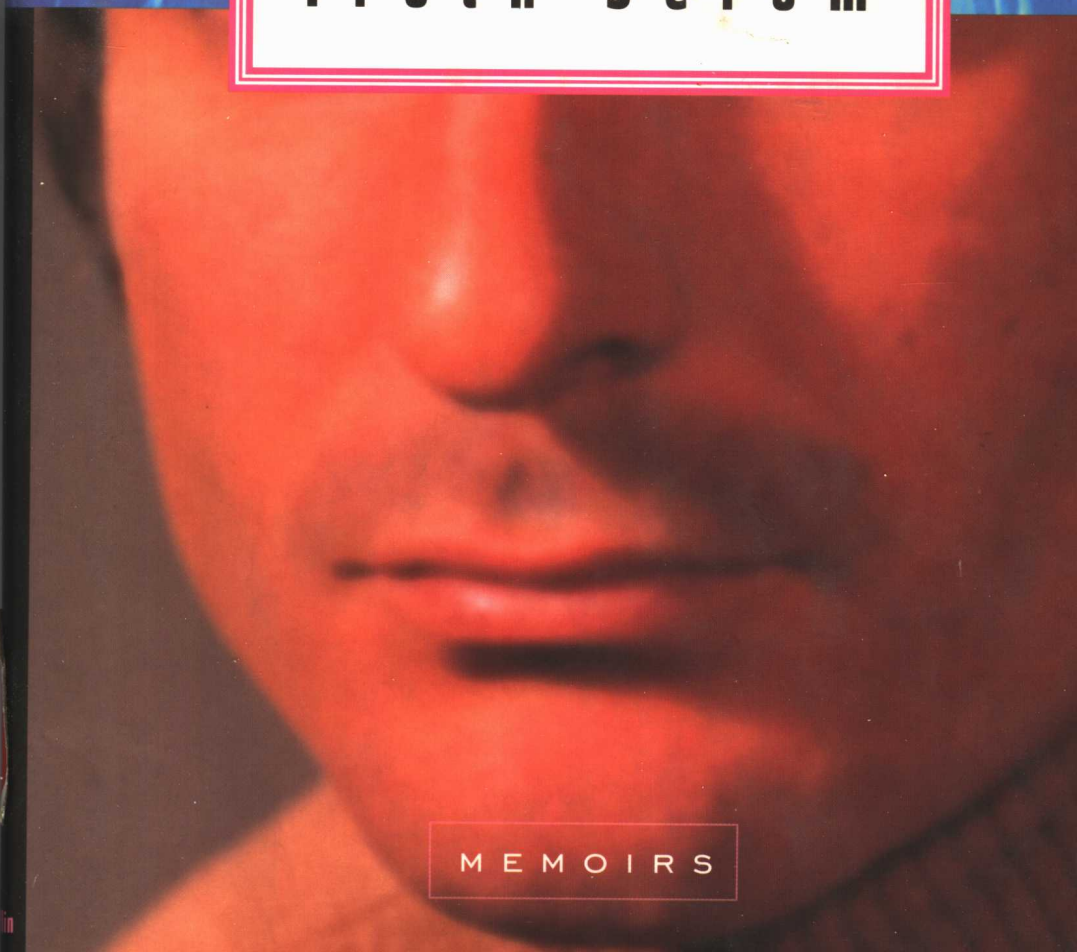
BERNARD COOPER

Truth Serum



MEMOIRS

Truth Serum

memoirs

Bernard Cooper

Houghton Mifflin Company · Boston · New York
1996

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Cooper, Bernard, date.
Truth serum : memoirs / Bernard Cooper.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-395-74539-X
1. Cooper, Bernard, 1951– — Biography. 2. Authors, American — 20th century — Biography. 3. Gay men — United States — Biography. I. Title.
PS3553.O57982463 1996 95-38984
813'.54 — dc20 CIP [B]

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Melodie Wertelet

Some of the memoirs in this collection have appeared elsewhere, in slightly different form: "101 Ways to Cook Hamburger" in *Harper's Magazine;* "Burl's" in *The Los Angeles Times Magazine* and *The Best American Essays 1995*, edited by Jamaica Kincaid; "Imitation of Life" in *The San Diego Reader;* "Arson" in *His: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers;* "Truth Serum" in *Harper's Magazine, The 1995 O. Henry Prize Collection,* and *Brother and Sister: Gay Men and Lesbians Write about Each Other;* "The Fine Art of Sighing" in *The Paris Review;* "Picking Plums" in *Harper's Magazine, A Member of the Family: Gay Men Write about Their Families, Turning Toward Home: Reflections on the Family from Harper's Magazine,* and *The Oxford Book of Aging;* "Train of Thought" in *The Gettysburg Review* and *Harper's Magazine;* and "Tone Poem" in *The Paris Review.*

Truth Serum

". . . but there it was, I knew it to be true,
and if it was impossible then the definition
of possibility was inadequate."

