingness to take the studies at face value. Just as most of Levine's participants failed to suspect their partners of colluding with Levine, so too did many of Milgram's participants believe they were administering shocks to a real person. In short, both studies exhibited participants who "defaulted to truth."

Not all of Milgram's subjects were so naive, however. In fact, many of them had serious doubts about the legitimacy of the experiment. One of the original test subjects believed that Wallace was faking his cries of pain. However, after Wallace emerged from the supposed shock room and put on an act of looking worn and emotional, the subject second-guessed himself. In the end, over 50 percent of Milgram's subjects believed the learner was receiving painful shocks; 24 percent had doubts but believed; 6.1 percent was undecided; 11.4 percent believed the learner was probably not receiving shocks; and only 2.4 percent failed to fall for the setup. So, while over 40 percent of subjects had doubts about the experiment, those doubts weren't enough to counteract their instinct to default to truth. This is the crux of Levine's philosophy on deception: people don't believe because they have no doubts—they believe because they "don't have enough doubts[.]"

Following Levine's logic, Wallace's performance following the shock treatment, in which he emerged from the shock room looking haggard and emotional, was the "trigger" that caused participants to dismiss any doubts they might have about whether they were actually administering shocks to another person and accept the reality that their actions had harmed Wallace. Though they might have had suspicions that they were being set up, seeing Wallace's worn appearance was enough to compel them to set aside those doubts.

5. Ana Belen Montes grew up in a wealthy suburb of Baltimore, Maryland. She studied at the University of Virginia and received a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University. She supported the Marxist Sandinista government in Nicaragua, which caught the attention of a Cuban intelligence recruiter who secretly brought her to Havana in 1985. Shortly after this, Montes joined the DIA and moved steadily up the ranks. When Scott Carmichael conducted his investigation of Montes, her coworkers described her as "focused" and "intelligent," albeit somewhat "aloof" and reserved.

For Montes's coworkers, her "focused" and "intelligent" demeanor was the so-called "trigger" that allowed them to disregard the "aloof," possibly suspicious elements of her character.


When Montes met with Carmichael, she assumed he was conducting a standard security check. She initially tried to call Carmichael off by claiming that she had just been promoted to Acting Division Chief and didn't have a lot of time to spare. Carmichael initially played along with the lie, but when Montes pushed too hard, he came clean about his suspicions that she was involved in a counterintelligence operation. The accusation created an instant look of fear in Montes's eyes. In retrospect, Carmichael realizes, it was this look that initially gave Montes away, since her reaction made no sense. Montes didn't try to question the accusation or ask Carmichael to backtrack—she simply stared ahead in silence.

Even Montes, who one would think might be hyper-aware of any suspicions directed toward her, defaults to truth and assumes that Carmichael is questioning her as part of a standard security check rather than a directed attempt to expose her as a spy. When Carmichael explicitly tells her that he is investigating her on the suspicions that she is involved in a counterintelligence operation, this is the trigger that prohibits her from casting aside her doubts that her colleagues are onto her.

Carmichael remembers having doubts about Montes. But, as Levine would argue, doubt that one can reason oneself out of isn't enough to "trigger disbelief." And Carmichael was more than willing to reason himself out of believing that the "Queen of Cuba" was a spy. As Carmichael and Montes continued to talk, Montes relaxed and became almost flirty. She continued to insist that she had never received a phone call the day of the shoot-down. Although people who were in the situation room with Montes that day clearly remember her receiving a phone call, this red flag wasn't enough to trigger Carmichael's disbelief. Montes raised a final red flag when she became agitated when Carmichael asked her to recall her movements after leaving work the day of the shoot-down, specifically whether she saw anyone on her way home from work.

Even as Montes continues to respond to Carmichael's interview in mildly suspicious ways, her casual, even flirtatious demeanor creates a reassuring atmosphere that makes it impossible for Montes to "trigger disbelief" in Carmichael. Her demeanor is reassuring enough that Carmichael even disregards the damning evidence that Montes continues to deny receiving a phone call that multiple people claim she received. Finally, when Montes responds to Carmichael's question about her activities after work the day of the air strike with agitation, it's more evidence that Carmichael's reluctance to doubt Montes isn't a consequence of Montes's skillfulness as a spy, but a symptom of his human instinct to assume that people are being honest.

After Montes's arrest, investigators discovered the truth about her movement that night. Cuban intelligence had a system in place where seeing one of her old handlers on the street was a signal to Montes that her spymasters needed to speak with her right away. When Carmichael later asked Montes if she had seen anyone she knew after leaving the office the night of the shoot-down, she must have assumed he was privy to this arrangement and aware of her spy activities. And yet, despite Montes's clearly suspicious reaction to Carmichael's question, he chose to rationalize her response.

Even as Carmichael interviews Montes with the explicit purpose of investigating suspicions that she is involved in engaged in spy activity, he finds reasons to rationalize her clearly suspicious behavior.

Gladwell concludes that while Montes was not a particularly talented spy, she didn't need to be. In a world governed by the Truth-Default Theory, people are primed to ignore all manner of deceptive behaviors. According to Levine, it's incredibly difficult to accumulate enough doubt that we are willing to reject the truth. Our instinct is to believe, and we will dismiss a high degree of doubt before we are willing to abandon belief. This logic provides us with an answer to the first puzzle of why Cuban intelligence was able to fool the CIA for so long: like all other humans, CIA agents have a bias toward truth.

Gladwell opens his discussion of Truth-Default Theory with a series of situations involving intelligence officers to show how even in extreme cases where people are specially trained to detect deceit, the human bias toward truth wins out and compels people to set aside their doubts. And, if trained experts are bad at detecting deception, this doesn't leave much hope for lay-people.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE HOLY FOOL

1. In November 2003, a Long Island-based portfolio manager named Nat Simons emailed his colleagues to express his concerns over a fund in which his hedge fund, Renaissance Technologies, had stakes. The fund in question was operated by a New York investor, Bernie Madoff, whom Simons disliked. Madoff was a big name in the finance world in the 1990s and early 2000s. He served on boards for numerous financial-industry associations and was incredibly secretive. Madoff's secretive nature made Simons suspicious of the man, and these suspicions only grew when someone Simons trusted predicted that Madoff would deal with "a serious problem" later that year. Apparently, Madoff was facing serious allegations about the legitimacy of his investment fund.

Gladwell opens this case involving Bernie Madoff, the New York financier responsible for the largest Ponzi scheme in history, by describing the abundant reasons Nat Simons had to be suspicious of Madoff's fund's legitimacy. As we've seen in the previous chapters, people can possess excessive incriminating evidence against others and still default to truth anyway, casting aside doubt to believe in a simpler story.

The next day, Henry Laufer, a senior executive at Renaissance, confirmed that something fishy was going on with Madoff. This prompted Laufer, Simons, and the fund's risk manager, Paul Proder, to conduct an investigation. Their findings revealed no plausible way for Madoff to make all the money he was reportedly making. Despite this concerning result, Renaissance didn't cut ties with Madoff's fund entirely, opting instead to "hedge their bets" and decrease their stake in the fund by half. When the news broke five years later that Madoff was operating a massive Ponzi scheme, Simons was shocked. While he'd been mildly suspicious of Madoff, he never truly believed Madoff was a fraud. Like so many others, Simons "defaulted to truth."

As one might have expected, Renaissance Technologies chose to discount their suspicions about Madoff; their default to truth shows up in their decision to decrease their stakes rather than sever ties with Madoff outright. Simons also marks a distinction between being suspicious of Madoff and truly believing that Madoff was committing fraud. In Levine's logic, Simons is describing the difference between having doubts and having enough doubts to trigger disbelief. In Simons's case, he simply didn't have enough doubt to transform mere suspicion into full-fledged belief.

The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) uncovered Simons and Laufer's email correspondence about Madoff during one of their routine audits. The SEC had been alerted to Madoff before. His fund generated *unbelievably* steady returns, which didn't make sense within the context of a perpetually fluctuating market. While Madoff claimed his steady returns were the combined result of skill and intuition, SEC investigator Peter Lamore remained unconvinced. Still, Lamore and his boss, Robert Sollazzo, set their doubts aside. So did the rest of Wall Street. While some investment banks avoided doing business with Madoff, nobody acted on their suspicions until early February 2009, when a man named Harry Markopolos testified before Congress.

Just as Gladwell showed with Ana Montes's success with deceiving the DIA, the Madoff case presents an example of reputable institutions and competent people willfully discounting their legitimate doubt about Madoff and his fund to default to truth. Markopolos is different from people Gladwell has discussed thus far. Unlike many others, he refused to default to truth and came forth with his suspicions about Madoff. This poses the question, what is it about people like Markopolos that allows them to avoid becoming suspectable to Truth-Default Theory?

Markopolos was a virtually unknown independent fraud investigator who had been trying to convince the SEC to investigate the Madoff Ponzi scheme since 2000 after he and his team thoroughly investigated Madoff's activities in Europe, where Madoff had generated most of his wealth. Their results gave the SEC more than enough evidence to shut down Madoff's operation, yet the SEC did nothing.

One possible cause for Markopolos's willingness to come forth about his suspicions about Madoff is his status as an independent fraud investigator. Thus far, Gladwell has mainly presented people like el Alpinista and Scott Carmichael who are associate with big, powerful institutions. Perhaps some aspect of existing apart from others compels a person to trust their gut instincts.

Gladwell places Markopolos among the minority of people who doubted Madoff and "did not default to truth." While a person might see defaulting to truth as a social ill that lets criminals off the hook, Gladwell suggests that there's more to Levine's Truth-Default Theory than meets the eye. In fact, there might even be benefits to defaulting to truth.

Whether it makes more sense for a person to embrace their fundamental bias toward truth or adopt a more skeptical attitude, like Markopolos, depends on how frequently a person encounters deceptive people in their daily lives. Markopolos's whistleblowing is commendable, but how often is the average person going to stumble upon a massive Ponzi scheme? If we accept that most people are trustworthy, can we really justify the intense emotional labor of trusting no one?

2. Gladwell describes Markopolos as a youthful, energetic man. On Wall Street, Markopolos is known as a "quant," or "numbers guy." To Markopolos, "math is truth." When he assesses an investment opportunity, he doesn't meet any of their people in person because he believes that doing so will distract him from the facts. Markopolos's skepticism comes from his upbringing as the child of Greek immigrants who taught him to be wary of the world. His parents ran a chain of Treacher's Fish & Chips outlets. The theft he observed in the business made him suspicious of fraud at an early age, and he carried a low tolerance for deception with him throughout his life.

Markopolos's approach to making sense of strangers is the opposite of anything Gladwell has presented thus far. Unlike Neville Chamberlain or the New York judge, Solomon, for instance, Markopolos believes that meeting someone in person will distract rather than aid in understanding them. His mantra, "math is truth," reaffirms this stance, suggesting that the only objective honesty we can really rely on is the honesty of cold, hard facts.

Madoff first came to Markopolos's attention in the 1980s, and Markopolos was immediately suspicious of the man's operation. In this regard, Markopolos was way ahead of Renaissance. The main difference between Markopolos and Renaissance, Gladwell states, is that while Renaissance trusted the system to prevail, Markopolos had no such illusions. Gladwell compares the people at Renaissance Technologies to the students involved in Levine's experiment, noting how both groups were unwilling to believe they were part of a setup.

Renaissance's status as a major hedge fund—as an institution within the broader system of the free market—gave it a confidence that it could trust the system to prevail. Markopolos's status as an independent outsider affords him no such trust, since he has only his own instincts and biases on which to rely. Gladwell seems to be gesturing toward a relationship between society and trust and, at the opposite end, independence and distrust.

3. Gladwell describes an archetype in Russian folklore called *yurodivy*, or the "**Holy Fool**." The Holy Fool is an outcast who society deems "eccentric" or "crazy," yet who also "has access to the truth." Furthermore, it is the Holy Fool's outcast status that gives him this access to the truth. People who exist outside of social constraints can say and see things everyone else accepts without question. One example of a Holy Fool is the Emperor in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes." In Andersen's version, the Emperor walks down the street in what is supposed to be a magical outfit. In reality, he is wearing nothing and was duped by tailors who claimed to have made him an outfit that would be visible only to a person "unfit for their job." Because none of the village people—nor the Emperor—was willing to admit to their supposed incompetence, nobody alerted the Emperor to his nakedness. In the end, it's a young boy—the Holy Fool—who dares to admit what nobody will say: that the Emperor is naked.

A Holy Fool's position on the outskirts of society gives them "access to the truth" that people who exist within society, sheltered by the protections of social networks and institutions of power, often fail to see. If Holy Fools actually have more wisdom and "access to the truth" than people who exist within society, the name "fool" seems rather counterintuitive, since it's actually the others who exist within society who are behaving foolishly by failing to believe truths that are right in front of them. Calling someone who disregards social norms in pursuit of truth a "fool" touches on the complicated relationship between society and truth. If everyone were as suspicious as the Holy Fool, there would be no society, since nobody would trust anybody else enough to participate in it. The Holy Fool is foolish not only because their ideas contradict those society deems socially acceptable, but because they give up the protections society affords them for their ideas.

3. Gladwell asserts that whistleblowers like Markopolos are contemporary society's **Holy Fools**. To the Holy Fool, unlike the rest of society, deception is everywhere. And while it can be beneficial to society to unearth deception, Levine's research suggests that humans evolved without developing skills necessary to identify deception because there's no biological advantage to over-scrutinizing the words and actions of others. On the other hand, being overly trustful allows for "efficient communication and social coordination," which arguably are beneficial to society. In short, Levine argues, the benefits of giving people the benefit of the doubt are greater than the cost.

Levine's research suggests that it is more beneficial for humans to trust and find safety and comfort in others. "Efficient communication and social coordination" are more conducive to survival than alienating oneself from society and avoiding deception on the very rare occasions where deceit occurs. In this light, one of the ways humans are bad at talking to strangers (that is, the fact that we're bad at identifying when they are lying to us) isn't such a bad thing after all.

4. In summer 2002, Markopolos and a colleague traveled to Europe in search of investors for a new fund they were starting. Upon discovering that nearly everyone he spoke with had invested with Madoff, Madoff's influence became apparent to Markopolos, and he realized that a lot of important, wealthy people had an interest in keeping Madoff's Ponzi scheme afloat. Markopolos believes that this is why the SEC ignored his many pleas for their attention.

Markopolos's experiences in Europe sheds additional light on why people default to truth. Here, Markopolos suggests that the SEC was unwilling to listen to his concerns not because it didn't believe Markopolos, but because it had incentive to keep wealthy, influential people happy.

Markopolos recalls his attempt to pass along his findings about Madoff to Eliot Spitzer, New York's attorney general, at a function at the John F. Kennedy Library at which Spitzer was delivering a speech. Paranoid that someone might stop his plan, Markopolos disguised himself to avoid suspicion. Despite these precautions, he was unable to deliver the files to Spitzer personally and gave them to a woman in Spitzer's party instead. In the end, Spitzer never received the documents. Looking back, Markopolos realizes that being overly suspicious cost him the opportunity to deliver the files to Spitzer. Had he leveraged the important position he held at the time as the President of the Security Analysts, he likely would have been granted access to Spitzer. Gladwell analyzes Markopolos's mistake within the context of Levine's Truth-Default Theory, which suggests that the occasional deceit doesn't pose a serious threat to human evolution.

Markopolos's failure to deliver his files to Spitzer shows how hyper-vigilance can backfire and have negative effects. Here, Markopolos's paranoia about being intercepted before he can deliver the papers ends up being the factor that directly interferes with his ability to deliver the papers. In failing to trust society, Markopolos deprives himself of an opportunity to tell the truth. Gladwell seems to suggest that the benefits society affords a person outweigh the guarantee of never falling victim to deceit.

5. After the SEC refused to listen to Markopolos's claims, he started carrying a gun. He went to his local police chief and claimed that his life was in danger. When Madoff turned himself in, Markopolos temporarily believed that all his troubles were behind him. He quickly changed gears, however, and decided that the SEC would now want to get their hands on *his* files, which were proof of their repeated incompetence. Markopolos grew increasingly unhinged, keeping a loaded gun in his house and pulling out his old gas mask for self-protection.

