

Scroogled

by Cory Doctorow

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Photo: "Security Screening at Denver Airport" by danjo paluska via Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

"Give me six lines written by the most honorable of men, and I will find an excuse in them to hang him." Cardinal Richelieu

"We don't know enough about you." Google CEO Eric Schmidt

Greg landed at San Francisco International Airport at 8 p.m., but by the time he'd made it to the front of the customs line, it was after midnight. He'd emerged from first class, brown as a nut, unshaven, and loose-limbed after a month on the beach in Cabo (scuba diving three days a week, seducing French college girls the rest of the time). When he'd left the city a month before, he'd been a stoop-shouldered, potbellied wreck. Now he was a bronze god, drawing admiring glances from the stewards at the front of the cabin.

Four hours later in the customs line, he'd slid from god back to man. His slight buzz had worn off, sweat ran down the crack of his ass, and his shoulders and neck were so tense his upper back felt like a tennis racket. The batteries on his iPod had long since died, leaving him with nothing to do except eavesdrop on the middle-age couple ahead of him.

"The marvels of modern technology," said the woman, shrugging at a nearby sign:

Immigration Powered by Google.

"I thought that didn't start until next month?" The man was alternately wearing and holding a large sombrero.

Googling at the border. Christ. Greg had vested out of Google six months before, cashing in his options and "taking some me time" which turned out to be less rewarding than he'd expected. What he mostly did over the five months that followed was fix his friends' PCs, watch daytime TV, and gain 10 pounds, which he blamed on being at home instead of in the Googleplex, with its well-appointed 24-hour gym.

He should have seen it coming, of course. The U.S. government had lavished \$15 billion on a program to fingerprint and photograph visitors at the border, and hadn't caught a single terrorist. Clearly, the public sector was not equipped to Do Search Right.

The DHS officer had bags under his eyes and squinted at his screen, prodding at his keyboard with sausage fingers. No wonder it was taking four hours to get out of the god damned airport.

"Evening," Greg said, handing the man his sweaty passport. The officer grunted and swiped it, then stared at his screen, tapping. A lot. He had a little bit of dried food at the corner of his mouth and his tongue crept out and licked at it.

"Want to tell me about June 1998?" Greg looked up from his *Departures*. "I'm sorry?" "You posted a message to alt.burningman on June 17, 1998, about your plan to attend a festival. You asked, 'Are shrooms really such a bad idea?'"

The interrogator in the secondary screening room was an older man, so skinny he looked like he'd been carved out of wood. His questions went a lot deeper than shrooms. "Tell me about your hobbies. Are you into model rocketry?"

"What?"

"Model rocketry."

"No," Greg said, "No, I'm not." He sensed where this was going.

The man made a note, did some clicking. "You see, I ask because I see a heavy spike in ads for rocketry supplies showing up alongside your search results and Google mail."

Greg felt a spasm in his guts. "You're looking at my searches and e-mail?" He hadn't touched a keyboard in a month, but he knew what he put into that search bar was likely more revealing than what he told his shrink.

"Sir, calm down, please. No, I'm not looking at your searches," the man said in a mocking whine. "That would be unconstitutional. We see only the ads that show up when you read your mail and do your searching. I have a brochure explaining it. I'll give it to you when we're through here."

"But the ads don't mean anything," Greg sputtered. "I get ads for Ann Coulter ring tones whenever I get e-mail from my friend in Coulter, Iowa!"

The man nodded. "I understand, sir. And that's just why I'm here talking to you. Why do you suppose model rocket ads show up so frequently?"

Greg racked his brain. "Okay, just do this. Search for 'coffee fanatics.'" He'd been very active in the group, helping them build out the site for their coffee-of-the-month subscription service. The blend they were going to launch with was called Jet Fuel. "Jet Fuel" and "Launch" that would probably make Google barf up some model rocket ads.

They were in the home stretch when the carved man found the Halloween photos. They were buried three screens deep in the search results for "Greg Lupinski."

"It was a Gulf War themed party," he said. "In the Castro."

"And you're dressed as...?"

"A suicide bomber," he replied sheepishly. Just saying the words made him wince.

"Come with me, Mr. Lupinski," the man said. By the time he was released, it was past 3 a.m. His suitcases stood forlornly by the baggage

carousel. He picked them up and saw they had been opened and carelessly closed. Clothes stuck out

from around the edges.

