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HOW *STORIES* DECEIVE

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A young woman fooled the governments of three countries. What does her con reveal about how we see the world?

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On the afternoon of October 10, 2013, an unusually cold day, the streets of downtown Dublin were filled with tourists and people leaving work early. In their midst, one young woman stood out. She seemed dazed and distressed as she wandered down O'Connell Street, looking around timidly, a helpless-seeming terror in her eyes. She stopped in front of the post office, or, as locals would have it, the G.P.O. Standing between the thick columns, she looked even more forlorn. She was dressed in a purple hoodie under a gray wool sweater; tight, darkly colored jeans; and flat, black shoes. Her face was ashen. She was shivering. A passerby, stunned by her appearance, asked if she needed help. She looked at him mutely, as if not quite grasping the essence of the question. Somebody called the police. An officer from the Store Street garda station answered the call. He took her to a hospital. It seemed the best thing to do.

She was a teen-ager—fourteen or fifteen, at most. At five feet six, she weighed just more than eighty-eight pounds. Her long, blond hair covered a spiny, battered back. Once she did talk, some days later, it became clear that she had only the most rudimentary grasp of English—not enough to say who she was or why she'd appeared as she had. But the girl could draw. And what she drew made her new guardians catch their breaths. One stifled a gasp. One burst out crying. There she was, a small stick-like figure, being flown to Ireland on a plane. And there she was again, lying on a bed, surrounded by multiple men. She seemed to be a victim of human trafficking—one of the lucky ones who had somehow managed to escape.

Three weeks later, the girl still wasn't talking—or, at least, nothing she said made much sense. The state was throwing everything it had at getting her help. Who was she? Where was she from? Into early November, the Irish authorities poured more than two thousand man-hours into a hundred and fifteen possible lines of inquiry. Door-to-door queries. Reviews of CCTV footage. Missing-persons lists. Visits to airports, seaports, rail stations. Guesthouse bookings. Did anyone fail to turn up, or fail to return? It was costing a pretty penny—two hundred and fifty thousand euros— but every cent was worth it if it brought them closer to helping a child regain her lost home and her fragile sanity. The investigation was dubbed Operation Shepherd. Eventually, the police came up with and systematically tested more than fifteen possible identities for their charge. All came up short.

On November 5th, the Garda Síochána won the right to undertake an extraordinary step. It would distribute the girl's image publically. (The picture itself had been taken on the sly; she'd refused to be photographed and had shied away from anyone in anything resembling an official uniform.) The girl was not only a minor but in a highly vulnerable state; the decision was an unprecedented one. But nothing else had worked. As the child's picture was broadcast on television and printed in newspapers, the Irish National Police told the world what they knew about the teen. "She has limited English. We're unable to decipher her nationality at the moment," a sergeant said. And anything anyone knew would be most welcome. "Any information is vital to the investigation, and the welfare of the child," the police implored. "Any information passed to us will, of course, be treated in the strictest of confidence." The girl's temporary guardian, Orla Ryan, concurred: "I am extremely concerned about the welfare circumstances of this young person. What we know about her, at present, is limited. It is in the child's best interests to be identified, and I fully support An Garda Síochána in their continuing investigation." The media frenzy began right on cue. It was such an odd case, and everyone had a theory. The teenager was quickly dubbed "G.P.O. Girl," for the place she'd first turned up.

Ten hours later, the garda received a phone call.

Samantha Lyndell Azzopardi was born in 1988, to a middle-class couple, Bruce Azzopardi and Joan Marie Campbell. Sammy to her friends, she grew up with her mother and brother, Gregory, in Campbelltown, New South Wales, just outside of Sydney, Australia. From her days at Mount Annan High School to a job waiting tables at Pancakes on the Rocks, a welcoming Campbelltown restaurant, she was seen, as her former boss put it, as a "lovely girl" who "had issues." In the late summer of 2013, Sammy decided to visit her mother's ex, Joe Brennan, in Clonmel, a small town some hundred and seventy-five kilometres southeast of Dublin, along the bank of the River Suir. It wasn't much, but it was the largest town in County Tipperary. For three weeks, she lounged about, enjoying a summer break away from it all. Then, abruptly, she left. Joe had done nothing to provoke her, as far as he could tell, but, then again, Sammy had always been prone to erratic behavior. He wasn't worried. She pulled this kind of thing all the time, and he simply assumed she'd returned home without telling him.

It came as a surprise when he saw the news that November afternoon. That photograph. That poor, lost girl. The horrifying story of human trafficking. That was Sammy. Brennan picked up the phone to call the police.

