

THE MAN IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

Sure, come in, I've got time. What else we got when you play it all out? I was just checking my stocks. I like to keep up with my financials. Not that there; that's the Racing Form. Some days, they feel like the same thing. Some days, it all feels like the funnies.

You read the sign on the door. Ivory Pointer. That's me. Ivory, like the elephant's tusk: beautiful, graceful, deadly. Pointer, like the dog: I find things. I'm a private investigator. A P.I. Here in P-Town. That's Petaluma for all you Frisco swells.

I keep an office on the boulevard, one flight up from the street. View of the river walk out the back window and the clock tower out the front. Time was, that clock was never wrong. The same way a dead man is never wrong. Then, they went and fixed it. Now, it's always wrong. Just like everybody else.

I work alone. I solve the mysteries the other guys won't touch, the ones that maybe shouldn't be solved, the old, toothless, sleeping dogs that somebody wants to kick for kicks. I hope you've got time for a drink and a story. Don't believe that clock out there. It's never too early for either.

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"Thank you for seeing me, Miss Pointer. My name is Kingsford."

I'd seen too much of this type. The plummy, past-it, East Coast sophisticate. Half the time, they really want...something else. No, not that; that I could cut off quick. The body part they foist on me is the sound of their own voice. They want validation. A tender ear. Makes me think I should raise my rates to drive them to more appropriate providers. Then, I check my financials, and guys like this get to stay. But I manage them.

"The story I have to tell . . ."

“It’s your dime, pal.”

“Of course.” He opened his briefcase. “Please look at this photograph.” A five-by-seven, still in its frame. That was different. The photo was G-rated. That was different, too.

“I see a cute kid, maybe two years old, in a playground swing, facing the camera. This your kid?”

“Look closer.”

“The photo’s yellowed, not recent. That’s a Plymouth Valiant at the curb. Brick apartments in the background. This is a city scene. I’m thinking New York, outer borough.”

“Exactly. This picture was taken in Queens in 1964. I am the boy in the swing.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Thank you. Now, look to my right. What do you see?”

“A man. Facing away from the camera. Early thirties, I’d guess from the body type.”

“I have to find him.”

“That’s not your old man?”

“My mother was no photographer, Miss Pointer.” Or much of anything else, I suddenly thought. I eyed the smartphone at the corner of my desk and pondered that dark era when even taking a picture of your kid was somehow man’s work.

“Okay, your father took the picture. So, who’s this guy?”

“You tell me.”

“A total stranger?”

“But is he? This photograph has hung on the wall of my parents’ house since it was taken. For as long as I can remember until I left home at eighteen, I had to look at this man. Every day, I saw him. Since moving back to town after college, I’ve seen him at every Sunday

dinner for over thirty years. My parents are gone now, Miss Pointer. The photo is mine. I'm sure you understand. I must find this man."

"Did this man..." I'm sure he got my meaning right away, but in service of his studied fastidiousness, he feigned shock.

"No...No, of course not."

"How do you know?"

"I'd like to think a strange man couldn't interfere with me in a park under my parents' noses." I'm not paid to disabuse clients of their delusions, even if it does move the clock. We moved on.

"Then, you want to find him . . . ?"

"For obvious reasons."

"Finding people for obvious reasons is my bread and butter. But check the markets, my friend. Bread and butter ain't cheap this week."

"I understand. We fly to New York tomorrow."

"You want to *go* there?" He leaned back in the chair, confident, his money now on display. When he spoke again, his voice was silkier than an ascot.

"I assumed you understood, Miss Pointer. When you want to find people for obvious reasons, you have to start at the very beginning." I played my part.

"Bread and butter don't fly coach."

"As you said: it's my dime."

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We flew coach into LaGuardia and checked into separate rooms at a mid-range suite hotel near the airport. I didn't act surprised, because I wasn't. Queens was Queens, block after

block of red brick apartments and not much else. Sometimes, the worst thing you can say about a place is that people live there.