When he returned home, he discovered that all of his fake pre-Columbian statues had been broken, and his brand-new white cotton Mexican shirt had an ominous boot print in the middle of it. His clothes no longer smelled of Mexico. They smelled like airport.

He wasn't going to sleep. No way. He needed to talk about this. There was only one person who would get it. Luckily, she was usually awake around this hour.

Maya had started working at Google two years after Greg had. It was she who'd convinced him to go to Mexico after he cashed out: Anywhere, she'd said, that he could reboot his existence.

Maya had two giant chocolate labs and a very, very patient girlfriend named Laurie who'd put up with anything except being dragged around Dolores Park at 6 a.m. by 350 pounds of drooling canine. Maya reached for her Mace as Greg jogged toward her, then did a double take and threw her arms open, dropping the leashes and trapping them under her sneaker. "Where's the rest of you? Dude, you look hot!"

He hugged her back, suddenly conscious of the way he smelled after a night of invasive Googling. "Maya," he said, "what do you know about Google and the DHS?"

She stiffened as soon as he asked the question. One of the dogs began to whine. She looked around, then nodded up at the tennis courts. "Top of the light pole there; don't look," she said. "That's one of our muni WiFi access points. Wide-angle webcam. Face away from it when you talk."

In the grand scheme of things, it hadn't cost Google much to wire the city with webcams. Especially when measured against the ability to serve ads to people based on where they were sitting. Greg hadn't paid much attention when the cameras on all those access points went public there'd been a day's worth of blogstorm while people played with the new all-seeing toy, zooming in on various prostitute cruising areas, but after a while the excitement blew over.

Feeling silly, Greg mumbled, "You're joking." "Come with me," she said, turning away from the pole. The dogs weren't happy about cutting their walk short, and expressed their displeasure in the kitchen as Maya made coffee.

"We brokered a compromise with the DHS," she said, reaching for the milk. "They agreed to stop fishing through our search records, and we agreed to let them see what ads got displayed for users."

Greg felt sick. "Why? Don't tell me Yahoo was doing it already..."

"No, no. Well, yes. Sure. Yahoo was doing it. But that wasn't the reason Google went along. You know, Republicans hate Google. We're overwhelmingly registered Democratic, so we're doing what we can to make peace with them before they clobber us. This isn't P.I.I." Personally Identifying Information, the toxic smog of the information age. "It's just metadata. So it's only slightly evil."

"Why all the intrigue, then?"

Maya sighed and hugged the lab that was butting her knee with its huge head. "The spooks are like lice. They get everywhere. They show up at our meetings. It's like being in some Soviet ministry. And the security clearance we're divided into these two camps: the cleared and the suspect. We all know who isn't cleared, but no one knows why. I'm cleared. Lucky for me, being a dyke no longer disqualifies you. No cleared person would deign to eat lunch with an unclearable."

Greg felt very tired. "So I guess I'm lucky I got out of the airport alive. I might have ended up 'disappeared' if it had gone badly, huh?" Maya stared at him intently. He waited for an answer. "What?" "I'm about to tell you something, but you can't ever repeat it, okay?" "Um...you're not in a terrorist cell, are you?" "Nothing so simple. Here's the deal: Airport DHS scrutiny is a gating function. It lets the spooks narrow down their search criteria. Once you get pulled aside for secondary at the border, you become a 'person of interest' and they never, ever let up. They'll scan webcams for your face and gait. Read your mail. Monitor your searches."

"I thought you said the courts wouldn't let them..."

"The courts won't let them indiscriminately Google you. But after you're in the system, it becomes a selective search. All legal. And once they start Googling you, they always find something. All your data is fed into a big hopper that checks for 'suspicious patterns,' using deviation from statistical norms to nail you."

Greg felt like he was going to throw up. "How the hell did this happen? Google was a good place. 'Don't be evil,' right?" That was the corporate motto, and for Greg, it had been a huge part of why he'd taken his computer science Ph.D. from Stanford directly to Mountain View.

Maya replied with a hard-edged laugh. "Don't be evil? Come on, Greg. Our lobbying group is that same bunch of crypto-fascists that tried to Swift-Boat Kerry. We popped our evil cherry a long time ago."

They were quiet for a minute.