Gladwell depicts Markopolos as undergoing a slow descent into paranoia and unhappiness. In this way, Markopolos functions as something of a cautionary tale against trying to shield oneself from deception absolutely. Gladwell seems to believe that occasionally being wrong about people—and being wronged by people—are risks a person takes to participate in society.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE BOY IN THE SHOWER

1. Chapter Five opens with a March 21, 2017 trial transcript between the prosecution and Michael McQueary, a former quarterback who in 2001 served as assistant coach for the Pennsylvania State University football team. The Deputy Attorney General for Pennsylvania, Laura Ditka, interrogates McQueary about witnessing Jerry Sandusky, who had just retired as defensive coordinator of the Penn State football team, molest an underage boy in the locker room showers one night in February 2001. At the time, Sandusky was a beloved figure in a community that took great pride in their football team.

The Penn State child sex abuse scandal is another case study that involves a powerful institution, Pennsylvania State University. Gladwell has thus far adopted a sympathetic approach toward people who want to choose the safety of society and institutions over embracing the truth. A major aspect of the Penn State scandal involved public outcry over university leadership's decision to protect Sandusky and the economic interests of their institution, which effectively allowed Sandusky's crimes to go unpunished for decades.

When McQueary confided in his boss, head coach Joe Paterno, about what he saw, Paterno seemed sad but passed along McQueary's admission to his boss, Tim Curley, Penn State's athletic director. Curley told the school's president, Graham Spanier. An investigation took place, and Sandusky was arrested. Afterward, eight young men came forward to testify that Sandusky had abused them for years.

At a first glance, information regarding Sandusky's alleged abuse seems to make its way up the administrative hierarchy seamlessly. Yet, while McQueary witnessed and reported the shower incident in 2001, it took another decade for an investigation to begin. To use Levine's logic, it took a decade for administration to uncover evidence that was enough to "trigger disbelief."

The most egregious element of the Sandusky case was that while McQueary witnessed the abuse in 2001, the investigation into Sandusky's behavior didn't begin until 2011. The court and the public would blame this delay of justice on Penn State's leadership. Paterno was forced to resign, and Tim Curley and Gary Schultz, two high-ranking administrators, were charged with "conspiracy, obstruction of justice, and failure to report a case of child abuse." Both men served time for their crimes. Attention later shifted toward Graham Spanier. Spanier had once been a beloved figure responsible for uplifting the university's academic reputation. By November 2011, however, the court convicted him of child endangerment.

The findings of an independent investigation conducted by former FBI Director Louis Freeh revealed that Spanier, Curley, and Schultz had known about allegations of Sandusky's child abuse as early as 1998—years before McQueary approached leadership with what he witnessed in the locker room showers in February 2001. Other reports indicate that Sandusky began assaulting children as early as 1971. If these allegations are true, the Penn State child sex abuse scandal is the most extreme version of defaulting to truth Gladwell has presented thus far. It's worth noting that the veracity of certain details of Freeh's report, too, have been up for debate.

At the height of the scandal, Sandusky spoke to NBC sports anchor Bob Costas. He claimed not to be a pedophile despite openly admitting to showering with young boys, and he used much of the interview to defend his actions. However, given the stories of Ana Montes and Bernie Madoff, and considering all these cases through the lens of Tim Levine's Truth-Default Theory, Gladwell argues, is it really fair to believe that the officials at Penn State who allowed Sandusky's behavior to continue could have responded any differently? And does the reader think they would have responded differently?

Gladwell uses Levine's Truth-Default theory to challenge accusations that Penn State leadership had knowingly allowed Sandusky's abuse to continue without repercussion, insinuating that officials had simply not been given enough evidence of any wrongdoing to "trigger disbelief." Asking what readers think they'd do highlights that Gladwell's arguments aren't just fun and games. Hopefully, readers will be able to use what they learn to think more critically about how they fit into society, and how they can best react when things in their own lives don't add up.

2. Gladwell summarizes Jerry Sandusky's sports-centric childhood growing up in Washington, Pennsylvania. Sandusky grew up surrounded by the many children his parents fostered and adopted, and he wanted to carry the joy of childhood with him as an adult. In 1977, he founded a charity organization, Second Mile, for troubled boys from impoverished and unsettled homes. Sandusky played with the boys, gave them gifts, and tried to be the father they didn't have. Suspicions about Sandusky's behavior first emerged in 1998 when a Second Mile boy told his mother he and Sandusky had showered together in the locker room. The mother took her son to a psychologist, Alicia Chambers. The son saw nothing wrong with the interaction with Sandusky, so nothing came of the incident.

Chambers contacted Ron Schreffler, a University Park detective, following the mother's report. When Schreffler reached out to the Centre County Children and Youth Service to investigate the allegations further, he was informed that the organization had a conflict of interest with Second Mile. As additional investigating agencies become involved, conflicting opinions begin to emerge about whether or not Sandusky's actions were extreme enough to warrant pressing charges. Ultimately, it was agreed that Sandusky simply needed to be taught about boundaries, and by early June 1998, District Attorney Ray Gricar decided not to pursue the case. As more powerful people with institutional backing become involved, more conflicting opinions form, which prevents any single narrative of guilt to emerge to "trigger disbelief" in anybody who had power to push the investigation forward.

The next incident came in 2008 from a boy named Aaron Fisher who *did* feel uncomfortable with Sandusky's physical behavior. Fisher met with a child psychologist over the course of a year, eventually uncovering his buried traumas and alleging that Sandusky had forced him to engage in sexual activity. Yet, due to Fisher's "default to truth" —his impulse not to doubt Sandusky—neither of these complaints went anywhere. Even a caseworker assigned to the 1998 abuse case couldn't definitively state that the incident could be considered sexual abuse. Likewise, Aaron Fisher's claims about oral sex that occurred between himself and Sandusky changed too often to be credible, and in 2009, a grand jury twice decided not to indict Sandusky.

Truth-Default Theory might explain why the caseworker assigned to Fisher's case and other adults who were aware of the abuse allegations doubted the veracity of Fisher's claims. At the same time, it seems rather reductive to claim that Fisher was defaulting to truth by trusting that a revered adult figure in his life (Sandusky) wouldn't do anything to harm him. There are more complex power dynamics involved in a relationship between a minor and an adult and culturally conditioned reasons why a child would "default to trust" adults in their life. At any rate, Gladwell includes cases like Fisher's to portray the Sandusky case as more ambiguous than certain media portrayals of it would suggest.


Everything changed in November 2010, when an anonymous email advised the prosecutor's office to talk to McQueary, who had supposedly witnessed an incident between Sandusky and a child. In McQueary, the prosecution finally had a credible witness to corroborate claims made against Sandusky. Leadership's failure to act on McQueary's accusation for eleven years drew outrage. Prosecutor Laura Ditka used the adage "absolute power corrupts absolutely" in her closing statement, suggesting that "Graham Spanier was corrupted by his own power[.]"

Gladwell establishes the prosecution's narrative of the Sandusky case: that a system of morally bankrupt people knowingly and purposefully abused their positions of power to protect the public image of their beloved football team at the expense of innocent children. But, as Gladwell has hinted, does such a stance tell the full story? Were things really as black and white as the prosecution would suggest? Or was administration simply faced with an assortment of doubts that weren't enough to "trigger disbelief?"


3. Michael McQueary was 27 years old and 225 pounds at the time he claims he witnessed a rape. Gladwell wonders why, if McQueary was so sure of what he saw, he didn't interfere to stop the abuse himself. Why had he instead run home and confessed to his father, and later, his doctor? In trial, Jonathan Dranov, the doctor to whom McQueary confessed, states that McQueary could not specify which sort of "sexual sounds" he heard, nor could he describe what, exactly, he saw. As a physician, Dranov is legally obligated to report suspected child abuse. Why, then, Gladwell wonders, did Dranov not come forward upon first hearing McQueary's admission? In trial, Dranov claimed that McQueary's story didn't sound "inappropriate enough" to report to Children and Youth Services.

The first way Gladwell challenges the prosecution's (and, by and large, the public's) understanding of the Sandusky case is by discrediting the notion that there was no ambiguity surrounding the allegations against Sandusky. Gladwell suggests that the accepted narrative surrounding the case falsely portrays Michael McQueary's 2001 allegation as absolutely damning. Yet, if everyone—including McQueary—was certain that an incident of abuse had occurred, it makes no sense that they'd opt not to go to the police right away. Gladwell is suggesting that these people hadn't heard enough damning evidence to "trigger disbelief."

Furthermore, there were inconsistencies in McQueary's story regarding the exact date he witnessed the shower incident that compromised his reliability as a witness, which the prosecution handled by simply pretending they "didn't exist." In fact, on reading the 2011 indictment, McQueary expressed concerns to lead prosecutor Jonelle Eshbach about his words being twisted. He wanted to alter them to convey his uncertainty about what he saw. In his letter to Eshbach, McQueary lamented how the indictment had painted him as a coward who clearly saw a rape and chose to run away to his parents rather than interfere. In short, the prosecution "had turned gray into black and white" to fit their chosen narrative and throw McQueary under the bus in the process.

Gladwell's main issue with the prosecution's handling of the Sandusky case is that it erases all nuance and ambiguity to present a more polished, compelling narrative of guilt. Such a narrative is problematic because it minimizes the subtle ways in which doubt influences a person's willingness to believe or reject the presence of deception. As Levine's Truth-Default Theory states, the degree of doubt matters more than the mere presence of doubt. People can have doubts about a person's innocence and still remain on the fence about whether they're truly guilty.

4. Gladwell compares the Sandusky scandal to the Larry Nassar case that unfolded a few years later. Nassar was a beloved team physician for the USA Gymnastics national team who had treated girls for years. His signature treatment was for "pelvic-floor dysfunction" and involved inserting his fingers into the patient's vagina to massage the muscles that had been shortened by years of intensive gymnastics training. Nassar would engage in this treatment often and without gloves, and he would accompany the procedure with medically unnecessary fondling. In short, the supposed medical procedure was really a front for sexual gratification. Nassar was convicted on federal charges in the summer of 2017.

Gladwell invokes the Larry Nassar case—another infamous child sexual abuse case that remained undisclosed to the public for decades—to further argue for the Sandusky case's ambiguities. Compared to the Sandusky case, the Nassar case was clear-cut and sufficiently documented. Despite numerous allegations gymnasts made against Nassar over the years—allegations that Gladwell seems to suggest are more credible than those of Sandusky's accusers—Nassar's trial, too, received the benefit of the doubt for years.

Gladwell categorizes the Nassar sex abuse scandal as "remarkably clear-cut." Nassar's seized computer contained abundant child pornography, as well as photographs of his young patients. Hundreds of athletes came forward to accuse him. Rachael Denhollander, whose allegations convicted Nassar, describes abuse that began at age 15. When she came forward to press charges in 2016, she was armed with an entire file of damning evidence. And yet, it took years for Nassar to be brought to justice.

Humanity's bias toward truth necessitated the discovery of child pornography on Nassar's personal computer before people were willing to believe the numerous allegations against him. Gladwell continues to establish the Nassar case as "remarkably clear-cut" compared to the Sandusky case to suggest that Penn State's leadership's actions weren't all that illogical.

Another Nassar victim, Larissa Boyce, testified to abuse that began in 1997. When she told Michigan State gymnastics coach Kathie Klages, Klages confronted Nassar. Nassar denied the allegations, and Klages chose to believe Nassar, not Boyce. This pattern recurred throughout Nassar's career. After a 2016 *Indianapolis Star* article broke the news of Denhollander's accusations against Nassar, those close to Nassar, including his boss, the Dean of Osteopathic Medicine at Michigan State, sided with Nassar. Many parents of Nassar's patients, too, believed in his innocence. It wasn't until police discovered the images on Nassar's hard drive that people began to believe the allegations.

Gladwell describes the substantial support Nassar received from his associated institutions—and even the parents of his victims—to show the immense power the bias toward truth has to make people second-guess their doubts and latch onto an easier narrative of Nassar's innocence. Nassar's case also shows how having a personal relationship with someone can exacerbate one's ability to make sense of them, as Nassar managed to deceive parents and close colleagues for years.

One mother—a doctor herself—recalls sitting in on one of her daughter's appointments and noticing that Nassar had an erection while treating her daughter. She thought it was "weird" but felt bad for the man and brushed aside her vague concerns. This situation, too, wasn't unique: many other parents sat unsuspectingly in the examination room as Nassar abused their daughters.

This uncomfortable scene portrays an extreme example of the power our bias toward truth has to influence perspective and alleviate doubt. The mother had every reason to suspect that something "weird," wrong, and criminal was going on in the examination room that day, yet her instinct to doubt herself allowed her to practically deny the existence of everything she saw.

Gladwell argues that the exceptionally "monstrous" nature of Nassar's misconduct was what made it so hard to believe. Had patients reported smelling alcohol on Nassar's breath or claimed he had treated them rudely, for instance, parents might have been quicker to complain. States Gladwell, "default to truth biases us in favor of the most likely interpretation." Indeed, even Nassar's victims initially stepped in to defend him. When a teammate confided in Trinea Gonczar about Nassar's behavior, Gonczar brushed aside the girl's apprehensions. Gonczar assured the girl that Nassar did those things to her "all the time!" Gonczar only changed her position once "the evidence against Nassar became overwhelming." While the Nassar case presents an example of how "default to truth" influences a clear-cut case, however, the Sandusky case isn't so simple.

Gladwell suggests that cases with abundant evidence like Nassar's are just as liable to be doubted as cases like Sandusky's, which are more ambiguous. Because "default to truth biases us in favor of the most likely interpretation," we stand the chance of rejecting evidence that doesn't conform to our ideas about how "monstrous" people are capable of being. In other words, the evidence against Nassar was simply too good to be true. It's also worth noting that one might view Gladwell's analysis of Gonzcar's initial denial as rather oversimplistic. It does a disservice to survivors of sexual assault to construe Gonzcar's impulse to trust Nassar as illustrative of a human urge to believe the best in people without also taking into account how the trauma Gonczar endured influences her perspective and compels her to compartmentalize her experiences.

5. After the public learned of the accusations against Sandusky, former Second Mile member Allan Myers rushed in to defend him. Myers insisted he had showered with Sandusky multiple times as a child and that nothing sexual had occurred between them. Furthermore, after reading the details of McQueary's account, he affirmed that he was the boy in the story. According to Curtis Everhart, an investigator for Sandusky's lawyer, Myers claimed that he and Sandusky were slapping towels at each other the night McQueary walked in on them in the locker room. Nothing sexual had occurred, and McQueary was lying. Only weeks later, however, after Myers began speaking with a lawyer who represented numerous alleged Sandusky victims, Myers changed his story and asserted that Sandusky *had* assaulted him. Ultimately, the prosecution felt that Myers's story was too inconsistent and opted not to bring him in as a witness.

Gladwell explores Gonzcar's testimony next to Myers's to draw on their similarities. Both cases involve a minor who initially alleges they experienced nothing out of the ordinary by an accused sexual predator, only to backtrack and insist that they were mistaken in their initial statement. Gladwell emphasizes these similarities to show the lengths people will go to give another person the benefit of the doubt. Additionally, these conflicting witness statements invite the reader to adopt Gladwell's sympathetic stance toward the adults and institutions who failed to believe the accusations against Nassar and Sandusky. If the alleged victims aren't even sure if they were assaulted, how could people who didn't directly experience the alleged assault be expected to believe that it had occurred?

Another notable Sandusky victim is Brett Swisher Houtz, a Second Mile kid who had been very close with Sandusky. Houtz was brought in as a witness and testified to dozens of sexual encounters with Sandusky. However, when Sandusky's wife, Dottie, was called to testify, she claimed that Houtz and Sandusky had remained friendly until a few years ago—two decades after the alleged abuse had occurred.

Gladwell's analysis of the Sandusky case within the context of Truth-Default Theory offers a new take on a messy, troubling case. Examining the case from this perspective allows us to see how witness testimonies were more ambiguous and inconsistent than the public might have been led to believe they were.

Gladwell asserts that the Sandusky case was more complex than the Nassar case because Sandusky's victims hadn't complained or confided in their friends. Instead, they acted as though nothing happened and voluntarily remained in contact and on friendly terms with their abuser well into adulthood. It's the "layers of shame and denial and clouded memories," Gladwell observes, that make sexual abuse cases complicated.

Gladwell suggests that the Sandusky case was particularly complex due to Sandusky's victims failing to behave as society believes victims of abuse should behave. Victims' failure to act visibly traumatized or hurt made their claims less believable.

