

Truths to Lie For

By Theron Couch

“For the good of the state you will comply with instructions. For the good of the state you will confess your crimes. For the good of the state you will say you were wrong.”

Over and over it played. Somehow tangible despite only being words. All around me. In the dark. Restrained in a chair, alone in the center of an empty room, I listened and endured.

“For the good of the state you will comply...”

It droned on like that, booming in volume but not in tone. Every time I was alone. I’d try to think but lose my thoughts. I’d try to sleep but wake in fits and starts. Too overt to brainwash yet too insistent to be forgotten; even when it wasn’t playing it was in my thoughts. It became as much a part of me as a limb.

The recording cut off. A high pitched squeak preceded the almost blinding shaft of light that stretched in from the opening door. I flinched and blinked repeatedly in the face of the bright intrusion into my darkness.

My visitor—my only companion in that place—entered through the open door, at first nothing more than a backlit shadow of a person.

“Good morning,” said the visitor as he entered. He always said “good morning.” I never recognized what was so good about it. Nor did I believe every visit corresponded to the morning.

The light brightened the room on either side of the doorway; the visitor stepped easily to a desk at the door’s right, a desk that faced me. He reached to the front corner of the desk, to a small curved light, and switched it on.

“Good morning,” the visitor said again.

“Hello,” I relented. He would repeat his greeting over and over until I replied—something I’d learned when, during one visit, I refused to answer him. How long he’d been in that room with me I couldn’t know, but I listened to him say “good morning” one time after

another, continuing long after I'd lost count. The repetition of it—the same two words spoken with such perfect equanimity over and over again—had been a strange kind of torture all on its own. In that room—that sleepless solitude—the strangest things would worm into my brain and start eating it out. I maintained defiance where I could, though; I never conceded the time of day.

The man stepped away from the desk, leaving through the open door and disappearing into that shaft of light. His absence lasted only a moment, and when he returned he carried a briefcase. There was always some delay—some contrivance that led the man to keep the door open long enough for my eyes to adjust from blackest dark to blinding light. This time it was the forgotten briefcase, and once he'd retrieved it, he closed the door behind him and forced my eyes to adjust again, back to a dimmer light.

“Do you know what your problem is?” He sat down behind his desk; the interrogation session had begun. “You're the part of the machine that thinks itself the whole. The one who values himself over the many.”

The interrogator reached to a control on his desk, illuminating a spotlight above me. The light wasn't so bright that I couldn't still make out details beyond the halo—the desk and the interrogator's face. The interrogator kept me always shifting between the darkness and the light, and I learned quickly that one wasn't preferable to the other.

“So much pain and anger.” The interrogator shook his head in slight before offering a sad, lackluster smile. “To say nothing of all the aggravation and paperwork. All because you think you know best.”

I locked on the interrogator's words, untrustworthy though they were. Some days—some sessions—I was better able to will away the physical and mental fatigue that nagged at me.

“You act like no one agreed with me. Like what I did I did alone and for my own benefit.”

As time passed and restful sleep—to say nothing of non-intravenous nutrition—became a more distant memory, I couldn't manage as tight a control over my outbursts. Engaging the

interrogator wasn't my first choice—it wasn't any kind of a good choice. He set the agenda, and his thoughts were more nimble than mine. But, if only to maintain my sanity, I conceded that I had to talk to someone.

“Wasn't it?” asked the interrogator. “I'm sure you'd like to believe that your eloquence swayed people. Your ideas. But people aren't swayed by ideas or by words. They care about celebrity and personality.”

“That's a lie.”

The interrogator leaned forward, arms resting on his desk. His face, a landscape of banality, contorted into a disappointed frown.

“Four times you've accused me of that,” the interrogator said. “I've never lied to you. I told you in the beginning that I wouldn't and I haven't.”

“I have only your word for that.”

The bland man behind the desk offered the barest of nods.

“I'm the one ally you will ever have in this room,” the interrogator said. “I'm not going to ask for your trust. But perhaps indulgence?”

Even in the dim light the interrogator's face didn't take on sinister shadows. I wanted to hate him as part of what I stood in opposition to—as part of the entity that imprisoned me. It would have helped if he looked like someone worth hating.

“This might actually be just the opportunity you and I need. To broach a difficult subject.” The interrogator stood. He stepped out from behind the desk and came to lean against it. The spotlight above my head threw just enough light on his face that I could still make out his expression. “The day that we met you asked why you were here—why you weren't shot.”

