

He didn't recognize the number calling when his phone started to vibrate.

It was late afternoon, and he didn't pick up.

He put a pillow over his face.

Thirty seconds later, his phone vibrated again.

A voicemail appeared in his inbox.

Its transcription read, "*Hi Andrew this is Storrs I'm calling from \_\_\_\_\_ Quest um I wanted to talk to you for the \_\_\_\_\_ and our team is actually working on another trivia type show and I thought you might be a good fit for the show so when you get this message please go ahead and give me a call back my number is \_\_\_\_\_ again this is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ is for \_\_\_\_\_ Quest giving you a call when you get this give me a call back thanks bye...*"

He didn't know what it meant.

Five minutes later, his phone vibrated once more.

The text message was from a different number than the one that had called.

It read, *Hey David, this is Stanis a casting producer from The Quest, whenever you're available give me a call. Thanks so much!*

He tried to remember what The Quest was about. He felt scared. Had the eagle betrayed him? Sold his social security number and bank account information to a third party loan consortium? Was he being called upon to do a service for someone? And where the hell was he?

He felt his toes wiggling, but he couldn't see them. His whole body, in fact, seemed restrained, swaddled in bandages.

His head throbbed. His eyes blurred. He wanted to shriek, but his throat felt dammed up. His mouth filled with sandpaper. He kicked off blankets and sheets.

What was her name, he thought, sweating. Like two overlaid images being dragged slowly apart, he watched reality cleave.

Then, almost as quickly, the images reversed and dissolved into place. He looked at his hands in the room where they slept.

—Anna, he cried out. —An-na-ah-ah-ah...

He sneezed.

The cat sauntered in. Its tail and hips grazing the door frames, walls, and corners. It jumped on the bed. He saw a tick clinging to one of its whiskers and flicked it away.

He shook his head and stood up and put on pants. He was beginning to comprehend the state of affairs.

—Anna, he repeated.

She was probably walking the dog.

They were engaged to be married.

According to his phone, it was the last day to file taxes.

He navigated to his recent calls and thumbed over the number.

His phone said, *No Service*.

He watched his hand open the door to the little rotting back porch and stood barefoot in the shadows. The cat weaved between his ankles. He bent to pet it. It was gone.

—Hello, the shallow pang of a voice emanated from his bent fingers. —Hello? Andrew?

He put his phone on speaker.

—Hey.

—Hi, hello, Andrew?

—Yeah, it's me. Sorry. What's up?

—This is Storrs, the voice said.

—Stanis?

—Storrs.

—The producer, he said.

—Maybe one day, the voice laughed. —Well, technically I'm still an assistant to the casting producer. But its easier in text to just say I'm the producer.

—From The Quest.

—Yes. But also, actually, that's what we wanted to talk to you about...

He waited.

—Are you there, the voice asked.

—Yeah, sorry. I was taking a nap.

—This is Andrew, though, right?

—I'm ninety-nine percent sure.

The voice laughed.

—See, this is why I thought you'd be a good fit. I've been looking over your application. You seem to have a bubbly personality and unique outlook. Unfortunately, we've wrapped on casting the next season of The Quest. But, I was wondering, would you be interested in auditioning for another trivia show? One that hasn't aired yet. It's a little different in style and...

—Okay, he interrupted.

—Awesome, the voice said. —So our working title is The Lying Show. We're not totally sure if that's what it's going to be called, but for all intensive purposes, that's the most basic concept. Are you with me?

—Um. Yup.

—Basically, the idea is it's a mixture of trivia and strategy. Trivia is an important element, but more important is convincing the audience and your other competitors that you know the right answer, whether you do or not. So, like, that's where the lying comes...

—Is this like The Trickster?

—Kind of, but The Trickster's been canceled. And not everyone had to lie to win. For this new show you do, and if you do with enough confidence, if you trick, I mean, *persuade* everyone into believing you're right about the trivia, even when it's a lie, then you win. Does that make sense?

He watched a wasp wobble into a spiderweb and struggle to escape while the orbweaver appeared from an unseen recess and attempted to incapacitate it. Eventually the web broke, and the wasp absconded. The spider looked winded. It bowed its head and scuttled off in disgrace.

—Sure, he said.

—Amazeballs, the voice chirped in his hand. —Okay, so do you have a chance now to talk a few minutes?

He nodded.

—I mean, Sure.

—Very cool. Excellent. Okay, so the plan is to ask you some questions, and you just answer like you know them. Whether you know the answer or not, just give me your most confident response, followed by a, like, explanation for why you know that's the answer. But don't say you know because, just go right into the explanation. We want this to feel as natural and streamlined as possible. Are you ready?

He sweated. Where was she? Wasn't it her job to answer these questions for him?

—Do you mind if I go find my agent, he said.

The voice laughed.

—You're funny. Don't worry, this will only take a few minutes. Are you ready?

—Sure.

—Okay, the voice said in three syllables. —First question. Why is the sun green in the morning and white in the afternoon?

—Global warming, he answered without pausing to think.

The other line sounded static with tension.

—And you know that because...

—Oh yeah, he said. —I know that because...

—Wait, don't say that, though. Just go straight into the explanation. We want to this to seem as streamlined and natural as possible.

—I...

—Hold on, let's start it over from the top. Do you mind? Okay, first question. Wait, do I have your consent to record you?

—Sure.

—Okay, the voice laughed. —First question. Why is the sun green in the morning and white in the afternoon?

—Global warming, he said. —I know that be... Oops. I'm sorry.

—It's okay, just keep going.

—The sun is green in the morning and white in the afternoon because of global warming. There was an article in the Beantown Herald that was my favorite when I was growing up. It was all about the different colors of the sun. With the ongoing rollout of global climate change the sun will actually keep changing colors season by season, much in the way we understand fashion week. For the past few decades it's been green in the morning and white in the afternoon, but what a lot of people don't know is that's it's also been tie-dye in the middle of the night, if you see it from Alaska or Finland in the summer, due to the effect of the corona borealis. They say the next colors are going to be orange, green, and red, for when Italy and Ireland share hosting duties of the World Cup.