6. Gladwell wonders about the doubts Curley and Schultz must have had about McQueary's initial accusation. After all, if what McQueary saw was so damning, why hadn't he gone straight to the police? In his witness testimony, Penn State lawyer Wendell Courtney describes a conversation he had with Gary Schultz when the assault allegations first came to light. In this conversation, Schultz expressed his doubts that anything sexual had occurred in the locker rooms. He also claimed that McQueary never mentioned anything about hearing sexual "slapping sounds."

Gladwell reemphasizes his earlier point about the inconsistencies in McQueary's allegations. Focusing on these inconsistencies forces the reader to put themselves in administrators' shoes and consider what they would have done if met with information as ambiguous as that which McQueary allegedly posed to Courtney.

Courtney considered Sandusky's reputation for having a playful, goofy demeanor around the Second Mile kids in public and, in Gladwell's words, "defaulted to that impression." When Curley and Schultz approached Spanier about the allegations against Sandusky, they construed Sandusky's behavior as "horsing around." Spanier recalls feeling uncertain about how to move forward with such a vague accusation. Ultimately, he chose to believe "the likeliest explanation," which was that Sandusky was the goofy but harmless man Spanier knew him to be.

It's worth noting that while Spanier's conviction of one misdemeanor charge of child endangerment was overturned in 2019, it was reinstated by an appeals court in December 2020. The Freeh report (an external investigation into the handling of the Sandusky case) also concluded that Spanier, Curley, Shultz, and Paterno knowingly concealed Sandusky's behavior, though Spanier's attorney disputed these claims. At any rate, Gladwell emphasizes Spanier's doubts here to further exemplify Levine's notion of Truth-Default Theory.

7. Curley and Schultz were charged first. Spanier, who had sincerely believed the men's claims that Sandusky's conduct was mere "horseplay," refused to distance himself from them. Gladwell argues that Spanier's loyalty is what made people like working with him. In contrast, nobody would want to work with someone like Harry Markopolos, who constantly suspects the worst in people. But, Gladwell argues, condemning Spanier for defaulting to truth stems from people's collective misapprehension that we should want our protectors to be on constant high alert for deception. Gladwell concludes the chapter by implying that there is a significant downside to being constantly suspicious with no regard for the possible consequences of that suspicion.

Gladwell draws on Levine's notion of Truth-Default Theory and the evolutionary benefits of trusting one's community to argue that we should have compassion and empathy for people like Curley, Shultz, Spanier, and Paterno who were placed in the difficult situation of having to pass judgment based on inconsistent and ambiguous information. Gladwell also implies that it is unfair to judge these men as if we can say with certainty that we would have acted differently in their situation. This is another theme Gladwell develops throughout the book: that we see ourselves as complex and nuanced but project an air of simplicity onto other people.

CHAPTER SIX: THE FRIENDS FALLACY

1. By its fifth season, *Friends*, a comedy about six friends living in downtown Manhattan, was slated to become one of the most popular television series of all time. Gladwell describes the seemingly convoluted plot of the episode "The One with the Girl Who Hits Joey," where tensions mount after Ross's sister, Monica, starts dating Chandler, who is Ross's best friend. The synopsis sounds complicated on paper, yet Gladwell asserts that on-screen, the plot of *Friends* is so simple that a person could follow it without hearing the sound.

The straightforwardness of an episode of Friends *evokes the way we want our interactions with strangers to be, though it's rarely that simple. As Gladwell has shown his study of Ana Belen Montes's success at fooling the DIA for years, as well as the study of the ambiguous Penn State child sex abuse scandal, people and situations are harder to read, and their motivations are harder to understand, than anything that might happen in a sitcom.*

2. To test his theory about *Friends*, Gladwell recruits Jennifer Fugate, a University of Massachusetts psychologist. Fugate is an expert in FACS (Facial Action Coding System). FACS assigns a number to each distinctive muscle movement the face can make to assess and score a person's facial expressions. To illustrate his point, Gladwell provides a photograph of a man smiling with the corners of his lips pulled up into a "Pan-Am smile," which appears polite but noticeably fake, much like the expression flight attendants use on their passengers.

FACS was developed by Swedish anatomist Carl-Herman Hjortsjö. It was further developed and published by Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen in 1978. Today, it's used in a variety of fields, from psychology to animation. Experts have also suggested that FACS can be used in the measurement of pain patients who cannot communicate verbally. The mechanics of FACS are compelling, but in light of everything Gladwell has presented regarding humanity's inability to read strangers, he questions if it is oversimplistic to believe that we can assess a person's emotions based on their outer facial expression.

Next, Gladwell presents a photograph of the same man boasting a "Duchenne smile," or a "genuine smile." This smile involves more muscles, particularly those around the eyes. Gladwell asks Fugate to analyze the expression Ross makes in the opening of the episode referenced in this chapter's introduction. Fugate's results, which focus on Ross's furrowed brow and raised lip, match the emotion the viewer is meant to discern in Ross: a mixture of "anger and disgust." Fugate analyzes a number of other expressions characters make throughout the episode, and each of her findings matches the emotions that the episode's storyline requires of them. These findings confirm Gladwell's opening theory: a person could discern the plot of an episode of *Friends* with no sound, since the actors' facial expressions are what carry the plot.

Fugate's analysis of Ross's face proves Gladwell's theory about Friends *correct: the actors' facial expressions can map their characters' inner emotions and motivations reliably enough carry the plot. But all this proves is that actors who are trained to manipulate their faces to achieve a specific affect can do so on command. It does not prove that people can so reliably and predictably use facial expressions as a measure of inner reality or character.*

Gladwell ruminates on the idea of transparency, which refers to the idea that a person's exterior appearance matches their interior reality. Strangers complicate transparency, since it's harder to read a person's outer expressions and behaviors when we don't know them personally.

For transparency to work, facial expressions, demeanor, and behavior would need to be universal: that is, every person in the world would need to have the same facial expression for sadness, anger, happiness, etc., and be able to identify that expression in others. Gladwell's suggestion that it's harder to make sense of strangers' facial expressions implies that this is simply not the case.

3. Gladwell explores the history of transparency, beginning with ideas Charles Darwin put forth in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). According to Darwin, quickly and efficiently conveying our emotions to others is critical to survival. Gladwell describes Darwin's theory as "intuitive." After all, children know to smile when they're happy, and people around the world can identify how Ross and Rachel are feeling based on their facial expressions.

Needing to quickly and effectively understand the emotions of others has obvious evolutionary benefits. It's advantageous to know when other people are exhibiting signs of hostility or violence, for instance. But in light of Mullainathan's experiment in Chapter Two, where a computer program could more accurately determine which defendants were more likely to commit a crime if released on bail than a human judge, is an "intuitive" understanding of emotion something that actually exists?

As another example of the weight society places on transparency, Gladwell cites an incident where a Michigan judge dismissed a Muslim woman's case after she refused to remove her *niqab* so he could look her in the eyes. The judge argued that he needed to "see certain things about [her] demeanor […] in a court of law." But is the judge really correct to assume that seeing the woman's face would tell him anything about her personality or motivations? If the judge were correct, Gladwell argues, judges would be better at assessing defendants than computers—and we've already seen that this is not the case.

The Michigan judge thinking he needs to "see certain things about her] demeanor" reflects his overconfidence in his ability to ascertain anything about the woman based on how she looks and acts. As Gladwell has made abundantly clear over the past five chapters, however, people aren't particularly good at assessing emotion. In fact, seeing strangers' faces often has the opposite *effect, diminishing our ability to assess people objectively.*

4. There's an archipelago called the Trobriands roughly 100 miles east of Papua New Guinea. The isolated tropical region is home to 40,000 people who practice a traditional lifestyle of farming and fishing. The region is virtually untouched by features of modern life. For this reason, social scientists go to the Trobriands to test hypotheses for universality. In other words, if an experiment elicits similar results in New York and the Trobriands, it's indicative that those results are consistent across humankind.

Testing the replicability of a social or psychological experiment in somewhere like the Trobriands is a good measure of universality because it eliminates the presence of customs and social norms inherent in modern life that might skew results. If people in New York and the Trobriands respond similarly to the same study, it's evidence that these responses come from some innate, human instinct rather than cultural conditioning, which shifts according to one's surroundings.

In 2013, an anthropologist named Sergio Jarillo and a psychologist named Carlos Crivelli traveled to the Trobriands to study transparency's limitations. They wanted to know if people across different cultures saw the same emotions in facial expressions. The scientists first presented six photos depicting different facial expressions to schoolchildren in Madrid and asked the children to match each photo to a specific emotion. The children aced the task. Next, Jarillo and Crivelli took the faces to the Trobrianders. Despite speaking a rich, emotionally nuanced language, the Tronbrianders struggled with matching the correct emotions to the correct faces. For instance, while 100 percent of the Spanish schoolchildren matched the smiling face to the "happy" emotional label, only 58 percent of Trobrianders managed to do so. Anger especially confused the Trobrianders, with 20 percent of them identifying the angry face as a happy face. These results suggest that transparency is not universal.

The findings of Jarillo and Crivelli's study demonstrate that facial expressions vary across cultures. In other words, there is no universal expression for happiness or anger. These findings are important to Gladwell because they debunk the common myth that people's facial expressions provide reliable, accurate insight into inner character or demeanor. It discredits the judge in Chapter Two who thinks he can tell whether a defendant will commit a crime if released on bail simply by looking at their face. After all, if facial expressions vary across cultures, there's no reason to think they don't vary within cultures, as well.

5. If transparency varies across cultures, does it also vary *within* cultures? Gladwell asks the reader to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they are led down a hallway into a dark room. There, they listen to a recording of a Franz Kafka story. At the end of the story, the reader must exit the room and walk down the hallway to take a memory test on what they have just heard. However, while the reader was listening to the story, the hallway changed: a team of workers took down the walls of the room and illuminated a bright bulb in the center. The reader's best friend is now sitting in a chair, a grave expression on their face. Surely, Gladwell argues, this unexpected twist would cause a surprised expression to form on the reader's face.

The experiment Gladwell describes is setting up the participant to respond with a particular emotion (surprise). If the participant responds to the altered hallway and grave-looking friend with surprise and *a stereotypically surprised expression (i.e., mouth agape, wide eyes, and an audible gasp, perhaps), it will imply that there is a meaningful connection between cultural associations with facial expressions and genuine emotional responses. If the participant's feeling of surprise is paired with some other facial expression, however, this finding would suggest that facial expressions are more varied and nuanced than one might initially expect them to be.*

This very scenario was tested by two German psychologists, Achim Schützwohl and Rainer Reisenzein. When asked to describe how they looked upon seeing the changed hallway, each subject assumed they had made a surprised expression. However, this was rarely the case. Video footage showed that only five percent of subjects made a surprised expression. These findings suggest that transparency is a construct we have learned from watching TV or reading books, where stereotypical expressions, such as a dropped jaw and wide eyes, correspond reliably to specific emotions. In real life, this correlation simply doesn't exist.

Schützwohl and Reisenzein's findings suggest only a weak connection between cultural ideas about what surprise looks like and what surprise actually looks like on human faces. The idea that people are transparent—that we can read a person's face and know what they are thinking—is manufactured and unreliable.

Believing in the myth of transparency is more compromising when dealing with strangers than with friends. When we get to know people, we learn to read their unique, personal emotional expressions. Gladwell recalls an incident that occurred at his family's vacation cottage. His father was in the shower when he heard Gladwell's mother scream and ran to assist her. Gladwell's father found a large man holding a knife to Gladwell's mother's throat. Gladwell's father sternly and loudly told the man to leave. To the assailant, Gladwell's father's expression might have seemed threatening. To someone who knew Gladwell's father, however, it would have been clear that his face registered fear. Gladwell concludes that seeing strangers forces us to "substitute an idea—a stereotype—for a direct experience."

While over time we can learn how specific people will modify their facial expressions and body language to respond to specific emotional stimuli, there's no manual that can help us how to discern fear from happiness from hostility universally. *People are not transparent, and it takes time and attention to learn how to discern their inner mood from their outer demeanor. This creates a real problem when one considers how widespread the myth of transparency is in American culture, from the judge who believes looking at a defendant gives them a better sense of their character to the administrator who believes they can tell the difference between their employee's "horseplay" and sexual abuse.*

6. The limitations of transparency explain the second puzzle Gladwell presented in Chapter Two: why are computers better judges of character than judges? The answer to this puzzle is that seeing a defendant in person gives the judge no advantage over the computer because facial expressions are a flawed way of assessing character. Gladwell cites a famous case in which a Texas man named Patrick Dale Walker was charged after putting a gun to his girlfriend's head. The judge lowered Walker's bail from $1 million to $25,000 after Walker spent some time in jail to "cool off." To Walker's judge, Walker seemed "mild-mannered" and calm, and he didn't have a record, either. He was also class valedictorian and showed remorse for his actions. The judge thought Walker was transparent. However, while out on bail four months later, Walker shot and killed his girlfriend. Walker's case confirms Team Mullainathan's findings that "the unobservables," or exterior attributes that the computer cannot see, "create noise, not signal."

Walker's judge mistook his "mild-mannered" demeanor for evidence that Walker was essentially mild-mannered as a person and unlikely to harm his girlfriend if released on bail. The judge's error resulted in devastating consequences. Gladwell includes this example to suggest that our overconfidence in our ability to ascertain truths about a stranger based on appearances alone regularly leads to mistakes, missteps, and, in rare cases, irreversible harm. Gladwell's remark that "the unobservables," exterior traits a computer cannot see "create noise, not signal" refers to the way emotional expressions "create noise" that distracts humans from seeing the truth about strangers. In reality, a facial expression we imagine to be a "signal" of a stranger's inner character is little more than "noise," the stereotypical, cultural associations we have with facial expressions that prevent us from understanding what people are really telling us with their unique, nuanced behaviors.

While the shortcomings of transparency can lead to devastating consequences, Gladwell maintains that society can't very well eliminate personal interactions entirely. States Gladwell, "the transparency problem ends up in the same place as the default-to-truth problem." While our methods for dealing with these problems are imperfect, they are also "socially necessary." The "paradox of talking to strangers," Gladwell argues, is that "we need to talk to them. But we're terrible at it."

The "paradox of talking to strangers" is what has, thus far, prevented Gladwell from offering any conclusive advice about how to improve our interactions with strangers. While there are flaws in the way we interact with strangers (i.e., we tend to trust them blindly, and we think we are better judges of character than we really are) there's no real way to exist in society without engaging with unfamiliar people.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A (SHORT) EXPLANATION OF THE AMANDA KNOX CASE

1. Rudy Guede, a "shady" character with a criminal history, murdered Meredith Kercher, a British exchange student, on November 1, 2007. Guede had been spending time around Kercher's house in Perugia, Italy, around the time of her murder. The crime scene was covered in his DNA, and he fled Italy for Germany immediately after investigators discovered Kercher's body. Despite the mountain of evidence against Guede, police focused their attention on Amanda Knox, Kercher's roommate, and Knox's boyfriend, Raffaele Sollecito. It was Knox who called the police after returning home one morning and finding blood in the house she shared with Kercher. Knox and Sollecito immediately became suspects and were charged with and convicted of Kercher's murder. The case dominated the media.

Gladwell introduces the infamous Amanda Knox case by comparing the type of evidence police held against Rudy Guede, the convicted murderer, to evidence they held against Knox and her boyfriend. The evidence against Guede was material: investigators found his DNA all over the crime scene. He also had a verifiable history of burglary and other crimes. In contrast, the evidence against Knox and Sollecito was circumstantial and presumptive: police used Knox's action of calling the police to make all kinds of assumptions about her behavior, personality, and motivations.

In hindsight, it is ludicrous that Knox and Sollecito were ever convicted. There was neither physical evidence nor motive to tie them to the case. Knox was an average, if not slightly naïve, college-aged woman from Seattle. Yet, the Italian Supreme Court bought the prosecutor's far-fetched scenarios of Knox and Sollecito's involvement in "elaborate sex crimes," and it took eight years for the pair to be exonerated. Gladwell forgoes a lengthy discussion of the many ways investigators botched their investigation into Kercher's murder at the expense of Knox. To Gladwell, the Knox case is about transparency.

The botched investigation of Knox and Sollecito rested on investigators' flawed logic that Knox's behavior was a valid substitute for material evidence. Like Solomon (the judge from Chapter Two) or Neville Chamberlain, investigators believed they could know all they needed to know about Knox—their stranger—by looking her in the eyes.