With the help of Brennan's tip, the story of the G.P.O. girl began to unravel. The garda called Interpol and discovered that Azzopardi—who was twenty-five years old, not fifteen— had more than forty aliases: Emily Peet, Lindsay Coughlin, Dakota Johnson, Georgia McAuliffe, Emily-Ellen Sheahan, Emily Sciberas. Her criminal history dated back to her teens. The police confronted her. She wouldn't speak. As more evidence poured in, she started communicating with short notes—in English. But her steadfast refusal to let the ruse go entirely prompted a second psychological evaluation. The girl might not be who she said, but she did not seem mentally all there. Still, a subsequent professional evaluation gave her a clean bill of mental health. Cleared for travel, Sammy was returned to Australia, her native country, with a firm injunction to stay away from Ireland. She was never formally charged with a crime, but the censure was severe. Her deception, the Irish judge George Birmingham said, had come "as a shock to everybody and as a surprise."

How had it happened? Azzopardi instinctively knew how to get emotions going to the point where nothing else mattered. Her pictures had told a story —a devastating story that no sane person would ever lie about. Who makes up a history of sex trafficking? What kind of person do you need to be?

Storytelling is the oldest form of entertainment there is. From campfires and pictograms—the Lascaux cave paintings may be as much as twenty thousand years old— to tribal songs and epic ballads passed down from generation to generation, it is one of the most fundamental ways humans have of making sense of the world. No matter how much storytelling formats change, storytelling itself never gets old.

Stories bring us together. We can talk about them and bond over them. They are shared knowledge, shared legend, and shared history; often, they shape our shared future. Stories are so natural that we don't notice how much they permeate our lives. And stories are on our side: they are meant to delight us, not deceive us—an ever-present form of entertainment.

That's precisely why they can be such a powerful tool of deception. When we're immersed in a story, we let down our guard. We focus in a way we wouldn't if someone were just trying to catch us with a random phrase or picture or interaction. ("He has a secret" makes for a far more intriguing proposition than "He has a bicycle.") In those moments of fully immersed attention, we may absorb things, under the radar, that would normally pass us by or put us on high alert. Later, we may find ourselves thinking that some idea or concept is coming from our own brilliant, fertile minds, when, in reality, it was planted there by the story we just heard or read.

In his book "Actual Minds, Possible Worlds," Jerome Bruner, a central figure in the cognitive revolution in psychology, proposes that we can frame experience in two ways: propositional and narrative. Propositional thought hinges on logic and formality. Narrative thought is the reverse. It's concrete, imagistic, personally convincing, and emotional. And it's strong.

In fact, Bruner argues, narrative thinking is responsible for far more than its logical, systematic counterpart. It's the basis of myth and history, ritual and social relations. The philosopher Karl Popper "proposed that falsifiability is the cornerstone of the scientific method," Bruner told the American Psychological Association at their annual meeting, in Toronto, in the summer of 1984. "But

believability is the hallmark of the well-formed narrative." Even scientists construct narratives. There is no scientific method without the narrative thread that holds the whole enterprise together. Stories make things more plausible, more convincing, and more fundable. Rightly or wrongly, a research proposal with a compelling narrative arc stands out. As the economist Robert Heilbroner once confided to Bruner, "When an economic theory fails to work easily, we begin telling stories about the Japanese imports." When a fact is plausible, we still need to test it. When a story is plausible, we often assume it's true.

What kind of person do you need to be to make up a history of human sex trafficking? For one thing, you need to have an intimate grasp of the workings of human psychology—you have to understand that this story, above any other, will elude scrutiny even when the facts that justify it are sparse. Victims, in the right light, stand above reproach. No one questions an escapee from human trafficking. I might refuse money to a man who says that his car broke down; I might question him, ask to see his stalled vehicle, or offer him a ride to a gas station. But I'm unlikely to refuse if the man says that he is trying to make it to his sick child. I can dismiss your hard logic, but not how you feel. Give me a list of reasons, and I can argue with it. Give me a good story, and I can no longer quite put my finger on what, if anything, should set off my alarm bells. When the psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock decided to test the persuasive power of narrative, they found that the more a story transported us into its world, the more we were likely to believe it—even if some details didn't quite mesh. The personal narrative is much more persuasive than any other form of appeal. And if a story is especially emotionally jarring—How amazing! How awful! I can't believe that happened to her!—its perceived truthfulness increases.

The more extreme the story, the more successful it becomes. Emotions on high, empathy engaged, we become primed to help. Azzopardi may have been lying, but that isn't all she was doing. She was also giving people the opportunity to shine in the humanitarian light that they always suspected lay within them.