—Great, the voice laughed. —And was that a lie, or did you really know that?

—It was a lie, he said.

—Incredible. You're a natural. You had me convinced. The correct answer is the sun is green in the morning because it's reflecting off the grass, and it's white in the afternoon to support the troops. But like I said, it's all about the confidence and persuasion of your lying technique. I believed you!

—Sweet, he said.

—Okay, second question. You ready?

—I'm ready.

—Which Netflix show is the most popular?

—Enron Wars, he almost yelled.

—Hold on, hold on. This one's multiple choice. Just wait until I say go. I'm going to run back the tape. One more second. Okay. Are you ready?

—Sure.

—Which Netflix show is most popular? Is it A. Go-Kart Drag Queens? B. Supply Jobs Anonymous? Or C. Garfield Is Sick?

He waited.

—Are you there?

—I thought you were going to say go.

—Oh yeah. Go!

—Enron Wars. And I know that because...

—Let me stop you right there, the voice said.

—I'm sorry. I know I fucked up. I shouldn't have said I know that because...

—I love your energy. I just need for the multiple choice questions for you to answer with one of the multiple choices.

—But isn't Enron Wars the most popular?

—I can see why you'd think that, but it's not one of the requisite answers. If you'll just let me run the tape back one more time... All right. Second question. Which Netflix show is most popular? Is it A. Go-Kart Drag Queens? B. Supply Jobs Anonymous? Or C. Garfield Is Sick? Go.

—Garfield Is Sick, he said. —I'm a huge fan of the trending cycle. If you go on there after five o'clock, it has the latest reports. For a while Enron Wars was pretty hot, but lately it's all about Garf.

—Oh my god, yes! That was excellent...

The voice did a Mr. Burns impersonation.

—Excellent, he mimicked.

—Wow, the voice laughed. —Yas. You're a king. And was that a lie, or did you really know it?

—I really knew.

—Perfect, the voice drew the word out. —Okay, just a few more Q's, and I'll get out of your hair.

—Take your time. This is fun.

—It is! Right? Aw, it's nice to talk to someone. Okay, question three. On your mark?

—Get set...

—The Jakarta Method is...

He waited.

The other line droned.

—Washington's anticommunist crusade and mass murder program. My fiancée is a huge Vince Bevins fan. We've read all his books. American-backed Indonesian forces were so successful in culling communism that the word Jakarta was later used to refer to the genocidal aspects of similar, later plans implemented by other authoritarian capitalist regimes with the assistance of the United States.

—You are a superstar. Wait, did you say fan?

—I meant enemy. My fiancée is a huge enemy of Bevins's. That's why I know so much about him.

—And did you know it for real, or was that yet another example of your epic fib abilities?

—I don't know, he said. —What do you think?

—Are you lying to me, Andrew?

—Am I?

The voice went into hysterics.

—We've got a keeper, it said.

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She left him drooling and incoherent. Twisted in sheets. The dog yawned. It snorted. It crawled under blankets and licked his sweat-dampened crotch.

—Blogspot, he mumbled. —I know that because...

—Come on, Houdini, she whispered.

The dog hopped off the bed and did yoga poses.

She opened the door. It trotted off the little rotting back porch and reclined against a tree. It could hear the cat bawling faintly inside. It became eager for something. It lost the thread. Then remembered. It wanted food and started walking through its own stream before it had finished urinating.

She opened a different door, and it sprinted inside to the room with the couch through the dead space to the kitchen, where the cat was performing figure eights between her legs.

—Shh, she said. —Stop.

She tossed the cat by its neck it into the mudroom with a shallow tin of paté. She scooped a handful of kibble for the dog, who was pawing her lap, opening its mouth, not to bark, but emitting a sound like a chortle, and she patted its head, dropped the pellets in a bowl at their feet, and laughed.

She turned on the radio.

—The real question, the radio said. —Is whether they should even be allowed to assemble if they're just going to use it as an excuse to protest...

She turned it off.

She filled the tea kettle and leaned over the island on her elbows and her palms over her eyes until the water had boiled. She steeped two bags of Earl Grey and climbed the stairs to their office, turned on the fluorescents, and surveyed her seedlings.

About half the seeds she'd sown had germinated. At first they'd climbed toward the cool glow of the lamps. Lately, however, they'd mostly seemed to stagnate. She couldn't tell if she was giving them too much or not enough of whatever. She tipped a capful of organic fertilizer sourced from plankton in a watering can.

Rivulets wriggled in the trays. Stems buckled under the flow. Speckles of insects scurried under the potting soil. Liquid pooled in the folds of the tarp. She sank to her knees and curled her toes.

She sniffed, trying to unearth a scent of progress. She'd planted fennel, cilantro, rosemary, thyme, parsley, chives, dill, watercress, celery, three varieties of basil, and cannabis.

They all smelled the same. Stale air. Sprouts of dull, pale green, starting to yellow in places, thin as strings, shriveling, sagging, probably ultimately untenable.

She examined calendars she'd pinned to the wall. He'd promised to help her dig the plot she had staked, but the stakes had blown off. And in the ensuing weeks there'd been multiple hard frosts, a few flurries. One day was eighty degrees, and two days later the house on the hill in the country was coated in icy slush.

She took a photo of her hand holding a withered dill filament and texted her former boss, who'd been fired at the same time as her after they'd unionized their workplace, which had been a museum, since converted to a private blue chip gallery in response to the plague. Her former boss was related to someone who might work on a farm.

*What am I doing wrong*, she texted.

*Oh my GOD*, her former boss replied an hour or so later. *WHAT is that on your finger????!!!!*

She was lying supine on the couch with her mug of tea scrolling through real estate listings with the television volume turned low on an episode of 30/30 about a man whose primary goal had been to get so good at taking hostages that no one noticed them missing, holding her phone to the window when it periodically lost LTE.

She looked at the ring. Light reflected from so many directions. She hadn't managed to count the fractal, cascading faces of the stone. A rainbow swarmed over the diamond. A glare of sun caught her eye. It left a purple stain on her visual field.

