



## American Gaslight

Craig Clevenger

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### I. Where Pain Comes From

During a recent stay in the Californian Mojave Desert, I had my first (and thankfully uneventful) encounter with a creature commonly known as the *tarantula hawk*, which is neither a spider nor a predatory bird but rather a species of wasp that, yes, hunts tarantulas. The tarantula hawk is not unique to the American Southwest, but if you've never heard of such an insect (which I had not) much less seen one (again, this was my first) and only spotted it by chance (which I had, in the late afternoon as it flew past my cabin in Wonder Valley), and though it poses no imminent threat (this one did not—they rarely do), even the briefest glimpse trips every alarm in one's most primitive, reptilian brain. You instinctively know this thing means business.

The tarantula hawk is much larger than garden-variety wasps. Its coloring is that of a comic book supervillain, the entire body—head, legs, and all—the impenetrable blue-black of tactical hardware, except for the volcanic red-orange of its wings. Fortunately, they're neither swarm creatures nor particularly aggressive. To the contrary, they are solitary and mostly docile. A tarantula hawk sting is a rare phenomenon—they require demonstrable provocation to attack, and only the female of the species is armed. Their sting is neither fatal nor requires medical attention, and it leaves little trace, if any, after the fact. Barring the odd anaphylaxis, a small, innocuous rash may linger after the pain has passed, and the pain itself subsides in mere minutes. Three to five at the most.

However.

The pain.

Dr. Justin Schmidt, an American entomologist specializing in the *hymenoptera* order—ants,

wasps, and the like—took it upon himself to personally grade the pain inflicted by those insects within his area of expertise. Yes, this endeavor was exactly what it sounds like.

The *Schmidt Sting Pain Index* catalogs roughly eighty discrete specimens, expressing each respective sting (or bite, perhaps—I'm not sure and don't want to be) with a simple low-to-high scale from one (merely inconvenient) to four (hellish and debilitating). Given the range of possible pain attested to, I would have expected a greater spread of numbers, but I will absolutely take Dr. Schmidt's word for each of these. At the base of the scale, his descriptions are almost sommelier-like ("spicy, blistering," "like coffee but oh so bitter," and "light and ephemeral, almost fruity"), while those nearing the top read like citations from an interrogation manual. The deceptively named velvet ant, a 3.0 on Schmidt's index, delivers a sting described as feeling like "hot oil from the deep-fryer." Crowning the index with a blistering 4.0+ is the not-so-deceptively named bullet ant, which Schmidt likens to "walking over flaming charcoal with a three-inch nail embedded in your heel," a sensation which typically lasts around eight hours but has been reported to keep victims wishing for a swift death for as long as twenty.

One particular specimen sharing that 4.0 (minus the "+") with the bullet ant: our tarantula hawk. However brief, Schmidt describes the pain it inflicts as "blinding, fierce, shockingly electric," akin to a live blow dryer dropped into bathwater. Indeed, Dr. Schmidt returns to his electrical-pain metaphors in multiple interviews, comparing the tarantula hawk's sting to being hit by a severed power line or struck by lightning, even "lighting from God," in one article. Another source/victim's analogy similarly recounts the pain as feeling like "all your blood suddenly turned to hydrofluoric acid while being electrocuted." Repeated searches for treatment of a tarantula hawk sting yield the same recommendation, again and again: *lie down and scream*.

Yes, the sting from a tarantula hawk is among the most excruciating one could experience from an insect—from most anything—though a victim would have virtually nothing to back up their story. As *Wired* magazine put it, the pain is "all agony and no damage." Indeed, the longest few minutes of your life could be casually dismissed as imaginary—as being *all in your head*.

My intention is not to plant nightmares in the readers' minds. Rather, my concern lies with the experience of pain absent physical trauma, i.e., pain purely as a specific sequence of signals within the brain. Although pain is real, it cannot be objectively witnessed. Pain quite literally exists in the patient's head. Amputee patients can feel pain emanating from missing limbs, a phenomenon known as *Phantom Limb Syndrome*; pharmaceutical test subjects can experience a placebo reaction, that is, a positive response to a pill that is chemically closer to a breath mint

than to an actual drug. No minor nuisance to controlled trial data, reactions to placebos can be sufficiently widespread as to wipe out years of costly research and development. One study even had subjects display clear signs of withdrawal after ceasing long-term use of placebo sugar pills. In another, patients who experienced pain relief from ostensible opioids had those effects successfully interrupted with the administration of naloxone, a drug used to treat overdoses by blocking opioid receptors in the brain. Yes, genuine pain relief from a sugar pill was halted with a real counter-agent. Pain is all in your head.

