

T H E B O S S I S D E A D

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Interburger has its way of finding the truth. I have seen their methods. A few months ago I arrived at work a bit earlier than usual. It was winter and dark outside, even at four in the afternoon, and cold.

The store was not busy. There were occasional customers. The door to Keith's office was closed, and, without thinking, I opened it. There they were—Wackhoff sitting at Keith's desk, Keith standing to one side with his arms folded, and, sitting in a metal folding chair across the desk from Wackhoff, one of the new girls who worked the day shift. She wore her uniform, but wires ran from the box to her arms and fingers. Another wire was strapped around her waist. The box on Keith's desk looked like a small suitcase.

"Get out," Keith says, turning to me. He pointed me out the door, then quickly shut it behind me. I heard it lock.

They had been giving the girl a lie detector test. Wackhoff called the black box on the desk his lie detector machine. Wackhoff had been trained to use it, I am told, and it was his favorite tool. He used it whenever there was a problem with the girls, or with the night manager, or a grillman, or anyone. When Wackhoff interrogated someone, or if for some reason he came to doubt their honesty, or if he wanted to threaten them into confessing, he asked them to submit to a lie detector test. 'Don't submit,' he would say, 'that's fine, you're fired.' He knew how to work it, I am told. He used it to get at the truth.

It made me nervous. How would I react if I was wired to such a thing? Who doesn't have something to hide? I was told to expect questions like, 'Do you masturbate?' What should I say? No? and give them a baseline for my dishonesty. Or, be humiliated with the truth? Everyone sometime had taken a cheeseburger from the steam table and eaten it because they had rushed to work without lunch. Or, who hadn't had time to take a break, and thought thus that Interburger "owed" them a little something and took it. Or taken home a pencil? Or a paper hat to use on Halloween? I mean, here's the thing. Wackhoff is sitting there with all these wires hooked up to you, and he sees the paper traces on the machine and you can't. And he's got this suit on, nice lightweight Brooks Brothers maybe, or Hart, Schaeffer, Marx. You are sitting there in your little brown and orange uniform, if you work on the counter, brown shirt if you work on the back, and you must wear your little paper hat. You sit there, and Wackhoff looks you in the eyes and says, "Did you ever steal anything?" and if you say 'No,' then he knows you're lying and god knows what is going on with his machine, the dials, the needles, and if you say, 'Yes,' you're done, you've dug your own grave. So, what do you say? Do you get fired for lying or fired for telling the truth. Here's the

point—you're on the machine, you've made Wackhoff go to all that much trouble, and you're gone, one way or the other.

The girl in the office is guilty for sure. After I had stumbled into Keith's office while she is being questioned, I saw her only once again, when she came back to the store at night to return her uniform. I heard she did not even get much past the first two questions. She broke down and cried. Most did, I have been told. There is no way to resist that force. In the minds of those young kids there may be no greater force on this planet than Wackhoff's eyes and his confident, off-handed way of asking questions you do not want to answer. There is no greater fear than to hear his firm voice as his hands adjust the dials on his machine. The threat is there, and if that is not enough, there is the machine. Only he can see it, the dials, the lights, the needle. Only he knows the truth, no matter what the truth is, no matter what you say. Did you ever wet your bed? I think I did, but I'm not sure. Did the machine reflect what I thought might be true, or did it know the truth for sure apart from what I remembered? Should I confess to what I think the truth is because—if I only think I have sinned—have I sinned? I think so. That would be the truth in the machine. But they make you answer, yes or no. There is no measure for, I'm not sure. There is no place for qualifying your answers—that I don't know if this has truly happened, or if I only dreamed it once or imagined it whole. He believes we all have wet our beds. This is a truth with which he calibrates his machine. This is how Wackhoff measures truth. But I am so nervous now, sitting here, I haven't said a word, yet he knows that I am lying. Have you ever masturbated? Have you?

Always the tears. Even men cry, I hear told. I suspect I would cry. And then they quit their jobs. It's better that way. How can they stay if Wackhoff knows the truth? Wackhoff agrees. It's better if you quit, then we won't prosecute. No one has ever been charged with anything, despite all the threats to bring in cops. The machine, the procedures, are that good.

The lie detector. I'll tell you what I think. It's an empty box with wires. Wackhoff asks questions. He knows the truth. He needs no machine. But he makes it look that way, he makes it look as if he depends on the machine to tell him all. After all, everyone hides something and, if properly confronted, everyone will confess. It is not Wackhoff's skill at running some machine that is the danger. It is his quest for truth. Truth is his knife. We are butter. Tears will come, but tears are aftereffects to loss, and never to any avail. Not here. Then comes the resignation. That is what Wackhoff wants, after all. That is the dance of death. When he starts these little journeys, they all end only in the one place they can end. Turn in your uniform. We will not prosecute. And we will apply your last week's wages against the things that you have stolen and the trouble you have caused us.

She was day crew, that poor girl entangled in that machine. I never got to know her, not her name, not even her face until that evening she came in to return her orange and brown uniform. It was clean and pressed, like new. She was crying. And then she was gone.

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At three o'clock Mary Lee comes to the back line and says she wants to leave early. She has arranged for Shellaine to work in her place.

"I guess that's okay," I say. "Is Shellaine still here?"

"She's been sitting out front on the curb for an hour," Mary Lee says.

I say it's fine if she leaves early.

"Don't you have anything to do?" I ask Shellaine. I have gone outside to talk to her. I squat to my haunches. We sit in the shade of the store. It is a warm, sunny Friday afternoon. The sky is clear and deep blue. Shellaine still wears her uniform. "You hang around here too much."

"There's nothing else to do," she says.

The heat makes my head itch.

"What do kids do these days in the summertime?"

"Work."

"Not all the time."

"No."

"What else? What do your friends do?"

She doesn't look at me, but plays with a stick in the street. The shadow of the restaurant moves away from the sun. "Drink," she says. "And drive around," she adds, like that is the complete list.

"Nothing for fun?"

"Drink."

"You know what I mean."

She looks at me funny.

"I don't mean that. You know what I mean. Just, for fun."

"That's it—work, and drive around—that's why I hang out with Bryan. He's got a car. And we drink a little. When there's school, I run..." My night grill man Bryan is in love with Shellaine. He is tall, young, goofy, and awkward, and he wears his heart on his sleeve. Shellaine hangs around him because he drives her around. He worships her.

"You could run in the summer. Get ready for track season." She is a long distance runner.