Kingsford had laid out his plan of attack on the plane, so we called it a night early. The TV menu was basic and dismal, but at least I didn't have to ponder what Kingsford might be watching next door. It had been a long day. Even with the west-to-east coast time difference, I was out quick. The next morning, we hit the breakfast buffet separately, then met at eleven to go to the park. I let Kingsford lead the way.

"Here we are. Nice looking playground."

"I'm amazed it's still here."

"It's on Google Earth," I said.

"Don't tell me such things!"

"Okay, okay. So, what do you think of the neighborhood?"

"A lot has changed. Some things, for the better. Some not. Let's get started."

"You really want to do it this way?"

"Yes. We must. We should at least try." Why? He never explained. I pulled out a copy of the photograph that we had made. I thrust it in the faces of passersby.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Have you seen this man?"

"Let me by, please."

"Sorry. Sir, look at this picture. Have you seen this man?"

"Nope."

"You didn't even look. You, sir, please. Look at this picture. Have you seen this man?" I got in front of him, and with people on all sides, he had to stop and look.

“Have I seen what man? This man? There’s no face. And what are you, a wise guy? How old’s this picture, anyway? You should go before someone calls a cop.” I kept at it for a few more minutes. Kingsford’s luck was no better. No one took an interest. Everyone just passed by.

“Perhaps,” he conceded, “it would be better just to put up the poster.”

“Put up your poster,” I said. “Put it up if you want. Then, we’re doing things my way. The modern way.” I reached into my bag.

“That’s a very big phone you’ve pulled out of your purse, Miss Pointer. I wouldn’t call that modern.”

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Lots of women, ordinary women, civilian women, have had men try to pay them for sex. In my racket, they try to pay you *with* sex. I hand them my bill, and suddenly they hear smoldering trumpets, they imagine an electric connection has passed between us through the paper, and they’ve got a better idea. So, when I billed this old eccentric for a small job, and he said, “I’ve got something I think might interest you more,” I braced for the usual, perhaps with visuals. But then...

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“It’s not a phone, Kingsford. A client I helped gave it to me once. Said it would make my job easier. Most people would call it...a time machine. It’s really an image machine. I enter a range of times, like 1964, I scan the photograph, and it takes us to where it happened.”

“But we’d change history. I don’t want my history changed. Or his either. That’s of the utmost importance!”

“We won’t change history. We won’t even really be there. We’ll just see it.”

“Very well.”

“Hang on. Here we go.”

Everything grew shimmery around us.

“And here we are.” Kingsford looked about to burst.

And there I am! In the swing. My father is pushing me. Strange. I had always assumed my mother pushed me that day while my father took pictures.”

“Your father never pushed you?”

“No. Wait, yes he did. When I was older, I remember now, he definitely did. I had just forgotten that.”

“We forget a lot.” The scene unfolded before us, pleasant, peaceful, meaningless. “Your father’s taking the picture now. Look, there’s the man. And where he’s looking in the photo: I bet that’s his family.” Kingsford took them in.

“A pregnant wife, two kids a few years older than me. Are you *sure* we’re not changing things?”

“I’m positive. We have to see his face or none of this matters. There. There it is.”

“I see it. It’s an ordinary face. Quite ordinary. Exactly as I had hoped.”

“Wait, quiet! She’s calling his name.” The voices and sounds were echoey and indistinct, but there was no mistaking this.

“Ernst! She called him Ernst.”

“I doubt we’ll get a last name.”

“He’s speaking to my father.”

“And he’s doing most of the talking.” It looked like whatever Ernst was selling, Kingsford’s father wasn’t buying. I strained to listen, but I couldn’t make out a word. Then, it hit me.

“Are they speaking German?”

“My father was from Germany, so yes, they are.”

“Do you speak it?”

“My mother wouldn’t allow it.”

Ernst abandoned the conversation and went back to his family. He said something in English. They started to pack up. Then, he came back.

“He’s coming over to you.”

“He’s patting me on the head.”

“It’s okay, though. You’re smiling.”

“Now, he’s shaking hands with my father.”