I offered a tentative nod, unsure where the interrogator was going; he'd never brought up that question I'd asked in our first encounter.

“The people in charge—the government that you turned your back on—spent a great deal of time and money to turn you into a hero. Think about how unpopular that war became

and how difficult it must have been to make anyone who came out of it into a hero.”

“It didn’t happen like that.”

“You were already a hero before their efforts?”

I shook my head. In my mind I knew what I wanted to say, but I could never seem to get the words to match my thoughts.

“I was never a hero,” I answered, angry despite myself. “I was a man in the right place to do the right thing. That wasn’t being a hero. That was...doing my job.”

“Modesty.” The interrogator favored me with one of those halfhearted smiles one aims at well-intentioned fools. “Another reason why they made the choice that they did. The public loves celebrating people who act like they don’t deserve to be celebrated. Whether what you did was heroic or not is immaterial. The government said it was; they treated you like a hero. You objected of course. But in the way that all modest men object when they don’t actually disagree with what’s being said about them.”

His words, wrong and yet not, burned as I heard them. I shook my head but didn’t quite meet his eyes.

“I just tried to stay out of the way. Eventually everyone would have forgotten me.”

The interrogator said nothing. He nodded in slight, his gaze seeming to drift off as if the vague, dark distance warranted serious thought. I watched him, silent. Would our discussion continue or end abruptly? I knew better than to try and anticipate the interrogator even if everything about my situation connived to make me expectant.

The moment, as likely to have been artificial as genuine, passed; the interrogator stood and stepped back behind his desk. He reached to his briefcase, opened it, and extracted a single sheet of paper and a pen. He set the pen and paper to the side and closed the briefcase.

“That’s what I meant when I said people weren’t listening to what you said when they first supported you.” The interrogator started on a deliberately slow circuit of the room, his path staying just at the edge of the halo that surrounded me. I watched him, my eyes following him as much as the chair restraints would allow. “The people loved you. They believed you

because they loved you. They didn't need evidence. They didn't need proof. They only needed you."

"But the new war—"

The interrogator waved off my objection like a pestering bug; he continued speaking, talking over what I tried to say.

"The government made you credible. They made you so credible that when you finally decided to use that credibility it outshined your creators. For a little while you could have said the sky wasn't blue, and it wouldn't have mattered; some people would have believed you anyway."

"I never said anything that wasn't true." I threw as much volume behind the statement as I could manage. I strained my arms against their restraints—gestural futility that chafed my wrists yet still the only way I knew to emphasize what I was saying; at the very least, it quieted my interrogator for a moment. "I can't help it if some people rush to agree rather than look at the issue for themselves. I didn't make the world we live in."

The interrogator, at a point in his never ending circuit where he stood just barely to my left, spun on me—the closest thing to enthusiasm I'd seen from him.

"So when you said that it was a lie that people followed you for you and not what you were saying, you knew better. You were the liar."

And suddenly my emphatic insistence seemed a waste.

"You're right, though. You didn't make the world we live in; it's a product of someone else. Just as what you are is a product of someone else."

"I'm still my own person." Strangely these words, which felt more honest to me than my earlier insistence that I'd never lied, came out quieter and without any emphasizing theatrics. "Did more people pay attention to me because your bosses turned me into posters and videos? Maybe. But that doesn't change the value of what I said—the truth of it."

The interrogator cocked his head to the side just so—that kind of gesture that hints at thoughtful consideration. I doubted it. For all his talk of honesty and being an ally, nothing the

interrogator did or said could be trusted.

“Truth.” The word rolled off the interrogator’s tongue, lazy and without any particular focus, as he started back toward his desk. He leaned against the front of it rather than sit behind it. “It keeps going back to that for you. That what you said was true.”

“It was.”

“Maybe,” the interrogator answered, shrugging. “From a certain point of view. Truth is subjective.”

“Truth is truth.”

The interrogator shook his head.

“You can’t be that naïve.” The interrogator folded his arms across his chest like a disapproving parent. “You started your service in peacetime. There was no war, and there were no enemies; that was the truth. Then the war began and those that had been friendlies were suddenly your enemies; that was the truth. Once the war ended, those same people were friendlies once again; yet another truth. Your view of the truth changed twice, completely contradicting what came before. You believed what you were told to believe and life went on.”