2. Gladwell analyzes Knox's case within the context of Tim Levine's trivia game experiment. Levine's findings in this experiment suggest people aren't good at detecting deception. But why is this so? In Chapter Three, Gladwell identifies humanity's tendency to be biased toward truth and willing to give others the benefit of the doubt as one explanation. But humanity's inability to detect lies is more complicated than this. To illustrate his point, Gladwell describes the interview of one of Levine's test subjects, a girl named Sally, whose face turned red when her interviewer asked her if she was telling the truth. Sally is lying. Another test subject, whom Gladwell calls "Nervous Nelly," never stops fidgeting as she answers her interviewer's question. Popular logic would suggest that Nervous Nelly, too, is lying. However, she's actually telling the truth.

The reason Sally and "Nervous Nelly" seem untrustworthy is because they exhibit behaviors our (Western) culture typically associates with deception, such as fidgeting, blushing, and physical discomfort. The problem with this logic is that it assumes a person's outer restlessness is a reflection of the inner moral restlessness that accompanies lying. In reality, as Gladwell suggests in the previous chapter, there is no universality to facial expressions and other physical responses to emotional stimuli. People's responses to emotional stimuli are nuanced, complex, and rarely conform to cultural stereotypes about what certain emotions ought to look like.

Levine's findings identify two distinct groups of people. The first consists of interviewees whom 80 percent of judges judged incorrectly. The second consists of interviewees whom judges judged correctly 80 percent of the time. Gladwell categorizes these findings as an example of "transparency in action." We tend to think that lying people behave nervously: they avoid eye contact, fidget, and look uncomfortable. In reality, this simply isn't true. It confuses us, then, when truthful people act stereotypically suspicious, and vice versa. Gladwell concludes that people aren't necessarily bad lie detectors—they're simply bad at detecting lies "when the person we're judging is mismatched."

Gladwell is suggesting that when people follow a social script—when their behaviors align with a society's commonly held views about what emotion that behavior is supposed to signify—we have no problem judging them accurately. The problem arises when we encounter a person whose emotional responses fall outside of society's prescribed, narrow ideas about how people ought to act in a given situation. The person who blushes and avoids eye contact as they tell the truth comes off as a guilty because they are mismatched: they act the way their culture believes a guilty person, not an innocent person, acts.

As an example, Gladwell describes financial journalist Michael Ocrant's experience interviewing Bernie Madoff after Markopolos tipped him off to Madoff's likely fraudulent activity. Ocrant recalls being struck by Madoff's casual, calm demeanor during the interview. Madoff's attitude made it impossible for Ocrant to believe he was guilty of the crimes of which Markopolos accused him. Gladwell reasons that this is because "Madoff was mismatched. He was a liar with the demeanor of an honest man." Although Ocrant knew that Madoff was likely guilty, Madoff's surprisingly calm attitude threw him off guard enough that he dropped his story.

Madoff's "mismatched" behavior was convincing enough to compel Ocrant to doubt and dismiss the objective evidence of Madoff's guilt. Ocrant's actions show how social norms influence our bias toward truth: Ocrant's failure to reconcile Madoff's honest behavior with society's idea of how a guilty person is supposed to look and act causes him to recant his belief in Madoff's guilt. When Ocrant reverses his opinion of Madoff, he accepts that his personal views are less reliable than the views that social norms espouse.

3. To Gladwell, Amanda Knox is an apt example of the mismatched, of "the innocent person who acts guilty." The media misunderstood and attacked Knox, fixating on her nickname, "Foxy Knoxy," and pointing to her act of buying red lingerie the day after Meredith's murder as evidence of sexual deviancy. In reality, Foxy Knoxy was a childhood nickname that referenced Knox's agility on the soccer field, and she was buying underwear because she had no access to her personal belongings while police investigated her house as a crime scene. In reality, Knox was a nerdy, "quirky" young woman who had trouble fitting in.

Amanda Knox is like Nervous Nelly: her behavior does not align with society's ideas about how a person in mourning ought to behave. Throughout the investigation and trial, the media and investigators seized on many of Knox's easily explainable behaviors (i.e., buying underwear when she didn't have underwear to wear). They drew from negative cultural stereotypes about female sexuality to advance a narrative that portrayed Knox as a morally bankrupt, sex-crazed woman whose deviance showed through in her visible lack of grief for Kercher's death.

The public further attacked Knox when her odd behavior in the aftermath of Meredith's murder didn't conform to common stereotypes of how people in grief or in shock are supposed to act. She was aloof and unaccepting of comfort. Other times, she was overly affectionate with Raffaele or inappropriately goofy. The lead investigator of the case, Edgardo Giobbi, claims that his team determined Knox's guilt based on her "psychological and behavioral reaction during the interrogation."

Giobbi explicitly admits to using illegitimate, circumstantial evidence to convict Knox when he claims that her "psychological and behavioral reaction during the investigation" was somehow proof of her guilt. Giobbi subscribes to the myth of transparency: he believes that Knox's unique behavior correlates to his culturally specific ideas of how guilt looks.

4. Levine's findings also suggest that law enforcement agents aren't any better at determining guilt or innocence based on behavior than laypeople. While law enforcement performed above average when determining the guilt or innocence of "matched" people, their judgement of mismatched people proved to be highly problematic. In fact, law enforcement correctly identified the guilt or innocence of mismatched people just 14 percent of the time. Gladwell wonders whether our inability to judge mismatched people can account for a fraction of wrongful convictions and other miscarriages of justice.

Gladwell insists that unfortunately, Knox's poor treatment by the Italian justice system is far from unusual. Levine's research reveals that law enforcement are no better at reading people's behavior than lay-people. This is so concerning for Gladwell because it suggests that the methods by which law enforcement are trained to assess suspects are based on the myth of transparency.

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE FRATERNITY PARTY

1. Chapter Eight opens with a transcript from the trial of Brock Turner. The prosecutor asks a Stanford University graduate student, Peter Jonsson, to recall the events of January 18, 2015. That night, Jonsson and his friend, fellow graduate student Carl-Fredrik Arndt, observed a man atop a woman outside a fraternity house. When Jonsson realized that the woman was unconscious, he angrily called out for the man to stop. The man tried to flee the scene, but Jonsson and Arndt tackled him before he could escape. The man was Brock Turner, who later claimed to have met the young woman at a party, drunk and danced with her, and gone outside to lay down. The woman, known in legal proceedings as Emily Doe, was found partially undressed. When she awoke in the hospital a few hours later, she was shocked to hear that she might have been sexually assaulted.

The Brock Turner sexual assault case presents a new type of stranger encounter. Gladwell emphasizes a few details about the case that give us insight into the angle from which he will approach this stranger encounter. First, he describes how Turner and Doe drank together prior to the assault. Then, he specifies that Jonsson believed Doe was unconscious during the assault. Finally, Gladwell mentions the fact that Doe was surprised to hear that she had been sexually assaulted, suggesting that she had potentially blacked out prior to Turner sexually assaulting her. These details suggest that Gladwell's aim is to draw the reader's attention toward the role alcohol intoxication played in this extreme example of a stranger encounter gone awry.

2. The situation between Turner and Doe isn't unique. Many college-aged people meet at parties and choose to go home together. Sometimes, things end badly. One in five American college students report being victims of sexual assault. Gladwell laments the complexity of these types of cases, noting the difficult nature of discerning whether one or both parties consented or objected to sexual activity.

Gladwell establishes a link between college sexual assault and miscommunication. He argues that the issue of proving whether the involved parties communicated consent makes sexual assault cases particularly difficult to assess from a legal and ethical standpoint. As Gladwell has suggested in previous chapters, strangers are harder to read than we tend to think they are.

Gladwell believes the transparency assumption adds yet another layer of complexity to sexual assault cases. He references a *Washington Post* poll that asked 1,000 college students to identify which actions imply a desire to engage in more sexual activity. "Takes off their own clothes" generated results of 47 percent Yes to 49 percent No. "Nods in agreement" generated results of 54 percent Yes to 40 percent No. In contrast, "engages in foreplay" elicited results of 22 percent Yes to 74 percent No. On this final question, there is a sharp divide between men's and women's responses, with considerably more men than women agreeing that foreplay is an invitation for additional sexual activity. Consent would be simple if college students agreed on what it meant, but these variable responses show that people have vastly different ideas about what constitutes consent and what does not. Additionally, Gladwell argues, alcohol exacerbates people's abilities to register consent.

The survey questions Gladwell quotes here all involve the act of making an assumption about somebody's intentions based on their behavior. College students' split responses to these questions reveal how heavily the myth of transparency plays into attitudes toward consent. Students who agreed that these behaviors indicate consent are operating under the assumption that a person's actions accurately connect with their inner thoughts and motivations. In other words, their logic is based on an assumption that people are transparent. The assumption of transparency becomes an even bigger problem when alcohol is involved, since alcohol intoxication can affect the behavior and cognitive function of all parties involved in a sexual encounter.

3. In his trial, Brock Turner admitted to consuming approximately five Rolling Rock beers and an unspecified amount of Fireball Whiskey before attending the fraternity party. He continued to drink after he arrived. Emily Doe's friends also testified that they drank alcohol prior to and during the party. Doe attests to drinking several shots of whiskey before leaving her house. Upon arriving at the party, she and her friends drank from an unopened bottle of vodka they found in the basement. In trial, she testified to being "pretty much empty-minded" and "not articulating much" due to her level of intoxication.

Gladwell offers descriptive details of the copious amounts of alcohol Turner and Doe consumed the night of the assault. He does this to emphasize the prominent role alcohol played in their encounter, and the degree to which it explicitly compromised their ability to communicate effectively. For instance, Doe recalls feeling "pretty much empty-minded" and "not articulating much," indicating the high degree to which alcohol consumption hindered her ability to communicate logically and verbally.

Doe and Turner met around midnight and started dancing. They chatted, started kissing, and walked outside after Doe agreed to go back to Turner's dorm room. Once outside, Turner alleges, he and Doe slipped and fell to the ground. They laughed about it, though, and resumed kissing. Turner alleges that he received Doe's permission to "finger" her and that she said she liked it. According to legal scholar Lori Shaw, under California law, a person must be intoxicated enough to be physically incapable of exercising reasonable judgment in order to be deemed incapable of giving consent. This differs from simply having too much to drink. The question thus becomes: was Doe initially a willing sexual participant and then passed out afterward, or had she been physically incapacitated from the start?

Gladwell describes the events of the night leading up to the assault to emphasize the communication Doe and Turner engaged in at the start of their stranger encounter. Initially, they appeared to be on the same page from a communication standpoint, with Turner allegedly receiving affirmative consent from Doe to engage in sexual activity. For Gladwell, and for the court, the critical question becomes at which point Doe's physical incapacitation caused this communication to break down. If Doe was too intoxicated from the start, the issue becomes whether the alleged consent she gave earlier in their encounter could be considered consent at all, since California law states that a physically incapacitated person is incapable of giving consent.

Ultimately, the jury ruled against Turner because they found his story unbelievable. It didn't make sense to them that Turner would flee when the graduate students confronted him if he was truly innocent. A photograph of Doe lying on the ground, clothes half off, near a dumpster, further convinced the jury of Turner's guilt. He was charged with three felony counts of assault and a prison sentence of six months. While the "who" and "what" of the Turner case are clear, Gladwell ruminates on the "why." Why did an allegedly innocent encounter at a party go so wrong? Gladwell's proposed answer has to do with a "lack of transparency," which "makes the encounter between a man and a woman at a party a problematic event."

Gladwell believes that a "lack of transparency" led Brock Turner to misinterpret Emily Doe's body language and initiate a sexual encounter to which she was potentially unable to consent. By fixating on transparency, Gladwell seems to suggest that blaming Turner's behavior on sexism or misogyny sidesteps the real underlying issue, which is that we're simultaneously bad at communicating with strangers and unaware of how bad we are. When we fail to recognize how we misunderstand others, we stand the chance of harming them, which "makes the encounter between a man and a woman at a party a problematic event."

4. In the mid-1950s, a Yale University anthropology graduate student named Dwight Heath traveled to Bolivia with his wife, Anna, and their baby to conduct field work for his dissertation about the Camba people. The Heaths immersed themselves in the Cambas' culture. Every Saturday, the Heaths would attend drinking parties with "heavily ritualized" structures. Attendees would sit in a circle, people would play music, and a bottle of rum would be passed around the circle until people became too tired or intoxicated and passed out. Anna recalls one occasion where Dwight had been so intoxicated, apparently, that he had wrapped his arm around a searing hot lantern and failed to notice that he was burning his arm. Upon returning to New Haven, the Heaths analyzed the liquor they'd been drinking and discovered that it was 180 proof laboratory alcohol, a potent substance not fit for human consumption.

Gladwell includes this anecdote about the Heaths' research on the Camba people to challenge the notion that alcohol necessarily *encourages violent or coercive behavior. Aided by excessively, dangerously strong laboratory alcohol, the Camba drank to acute intoxication each weekend. Yet, the Heaths report no unrest among the party attendees. The reason for this has to do with context. The Camba drink in a "heavily ritualized" context. They're not drinking in unpredictable settings that place them in the complicated position of having to make sense of unfamiliar people. We can speculate, then, that the absence of violence is directly linked to the absence of the unknown and the unpredictable.*

One would think that drinking alcohol of this strength every weekend would lead to increased violence and sexual aggression among the Camba, yet the Heaths observed none of this. Nor did they observe any alcoholism among the Camba. Dwight Heath published his findings in the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*. Subsequent studies confirmed Heath's findings: while alcohol sometimes resulted in increased violence, no definite link between alcohol and increased violence could be established. Studies conducted in other cultures garnered similar results. Ultimately, the Heaths' work in Bolivia inspired a rethinking of our understanding of intoxication. It suggested that alcohol was less "an agent of disinhibition" than "an agent of myopia."

Heath's research proposes an explicit relationship between alcohol and context that hadn't existed before. When intoxicated people become violent, it's not a consequence of the alcohol itself, but of the context in which the intoxication occurred. Surrounded by close friends and in a controlled, predictable environment, the Camba saw no increase in violence as they grew more intoxicated. "Myopia" is a clinical term for nearsightedness. Describing alcohol as "an agent of myopia" reaffirms that it doesn't make people violent; rather, it changes how they see and interpret their surroundings.

5. Psychologists Claude Steele and Robert Josephs were the first scientists to propose the "myopia theory," which dictates that alcohol heightens the drinker's concern for immediate considerations and inhibits their concern for long-term issues. The myopia theory explains why alcohol has such varied effects dependent on one's immediate surroundings. If a sad person drinks alone in a bar, they'll feel sadder and more alone. However, if a sad person drinks while surrounded by friends at a football game, the atmosphere may boost their mood. In short, alcohol "crowds out everything except the most immediate experiences." This differs from the older disinhibition theory of alcohol, which suggested that drunkenness robbed a person of all inhibition. States Gladwell, "Alcohol isn't an agent of revelation. It is an agent of transformation."

Myopia theory suggests that alcohol intoxication causes the drinker to lose sight of distant surroundings and distant consequences. The drinker then redirects their attention toward immediate concerns, i.e., their immediate surroundings, and the immediate consequences of their actions. When people become intoxicated, they redirect their behaviors and values to match the atmosphere and expectations of their immediate surroundings. To suggest that alcohol intoxication simply disinhibits the drinker oversimplifies the problem at hand and ignores the vital role that time, place, and other variables play in how the drinker responds to intoxication.

6. Gladwell shifts focus to the case of a 25-year-old software designer named Brian Bree. In 2006, Bree and a woman known in court as "M" drank heavily all evening before returning to M's apartment to have sex. Bree believed the sex was consensual, but M alleged that it was not. The case was brought to trial, and Bree was convicted of rape and sentenced to five years in jail, although the case was ultimately dismissed on appeal. In court, Bree testified to engaging in sexual contact that he assumed was consensual, though he never asked for M's consent, figuring he could "infer" what she wanted based on her actions or lack of verbal refusal.

Bree alleges that he"infer[ed]" that M had consented to a sexual encounter because she failed to reject his advances verbally or physically. Bree's logic rests on the myth of transparency, which is problematic under normal circumstances. By his own admission, he felt that he could "infer" M's feelings based on behavior. Myopia theory, however, would suggest that their situation becomes even more complicated once alcohol enters the picture. Understanding strangers is complicated enough, but Bree was attempting to navigate this challenge while under the distorting influence of alcohol.

