

Private “I”

The girl at the door saw me coming, and the usual cycle of emotions played on her face—sadness, pity, fear. I was headed toward her, she could see that now, and she tried to prepare herself.

“Hi!” she said loudly, as if I were deaf.

“Hi,” I said, staring at the tight t-shirt with BEEYOTCH written in sparkly silver letters across her chest.

“It’s five bucks to get in,” she said.

I pulled a ten from my pocket and held it out. She took it gently from my hand and paused.

“Was that a five I gave you?” I asked. She looked closely at the bill, as if she hadn’t noticed.

“You gave me a ten,” she said, taking a five from her fanny pack and pressing it into my hand. At least she was honest.

“Thanks. Say, can you point me in the right direction?”

After some hesitation she said, “Okay,” and took my arm and aimed me toward the door. “Straight ahead.”

“Thank you,” I said, poking my red-tipped cane at the ground as I stepped into the club. They were three-deep at the bar, and most everyone moved out of my way as I came through. But there was one young buck with his back to me, tall with wavy hair. I gave him a good whack

on his cowboy boot with my cane. He turned and delivered a withering look, then his face softened and turned pink. "Sorry," he stammered, his soul patch fairly quivering.

"Quite alright," I said. "Just coming through."

In the back of the club was a wide, rectangular room with a small stage at the far end. Little round tables and chairs—two-thirds of them occupied—filled out the rest of the room. In the corner, next to a jukebox, sat Mrs. Kemper, alone. It was clever of her to sit there, so close to the blaring music. I stood in the doorway a while before a waitress approached.

"Can I help you find a seat?"

She was refreshingly unafraid, without the pointless fake smile so many people trot out in such situations. She took my arm and led me to the nearest unoccupied table.

"Can you seat me nearer the juke box?" I asked.

She looked surprised.

"The music," I said. "I like it loud."

"Of course."

She led me to a table about ten feet away from Mrs. Kemper's.

"Here you go," she said, pulling out a chair. She had to speak loudly because of the jukebox. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"That would be great."

"What's your pleasure?" she asked. "Beer? Wine? Hard stuff?"

Her eyes were brown, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a short t-shirt and low-riding jeans, exposing the peach fuzzy strip of skin just below her navel. I ordered a Guinness and as she headed toward the bar I could see there was some kind of tattoo just above the crack of her ass.

It's a challenge to watch someone without appearing to do so, even behind pitch-black glasses, even when people assume you can't see them. They expect that subtly unnatural posture, that Ray Charles cock of the head that facilitates a sharpened sense of hearing. Any movement that could be interpreted as sight-related—say, turning my head to blatantly follow the waitress's progress—might arouse suspicion. Therefore, I have perfected the stationary-head/roving-eyes technique that hen-pecked husbands will recognize from their experience at the beach.

The loud song ended, replaced by a slow, insipid ballad. Mrs. Kemper sat nursing what looked like a cosmopolitan as she nervously eyed the quarrelling couple at the table between us. The woman was upset, but composed, almost as if she relished the lashing she was handing out. The man kept looking around, hoping no one would hear.

"All you care about is yourself," the woman said. "When I needed a ride from the airport, where were you?"

"You knew I had work to do. I told you."

"But when you needed me to mend your sweater, I was expected to stay up half the night, even though I had to get up the next morning for a double shift. You're such a selfish prick."

"Shhh."

"Oh, I don't give a shit."

"Caitlin, please," the man said.

The woman pushed back her chair and stood up. "Go fuck yourself," she said, and walked off.

The man stood and followed, calling out her name.

"Ain't love grand?" the waitress said, having appeared at my table. She set down a pint. "You wanna run a tab?"

"I'd better not," I said, admiring the chocolaty dark stout. I gave her a ten and asked her name. "In case I have to shout for you."

"Tina," she said. "But don't worry. I've got my eyes on you."

"That makes one of us," I said, and she laughed in a way that said she laughed a lot.

"Keep the change, Tina."

She took the cash and swooped off, like a bird ascending.

At another nearby table sat three girls, college age. Two blondes, one brunette. They were talking about me, I could tell. There were whispers and quick glances. The brunette said, "You don't have to pretend—he can't *see* you," and they all laughed. One of the blondes stared right at me. She had a heart-shaped face, and a red stain on her white blouse. Blood? Lipstick? I sipped my Guinness, then slowly ran my tongue across my upper lip to gather in the stray foam. I made a show of it, and she continued to stare while the other two moved on to another topic.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Kemper kept glancing at her watch.

She was a looker, our Mrs. Kemper. Blonde hair to her shoulders, big green eyes, kewpie doll lips. She was in her mid-thirties, tall, probably as slim as she'd been in college. Maybe she went to the gym four times a week. Or maybe she was one of those high-strung people who stay lean out of nervousness. Her eyes seemed tired, perhaps from crying, and she slumped in her seat, but otherwise she was looking good tonight, with the dark red lipstick, the sleeveless sweater, the tight black slacks that flared at her ankles. She glanced my way while I was sizing her up but I continued to stare right at her until, a little unnerved, she turned toward the doorway. She grinned, waved at someone, and her eyes blazed up like carnival lights.

He was older than her by at least five years. Blue shirt, khakis, loafers. He wore glasses and a sloppily trimmed beard, his graying hair artfully tousled. His name was Philip Asher. He

walked over to the table and leaned in to kiss her. They kissed for a few seconds longer than would a married couple, and then he sat down close to her.