"It started in China," she went on, finally. "Once we moved our servers onto the mainland, they went under Chinese jurisdiction." Greg sighed. He knew Google's reach all too well: Every time you visited a page with Google ads on it, or used Google maps or Google mail even if you sent mail to a Gmail account the company diligently collected your info. Recently, the site's search-optimization software had begun using the data to tailor Web

searches to individual users. It proved to be a revolutionary tool for advertisers. An authoritarian government would have other purposes in mind.

"They were using us to build profiles of people," she went on. "When they had someone they wanted to arrest, they'd come to us and find a reason to bust them. There's hardly anything you can do on the Net that isn't illegal in China."

Greg shook his head. "Why did they have to put the servers in China?"

"The government said they'd block us otherwise. And Yahoo was there." They both made faces. Somewhere along the way, employees at Google had become obsessed with Yahoo, more concerned with what the competition was doing than how their own company was performing. "So we did it. But a lot of us didn't like the idea."

Maya sipped her coffee and lowered her voice. One of her dogs sniffed insistently under Greg's chair.

"Almost immediately, the Chinese asked us to start censoring search results," Maya said. "Google agreed. The company line was hilarious: 'We're not doing evil we're giving consumers access to a better search tool! If we showed them search results they couldn't get to, that would just frustrate them. It would be a *bad user experience*.'"

"Now what?" Greg pushed a dog away from him. Maya looked hurt.

"Now you're a person of interest, Greg. You're Googlestalked. Now you live your life with someone constantly looking over your shoulder. You know the mission statement, right? 'Organize the World's Information.' Everything. Give it five years, we'll know how many turds were in the bowl before you flushed. Combine that with automated suspicion of anyone who matches a statistical picture of a bad guy and you're "

"Scroogled."

"Totally." She nodded. Maya took both labs down the hall to the bedroom. He heard a muffled argument with her girlfriend, and she came back alone.

"I can fix this," she said in an urgent whisper. "After the Chinese started rounding up people, my podmates and I made it our 20 percent project to fuck with them." (Among Google's business innovations was a rule that required every employee to devote 20 percent of his or her time to highminded pet projects.) "We call it the Googlecleaner. It goes deep into the database and statistically normalizes you. Your searches, your Gmail histograms, your browsing patterns. All of it. Greg, I can Googleclean you. It's the only way."

"I don't want you to get into trouble."

She shook her head. "I'm already doomed. Every day since I built the damn thing has been borrowed time now it's just a matter of waiting for someone to point out my expertise

and history to the DHS and, oh, I don't know. Whatever it is they do to people like me in the war on abstract nouns."

Greg remembered the airport. The search. His shirt, the boot print in the middle of it. "Do it," he said. The Googlecleaner worked wonders. Greg could tell by the ads that popped up alongside his searches, ads clearly meant for someone else: Intelligent Design Facts, Online Seminary Degree, Terror Free Tomorrow, Porn Blocker Software, the Homosexual Agenda, Cheap Toby Keith Tickets. This was Maya's program at work. Clearly Google's new personalized search had him pegged as someone else entirely, a God-fearing right winger with a thing for hat acts.

Which was fine by him.

Then he clicked on his address book, and found that half of his contacts were missing. His Gmail in-box was hollowed out like a termite-ridden stump. His Orkut profile, normalized. His calendar, family photos, bookmarks: all empty. He hadn't quite realized before how much of him had migrated onto the Web and worked its way into Google's server farms his entire online identity. Maya had scrubbed him to a high gloss; he'd become the invisible man.

Greg sleepily mashed the keys on the laptop next to his bed, bringing the screen to life. He squinted at the flashing toolbar clock: 4:13 a.m.! Christ, who was pounding on his door at this hour?

He shouted, "Coming!" in a muzzy voice and pulled on a robe and slippers. He shuffled down the hallway, turning on lights as he went. At the door, he squinted through the peephole to find Maya staring glumly back at him.

He undid the chains and dead bolt and yanked the door open. Maya rushed in past him, followed by the dogs and her girlfriend.

She was sheened in sweat, her usually combed hair clinging in clumps to her forehead. She rubbed at her eyes, which were red and lined. "Pack a bag," she croaked hoarsely.

"What?"

She took him by the shoulders. "Do it," she said.

"Where do you want to...?"

"Mexico, probably. Don't know yet. Pack, dammit." She pushed past him into his bedroom and started yanking open drawers.

"Maya," he said sharply, "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on."