In contrast, M's testimony described an unwanted sexual encounter. She reportedly called her best friend in tears at 5:00 that morning. Meanwhile, Bree remained so unaware of M's "inner state" that he invited her out for lunch a few hours later as though nothing was awry. After serving several months of his sentence, the court dismissed Bree's case, claiming that it was impossible to gauge whether or not consent had occurred and that neither party had behaved unlawfully in consuming excess amounts of alcohol. Gladwell laments the chaotic and unfamiliar atmosphere of today's college-aged drinkers, who often "do[] so in the hypersexualized chaos of fraternity parties and bars."

Bree's decision to invite M to lunch only a few hours after the alleged sexual assault took place suggests his genuine lack of awareness that their sexual encounter had not been consensual. Gladwell wants us to see how Bree's actions were mistaken, not malicious. He made the same error a lot of people make when interacting with strangers: we overestimate our ability to make sense of them. Finally, Gladwell's closing remark about "the hypersexualized chao[tic]" atmosphere in which many college-aged students drink implies a relationship between alcohol myopia and college sexual assault, likely a nod that Gladwell will address this link later on in the chapter.

7. Gladwell breaks down what happens to our brains when we get drunk. The brain tissue absorbs alcohol, beginning in the frontal lobes, "dampen[ing]" cognitive function. It triggers the reward center of the brain, makes us feel euphoric, and inhibits our responsiveness to danger. When alcohol reaches the cerebellum, we become uncoordinated. "These are the predictable effects of getting drunk," explains Gladwell. Blacking out occurs when a person's blood-alcohol level reaches 0.15 and the hippocampus begins to shut down, thus inhibiting the brain's ability to form new memories. In a true blackout state, a person won't remember anything that happened while they were intoxicated.

Throughout the book, Gladwell has criticized oversimplified explanations for why stranger interactions go awry, suggesting that such explanations focus on superficial elements of the interaction while failing to identify the root cause of the problem. Gladwell adopts this critical approach once more, analyzing alcohol's influence on stranger encounters by explaining alcohol's biological effects on cognitive function. One key characteristic of alcohol intoxication is that it comes with "predictable effects," such as blacking out when one's blood-alcohol level exceeds 0.15. This is important, since negative experiences with alcohol intoxication often happen when the intoxicated person is in an unfamiliar, unpredictable *atmosphere.*

The kind of drinking that leads to blackouts was virtually unheard of among college students in the 1940s and 1950s. Today, binge drinking is far more prevalent, and the consumption gap between men and women drinkers has narrowed. This latter trend puts women, in particular, at a greater risk of experiencing blackouts, since women metabolize alcohol differently than men.

Heavy drinking on college campuses takes place in an environment of heightened unfamiliarity. Students are surrounded by unfamiliar ideas, unfamiliar people, and unfamiliar situations. Many of them might be unfamiliar with drinking. As Gladwell has previously established in his discussion of alcohol myopia, alcohol intoxication that occurs in an unfamiliar setting puts intoxicated people at greater risk of experiencing conflict and violence.

Gladwell states that blackouts put women "in a position of vulnerability." Talking to strangers at parties "is not an error-free exercise in the best of times," and alcohol only increases the chance for errors to arise. When a person blacks out, they "cede[] control of the situation." In an article for *Slate*, critic Emily Yaffe stresses that while it is always the perpetrator and never the victim who is responsible for sexual assault, it does young women a disservice when society fails to stress the dangers of becoming intoxicated to the point that one "lose[s] the ability to be responsible for [one]self." Furthermore, Gladwell argues, it's difficult for the stranger an intoxicated woman is talking to to discern the woman's level of drunkenness. He also argues that strangers are less aware of the nuances of an intoxicated person's body language than the intoxicated person might think.

As the situations Gladwell has explored in previous chapters make abundantly clear, talking to strangers "is not an error-free exercise in the best of times." When we add alcohol to the equation, we lose sight of long-term consequences and, thus, "cede[] control of the situation." Gladwell includes Emily Yaffe's point about needing to stress to young women the importance of avoiding becoming so intoxicated that one "lose[s] the ability to be responsible for [one]self" to strike a balance between assigning due blame for sexual assault to the perpetrator and *warning women of the predictable effects of acute alcohol intoxication. Always, it is the perpetrator and the perpetrator alone who is responsible for committing sexual assault. However, Gladwell also suggests that it's counterproductive to disregard 1) the element of misunderstanding that can play a role in sexual assault that occurs between strangers, and 2) the degree to which alcohol intoxication increases the chances that we will misunderstand—and be misunderstood by—a stranger.*

Emily Yaffe's advice to women comes with a corresponding advice to men. Yaffe argues that men need to be cautioned that excess drinking can "drastically increase the chances that [they] will commit a sexual crime." In the *Washington Post* study referenced earlier in chapter, students were asked to identify the measures they believed would be most effective in preventing sexual assault. The most common answers were "harsher punishment for aggressors, self-defense training for victims, and teaching men to respect women more." Yet only 33 percent felt that drinking less would be effective, and only 15 percent identified stricter alcohol rules on campus as a way to reduce sexual assault.

Some people criticize victims of assault cases where alcohol was involved, arguing that the victim bears some responsibility for their assault because they put themselves in a vulnerable position by drinking too much. Yaffe refrains from victim-blaming while also advocating for better alcohol awareness by suggesting that women and *men need to be aware of the consequences of acute alcohol intoxication. Ultimately, consent is an act of communication that requires the cooperation and mutual understanding of the person giving or not giving consent, and the person acknowledging that consent or lack thereof. When we introduce alcohol into the equation, we run the risk of miscommunicating and potentially initiating a horrific crime.*

8. Gladwell returns to the night of Emily Doe's sexual assault. He emphasizes that she was blacked out, which is what reliably happens when a person drinks as much alcohol as Doe drank that night. Later, she has no memory of meeting Turner, nor anything that happened afterward. She testifies that she would never leave the party with another man, since she had a boyfriend. However, Gladwell claims, "it wasn't the real Emily Doe who met Brock Turner," but a blacked-out, compromised Doe.

Gladwell returns to the Brock Turner sexual assault case. This time around, he places a heavier emphasis on alcohol's role in the incident. Gladwell's argument that "it wasn't the real Emily Doe who met Brock Turner" establishes a connection between personal agency and identity. Our "real" self is the person we choose to be. This self is the combined effort of our values, beliefs, and actions, all of which are the product of our unique perspectives and experiences. When we drink to excess, alcohol myopia causes us to lose perspective, and, subsequently, we lose our "real" self.

While Turner claims to have remembered every stage of the night, this version of events was the one he prepared for trial. When he was first questioned by police, Turner alleged to remember much less and denied having run away from Doe after the graduate students confronted him. He also alleges to have "kind of blacked out."

Gladwell implies that Turner likely has a less reliable memory of the night of the assault than the rehearsed version of events he delivered at his trial would suggest. His admission to having "kind of blacked out" suggests that he, like Doe, was considerably intoxicated.

At the end of Turner's trial, Emily Doe read aloud a letter addressed to Turner, detailing the emotional trauma she endures in the aftermath of her assault. While Doe lists alcohol as a contributing factor to the assault, she ultimately states that "Alcohol was not the one who stripped [her], fingered [her], [and] had [her] head dragging against the ground."

Doe's statement criticizes the defense's efforts to excuse Turner's actions on the grounds of alcohol intoxication. Alcohol might have complicated their stranger encounter by making it more difficult to understand each other. However, it was Turner, ultimately who committed the act of sexual assault.

Doe delivered a "scathing" response to Turner's statement, in which he called for the implementation of an alcohol education program on campus. Doe argued that society should "show men how to respect women, not how to drink less." Gladwell disagrees with this point, however, arguing that society should teach men to respect women *and* teach them to drink less. To Gladwell, the two lessons are connected. Alcohol radically complicated Turner's already complicated feat of deciding what a stranger wanted from him.

Gladwell implies that thinking of sexual assault as a consequence of systemic misogyny or sexism and disregarding the role alcohol often plays in sexual assaults oversimplifies the issue. For Gladwell, Turner's assault on Doe is an unfortunate consequence of misunderstanding. Under regular circumstances, our overconfidence in our ability to understand strangers leads us to misjudge them. When we add alcohol to this overconfidence, we drastically increase our likelihood of misunderstanding others and being misunderstood ourselves.

CHAPTER NINE: KSM: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE STRANGER IS A TERRORIST?

1. James Mitchell recalls the first time he saw the captive Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, or KSM, a senior Al Qaeda official. Mitchell is a trained psychologist whom the CIA recruited to aid in interrogations after 9/11. Over the next decade, Mitchell and his colleague, Jenson, would interview many terrorists, but KSM, whom Mitchell describes as "brilliant," was by far "the biggest prize." Had KSM not been captured, it's likely that many subsequent attacks would have followed 9/11.

Chapter Nine presents a new variation on the stranger encounter. In this scenario, the stranger we are trying to understand is a terrorist trained to reveal nothing to his interrogators. The language Mitchell employs in his description of KSM lends additional insight into the way he approached this stranger encounter. By referring to KSM as "the biggest prize," he construes the act of interrogation as a game, and the prospect of a confession, the prize. There's a fierce desire for certainty embedded in Mitchell's language. Obviously, there are high-stakes political reasons for wanting to force information from a captured terrorist. But introducing interrogation—coercing information from another person—raises broader questions about how our desperate attempts to know things about a stranger compromise our ability to truly understand and relate to them.

While KSM eventually disturbed his interrogators with lurid accounts of violence he had committed, he was not always so forthcoming. When he was first captured in March 2003, in fact, he refused to talk. Interrogators who tried to get KSM to open up by being friendly were unsuccessful. Later efforts to get through to KSM by forcing him into physically uncomfortable "stress" positions, too, failed.

Gladwell analyzes the CIA's interrogation of KSM to explore the consequences of forcing a stranger to make themselves familiar to us. But is coercion an effective means of eliciting information from a stranger? And, even if coercion does give us the information we desire, is this a meaningful way to engage with strangers?

When the CIA recruited Mitchell and Jessen to interrogate KSM, they employed highly controversial techniques called "enhanced interrogation techniques," or EITs, which critics refer to as torture. Ethical ramifications aside, Gladwell argues that the interrogation of KSM is an apt example of "the most extreme version of the talking-to-strangers problem," where the stranger is a terrorist who will do anything to withhold his secrets.

After 9/11, the Bush Administration allowed interrogators to use "enhanced interrogation techniques" (EITs) on detainees. These techniques involve the application of physical and psychological torture, such as waterboarding or sleep deprivation, in an effort to force a confession. Gladwell explores the CIA's use of EITs to pose broader questions about how we ought to approach the issue of uncertainty as it relates to strangers.

2. Prior to their involvement with the CIA, Mitchell and Jessen worked as psychologists for the Air Force's SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) program, which trains military personnel in how to respond to being captured by enemy forces. The typical training exercise involved local police arriving unannounced and transporting soldiers to mock prisoner-of-war (POW) camps. There, they would be led through a series of trials meant to simulate the experience of being subjected to torture and interrogation.

SERE was founded after World War II. While initially a program designed to teach survival skills to military personnel, SERE later shifted its emphasis to resistance training, or training to resist interrogation. So far, most of the scenarios Gladwell has presented feature two people who want to, but fail to understand each other. In this chapter, he introduces a new variation on the stranger problem: understanding someone who is determined not *to be understood.*

Mitchell was in charge of designing the SERE program and sometimes had to participate in training procedures himself. One such procedure involved the interrogator threatening the captured subject's colleague. According to Mitchell, men are more likely to fold in this situation, whereas women remain silent. When Mitchell was paired with a woman in this SERE exercise, she refused to talk, and Mitchell was placed in a fifty-five-gallon drum. The drum was sealed, placed in the ground, and covered in dirt. A hose attached to the drum emitted water that slowly filled the barrel. When Mitchell was removed an hour later, the water had risen to his nose. Mitchell notes that many trainees were placed in the barrel, which was then a part of SERE's standard course.

Mitchell's descriptive account of the barrel procedure—which, Mitchell specifies, was only part of the standard course—emphasizes the psychological rigor involved in resistance training. The extreme lengths we're willing to go to to extract information from unwilling subjects and withhold information from others raises philosophical concerns about our relationship to truth and certainty. Gladwell implies that we believe that if we push hard enough, there is no aspect of a stranger that is beyond our ability to understand. But is this true? Can we force the issue of confession, and should we?

3. The training exercises Mitchell and Jessen designed for SERE formed the basis of the CIA's "Enhanced Interrogation" program. Asked to assemble a list of the most effective interrogation techniques, the men placed waterboarding, wailing, and sleep deprivation as the most effective measures for getting people to talk. Waterboarding is a technique where the detainee is placed on a hospital gurney that is tilted 45 degrees, with the detainee's head lower than their body. A cloth is placed over the face, and water is poured into the mouth and nose, which mimics the sensation of drowning.

The CIA hired Mitchell and Jessen to develop the SERE program despite the fact that neither man had an intelligence background or experience in conducting a formal interrogation. Additionally, the CIA later discovered that Mitchell and Jessen did not have the waterboarding expertise they claimed to have had, and their claims of its effectiveness and safety were therefore subject to debate.

In their interrogations, Mitchell and Jessen strive for compliance—for detainees to volunteer information of their own volition. KSM was a complicated case, Mitchell recalls, since the severity of his crimes meant he would never leave prison and, thus, had no incentive to share information. It took three weeks of heightened interrogation techniques for KSM to break. However, this would only be the beginning of Mitchell and Jessen's troubles with KSM.

The question of what constitutes volunteered information is relevant here. For instance, is an action really voluntary if it comes as a response to coercion? This conflict and the detail about KSM's lack of incentive to share information hint at the idea that Mitchell and Jessen's techniques weren't as effective as they were supposed to be.

4. Gladwell shifts focus to a psychiatrist named Charles Morgan's research on PTSD. Morgan was interested in learning why some veterans develop the illness and others do not. He went to a SERE school at Fort Bragg, North Carolina to conduct his research. As Morgan observed the trainees being interrogated, he was shocked to see them respond to their pretend interrogations as thought they were real. One man even broke down in tears. Morgan realized that what was so troubling to the soldiers "was the uncertainty of their situation." Knowing this, Morgan instructed the soldiers to take the Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure drawing test, which assesses participants' ability to reproduce a particular image from memory. SERE students excelled at the test before their interrogations but failed afterward, which suggested that the trauma of the interrogation caused their prefrontal cortex to shut down.

Morgan's research at Fort Bragg suggests that Mitchell and Jessen's interrogation techniques likely weren't as effective as they had purported them to be. In the extreme state of duress experienced by people who are subjected to torture, the brain shuts down instead of opening up. Morgan's findings also further explore humanity's relationship to uncertainty. Morgan identifies "the uncertainty of [SERE students'] situation" as a primary cause of their psychological duress. This shows that people are fundamentally uncomfortable with uncertainty.

Morgan's findings were troubling, since the purpose of interrogation was to get the subject to open up, not shut down. Another troubling finding was that post-interrogation SERE students had trouble with facial recognition. In one test, 20 out of 52 students misidentified the man who ran the training camp and ordered their punishments. After 9/11, Morgan began working for the CIA. He tried to impress upon his colleagues the significance of his findings, which suggested that information that detainees shared under stressful circumstances could be misleading and downright deceptive. When Morgan heard about Mitchell and Jessen's methods, therefore, he was understandably concerned.

Morgan's research suggests major flaws in the CIA's new methods of interrogation. At a broader level, too, seeing how the CIA's desire for certainty led them to pursue disreputable, unsafe methods of interrogation suggests that striving for certainty is misguided and harmful. Gladwell presents this chapter on the ineffectiveness of Enhanced Interrogation techniques to suggest that uncertainty is unavoidable, and perhaps the sooner we abandon the false conviction that we can know everything about a stranger, the better chance we stand to communicate effectively with them.

5. KSM's first public confession occurred on March 10, 2007, during a hearing held at Guantánamo Bay. KSM confessed to serving as Operational Director for Sheikh Usama Bin Laden for the 9/11 operation. He continued in this manner, confessing to each Al Qaeda operation in which he'd been involved. The confession was a victory for Mitchell and Jessen. Yet, the question remained: just how much of KSM's confession was actually true? As Morgan's study of the cognitive effects of trauma in SERE students suggests, the torture to which KSM's interrogators had subjected him could have compromised his ability to be objective and accurate. There didn't seem to be a terrorist plot that KSM *didn't* confess to, and officials suspected he was lying to exaggerate his status as an accomplished terrorist.

