

To Tell a Lie

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Note: The body of my story is under 2500 words (2486 according to my word processor), but the contact information puts me over.

As a child, Emile Cramer had enjoyed skipping stones off a pier in the Long Island Sound. She'd always found something therapeutic in the perfect arcs of the smooth pebbles. Something utterly tranquil in the ripples they cast off in concentric circles across the chopped waters. Something eminently satisfying in the way they exploded into so many unbound ash particles when they came to the edge of the country's territory, dancing their last dance with the nanoPod shield grid that protected its borders.

Emile had not been an unhappy child, and she was never tormented by curiosity about the world beyond the 'Pod grid. What could have tormented her, when she had access to all she could wish to know? In school, she had learned about the outside: the poverty; the battles for resources; the arms races; the unstable governments, tentative democracies, relapses to dictatorships. She knew that if she swam east across the Atlantic, she would find herself on the Portuguese coast, and that it would be terrible.

Because in Portugal, people lied.

She and her peers were children of the new generation: born in the '50s, half a decade after the Speech Revolution of 2047. Some of her friends' parents, like hers, had rallied for the movement; others clung to the chaotic social ideals of the past. As a result, there were children in her school that naturally tended toward the radical, but Emile had never been one of them. Even as a child, the system had made perfect sense to her. America, unlike the rest of the world, was free of the plague of mistruth.

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Emile was dancing when her boss found her. Of course, she would have rejected the notion of dance had she known what it was, but like so many other things, the interpretive arts had been culled from the list of acceptable forms of expression long before she'd

ever been exposed to them. Her dance was deliberate rather than creative, verging on mechanical. She stood in the center of an eight-foot cube with white-washed walls, eyelids faintly cracked, pupils twitching across the floor-to-ceiling screen as she followed the myriad paths of data output windows. Her arms, defaulting to a horizontal wingspan, jerked to some imaginary rhythm, fingers flying along the keys of an invisible, long-obsolete piano. She writhed at the abdomen, shuffled her feet, cracked her neck, twitched her tongue. Every muscle in her body was alive and responsive.

The nanonerves built into the myofibrils of her muscle recorded her every movement and reported it back to the screen, whose pseudo-intelligent system interpreted it and responded accordingly. With the twitch of a fingertip, Emile could select a single data thread for publication in the Federal News Service's constant news feed; with a sweep of her foot, she could send several dozen topics to oblivion. And with her professional training as a journalist, she could go on like this for hours, processing several billion news topics in a single day.

She was startled from her trance by a sharp *pop* as the door to her cube opened, then snapped shut, admitting a visitor and threatening to blind her as the projections dimmed and lights came on. Turning, she came eye-to-eye with a glossy, full-bodied black moustache.

"Cramer," grunted the moustache. With some effort, she raised her eyes to meet those of the man himself, musing on how certain things really seem to dominate a person's personality. Her boss was not a bad-looking fellow, but she had to make a conscious effort to notice him past the personality of his facial hair.

He was talking. "...heathens in California rediscovered God."

"Yeah, I saw it," she replied, recovering just in time to know what he was talking about.

"Came out in the feed this morning. '0200 hours, Class 2 Violation: Intelligent Design Theory, please report further Resurgences near you, etc.' The usual." The Federal News Service – the only news service – had processors that filled in the fluff in newsblurbs between when she saw them and when the public received them.

Emile paused and waited patiently, knowing her boss had more to say. Intelligent Design resurgences were rare – religion had been declared contrary to the evidence of known fact in the late '60s – but not unheard of.

"And..." her boss' hand went instinctively to his moustache as he built up the suspense, "the newest lie detector nerves were released today. You have an installation scheduled with your family after your shift."

Emile resisted the urge to clap giddily. "Wonderful!" she chirped instead.

The moustache cocked his head at her. "Cramer... you're what, thirty-eight now?"

"Thirty-six."

"How many of these upgrades have you had?"

She paused to think about it. "Well, all of them." Emile had enrolled to be one of the select few in the first tester groups for each new incarnation of the 'Tectors all citizens wore. She was well ahead of the upgrade requirement. "I think that's upwards of twenty now. They get more and more sophisticated all the time."