~ Jan Morris

For Brian

The author wishes to thank the following people for their kindness, advice, and forbearance:

Steven Barclay, Steve Blakley, Clifford Chase, John Chase, Robert Dawidoff, Jacqueline De Angelis, Amy Gerstler, Sloan Harris, Amy Hempel, Richard Howard, Terryl Hunter, David Leavitt, Rondo Mieczkowski, Judith Moore, Linda Norlen, Gordon Pollack, Kit Rachlis, Greg Riley, Aleida Rodríguez, Dawn Seferian, Ilena Silverman, and Benjamin Weissman.

And especially Jill Climent, Jeff Hammond, Michelle Huneven, Tom Knechtel, and Bia Lowe.

Contents

Where to Begin

One day I was looking through an issue of *Art in America* when I came across a reproduction of the most complicated painting I'd ever seen. Rendered in bright colors and with painstaking precision, the canvas contained, among a hundred other images, a naked man and woman, a passenger jet, a bouquet of red roses, a five-dollar bill, a wristwatch, a pencil, and a slab of raw steak. Nowhere did sky or sunlight squeak through. There was, in fact, no foreground or background, none of the comforts of scale or perspective. Each thing seemed to be tossed on a heap, jostling for space and attention. The other paintings in the magazine — minimal this and abstract that — looked arid and bland by comparison, as uneventful as a Sunday in the suburbs. As I brought the page closer, astonished by the craftsmanship, a cocker spaniel or a telephone suddenly emerged from the chaos.

I couldn't help but think that it would have taken someone many, many years to complete such a painting. It's even possible that the artist, a man I'd never heard of before or since, invented a few mechanical aids to help him with his mission: a splint to hold up his cramping hand, flashlights affixed to his thick prescription glasses. Or he might have gone blind and mad in the process, like someone condemned to spend his life embroidering a circus tent.

Beneath the reproduction it read, "*A Grain of Sand*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas (detail)." Wow, I thought, if that's a detail,

imagine the whole painting. And if the whole painting is a single grain of sand, imagine the beach, the coastline, the continent rimmed by a trillion grains.

This painting comes to mind whenever I try to write about my life. Sure, such and such happened. But what about that and that and that, till the picture is jammed to overflowing, and I don't know where to begin.

I can still see the nurse — Sister Mary Something-or-other — coming though the door. Her pale face peers out from her habit. She regards me in my mother's arms, tells me I'm tiny, then turns and walks away. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the maternity ward was on the seventh floor of Queen of Angels Hospital and my mother's room, facing south, overlooked the Hollywood Freeway, which wasn't nearly as crowded then as it is today. I remember the swoosh of afternoon traffic wafting through the open window. Mother's hospital gown was strewn with blue dots, her eyes as bright as milk.

Which reminds me of when I twinkled in my father's eye. I was nothing back then but a yen for affection, a shimmer of expectancy as he pulled my future mother to the sheets. Her wavy hair splashed upon the pillow. As he undid the buttons of her sleeveless blouse, he also managed to tug off his tie and toss it over his shoulder. His zeal caused my mother to grab him and laugh. His last thought before he was too glad to think: *I wish I had more hands.*

But let's go back further to the static of nonbeing, so like a sandstorm. Every infinitesimal grain contained a vague potential charge, a quasi-almost-stab-at-something, a not-quite-manifest-inkling-of-matter. The air around me felt quiet but alive, like the pause before a clap of thunder. The idea dawned that I might take shape, might take my place among abundance. Life was so much fresher then, my molecules as wet as drops of paint, my soon-to-be memories too numerous to mention.

