

Deceptive

by **James Hanna**

Those who say the truth will set you free have probably never been polygraphed. I had the experience in my early thirties during a campaign of self-renewal, leading inevitably to the West Coast. After spending a decade as a counselor at the Indiana Penal Farm, a provincial Midwest prison, I felt like a bastard at a family reunion. Was it because I built on my education instead of boozing with good ol' boy guards? I had attended a nearby state university under a blind assumption: the patented belief that a master's degree would open the door to promotions. Sadly, the reverse proved true. Organizations will stigmatize overachievers as surely as they flag the fuckups. (If you doubt this, watch any season of *Survivor*.) And so I was deemed overqualified when I faced the promotion boards. One of the inmates summed it up well when I told him I was leaving. "Sounds like a plan," he said. "Do it soon. You don't need to be hanging around Podunk, Indiana."

I relocated to the Golden State and submitted a job application to the Santa Clara Department of Corrections. California has always been an innovator in the field of criminal justice, so I was more than confident I would soon take my place among the learned elite. I applied for the position of deputy jailor, a menial job, but one from which I intended to soar like a butterfly shedding its cocoon. Before long, I would be devising programs, publishing in correctional journals, and initiating critical reforms.

I reported to the Santa Clara Government Center to take the written test. The questions struck me as wholly redundant, and I scored in the high nineties. The oral interview, which took place at the Santa Clara County Jail, was also an effortless challenge. One of the board members, a plump correctional lieutenant with a goatee, simply shook his head. "Ten years as a counselor," he said. "A master's in criminology. And you want to work as a deputy jailor?" I told him I needed a change and he laughed. "I see," he snorted. "Are ya gonna take up surfing?" The board gave me a ringing

endorsement, which left me with one final obstacle. To wear the uniform of a deputy jailor, I would have to pass a polygraph examination.

I received a letter from the Santa Clara Human Resources Department, instructing me to report to the Government Center, Room 101, to take the polygraph test. I was advised to allow three hours for the test and to bring a number two pencil. I chuckled at the irony of the location. Room 101—wasn't that the chamber of horrors in Orwell's *1984*? The place where aberrant Winston Smith was reduced to a quivering pulp? Convinced I would fare better than poor Winston, I showed up early on the day of the test.

Armed with my number two pencil, I entered Room 101. The room was utterly barren except for a desk and a chair. No carpet cushioned the floor, no flowered plants scented the air, not even a requisite landscape painting hung from the drab green walls. Behind a second door, in what must have been the testing chamber, I could hear a couple of voices. Voices so strained and muffled that they seemed to belong to ghosts.

I sat by the desk and waited, my pencil as sharp as a tack. After ten minutes, the second door opened and I felt my muscles tense. The man who entered the room was so fleshless that he appeared to be carved from bone. His nose was sharp and hawkish, his smile was frozen in place, and a thick pair of horn-rimmed glasses expanded his muddy brown eyes. He looked at me incuriously and handed me a booklet. He smelled of cheap aftershave.

"Answer these questions, pardner," he muttered. "Answer 'em truthfully."

He vanished back into the testing room in a lingering wave of Old Spice.

I broke the seal to the booklet and began to read the questions. There were approximately two hundred of them and they made me feel like a freak. *Have you ever exposed your anus or genitals for sexual gratification? Have you ever been married to two persons at the same time? Have you ever had sex with animals?*

Indignant, I cruised through the questions and marked almost all of them no. Only a few gave me pause. *Have you ever engaged in drug use?* Well, I smoked pot a few times in college. And once I sampled a dab of meth. *Better check yes,* I decided. *I don't want to make the scrolls flutter.*

Have you ever been referred to a collection agency? another question read. Once, I remembered. When I didn't pay a medical bill because I had been overcharged. *Do they really need to know that?* I wondered. I gritted my teeth and marked the yes box.

Have you ever abused, struck, or injured any person under fifteen? I remembered spanking my toddler brother after he crapped on the living room rug. Did I have to put *that* down? I shrugged and checked the yes box once again.

You'll be given a chance to explain your answers, the last section of the booklet advised. I signed and printed my name in this section, acknowledging the terms of the test. I then pocketed my pencil and waited for Ichabod Crane.

An hour passed. No one came. *Has he forgotten me?* I wondered. Eventually, the voices grew louder—they seemed to be at odds. “If you’ve stolen a car we’ll find out!” boomed Ichabod when the inner door finally opened.

The woman who dashed across the room looked angry and harassed. “Do I look like a car thief?” she shouted back as she opened the door to the hallway. Glancing at me, she held her nose, then hurried from the room.