“The war was wrong.” I spoke because not speaking felt the greater sin—though who could or would judge my sins in that place I didn’t know. “I obeyed orders. I did my job because to do otherwise would have put everyone else in harm’s way. None of that makes the war right.”

The interrogator nodded, his eyes almost bright.

“And so the truth changes once again. Subjective. Mutable.”

I opened my mouth, meaning to argue only to discover I had nothing to say—nothing that I believed the interrogator wouldn’t back himself out of with more manipulative words.

“I still haven’t answered your question, though. Why you’re here.”

The interrogator reached behind him to the sheet of paper he’d pulled from his briefcase. He glanced at it before folding it top to bottom—gentle and delicate without creasing the middle.

“The truth has changed, does change, will change. But that begs the question: who decides what’s true?”

I shrugged reflexively which only pulled my wrists against the restraints.

“The same people that made you a hero. But the truth of your heroics made you so credible that when you came out and proclaimed them wrong, your truth became a threat to their truth.”

“So why not just kill me?” Fatigue gave way to anger.

“You can’t truly be beaten if you’re dead.” The interrogator spoke like it was just one more truth—one that I should already know. “Alive you can be proven wrong. You can repent. You can be served up as evidence that no truth is better or stronger than theirs.”

For the first time I felt confused. If that was the goal, why tell me in advance and risk me resisting? It felt like that moment in every bad movie where the villain explains his plan. I watched the interrogator play the corners of the sheet of paper between his thumbs and forefingers.

“Read this,” he said, setting the paper on my lap. “It’s your confession.”

The prisoner stared at me, and I wondered if the confusion on his face was genuine. The process—sleep deprivation, playing against a person’s circadian rhythms, poor nutrition—played havoc with a person’s ability to honestly express himself. But whether I’d pushed him far enough into uncertainty that he was receptive to what was coming next was immaterial; despite my misgivings over the timing, I had my instructions.

“Read this.” I set the paper on the prisoner’s lap. “It’s your confession.”

His confusion after I gave him the confession was genuine. The prisoner looked down at the sheet, staring for a moment before cocking his head to the right as far as he could. I realized the paper was upside down. I turned back to my desk, pressing a button that released the prisoner’s wrists. I’d done this on three previous occasions and each time his immediate

reaction was to search for some way to twist the opportunity to his advantage. When I turned back to face him, I could see that was his reaction this time as well. I continued leaning against my desk, waiting. He'd come back to the issue at hand in a moment.

"My confession?" He forced a laugh—rough and ugly. "What would I have to confess to? I've committed no crimes."

"One man's opinion, perhaps." I pointed toward the sheet of paper he was avoiding looking at. "The specific grievances are enumerated in your confession."

Glancing down at it a second time, the prisoner made no attempt to read it. He took up the confession in both his hands and tore it down the middle lengthwise. Released from his grip, the paper's two halves fell to the floor without a second glance from him.

"We have more copies."

I stood up and rounded my desk, returning to my chair. From my briefcase I pulled a second copy of the confession.

"You claim responsibility for a variety of terrorist activities and beg forgiveness for the deaths you've caused."

"Deaths?" The prisoner's attention had wandered when confronted with the confession. I'd seen it before; he often grew dismissive when he felt the discussion drifting too far from the narrow viewpoint he believed. But he cared enough about his perception as a good, honest man that such an accusation would hold his attention for the rest of the session. "No one died. Everything I've done has been peaceful."

I shook my head. I tired of the back and forth. Seldom did someone sit where the prisoner sat and keep an open mind—consider both his point of view and that of a government with hundreds of millions of people to protect; walls of resistance, no less palpable for being intangible, often came to surround that chair. It never forced me from my mark—the middling averageness I presented in that room was well practiced. But that didn't make his righteous intransigence any less wearying.

"Insurrection is never peaceful," I answered. "You may intend nonviolence at the start

but, like a dandelion, once you've blown on the seeds you can't guess where they'll land."

"There's been no insurrection." I'd owned clocks less predictable than this prisoner; everything began with resistance and refutation. "There's been dissent. There's been protest."

"There has been that." I opened my briefcase again, this time reaching not to the stack of pristine copies of his confession but a folder. "But there's been more."

