

We've known it for some time now: that belief is a liar's sharpest tool, deadliest weapon, so often self-inflicted for the lie's sake. Though it's a notion more simply said than known. Me, I see it in people's eyes; the lies accrete faster than their mouths can spit them out, and so a surplus turns suddenly toxic, there, where they avoid my gaze. And I'm no different, mind you. In-between each word, whispered to myself while I walk – is the stench of something believed.

I'm pacing a platform at Union Station; watching what few faces pass, half-listening to traffic's mechanical hum down the 101 Freeway. Headlights look searing in tonight's gloom. A grayscale sky looms dreadfully over downtown. Seven-or-so paces behind me and slumped in a public bench: someone sits with chin tucked against chest, her head bobbing along to ragged inhales. And a hat-shaped shadow is cast, ownerless, over the platform's turnstile.

The time's something like 2:00 AM: about three hours since Operation, with ten left till testimony. Our lie should've taken hold by now – but traces of truth show through, floating at the surface of my mental soup like scum. And I can still hear her pre-recorded voice, spoken through high-fidelity headphones: 'Hypnotherapy used in combination with our patented computer-brain interface procedures...' etcetera.

Dr. Pooling hasn't called me back. Looks like we'll be arriving without notice.

A policeman's heavy footfalls hit the platform's far end. He's prodding that half-awake woman's rounded shoulder; 'Ma'am, would you look here, please?' – directing her attention to a bulky vest's embedded camera – 'Can you look into the lens, Ma'am?' Her eyelids flutter open, struggle to stay that way; 'Have you ingested any illegal substances tonight?' he asks.

And she croaks out – weakly: 'No, no.' I turn my back for another lap.

That'll be Neuropticon's Numanet6 he's wearing. The hypnotist's whispers return to me, albeit piecemeal: 'With AI-powered lie-detection measures gaining legal traction, it's increasingly necessary that private citizens follow suit, and double down.' Doubtless the cop's augmented visor just flagged a falsehood. I hear handcuffs click – 'Please stand up, ma'am.' – and the woman's still bidding him believe her, though it doesn't take a neural net to tell she's lying.

Nothing short of utter conviction suffices. Because – and like we always knew – lies make for such a lucrative industry, with belief in high demand, and innocent minds awful hard to come by. Take mine, for example; my mind. As of three hours ago it's ten thousand spent, and I'm still steeped in guilt.

The hat-shaped shadow oozes round a corner.

I give the doctor another call, watching that liar-woman be led away while it rings, rings – 'What?'

'It's me,' I tell him; my voice hardly breaks a murmur.

'Who? 'N how'd you get this number?'

'Her Operation didn't work, is how,' I say. 'Meaning I'm still privy: as in un-fucking-convinced.'

The doctor swears softly into his mic. '...How long do we have?'

'I'm set to testify at noon,' I say. 'Be in Crenshaw soon. And – Dr. Pooling, there's something else.'

But E-Line hisses into the station. Rows of empty seats can be seen through its fluorescent-lit windows. I curse under my breath; dart onboard. Barely visible, some two cabins to my right: a hat's wide brim.

“Cause the lie didn’t stick, but I think something else did. Maybe a glitch or whatever, some sorta switch-up – I don’t know – it’s just *there*.’

Though he’s hung up by now. A sigh skirts my lips; from my blazer’s pocket is produced a pack of Marlboros. I’m slumped in my seat, feeling train-tracks whir beneath me, and eeking out what little’s left of this lighter.

I recall her promising, on several occasions, that the Operation couldn’t convince me of anything I didn’t already want to believe: ‘One’s conscious and/or preconscious consent is paramount to successful self-deception,’ something like that – which, in retrospect, sounds impossible to prove.

My joggling knee shakes the whole row of seats; forehead long-since slick with sweat, and heart stuck at high-gear like I can almost hear it. City-lights and corporate logos gleam, past the cabin’s badly-scratched window. I’m counting each minute: it’s 2:36 AM.

She told me mass adoption’s close at hand, too; that, pretty soon, ‘Three in ten Americans will be guilty of crimes they can’t remember, convinced of their own innocence and so completely undetectable.’ Hell – we could already be there. The cynical sort might say we’ve always been.

My cigarette’s gone after three pulls. I ash it on the seat beside me.

It’s something easier said than known, barely but a glimmer – ghostly, haunting the eyes’ bloodshot margins, where their lies multiply like parasites. Me, I must’ve always seen it. Because we’re each and all ashamed; this place – coiled with repression, tight, and whether we know why or not.

Some two cabins down: peeking round the plastic partition: a wide-brimmed hat – just *there*, where it hasn’t moved since I sat down. Every so often, when the train bends and flexes, I could swear an eye of pinpoint-white’s peeking back at me.

The train slows to a stop: Expo / Vermont. A pair of gentlemen sulk onboard, sitting three seats left and across from me. They’re wearing black hoodies, the both of them. A gun’s unmistakable shape bulges from the further one’s waistband.

And we’re off.

‘Hey,’ says the closer one. ‘You’re the corpo, right?’

I nod my head, Yes; no point in lying.

‘Dr. Pooling sent you?’ I ask.

‘Yeah – to keep things at a quote-unquote “even keel,” he said.’

My head pendulum-swings sidelong between his words; it’s still there, still staring back at every glance.

‘I think we’re well beyond an even keel.’

‘Listen – mister.’ He clears his throat; pulls a smartphone from the hoodie, leveling all four of its front-facing cameras at me. ‘Just to make extra sure: Did you do it?’