She glared at him and pushed her hair away from her face. "The Googlecleaner lives. After I cleaned you, I shut it down and walked away. It was too dangerous to use anymore.

But it's still set to send me e-mail confirmations whenever it runs. Someone's used it six times to scrub three very specific accounts all of which happen to belong to members of the Senate Commerce Committee up for reelection."

"Googlers are blackwashing senators?"

"Not Googlers. This is coming from off-site. The IP block is registered in D.C. And the IPs are all used by Gmail users. Guess who the accounts belong to?"

"You spied on Gmail accounts?"

"Okay. Yes. I did look through their e-mail. Everyone does it, now and again, and for a lot worse reasons than I did. But check it out turns out all this activity is being directed by our lobbying firm. Just doing their job, defending the company's interests."

Greg felt his pulse beating in his temples. "We should tell someone."

"It won't do any good. They know everything about us. They can see every search. Every e-mail. Every time we've been caught on the webcams. Who is in our social network...did you know if you have 15 Orkut buddies, it's statistically certain that you're no more than three steps to someone who's contributed money to a 'terrorist' cause? Remember the airport? You'll be in for a lot more of that."

"Maya," Greg said, getting his bearings. "Isn't heading to Mexico overreacting? Just quit. We can do a start-up or something. This is crazy."

"They came to see me today," she said. "Two of the political officers from DHS. They didn't leave for hours. And they asked me a lot of very heavy questions."

"About the Googlecleaner?"

"About my friends and family. My search history. My personal history."

"Jesus."

"They were sending a message to me. They're watching every click and every search. It's time to go. Time to get out of range."

"There's a Google office in Mexico, you know."

"We've got to go," she said, firmly.

"Laurie, what do you think of this?" Greg asked.

Laurie thumped the dogs between the shoulders. "My parents left East Germany in '65. They used to tell me about the Stasi. The secret police would put everything about you in your file, if you told an unpatriotic joke, whatever. Whether they meant it or not, what Google has created is no different."

"Greg, are you coming?"

He looked at the dogs and shook his head. "I've got some pesos left over," he said. "You take them. Be careful, okay?"

Maya looked like she was going to slug him. Softening, she gave him a ferocious hug. "Be careful, yourself," she whispered in his ear. They came for him a week later. At home, in the middle of the night, just as he'd imagined they would.

Two men arrived on his doorstep shortly after 2 a.m. One stood silently by the door. The other was a smiler, short and rumped, in a sport coat with a stain on one lapel and a American flag on the other. "Greg Lupinski, we have reason to believe you're in violation of the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act," he said, by way of introduction. "Specifically, exceeding authorized access, and by means of such conduct having obtained information. Ten years for a first offense. Turns out that what you and your friend did to your Google records qualifies as a felony. And oh, what will come out in the trial...all the stuff you whitewashed out of your profile, for starters."

Greg had played this scene in his head for a week. He'd planned all kinds of brave things to say. It had given him something to do while he waited to hear from Maya. She never called. "I'd like to get in touch with a lawyer," is all he mustered.

"You can do that," the small man said. "But maybe we can come to a better arrangement."

Greg found his voice. "I'd like to see your badge," he stammered.

The man's basset-hound face lit up as he let out a bemused chuckle. "Buddy, I'm not a cop," he replied. "I'm a consultant. Google hired me my firm represents their interests in Washington to build relationships. Of course, we wouldn't get the police involved without talking to you first. You're part of the family. Actually, there's an offer I'd like to make."

Greg turned to the coffeemaker, dumped the old filter. "I'll go to the press," he said.

The man nodded as if thinking it over. "Well, sure. You could walk into the *Chronicle's* office in the morning and spill everything. They'd look for a confirming source. They won't find one. And when they try searching for it, we'll find them. So, buddy, why don't you hear me out, okay? I'm in the win-win business. I'm very good at it." He paused. "By the way, those are excellent beans, but you want to give them a little rinse first? Takes some of the bitterness out and brings up the oils. Here, pass me a colander?"

Greg watched as the man silently took off his jacket and hung it over a kitchen chair, then undid his cuffs and carefully rolled them up, slipping a cheap digital watch into his pocket. He poured the beans out of the grinder and into Greg's colander, and rinsed them in the sink.

He was a little pudgy and very pale, with the social grace of an electrical engineer. He seemed like a real Googler, actually, obsessed with the minutiae. He knew his way around a coffee grinder, too. "We're drafting a team for Building 49..."