In 2010, Dakota Johnson appeared in Brisbane. She told the police that she was fourteen, that she had got away from a sexually abusive relative, and that she desperately needed help. She had been travelling to Australia with her European uncle and, along the way, on Lord Howe Island, they'd parted ways—it was unclear whether he'd abandoned her or she'd escaped. Whatever had happened had been traumatic. The Brisbane support system gave her shelter and food. She told her support group that she wanted nothing more than to go back to school and finish her education, just like any normal teen.

Johnson had very little with her— she'd left in a hurry and taken what she could. Just a few possessions: some clothes, a laptop. There was a letter of introduction from Le Rosey, a ritzy Swiss private school with a sprawling campus by Lake Geneva. There was a receipt from a Lord Howe Island bank. And there was a pink diary containing a vivid, violent account of sexual abuse by a close relative. It wasn't much to go on. But the authorities wanted to give her a chance at a normal life. A local high school accepted her for the following term. The police, however, didn't feel that enough was being done. They wanted to learn more about Dakota, to see how they could further help her. Concerned for her welfare—if she had been abused, perhaps there were things she wasn't comfortable sharing—they searched her computer while she was out. There was Dakota, smiling, with her family, standing on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The photo had a date, and that date was a clue. The local police contacted the tour company in charge of bridge tours and asked to see records of the participants. It wasn't long before they found a match: twenty-two-year-old Samantha Azzopardi. She wasn't fourteen at all. The Le Rosey letter: a fabrication crafted on her laptop. The bank receipt: another fudged fake. Dakota Johnson was, of course, an alias based on the actress who would go on to star in the movie "Fifty Shades of Grey."

When the police dug deeper, they discovered that Azzopardi was already wanted for fraud in Queensland, where she had attempted to use a fake Medicare card to procure services in Rockhampton, a small coastal town. The Brisbane Magistrates Court charged Azzopardi with two counts of false representation, one count of intention to forge documents, and one count of contravening directions. She was convicted. The sentence was lenient: a five-hundred-dollar fine. The next month, Sammy was again convicted, on four

counts of false representation: yet another identity, yet another attempt at fraud through sympathy. Again, the charge was five hundred dollars. And then, for a few months, she dropped off the legal radar.

Azzopardi's frauds relied on a quirk of human nature: when we become swept up in powerful narrative, our reason often falls by the wayside. Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist at Claremont Graduate University and the director of its Center for Neuroeconomics Studies, studies the power of story in our daily interactions with friends, strangers, books, television, and other media. Repeatedly, he has found that nothing makes us receptive, emotionally and behaviorally, quite like narrative flow.

In one study, Zak and his colleagues asked people to watch a video in which a father talks about his child. "Ben's dying," the father tells the camera as it pans to a carefree two-year-old boy in the background. He goes on to say that Ben has a brain tumor that, in a matter of months, will end his life. The father says that he has resolved to stay strong, for the sake of his family, as painful as the coming weeks will be. The camera fades to black. Watching the film prompted about half of the viewers donate money to a cancer charity.

Zak didn't just ask people to watch "Ben's Story," as he calls it. He had them watch it together, while his team monitored their neural activity, specifically the levels of certain hormones released from the brain into the blood. For the most part, the people who watched the video released oxytocin, a hormone that has been associated with empathy, bonding, and sensitivity to social cues. Those who released the hormone also reliably donated to charity, even though there was no pressure to do so.

Next, Zak switched the story around. Now Ben and his dad were at the zoo. Ben was bald. His dad called him "Miracle Boy." But there was no real story arc, mention of cancer, or discussion of death. The people who watched Ben now drifted away from the story. Their arousal signs fell. They donated little or no money. They also felt less happy and empathetic than those who had seen the original story. In a further study, testing the effects of different ads on donations, Zak and his colleagues sprayed oxytocin into the noses of some subjects. Their donations increased substantially: they gave to fifty-seven per cent more causes, and, when they gave, their donations were more than fifty per cent greater.

Keith Quesenberry, a marketing professor at Johns Hopkins University, found much the same thing in his two- year-long systematic study of that most scientific of topics: Super Bowl ads. He looked at each ad, analyzed the content, and tried to determine what, if anything, predicted how successful it would be. In total, he looked at more than a hundred spots.

