

The Interrogation

“We can put a man on the moon. Don’t you think we can tell when you’re lying?”

Detective Adams said in his Texas drawl. He bent over to rest his palms on the scratched-up table of the interrogation room. Across from him fifteen-year-old Zac Reinemund sat unresponsive on a metal chair. The stark fluorescent light washed the color from the walls.

In the summer of 1969 the whole country was swelling with pride that an American, Neil Armstrong, was the first man to set foot on the moon. Zac Reinemund, however, didn’t exactly see the connection between lunar landing and lie detection. At a loss for an answer, he could feel the muscles in the back of his neck tighten, his heart beat faster, and his palms start to sweat.

While the detective stood bent over, waiting in vain for a reply, his white shirt gaped between the buttons. His gut hung well over his low-belted, blue slacks, and his pant legs stopped about three-quarters of an inch too short, exposing his white socks.

“We know you’re lying,” the detective said. “Why don’t you just confess? Admit it—you broke into the house across the street and stole the money.”

Zac tossed his long hair out of his face. “But I didn’t do it!”

What else could he say? Detective Adams based his accusation on the sole fact that the neighbors saw him sitting on the curb strumming a guitar the evening of the burglary. So, he committed the theft because he played the guitar, and the detective knew he was lying because the Americans had beaten the Russians to the moon. What sense did that make? He felt like a character in the theatre of the absurd. In the absence of hard evidence or logical arguments they had played ping-pong with the paddles of accusation and denial for over half an hour now. Zac had made no progress in convincing the detective of his innocence.

Then Detective Adams changed his tack. “Here, take this pencil and paper, and write these words: ‘I’m sorry I did this, but I needed the money for drugs.’”

“What? You want me to write a confession? No way. I’m not doing it.”

“No, it’s not a confession. We need a handwriting sample. Just for comparison. You don’t have to sign it.”

Reluctantly, Zac complied. When he had finished writing, Detective Adams examined the paper. “Uh huh. Just what I thought. We found a note in the house with these words, and I would say your handwriting is almost a perfect match. Here, take a look at it,” the detective said, handing Zac two pieces of paper.

Zac compared his handwriting with the thief’s and saw that they had both printed rather than written in cursive. Additionally, they both had used a Greek “ε” for the lower-case Latin “e.” Although their styles of penmanship showed some differences, the similarities unsettled him. Could it be that . . . ? No. How could it? His stomach churned, his chest hurt, and the strength drained from his arms and legs.

“You see? Pretty much identical, huh? I’d say that about proves you did it, but just to put the last nail in the coffin we’re gonna give you a lie detector test while our handwriting expert looks at your writing sample. Come this way.”

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The moment Detective Adams opened the door of the interrogation room, Zac’s mother rose to her feet from a chair in the hall, as though she were a defendant about to hear the verdict. Zac could see the anxious expectation written on her face and wished he could comfort her. Even more, he wished he were a little boy again and could run to her to be comforted.

“Well?” she finally said.

“We’re going to give him a lie-detector test, ma’am,” Detective Adams replied without inviting her to accompany them or even mentioning the option of having an attorney present.

“We’ll be back in a bit.”

Sighing, Zac’s mother sat down and twisted the tissue she clutched in her hands. Another long wait.

Detective Adams led Zac down the corridor to a second bare room that, like the other one, contained only a rectangular desk with a metal chair on either side. On top of the desk sat a polygraph machine, an intimidating contraption with a mass of tangled wires and five long, thin needles poised on a sheet of paper from a thick roll.

Detective Adams seated Zac at the long edge of the desk so that he faced a blank wall, while the polygrapher occupied the other chair, observing Zac from the side. Once the detective had placed a blood pressure cuff on Zac’s upper left arm, strapped two air-filled tubes around his chest and abdomen, and attached sensors to the first and third fingers of his right hand, the test began.

“I’m gonna ask you some questions,” the fat, bald polygrapher explained in the same Texas drawl as the detective’s, “and this machine here is gonna tell me if you’re lying.” He took another puff from his cigar, which filled the room with its stench.

“That’s right,” Detective Adams chimed in. “If we can put a man on the moon, we can sure as hell tell if you’re lying.”

“Okay. Let’s get started,” the polygraph operator said. “Do you drink coffee?”

“I tried it once, but I didn’t like it.”

“Just answer ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ boy. Nothing else. Do you drink coffee?”

“Uh, no.”

“Do you drink tea?”

“Not very often.”

“Just ‘yes’ or ‘no’ I said.”

“No.”

“Do you use drugs?”

“No.” The question sounded like an accusation, and Zac could feel his hands start to shake.

“Did you break into the house at 4503 Westland Drive?”

The polygraph operator had suddenly increased the volume of his voice, and Zac started at the forcefulness of the question. His heart was racing.