And yet for all of the advances in medicine, pain—the actual neural message—remains beyond our ability to observe, aside from clear evidence of trauma (such as an obvious flesh wound or dental x-ray, for example). But effective treatment of any ailment begins with proper diagnosis. How then to address something which is real but which cannot be measured, quantified? We rely on one of the oldest and simplest tools at hand: the social contract—that is, honest and candid communication between the patient and physician.

For a patient to receive adequate care, he or she must answer the physician's questions honestly, and some of these questions can be extremely personal. Almost any medical professional will tell you this is easier said than done. As a friend of mine, an emergency room nurse, once said, "You just get sick of being lied to." A patient's truthful answers to questions about diet, exercise, smoking, drinking, drugs, and sexual history are critical for an accurate diagnosis. Honest answers about the presence of pain, the degree, how and where it hurts, what may have caused it—all of these are also critical. Exaggerating pain or altogether making it up for the sake of procuring drugs is one concern, obviously. But equally important as honesty with one's physician is honesty with one's self. Dismissing pain for the sake of not appearing weak or to soothe one's ego might mean ignoring a critical signal that something else is wrong.

Honesty with one's self is crucial for the physician as well. Obviously, it helps if one is actually qualified for the title, moreover that he or she is adhering to their professional oath. This, in particular, contributes to the current opioid crisis in the United States. Pain clinics have sprung up in jurisdictions with the right legal loopholes; patients queue up en masse for doctors who dispense powerfully addictive medicines as casually as if they were doling out vitamins. On the other hand, a doctor harboring undue suspicion could potentially turn away a patient who genuinely needs help.

## **II. The Liar**

A novel such as *The Contortionist's Handbook* would appear an obvious fit for a discussion on

lying. For those unfamiliar, *The Contortionist's Handbook* is the story of John Dolan Vincent, following an overdose, as narrated by Vincent himself. Vincent was brought up working-class poor, his recidivist father leaving the care of Vincent and his sister to their mother during his stretches of incarceration. Viewing our narrator through this lens, the expectations of his teachers and other childhood authorities were lowered to where they not only overlooked John Vincent's prodigious intellect but also misclassified him as learning-disabled. His juvenile delinquency was ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy. He spent the bulk of his youth colliding with authorities—meeting the expectations of many by tracing his father's footsteps—which fostered his profound distrust of “the System” as something fundamentally broken and helmed by his intellectual inferiors.

As an adult, John Vincent has jettisoned the limiting definitions foisted upon him as a young man, and he is fully aware of his brainpower, which he's since parlayed into a clandestine career as a forger, bootlegging identity documents for money and, more significantly, himself. Vincent's distrust of authority has left him to self-medicate his recurring migraines in lieu of seeking professional help, and his repeated overdoses send him back into the System following each resuscitation. Vincent can bluff his way through the legally mandated psychiatric evaluation and convince any doctor that he's not “a threat to himself or others,” but only once. After his name and personal details are logged, he knows he'll be remanded to state psychiatric care—without even the slim checks and balances of the penal system—if he turns up a second time.

Upon his discharge, Vincent then reboots his identity (his name and every attendant document, as well as a fabricated life history) and starts clean, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for yet another alias in anticipation of his next run-in with the System. It's a Sisyphean existence, the pattern of which is disturbed by recent events in Vincent's life, events that only come into focus with his telling. All of this is recounted in the psychiatric interview that serves as the spine of the novel, which is sectioned according to each principal alias he inhabits throughout.

Clearly, John Vincent does not fit the description of our honest patient, above. He spins a host of lies throughout the narrative—not simply individual facts but, indeed, whole lifetimes replete with family, school and work histories, and critical life events. In spite of this, I never intended to present Vincent as a liar per se, much less as an entry into the canon of unreliable narrators. John Vincent's lies were never the story's foundation.