A practical soul may have seen this incident as a portent of pending doom. But my instincts were akin to Don Quixote, not savvy Sancho Panza. *One less rival for the job,* I thought as I rose from the chair. It was my turn now. I held my head high, like a bird drinking water, and entered the testing room.

As I sat by a desk where the polygraph was perched, my palms began to sweat. I felt more like a patient on life support than a pilgrim on a mission. A blood pressure cuff, plump with air, gripped my upper arm like a hall monitor; a couple of rubber tubes, also tightly inflated, hugged my chest and abdomen; and a pair of electrodes pinched two of my fingers like dime store rings. The cuff was to measure my heart rate, the tubes were to record my breathing, and the electrodes were to pick up whatever perspiration my fingers might produce.

I tried to chat with Ichabod, but his focus was on the machine. Clearly, he had no interest in whatever I had to say. “Answer the questions truthfully,” he mumbled. “Don’t be making stuff up.”

Activating the polygraph, he asked me some baseline questions.

“Your name is James Hanna?”

“Yes,” I replied, and the scrolls began to nod.

“Are you sitting down?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Have you got a bachelor’s degree?” he inquired.

“I have a master’s,” I said.

Ichabod shut off the polygraph as though he was swatting a fly. “That’s *not* what I asked you, pardner,” he muttered. “Stick to yes or no answers.”

I felt familiar anger as he turned the machine back on. How many times was I going to be penalized for advancing my education?

“Have you ever stolen from an employer?” he asked.

“No,” I sarcastically said.

“Have you ever lied to someone who trusted you?”

“No,” I fibbed.

“Have you ever driven a car when you had too much to drink?”

I knew enough about polygraph tests to know that these were control questions. Who hasn’t taken a pen from work, lied to a friend, or driven a car after having a sip too many? I was expected to lie on these questions, which would provide a comparative response. If the scrolls fluttered less on the relevant questions, that meant I would pass the test.

“Ever committed a sex crime?” he asked.

“No,” I proudly replied.

“Ever been addicted to drugs or alcohol.”

“No,” I triumphantly chirped.

“Ever stolen an automobile?”

“No,” I crowed with glee.

The questioning continued for another minute then he turned the polygraph off.

“How’d I do?”

He scratched his jaw. “The results are inconclusive.”

“What does inconclusive mean?”

He sighed. "Shall we try it again?"

He asked another series of questions, this time intermingling the control questions with the relevant ones. Whenever I was asked about job theft or drunk driving, I dug my fingernails into the palm of my free hand. If I spiked on the control questions, I reasoned, I would surely pass this damn test.

When the questioning was done, he turned off the machine and gave me the final verdict. "*Deceptive*," he snapped.

I looked at him incredulously; I felt as though I had been slugged. "Just where was I deceptive?" I asked.

"Alcoholism, drug addiction, sex crimes, and car theft."

"You're kidding," I stammered. "I've done all that? When would I have found time to go to work?"

He folded his arms then stared at me with the air of a hanging judge. "Ya may as well come clean, Tom Hemmings. Whaddya trying to hide?"

"Nothing," I snapped.

"Horse turds," he answered. "Whaddya trying to hide?"

I knew my anger was showing when he opened the drawer to the desk. The drawer contained a handgun and several ammo clips. As I looked at the gun, he pushed the drawer shut; he was only warning me to calm down. But the sight of the weapon did not dissuade me from taking a shot of my own.

"Ask me if I killed John Kennedy," I said. "I'd like to see the result."

He looked at me so piously that I felt like a Salem witch. "Whaddya trying to hide?" he repeated. "Whaddya trying to hide?"

Arguing was useless; his mind was as closed as a tomb. *What have I done to deserve this?* I wondered. *What is my unavowed crime?* Whatever the sin, I would never forget that unforgiving gaze.

I unhooked myself from the tubes and wires. "Have a good day," I said. I could feel his eyes boring into my back as I walked out of the room.

Only when I stood in the hallway did I feel the full weight of my anger. I had a crime coming to me, I reasoned, and vandalism would do.

I whipped out my number two pencil as though I were drawing a sword. And I scrawled a single word on the door to Room 101.

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James Hanna worked as a counselor in the Indiana Department of Corrections and recently retired from the San Francisco Probation Department, where he was assigned to a domestic violence and stalking unit. His familiarity with criminal types has provided fodder for much of his writing. His debut novel, *The Siege*, depicts a hostage standoff in a penal facility. *Call Me Pomeroy*, James' second book, chronicles the madcap tales of a street musician on parole who joins Occupy Oakland and its sister movements in England and France. Hanna's stories and essays have appeared in many journals and have received three Pushcart nominations. Many of his stories are included in his third book: *A Second, Less Capable Head*, which was designated a Distinguished Favorite by The Independent Press Awards. Hanna's books are available on his [Amazon Author Page](#).