She took off her glasses. She itched her nose and replied, *Lol, yeah. It's crazy. Andrew proposed. I don't know what to say*

*Followed by, I mean of course I said yes*

*Congratulations!!!!!!!!!!!!!!*

Her former boss's text message was adorned with a deluge of digital confetti and balloons.

*When's the big day?*

*Idk. We have to find a new place to live first. And so much other shit. My plants are struggling. My driver's license. Speaking of, I was actually about to go practice now. I'll ttyl!*

*Love you,* her former boss texted back.

The cat's head appeared between the coffee table and couch cushion. She smelled its bellicose breath.

—No tea for you.

She snatched her mug and dumped it in the sink. She skipped upstairs. The plants looked asleep. The cat pawed at one.

—Hey, she scolded.

She nudged it out with her foot tapping its butt until they were met on the landing outside the office by the dog, who jumped on the cat, who sprinted to the front door, clawing while she secured the dog's harness, grabbed the keys, and they all piled out to the garage.

—Go away, cat, she said.

She nudged its butt again, and it ran into the woods. For an instant she could see its tail twitching at the edge of the brush. Then it was gone. She opened the garage door.

She'd never taken the car out alone. Now that they were getting married, she felt more entitled and relaxed than the day she'd threatened to steal it. What's his would be hers. She'd forgive his increasingly peculiar tendencies, she thought, if he could forgive her this too.

Plus, it's not like he'd ever find out. Not the way they'd been carrying on. Like ships in the night, her father would've said. To put it in his words, they'd been miscommunicating.

She opened the back driver's side door.

—Get in, Houdini.

The dog barked. They'd never been in the car just the two of them. It mooned up at her. She lifted its haunches, impelling a squat.

—Hippity hop.

It jumped in. And she sat at the wheel, adjusting the mirrors and seat. She put the key in the ignition. She turned it too hard to the right. A grinding sound emanated. Her hand shook. She released pressure, and the engine caught.

The car idled. Smoked surged from the tailpipe. She centered her boot on the brake. She jostled the handbrake until it unstuck and the indicator on the dash dimmed. She shifted into reverse, and gently, gently eased her foot up. She turned and looked over her shoulder, one hand

on the twelve o'clock of the steering wheel, the other cupping the back of the passenger seat, like he'd shown her. The dog's tongue hung out panting. The car rolled back even and straight.

When she'd got it out of the garage, she rotated the wheel, hand over hand, until the car's nose faced the street. She shifted into drive and accelerated. The vehicle bucked, and she took her foot off. She let it glide to the end of the driveway. She turned her left blinker on, craned her neck to the right, to the left, and was about to pull out when a pickup truck careened from the right and screeched into the wrong side of the street, cutting the car off, and blocking her in the driveway.

She slammed the brakes. She heard the dog's claws scramble over upholstery.

—What the fuck, she screamed.

The truck towered above them. Its cab three feet off the ground. Its windows were open, and a tobacco-stained-toothed old man in battered army fatigues was leaning out, beckoning.

He said something.

She rolled the driver's side window down.

—Hi.

—You live here, asked the man.

—Yeah, she said.

—You bought it from Toby?

That wasn't the name of their landlord.

—Oh. No. We're renting. Our landlord bought it last year. I'm not sure who the previous owner was.

—I know Toby, the man said.

—Oh?

—Where is he?

—Um, she paused. —I don't know. Like I said, we're just renting from the guy who bought it.

—Lived here long?

—Almost nine months.

—You won't be much more.

—What makes you say that?

—This house has some history, the man mused. —No one stays on.

—Our landlord is kicking us out at the end of the summer.

—How much'd you buy 'er for?

—No, no. We're just renting.

—Why isn't the owner live here?

—I honestly don't know, she said. —I think because there's no internet.

—Don't you want internet?

—No.

—Where're you from?

—The city, she said.

—City's got internet.

—It sure does.

—You ain't miss it?

—Not really.

—I never had internet, the man coughed.

—Wow, she said. —I envy you.

—I can't miss it because I never know what it did.  
She couldn't tell if the old man was messing with her or being earnest. He coughed. She wondered if he had cigarettes.

—Can't miss what you never had, the man said.  
She nodded.

—Where will you go when you leave?  
—I'm not sure. We'll have to find somewhere. Do you know of anyone renting or selling or...

—I'll keep an eye out.  
—I appreciate that, she said. —What's your name?  
—You can call me The Sack, but I can't tell you what it means.  
—That's okay.  
—It's an old army nickname. I was in Japan, China, Korea, Indonesia. People say I should write a book.  
—Maybe you should.  
The Sack squinted.  
He coughed.  
—It sure is some house.  
—Yeah...  
—Lotta space for one person. You had better be careful.  
—Oh, well, there's actually my boyf... I mean fiancé. He lives here too.  
—Where's he at?  
—He's not feeling well.  
—Dang girl. Your man caught the 'vid?  
—No, no, nothing like that. He's just feeling under the weather today. He's sleeping in. The dog clambered over the center console and stood on her lap. It put its head out the window.

—And who's this, The Sack asked.  
—This is Houdini.  
The Sack had his hand halfway out of the truck's window, but recoiled upon hearing the name.

—You're not lying now?  
—Why would I?  
—I just get a little shaky around magic.  
The dog opened its triangular mouth like a smile. The Sack laughed. After a beat, so did she.

—Well, you take care now, he said. —And give my best to Toby...  
The Sack peeled off in the same direction from which he'd come. She didn't have time to reply, or ask about cigarettes. She stared at the windshield. She waved.

The interaction left her giddy. She felt independent and drove down the hill, cruising through bends without braking or jerking the wheel. She thought she heard him calling her name.

The dog lay down in the back with its head on its paws. Where the road widened, she switched on the blinker and pulled over and performed two flawless K-turns. She'd almost made it to the parking area alongside the river at the intersection with their street and the state highway when she realized she'd forgotten her glasses at the house.



Suddenly, the scene blurred. Her temples pounded with blood. Her throat closed, and she tried to ease on the brakes, but accidentally hit the accelerator, and speeded through a stop sign and into the intersection with the state highway, just in front of an oncoming school bus.