At the beginning of Chapter Eleven, Gladwell quotes Mitchell as describing KSM as "the biggest prize," after which Gladwell guides his audience through a detailed account of the horrific efforts Mitchell and Jessen undertook in an effort to claim their coveted prize of KSM's coerced confession. Now, at the end of the chapter, Gladwell invites us to reconsider whether the psychologists "winning" a prize at all. In addition to the fact that Enhanced Interrogation techniques are ethically dubious and illegal under U.S. and international law, Morgan's findings suggest that torture isn't even an effective means of opening up the brain. Ultimately, the saga of KSM's interrogation shows that the harder the CIA pushed for certainty, the more certainty eluded them.

Gladwell concludes the chapter with a meditation on the fragility of truth. Learning strangers' secrets—and talking to strangers in a broader sense—is a complicated task that people must approach "with caution and humility." Gladwell wonders how many of the conflicts he has covered thus far might have been avoided had the people involved heeded this advice.

Gladwell presents the CIA's methods for learning strangers' secrets—through brute force—to demonstrate how not *to talk to strangers. Ultimately, the only definitive answer that came of the CIA's interrogation of KSM was that we cannot evade uncertainty, and any attempts to do so will be in vain. As Gladwell has shown in previous examples, our overconfidence in our ability to understand strangers inevitably becomes our downfall. If we truly want to understand strangers, Gladwell suggests, we must instead abandon this unearned confidence and approach strangers "with caution and humility."*

CHAPTER TEN: SYLVIA PLATH

1. In 1962, American poet Sylvia Plath moved to London for a fresh start after her husband, Ted Hughes, abandoned her and their two children to be with another woman. She found a rental in the Primrose Hill neighborhood. Plath was initially productive, and she completed a poetry collection that her publisher believed was worthy of a Pulitzer Prize. However, by December, her chronic clinical depression took hold of her life once more, and she died by suicide shortly after the new year.

In the months before she succumbed to chronic depression, Plath experienced a devastating separation, the promise of a new start, and a rewarding period of intense, productive creativity. Yet, many people remember Plath exclusively for her infamous suicide, reducing her to a romanticized figure whose life was consumed by despair. Gladwell begins Chapter Ten with a brief glimpse into the life Plath lived outside of the culture's oversimplified memory of her to show how reducing our thoughts about a person to a single experience causes us to underestimate and misunderstand the meaningfulness of their life, the reasons for their actions, and the complexity of their character.

2. "Poets die young," Gladwell claims, citing the statistically higher suicide rates of poets compared to other professions. Additionally, Plath's circumstances put her at an increased risk of suicide: she had a prior suicide attempt, she had been hospitalized, and she was living abroad, cut off from friends and family. There is some ambiguity about whether Plath actually intended to die when she turned on the gas and placed her head in the oven on the night of her death. She had left a note to her doctor, which makes her best friend, Jillian Becker, wonder whether she had wanted to be rescued. On the other hand, the coroner's report notes that Plath pushed herself as far inside the oven as possible, which implies her clear intention to die. Furthermore, she wrote morbid poetry in the days before her death.

The cliched phrase "poets die young" implies that suffering artists inevitability die tragic deaths. However, Gladwell challenges this notion by presenting conflicting details surrounding Plath's suicide that, at the time, led some to question whether she was truly resigned to die. On the one hand, Plath wrote morbid poetry in the days before her suicide and had fixated on death for most of her life. On the other hand, the presence of a note to her doctor makes Plath's friend wonder if she'd intended to be rescued before the poison carbon monoxide gas she inhaled from her oven killed her. The uncertainty surrounding Plath's suicide suggests an impulsivity to her actions, as though she chose to die on a whim without fully thinking the decision through. Thus, Gladwell presents two opposing takes on Plath's suicide: either Plath was a tortured soul who was destined to die, or Plath made a snap decision to die based on factors that presented themselves in the moment. Her suicide was not the consequence of fate, but of circumstance.

3. After World War I, many British homes used a manufactured fuel called "town gas" in their homes. The carbon monoxide used in this gas offered an easy means to commit suicide. In 1962, of the 5,588 people in England and Wales who committed suicide, approximately 44.2 percent died by carbon monoxide poisoning. When the discovery of natural gas deposits in the North Sea caused England to phase out the use of town gas in favor of natural gas, most English households had to replace their old appliances. Towns had to construct new gas mains. This process began in 1965 and was completed in 1977. During these years, as town gas was phased out of use, gas suicides became increasingly rare. For Gladwell, the question thus becomes: did the people who would have died by gas opt for another method, or did they choose not to die by suicide?

The positive correlation between access to town gas and high rates of suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning suggests that the people who died by carbon monoxide poisoning in years when town gas was readily available opted to commit suicide only because a convenient means to do so became available to them. This theory also sheds light on the nature of Plath's suicide. If we accept that the second option Gladwell presents us with is true (that people who died by carbon monoxide poisoning would not have died by suicide had gas not been available to them), we can speculate that Plath, as the statistics suggest, chose to die because a set of ideal circumstances presented themselves to her—not because she was fated to do so.

Gladwell calls the former option—that people could simply choose an alternate method of suicide—displacement. This theory suggests that when a person's mind is set about doing something, they are likely to do it. For instance, Plath had a history of suicide attempts, so it's logical to believe that she would have found an alternate method to take her life had town gas not been an option.

Displacement theory suggests that removing the opportunity for a behavior to occur doesn't prevent the behavior occurring, it merely alters the circumstances in which it occurs. Applying displacement theory to Plath's suicide seems to make sense, given Plath's history of suicide attempts and chronic depression.

The second possibility—"that suicide is a behavior coupled to a particular context"—suggests that the act of suicide is tied to circumstance. To illustrate the concept of "coupling," Gladwell describes the set of circumstances his father, an emotionally repressed man, required to cry in public: a sentimental Dickens novel and the company of his children. Without these two factors, his father would not cry.

We can think of coupling theory as the inverse of displacement theory. Coupling theory argues that behaviors are tied to circumstances. If these circumstances are not met, the behavior will not occur.

If suicide is a coupled behavior, then it's not merely something that depressed people do: it's something depressed people do because of a particular moment or set of circumstances. If suicide is a coupled behavior, its rates would rise and fall according to the availability of means to commit suicide, such as town gas. On the other hand, if suicide is a displaced behavior, then one would expect suicide rates to remain constant over time. To determine if suicide is a coupled or displaced behavior, Gladwell references a graph that charts suicide rates in England, Wales, and the U.S. between 1900 and 1980. In Gladwell's words, the graph resembles a "roller coaster," with unpredictable, sharp rises and falls in suicide rates over the century.

If suicide is a displaced behavior, society has limited means to reduce suicide rates. For instance, enforcing stricter gun-control laws for patients with a history of mental illness in an effort to offset a rise in self-inflicted gunshot deaths might not have a significant effect on suicide rates overall, since the people who might have died by a self-inflicted gunshot will simply seek out another method to accomplish the behavior. If suicide is a coupled behavior, however, society can conceivably construct plans to reduce suicide rates by eliminating the particular circumstances with which suicide is coupled.

Criminologist Ronald Clarke argues in favor of suicide as a coupled behavior. In a 1988 essay, he describes how the painlessness and ease of access of town gas made it a preferable method of suicide compared to methods such as shooting, cutting, or hanging, which require additional planning. Gladwell observes the shockingly dry, detached way Clarke writes about suicide. Yet, Gladwell suggests, it's illogical to pretend that method doesn't matter. When gas began to be used in British households in the 1920s, no studies considered the possibility that the new technology could increase suicide rates. Furthermore, when the British government published a gas-modernization report in 1970, it, too, failed to mention natural gas's influence on suicide rates.

Clarke argues that people who died by carbon monoxide poisoning in the decades after World War I died only *because a convenient and painless method of suicide became available to them. Had town gas not been as readily available, these people might conceivably still be alive. One can't help but consider Sandra Bland's suicide a coupled behavior, as well. Like Plath, Sandra Bland had a history of hardship and mental illness. Yet had a very specific set of circumstances not presented themselves to Bland (i.e., the jarring experience of being in a new town, the excitement and trepidation of starting a new job, the trauma and humiliation of being threatened, belittled, and physically harmed by a police officer for failing to signal a lane change) one can speculate that Bland might still be alive.*

Gladwell offers the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco as further evidence of suicide as a coupled behavior. Since its completion in 1937, the Golden Gate Bridge has been the site of over 1,500 suicides. Statistics suggest that suicide is coupled to the Golden Gate Bridge. A survey conducted by psychologist Richard Seiden revealed that of the 515 subjects who tried to fall from the bridge but were restrained before they could go through with the act, only 25 went on to kill themselves in another manner. In conclusion, people who go to the Golden Gate Bridge to die want to die at that moment, on that bridge. They do not have a general desire to die.

Like Ronald Clarke's research on the link between town gas availability and increased suicide rates, Seiden's findings suggest that people who go to the Golden Gate Bridge to die by suicide would not die by suicide at all were the Golden Gate Bridge removed from the equation. This situation presents a very clear, achievable action society can take to reduce suicide rates: construct a barrier around the bridge to catch the people who jump from the bridge.

It wasn't until 2018 that the city constructed a suicide barrier around the bridge. Gladwell attributes this delay to society's unwillingness to see suicide as a coupled behavior. As evidence, Gladwell cites a national survey that found that 75 percent of Americans believed a suicide barrier would not dissuade suicidal people from taking their lives some other way. Gladwell uses these findings as a segue to a second set of mistakes humanity makes when talking to strangers: "we do not understand the *context* in which the stranger is operating."

In 2018, the Golden Gate Bridge was 81 years old. Between its completion in 1937 and 2014, around 1,400 bodies of people who jumped from the bridge have been recovered. If the city had constructed a barrier sooner, they might reasonably have saved many lives. And yet, the delayed construction was met with no public outcry. The survey statistics Gladwell presents that a people resist the idea that suicide could be a coupled behavior. Gladwell uses this disbelief to connect Chapter Ten's analysis of suicide to the book's broader discussion about talking to strangers. For Gladwell, the notion that suicide is a coupled behavior—and the majority's rejection of that notion—reflects another critical mistake we make when we talk to strangers: "we do not understand the context in which the stranger is operating." In other words, we reduce the stranger to the person they are in our encounter with them. In so doing, we disregard the broader "context" of the stranger's life that could explain and help us understand why they behave the way they do.

4. Today, Brooklyn's 72nd Precinct is a gentrified neighborhood. Thirty years ago, it was a high-crime area. David Weisburd is a criminologist who researched the area. Though it's a common theory that economically and socially disadvantaged areas generally see elevated crime rates, Weisburd's findings showed that most crime was limited to one or two streets. This didn't make sense to Weisburd, whose "Dracula model" of understanding criminals posits that criminals are driven by inner impulse and "have to commit a crime." If this were the case, though, wouldn't criminals' drive to commit crimes compel them to extend beyond a couple streets? Weisburd realized it was time to rethink his assumptions about crime.

Gladwell shifts focus to analyze the notion of crime as a coupled behavior. The first example of this is Weisburd's findings about crime in Brooklyn's 72nd Precinct, which implied a connection—a coupling—between crime and place. These findings contradict Weisburd's original "Dracula model" of crime, a model that draws from the theory of displacement to suggest that criminals' inner impulse to commit crimes will drive them to act unlawfully, regardless of their shifting circumstances.

5. After leaving Brooklyn, Weisburd joined fellow criminologist Larry Sherman to continue studying the relationship between geography and crime. Weisburd and Sherman's study focused on Minneapolis, and they collected data about crime as it corresponded to specific addresses. Their findings astonished them: just 3.3 percent of the city's streets were responsible for half of all calls placed to the police. Studies in other cities, such as Boston, Seattle, and Kansas City, produced similar results. Gladwell believes that these findings suggest a "fundamental truth" about interactions with strangers: where and when we interact with strangers has a major influence on what kind of person we perceive that stranger to be.

The results of Weisburd and Sherman's research in Minneapolis support Weisburd's earlier findings in Brooklyn. Together, these findings make a compelling case for crime as a behavior that's coupled, or linked, with place. For law enforcement, these results offer ideas about where to target efforts to reduce crime. For Gladwell, the coupling theory forms the basis of yet another "fundamental truth" about our struggle to talk to strangers: context has an enormous influence over how people behave. And, if we recall the national survey about people's disapproval of the construction of a suicide barrier around the Golden Gate Bridge that Gladwell referenced earlier in this chapter, we can assume that context isn't something we consider when we judge a stranger's actions.

When Plath died by suicide in 1963, suicide rates among women in her age bracket in England were at a record high: ten deaths per 100,000 women. By the time England phased out town gas usage, that rate dropped by half. Looking at these statistics, Gladwell describes Plath as "really unlucky," insinuating that she would not have died had she been a decade younger and missed the suicide peak of the early 1960s.

Having established suicide to be a coupled behavior, Gladwell surmises that Plath would not have died had she not met the "unlucky" circumstances of suffering a mental health crisis at the peak of town gas usage in the early 1960s.

7. In 1958, two years into her marriage to Ted Hughes, Plath and Hughes moved to Boston. She was not yet a famous writer and found work as a receptionist for Massachusetts General Hospital's psychiatric ward. She enrolled in a Boston University writing center, where she befriended the poets Anne Sexton and George Starbuck. Like Plath, Sexton was obsessed with death. Sexton's family had a history of mental illness, and Sexton suffered from depression, mood swings, and substance abuse. According to her biographer, Diane Wood Middlebrook, Sexton carried a bottle of barbiturates in her purse "to be prepared to kill herself anytime she was in the mood." She died by suicide on October 4, 1974. Sexton's death wasn't a shock to anybody who knew her.

Sexton seems to have been well aware of the coupled nature of suicide. She carried a bottle of pills with her everywhere she went "to be prepared to kill herself anytime she was in the mood," or anytime the perfect set of circumstances came her way. Sexton's death didn't surprise people who knew her because she, like Plath, was very interested in death. But what assumptions do we make when we pass judgments like this? Are we falling for the fallacy that suicide is a displaced behavior, and that suffering souls like Plath and Sexton ought to be defined by a singular, fateful moment in their lives?

Gladwell digs deeper into Sexton's and Plath's deaths, noting that their personalities and histories of mental illness are only partial explanations for why they chose to die on a particular day. Gladwell embraces the opinion of Plath's close friend, the critic Alfred Alvarez, who thought the world had come to define Plath by her suffering, thus minimizing the complex, multifaceted person she really was.

Gladwell implicitly connects the way people reduce Plath to a tragedy to the way we tend to oversimplify the inner lives of the strangers we encounter, reducing them to one-dimensional characters who don't exist beyond our interactions with them.

Gladwell shifts his focus to a map of Jersey City that Weisburd constructed. In the center of the map is a small, shaded area that represents a hot spot for sex work. After Weisburd assigned more police officers to the area a few years ago, sex work activity fell. Interestingly, however, sex work didn't rise in the area outside the patrolled zone. This suggests that sex workers who could no longer work in the patrolled zone found different work or "change[d] their behavior." Gladwell concludes that sex workers were "anchored to place."

Weisburd's map of Jersey City is further evidence of the link between crime and place. In this case, we see how sex workers in the patrolled area "change[d] their behavior" by finding new work instead of moving to continue sex work elsewhere. These findings can give us insight into the circumstances that went into sex workers' decisions to begin working in the profession in the first place. This is why Gladwell believes coupling theory can help us approach strangers with a better attitude: it forces us to consider the myriad of ways that a person's background and present circumstances impact their behavior. In so doing, we begin to see the stranger as a person whose life is as complex and layered as our own.

While people commonly regard sex workers as forced into sex work by extraordinary circumstances of economic and social disadvantage, Gladwell sees their unwillingness to move as surprisingly ordinary. Weisburd notes how sex workers affected by the increased police presence talked about the difficulty of establishing a client base in a new area and learning which strangers they can and can't trust. A familiar locale offers predictability and assurance, while a new environment presents the threat of strangers and the unknown.

A lot of people attach certain stereotypes to sex workers. Some condemn their line of work; others overgeneralize them as all forced into sex work by poverty and disadvantage. Both attitudes reduce the sex worker to a one-dimensional character whose identity centers around sex work. But Weisburd's findings normalize sex workers, revealing their normal reasons for not wanting to move, such as the unnecessary hassle of building a new client base.

