

CHAPTER I

# See Things for What They Are— Intense Realism

REALITY CAN BE RATHER HARSH. YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED. IT TAKES CONSTANT EFFORT TO CARVE A PLACE FOR YOURSELF IN THIS RUTHLESSLY COMPETITIVE WORLD AND HOLD ON TO IT. PEOPLE CAN BE TREACHEROUS. THEY BRING ENDLESS BATTLES INTO YOUR LIFE. YOUR TASK IS TO RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO WISH IT WERE ALL DIFFERENT; INSTEAD YOU MUST FEARLESSLY ACCEPT THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, EVEN EMBRACE THEM. BY FOCUSING YOUR ATTENTION ON WHAT IS GOING ON AROUND YOU, YOU WILL GAIN A SHARP APPRECIATION FOR WHAT MAKES SOME PEOPLE ADVANCE AND OTHERS FALL BEHIND. BY SEEING THROUGH PEOPLE'S MANIPULATIONS, YOU CAN TURN THEM AROUND. THE FIRMER YOUR GRASP ON REALITY, THE MORE POWER YOU WILL HAVE TO ALTER IT FOR YOUR PURPOSES.





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## The Hustler's Eye

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THIS IS LIFE, NEW AND STRANGE; STRANGE, BECAUSE WE FEAR IT; NEW, BECAUSE WE HAVE KEPT OUR EYES TURNED FROM IT. . . . MEN ARE MEN AND LIFE IS LIFE, AND WE MUST DEAL WITH THEM AS THEY ARE; AND IF WE WANT TO CHANGE THEM, WE MUST DEAL WITH THEM IN THE FORM IN WHICH THEY EXIST.

—Richard Wright

As a boy, Curtis Jackson (aka 50 Cent) had one dominant drive—ambition. He wanted more than anything the very things that it seemed he could never have—money, freedom, and power.

Looking out on the streets of Southside Queens where he grew up, Curtis saw a grim, depressing reality staring him in the face. He could go to school and take it seriously, but the kids who did that didn't seem to get very far—a life of low-

paying jobs. He could turn to crime and make his money fast, but the ones who went for that either died young or spent much of their youth in prison. He could escape it all by taking drugs—once you start down that path there is no turning back. The only people he could see who led the life that he dreamed of were the hustlers, the drug dealers. They had the cars, the clothes, the lifestyle, the degree of power that matched his ambitions. And so by the age of eleven he had made the choice to follow that path and become the greatest hustler of them all.

The further he got into it, however, the more he realized that the reality was much grimmer and harsher than he had imagined. The drug fiends, the customers, were erratic and hard to figure out. The fellow hustlers were all fighting over the same limited number of corners and they'd stab you in the back in an instant. The big-time dealers who ran the neighborhood could be violent and heavy-handed. If you did too well, someone would try to take what you had. The police were everywhere. One wrong move could land you in prison. How could he possibly succeed amid this chaos and avoid all of the inevitable dangers? It seemed impossible.

One day he was discussing the troublesome aspects of the game with an older hustler named Truth, who told him something he would never forget. Don't complain about the difficult circumstances, he said. In fact, the hard life of these streets is a blessing if you know what you're doing. Because it is such a dangerous world, a hustler has to focus intensely on what's going on around him. He has to get a feel for the streets—

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who's trouble, where there might be some new opportunity. He has to see through all the bullshit people throw at him—their games, their lousy ideas. He has to look at himself, see his own limitations and stupidity. All of this sharpens the eye to a razor's edge, making him a keen observer of everything. That's his power.

The greatest danger we face, he told Curtis, is not the police or some nasty rival. It's the mind going soft. I've seen it happen to many a hustler, he said. If things go well, he starts thinking it will go on forever and he takes his eyes off the streets. If things go bad, he starts wishing it were all different and he comes up with some foolish scheme to get quick, easy money. Either way, he falls fast. Lose your grip on reality on these streets and you might as well kill yourself.