“N-no.” They’ll never believe me, he thought.

“Did you steal money from the house you broke into?”

The polygrapher’s voice had become even louder. By now beads of sweat were breaking out on Zac’s forehead.

“But I didn’t break into the house.”

“Yes or no. Did you steal money from the house you broke into?” His tone of voice was growing angry and impatient.

“No,” Zac said, feeling nauseous and faint.

“After you broke into the house, did you leave a note that said, ‘I’m sorry I did this, but I needed the money for drugs’?”

Zac remembered how much his handwriting resembled the thief’s and felt as if he were going to be ill. “No.” He could scarcely get the word out.

“Damn it!” shouted Detective Adams. “We can put a man on the moon! Do you understand? A man on the moon! How are we not gonna know when you’re lying?”

“He’s lying all right,” the polygrapher said. “The machine says so.”

Detective Adams unhooked Zac from the measuring instruments and led him back down the hall to his mother. The moment he arrived, a uniformed police officer walked up and handed the detective a note. Detective Adams glanced down at it and then looked up, addressing Zac’s mother. “He failed the lie detector test, ma’am, and according to this note here our handwriting analyst says that his handwriting matches the thief’s, but we have to send it to the crime lab in Austin to be one hundred percent sure. You can take your boy home now. We’ll call you when we get the results from the crime lab, and then we’ll go from there.”

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In a daze Zac staggered out with his mother. How could his handwriting have been a match when he didn’t write the note? And he was telling the truth. How could he have failed the lie detector test? He had heard about split personalities. Was it possible that he had one of those, that his other self did things he didn’t even know about? The very notion of it unnerved him. Did he have amnesia? He saw a movie once about a man who had committed murder and couldn’t

remember it afterwards. Was he like that? Maybe he had been sleepwalking. Could he have gotten up in the middle of the night and broken into the house while he was still asleep? Perhaps he just didn't remember it the next morning. As improbable as any explanation seemed, Zac was beginning to doubt his own sanity. His handwriting matched, and he failed the lie detector test—there had to be an explanation, but he didn't know what it was.

“Are you okay?” his mother asked once they were inside the car.

“Yeah, I guess so. I didn't do it, you know.”

“I know, honey.”

At least she believed him.

Zac's father returned that evening from a business trip. From his bedroom Zac could hear his parents talking in the kitchen.

“What? I come home, and my son's in trouble with the police?” his father said, raising his voice.

“No, he's not in trouble,” his mother countered. “It's all just a big misunderstanding.”

“It's that damn rock-and-roll he listens to, and those hippie friends he hangs around with. I knew they would get him into trouble.”

“He's not in trouble,” his mother repeated. “It will all work out.”

“The hell it will.”

“Sh. Lower your voice. He can hear you.”

He's only worried about what his business friends will think if they find out, Zac thought. His reputation. He doesn't give a damn about me. But Mom still believes in me. She stood up for me.

That night—it was Friday—Zac tossed in bed more than he slept. There was no further discussion of the matter over the weekend, and the silence hung heavy in the air. When the phone rang late Monday morning, his heart stopped. The crime lab. The results were in. Was he guilty? Mentally ill? Zac dashed to the phone.

“Hello,” he said, out of breath.

“Is Sissy there?” a girl’s voice asked.

“It’s for you,” he called towards his sister’s room, walking off and leaving the receiver of the wall phone dangling by its cord.

For the next week and a half every phone call nearly provoked a panic attack in him. His nerves were frayed.

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Wednesday of the following week, Zac’s mother shopped for groceries while the kids were at the municipal swimming pool. Returning home, she pulled the station wagon into the garage, opened the tailgate, and took out the first bag to carry it into the house.

I didn’t leave the door open, did I? she asked herself. No, I couldn’t have.

She stepped through the open door from the garage into the kitchen and set the bag of groceries down on the counter. Before going back to get the next one, she needed to use the restroom. When she walked into the master bedroom on the way to her bathroom, she saw that the top drawer of the dresser was open. She knew she hadn’t left it that way and hurried to check its contents. Oh, no. The pearl necklace her husband had given her on their first wedding anniversary—her only real piece of jewelry—was missing. So was the cash they kept in a small box there. Then she saw the note. It read: “I’m sorry I did this, but I needed the money for drugs.” She ran to the phone with great joy and dialed her husband’s office number.

“Hello.”

“Honey, I have great news! We’ve been robbed!”

She couldn’t wait for the kids to come home from the pool and tell Zac. She had forgotten all about the ice cream melting in the back of the station wagon.

Glossary of Names

Adams: man (Hebrew). He is “the man.”

Zac: short for Zachaeus = pure (Hebrew)

Reinemund: pure mouth (German). Zac Reinemund is telling the truth.

Sissy: nickname for sister