It laid down its horn.

She began to hyperventilate.

She wanted to close her eyes and cry, but she couldn't see which side of the road she was on. And just as she was about to pass the parking area, an eagle swooped overhead, narrowly avoiding colliding with the grill of the car.

She wrenched the wheel. The dog yelped. It tumbled into a footwell, and she barely managed to bring off the turn.

She felt the car tilt, the tires screech and lose traction, and a moment later, all was still.

Her boot flattened to the brake. The car stopped at a wild, sideways angle, dust wafting around it in the parking area, unscathed. She smelled the aroma of exhaust and burned rubber. The dog let out a yawn.

Minutes elapsed. She didn't move. She didn't shift into park. She kept her foot on the brake. She looked over her shoulder. The dog seemed all right. It put its paws on the center console and panted.

—Oh my god, she said, automatically and under her breath.

A few minutes later, she'd collected herself enough as she was going to be able to that day. Gradually she lifted her boot. She straightened the steering wheel and navigated the vehicle through a wide, careful U-turn.

She idled at the parking area's exit. She spotted a crumpled pack of cigarettes on a sewer grate and pulled the parking brake, got out and jogged to the gutter, but the pack was empty.

Back in the driver's seat, she stretched her gaze to the left, to the right, to the left again. She prepared for the turn. And if not for the half-decomposed tree that bowed into her lane, she would've made it out safely.

As things were, she clipped its limb on the side of the car's undercarriage. The check engine light flickered twice, then illumined, and remained on for the duration of her excursion.

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All the week following she bided her time. Nervous and waiting, anticipating the admonishing accusations he'd make about the state of the car.

But he never said anything. He may not have even seen. He slept until sunset, swallowed fistfuls of grain-free granola, and went walking through tall grass, reeds, trees, dead leaves, new ones, and dew, often not returning to exchange places with her in bed before dawn.

—Gotta get in my steps if I wanna make it in Hollywood, he said unprompted.

Then fell into deep, benumbed, perilous reverie.

He awoke to the vibration of his phone.

An unknown number had texted, *Hi Andrew! My name is Jennica and I am on the casting team over at TvTron- we had your information from the Quest and I know one of my coworkers reached out to talk about a new game show we're doing with Netflix. Next step in the casting process is for you to answer some on-line trivia question. I just sent a link to the email we have on file for you. Whenever you have a chance today or tomorrow, please fill it out and we will be in touch with next steps!*

He thumbed his email app. The one LTE bar keeled away. *No Service* appeared in its place, and he groaned, throwing off sticky sheets. He crawled to the door and onto the little rotting back porch.

The bar reappeared. His email refreshed. Before the plague, he'd kept it organized, each message paired with its strict fitting category, folder, and label. No promotion went unsubscribed. No spam unreported, no correspondence unreplied to, no directive unread, no update ignored.

The number next to his inbox confused him.

The subject line at the top of the screen read, *TvTron Studios Lying Game Show Test*

He opened it.

*Dear Andrew*

*Great speaking with you and looking forward to moving you to the next step in the casting process*

*You can take the 15 question multiple-choice test we spoke about here, and you can access the exam with: Username: andrewkingliar Password: PWqQgqWKM6lXo81hn-E8\_rZ8lioR5K7hYnG68JK*

*Important: You will need to complete this test prior to your skype interview.*

*If you have any questions contact team96@thequestcasting.net*

*Good luck.*

*Your Exambuilder*

*Stanis Storrsy*

The word *here* was a hyperlink. He clicked it.

A new browser page opened.

*TvTron Studios Lying Show - Time limit per question: 9 seconds*, it read.

And below that simple white with black text.

*Oh hi there! You're about to take our 15 question multiple-choice test. When you click the "START TEST" button the test will begin. You will have 9 seconds to click the answer you think is correct for each question. Once you click your answer, the test will automatically move on to the next question. If you fail to select your answer in 9 seconds, it will automatically move on to the next question. GOOD LUCK!*

The *START TEST* button loomed in the corner, but when he thumbed over it, it wouldn't highlight, open a new page, or digitally depress. He rapidly and repeatedly tapped the screen.

He dropped his phone on the porch, peered into afternoon light. The cat hunched at the foot of a gutter. It had learned that inevitably a chipmunk would issue. It was a matter of time.

He look at his phone. A slew of new windows cropped up and spilled out, each leading to the page, which asked, *How many girlfriends did Christopher Columbus kill?*, and expired before he had time to react, into further plummeting questions, which only half-loaded before each nine seconds ran out.

He tried to determine if he felt annoyed, angry, or something else.

He closed the browser, and replied to the unknown number's text, *hi jennica i tried to take the test this morning but the site was finnicky and lag caused me to click answers i didn't intend to click. i don't believe the results accurately represent my trivia knowledge or even the answers i wanted to choose. in any case that's that i hope you're well lmk if you need anything else from my end*

Five minutes later, his phone vibrated again.

*Hi Andrew! No worries at all- thanks so much for doing that. Can you go ahead and fill out this questionnaire?*

A link below led to a form page. He scrolled through. There were twenty questions, each connected with an empty response box and more open-ended and associative than the last.

He hovered over the first: *TELL US BRIEFLY ABOUT YOUR HOME LIFE, MARRIED, SINGLE, ROOMMATES, KIDS?*

—Anna, he called.

He waited. He felt responsible. He needed the money, but he couldn't remember for what. She wanted to buy property, but that didn't seem right. What had the thoughts been trying to tell him? What had the eagle said?

—Anna...

But she wasn't the one who could answer these questions. Every day since they'd move to the house on the hill in the country, she'd known him less. This was something he needed to do on his own.

Where was he from? What places had he gone to? What were people's misconceptions of him? What was the zaniest thing he'd ever assumed?

*DESCRIBE YOUR PERSONALITY.* wasn't a question. Still, he answered with self-effacement and unflappable wit of which he hoped the eagle would approve.