In the months to come, Curtis thought more and more about what Truth had told him, and it began to sink in. He decided to transform the hustler's words into a kind of code that he would live by: he would trust no one; he would conceal his intentions, even from friends and partners; and no matter how high or low life brought him, he would remain the supreme realist, keeping his hustler's eye sharp and focused.

Over the next few years he became one of the savviest hustlers in his neighborhood, operating a small crew that brought him good money. The future looked promising, but a moment's inattention got him trapped in a police sting, and at the age of sixteen he was sentenced to nine months in a shock rehabilitation center in upstate New York. In this unfamiliar space and with time to reflect, suddenly the words of Truth

came back to him. This was not the time to get depressed or to dream, but to fix that hustler's eye on himself and the world he lived in. See it as it is, no matter how ugly.

He had unbridled ambition; he wanted real power, something he could build on. But no street hustler lasts that long. It's a young man's game. By the time hustlers reach their twenties, they slow down and something bad happens or they go scurrying into a low-paying job. And what blinds them to this reality is the money and lifestyle in the moment; they think it will go on forever. They're too afraid to try something else. It doesn't matter how clever you are—there's a ceiling to how high you can rise.

He had to wake up and get out while he was still young and his ambitions could be realized. He would not be afraid. And so based on these reflections, he decided he would make a break into music. He would find a mentor, someone who could teach him the ropes. He would learn everything he could about music and the business. He would have no plan B—it was either make it there or die.

Operating with a kind of desperate energy, he made the transition into music, carving a place for himself by creating a sound that was hard driving and reflected the realities of the streets. After a relentless mix-tape campaign in New York he got the attention of Eminem, and a record deal followed. Now he seemed to have realized his childhood ambitions. He had money and power. People were nice to him. Everywhere he went they flattered him, wanting to be a part of his success. He could feel it happening—the good press, the sycophantic

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followers—it was all starting to go to his head and dull his vision. On the surface everything looked great, but what was the reality here? Now more than ever he needed that clear, penetrating eye to see past all the hype and glamour.

The more he looked at it, the more he realized that the reality of the music business was as harsh as the streets. The executives who ran the labels were ruthless. They distracted you with their charming words, but in fact they could care less about your future as an artist; they wanted to suck you dry of every dollar they could get out of you. Once you were no longer so hot, you would find yourself slowly pushed to the side; your decline would be all the more painful for having once tasted success. In truth, you were a pawn in their game. A corner hustler had more power and control over his future than a rapper did.

And what about the business itself? Record sales were falling because people were pirating music or buying it in different forms. Anyone with two eyes could see that. The old business model had to go. But these very same executives who seemed so sharp were afraid to confront this reality. They held on tightly to the past and would bring everyone down with them.

Not Fifty. He would avoid this fate by moving in a different direction. He would forge a diversified business empire, music merely being a tool to get there. His decisions would be based on his intense reading of the changing environment that he had detected in music but was infecting all levels of business. Let others depend on their MBAs, their money, and

their connections. He instead would rely upon that hustler's eye that had brought him from the bottom of America to the top in just a few short years.

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## The Fearless Approach

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REALITY IS MY DRUG. THE MORE I HAVE OF IT, THE MORE  
POWER I GET AND THE HIGHER I FEEL.

—50 Cent

You might imagine that the streets that molded Fifty and the code he created for himself have little to do with your circumstances, but that is merely a symptom of your dreaming, of how deeply you are infected with fantasies and how afraid you are to face reality. The world has become as grimy and dangerous as the streets of Southside Queens—a global, competitive environment in which everyone is a ruthless hustler, out for him- or herself.

Truth's words apply to you as much as to Fifty: the greatest danger you face is your mind growing soft and your eye getting dull. When things get tough and you grow tired of the grind, your mind tends to drift into fantasies; you wish things were a certain way, and slowly, subtly, you turn inward to your thoughts and desires. If things are going well, you become complacent, imagining that what you have now will continue forever. You stop paying attention. Before you know it, you end up overwhelmed by the changes going on and the

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younger people rising up around you, challenging your position.