"There is no Building 49," Greg said automatically.

"Of course," the guy said, flashing a tight smile. "There's no Building 49. But we're putting together a team to revamp the Googlecleaner. Maya's code wasn't very efficient, you know. It's full of bugs. We need an upgrade. You'd be the right guy, and it wouldn't matter what you knew if you were back inside."

"Unbelievable," Greg said, laughing. "If you think I'm going to help you smear political candidates in exchange for favors, you're crazier than I thought."

"Greg," the man said, "we're not smearing anyone. We're just going to clean things up a bit. For some select people. You know what I mean? Everyone's Google profile is a little scary under close inspection. Close inspection is the order of the day in politics. Standing for office is like a public colonoscopy." He loaded the cafetière and depressed the plunger, his face screwed up in solemn concentration. Greg retrieved two coffee cups Google mugs, of course and passed them over.

"We're going to do for our friends what Maya did for you. Just a little cleanup. All we want to do is preserve their privacy. That's all."

Greg sipped his coffee. "What happens to the candidates you don't clean?"

"Yeah," the guy said, flashing Greg a weak grin. "Yeah, you're right. It'll be kind of tough for them." He searched the inside pocket of his jacket and produced several folded sheets of paper. He smoothed out the pages and put them on the table. "Here's one of the good guys who needs our help." It was a printout of a search history belonging to a candidate whose campaign Greg had contributed to in the past three elections.

"Fella gets back to his hotel room after a brutal day of campaigning door to door, fires up his laptop, and types 'hot asses' into his search bar. Big deal, right? The way we see it, for that to disqualify a good man from continuing to serve his country is just un-American."

Greg nodded slowly.

"So you'll help the guy out?" the man asked.

"Yes."

"Good. There's one more thing. We need you to help us find Maya. She didn't understand our goals at all, and now she seems to have flown the coop. Once she hears us out, I have no doubt she'll come around."

He glanced at the candidate's search history. "I guess she might," Greg replied. The new Congress took 11 working days to pass the Securing and Enumerating America's Communications and Hypertext Act, which authorized the DHS and NSA to outsource up to 80 percent of intelligence and analysis work to private contractors. Theoretically, the contracts were open to competitive bidding, but within the secure confines of Google's Building 49, there was no question of who would win. If Google had spent \$15 billion on a program to catch bad guys at the border, you can bet they would have caught them governments just aren't equipped to Do Search Right.

The next morning Greg scrutinized himself carefully as he shaved (the security minders didn't like hacker stubble and weren't shy about telling him so), realizing that today was his first day as a de facto intelligence agent for the U.S. government. How bad would it be? Wasn't it better to have Google doing this stuff than some ham-fisted DHS desk jockey?

By the time he parked at the Googleplex, among the hybrid cars and bulging bike racks, he had convinced himself. He was mulling over which organic smoothie to order at the canteen when his key card failed to open the door to Building 49. The red LED flashed dumbly every time he swiped his card. Any other building, and there'd be someone to tailgate on, people trickling in and out all day. But the Googlers in 49 only emerged for meals, and sometimes not even that.

Swipe, swipe, swipe. Suddenly he heard a voice at his side. "Greg, can I see you, please?" The rumpled man put an arm around his shoulders, and Greg smelled his citrusy aftershave. It smelled like what his divemaster in Baja had worn when they went out to the bars in the evening.

Greg couldn't remember his name. Juan Carlos? Juan Luis?

The man's arm around his shoulders was firm, steering him away from the door, out onto the immaculate lawn, past the herb garden outside the kitchen. "We're giving you a couple of days off," he said.

Greg felt a sudden stab of anxiety. "Why?" Had he done something wrong? Was he going to jail?

"It's Maya." The man turned him around, met his eyes with his bottomless gaze. "She killed herself. In Guatemala. I'm sorry, Greg."

Greg seemed to hurtle away, to a place miles above, a Google Earth view of the Googleplex, where he looked down on himself and the rumpled man as a pair of dots, two pixels, tiny and insignificant. He willed himself to tear at his hair, to drop to his knees and weep.

From a long way away, he heard himself say, "I don't need any time off. I'm okay." From a long way away, he heard the ruffled man insist. The argument persisted for a long time, and then the two pixels moved into Building 49, and the door swung shut behind them.