What was the most unique thing about him that no one would be able to tell by looking at him? How would he describe his ability to lie? How good was he at it? How did he learn to lie so well? How did he put lying to use in every day life, work, home, and school? What persona would he create for the show, or would he elect to be himself?

He didn't know, so he lied. He typed whatever came to mind.

How could he tell if someone else was lying? What would his strategy for the game be? How would he win? Did he think he'd be able to get by on trivia knowledge alone and not depend on deception? Is lying a kind of intelligence? What made him think he had the right to mislead others in exchange for profit? And what were the stakes of being on this show? What would the money mean?

After an hour, he'd reached the bottom of the form page.

The second to last question was a prompt.

*TELL US AN OUTRAGEOUS TRUE STORY OR LIE THAT HAPPENED TO YOU. PLEASE BE SPECIFIC, AT LEAST 4 OR 5 LINES. THIS NEEDS TO BE A BIG TALE TRUE OR FALSE IT MUST SHOCKING BUT PLAUSIBLE.*

He typed without thinking.

*My fiancée and I live on a winding road near a large, flowing river. One rainy night, a man knocked on our door and said he'd run his car out of gas and his phone was dead and he needed to borrow a phone to get a ride home. He was soaked head to toe, but otherwise looked okay. We were nervous, but we felt we had a civic responsibility to help him. Anna put on some tea, and I sat with him on the little rotting back porch while he ordered an Uber. That's when I noticed the man had hooks instead of fingers. He didn't have a hook for a hand. Only the top third of his fingers had been severed, with little metal attachments stemming from his knuckles like fishing lures. The man asked if he could smoke a cigarette on the front porch while we waited for the car, and I watched him elegantly extract one and light up with his hooks. We chatted a bit, I don't remember about what, and then the conversation fizzled, and I kind of zoned out until the Uber arrived. But when it did, the man was nowhere in sight, which was odd, because our house is rigged with motion-activated lights, and if he'd slipped away, they*

would've gone off, and I wouldn't've been able not to notice. He'd Venmoed me for the ride, since I'd ordered it on my phone, and the money was there in my account, but I had to send the Uber driver away, totally nonplussed. It was unnerving. And in the morning, I asked Anna if she thought it had happened. We really weren't sure. But when I went out on the porch, I found the man's cigarette butt still stamped out in an old flower pot.

The final question was, *THINK ABOUT THE STORY YOU JUST TOLD US. HOW WOULD TELLING THIS STORY HELP YOU WIN? WHAT DO YOU WANT VIEWERS TO THINK OF YOU?*

*I don't know*, he typed. *I don't know if the story I told is a truth or a lie. I just know it's authentic.*

At the bottom of the page was a button, which read, *SUBMIT*.

When he pressed it, the form disappeared.

He crawled back to the room where they slept.

\*

She watched a You'll Weekly Investigates special. A person wearing all black, leather gloves, aviator sunglasses, and a mask interviewed one of Jim Jones's adopted sons, who said the cult leader had been misunderstood, because he was actually secretly Francisco Franco's long lost nephew, who'd discovered oil offshore Guyana and established Jonestown as a distraction campaign in an attempt to broker a trade deal with Spain in exchange for scrubbing his uncle's reputation from history.

—It's a shame, the interviewer said.

The dog lapped at the skin between its anus and where its testicles had once surfaced.

—Next week, the television said. —On The Trickster's triumphant return, there's no knowing who'll pay the prank piper's electric bill...

She shot up.

—Oh my god, she yelled. —Andrew! Andrew, did you hear that? New episode of The Trickster next week!

He was lying on the other end of the couch, staring vacantly through the crossword puzzle in his lap, trying to tap into the instructions hidden in his own thoughts, which seemed connected to the arrangement of boxes on the page.

—Flargh, he said.

He cleared his throat and focused.

—I thought The Trickster was canceled, he managed.

—I think they just reduced the cash prizes to airline mile vouchers. They kept flashing the Unity Flight dolphin logo in the corner of the screen.

—Cool, he said.

His phone vibrated, and he lunged. It read, *Zoar Town Library*, and he turned it upside down on a cushion and let its dampened buzz drone until the call stopped.

—Who was that?

—They're still bothering me about a bunch of stuff I checked out that day you drove up and I haven't looked at yet.

—I'm really sorry we still haven't watched *A Final Woman*.

—It's okay, he said.

—Do you want to return stuff? I could drive. I've been wanting to get more practice.

He could feel his face scowl, and pulled it back to a glare. He pulled it back further so that he looked sullen, glum, hangdog. Finally he settled on a dejected-looking neutral smile, lips taut and teeth bared.

—The check engine light's on.

—I've been meaning to talk to you about that.

—Eh, he brushed her off. —It happens.

—But...

—It'll turn off when it's ready.

—We should get groceries soon... Right?

—Right, he said.

—I'm glad you've been making more of an effort to stay awake during the day.

He nodded.

The cat jumped up on the couch, and his head filled with thoughts. It leaned over his shoulder. Its muscles tremored and pulsed.

She moved her tea and milk mug to a shelf out of reach. He completed the crossword, filling in only across answers one by one without pausing. The cat lurked away.

—Twenty-eight years after his supposed death by suicide, the television remarked.

—He'd hit the charts again, with the number five single "We Fly High."

An hour later, the young couple was still on the couch.

He hadn't moved. She'd scrolled through fifty new real estate listings. The dog sat by the door to the back yard, breathing condensation prints on the glass in the shape of its nose.

—Should we take Houdini for a walk, she asked..

He didn't have an opinion. He hadn't heard from the eagle in a week. Maybe they would see it on a walk. Maybe not.

She was already at the door, lacing her boots. One of his thoughts told him the volume of the Great Sphinx of Giza in cubic meters.

—Thanks, he whispered. —I'll try to remember.

You already do, the thought assured.

—What, she called from the front porch.

—Nothing!

The afternoon was green and opaque. They walked along the riverside, and it started to rain. Mist vaporized off the mountains surrounding them on all sides. Longingly she regarded nubs of discarded cigarettes.

A Jeep with its doors off pulled up beside them. A person with hair to his or her or their waist slumped over the wheel.