Understand: you need this code even more than Fifty. His world was so harsh and dangerous it *forced* him to open his eyes to reality and never lose that connection. Your world seems cozier and less violent, less immediately dangerous. It makes you wander and your eyes mist over with dreams. The competitive dynamic (the streets, the business world) is in fact the same, but your apparently comfortable environment makes it harder for you to see it. Reality has its own power—you can turn your back on it, but it will find you in the end, and your inability to cope with it will be your ruin. Now is the time to stop drifting and wake up—to assess yourself, the people around you, and the direction in which you are headed in as cold and brutal a light as possible. Without fear.

Think of reality in the following terms: the people around you are generally mysterious. You are never quite sure about their intentions. They present an appearance that is often deceptive—their manipulative actions don't match their lofty words or promises. All of this can prove confusing. Seeing people as they are, instead of what you think they should be, would mean having a greater sense of their motives. It would mean being able to pierce the facade they present to the world and see their true character. Your actions in life would be so much more effective with this knowledge.

Your line of work is another layer of reality. Right now, things might seem calm on the surface, but there are changes rippling through that world; dangers are looming on the ho-

rizon. Soon your assumptions about how things are done will be outdated. These changes and problems are not immediately apparent. Being able to see through to them before they become too large would bring you great power.

The capacity to see the reality behind the appearance is not a function of education or cleverness. People can be full of book knowledge and crammed with information but have no real sense of what's going on around them. It is in fact a function of character and fearlessness. Simply put, realists are not afraid to look at the harsh circumstances of life. They sharpen their eye by paying keen attention to details, to people's intentions, to the dark realities hiding behind any glamorous surface. Like any muscle that is trained, they develop the capacity to see with more intensity.

It is simply a choice you have to make. At any moment in life you can convert to realism, which is not a belief system at all, but a way of looking at the world. It means every circumstance, every individual is different, and your task is to measure that difference, then take appropriate action. Your eyes are fixed on the world, not on yourself or your ego. What you see determines what you think and how you act. The moment you believe in some cherished idea that you will hold on to no matter what your eyes and ears reveal to you, you are no longer a realist.

To see this power in action, look at a man like Abraham Lincoln, perhaps our greatest president. He had little formal education and grew up in a harsh frontier environment. As

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a young man, he liked to take apart machines and put them back together. He was practical to the core. As president, he found himself having to confront the gravest crisis in our history. He was surrounded by cabinet members and advisers who were out to promote themselves or some rigid ideology they believed in. They were emotional and heated; they saw Lincoln as weak. He seemed to take a long time to make a decision, and it would often be the opposite of what they had counseled. He trusted generals like Ulysses S. Grant, who was an alcoholic and a social misfit. He worked with those whom his advisers considered political enemies on the other side of the aisle.

What they didn't realize at the time was that Lincoln came to each circumstance without preconceptions. He was determined to measure everything exactly as it was. His choices were made out of pure pragmatism. He was a keen observer of human nature and stuck with Grant because he saw him as the only general capable of effective action. He judged people by results, not friendliness or political values. His careful weighing of people and events was not a weakness but the height of strength, a fearless quality. And working this way, he carefully guided the country past countless dangers. It is not a history we are accustomed to reading about, since we prefer to be swept up in great ideas and dramatic gestures. But the genius of Lincoln was his ability to focus intensely on reality and see things for what they were. He was a living testament to the power of realism.

It might seem that seeing so much of reality could make one depressed, but the opposite is the case. Having clarity about where you are headed, what people are up to, and what is happening in the world around you will translate into confidence and power, a sensation of lightness. You will feel more connected to your environment, like a spider on its web. Whenever things go wrong in life you will be able to right yourself faster than others, because you will quickly see what is really going on and how you can exploit even the worst moment. And once you taste this power, you will find more satisfaction from an intense absorption in reality than from indulging in any kind of fantasy.