To the contrary, Vincent's rigorous fidelity to the facts—at least with the reader—quickly became problematic during the writing. To keep track of his multiple, intersecting stories, I manually charted where the salient events of his “real” life overlapped with his “made-up” lives via detailed

spreadsheets which, along with a thirty-year calendar beginning with his birth year and month, papered an entire wall of my apartment. (This vetting exposed some large holes in my chronology, which ultimately proved irreconcilable but which have mercifully gone undetected.)

Vincent's greatest fear is any authority in the grip of self-delusion, because someone in a position of power who is blind to their own blindness poses a serious threat to those beneath them. So, from the outset, the novel was meant as a critique of those in power who lack the courage for critical self-examination, i.e., authorities who lie to themselves. But looking back after seventeen years, I can finally see the much larger, more dangerous breed of lie I've had my crosshairs coming on four novels.

### **III. The Good, the Bad, and the Instant**

The love of instant gratification and quick fixes to complex problems is fundamental to the American psyche. We celebrate inventors and lone geniuses, oblivious of their debt to predecessors on whose shoulders they stand. We claim the birth of mass production, which has made ubiquitous everything from the automobile to McDonald's (I do apologize for the latter) and brought about both cheap necessities and affordable luxuries in the industrialized West. Since westward expansion from the Colonies, Americans have acted on the belief that there is always more for the taking and that it's ours to take—be it land, water, gold, silver, pelts, music, literature, scientific credit, human labor, or human life.

American cowboy mythology embodies this—our exaltation of the individual freed from bureaucratic constraint and armed with our hands-down favorite quick-fix solution, the gun. No Western movie finale brings together hero and villain, white hat and black hat, squaring off beneath a Morricone soundtrack to cordially voice their differences and to negotiate a mutually beneficial compromise.

Perhaps older than our cowboy myth is the American search for instant gratification and quick fixes via patent medicines and quack spiritualists, whose early purveyors gave rise to self-help experts in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And from the social upheaval of the 60s came aftershocks, with new spiritual movements/religions/cults, gurus, seminars, retreats, psychoactive drugs, and self-help books. This last category, in particular, has only picked up speed since—the *Self-Help* aisles of many bookstores are as well-stocked as those shelves labeled *History* or *Science*.

And in 1997, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration further loosened restrictions on direct-to-consumer pharmaceutical advertising. Historically, drug manufacturers had spent millions

annually to legally flog their products to medical doctors, but direct reach to patients was limited. Since the early 60s, television and print ads targeting consumers of prescription drugs were required to disclose all possible side effects. Although not as problematic for print ads, these precautionary disclosures ate up valuable air time and dampened the sales pitch. (On the upside, they gave ample material for shows like *Saturday Night Live* to parody, which they did brilliantly.) TV ads for prescription drugs weren't unusual at the time, but the 1997 laws eliminated the need for the costly, cattle-auction recitation of side effects. And so, the floodgates opened. A condition that may require lengthy questions and answers with a patient for a doctor to reach a clinical diagnosis is now squeezed into a thirty-second TV spot, a description of its symptoms so shallow and sweeping that it would be a shock to find a single adult who hasn't experienced them to one degree or another in their lifetime.

Popular media have so diluted psychiatric concepts and suffused common vocabulary with diagnostic terms that legitimate medical conditions are now used to label ordinary behavior—behavior that may be puzzling or inconvenient to an observer but that is no less ordinary. The restless are tagged as *ADHD* and the merely fastidious as *OCD*. Not only has the casual use of *sociopath* eroded its meaning but also it has eclipsed our perfectly serviceable expletives. And a great many healthy, educated Americans can, off the cuff, name more prescription psychotropics than those for any other ailment that's not, well, "all in your head."

We've become a nation of unqualified experts. The popular perception of mental illness—and the average person's belief that he or she is entitled to call it out—has reached such a fever pitch that its absence from casual conversation is the exception. At least that was how I saw it around the turn of the millennium. So my premise for the *Handbook* was simple: What if someone so ill-equipped to make such pronouncements had real power over someone else?

With that, the framework for the story seemed self-evident: the narrator/patient anticipating the pitfalls of a psychiatric interview while simultaneously deconstructing the interviewer/doctor, identifying the doctor's own issues so as to tailor his answers and to walk free. The interview itself was broken out on a grid of index cards—one question each. The various tests and questions all came from a single, off-the-shelf textbook titled something like—I kid you not—*Basic Psychiatric Diagnosis*.

