

# THE LIE

By

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I sat in an armed upright chair while sensors connected me to the machine. They were attached to two straps across my chest, a collar on my left arm, and taped to the fingers of my right hand – their purpose to monitor my heart rate, pulse, breathing and the conductivity of my skin for signs of increased sweating. The tester was a woman. She had coal black hair which was probably dyed or at least partially tinted as I judged her to be about my own age in her mid forties. She wore a matching dove grey jacket and skirt with a pink blouse.

She looked up from the laptop on the table in front of her. The screen was towards her and away from me so I could not see it. "Right", she said, "we are ready to start. Have you taken a polygraph test before?"

"Once when I was a student."

She nodded. "Well then you should have some knowledge of the procedure. I am going to ask you some questions so that I can get a baseline. It is important that you tell the truth. What is your full name?"

"Bernard Richard Thomas."

"And what do you do for a living Bernard?"

"I am a philosophy lecturer at Wellstone University."

"And how long have you taught there?"

"About seventeen years."

She studied the monitor for a few moments and made a few clicks with the mouse. "Now I want you to deliberately lie. How old are you?"

"I'm four years old."

I watched her from the corner of my eye. Her face showed not a flicker of emotion but she made a few more clicks with the mouse. "Good. Now for the remainder of the test you must answer all my questions truthfully. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

"If I said, 'I am lying'. Is this statement true or false?"

"That's a trick question."

"Come now Bernard as a Philosophy lecturer you must be aware of the Liar Paradox."

"You mean the paradox that if "this sentence is false" is true, then the sentence is false, which would in turn mean that it is actually true, but this would mean that it is false. Similarly, if "this sentence is false" is false, then the sentence is true, which would in turn mean that it is actually false, but this would mean that it is true."

"I just about followed that. You explain it well."

"I ought to – the paradox has troubled philosophers since the fourth century BC and maybe before that. I am a philosophy lecturer after all."

"So you should be an expert on lying?"

"I do not regard myself as being an expert on anything."

"What is the square root of one hundred?"

"I don't know."

"Come on everyone should know that. The answer is ten. Ten times ten is one hundred."

"I'm a philosopher not a mathematician. Your question about the square root confused me. If you had asked me what is one hundred divided by ten I would of course answered ten."

"Who first said, 'There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics?'"

"There is some debate about that. It was said by Mark Twain who attributed it to Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli but there is no evidence that he ever said or wrote that."

"Do you believe the statement to be true or false?"

"There is something to be said for it. Politicians of different persuasions can interpret the same data to suit their own ideology. But without statistical analysis we might never have found out the harmful effects of smoking or the drug Thalidomide."

"Do you find me attractive?"

"Yes."

"There are two doors, one leading to certain death and the other to freedom. In front of each door is a guard, one always tells the truth and the other always lies. Which guard do you think will help you?"

"Either. I would say to one of them, 'If I asked the guard over there if the door he stood in front of led to freedom would he answer yes?' If the guard I asked answer was yes. I would go through the other door."

"Why did you give that answer?"

"It is a famous logic problem and I have given the logical answer."

"But questions are not always logical are they? Neither are answers. Was George Washington right to confess that he chopped down his father's Cherry Tree?"

"That is a folk tale taught to western children to show that truth and honesty produce a positive outcome. It is not exactly ethical to teach children that way."

"Do you teach ethics?"

"Ethics is part of philosophy and therefore is part of the course I teach."

"Is it ever ethical to lie?"

"Of course it is – if you are trying to spare someone's feelings or to protect someone."

"Are you trying to protect yourself now?"

"Of course I am but if you are implying that I am now lying to protect myself then you are wrong. I am telling the truth and the polygraph will show that."

"Do you believe that the polygraph test is infallible?"

"Yes I do."

"Do you know Jennifer Phillips?"

"She is one of my students."

"Have you ever slept with her?"

"No."

"Sorry I will rephrase that – have you ever had sexual intercourse with her?"

"Yes."

"Did you kill your wife, Bernard?"

"No."

She looked down at the screen and studied it closely for what seemed like an eternity. Then she opened a drawer in the desk, took out a handgun and levelled it at my head. "You are lying and now must pay the price."

I closed my eyes and waited for the shot. More agonising moments passed. Then I felt the straps loosen. I opened my eyes. The gun lay harmlessly on the table and she was disconnecting the sensors. She was smiling for the first time we had entered that room. "Congratulations Dr Thomas," she said, "you have passed the test."

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