The folder had been in my briefcase during every session. When I was assigned this case I didn't know whether I'd have need of it or not—no case is the same, and it's impossible to predict how each one will go. I closed the briefcase and fixed my eyes on the prisoner, keeping them there as I stood up and walked around the desk. A lap strap kept the prisoner in his chair even without the wrist restraints; I stepped up to him, our eyes still locked, and dropped the folder in his lap.

I backed away from the chair until I came to lean on my desk again. I watched him open the folder, watched him leaf through the pictures within it, watched the emotions play on his face as he digested the images. And watched him, not unexpectedly, throw the folder and the pictures away; they landed somewhere in the darkness beyond his lighted halo.

"I didn't do any of that," he insisted.

I kept my voice even. My breathing, too. I let his words hang for a moment.

"A bomb at a military base. Gunmen at a political fundraiser. Sabotage at munitions factories. All in the name of your cause. But you didn't do any of it." I shook my head. "Your truth. Not the truth."

The prisoner didn't answer right away. He stole a fleeting glance in the direction he'd tossed the folder. Was he really bothered by the pictures? I pushed such thoughts away; they were a dangerous proposition. Ascribing emotions, thinking of him by name—behaviors that risked making him a person in my eyes and not a case. Risked interfering with my job.

I grabbed my chair from behind my desk and set it down across from the prisoner's, three or four feet distant.

"You also never called on it to stop," I said as I sat down. "You never got angry. You

never apologized. You continued to throw out your opinions as if philosophizing existed in a vacuum and was a means to its own end. You never took a moment out of your nonstop objection to a war you weren't fighting to say that killing innocent people was wrong. You, a hero for protecting another country's innocent civilians in a warzone, had no words to spare for your own."

I waited for a response. And waited. Seconds, moments, minutes—I wasn't sure how long the quiet lasted.

But finally I spoke first.

"People were scared and wanted a war. People stopped being scared and thought the war unjust. Compensating for the first war, people mistrusted the second war. You, reluctant hero, revealed ambivalence to the first war and opposition to the second. The people listened. They believed. They acted. Why wouldn't they—you embodied all the qualities they wished they possessed. Your truth, expressed irresponsibly.

"Those people were killed in your name."

Silence again. The prisoner's eyes drifted here and there as if the internal compass that kept his gaze anchored up to that point had suddenly broken. I sat in my chair, waiting.

"Dissent is not insurrection."

He sounded tired. For the first time in our sessions he sounded exhausted. The words sounded like a child in school reciting multiplication tables from memory—which didn't necessarily make the recitation less honest.

"Dissent is easy." I stood up. "Dissent is quiet." I walked back to the desk, behind the desk. "Dissent is respectful." I opened my briefcase and retrieved another copy of the prisoner's confession. "Dissent changes the world because it changes minds." With the hand that didn't hold his confession I grabbed my pen; I started back around the desk. "Insurrection simply blows them up."

“Dissent is not insurrection.” But saying the words didn’t erase those images—ones that were already burned into my memory but had been summoned to the forefront by the interrogator’s pictures. I’d never advocated violence in my protests, but I knew such acts boasted my cause. I’d memorialized those images in my mind—grieved for those victims. And I’d benefitted from their deaths. All at once the fatigue that existed in every part of my body seemed to rush to my head; I felt tired. Very tired.

“Dissent is easy.” As he spoke the interrogator stood up and started back around his desk. “Dissent is quiet. Dissent is respectful.”

He opened his briefcase and pulled out another sheet of paper—no doubt another copy of “my” confession.

“Dissent changes the world because it changes minds,” he continued. “Insurrection simply blows them up.”

He started toward me, a confession in one hand and a pen in the other. He set both on my lap. I let him. He sat back down in that chair just a few feet away. I read the confession he’d given me—short and sweet. No fluff. I’d expected to be angrier.

“So I sign this and that’s it? Happily ever after? They get what they want and I get out of here?”

The interrogator stayed quiet for a moment, but I saw nothing in his face that hinted at consideration. It was silence for silence’s sake. And the likelihood that I’d asked exactly what he’d expected didn’t bother me at all.

“I said I wouldn’t lie to you,” he answered. “And right now that’s a problem. Because the best answer would be a lie—the happily ever after.”

The interrogator shook his head.