101 Ways to Cook Hamburger

Theresa Sanchez sat behind me in ninth-grade algebra. When Mr. Hubbley faced the blackboard, I'd turn around to see what she was reading; each week a new book was wedged inside her copy of *Today's Equations.* The deception worked; from Mr. Hubbley's point of view, Theresa was engrossed in the value of *X,* but I knew otherwise. One week she perused *The Wisdom of the Orient,* and I could tell from Theresa's contemplative expression that the book contained exotic thoughts, guidelines handed down from on high. Another week it was a paperback novel whose title, *Let Me Live My Life,* appeared in bold print atop every page, and whose cover, a gauzy photograph of a woman biting a strand of pearls, her head thrown back in ecstasy, confirmed my suspicion that Theresa Sanchez was mature beyond her years. She was the tallest girl in school. Her bouffant hairdo, streaked with blond, was higher than the flaccid bouffants of other girls. Her smooth skin, plucked eyebrows, and painted fingernails suggested hours of pampering, a worldly and sensual vanity that placed her within the domain of adults. Smiling dimly, steeped in daydreams, Theresa moved through the crowded halls with a languid, self-satisfied indifference to those around her. "You are merely children," her posture seemed to say, "I can't be bothered." The week Theresa hid *101 Ways to Cook Hamburger* behind her algebra book, I could stand it no longer, and after the bell rang, ventured a question.

"Because I'm having a dinner party," said Theresa. "Just a couple of intimate friends."

No fourteen-year-old I knew had ever given a dinner party, let alone used the word "intimate" in conversation. "Don't you have a mother?" I asked.

Theresa sighed a weary sigh, suffered my strange inquiry. "Don't be so naive," she said. "Everyone has a mother." She waved her hand to indicate the brick school buildings outside the window. "A higher education should have taught you that." Theresa draped an angora sweater over her shoulders, scooped her books from the graffiti-covered desk, and just as she was about to walk away, turned and asked me, "Are you a fag?"

There wasn't the slightest hint of rancor or condescension in her voice. The tone was direct, casual. Still I was stunned, giving a sidelong glance to make sure no one had heard. "No," I said. Blurted really, with too much defensiveness, too much transparent fear in my response. Octaves lower than usual, I tried a "Why?"

Theresa shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. I have lots of friends who are fags. You remind me of them." Seeing me bristle, Theresa added, "It was just a guess." I watched her erect angora back as she sauntered out the classroom door.

She had made an incisive and timely guess. Only days before, I'd invited Grady Rogers to my house after school to go swimming. The instant Grady shot from the pool, shaking water from his orange hair, his freckled shoulders shining, my attraction to members of my own sex became a matter I could no longer suppress or rationalize. Sturdy and boisterous and gap-toothed, Grady was an inveterate back slapper, a formidable arm wrestler, a wizard at basketball. Grady was a boy at home in his body.

My body was a marvel I hadn't gotten used to; my arms and legs would sometimes act of their own accord, knocking over a glass at dinner or flinching at an oncoming pitch. I was never

singled out as a sissy, but I could have been just as easily as Bobby Keagan, a gentle, intelligent, and introverted boy reviled by my classmates. And although I had always been aware of a tacit rapport with Bobby, a suspicion that I might find with him a rich friendship, I stayed away. Instead, I emulated Grady in the belief that being seen with him, being like him, would somehow vanquish my self-doubt, would make me normal by association.

Apart from his athletic prowess, Grady had been gifted with all the trappings of what I imagined to be a charmed life: a fastidious, aproned mother who radiated calm and maternal concern, a ruddy, stoic father with a knack for home repairs. Even the Rogerses' small suburban house in Hollywood, with its spindly Colonial furniture and chintz curtains, was a testament to normalcy.

Grady and his family bore little resemblance to my clan of Eastern European Jews, a dark and vociferous people who ate with abandon — matzo and halvah and gefilte fish; foods the goyim couldn't pronounce — who cajoled one another during endless games of canasta, making the simplest remark about the weather into a lengthy philosophical discourse on the sun and the seasons and the passage of time. My mother was a chain smoker, a dervish in a frowsy housedress. She showed her love in the most peculiar and obsessive ways, like spending hours extracting every seed from a watermelon before she served it in perfectly bite-sized geometric pieces. Preoccupied and perpetually frantic, my mother succumbed to bouts of absentmindedness so profound she'd forget what she was saying in midsentence, smile and blush and walk away. A divorce attorney, my father wore roomy, iridescent suits, and the intricacies, the deceits inherent in his profession, had the effect of making him forever tense and vigilant. He was "all wound up," as my mother put it. But when he relaxed, his laughter was explosive, his disposition prankish: "Walk this way," a waitress would say, leading us to our

table, and my father would mimic the way she walked, arms akimbo, hips liquid, while my mother and I were wracked with laughter. Buoyant or brooding, my parents' moods were unpredictable, and in a household fraught with extravagant emotion it was odd and awful to keep my longing secret.

