‘Stop telling me stories’ (she said)

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I remember when I was young, an advertising billboard poster proudly proclaimed: Coke Adds Life. An anti-advertising group were always at the ready to delete a D and graffiti a cross over the F to create the more believable slogan: Coke Ads Lie. Take the ‘f’ out of Life and we are left with a lie. This ad-busting was not only a reminder that Coke ads lie, but that all advertisements lie.

When I was young, ‘telling stories’ was a euphemism for finding excuses and making things up. As an admonishment and a cautionary warning, we were told to ‘stop telling stories’. Stories were not trusted; storytelling was ‘telling tales’.

I started to see the act of telling stories as part of a ‘true stories’ paradox. Film poster marketing now tries to sell us the fiction that a film is somehow more believable because it is ‘based on a true story’.

A true story purports to be true, or as true as a creative illusion can be. A true story is true but it’s also a story — a fiction, or a collection of fictions. As a story, it cannot be other than a collection of inter-connected fictions that masquerade as truthful representations.

So, if a story is a fiction, a true story is a true fiction. It is both true and a fiction. A true fiction is a collection of fictions and creative lies dressed as a truthful story. A story is not merely a lie: it’s a true lie. And a story that parades as a true story is truly a lie.

Be they ‘little white lies’ or ‘big pork pies’, lies are first hatched and then despatched as stories. And like a story, a lie is a way of winging it, improvising, playing things by ear and ‘making things up’.

So, this is a story about … telling stories.

I tend to consider all stories as telling stories: stories that are told, and stories that are telling (of significance and worth).

This is not only a story about telling stories; it’s also a story about making things up. I’m making up a story, about making up stories, and how stories tend to be made … up. (Isn’t it always thus, when we perform our selves, or today’s version of our selves?)
I'm making up a story, now, about a story I previously made up, once upon a time. It's a story I created, but now I wonder how much of it I made up. I think I might have made bits of it up — maybe even some of the important bits. Whatever the case, whatever was made, was made up. Whenever we remember, or try to recall, we also forget — so, we tend to rely on invention, to make things up.

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I am interested in trying to trace some of the shifts and differences between what seems easily understood and the more difficult grey areas, at the borders. Whilst it is easily agreed that stories are valued, there is also that uneasy feeling that at any moment, the whole storytelling edifice could crumble: when one uncertainty throws everything into doubt.

Lies and Stories are branch members of the same family tree. They are both inherently ambiguous, because they are suffused with the same embellishments, inevitable sidetracks and detours; the same vast sweeping brushstrokes, inadvertent omissions, conveniently forgotten little murders ....

Whilst Lies are meant to sink us into deeper waters, Stories can also find us flailing in quicksand. Lies and Stories are equally characterised by uncertainties and inconsistencies. There are times when we tell others a half-invented story, to protect ourselves, and provide an alibi. Sometimes, there are stories that function as delusions: the lies we tell our/selves. The changing images we construct for ourselves are necessary fictions and convenient lies, based on these stories of self-deception. Mostly, the stories we tell (ourselves and others) are part of this precarious balancing act we perform every day.

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So, here is a familial case study, where my mother and I play the roles of Mother and Son.

In my teens, I obtained a small souvenir scar on my chin, from my first attempt to stand up for myself on a surfboard. More than 30 years later, I wrote a script based on blurred, fading memories of this incident. This script was based on selective memory-images, free-form associations and speculative imaginings. It took me around 10 years to make a video about this story. Since completing the video of Lorne Story (2003), I have been re-making and re-considering this story for the last 5 years. Hopefully, I'll be re-writing it (and myself) for a few more years to come. Whilst the repetition compulsion is still strong (like the repetition compulsion to wake up each morning and breathe), the compulsion here has less to do with the desire to dwell in the past, and more to do with the desire to learn from, and with, a continuously re-writable past.

In the video of Lorne Story (2003), there are a series of re-enactments: being knocked out by one of Neptune’s waves; staggering to the local sea-side Hospital for stitches, and eventually returning back to the fold: groggy, tired and low on spirits after the ordeal — getting ready to face the impending judgement.