One factor, he found, was central to a commercial's success: whether or not it had a dramatic plotline. "People think it's all about sex or humor or animals," he told (http://hub.jhu.edu/2014/01/31/super-bowl-ads) *Johns Hopkins Magazine*. "But what we've found is that the underbelly of a great commercial is whether it tells a story or not." The more complete the story, the better. When the interviewer asked him to predict, based on his findings, which ad in the 2013 Super Bowl would take the prize, he chose the Budweiser spot about the friendship between a puppy and a horse. "Budweiser loves to tell stories," he said. "Whole movies, really, crunched into thirty seconds. And people love them." He was right. The ad was the highest scorer on both *USA Today*'s Ad Meter and Hulu's Ad Zone.

These ads work because they appeal to your emotions by drawing you into a story that you can't help but be moved by. From that point on, you are governed by something other than reason. Emotion is the key to empathy. Arouse us emotionally and we will identify with you and your plight. Keep us cold, and empathy won't blossom.

In 2011, Sammy Azzopardi resurfaced from the brief hiatus that followed Dakota Johnson's short-lived life. This time, she transformed into Emily Azzopardi, a gymnast, the role borrowed from a past identity as Emily Sciberras. She was a top athlete, she told a new friend in Perth, where she was now living. When she stayed over at her friend's house—an increasingly common occurrence—she repeated the story to her parents. She'd lived in Russia, she said, while training, and had been the top under-sixteen gymnast in the country.

A month later, a disturbing notice appeared on Emily's Facebook page. Her entire family had died tragically in France. Alongside the announcement, she posted a newspaper article: a murder-suicide. A man had killed his wife and fifteen-year-old daughter before shooting himself. There was, the article said, a twin who had survived. Emily was that twin. Her friend's family, moved by her plight, asked to adopt her. She would love that, she replied; she was just then in

the United States, she told the family, with an adoptions specialist. He would figure everything out. (In reality, she had never left Australia or met with an adoptions expert.)

Azzopardi proceeded to steal the identity of a Floridian judge—an actual adoptions expert—and, under his name, e-mailed the family and obtained the requisite adoption paperwork. To finalize everything, she met them in Sydney, claiming she had been raped in Perth and couldn't go back. But when the family enrolled her in school, everything fell apart. Her birth certificate as Emily was, predictably, a fake. In 2012, Azzopardi was again sentenced, this time to six months in prison for attempting to illegally collect social welfare benefits. The sentence, however, was suspended for a year—as all her charges had been, every time. (She was, after all, a lovely girl.) In June of that year, she stood in the Perth Magistrates Court to plead guilty to three counts of opening up accounts under a false name, one of inducing someone else to commit fraud, and one of intent to defraud by deceit. On October 2nd, she was sentenced to six months in prison, again suspended for twelve months.

Some might call Sammy a pathological liar—someone who is mentally incapable of telling the truth and in the throes of an illness. And, in one sense, that's true. There's no denying her proclivity for telling lies. The difference is that, for con artists like Sammy, lying is not a pathology; Sammy, you may recall, received a clean mental bill of health. It's a deliberate choice. Pathological liars lie for no reason at all. For them, lying is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, or may point to a deeper psychopathy. (Indeed, pathological lying is listed as a symptom on the Psychopathy Checklist.) Con artists lie for a very specific reason: personal gain, financial or otherwise. They lie to set the play in motion, so that they can gain your confidence and then lead you down a reality of their making. And their lies are believable, whereas a pathological liars' are often too big and elaborate to be taken seriously. Azzopardi lied in a very deliberate fashion: she took advantage of a social taboo. She ventured into an area so rife with emotion that to lie about it would be to betray our trust in humanity.

It seems that visceral states create an intense attentional focus. We tune out everything else and tune in to in-the-moment emotional cues. It's similar to the feeling of overwhelming hunger or thirst, or of needing to go to the bathroom: you suddenly find yourself unable to think about anything else. In those moments, you're less likely to deliberate, more likely to just say yes to

something without fully internalizing it, and more prone to ignore everything that's outside the focus of your immediate attention. (In fact, one study showed that having to pee made people more impulsive: they were so focussed on exercising control in one area that their ability to do so elsewhere faded.) Cons, both long and short, thrive on in-the-moment arousal. They don't give us time to think or reconsider. Con artists heat us up. As one grifter put it, under condition of anonymity, when asked by researchers about his methods, "It is imperative that you work as quickly as possible. Never give a hot mooch time to cool off. You want to close him while he is still slobbering with greed." Emotion in the moment matters. But we find it almost impossible to anticipate future emotion—like the regret that might come from being too hasty now. "Today's pain, hunger, anger, etc. are palpable, but the same sensations anticipated in the future receive little weight," the psychologist George Loewenstein writes.