"So what's different about this one?"

"No idea..." Emile started to say, then quickly cut off the last word before she could

finish. She flinched out of habit, but the shock didn't come.

"Got you?" asked her boss, craning his neck to get a good look at the jutting bone of her left hip.

"No." If she bothered to check, she knew what she'd find: the same illuminated circle, half an inch in radius, and the same little green pinprick of a light flashing at about 3 o'clock. The nanonerves from the embedded device connected it to a natural nerve at the base of the spine, which was – conveniently – extremely sensitive to pain. If she'd finished her sentence, the device would have translated her sound bites into data, checked its records, and alerted her of her error by means of a gentle electric shock. But after all her years at the top of the live prototype trials list, Emile had acquired the skill of almost never triggering her lie detector.

"I *do* have an idea," she corrected herself cautiously. "The Department of Experimental Technologies recently finished a project they're calling revolutionary. They're working on personal truths – not matters of experience, but more theoretical areas."

The moustache stroked his most prominent feature while Emile shifted on her feet, uncomfortable with the interrogation. "So just now your 'Tector recognized that you've spoken to someone in E.T. about the upgrade and therefore *do* know something about what's new... but after your upgrade it'll be able to tell if you like, say, oranges or not?"

"That's the theory."

"Hmph." Emile knew that her boss wasn't well versed in technology, which was something of an accomplishment these days. He did what he did – managing journalists – well, and that's what counted; he went along with the 'Tector laws because it was what you did. Having devoted herself to America's highest cause, the pursuit of pure democracy, Emile was the resident expert on the ever-advancing wave of truth technologies. Even so, she wasn't prepared for his next question.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"I was just thinking. Why does it matter if your 'Tector knows more about you?"

"Why does it matter if your 'Tector knows anything at all?" Emile shot back, irked at the ignorance washing off her supposed superior. "Why does it matter if people can lie on a whim? Call up a history file sometime and read about how well *that* worked out for us back at the beginning of the century. Can't run a representative democracy if none of the representatives are honest. Can't have a society where people perpetuate unfounded rumors. It's all about filtering the information net, and for each person that learns to be honest, it gets a little bit cleaner."

The moustache burst into sudden laughter. "I know all that, sweetheart. Don't parrot to me the lectures we all learned as kids. I just thought the oranges were a little bit much. Lies about things like that just don't matter."

For a split second, the man spasmed as if swarmed by ants. Then he looked up. "Okay," he said, rubbing the base of his spine, "evidently they do."

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She walked with the confident gait of a professional. Walking was a purely symbolic

gesture; having the leisure to waste time in unpowered transit was only possible if you were an influential person. How could Emile not be, when she kept six hundred million countrymen constantly informed through their cochlear implant speakers and the building-high infoscreens that lined the streets?

And she was leaving behind breadcrumbs of her ideology in the form of her daughter: a feisty, precocious, endearing golden-haired creature upon whom rested the burden of the Cramer legacy and their unflinching pursuit of truth.

Underneath a sky stained black by the dense clouds of the 'Pod grid, she set a path for herself through Manhattan to the Experimental Technologies headquarters, where she knew her family would be waiting. She might normally have taken the subway home, but today she wanted to flaunt her success. Looking down on the Underground through the acrylic glass streets, she felt on top of the world. Around her, the buildings' walls echoed stripes of text and images that she recognized from the morning; threads in the cloth of a nation-wide truth she helped to weave.

Beside her on façade of a bank, the President was delivering a re-election speech. "I can give you three undisputed facts," he was saying. "First, I am not my opponent. Second, my long-term economic plan differs from his. And third, should you elect me, the outcome will be undeniably different from if you elect him."

Politicians used to dance around the truth, she remembered from her history texts. *How can the rest of the world still function like that?*

She arrived at E.T. headquarters in a whirl of renewed conviction, sweeping up to her designated medical suite on the thirty-first floor. Inside, she found her husband – for whom she spared a glance – and her daughter, unconscious, dressed in a hospital robe, already stretched out on a long plastic table and strapped down so the automatic machines could do their work. Other than the three of them, the small, bright room was empty.