One day I made the mistake of asking my mother what a fag was. I knew exactly what Theresa had meant, but hoped against hope it was not what I thought; maybe *fag* was some French word, a harmless term like *naive.* My mother turned from the stove, flew at me, and grabbed me by the shoulders. "Did someone call you that?" she cried.

"Not me," I said. "Bobby Keagan."

"Oh," she said, loosening her grip. She was visibly relieved. And didn't answer. The answer was unthinkable.

*

For weeks after, I shook with the reverberations from that afternoon in the kitchen with my mother, pained by the memory of her shocked expression and, most of all, her silence. My longing was wrong in the eyes of my mother, whose hazel eyes were the eyes of the world, and if that longing continued unchecked, the unwieldy shape of my fate would be cast, and I'd be subjected to a lifetime of scorn.

During the remainder of the semester, I became the scientist of my own desire, plotting ways to change my yearning for boys into a yearning for girls. I had enough evidence to believe that any habit, regardless of how compulsive, how deeply ingrained, could be broken once and for all: the plastic cigarette my mother purchased at the Thrifty pharmacy (one end was red to approximate an ember, the other tan like a filter tip) was designed to wean her from the real thing. To change a behavior required self-analysis, cold resolve, and the substitution of one thing for another: plastic, say, for tobacco. Could I also find a substitute for

Grady? What I needed to do, I figured, was kiss a girl and learn to like it.

This conclusion was affirmed one Sunday morning when my father, seeing me wrinkle my nose at the pink slabs of lox he layered on a bagel, tried to convince me of its salty appeal. "You should try some," he said. "You don't know what you're missing."

"It's loaded with protein," added my mother, slapping a platter of sliced onions onto the dinette table. She hovered above us, cinching up her housedress, eyes wet from onion fumes, a mock cigarette dangling from her lips.

My father sat there chomping with gusto, emitting a couple of hearty grunts to dramatize his satisfaction. And still I was not convinced. After a loud and labored swallow, he told me I may not be fond of lox today, but sooner or later I'd learn to like it. One's tastes, he assured me, are destined to change.

"Live," shouted my mother over the rumble of the Mixmaster. "Expand your horizons. Try new things." And the room grew fragrant with the batter of a spice cake.

The opportunity to put their advice into practice, and try out my plan to adapt to girls, came the following week when Debbie Coburn, a member of Mr. Hubbley's algebra class, invited me to a party. She cornered me in the hall, furtive as a spy, telling me her parents would be gone for the evening and slipping into my palm a wrinkled sheet of notebook paper. On it were her address and telephone number, the lavender ink in a tidy cursive. "Wear cologne," she advised, wary eyes darting back and forth. "It's a make-out party. Anything can happen."

The Santa Ana winds blew relentlessly the night of Debbie's party, careening down the slopes of the Hollywood Hills, shaking the road signs and stoplights in its path. As I walked down Beachwood Avenue, trees thrashed, surrendered their leaves, and carob pods bombarded the pavement. The sky was a deep but luminous blue, the air hot, abrasive, electric. I had to squint in order to

check the number of the Coburns' apartment, a three-story building with glitter embedded in its stucco walls. Above the honeycombed balconies was a sign that read *Beachwood Terrace* in lavender script resembling Debbie's.

From down the hall, I could hear the plaintive strains of Little Anthony's "Goin' Out of My Head." Debbie answered the door bedecked in an empire dress, the bodice blue with orange polka dots, the rest a sheath of black and white stripes. "Op art," proclaimed Debbie. She turned in a circle, then proudly announced that she'd rolled her hair in frozen orange juice cans. She patted the huge unmoving curls and dragged me inside. Reflections from the swimming pool in the courtyard, its surface ruffled by wind, shuddered over the ceiling and walls. A dozen of my classmates were seated on the sofa or huddled together in corners, their whispers full of excited imminence, their bodies barely discernible in the dim light. Drapes flanking the sliding glass doors bowed out with every gust of wind, and it seemed that the room might lurch from its foundations and sail with its cargo of silhouettes into the hot October night.