—Hi, she said.

—Are you the new owners of the house over there, the person croaked.

—Unfortunately we're just renting it, she replied.

—From Toby?

He stiffened, and studied the driver. The person didn't seem capable of sitting upright. He or she or they gave the impression of slight back and forth rocking, nodding out in an opioid haze.

—No, she said. —From this other guy. I think Toby might've sold it to him. We never got the whole story.

—Where's Toby now, the person interrogated.

—I really don't know, she said.

He put his hands in his pockets and looked away.

—I used to live in that house, the person cawed.

—Really, she asked. —Are you sure?

—The white one on the hill with doric columns. Yeah I'm sure. I used to work for Toby, you know.

—What did you do?

—This and that, the person hacked.

—And where do you live these days?

—Here and there. Now and then.

She forced a polite laugh.

He looked at his phone.

The dog turned in a circle, wrapped the orange rope harness around her legs.

—We love it here, she nodded. —We want to buy a house in the area. Our cash situation isn't totally settled, but I've been keeping a lookout.

—Why don't you buy Toby's, the person rasped.

—I don't think we can afford it, she said. —Unless Andrew wins this game show I signed him up for.

She elbowed him.

He ignored her.

—Which one?

—Um, it's new. About lying or something. Andrew knows more. I think it's coming out on Netflix?

—You should run for town select board, the person grunted

—I would honestly love to. I used to be pretty politically involved before all this...

She put her hands up, as though a gesture could give their lives context.

The person grinned. His or her or their mouth was gray gums and brown and black stringy phlegm.

—She was on the bargaining committee to unionize her old workplace, he said.

The person cocked back its head and let out an airy report. Like the hiss, but more lighthearted.

—Yeah, she said. —We were all fired as soon as stuff in the city got bad. And they made it so the union basically doesn't exist. I'd really love to get more involved in local civic activities, but I'm afraid we don't know if we'll even be here past summer. Our landlord's kicking us out.

—The Sack told me, the person wheezed. —That's why I suggested the select board. You get in on their good side and they'll find you an in.

—Yeah, I mean. We're basically looking for anything. Anywhere that would allow us to stay in the region.

—You want me to keep an eye out for you all's?

—That would be awesome.

—The annual town meeting is on the thirteenth of next month, the person said.

—That's good to know. Really, thank you. I didn't catch your name by the way.

—You're Anna.

—Yeah, she giggled. —And this is Andrew.

—You can call me...

The person dislocated his or her or their jaw and erupted a low thrum of garbled incoherences.

She waited a beat.

—Gotta jet, the person squealed.

—Be seeing you...

He repeated the low thrum of nonsense and took the harness from her slack grip and tugged the dog away from the Jeep.

—Bye, she said.

The person winked.

\*

The rain picked up that evening and continued through the next day.

She googled different combinations of their address and the name Toby, but the storm must have been blocking the cell towers, because she couldn't keep an LTE signal for more than two minutes before the bars disappeared, and she was forced to relent. The search resulted in nothing relevant anyway.

He sat with his feet on the couch and his back on a rug she imagined her father would've estimated was worth two hundred dollars, but which was bigger than the rug in the room of dead space.

He was thinking about nothing. His phone vibrated. The text was from yet another number.

*Hey Andrew! This is Marlicia, Your questionnaire looks great- we would love to do a one hour Skype interview with you at some point this week- what; 's your schedule for Tuesday like? We will of course set up a call either tonight or tomorrow to tell you more about what these interview will entail*

—What day is it, he said.

She wanted to respond, but her phone had died in her hand, and she felt unsure as to whether it was Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. She wanted a cigarette.

She didn't say anything.

*hey that sounds great,* he texted.

*Followed by, this tuesday i should be free all day. just give me a call and i'll make it work. looking forward to it, thanks*

—I have an interview with The Lying Show people on Tuesday, he said.

—Wow, that's great. Have they mentioned anything else about what the show will be like or what they want to talk to you about?

He shook his head.

—I had to fill out this long form, uh... At some point... I can't remember. I tried to call you, but you weren't there. Some agent I've got...

He paused for comic effect, but she remained silent.

—I had to make up an outrageous...

He did air quotes.

—Story to tell. I told the Legend of Hook Man Finger.

—What is that?

She put her phone on the arm of the couch. Suddenly she felt a chill.

—Just, like, a guy with hooks instead of fingers knocking on our door late at night, asking us to help him.

—Why would you say that?

—It just came to me, he said.

—I don't like that at all. It reminds me of The Unabridged Directory of Murder on the Great Lakes.

—They're all like that.

—What do you mean? Who's Hook Man Finger?

—Just a guy. Jesus, forget it. I was trying to be funny. Also hey, where's your ring? Why aren't you wearing it?

She looked at her hand.

—I don't know. It's been loose on my finger lately. Maybe the gold stretched?

—It's eighteen karat gold.

—What, eighteen karats don't stretch?

—I don't know, he said. —I don't know anything about gold.

Instantly his thoughts were filled with gold facts. Gold-based artifacts first appeared in Egyptian civilization at the end of the fifth millennium BCE. Gold is used in some aircraft cockpit windows for de-icing glass by passing electricity through it. Gold has an atomic number of seventy-nine, which means it has seventy-nine protons found in the nucleus of every one of its atoms.

They sat in silence, listening to the rain until the room went dark.

His phone vibrated.

He didn't recognize the number calling.

She looked at him, and he shrugged, and power-walked through the room of dead space up the stairs to their office.

—Hello, he said.

He put the phone on speaker.

—Andrew, a voice echoed.

—Yeah, it's me.

The voice laughed.

—Still got that sense of humor.

He nodded.

—This is Rocky?

The voice sounded unsure.

—I'm with TvTron Clambake Studios?

—Great, he said.

—We're really excited to set up your Skype interview. I just wanted to go over a few things beforehand...

The voice paused, and from the other line came the sound of papers shuffling and smothered voices in the background.

—Sorry, the voice said. —You probably hear my rabbits. They're hungry. It's usually lunch time now.

—I know the deal.