She sidled up next to her husband and leaned against the wall.

"Good day?" he asked her casually. "You seem chipper."

Emile smiled broadly. "We're upgrading. We're one step closer to perfection. What isn't good about that?"

Her husband rolled his eyes – he didn't quite share her fervor, but she was able to overlook it. "Well, you must have pulled some favors, because we're the very first civilian test subjects. How was work?"

A shadow crossed her face. "The moustache was off today... asked some strange questions about the 'Tectors. I'm tempted to report him for surveillance."

"He probably just had to face a hard truth," her husband said absently, watching mechanical arms penetrate their daughter's muscles. "It happens to everyone." He twitched and Emile saw his 'Tector flash red. "Pardon: it happens to a lot of us. It's hard when there's no ambiguity, right?"

"A hard truth? Truth frees us, sweetheart, nothing more."

Emile strolled over to a media screen attached to the medical table and monitored her daughter's progress. A green bar across the bottom of the screen indicated that the 'nerve replacement was nearly finished. Emile's breath caught in her throat – something gorgeous was happening here, even if her husband didn't realize it. This was really the final step of the process of purifying the information net. If this worked, people wouldn't

be able to fool even themselves. No cons, scams, manipulation. Reality without filters. Knowing that the first trials were always monitored, Emile beamed at the ceiling. The progress bar read 98%.

Finally, the network of mechanical arms improving her daughter withdrew to their idle positions and the straps began to undo themselves. Emile's eyes locked onto the 'Tector interface at her daughter's hip and knew that despite the lack of external modification, much more sophisticated processes were taking place within. Her daughter's unblemished lids flickered and flew open, and she turned to face her parents as if waking from a coma. Emile rushed to her. "Are you alright? Did it hurt?"

"Not really," said the angelic face that had grown to dominate Emile's world. "I don't feel any different."

Emile deflated a little. What was I expecting? Something dramatic? This will change the world. She smiled and put her arm around her daughter, bursting with pride and pent-up tension. "I love you, dear. Thanks for going through with it."

"Love you too, mom."

Then she fell to the floor.

Emile watched in fixed horror as her daughter convulsed, the red light flashing like the flare of a gun muzzle at her hip. Her husband scrambled to help, but Emile was paralyzed.

It felt like hours before she spoke again. Her daughter was back on her feet, dazed and shocked.

"Say that again," Emile breathed, unfeeling.

She could see the terror in the girl's eyes. "I love you, mom." The light flashed again, but this time she held her ground. Emile blinked in disbelief.

"Again."

"What?" That was her husband. "No! Stop, don't listen to her, don't make it hurt more. Emile, what the hell?"

Emile hardly heard. Her world was crashing down upon her. She felt the room spinning, put a hand out to steady herself. She knocked something loose and heard it shatter on the floor. Her daughter backed away from her, tears flowing freely now.

"I don't know why it did that! It's not true!"

Two more jolts of electricity shot up her daughter's spine and she fell back into the medical table. A metal arm, dislodged from its position, swung and made contact with her husband's face, and he staggered away, clutching his eye.

Emile advanced inexorably forward, hand outstretched. At some point between her sixth step and her seventh, her palm brushed the smooth, pale cheek. She felt the wet tears and the trembling. "Shhh," she said. "It's okay, I understand." Her hand traced downward, feeling the young jawline, the pulsing jugular. She pressed forward, comforting. "It's okay. Hard truths." Her daughter's weeping became a choked sob. Emile pushed harder, willing everyone to understand. "I get it." She had tears coming down her cheeks now, too – her reality was sinking in, too late. The room refused to slow.

The sobbing stopped. Emile looked down, startled, and found her daughter collapsed on the floor. A purple bruise was creeping across her neck, carefully, almost shyly. Her eyes were open. Her chest was still.

Emile turned and found her husband frozen against the far wall. She fell to her knees and screamed.

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The head of the Department of Emerging Technologies turned away from the screen. “Shut it down,” he sighed. “But keep it quiet.”