Grady was the last to arrive. He tossed a six-pack of beer into Debbie's arms, barreled toward me, and slapped my back. His hair was slicked back with Vitalis, lacquered furrows left by the comb. The wind hadn't shifted a single hair. "Ya ready?" he asked, flashing the gap between his front teeth and leering into the darkened room. "You bet," I lied.

Once the beers had been passed around, Debbie provoked everyone's attention by flicking on the overhead light. "OK," she called. "Find a partner." This was the blunt command of a hostess determined to have her guests aroused in an orderly fashion. Everyone blinked, shuffled about, and grabbed a member of the opposite sex. Sheila Garabedian landed beside me (entirely at random, though I wanted to believe she was driven by passion), her timid smile giving way to plain fear as the light went out.

Nothing for a moment but the heave of the wind and the distant banter of dogs. I caught a whiff of Sheila's perfume, as tangy and sweet as Hawaiian Punch. I probed her face with my own, grazing the small scallop of an ear, a velvety temple, and though Sheila's trembling made me want to stop, I persisted with my mission until I found her lips, as tightly sealed as a private letter. I held my mouth over hers and gathered her shoulders closer, resigned to the possibility that, no matter how long we stood there, Sheila was too scared to kiss me back. Still, she exhaled through her nose, and I listened to the squeak of every breath as though it were a sigh of inordinate pleasure. Diving within myself, I monitored my heartbeat and respiration, trying to will stimulation into being, and all the while an image intruded, an image of Grady erupting from our pool, rivulets of water sliding down his chest. "Change," shouted Debbie, switching on the light. Sheila thanked me, pulled away, and continued her routine of gracious terror with every boy throughout the room. It didn't matter whom I held — Margaret Sims, Betty Vernon, Elizabeth Lee — my experiment was a failure; I continued to picture Grady's wet chest, and Debbie would bellow "Change!" with such fervor, it could have been my own voice, my own incessant reprimand.

Our hostess commandeered the light switch for nearly half an hour. Whenever the light came on, I watched Grady pivot his head toward the newest prospect, his eyebrows arched in expectation, his neck blooming with hickeys, his hair, at last, in disarray. All that shuffling across the carpet charged everyone's arms and lips with static, and eventually, between low moans and soft osculations, I could hear the clack of tiny sparks and see them flare here and there in the dark like meager, short-lived stars.

*

I saw Theresa, as sultry and aloof as ever, read three more books — *North American Reptiles*, *Bonjour Tristesse*, and *MGM: A Pictorial History* — before she vanished early in December. Rumors of her fate abounded. Debbie Coburn swore that Theresa had been "knocked up" by an older man, a traffic cop, she thought, or a grocer. Nearly quivering with relish, Debbie told Grady and me about the home for unwed mothers in the San Fernando Valley, a compound teeming with pregnant girls who had nothing to do but touch their stomachs and contemplate their mistake. Even Bobby Keagan, who took Theresa's place behind me in algebra, had a theory regarding her disappearance colored by his own wish for escape; he imagined that Theresa, disillusioned with society, booked passage to a tropical island, there to live out the rest of her days without restrictions or ridicule. "No wonder she flunked out of school," I overheard Mr. Hubbley tell a fellow teacher one afternoon. "Her head was always in a book."

Along with Theresa went my secret, or at least the dread that she might divulge it, and I felt, for a while, exempt from suspicion. I was, however, to run across Theresa one last time. It happened during a period of torrential rain that, according to reports on the six o'clock news, washed houses from the hillsides and flooded the downtown streets. The halls of Joseph Le Conte Junior High were festooned with Christmas decorations: crepe-paper garlands, wreaths studded with plastic berries, and one requisite Star of David twirling above the attendance desk. In arts and crafts, our teacher, Gerald (he was the only teacher who allowed us, *required* us, to call him by his first name), handed out blocks of balsa wood and instructed us to carve them into bugs. We would paint eyes and antennae with tempera and hang them on a Christmas tree he'd made the previous night. "*Voilà*," he crooned, unveiling his creation from a burlap sack. Before us sat a tortured scrub, a wardrobe's worth of wire hangers that were bent like branches and soldered together. Gerald credited