I knew that before I could present my case and furnish a defense, my mother, the judge, would be ready to interject during my concluding remarks with the familiar retort: ‘Stop telling me stories’. Storytelling, somehow, became linked with the need to provide an explanation, in the form of a comprehensible, believable narrative. It became necessary to ‘tell tales’ and create a story, in order to ‘buy time’ and protect an experience that I had not been able to process or even slightly comprehend.

(The following [in light shading] is the audio voice-over from the video production of
Lorne Story (2003). The words in darker shading, are examples of the ‘live’ voice-over performed during the conference presentation. This ‘live’ voice-over provided new interpretative annotations. It also demonstrated how a story is open to re-tellings, and how the creative act of ‘making things up’ continuously generates new versions.)

After the Hospital, I started the long walk back to the Lorne Chalet. I was still groggy, and tired, and low on spirits. Maybe I was groggy because they gave me an anaesthetic. Or maybe I was just exhausted from the whole ordeal. I meandered through the back streets again and trudged back to my cell, willingly becoming a prisoner again — at least, a willing prisoner until I summoned enough strength or courage to make another getaway.

Now that I think about it, it has taken a long time to summon the strength. Maybe I never have tried to escape again. Maybe it’s just impossible to escape. The stitches were like the bars of a prison cell. I felt like I was, once again, trapped and behind bars. I felt like a simpering puppy returning to the leash, after knowingly straying beyond the flags. After a while, all the different prisons become bearable — or at least familiar. And the self becomes a prison, inside a larger prison. And it becomes harder to pull away from the gravitational pull of the familiar and the comfortable. And that’s the tragedy of voluntary incarceration.

Now I was fearing the ‘I told you so’ chorus. When I found my way back to the Chalet, I went straight back to my room. Just as I sneaked out, I sneaked back in, avoiding everyone.

But how did I get into my room? (I'm not sure.) I must've left the lock snibbed, or maybe I hid them (the keys) in one of the flowerpots, or under a doormat, as was the custom in those days. I guess, it's just another loose end to the story. (There are so many loose ends to this, and every story.)

I do remember collapsing on the bed, face up, staring at the ceiling, feeling my chin shivering from the repercussions of the morning’s events.

Looking at the ceiling, I imagined the doctor’s needle, as a Malibu board, with the black thread as a leg rope. The needle like a surfboard, skimming the surface of my skin, joining the edges of my wounded chin, and in a flourish, the needle did some elegant re-entry turns and stitched two broken waves into one.

Did I hear the gongs chiming for lunch? Probably. Did I whisper under my breath?: ‘Not today, thanks.’

I remember that Mum eventually came in to see where I was. I also remember that she didn’t seem to be angry. There was no room for that — only her sympathy and calm concern, as I tried to tell her what happened.

I don't remember a single word that was said. It's times like that, when all you remember are the raw emotions. What I do remember is that Mum was strangely sympathetic and comforting. Strange, because I was expecting a volcanic eruption. Understandable, because Mothers have a way of wanting to protect their young, irrespective of blame.

On all of the small petty matters, Mum was a hard task-master; but when it came to the big picture, she always had things in perspective, and always displayed a sense of dignity.
Mum was sympathetic because she knew that I needed her sympathy — a sympathy towards the stitches rather than the cause.

She knew that I *did* want to be a surfie.
I'm pretty sure that she also knew that I wanted to be a rebel with a cause. (But how do I really know? This sounds more like an immature projection of my anxiety and a fantasy wish that she would be comforting, empathetic and understanding.)

At the time, though, what was submerged and repressed, were the reasons behind the event — the story behind wanting to be a surfie.
In a way, trying to surf, (and trying to be a surfie) was a way of trying to do things for myself, by myself. But trying to be a surfie overnight was like trying to escape into a fool’s paradise.

It's only *now* that I can see it — the surfing dreams, and Lorne as a new frontier; driving without a licence, and trying to surf without a licence. All of it was just trying things out, and testing the limits ... to see how far I could go ...