“You’ll read the confession,” he continued. “Then they’ll want you to travel. They’ll probably insist on it. To show off the evidence that you were wrong—that their truth is the only truth. Outside those obligations your life will be your own. Eventually, as your importance fades, you’ll have more and more time to yourself. There will come a day, years from now,

when you've been forgotten—when your name is no longer connected to dissent or insurrection or repentance. When that happens...when that happens it will be quick, painless—you won't see it coming."

I stared at that sheet of paper. I read the words—all the things they were blaming me for. And there it was at the bottom. A line and my name. A signature and a few words is all they wanted. A signature and a few words and I could get out of that hell. My life for a scribble on that line. I picked up the pen. I held it—felt the weight of it and the weight of its purpose. I stared at that line and imagined a future—something I thought I'd never have once I found myself in that room. Was it a betrayal if I did my part and went home while others remained to carry on the fight after me?

The prisoner stared at that confession. Longer than I'd expected him to. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd been wrong. I was good at my job, but no one was one hundred percent. The prisoner stared and he stared. Finally he moved the pen toward the confession.

And then he tore it in half for a second time.

"Dissent is nothing of what you describe." He still sounded tired. But there was a difference—the anger was back. "We're a people born of dissent. If dissent can put me in a place like this, then there hasn't been enough dissent."

I stood up. I picked up my chair and carried it back behind my desk, sitting in it once I'd put it down.

"You demand dissent but have no regard for the lives it ends." I nodded, more to myself than to the prisoner. "Confession is their best option for stopping what you started. But it is not the only option."

I opened my briefcase. I already knew that it would be the last time. I pulled out one last sheet of paper.

"Deconstruction," I said. "Your truth was believable because you were the one speaking

it. You. It all stemmed from you. If you continue to stand in opposition to their truth—the truth—there are remedies.”

I glanced at the sheet of paper I’d pulled out. I knew what was on it. And I knew it was all true. I looked. I paused. I faced the prisoner.

“You’ve cheated on your wife with two women: one while you were in the service abroad, another after you came home. You have a son from the second affair that you’ve never seen; you pay child support with mailed, unsigned money orders. You were involved in a friendly fire incident during the war that was completely not your fault but that you have allowed to be covered up.”

All along—all our exchanges—the prisoner had never looked at me like he did in that moment. I doubt he ever trusted me, so it couldn’t have been betrayal in his eyes. But it was akin to that. It was a man angry at himself for his failures and at me for knowing them.

Then the rough, ugly pseudo-laugh returned.

“They have it all figured, don’t they?”

“Didn’t you on the outside? The truth may be mutable, but it’s internally consistent. You get to win”—I stood up, a finger gesturing at the room around us—“in here. Outside—if you never go back, it will be in your head ever as you left it.”

I glanced at the prisoner’s left wrist and then his right before meeting his eyes. We’d been through this enough that he no longer fought it. He set both his arms on the arms of his chair. With a touch of a button I restrained his wrists once more.

“I didn’t do what you said,” came the prisoner’s voice. “I didn’t kill those people.”

“Your truth,” I said as I stood up. “Their truth. Do the dead believe one over the other?”

I grabbed my briefcase. I looked at him one last time.

“You can’t ever beat them,” I said.

“I don’t have to beat them,” he answered. “I just have to keep saying ‘no.’”

I looked to my desk. With the press of one button I turned off the halo of light above the prisoner. With the press of another I opened the door leading out; a warm bright light greeted

Writing Raw

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me. Into it I walked—just far enough to set my briefcase out of the way. I returned to the cell, back to my desk, and switched off the lamp.

I pressed one last button—the one that ended the prisoner’s day.

“For the good of the state you will comply with instructions. For the good of the state you will confess your crimes. For the good of the state you will say you were wrong.”

The words came from overhead, repeated endlessly in my voice. I walked back to the door. I’d come close, but he wasn’t ready; I wondered now if this too-early attempt had poisoned him against it. Closed-minded and inflexible he was—protective of his legacy because for all his protests he knew that truth is only as strong as the people peddling it. In that dark room I left him, alone save for whatever truths he kept as companions.

The End

Theron Couch bio: Theron Couch spends his days as a wine merchant and his nights as a writing addict. “Truths to Lie For” is his first published short story, and he’s previously written a novel entitled The Loyalty of Pawns. He somehow endures the temperate weather and natural beauty of the San Francisco bay area. Follow him on Twitter (@theroncouch) or Facebook (facebook.com/theroncouch).