As for the narrator's take on the doctor, I was less interested in psychology-on-psychology than in how we read others and infer what they *aren't* telling us from the standpoint of one's profession or particular skill—that is, how do we see through their lies? Police interview methods, sales techniques, card sharps—the ways certain people have of reading and

interpreting body language quickly became overwhelming to me, and the more I learned, the more of my assumptions I abandoned. Any interpretation of body language is contextual, if the cues mean anything at all (and often they don't). Crossing one's arms, for example, is universally seen as creating a barrier or withholding something. This may be true during a date or deposition, but in other circumstances, it's conducive to deep thought—or simply being comfortable. Nonetheless, I settled on researching the interrogation techniques of law enforcement. As useful as they proved for the novel, the most well-known methods have come under scrutiny in recent years. At best, they're now seen as statistically unreliable and, at worst, they're responsible for a great many false confessions.

#### **IV. American Power and Gaslight**

Imagine a spouse or flatmate appearing with a sledgehammer and, for no apparent reason, smashing your furniture to splinters. You'd have good cause to be frightened. And if you imagine the offender refuses to apologize or to explain themselves, you'd have good cause to be angry. But next, imagine they deny that the damage ever occurred—much less that they caused it. Imagine that they insist they're not holding the nine-pound sledgehammer that's in their very hands as they deny its existence. Picture yourself standing within the wreckage of your home, the dust settling, with the offender looking you in the eye and saying, "What on earth are you talking about?" As though it were all in your head.

We call this *gaslighting*, in reference to a pair of noir films from the 1940s (both based on the same play, *Gas Light*, by British playwright Patrick Hamilton) wherein the villain works surreptitiously to convince his wife that she's losing her mind, that her reality is not reality at all. Gaslighting is a common technique among domestic abusers, sex offenders and, as we're seeing, certain world leaders. In such cases, a perpetrator denies the very occurrence of his actions, not to authorities but to the victim, in an effort to bend the victim's memory—their very reality—until they call their own sanity into question and are further subjugated to their abuser. Gaslighting is telling the victim of trauma that it never happened, that it was all in their head.

Survivors of abuse sometimes don't come forward for years, even decades, after the only evidence remaining is their word and reputation against those of a perpetrator with far greater visibility and influence. We've seen this documented *ad nauseam* with abuses from the Catholic church. Victims of school teachers, athletic coaches, or scoutmasters likewise often break silence years after the crimes. Political candidates have accusers come out of the woodwork upon their nomination, appointment, or campaign, most recently with our own president and, decades ago,

with the appointment of a Supreme Court Justice<sup>1</sup>—with many others in between. As those two examples make clear, the accusations often have little influence on the election or appointment. Hollywood power players have been publicly felled but with little change in their private lives. Neither Bill Cosby nor Harvey Weinstein are likely to see the inside of a prison cell, to say nothing of legions of clergy members who’ve been shuffled about with impunity in what the late Robin Williams called “the Vatican Protection Program.” As of this writing, more victims were making accusations public for the first time, naming entertainment executives and high-ranking officers from other industries.

And time and again, when fingers are pointed and names are named long after the fact, scrutiny falls upon the *accuser* before the *accused*. And more often than not, it begins with, “Why did you wait so long?”

The first obvious answer is evinced by the reverse order of those being questioned: for a victim to hesitate in the face of implied blame shouldn’t come as a shock to anyone. As for acceptable urgency or unacceptable lag with a victim’s report, the only standard appears to be whatever each person failed to meet in a given case. There are many other possible answers, but it’s not my place to speak to them. However, I can say this: from the instant of violation—beginning with the perpetrator, extending to their closest family and social network, sometimes reaching our whole society—survivors are told, “It did not happen. Your pain is not real. It’s all in your head.”

Because, beyond their power over an individual, some perpetrators are so emboldened by the authority and trust the public grants them, they can bend collective opinion in their favor. Third parties commonly rush to their defense, both privately (one family member denying accusations against another) and publicly (churches, school administrations, student bodies, and voters circling wagons around the accused). And that same community can not only disparage a single accuser but can also dismiss widespread grievances from huge segments of society that don’t hold an equal voice in the public discourse.