I gulp. ‘What?’

‘Numanet4.’ He taps the phone with his pointer-finger. ‘Call it a rehearsal, yeah?’

And my stomach’s started cartwheeling. Face flushed through to bone. A drop of sweat can be felt following my skull’s contours, because –

‘Of course I did. I know I did. She said I should’ve forgotten that by now – as in the Operation didn’t fucking work.’

He scoffs; 'You were s'posed to lie, asshole.' pockets his phone with a scowl. 'And who the fuck is "She", then?'

The one with a gun's just been staring at me.

'Y'know,' I say. 'The headphones; hypnotist.'

'Alright.' He settles into his seat. 'Okay, I see. Take a breath for me. We've got – what, nine hours till court?' Dons a criminal grin. 'That's plenty. Trust me, we'll troubleshoot this in no time. Alright?'

I nod my head again. 'Alright. Yeah.'

But he's lying, of course.

Exposition Blvd. rolls by in a montage of dilapidation. The doctor's men make not another sound, silently watching something occur to me, here, with my fingers folded together.

Because it's just now occurring to me that we're headed for my execution. No – what else is there to do, in our position, except the tried-and-true? She said so herself, circa three hours since – the sentence still feels seared into my cerebellum: 'Such that compromised minds need no longer die, I may eat your sins, and be freed by them.'

Expo / Crenshaw creeps into view with a gut-wrenching quietude. Cricket-chirps and engine-revs; the howl of outside-dogs, or how sirens doppler distantly. We rise, myself and the doctor's two men – when I'm then helpless but to cast another glance back, and it's risen with us.

I must've always seen it: some god-awful truth we try our best at forgetting, buried – miles deep – beneath innocent appearances. The men make a point to smile at me, gesturing for the bus's open doors.

'After you, friend.'

And a chill's been climbing my spine, beelining for the brain. But I oblige.

Dr. Pooling's setup sits a block away from the station; stucco prism, surrounded with chainlink and overgrown grass. Sodium lamps along the sidewalk bleed their signature, sepia light. A dog barks at us from the neighboring yard. Apart from this, we're the only moving things in eyeshot, and I could swear the wind is holding its breath.

The men rap twice at Dr. Pooling's door like a death knell. Another phrase, fragmentary – floating to the surface: 'For life is a most heinous lie.'

Door clatters against chain. A single, squinting eye peers past the jamb at us.

'You two; wait outside.' Dr. Pooling opens the door fully. 'Sorry for them, they're, I think, a little impolite.'

'They were fine,' I say. 'Thank you.'

The latch's click behind me marks a sudden silence.

'Now then.' He claps his hands. 'About this mishap – you say, as I understand it, that the lie didn't take?'

Linoleum's ran with dark-red streaks, underfoot. Dead-ahead, where most people would put a living room, is what looks like a hospital bed bolted to the floor; the walls are hung with translucent plastic, and – there, poorly hidden behind it, with eyes of pinpoint-white shining through –

'You with us?'

'Right, sorry. No,' I say. 'The Operation didn't do much of anything.'

'Well, I'm...I'm sorry to hear.' He's inspecting a metal cart left just beside the bed: assorted scalpels, drill-bits, serrated saw-blades and so on. 'No worry, though; we have surgical alternatives for just this occasion. Are you allergic to any anesthetics?'

'No.'

'Very well. Oh – and, before I forget, you mentioned a woman over the phone. Is there anyone else aware of our...predicament, here?'

'Nobody.'

'Very well, then.'

'But – Dr. Pooling?' I ask. 'Tell me, was there any voice playing? During the Operation?' He blinks.

'Like a hypnotist?'

And shakes his head. 'No. No hypnotist. *Mauvaise Foi* – the Operation, as you call it – the model was trained as an adversary to Numanet5, with audio as a parameter. It settled on a low-frequency throb, I think.'

'You mean it's an AI?'

'Synaptic style-transfer, yes. Now – if you'd lay down for me, please.'

I oblige some more. Dr. Pooling wheels an IV-pole into place at my side. All the while, watching us from the space's dimly-lit periphery – it must be nine feet tall, at least.

'You did the right thing, coming here.' Metal instruments clank. 'Your call gave us all quite the scare, to put it lightly.'

I lay back against the bed's crinkly spread. My skin's begun to crawl, blood gone cold in every vein – because the lie didn't take but something else did.

'Ours is a burgeoning trade;' I hear the harsh snap of latex gloves. 'cutting-edge, only just beginning.'

'Are you there?'

'What? Of course I am.'

And it leans over: a wide-brimmed hat, looming just above my head.

'Yes.'

The doctor's words fizzle out like static.

'What are you?' I whisper.

'Oh, but the truth, of course. Humanity's most horrid secrets, all suppressed in me.'

I feel the prick of an IV.

'I'm what everyone sees but so few notice, much less admit: this monster in their minds -- you must've always known it,

'that mine is the true face of things,

'in all its violence,

'all its heresy.

'And lies never die quietly.'

'Dr. Pooling?' I call.

His eyes avoid mine, administering a colorless liquid. 'Yes?'

'Am I about to die?'

Silent beat; he sucks his teeth. 'Let's not make this any harder, son. It's been a long night for both of us. I think we're due some respite – don't you?'

I do.

'Divest yourself, now, of faith in anything but this --

'the body of sin,

'taken to your grave.'

'Thank you, Dr. Pooling,' I say. 'For your honesty.'