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## Keys to Fearlessness

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KNOW THE OTHER, KNOW YOURSELF, AND THE VICTORY  
WILL NOT BE AT RISK; KNOW THE GROUND, KNOW THE  
NATURAL CONDITIONS, AND THE VICTORY WILL BE  
TOTAL.

—Sun Tzu

America was once a country of great realists and pragmatists. This came from the harshness of the environment, the many dangers of frontier life. We had to become keen observers of everything going on around us to survive. In the nineteenth century, such a way of looking at the world led to innumerable inventions, the accumulation of wealth, and the emergence of

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our country as a great power. But with this growing power, the environment no longer pressed upon us so violently, and our character began to change.

Reality came to be seen as something to avoid. Secretly and slowly we developed a taste for escape—from our problems, from work, from the harshness of life. Our culture began to manufacture endless fantasies for us to consume. And fed on such illusions, we became easier to deceive, since we no longer had a mental barometer for distinguishing fact from fiction.

This is a dynamic that has repeated itself throughout history. Ancient Rome began as a small city-state. Its citizens were tough and stoic. They were famous for their pragmatism. But as they moved from being a republic to an empire and their power expanded, everything reversed itself. Their citizens' minds hungered for newer and newer forms of escape. They lost all sense of proportion—petty political battles consumed their attention more than much larger dangers on the outskirts of the empire. The empire fell well before the invasion of the barbarians. It collapsed from the collective softness of its citizens' minds and the turning of their back on reality.

Understand: as an individual you cannot stop the tide of fantasy and escapism sweeping a culture. But you can stand as an individual bulwark to this trend and create power for yourself. You were born with the greatest weapon in all of nature—the rational, conscious mind. It has the power to expand your vision far and wide, giving you the unique capacity to distin-

guish patterns in events, learn from the past, glimpse into the future, see through appearances. Circumstances are conspiring to dull that weapon and render it useless by turning you inward and making you afraid of reality.

Consider it war. You must fight this tendency as best you can and move in the opposite direction. You must turn outward and become a keen observer of all that is around you. You are doing battle against all the fantasies that are thrown at you. You are tightening your connection to the environment. You want clarity, not escape and confusion. Moving in this direction will instantly bring you power among so many dreamers.

Regard the following as exercises for your mind—to make it less rigid, more penetrating and expansive, a sharper gauge of reality. Practice all of them as often as you can.

#### REDISCOVER CURIOSITY—OPENNESS

One day it came to the attention of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates that the oracle at Delphi had pronounced him the wisest man in the world. This baffled the philosopher—he did not think himself worthy of such a decree. It made him uncomfortable. He decided to simply go around Athens and find a person who was wiser than he—that should be easy and it would disprove the oracle.

He engaged in many discussions with politicians, poets, craftsmen, and fellow philosophers. He began to realize that the oracle was right. All the people he talked to had such a cer-

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tainty about things, venturing solid opinions about matters of which they had no experience; they were full of so much air. If you questioned them at all, they could not really defend their opinions, which seemed based on something they had decided years earlier. His superiority, he realized, was that he knew that he knew nothing. This left his mind open to experiencing things as they are, the source of all knowledge.

This position of basic ignorance was what you had as a child. You had a need and hunger for knowledge, to overcome this ignorance, so you observed the world as closely as possible, absorbing large amounts of information. Everything was a source of wonder. With time our minds tend to close off. At some point, we feel like we know what we need to know; our opinions are certain and firm. We do this out of fear. We don't want our assumptions about life challenged. If we go too far in this direction, we can become extremely defensive and cover up our fears by acting with supreme confidence and certainty.

What you need to do in life is return to that mind you possessed as a child, opening up to experience instead of closing it off. Just imagine for a day that you do not know anything, that what you believe could be completely false. Let go of your preconceptions and even your most cherished beliefs. Experiment. Force yourself to hold the opposite opinion or see the world through your enemy's eyes. Listen to the people around you with more attentiveness. See everything as a source for education—even the most banal encounters. Imagine that the world is still full of mystery.