It wasn’t just the desire for sporting adventure; it was more like an attempt to escape: to escape from responsibility; to escape from the ‘careful’; to escape from a pre-scripted future of marriage, mortgage and weekend renovations.

The simple surface explanation was that it was just an accident.
That’s what I told others. That’s what I told myself. Eventually I even convinced myself that it was ‘just an accident’.
Now I’m not so convinced. (I wasn’t convinced then, and I’m not convinced now. But if it wasn’t an accident, what was it? Was I setting myself up, in order to fail? I was breaking every rule in the book: sneaking out by myself; without anyone knowing; without anyone to watch over me; with a ‘borrowed’ surfboard that was too large and heavy; without waxing the board beforehand; without even knowing that I should have waxed it. Did I realize that I was heading for a fall?)

I cried in my Mother’s arms; her comforting arms.
And I confessed — admitting that I was just, plain, silly. I sensed that Mum was pleased, at least relieved that I was taking some form of responsibility. I wanted to confess, not to apologize, but to claim ownership and claim a sense of identity — a way of saying ‘this was *my* mistake’. It’s probably much the same reason for wanting to discover and re-cover this story, now — to claim it as *my* story, my version of things — however uncertain, however hazy.

I remember the comfort and solace of crying in my mother’s arms. Even though I was probably tired and exhausted, I don’t think I was just crying from the physical shock. I was crying *to* myself; and mourning *for* myself. Not only had I *slipped*, I’d slipped up.

In trying to escape, I’d slipped and fallen, onto the crack on the surfboard, and *into* the gap, between the sea and the sand.

I’d slipped onto my chin and through the cut, *into* my chin. I’d slipped inside myself, and disappeared into my self.

A part of me is still stitched up, inside this scar. Another part of me is buried in the shallows at Lorne.

Actually, I’m not sure whether it was like that at all. Neither the feelings then,
nor the feelings now, seem like anything other than a story.
I sometimes wonder how much of the story I may have made up.
And might still be making up … 
For example: I'm not sure whether I was actually crying in my Mother's arms,
or lying in my Mother's arms.

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Stories stretch. They can extend from possible imaginings, minor slips, unknowing inaccuracies and embellishments, to patent falsehoods, wilful deceptions, and bald-faced lies. They are a way we tell our selves (and others) convenient and necessary fictions. They are a way of protecting ourselves (and others) from the things that cannot, at first, be tolerated. What was it that I couldn’t tolerate? And what may I have thought my mother could not tolerate?

For me, it was probably a number of things. Wanting to be a surfer was, once upon a time, a way of trying to break out, jump the fence and escape from expectations …. Failing to be a surfer would be like failing at being a failure. Perhaps, also, there was the fear of being exposed, being ‘found out’ or revealed. To return, back to earth with a thud, is a tough, but all too familiar lesson for an adolescent with dreams of catching the great white wave.

Whilst my parents did not easily tolerate lies, homespun stories and heartfelt testimonies based on experience and recollection were cherished. Around the family dinner table, those who told the stories of their travails were highly respected and deemed worthy of praise. And yet, when I attempted to tell my own stories, and sought to re-enact my own humble footsteps, it was as if I was on a circus tightrope, tentatively placing one foot in front of the other.

In the risky high-wire act of autobiographical testimony, an uncertain foot slips. Before a spellbound audience, the performative storyteller teeters. The foot hovers, searching for a sense of balance. At this moment of suspense, improvisation comes to the rescue. We learn how to improvise, perform our stories and make things up: to find our footing; to seek recognition; to avert the severe decree. If the initial slip is accidental, the need to find a counterbalance is part of a survival instinct. However, there is another mode of performative storytelling where the initial slip is less than accidental. After some practice, the feigned slip can become a deliberately playful performance — a mischievous flourish to keep the audience on the edge of their seats. Charlie Chaplin plays with this ambiguity in The Circus (1928) with the knowingly untrainable monkeys that attempt to unhinge his hire-wire act. As with all of his circus antics, initially there is a slip; eventually it becomes part of a script. (The central performative image in Lorne Story also started from a slip. My fall from grace began as a fall from a surfboard. When I attempted to re-enact this story, I was also conscious of how unscriptable a surfboard can be amidst the high seas.) As the naïve circus apprentice, Chaplin recognizes the fragile power that resides in his uncertain teetering foot. To survive the ordeal, he seeks security and stability and a firm foothold. But he also presents this scene as a self-reflexive allegory on the act of performance, itself. As the chaos intensifies, so does Chaplin’s hold over the increasingly sympathetic and awe-stuck audience. As with all high-wire performers, Chaplin swayed between continuously-scripted and continuously-improvised stories. Be it a magical trick or a downright deceptive illusion, the creative art of performative storytelling can, in this way, function as a protective defense and a distraction from the threat that cannot be easily accepted or even endured.