—Well, this won't take a bit. I just need to go over some ground rules. You might want to take notes. Are you ready?

—Yeah, he said.



—Okay. Article one. For your Skype interview, we ask that you please wear bright, solid colored clothing. Avoid all red, black, and white, as well as shirts with prominent logos or catchphrases, or stripes. We don't want this to be too dressy, but still nice. Please make sure your clothing is a different color than your background. Feel free to show your personality when choosing an outfit. And if you can avoid wearing a button down...

—That shouldn't be a problem.

—A solid t-shirt would be fine, or a sweater, the voice continued. —Also, be prepared with a backup clothing option in case we don't like what you've chosen. Um, right, also please have your hair styled and be makeup ready. You're about to be on camera. We'd like you to look like a star.

He didn't respond.

The voice laughed.

—Okay. Article two. Find a quiet location in your house that is as close to your wireless router as possible and has a blank or close to blank wall that you can stand in front of. This area should not have posters, photos of family, sexual stimulation devices, bric-a-brac, or other distracting items in the background. Lighting needs to be directed towards your face from behind your computer, not above or behind. Avoid having windows behind you and have a spare lamp on standby if needed. And in addition to that lamp, if you could have another lamp or two available in case we need to adjust your lighting...

—I only have one lamp, he said.

—Stop, the voice screamed. —You're killing me, Andrew.

—Okay.

—At long last, article three. For the interview, you'll be standing up the entire time and we need to get a mid-body shot of you from waist to head, showing your arms. Can you talk with your hands?

—I can try.

—Just pretend you're Italian, the voice said. —Also please don't wear headphones. If you need to wear some, wireless is okay, but only if you have no other choice. Like you're going to be killed if you don't wear headphones. And please be sure your WiFi connection is strong.

—We actually don't have WiFi, he replied.

The voice cackled.

—Save the lies for the show! Speaking of, me and all the producers went crazy for your story about the guy and the car crash and the spooky cigarette. Was that really a lie?

—Yeah. There aren't any motion-activated lights.

—Huh?

—The Legend of Hook Man Finger, he said.

—Yas! Yas, that's it!

—I didn't mention a car crash.

—Oh, the voice hesitated. —Well, do you think you could work one in?

—Sure, he said.

—Great. That's great, Andrew. Can you prove it to me?

—You mean now?

—That's right, kiddo. I want to see your chops. Show me those lying skills.

—You want me to off the cuff recite that story and work in, like, a car crash element?

—You don't seem confused at all. I'm going to time you. Let's see if you can do it in under a minute. Ready, set...

—Hold on...

—Go!

He recounted the story best he could, replacing the part about running the car out of gas with running the car off the road and into the river.

—Wow, the voice said in a faux-flattering tone. —Are you a genius? Will you be able to lie it like that again in the Skype interview? Can you pump up the confidence to eleventy-nine to make people believe you?

—Sure, he said.

—My only criticism. It took you a minute twenty-two. I need you to promise to cut it down to under a min. This is TV we're talking about. Every second matters. No wasted air.

—Okay, he said.

—Can I count on you to practice?

—Practice?

—Get it under a min-min for the Skype interview.

—Okay, he said.

—This is for cash mon-ayy, Mr. Captain Deception. I need you to lie like you're going to win biggie Ruth Bader dollahz.

—How much is the jackpot?

—We haven't decided. First we've got to make sure you're the right fit. And one last thing. I know we're going with the Hook Man story to establish your personality factor. But I need you to also prepare another installment. What's the most epic thing you've ever lied about and gotten away with?

He balked.

—Are you there, my man? Andy?

—Yeah I'm here.

—Did you catch that?

—I did.

—What's the most epic thing you've ever lied about and gotten away with?

—Well, I'm not sure I can tell you the most epic ever. That might be giving too much away...

The voice mumbled to someone on the other end of the line.

—Sorry, you know, my rabbits. You've got me enticed with this withheld epicness.

—I'm just not sure it would reflect well on me to... To just tell it...

—I know you'll think of something. Get it down under a minute. You're our future lying champ. I can feel it in my ligaments.

—Thanks.

—Promise me?

He watched the cat creep up in the corner of his eyes. It chewed one of her cannabis seedlings' leaves, then proceeded to vomit.

—Pwomise?

—Uh...

—Pwomise you'w wie bettew than anyone has ewew befow.

—Sure, he said.

The most epic thing he'd ever lied about was too complicated to recite in fewer than sixty seconds.

And every day it got longer, he thought.

He thought it through other thoughts. The layers expanded. More thoughts emerging and replacing them. His consciousness seemed in thick competition for cognitive domination, to make sense of what was happening to him, and in all other corners of thoughts, which provoked and projected and interrupted one another with new, pertinent, or irrelevant information to add to or replace them, or himself, if he was even the one who was having the thoughts, or perhaps he'd become someone else.

The most epic thing...

He thought.

It had started with the eagle. That day in the woods. When they'd locked eyes, he had felt their lives shift. His and hers, and the eagle's, the dog's, the cat's. But he couldn't put straight language to it.

He'd been compelled to know more. He had to track down the bird. Get to the bottom of what knowledge it harbored. He'd stopped being able to sleep, so preoccupied he'd become with this talisman animal. And besides, his thoughts had gotten so loud.

The walking quelled them at first. So he'd walked all night long, and then into the mornings, and in the woods, he had felt he belonged.

The thoughts unspooled. They communed with arcadian air. Particles, minerals, plants, automatons, and everything else he wasn't able to detect with his senses sighed as one.

He followed the thread of their mysterious rhythms. And yet more than a week passed before he saw the eagle again. In fact, he'd nearly killed it in the process.

He sat at the edge of the railroad tracks staring out on the river, skipping rocks.

The night had expired and the morning was being reformed. He didn't want to go back to the house on the hill. He decided he wouldn't until he'd successfully skittered a stone all way across the waterway's width and into the woods on the bank's other end.

He dug through the silt, seeking the optimal balance of flatness, circularity, density, weight, and grip.

They must have opened the dams by the nuclear plant because the water moved fast. He needed a rock that could handle such momentum. He tested out larger and heavier variations.