When you operate this way, you will notice that something strange often happens. Opportunities will begin to fall into your lap because you are suddenly more receptive to them. Sometimes luck or serendipity is more a function of the openness of your mind.

#### KNOW THE COMPLETE TERRAIN—EXPANSION

War is fought over specific terrain. But there is more involved than just that. There is also the morale of the enemy soldiers, the political leaders who set them in motion, the minds of the opposing generals who make the key decisions, and the money and resources that stand behind it all. A mediocre general will confine his knowledge to the physical terrain. A better general will try to expand his knowledge by reading reports about the other factors that influence an army. And the superior general will try to intensify this knowledge by observing as much as he can with his own eyes or consulting firsthand sources. Napoleon Bonaparte is the greatest general who ever lived, and what elevated him above all others was the mass of information he absorbed about all of the details of battle, with as few filters as possible. This gave him a superior grasp on reality.

Your goal is to follow the path of Napoleon. You want to take in as much as possible with your own eyes. You communicate with people up and down the chain of command within your organization. You do not draw any barriers to your social interactions. You want to expand your access to different ideas. Force yourself to go to events and places that are beyond your

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usual circle. If you cannot observe something firsthand, try to get reports that are more direct and less filtered, or vary the sources so that you can see things from several sides. Get a fingertip feel for everything going on in your environment—the complete terrain.

### DIG TO THE ROOTS—DEPTH

Malcolm X was a realist—he had a way of looking at the world that was honed by years on the streets and in prison. After prison, his mission in life was to figure out the source of the problem for blacks in America. As he explained in his autobiography, “This country goes in for the surface glossing over, the escape ruse, surfaces, instead of truly dealing with its deep-rooted problems.” He decided to dig as far below the surface as possible. Finally he arrived at what he believed to be the root cause—dependency. As it stood, African Americans couldn’t do things completely on their own—they depended on the government, on liberals, on their leaders, on everybody but themselves. If they could end this dependency, they would have the power to reverse everything.

Malcolm X died before he could go further with his life’s mission, but his method remains valid for all time. When you do not get to the root of a problem, you cannot solve it in any meaningful manner. People like to look at the surfaces, get all emotional and react, doing things that make them feel better in the short term but do nothing for them in the long term.

This must be the power and the direction of your mind whenever you encounter some problem—to bore deeper and

deeper until you get at something basic and at the root. Never be satisfied with what presents itself to your eyes. See what underlies it all, absorb it, and then dig deeper. Always question why this particular event has happened, what the motives of the various actors are, who really is in control, who benefits by this action. Often, it will revolve around money and power—that is what people are usually fighting over, despite the surface gloss they give to it. You may never get to the actual root, but the process of digging will bring you closer. And operating in this way will help develop your mind into a powerful analytical instrument.

#### SEE FURTHER AHEAD—PROPORTION

By our nature as rational, conscious creatures, we cannot help but think of the future. But most people, out of fear, limit their view of the future to a narrow range—thoughts of tomorrow, a few weeks ahead, perhaps a vague plan for the months to come. We are generally dealing with so many immediate battles, it is hard for us to lift our gaze above the moment. It is a law of power, however, that the further and deeper we contemplate the future, the greater our capacity to shape it according to our desires.

If you have a long-term goal for yourself, one that you have imagined in detail, then you are better able to make the proper decisions in the present. You know which battles or positions to avoid because they don't advance you towards your goal. With your gaze lifted to the future, you can focus on the dangers looming on the horizon and take proactive measures to avert

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them. You have a sense of proportion—sometimes the things we fuss over in the present don't matter in the long run. All of this gives you an increased power to reach your objectives.

As part of this process, look at the smaller problems that are plaguing you or your enterprise in the present, and draw arrows to the future, imagining what they could possibly lead to if they grow larger. Think of your own biggest mistakes or those of others. How could they have been foreseen? Generally there are signs that seem so obvious afterwards. Now imagine those very same signs that you are probably ignoring in the present.