Gladwell bounces back to the subject of Anne Sexton's suicide. He argues that it's no accident that she spoke about dying by overdose. Statistically, drug or poison ingestion as a suicide method results in death only 1.5 percent of the time. In contrast, use of a firearm has an 82.5 percent fatality rate. Gladwell suggests that Sexton's preferred method reflects her ambivalence about dying. Eventually, taking inspiration from Plath's death, Sexton died by carbon monoxide poisoning in her garage. Carbon monoxide poisoning has a much higher fatality rate than Sexton's earlier preferred method.

Gladwell implies that Sexton's initial preference for a suicide method with a low fatality rate reflects her initial ambivalence about dying. Eventually, as certain circumstances in her life changed to make Sexton feel more certain about her desire to die, she shifted her preferred suicide method to carbon monoxide poisoning, ensuring the success of her attempt. Earlier, Gladwell mentioned how Sexton's friends expected her suicide. Yet, Sexton's relationship to suicide wasn't constant. It shifted in a number of subtle, logical ways to conform to whichever set of circumstances she was dealing with at different points in her life. Reducing Sexton to her single, fateful behavior oversimplifies her life and compromises our ability to understand her.

Gladwell proposes another similarity between Plath and Sexton. Sexton used fumes from her 1967 Mercury Cougar to poison herself. Emissions from the 1975 version of the same car contained roughly half as much carbon monoxide. Today's cars emit hardly any carbon monoxide at all. Had Sexton been in crisis ten years later, she, like Plath, might have lived longer. Gladwell closes Chapter Eleven by describing a scene in which Plath and Sexton enthusiastically discussing death at a bar at the Ritz, a favorite past time of theirs. While a stranger who overhears the women's discussion as they pass by might believe the women "do not have long to live," the principles of coupling theory encourage us to take the opposite approach: States Gladwell, "Don't look at the stranger and jump to conclusions. Look at the stranger's world."

Gladwell suggests that Sexton might not have died had two particular conditions (Sexton having a mental health crisis and Sexton's car being an older model) not coincided. Sexton's friends and other outsiders felt, in retrospect, that her suicide was predictable. However, Gladwell suggests that the different conditions that had to be met during a period in Sexton's life where she just so happened *to be in the midst of a mental health crisis makes her suicide a singular event that can't be so easily reduced to a tragic but inevitable incident. If we use the lessons that coupling theory teaches us to make an effort to understand the many independent variables that influence a stranger's actions, we stand a better chance at being able to communicate with, understand, and help them. Gladwell's closing remarks encapsulates the key lesson coupling theory teaches us: "Don't look at the stranger and jump to conclusions. Look at the stranger's world." The key to getting better at talking to strangers is to consider the stranger's life* beyond *the stranger encounter. When we consider the stranger from the broader context of their "world," we can better understand and respond to their behavior.*

CHAPTER ELEVEN: CASE STUDY: THE KANSAS CITY EXPERIMENTS

1. A century ago, renowned law enforcement officer O.W. Wilson invented the idea of "preventative patrol." Wilson's theory was that the constant presence of patrol cars would reduce crime. In the early 1970s, the Kansas City Police Department decided to test Wilson's theory of preventative patrol. They hired criminologist George Kelling to research the best way of implementing this revolutionary method of policing. Kelling's approach was to divide the city into three groups. The first group would be the control group, continuing police work as usual; the second group would have no preventative patrol, and officers would respond only when called; the third group would double or triple its patrol squads.

We can interpret O.W. Wilson's theory of "preventative patrol" within the context of coupling theory. The central premise of preventative patrol is that by manipulating the conditions of a particular area (i.e., increasing the police presence) law enforcement could dissuade would-be criminals from committing crimes. This logic assumes that crime is a coupled behavior rather than a displaced behavior: criminals aren't instinctually drawn to commit crimes—they commit crimes when the circumstances provide the opportunity for them to do so.

Kelling's experiment was revolutionary. Until then, policing was more of an art than a science, and a lot of people thought lack of cooperation from officers not wanting to be guinea pigs in Kelling's project would sabotage the experiment. Nevertheless, Kelling proceeded with his experiment, which lasted for a year. In the end, crime statistics were virtually identical across all three groups, and citizens in the preventative patrol group didn't report feeling any more secure. Kelling published his study as the U.S. was in the midst of a crime surge. As police departments around the country desperately tried to reduce local crime, they wondered what method of policing to implement in place of preventative patrolling. In 1990, Kansas City homicide rates were more than three times the national average. With nothing left to lose, Kansas City decided to try a second experiment.

The failure of Kelling's experiment seems to suggest that crime isn't a coupled behavior, as Kelling's findings reveal no discernable link between an increased patrol presence and a decreased rate of crime. However, Kelling's experiment fails to account for the relationship between crime and place that Weisburd and Lawrence's research establishes in the previous chapter. When Kelling divided the city into three groups, did he do so with regard to certain characteristics of the three sections, or did he select the boundaries arbitrarily? Knowing more about the crime statistics of a focused area can help us determine how to reduce crime more effectively.

2. Lawrence Sherman targeted guns as what fueled Kansas City crime. He assigned teams to go door to door in District 144, the city's most violent area. The teams would introduce themselves, educate the community on gun violence, and provide residents with a number they could call to report gun violence anonymously. A criminology graduate student, James Shaw, accompanied the officers to assess the success of the program. Shaw's findings revealed that community members were enthusiastic about the program.

Unlike Kelling's failed efforts to reduce crime in Kansas City, Sherman's experiment targeted a focused area of the city infamous for its high rates of gun violence. Sherman's emphasis on place seems to draw inspiration from Weisburd and Sherman's research on the relationship between crime and place in Minneapolis.

Despite the hotline's popularity, the experiment ultimately failed. Shaw's findings determined that District 144's problems didn't arise from its residents not wanting help—it was because frightened residents never left their houses. And because they didn't leave their houses, Shaw concluded, they had no way of knowing who had guns and who didn't.

The failure of Sherman's first experiment represents a common mistake Gladwell suggests we make in our interactions with strangers. When we fail to look beyond our own experiences and see things from the stranger's perspective, we compromise our ability to understand and help them. In Sherman's experiment, the physical isolation of District 144's residents prevents them from knowing their neighbors and reducing crime in their community.

The experiment's next project was to train officers to spot concealed weapons. This project borrowed from theories developed by a New York City police officer named Robert T. Gallagher, who discovered a trend in criminals carrying guns tucked into their waistband— it caused a slight unevenness in their stride on the gun side of the body. Gun carriers also tend to glance down toward their concealed weapons instinctively. Gallagher traveled to Kansas City to help train officers to spot concealed weapons. However, this experiment failed, too.

Gladwell doesn't provide any explanation for why this second strategy failed. One possible explanation is that Gallagher's method subscribes to the myth of transparency, relying on assumption that all people who carry concealed weapons give themselves away with subtle but predictable body language.

3. Kansas City's final effort involved a loophole in the Fourth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which protects citizens form "unreasonable searches and seizures." The amendment prevents officers from searching citizens' houses without a warrant, and from frisking people on the street without "reasonable suspicion." However, the amendment provides minimal protections for motorists, whom officers are legally allowed to apprehend for even the most trivial of reasons: speeding, running a red light, and malfunctioning lights are all fair game, explains legal scholar David Harris. Additionally, explains Harris, officers can stop motorists who are otherwise acting lawfully for behavior the officer considers "unreasonable."

The loophole at the center of this final effort to reduce crime in Kansas City encourages police to abandon humanity's fundamental bias toward truth and apprehend motorists for minor offenses that wouldn't generate "reasonable suspicion" under normal circumstances. This third attempt to reduce crime operates under the assumption that every motorist could be a criminal until proven otherwise.


Gladwell describes a related Supreme Court case involving a North Carolina motorist whom an officer deemed "suspicious" due to a broken brake light. However, North Carolina law permits the operation of vehicles with one broken light, so long as the other works. The driver took the officer to court, and the court sided with the officer, claiming that the officer's mere "thought" that driving with one broken light was illegal was enough to warrant a traffic stop. In short, there is no limit to the list of legal reasons an officer can use to validate a traffic stop. Once the motorist is stopped, the officer has the right to search the car if they "believe the motorist might be armed and dangerous."

This Supreme Court case is an extreme example of the freedom law enforcement have to determine which behaviors they can legally determine to be "suspicious." Even though the motorist in the case wasn't doing anything illegal, the Supreme Court concluded that the mere fact that the police officer mistakenly "thought" the motorist was behaving unlawfully provided sufficient cause for the officer to cast suspicion on the motorist and initiate a traffic stop. So far, Gladwell has advocated against approaching the world with heightened skepticism. Because people are usually honest and well-intentioned, it makes more sense to approach many situations in our daily lives with trust rather than doubt. On the other hand, coupling theory also teaches us the importance of context. *Kansas City's abnormally high crime rates make it impossible to assess the city as one would assess a typical American city. Within the context of Kansas City's high concentration of crime, Gladwell's advice to default to truth becomes less logical.*


So, Kansas City took advantage of this legal loophole, using increased traffic stops as opportunities to search the vehicles of "suspicious-looking drivers" for weapons. The results of the experiment were remarkable. Outside of District 144, crime remained the same. Inside, gun crimes were reduced by half. Over the first seven months of the experiment, patrol cars issued roughly 5.45 traffic citations and 2.23 arrests per shift. The final Kansas City experiment kept officers in constant motion and validated their efforts to protect the community. After the *New York Times* ran a front-page story about the experiments, police departments around the country began to implement the new strategy. Over the course of seven years, the North Carolina State Highway Patrol increased their annual traffic stop count from 400,000 to 800,000.

The third phase of the Kansas City experiment reaffirms Sherman and Weisburd's findings about the link between crime and place. The effectiveness of increased traffic stops varied according to the concentration of crime in a given area. In locations with a high concentration of crime, increased traffic stops resulted in a drastic decrease in gun crimes. In contrast, increased traffic stops in areas that already saw relatively low levels of crime resulted in a negligible reduction in crime.

4. Gladwell points out that Lawrence Sherman of the Kansas City experiment is the same Sherman who worked with David Weisburd in Minneapolis. They were friends who both taught at Rutgers under department head Ronald Clarke, whose research on suicide Gladwell covers in the previous chapter. While these three men's interests vary, all three are alike in their focus on coupling. To Gladwell, coupling's relevance within law enforcement is simple: it means that cities don't need more law enforcement, they need their law enforcement to be "more focused." In short, crime hot spots need to have a heavier police presence.

The success of Sherman's experiment presents further evidence of the link between crime and place, reaffirming the notion that crime is a coupled behavior. An understanding of the crucial link between crime and place is what made Sherman's Kansas City experiment succeed while Kelling's earlier effort failed. Thus, we can speculate that police department who disregard place will see less successful results than Sherman saw in Kansas City.

The Kansas City experiment proved that preventative patrol works *only if* it is applied aggressively, to a focused area. When other cities began their own version of the experiment, they implemented aggressive preventative policing over an unconcentrated area. As a result, officers could spend their entire shift patrolling the same neighborhood and have nothing to do, and nobody wanted to believe in Weisburd and Sherman's Law of Crime Concentration.

Police departments that disregarded the relationship between crime and place and failed to confine preventative patrol operations to "focused and concentrated" areas weren't able to replicate the success Sherman saw in Kansas City. Police departments around the world failed to appreciate the role that place and context played in the Kansas City experiment. This suggests that many of modern policing's flaws can be attributed to a misunderstanding of how preventative patrol actually works.

Gladwell attributes law enforcement's unwillingness to practice concentrated policing on humanity's misconceptions about coupling, or "the notion that a stranger's behavior is tightly connected to place and context." Furthermore, when we combine our misunderstandings about coupling with "the problems of default to truth and transparency," we open the door for cases similar to the Sandra Bland incident to occur.

Gladwell suggests that Sandra Bland's encounter with Brian Encinia is what happens when a society that fails to grasp its flawed strategies for talking to strangers uses those flawed strategies to create flawed policing practices. In so doing, Gladwell alludes to the idea that we need to reassess the way we respond to instances of police brutality and misconduct. Bad policing isn't a coincidence: it's a reflection of the ideals of the society it serves.

CHAPTER TWELVE: SANDRA BLAND

1. Brian Encinia pulls over Sandra Bland at 4:27 p.m. on July 10, 2015. Gladwell conveys much of the encounter through a transcription from the scene recorded on Encinia's body camera. Initially, Encinia and Bland are polite to each other. Encinia takes Bland's license back to his patrol car. When he returns a few minutes later, he thinks that Bland looks "very, really irritated" and asks her what is wrong. She replies honestly: she's annoyed about the ticket. Most people consider this to be Encinia's first mistake: in asking Bland to explain or justify her irritation, he escalates rather than deescalates the situation.

Sandra Bland's encounter with Brian Encinia becomes more complex once we examine it in light of the flawed social strategies Gladwell has covered over the course of the book. Here, for instance, we can focus on Encinia's assumption that Bland's "very, really irritated" demeanor was suspicious enough to warrant an interrogation. Encinia fixated on Bland's irritation because he thought she was transparent and that her irritation was suspicious, perhaps a sign of guilt. His suspicions compelled him to ask Bland probing questions about her mood. This escalated the situation. Thus, Encinia's assumption of transparency was the indirect cause of this unnecessary escalation.

Next, prompted by Encinia, Bland announces that she's "done" voicing her frustrations. She lights a **cigarette** to relax. If everything played out as it should have, Encinia and Bland's interaction would have ended here. But Encinia decides to escalate the situation once more, aggressively demanding that Bland put out her cigarette. She (correctly) states that Encinia has no right to make her do this. Encinia balks at Bland's challenge to his authority and escalates the situation yet again, demanding that Bland exit her car. They argue back and forth until Encinia literally threatens to "remove" Bland from the vehicle. He gives her a "lawful order" to exit on her own. Then, he reaches his hand inside the car to remove Bland. She orders him not to touch her. He tells her she's under arrest.

Once more, Encinia escalates the situation by interrogating Bland about her actions. He's doing this because he believes her actions indicate inner guilt or intent to act violently. He believes Bland is transparent, and that her behavior indicates an inner, sinister intent. He thinks there's something more to Bland's irritation at being pulled over for a minor traffic violation. His assumption that he knows Bland well enough to be an authority on her mannerisms causes him to escalate a situation that needn't have lasted longer than a few minutes.

Bland and Encinia's struggle continues as Encinia tries to remove Bland from her car. Eventually, Encinia handcuffs Bland. Encinia's backup arrives, and tensions continue to build. A female officer orders Bland to stop resisting. Eventually, they take her into custody and charge her with felony assault. Three days later, she dies by suicide in her cell. Encinia is fired for having violated Chapter 5, Section 05.17.00 of the Texas State Trooper General Manual which, among other guidelines, requires officers to "be courteous to the public," and to "exercise the utmost patience and discretion." One takeaway from the incident is that Encinia is a "bully" who should have been more courteous with Bland. But Gladwell thinks there's more to it than this.

Gladwell takes issue with regarding Encinia as a "bully" and moving on because it ignores the broader context of Encinia and Bland's encounter. To get to the root of why things went awry between them, or why Encinia was compelled to escalate the situation in the first place, we need to consider the backgrounds of both of the involved parties. For instance, having more information about what kind of training Encinia received that might have influenced his interpretation of Bland's behavior can help us understand why he acted the way he did.

2. Gladwell describes a Kansas City traffic stop as "a search for a needle in a haystack," since they use the common infraction of a traffic stop "to search for something rare—guns and drugs." The same principle applies to hand luggage security checks at the airport. For every 1.7 billion bags the TSA screens each year, they only find a few thousand guns, which equates to a hit rate of roughly 0.0001 percent. When the TSA conducts audits by slipping a fake gun or bomb into a piece of luggage, the weapon goes undetected 95 percent of the time. Gladwell attributes this low detection rate to humanity's "tendency to default to truth." Because guns are so rare, the average airport screener assumes that a mildly suspicious-looking object is likely nothing to worry about and moves on without further inspecting the luggage. Kansas City-style policing, in contrast, takes an opposite approach.

The Kansas City style of policing is a great example of why defaulting to truth is the more logical way to navigate the average stranger encounter. Because deception is so rare, it's akin to "search[ing] for a needle in a haystack" to approach every stranger encounter suspiciously, as it's highly unlikely that the stranger doesn't mean well. While it might be alarming to hear that the TSA fails to pass 95% of audits, the reality is that it's very rare to find a gun in a piece of luggage. Thus, defaulting to truth is the more logical choice for TSA agents, who are forced to check a large amount of luggage as efficiently as possible.