At the circus and in the courtroom of our daily proceedings, what is clear and what is unambiguous, is often under pressure. There is a precarious balancing act that takes centre-stage during performative autobiographical testimony: from its uncertain steps
and narrative slips, to the ways in which we try to maintain a sense of equilibrium, whilst juggling with selective recollection, imaginative improvisation, and speculative conjecture.

So what do I really remember of the original events of my teenage surfing scenario? And what am I in the process of forgetting, fudging, and falsifying? What I have come to realize, is that each time I re-consider this scenario, I tend to create new interpretations and make up new versions. Each new version layers the last, and each new version begets a new annotation. And so it continues.... Once upon a time, there was a story: one of many possible tellings. Now there are multiple stories of how I fell from grace. Some of them are contradictory; some seem strangely unfamiliar. In my memory, the video version is replacing the initial uncertain scenario. Together, they are all telling stories.

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As an autobiographical performative character, I am making, and I am made, and, all the while, (I am) somewhat invented.

As an autobiographical character, I am invented and self-made in a number of ways. I am the creation of a series of fictions: I am creatively fictive and (hopefully) furtive. I appear and disappear between the lines, and between the edits. I am a character who is made, and in the same sweep, I am a character that is made up. And as an autobiographical character, I am the one making myself up. I am putting on my own make-up, and creating my own character: backstage, in the mirror, and on stage, during the performance, in the presence of the audience.

Whilst performing to others, and for others, we are also performing to and for our selves. In the autobiographical mirror, we are not only telling our stories (our selves), we are also telling our selves stories. However, there are times when even we can hardly believe our own stories. In 2003 I tried to stop telling this surfing scenario to myself and to others. However, the story kept begetting new versions. At least, I have stopped believing that it is possible to tell only one version of the story.

An autobiographical story is a convenient but necessary fiction: a magical illusion and a mesmerizing lie, dressed in the vestments of a creative narrative. It is a tall tale told by an inventive conjurer. In the biographical documentary, The Magic of Fellini, Paolo Villaggio properly defends Federico Fellini’s autobiographical flights into imaginable fantasy:

> He was a great storyteller, [and] an inventor, but he wasn’t a liar. All his lies were at the service of his creativity, and of the pleasure he wanted to give the viewer.

His personal assistant, Fiammetta Profili also reminds us that, with Fellini, everything is always imagined.

> As he once said to [Roberto] Benigni, who was also accused of distorting reality a little: ‘Look, Roberto, people don’t understand. Instead of thanking us for making life more interesting, by enriching it with details that should have been there but were missing, people should be more grateful, instead of saying that we lie.’

Rather than wilful deception or a deliberate lie, creative storytelling can be seen as a spectacular performative act, fuelled by flourishes of improvisation and speculation. As the curtain opens, the audience becomes part of the lingering magic and the theatre of continuous possibility. For the performer, the opening curtain also signals the ineffable thrill of improvised invention. Both the audience and performer, together, put one thing next to another. Together, we are made; together, we make things; together, we are making things up.
This paper is based on my presentation at the Double Dialogues Conference, Lies: a Conference on Art, at The University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji, on July 5, 2007.

**Filmography**

Charles Chaplin (1928). *The Circus* (Charles Chaplin Productions)

Stephen Goddard (2003). *Lorne Story* (Deakin University, Burwood)