“Something wasn’t right there.”

“Don’t be silly. It seems a lovely day.”

Ernst’s family picked up and walked toward a station wagon at the curb.

“Now, they’re leaving,” I said. “Now, they’re gone. We should go, too.”

“Please, a bit more. I’m swinging again. My father is pushing me.” We watched Kingsford swing. The chains squeaked their calming rhythm like a metronome. Kingsford looked at me sorrowfully. “All right. Let’s go.”

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Back in my office, I got to work. I had Ernst’s face from the image machine, and I scanned Kingsford’s photo. I set them next to each other with the caption. “Hello, Ernst. My client is the boy in the picture. He needs to speak with you.” I added my phone number. Then, I blasted it everywhere you can blast things these days. I didn’t have long to wait until the phone rang.

“Ivory Pointer.”

“Yes, Miss Pointer. Who are you, and what do you want with my grandfather?”

“You saw one of our posts, huh?”

“Posts? I saw a poster on a telephone pole. Grandfather saw it, too.”

“So, he’s alive. Ernst is still alive.”

“Lucky for you. He nearly dropped dead when he saw it. Is this some kind of sick joke?

Are you suggesting. . . ?” I would have suggested it until we went back in time. Now?

“No.”

“Then, what’s this about?”

“Honey, it’s about a free trip to California to have a short conversation and then go sightseeing. Now, does the old man travel?”

“Yes, but . . .”

“Then, stop wasting my time.”

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We agreed to meet in a room at Hotel Petaluma. I like what they’ve done with the joint. Kingsford was nervous. I thought he’d pace ruts in the new floors.

“What if they don’t come?”

“They’ll come. We scared them. They’ll come.” A soft knock at the door came right on cue.

“Who’s there?” I called out. The granddaughter answered. She better not be alone.

“I spoke to you on the phone.”

“Is your grandfather with you?” There was a hesitation, and then...

“I’m here,” he said, his voice soft and frail, his German accent unmistakable, even after decades in America.

I opened the door, and they came inside. Ernst walked with a cane and held onto his granddaughter’s right forearm with his left hand. I closed the door.

“You’re Ernst,” I said.

“Yes, I am.” I pointed to Kingsford.

“This is the boy in the photograph.”

“Hello, Ernst. You’ve changed.” He stepped toward Ernst, so forcefully that I wondered if my machine had lied.

“And look at you,” said Ernst. “All grown up. Much closer to me than to this little boy in the picture. So, yes, we’ve both changed.”

“Enough small talk,” said the granddaughter. “We’re here. If there’s something you want to say, say it. Then, we can go to the police.”

“No, dear, no,” said Ernst. “We don’t need police, but, really this has been disturbing. You have me mixed up with somebody else.”

“You are the man in the photograph?” Kingsford confirmed.

“Yes, yes, but . . .”

“Then, I just have one question for you, Ernst. It’s the only question that can possibly matter between us. I hope you answer it.”

“I’ll try, but, really, this is a mistake. Don’t you understand? It’s a mistake. I didn’t...I don’t...” The granddaughter grabbed Kingsford’s arm.

“Ask your question! You’re killing him.”

“Fine!...Fine. Here is my question. How have you been?”

“What?!” said the granddaughter.

“Excuse me?” Ernst asked.

“Since I last saw you so many years ago, since this frozen, chance moment in time... so very much life lived and lost...how have you been?”

“How have I been? Honestly?”

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I left them to it. My work was done, and there was a wine bar in the lobby. I don't know if Ernst came clean about what went on with Kingsford's father, but I think the boy in the photograph learned what he needed to know. If nothing else, he learned it in the park.

Never kick a sleeping dog. But if you nudge that sleeping dog, you might find it was lying atop something you were looking for. Even if you didn't know it. The dog might learn something, too.

Those all sounded like obvious reasons to me. End of sermon. It was a nice night, so after I left the hotel, I went for a walk in town. I saw the clock tower; all lit up. Gosh, I thought, it's beautiful.

I wonder what time it is.