

The Mastermind

People say that a society built on lies will collapse. However, that's not entirely true. It will only fall if people suddenly start telling the truth. What these critics don't realize is that every society is built on lies. They just won't know it until someone starts being honest and their world goes downhill, which is kind of what happened to us, I guess.

It all started with a little awareness game we used to play as kids. We would all get clothespins and throughout the day, these clothespins would be found clipped on the edge of someone's back pocket, or on the tail of their jacket. The idea was you'd have to be aware or you'd get tagged. It was just a fun little game. It was a small excitement for children but we grew up. We became adults in a world where you'd be arrested for such suspicious activities. However, by that time, we had all forgotten the game anyway. That is, until one day someone revived the childhood sentiment and there was the occasional passbyer with a wooden clothespin clamped secretively on the loose fabric of the sleeve, or the back of a jacket's hood. Those who witnessed this subtle reminder chuckled to themselves or whispered to a companion, "Remember when we used to do that?"

And just like that, the whole city had a sparkle of mischief in its eye. People went home and rooted through their desk drawers for those old instruments of adventure or took their juvenile energy to a new level and shoplifted a package from local convenience stores until the problem got so bad, the clerks put security tags on the formerly insignificant objects.

Soon, there was not a man on the street that was not tagged with a cleverly attached pin. But nor was there a man in the city who was not grinning stupidly, greatly pleased with himself

after a successful mission. The sidewalks became packed with people because, as everyone knows, it's easier to slip unnoticed in a crowd, as the constant jostling ensures that no one will notice the light touch it takes to attach a clothespin. This excitement continued for a while but the joke eventually grew old; less and less people giggled at the sight of a businessman crossing the street, two or three clothespins hanging from the edge of his suit coat, but there were fewer and fewer people getting tagged anyway.

The world had all but returned to normalcy when a deviant parody of the childish prank came into being. Now a working man was minding his own business, entering an elevator on the way to his office on the fifth floor and, upon exiting said elevator, found himself tagged but not with a simply blank clothespin. Someone had written in black letters on the clothespin, "**I'm cheating on my wife,**" and this father of two removed it hastily, least anyone see the words, and tossed it into the nearest waste basket. Thinking himself in the clear, he made his way back home later that evening, but unbeknownst to him a second, identical tag on his briefcase strap would be discovered by his fourteen year old daughter right before supper.

A teenage girl wandered home one day with the words, "**I'm pregnant,**" clipped on her skirt. A woman went to work with a pin that says, "**I'm stealing money from my company,**" on her purse strings. The mailman's tag says, "**I smuggle heroin from Mexico.**" The hairdresser dons a pin that reads, "**I make my money by blackmail.**" A homeless man's clothespin has the words, "**I deserve this,**" on it. A nine year old girl wears a badge that innocently admits, "**I know I was adopted.**"

The clothespins kept showing up and it seemed no one was spared, but curiously enough, no one was doing it. People became paranoid of everyone in close proximity, jumping at the slightest touch, watching others suspiciously on the subways. Fights broke out between people accusing each other of being their tagger.

Citizens were getting targeted based on their clothespinned secrets. Murderers were murdered by those who thought the clothespins were a sign from god, asking them to rid the world of scum. Then, ironically enough, those who had murdered the murderers were tagged as murderers themselves and killed by others who thought it up to them to right the world.

Husbands were kicked out of their houses by wives who were no better and there were shouting matches in every home. Children sat on their porches crying, not daring to step out into the city, but terrified to stay in their homes. There was nothing the authorities could do about the chaos.

The police stations themselves were a turmoil of internal affairs investigations, seeing as almost every cop came to work with a tag saying, "**I falsified evidence,**" or "**I beat a prisoner,**" or some other sort of matter that involved extensive looking-into-things. No officer was trusted enough to be of any use, so all regulation was frozen.

The few who ventured from their hell-hole homes were bombarded with beggars from the streets. They were mostly middle aged men who'd been evicted from their homes or politicians run out of office or white collared workers whose business had gone under. However, no single beggar stayed at one corner too long. After a single walk around the city, they all start to look the same anyway, except for maybe that one blind boy with the pale, unseeing eyes rumored to live

among the drain pipes under the street. But he was around before the world went to the dogs, so no one thought anything of him.

He still stands out on corners in the afternoons, staring at people with his wide, unnatural eyes, asking them, "Please. Please help me," but it is rare for anyone to take the time and dig out a dime for his rough, dirty hands. More often than not, they find his pale, unseeing eyes unnerving and push by, preferring to act as if they'd never seen him in the first place. Sometimes he'd follow these offenders down their path, identifying them by their footsteps, calling out to them, "Please help me, sir! I need help!" They'd scamper faster until they couldn't hear his voice, thinking him blocks away but sometimes he'd stalk them for days through the city he was so familiar with. No cat of prey could hope to achieve such stealth in their own jungle.

He would follow them home and press his ear to their door. He would learn their routine and position himself to hear their voices in the wind from far away. When he knew what he wanted to know, he would place himself in their path once more and ask for a dime, just a dime, and they would go right past him, too busy watching over their shoulders to be aware of anything else. As they turned, he would snake his hand out and attached their dirty little secret to follow them forever.