

KAREN PALMER

# ACCORDING TO THE MAP

I am going to tell you two stories. One is true, the other a lie, and not necessarily in that order.

## *Story 1*

I sit alone at the kitchen table. The windows are black, the trees in the yard indistinguishable from the sky. The apartment is quiet, my four-year-old daughter tucked into her bed. The baby due in a month rests inside me. My eyes are tired, and I have to tilt the pages of the book in my hand to escape the glare from the overhead light. Across the table the pages of the newspaper lie open, unread. My husband is in the bathroom off the kitchen and has been for some time. He's been drinking since before dinner, and it occurs to me that he must've taken the glass in there with him because the sweat rings on the newspaper have dried. I put the book down and call his name, but he doesn't answer.

I get up and go into the hall and loiter outside the closed bathroom door. I give a tentative rap, then try the handle. *Locked*. And instantly I am furious, certain he's shut himself up in there to do drugs, to snort cocaine, or crank, or whatever it is he's hidden away. Open it. I pound on the door. Fucking. Open. It.

He does, unexpectedly. I squeeze quickly inside, wedge my pregnant bulk into a corner. The bathroom is tiny, a narrow shower, a cabinet sink, a medicine chest hung too high on the wall. In the tight space he smells sour. He stands smirking at himself in the mirror, his eyes bloodshot, his skin pale. I watch him lean into his reflection and drop his jaw to inspect his molars. The metal clasps of his dental bridge shine. I was with him

for years before I learned that he had a bridge — how do you kiss a man and never notice that?

The gun at his temple wobbles.

I could be gone, he says. Just like that.

My throat constricts, and then I start to cry.

He turns and points the gun at my belly. His wrist shakes, as if the weapon is too heavy to hold. Stop sobbing, he says. It isn't loaded.

I reach forward and smack at his arm. It jerks and the gun goes off in the sink. The sound deafens me. There's a sharp smell, a powdery cloud. My husband looks surprised, and then he looks . . . *interested*. He opens his mouth to speak but I can't hear him, not a single word.

### *Story 2*

It is the summer of 1968. I am twelve and my brother Mick has just turned nine. We live with our parents in the Los Feliz neighborhood of Los Angeles, on a street called Waverly Drive. It is a solidly middle-class area, with trees and lawns and 1920s-era Spanish-style homes, but there are no other children on the block to play with, and so we are often alone. My brother is, as Mom says, young for his age — he suffers from ants in the pants and he still wets the bed — and Mick isn't allowed out in front of the house unless I am with him.

That August, Sharon Tate, the pregnant wife of director Roman Polanski, along with three of her friends and a young man who was visiting the caretaker, are murdered at a house in Beverly Hills. The next night Rosemary and Leno LaBianca are killed. The LaBiancas live on Waverly Drive, across the street and three doors down from our family. My parents know them to say hello to, but to me and to Mick they are middle-aged shadows, all but invisible.

For days cops and reporters swarm the area. It's scary but also exciting. We children are told to stay inside. I am full of questions that no one answers. Things calm down eventually, but I never do get a real explanation of what happened. I learn what I can by eavesdropping on adults, from the news on

TV, and then, once school starts, from playground gossip, some of which is contradictory, some of which I know to be false: Leno LaBianca owed the Mafia money; Roman Polanski had his wife killed; the murders were related, or else the LaBiancas were a copycat crime. I know that the word *pig* was scrawled in blood on the front door at Sharon Tate's house, *death to pigs* on the wall in the LaBiancas' living room.

One Sunday in mid-December, a photograph of Charles Manson appears on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*. Due to be released for an entirely different crime, he's been named by a jailhouse snitch as the perpetrator of the summer's murders.

Mick and I lounge on the living room floor, newspaper spread all around us. Mick lies on his stomach, chin propped in his hands. He stares at Manson's picture, the weird eyes, the stringy long hair. He says that he recognizes this guy, that he saw him on our street a day or two before the killings, sitting with some people in a car at the foot of the LaBiancas' driveway. Manson, Mick says, called him over to the driver's side window.

He told me a joke, Mick says.

He did not. An automatic response, because Mick is a liar. He lies to get out of trouble, he lies to make himself important, he lies, sometimes, to be loved.

Knock knock, he says.

Who's there? Another automatic response. Because if someone starts a knock-knock joke, you must complete it.

Leno, he says.

Leno who?

Leno little closer, I want to tell you a secret.

Liar, I say. That never happened.

Mick shrugs. How do you know? You weren't even there.