In 2001, Jeff Langenderfer, a behavioral economist at Meredith College, and Terence Shimp, a professor emeritus at the University of South Carolina, decided to directly test what factors could make someone more susceptible to the influence of a con artist. That year alone, scams had cost the United States more than a hundred billion dollars, some forty billion of that from phone scams. Langenderfer felt that little was being done to understand who was most likely to fall victim, and how and why they would do so. Some people don't see the signs of fraud, but, he felt, this couldn't be the fundamental factor; if it were, there wouldn't be nearly as much diversity in the victim pool. It was, he concluded, a question of visceral influence: greed, hunger, lust, and the like. "They are so eager to get their hands on the proffered scam payoff that they fail to pay even rudimentary attention to the details of the proposed transaction and ignore scam cues that may be obvious to others not so overwhelmed by desire," he wrote in a paper called "Consumer Vulnerability to Scams, Swindles, and Frauds." The emotional outcome becomes the center of focus, and logic falls away.

On September 16, 2014, Aurora Hepburn walked into a Calgary clinic. She was fourteen, she said, and had been abducted, sexually assaulted, and tortured. "There was considerable impact to a lot of the professionals that were working on this investigation," Kelly Campbell, a sergeant with Calgary Police Service's child-abuse unit, told reporters. "Our concern was that there were actual victims out there, more

victims." If this scenario sounds oddly familiar, it's because it is: even after her Irish escapade and deportation, Samantha Azzopardi was back. And she was just as talented at deception as she'd ever been. Canadian authorities spent a hundred and fifty-seven thousand dollars on identifying her before her identity became clear—yet another foreign government expending resources to track perpetrators that had never existed. How had Sammy managed it, after the deportation, the travel bans, and the close monitoring by her family? Like so many impostors before her, she seemed to have a knack for resuming her chosen lifestyle immediately after each unmasking. Azzopardi hadn't been back in Australia for six months after her Irish caper when she again managed to secure a passport. She made her way back to Ireland. She wasn't done. She'd spent months preparing her return, corresponding with a Midlands family with two children, this time to work as a potential au pair.

Alan and Eilis Fitzgerald needed someone to help to care for their small sons, four-year-old Jack and two-year-old Harry. They began to look at au-pair sites for a possible match. One young woman stood out immediately. Her name was Indie O'Shea. She was eighteen, had Irish roots, and was eager to come to Dromod. They took up a correspondence. "We were in contact with her for ages online," Eilis later said. "And she seemed a perfect fit and really lovely. We were friends before she even arrived."

She got on famously with Harry and Jack. Eilis and Alan quickly came to see her as part of the family. "She was great with the boys and around the house," Eilis said. But the family didn't know much about her. She would drop hints here and there—private jets, powerful relations, false names adopted out of necessity—but nothing definitive. "It was like Hansel and Gretel," Alan recalled. "She was leaving crumbs for us to find so we could discover who she was." Soon the crumbs started adding up. Indie O'Shea wasn't really Indie O'Shea. Instead, she was the illegitimate daughter of Princess Madeleine of Sweden. She had been raised by one of Madeleine's cousins and her biological father. The day after her royal revelation, O'Shea tried to open a bank account. It was denied; her papers didn't add up. The family found her sobbing on the floor. Her mother, she said, had died in Miami. A few days later, Indie continued, her passport had expired. But fear not: she'd previously been an au pair for Jens Christiansen, a Danish politician. He would sort it out. Eventually, Indie returned with a British passport. It had a fake name and a different photograph. It's okay, she assured Alan and Eilis. She was allowed to

do this. "The 'family' had organized it," Eilis said. Six weeks later, O'Shea left, unexpectedly. Searching through her belongings, the Fitzgeralds found multiple papers with a name they had never seen: Samantha Azzopardi. They were confused to no end. "We got on brilliant and she was really such a nice person," Eilis recalls. How could she not be who she said? It was then that Sammy made her way to Canada, where she turned up as Aurora Hepburn.

As 2014 drew to a close, she was charged with public mischief, pled guilty, and was sentenced to the two months she'd already served in custody. She was deemed such a high flight risk that she was locked up until her extradition flight— and guarded on the flight itself. "Ms. Azzopardi has a long history of impersonating others, lying, and committing fraud," the hearing officer Rhonda Macklin said during Azzopardi's immigration hearing. No resource would be spared to make sure that she was returned to Australia—and, preferably, kept there.

This piece has been adapted from the book "The Confidence Game: Why We Fall for It … Every Time (http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/316878/the-confidence-game-by-maria-konnikova/9780525427414/)."

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