The unofficial guide to Kansas City-style policing is *Tactics for Criminal Patrol* by Charles Remsberg (1995). Remsberg calls for officers to "go beyond the ticket," meaning they should pursue "curiosity ticklers," or "anomalies that raise the possibility of protentional wrongdoing." For instance, a motorist who stops at a red light in a bad part of town and looks down at the passenger seat could, in theory, be looking at a gun. As such, their actions warrant a traffic stop.

Remsberg's method asks police officers to take the opposite approach of TSA agents, "go[ing] beyond the ticket" by actively searching for signs of danger or misconduct in places where one might not spot anything suspicious at first glance. This method asks officers to go against their fundamental instinct to default to truth. Officers are trained to fixate on doubts that our bias toward truth would make us dismiss under normal circumstances.

Once an officer stops a motorist, the officer needs to be on high alert for subtle clues that imply discretion. For instance, drug couriers often use air fresheners to conceal the scent of drugs. Another tactic involves engaging the motorist in conversation to prolong the incident as long as possible, giving the officer ample time to detect nervousness in the motorist. While many of these supposed signs of illegal activity are totally normal, the officer searching for a "criminal needle in the haystack" has to assume guilt, not innocence.

Again, Gladwell reaffirms how Remsberg's Kansas City-style of policing teaches officers to go against their human instinct to assume the best in everyone. In addition to fixating on subtle signs of deception or wrongdoing that most people would dismiss under normal circumstances, officers trained in this method are asked to read into details (i.e., an air freshener, which many law-abiding people have in their car) that wouldn't raise the slightest doubt in other contexts.

Gladwell returns his focus to Brian Encinia, selecting a random day in Encinia's career, September 11, 2014, to see how the officer applies Remsberg's methods to his policing. Predictably, much of Encinia's day consists of pulling people over for minor infractions: an improperly placed license plate, a lack of reflective tape on a trailer, driving with expired registration, driving with "no/improper ID lamp." Only one of Encinia's stops—one at 5:58 for driving more than 10 percent over the speed limit—could count as a serious infraction. For the most part, Encinia's day is a case study in "modern, proactive policing."

The banality of Encinia's day illustrates how ineffective proactive policing is when law enforcement disregard context. As Gladwell shows with his analysis of Lawrence Sherman's Kansas City experiments in Chapter Eleven, preventative patrol does little to reduce crime outside of focused areas with high crime rates. Encinia spends his day apprehending motorists for minor violations, none of which yield the more serious infraction, the proverbial "needle in the haystack," that preventative patrol is supposed to yield.

Remsberg advises proactive patrol officers to pull over everyone to avoid being accused of racial profiling. If an officer is accused of bias, then, they need only bring their logbook to court to show the myriad of minor infractions for which they chose to initiate traffic stops. It's this logic that initiates Bland's traffic stop. Encinia sees her Illinois license plates and considers them to be a "curiosity tickler." When Bland spots Encinia pulling up fast behind her, she moves over to let him pass, giving Encinia his in to initiate a traffic stop. When he walks up to her car and looks inside, he sees fast-food wrappers scattered on the floor. For Bland, who has just driven from Illinois to Texas for her job interview, the wrappers are entirely excusable. But for Encinia, "the new breed of police officer" trained to cast suspicion on everything, the wrappers indicate that something is amiss.

That Encinia views Bland's out-of-state license plates as a "curiosity tickler" shows how hyper-alert modern police training teaches officers to be. Interstate travel is a wholly unremarkable—and legal—activity. In fact, the plates make the presence of fast-food wrappers in her car even more understandable: people taking long road trips need to eat. Many of them take care of this need with convenient, road-side fast-food restaurants. Yet, "the new breed of police officer" is trained to cast suspicion on all manner of perfectly understandable, commonplace behaviors, so Encinia swaps defaulting to truth for defaulting to doubt.

3. In his deposition with state investigator Cleve Renfro, Encinia states that he found Bland's "aggressive body language and demeanor" suspicious. Gladwell interprets this as Encinia's "belie[f] in transparency," of believing that people's external appearance can reliably help us understand their inner character. In fact, most training programs for law enforcement believe in transparency, too. The Reid Technique is a system that teaches law enforcement "to use demeanor as a guide to judge innocence and guilt." For example, Reid training states that a refusal to maintain eye contact indicates deception. So, Encinia sees Bland appearing restless and decides that something is wrong.

Gladwell situates Encinia's "belie[f] in transparency" within the context of his police training. Gladwell's aim is not to excuse Encinia's behavior but to explain it. As Gladwell argues in Chapter Ten, knowing the context of a stranger's behavior is essential to understanding why they act the way to do. Here, Gladwell suggests that Encinia reads Bland's "aggressive body language and demeanor" as a threat because his training has taught him "to use demeanor as a guide to judge innocence and guilt." Encinia's training causes him to treat Bland's demeanor as evidence of guilt. This explains his later decision to prolong the traffic stop as well.

As Encinia returns to his patrol car to check Bland's license, he observes her through her rear window and watches her "disappear[ing] from view for an amount of time," which indicated the possible presence of a gun in the car. This explains why Encinia approaches Bland's driver's side window when he next approaches the car: training teaches officers that it's more difficult for suspects to shoot someone standing outside the driver's side.

There are many reasonable explanations for why Bland was "disappear[ing] from view for an amount of time" that don't involve a gun. But because Encinia is trained to look for the worst in people, he never considers the many valid reasons Bland might disappear and instead, assumes the worst of her.

And so, Encinia's training leads him to believe that Bland poses a threat to him. Gladwell considers this thinking "dangerously flawed" under normal circumstances, and even more so when we apply it to "mismatched" people. And Sandra Bland is mismatched: she is an innocent person who Encinia believes is guilty. Besides this, her record reveals a history of numerous encounters with the police, $8,000 in outstanding fines, and a suicide attempt in the recent past. To Gladwell, Bland was a woman in crisis: she has a troubled past of debt, hardship, and mental illness. She's just moved to a new town for a fresh start, and now a minor traffic violation has threatened to upend all her hopes for the future. Because Encinia is a stranger who knows nothing about Bland, however, he mistakes her despair for malice.

Encinia's belief that Bland poses a threat to him is "dangerously flawed" because he's relying on the main problematic strategies we use in stranger interactions to justify his actions. For starters, he believes that Bland is transparent: that her outward irritation is a sign that she poses a threat to him. Second, he's ignoring how the context of their encounter is possibly affecting Bland's behavior. For instance, he fails to acknowledge how entirely reasonable it is to be irritated about getting pulled over and receiving a ticket. Additionally, he's completely unaware of the history of mental illness and personal hardship that Bland brings to their encounter, and how this history influences her behavior.

When Renfro asks Encinia about his order for Bland to extinguish her **cigarette**—the moment the altercation took a turn for the worse—Encinia claims that he wanted to ensure that Bland didn't throw it at him. Gladwell interprets this as evidence that Encinia is "terrified of her," which "is the price you pay for not defaulting to truth." As Renfro's interrogation continues, Encinia continues to assert his belief that Bland posed a threat to him. States Encinia, "My safety was in jeopardy at more than one time."

Encinia claims that his "safety was in jeopardy at more than one time," but this isn't entirely true. A more accurate phrasing would be that Encinia thought *he was in danger. Encinia's language reaffirms how significantly his police training warps his sense of reality and influences his behavior. Being trained not to "default[] to truth" causes Encinia to regard the normal action of lighting a cigarette as concrete evidence of Bland's ill-intent.*

Gladwell criticizes the common portrayal of Encinia as an unfeeling bully "without empathy." He believes that Encinia wasn't "indifferent" to Bland's feelings—he simply misread them. To illustrate his point, Gladwell highlights the couple times Encinia asked Bland if she was "okay." He ends with the conclusion that Encinia's incident with Bland didn't go awry because Encinia disregarded his training—it went awry "because he did exactly what he was trained to do."

Gladwell thinks it's missing the point to accuse Encinia of being "without empathy" and indifferent to Bland's feelings. In fact, he was hyper-fixated *on her feelings. And if he hadn't been so concerned with Bland's demeanor, the whole altercation could have ended with Encinia writing Bland a ticket or issuing her a warning and sending her on her way. Instead, he narrows his focus on Bland's temperament to search for signs of guilt. In this way, suggests Gladwell, Encinia "did exactly what he was trained to do."*

4. In 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a white police officer named Darren Wilson shot an 18-year-old African American man named Michael Brown. Wilson had approached Brown on suspicion of robbing a grocery store, Brown reached inside Wilson's patrol and punched him, and Wilson responded by shooting Brown six times. Riots ensued. Prosecutors didn't press charges against Wilson. Ferguson began what Gladwell refers to as "the strange interlude in American life when the conduct of police officers was suddenly front and center." The U.S. Department of Justice sent a team to Ferguson to investigate. Their findings revealed that frustrations in Ferguson were less about Brown's death than a critique of the Kansas City style of policing that the Ferguson Police Department practiced. It was their job to pull over as many people for as many reasons as possible.

Michael Brown's death resulted in many riots and protests that brought the Black Lives Matter civil rights movement national recognition. The central focus of the Black Lives Matter movement is to challenge police violence and injustice against Black people. The U.S. Department of Justice's investigation revealed that people were frustrated with a style of policing that is fundamentally incompatible with a functional society. Gladwell has previously established that a society where people do not default to truth would crumble. But in practicing Kansas City style policing and treating everybody as a suspect, Ferguson police instilled in their community a culture of fear and mistrust in law enforcement.

Gladwell believes these types of traffic stops are ineffective. To illustrate his point, he reveals that the North Carolina Highway Patrol's annual increase of 400,000 searches turned over only 17 guns. "Is it really worth alienating and stigmatizing 399,983 Mikes and Sandras in order to find 17 bad apples?" asks Gladwell. Larry Sherman predicted this problem when he organized the Kansas City gun experiment and anticipated it would create "hostility to the police." It's for this reason that the Kansas City officers who pioneered the program received special training, and that proactive policing was limited to District 114. If the purpose of the Kansas City experiment was to apply specialized proactive policing to the city's most crime-ridden areas, the question regarding Encinia's incident with Bland thus becomes: "was he in the right place?"

Gladwell highlights the North Carolina Highway Patrol's statistics on annual gun seizures to reaffirm the importance of context. As Gladwell establishes in Chapter Ten, crime is a coupled behavior: it's fundamentally linked with place. *Thus, preventative patrol works—but only when applied to a focused are with high crime rates. Not only does indiscriminate, unfocused preventative patrol not reduce crime to a meaningful degree, but it's also harmful in the long term due to the atmosphere of "hostility" it creates within communities.*

5. Prairie View, Texas, where Encinia pulled over Bland, is a rural area 50 miles outside Houston. It's a small town with a population of fewer than 1,000 people. The majority of its population is Republican, white, and working-class. In his interrogation with Renfro, Encinia claims that the area of town where he pulled over Bland is a high crime area. However, this is blatantly untrue. Encinia's official records show no evidence of the drug- and weapons-related arrests he claims to have made there in the past.

This passage illustrates another way Encinia's training caused his encounter with Bland to go awry. Not only does Encinia rely on the flawed logic of transparency to cast suspicion on Bland's normal behavior, but he's also applying the principles of preventative police to an area where crime isn't much cause for concern. While this context makes the suspicion Encinia directs toward Bland even more illogical, it makes perfect sense within the context of his training.

While it's true that Encinia might have exaggerated the area's dangerousness as an excuse to pull over Bland, Gladwell thinks it's equally likely that Encinia hadn't thought to associate *crime* with *place* in the first place. For Gladwell, Bland's death "is what happens when a society does not know how to talk to strangers." Encinia's police training taught him to assume the worst in everyone. At the same time, the Texas Highway Patrol disregarded the connection between crime and place and assigned Encinia a historically safe area to patrol. Most everyone in the world believes that demeanor is an indication of inner character. And nobody stops to question that any of these decisions or assumptions might be wrong.

Gladwell implies that modern policing reflects and perpetuates the broader issue of our society "not know[ing] how to talk to strangers." After all, the principles of modern policing weren't created in a vacuum: they're informed by society's flawed ideas about human communication and behavior. Encinia's police training taught him to combat his human bias toward truth by casting suspicion on everybody. It taught him that humans are transparent. To that end, the elements of modern policing that people tend to criticize are merely exaggerated versions of the ways in which we, as a broader society, fail to understand and communicate with each other.

In his closing remarks, Gladwell references a portion of Renfro's interrogation of Encinia in which Encinia speculates that Bland might have behaved as she did simply because "she did not like police officers." Encinia's argument conveniently reframes his incident to construe Bland—and not himself—as the villain. Encinia's logic illustrates Gladwell's final point: when interactions with strangers go awry because we don't understand each other, we inevitably "blame the stranger."

Our methods for dealing with strangers are skewed toward justifying our own actions and vilifying the stranger's. Stranger interactions end badly when we overestimate our ability to understand strangers and misjudge them. Until we can acknowledge our own communicative shortcomings, we will continue to make uninformed judgments about strangers. While we can't eliminate the possibility of misunderstanding strangers, we can adjust the way react to that misunderstanding by approaching strangers with more caution and humility.

AFTERWORD

1. Gladwell identifies his second book, *Blink* (2005), as the first time he approached the subject of police interactions with African American people. In *Blink*, Gladwell explores the police shooting of Amadou Diallo, a young African immigrant whom police shot after mistaking him for a rape suspect. 2. As Gladwell researched Diallo's case, he realized that his death was about more than bad policing: it was also about a clashing of disparate, unfamiliar cultures. In Diallo's native West Africa, it is customary for a person to reach for their ID when an officer approaches them. In the South Bronx, such a gesture signifies to police a person grabbing a gun. In this way, Diallo's shooting is as much a consequence of the stranger problem as it is indicative of bad policing.

Police shot Diallo after mistakenly believing he was reaching for his gun instead of his wallet. While their assumption might have been incorrect, it didn't come from nowhere: it was an educated guess informed by past experiences that taught them to interpret Diallo's gesture as a threat. Then, overconfidence in their informed guess prevented police from considering that they might be wrong. Bad policing directly caused Diallo's death, but it's imperative that we also identify the broader cultural issues that created those bad policing practices.

3. Gladwell admits to writing *Talking to Strangers* out of frustration. Since Diallo's 2004 shooting, the country has seen numerous other police shootings of innocent Black men. When Gladwell began work on *Talking to Strangers*, he believed that America "had decided to tolerate a certain amount of police violence."

Gladwell sheds additional light on what he wants Talking to Strangers *to accomplish.* Talking to Strangers *recontextualizes Gladwell's perceived tolerance for police brutality as symptomatic of a deeper systemic issue in the way we fail to understand other people, and our inability to even recognize this failure as an issue.*

4. When a police officer murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020, protests broke out around the country. Yet, Gladwell has a hard time feeling optimistic that positive changes will emerge out of the outrage. One slogan born of these protests was "defund the police," yet officers who kill due to insufficient training need more training and funding, not less. One encouraging trend to emerge from the Floyd killing was a desire to "rethink[] policing." Gladwell believes that officers need to be better trained to understand and empathize with people and deescalate the very different types of conflict that the country tasks them with deescalating.

Gladwell believes responses the George Floyd killing fail to address the root problem underlying police brutality: our inability to talk to strangers. Gladwell believes it is unproductive and inaccurate to suggest that our society's bad policing exists separate from society. Police officers who kill aren't anomalies: they're the product of a society whose increasingly diverse members have made it glaringly obvious how poorly it teaches people to understand strangers.

Gladwell considers the term "emotional labor," which he defines as "the work that goes into the public management of emotions." It's the work society requires of flight attendants, teachers, and waitresses. Gladwell thinks that we should require this same labor of law enforcement. To be sure, Brian Encinia appeared incapable of containing his fear the day he pulled over Bland. Gladwell argues that policing in this country could be more humane and effective if we understand the difficult tasks required of law enforcement and give them the training they need to undertake those tasks. After all, everyone is bad at talking to strangers—not just police officers.

Gladwell considers today's criticism of police as yet another variant of our stranger problem. We fail to recognize that the flaws of modern policing are the flaws of the broader culture. Gladwell believes we ought to approach the systemic flaws of modern policing the same way we ought to approach our failed stranger encounters. We need to learn to communicate with humility and openness rather than blame.

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