### **LOOK AT PEOPLE'S DEEDS, NOT WORDS—SHARPNESS**

In war or any competitive game, you don't pay attention to people's good or bad intentions. They don't matter. It should be the same in the game of life. Everyone is playing to win, and some people will use moral justifications to advance their side. All you look at are people's maneuvers—their actions in the past and what you might expect in the future. In this area, you are fiercely realistic. You understand that everyone is after power, and that to get it we all occasionally manipulate and even deceive. That is human nature and there is no shame in it. You don't take people's maneuvers personally; you merely try to defend or advance yourself.

As part of this approach, you must become a better observer of people. This cannot be done on the Internet. It must be honed in personal interactions. You are trying to read

people, see through them as best you can. You come to understand, for instance, that a person who is too obviously friendly after too short a time is often up to no good. If they flatter you, it is generally out of envy. Behavior that stands out and seems excessive is a sign. Don't get caught up in people's grand gestures, in the public face they put on. Pay more attention to the details, to the little things they reveal in their day-to-day lives. Their decisions reveal a lot, and you can often discern a pattern if you look at them closely.

In general, looking at people through the lens of your emotions will cloud what you see and make you misunderstand everything. What you want is a sharp eye towards your fellow humans—one that is piercing, objective, and nonjudgmental.

#### REASSESS YOURSELF—DETACHMENT

Your increasing powers of observation must occasionally be aimed at yourself. Think of this as a ritual you will engage in every few weeks—a rigorous reassessment of who you are and where you are headed. Look at your most recent actions as if they were the maneuvers of another person. Imagine how you could have done it all better—avoided unnecessary battles or confronted people who stood in your way, instead of running away from them. The goal here is not to beat up on yourself but to have the capacity to adapt and change your behavior by moving closer to the reality.

The endgame of such an exercise is to cultivate the proper sense of detachment from yourself and from life. It is not that you want to feel this detachment at every moment. There are

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times that require you to act with heart and boldness, without doubts or self-distance. On many occasions, however, you need to be able to assess what is happening, without your ego or emotions coloring your perceptions. Moving to a calm, detached inner position to observe events will become a habit and something you can rely on amid any crisis. At those moments in life when others lose their balance, you will find yours with relative ease. As a person who cannot be easily ruffled by events, you will attract attention and power.

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### Reversal of Perspective

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The word “realist” often comes with some negative connotations. Realists, according to conventional wisdom, can be practical to a fault; they often lack a feel for the finer, higher things in life. Taken too far, such types can be cynical, manipulative, Machiavellian. They stand in contrast to dreamers, people of high imagination who inspire us with their ideals or divert us with their fantastical creations.

This is a concept that comes from looking at the world through the lens of fear. It is time we reverse this perspective and see dreamers and realists in their true light. The dreamers, those who misread the actual state of affairs and act upon their emotions, are often the source of the greatest mistakes in history—the wars that are not thought out, the disasters that are not foreseen. Realists, on the other hand, are the real inventors and innovators. They are men and women of imagi-

nation, but their imagination is in close contact with the environment, with reality—they are empirical scientists, writers with a sharp understanding of human nature, or leaders who guide us thoughtfully through crises. They are strong enough to see the world as it is, including their own personal inadequacies.

Let us take this further. The real poetry and beauty in life comes from an intense relationship with reality in all its aspects. Realism is in fact the ideal we must aspire to, the highest point of human rationality.

PEOPLE WHO CLING TO THEIR DELUSIONS FIND IT  
DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, TO LEARN ANYTHING  
WORTH LEARNING: A PEOPLE UNDER THE NECESSITY  
OF CREATING THEMSELVES MUST EXAMINE EVERY-  
THING, AND SOAK UP LEARNING THE WAY THE ROOTS  
OF A TREE SOAK UP WATER.

—James Baldwin