Like many writers I also teach, and I often begin workshops with these two stories, told more or less as written here and prefaced identically: one is true,

the other a lie, and not necessarily in that order. I keep my tone and expression neutral, hands folded and body still. When I'm done, the students vote for the narrative that seems most likely true. We then discuss why they've chosen as they have. Someone might say that the Manson story is clearly false, because the younger brother wasn't allowed to play outside alone. Another counters that the contradiction is what makes it seem real. Someone else finds it far-fetched that a pregnant woman would remain in a bathroom with a man with a gun. We talk a bit about dialogue, what it means to put words in the characters' mouths, and about exposition, the information needed to understand the story's action. We talk about the ways in which the stories would change if switched from first person to third. *She sits alone at the kitchen table.*

By this time I've usually coughed up the truth. The gun story, I say, that's the one that happened to me. Which means the other must be a lie. And so it is. Everything I know about the events of August 8-9, 1969, comes from what I've read in books and articles or seen in documentary films. Like the girl in the story, I was twelve when the murders occurred, just beginning to see the world on my own terms. But I don't have a younger brother; I have no siblings. And although I grew up in Los Angeles, only a few miles from Los Feliz, I've never lived on Waverly Drive.

Manson, of course, was a real, live bogeyman, his followers mostly spooky young women swept up at just the right age and time. I first read *Helter Skelter*, Vincent Bugliosi's classic book about the case, in 1974, when I was seventeen, and both the horror of the murders and the guilty thrill of touching evil at a distance have stayed with me. But what chills me most now is how easily Manson convinced those girls to see him as something other than what he was, how he turned their alienation to his purposes. He gave them a new family, and new names. He said he was their savior and they his chosen people, and they became killers for him. What made them so susceptible?

Later, when all were caught, Manson's girls in their jail cells carved swastikas into their foreheads, just as he had, and they walked to court arm in arm, singing, telling anyone who would listen, *Charlie is love.*

In class, every once in a while someone will ask, What happened next? To the husband, and the children. And *you*. What happened to you?

I divorced him, I say. I say, It was a long time ago; I was another person then. And it's true, we did divorce. But the statements are misleading, because more than two years passed before I left. My husband pointed that gun at my pregnant belly and still I failed to scoop up my daughter and run. That night has everything to do with who I am.

My daughter slept through the gunshot. I think she did. Possibly it entered her dreams, a poke to the solar plexus, a flash of light behind her closed lids. But when I checked on her, her breathing was even; her chest rose and fell lightly under the sheet. I knelt by the bed and kissed her forehead. She smelled musty, a little doughy, as children who have not had a bath before going to bed do. I waited for what would come next. But there was nothing. No stomp of footsteps in the apartment upstairs, no lights burning in the building next door, no sirens wailing out in the street. The police were not going to break down the door. It made no sense: my husband had shot a hole in the sink. I heard the freezer door open, ice cubes falling daintily into a glass. I heard the scrape of chair legs, my husband seating himself at the kitchen table. *It was late, the windows were black, the trees in the yard indistinguishable from the sky.*

I dragged a blanket and pillow from our bed to the living room and curled up on the couch. I held my breath and listened for sounds, but the apartment was again still. My heart was beating too fast, the baby pressed up under my ribs. I was sure I wouldn't sleep, but I did. And in the morning the sun came up, as it always does, and my husband was his usual self, no worse for the night's wear, chipper even, bacon and eggs on the stove and coffee brewing, our girl seated at the kitchen table, gabbing as he cooked her breakfast, her bare feet swinging, and he was smiling broadly, listening to her as if she were the most compelling person on earth.

He'll look at me now, I thought, his expression open, contrite. *It was an accident. I didn't know the gun was loaded. I'd never hurt you.* Or maybe he would be defiant, offhand. *Forget it, baby. It never happened. It was all a dream.* I would have found that

storyline comforting. It made it possible to stay. I'd never have to tell anyone.

You can hold conflicting beliefs in your head, but it makes you crazy.

Later, I remember thinking that after all no one had been hurt. No one was perfect, no marriage was perfect, there are always shadows.

The truth is, I still loved him then. So I stayed.

There was a game I used to play as a child. I'd hide a bit of treasure somewhere in the house—a piece of my mother's costume jewelry, a soft white slice of Wonder Bread—then sit at the dining room table and draw myself a map. I'd put in lots of detail, furniture and people, markers and clues, everything needed to find the treasure. Then I'd march around chanting, *According, according, according to the map!* The success of this game, my pleasure in it, depended on pretending not to know what I clearly did know.

But the body's a snitch. Liars scratch or fidget or hold themselves unnaturally still. They look away or else too directly into your eyes. A polygraph measures heartbeat and breathing, rising blood pressure, sweat, but it can't measure the source of the stress. Is it the lie, or the fear of being thought a liar? Can you lie to yourself? Can you really? With an fMRI, neuroscientists map blood flow to the brain. Lie, and areas associated with conflict and emotion light up. The brain must stop itself from telling the truth before it can formulate an alternative reality. The scan glows red. The task literally generates heat.