Finally, he heaved one the size of his palm like a frisbee. It caught the rapids at an ideal angle and sailed up. Halfway across the great stream it caromed, and skipped again, spraying prismatic freckles of sediment and foam, and thrust forward about to skim the lip of the opposite streamside when the eagle crossed into its path.

The stone struck its beak, and the great bird went down. Its wings sliced the water. They flailed in the swell. He watched the rapids absorb the stately body of feathers and talons and fling it sidelong between boulders and dips. He watched water split. He watched the bald eagle thrash.

Without thinking, he waded in to his waist, throwing gravity against the current and waves. He slipped and went under. Surfaced gasping and searched with his boots for a foothold, but he was too deep. The raptor glided away. Its beak screeched. Open and gushing. A crest burst at his back, and he breathed in and plunged.

Hands before him, eyes squinting, he could barely discern the outline of plumage and claws. He dove farther, grasping, choking, and swallowing murk. He felt his spine carve against submerged razorlike crags. His digits closed on a slick, pumping rod of tendon and bone. He took a lungful of water. He swooned.

When he woke, he was still holding the eagle's left leg. It was morning again, two days later, though how could he know? They were several miles downstream. The eagle picked at his hand with its bill.

—Jesus, he said.

—Oh, thank heavens, the eagle squawked, lifting its gaze. —I was beginning to think I'd have to peck through hard tissue.

He shook his head, burped, and sneezed. A scant stream of muddy liquor flowed nostril-wise.

—Now if you wouldn't mind...

The eagle gestured its beak.

He let go of its leg.

—Sorry, he stammered. —I was looking for you.

—Well, the eagle said.

It preened.

It fanned out its wings, craned its neck, gave a few practice flaps.

—You found me.

It hopped to a felled tree limb and prepared to take flight.

The wind rose.

—Wait, he cried.

—Yes?

The eagle sounded annoyed.

—Aren't you going to explain? What's going on?

—Me? I don't know! I was all set for breakfast, homing in on a trout dumped from the hatchery truck when I got coldcocked. Chipped my beak, can't you see? Then I came to in your clutches and couldn't move for a day, while you shuddered and wept through dense, bristling dreams, and I still haven't had breakfast.

—Didn't I see you last week?

—You might've, the eagle yawned.

—Did you, like... I was very affected. By that experience... Are you going to tell me you weren't?

—I may have detected something useful in you, the eagle mused. —I may have marked you, in a manner of speaking, as they say, if they do. I don't know.

—But I've been looking for you.

—So you said.

—I think it's my fault you ended up almost drowning. I was skipping stones across the river... But I saved you!

—What do you want, a reward?

—I just want to talk.

The eagle checked its wristwatch. At least it was still running, it thought.

—Go ahead, but be snappy. I don't have all day.

—What's your name, he asked.

—Toby, the bird answered. —Now is there anything else, or am I free to leave?

—I've been so confused, he said. —My girlfriend and I moved to the country, but now I don't know what to do. I used to have a job and friends, an art practice, ideas. These days, it just feels like I'm waiting. Though I don't know what for. I don't have any purpose. I don't feel like I'm living my truth.

—Get used to it, bub. I used to be like you. I had a house on the hill in the valley. White with doric columns and a whole bunch of friends. Life comes at you fast. Then, you know, death. If you're like me, you come back. It's not the worst fate. Though I can think of better.

—Ever since I ran into you, my head's been rattled with thoughts. Information like jabber. I can't make sense of where it's coming from.

—Those are the voices of the living and dead. If you make eye contact with a spirit, the channel unhinges. It's a lot all at once, but you'll get used to it.

—So you... Did do this?

—Not on purpose. Though our souls aligned, I guess.

—I think I live in the house you used to live in.

—I know you do.

—I can help you, he said.

—No you can't. Can't you see, you're a renter. You're not even a man. Just a consumer, a tool, a resource suck. You're disposable. You're nothing in this world without property of your own.

—But I wanted to see you again, and now I have, I have purpose. I want to repay that.

—What use could you be? You almost killed me again. And now you live in my house. It's not like you can sign the deed back in my name... Unless...

—I'll do anything.

—Then wait here. I'll return in the morning. If everything goes according to plan, we'll both get what we want.

—What about Anna? She must be worrying.

—Don't, the bird said. —I've got her covered. Plus I'm in touch with your cat. I'll give instructions to make sure everything's gucci for your triumphant return. Now take off your shirt.

He did as the eagle commanded. It packed his back with sacred poultice, sewed the gash with fine reeds, and flew off in the direction of the current away from the house, farther down through the valley.

He rubbed his stitches and watched the sky dampen to dark. His mind cluttered with tender, vague ecstasy.

—Okay, the eagle woke him with a slap of its wing. —Now get your story straight...

It dropped a diamond ring on a chain at his feet.

—You got this from the Diamond District in Manhattan. You've been going back and forth to the city to get this engagement ring set for the past three days. I've had that cat deposit a fresh coffee mug in the sink, so your fiancée-to-be thinks you've slipped in and out. You're going to ditch the chain and tell her its an old family heirloom and propose, and she'll forgive all your neglect, but you need to do something else for her. She didn't get on the game show she auditioned for. Let her sign you up in her stead. The top jackpot last season was four hundred thousand dollars. If you get on, I'm sure the voices of the living and dead can tell you enough to secure the bag. Which you will then use to buy my house back from your landlord.

—But where will we live?

—Aw, you and your betrothed can stay a while. Until you find your own place. Just as long as you don't mind my coming and going, having the occasional guest. Then you can consider us even. You know, for almost decapitating my head? I'm not ready for anymore transmutations. Who knows what form I'll take next.

He held the stone to the light.

—Where did you get this?

—It belonged to a congressional representative's aide, the eagle said. —But don't sweat it, I took care of everything. Now go wake up your woman... And oh yeah, your friend Mark says hey.

He did as he was told. It worked out as the raptor explained. The most epic thing he'd ever lied about and gotten away with. But the eagle had a plan of its own. To tell it would give too much away.