Consider the recent large-scale clashes between leftists and white supremacists, clashes which have become all too frequent news in the United States. Our President equivocated the violence of these neo-Nazis, going so far as praising some of them—these people who fly the flags of ideologies espousing genocide while taking cover beneath our Constitution. The idea that one particular skin color, gender, or gender preference is innately “superior” or “inferior” to another is patently absurd. Nonetheless it remains up for widespread debate in 21<sup>st</sup> century America,

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note : Clarence Thomas, nominated in 1991



where white supremacists, claiming preservation of history, stage armed marches in defense of symbols whose very existence denies the history of those they oppress. And they do so with the backing of our own president.

Consider our epidemic of mass shootings, which peaked with the worst in recent history less than two months ago (as of this writing), in Las Vegas, NV, when 59 people were killed and 546 were injured in the latest of over 1,500 mass-shootings since 2012 (counting forward from Newtown, CT, where a gunman killed twenty-six people, mostly children). This was followed by yet another mass shooting, barely a month later, in Sutherland Springs, TX. Consider that the majority of handgun deaths in the United States are suicides, or that the statistics of homicides versus suicides are so neatly split along racial lines. Nonetheless, every attempt to address America's clear problem with gun violence is stonewalled by gun lobbyists and the legislators in their pockets.

In light of the current socio-political climate in the United States, to suggest that a specific segment of the population does not have a stranglehold on the national debate either makes one a victim of their large-scale gaslighting or a willing participant—*gaslighting*, because it's not just disputes over causes and solutions to these issues that dominate our news, but whether they're issues at all.

Remember, our President is waging a war on our mainstream journalists and what he calls *fake news*, while at the same time repeating demonstrably false claims regarding, among many other things, crowd sizes at his various appearances, claims which one of his advisors dubbed *alternative facts*. This is a purported world leader who, as a real estate developer, lied about the height of his buildings so as to boost their value. Think about that. There is nothing to dispute here, nothing to attribute to faulty recollection or variant methods of accounting. One only need to stand in the street and count floors, but even this obvious truth isn't safe from his *alternative facts*. Still, however flawed or outright compromised his election may have been, he remains the largest expression of those who deny the inequity that comes from the privilege they hold.

And we perpetuate our own national gaslighting as reality television and talk radio dominate the airwaves—complex news stories are reduced to sound bites and tweets; recursive paraphrasing pervades online journalism, wherein news reports are based on existing coverage from other outlets who've done likewise, each instance a step further from the source; and the vast majority of Americans maintain that everyone is entitled to an opinion and moreover believe that all opinions are equal, that those ill-informed and posted anonymously carry as much weight as any other.

And our homegrown, crowd-sourced gaslighting is aimed daily at those who've lived with the lingering threat or long-term aftermath of street harassment, discrimination, police brutality, domestic violence, child abuse, or rape: *They're just compliments. I'd love it if women "harassed" me. Boys will be boys. What were you wearing? Did you say no? Did you fight back? Were you drinking? They're just doing their job. How do you know it was because of your race? If you don't want cops to (fill in the blank), don't break the law. It was just a game. It was consensual. You just want money/attention. Aren't you exaggerating a little? He/she would never do such a thing. Learn the language. Go back home.* These and similar refrains are nothing more than variants of "*It never happened.*" They're polite code for "*It's all in your head.*"

I wrote the *Handbook* as a critique of a social phenomenon that, in my eyes, was proliferating beneath our radar—the use of casual judgments based on pop psychology growing more common and extreme—and I've not strayed from that. In the seventeen years since I first wrote John Vincent's opening line, I've published a second novel, completed a third, and am well into a fourth, all of which begin with two characters in a more or less empty room. In that room, the life-altering experience of the first character is brought under scrutiny by the second, whose authority is sufficient for their explanation of events to supplant all others. Their lies can become everyone else's truth. Information, whether true or false, now spreads farther and faster than ever—the tools with which to do so are within reach of virtually anyone, for the first time in history. Simultaneously, our current administration stokes the fires of economic and racial division, and those on the privileged side of the gap are further emboldened to say the unthinkable and do even worse. Moreover, that privileged and empowered minority will say to the rest of us, whatever cause we take up, whatever we fight to change, whatever injustice we protest, whomever we stand beside, and whatever we speak out against, that we're *imagining all of it.*

They want us to believe that it's all in our heads.