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Burt Kemper had called me earlier that day. I hadn't seen him in a good twenty years, since high school.

"Lucas Wolf?" he said when I answered the phone.

"Yeah."

"Burt Kemper. Remember me?"

"Sure I do." In the old days Kemper had been what we called a geek—wafer thin, gawky, thick glasses, president of the Latin club. Now the geek ran a multi-million dollar software business.

"Blast from the past, huh?"

"What can I do for you, Burt?"

He wanted to meet and have a chat. I knew what it was about. No one calls me out of the blue to chat about the Tigers or the stock exchange. I'd seen Kemper's photo in the newspaper now and then, galas and society functions. I'd seen the gorgeous woman on his arm in the photos. And I'd always wondered: how long is *that* going to last?

We met at the Gilded Boar, where I made him buy me drinks. He hadn't aged well—pot belly, hair transplant, skin pale and blotchy from sitting in front of a computer all day—but there was something cocky about him now, as if all that money sat stacked up behind him, like a row of tanks. He told me about his wife, and his suspicions about Philip Asher.

"Who is he?" I asked.

"Oh, some professor. She wanted to take some classes, said she was bored, so I thought, why not? Keep her occupied while I slaved away earning the money that pays for the tennis and shopping and all that crap. Pretty soon it's 'Professor Asher this' and 'Professor Asher that.' I thought it was a schoolgirl crush on some daddy figure."

"Professor of what?" I asked.

"I don't know. Literature? All I know is she's reading all these goddamn books."

"Terrible thing," I said. "Reading."

"Worse than computers, in my opinion."

"How sure are you?" I asked. "That something's going on, I mean."

"Pretty sure. But that's where you come in. I need to know." He gulped from his martini.

"If I can prove it, she won't get a dime."

"I see."

He leaned in closer, blinked a few times. "I never thought this would happen to me, Lucas. I've had business deals go sour, I've lost millions on the market, I've had partners run off to Mexico with my money. None of it stings like this."

I wasn't sure how to take this little speech. Was his heart broken, or his ego?

I asked him some basic questions—where they lived, etc.—then got a little personal. Though he and Mrs. Kemper were well into their thirties, and had been married for more than five years, they had no children. I got the sense it was a sore subject. I don't enjoy poking at wounds, but I thought it might be pertinent, so I poked.

"She's barren," he said.

"Barren?" What year *was* this—1910?

He made a dismissive gesture, as if this line of questioning was irrelevant. "Something to do with her ovaries, I don't know."

Over another drink he asked how much my services would run him. I quoted a figure, and he grimaced. The richer they are, the more they gripe. I told him he could shop elsewhere. He pulled a checkbook from his briefcase—more like a ledger, really, with multiple checks per page. It's a simple equation: the more checks per page, the more money in the bank. "Make it out to cash," I said, noting the time. If I hurried I could get to the bank before it closed.

He told me he'd called his wife earlier to let her know he had to work late. "Maybe you can find out something tonight," he said.

"You in a hurry for bad news?"

"I just want to get it over with."

On our way out, he said, "I always liked you, Lucas. You weren't like the other popular kids. You were more . . . mature or something."

"You think so?" I wanted badly to tell him I was the one who had painted the windshield of his daddy's car bright pink in the school parking lot.

"I hope I'm wrong about her," he said. "You think I'm wrong, Lucas?"

Of course I thought he wasn't wrong, but I didn't say anything. I left him standing next to his pearl-blue Audi, looking forlorn. We did not shake hands or say goodbye.

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The slow song ended, and a fast-tempo'd pop tune came on the jukebox, all drums and synthesizers. Tina took Asher's drink order. He and Mrs. Kemper barely looked at her, as if they didn't want her to recognize them later.

Meanwhile, up on the stage a pony-tailed kid started setting up a drum kit. Two more musicians arrived lugging amplifiers and guitar cases.

Mrs. Kemper was talking animatedly to Asher. She seemed to be complaining, though not about him, apparently. He held her hand and listened. Mrs. Kemper paused when Tina brought a beer for him and another cosmo for her, then started up again after she left.

"Looks like you're almost done with that," Tina said to me. "Can I bring you another?"

"Better not," I said. "I need to keep my wits about me."

"Hope you're not driving."

I laughed. "Not tonight, anyway."

"I'll check back in a bit," she said, then walked away. It was a pink rose—the tattoo that peeked out from the back of her jeans.

The drummer started banging away at the snare and toms, fine-tuning their placement. The others removed guitars from cases and plugged them in. I could tell the band would be awful—they had Holiday Inn lounge written all over them—but there was nothing I could do until Mrs. Kemper and Asher left the club. He leaned in closer to her, listening intently to her story.

I was bored. I wished Tina would come over and sit on my lap.

*

After cashing Kemper's check that afternoon I went home to get ready. By six o'clock I was driving by the Kempers' home, a massive monstrosity in a subdivision made up of similar monstrosities. Theirs was especially offensive, with its beige vinyl siding and the ubiquitous round foyer window above the front door. There was no place to park without being noticed, so I pulled in to a gas station just outside the subdivision entrance. Kemper had given me a

description of his wife's car, a red Range Rover. Why these people need cars designed to survive the outback is beyond me. Three or four of the damn things emerged from the subdivision, none of them red, before Mrs. Kemper made her appearance. She turned west, and I pulled in behind her.

She drove cautiously, never ran a yellow light or turned left when there was oncoming traffic. I figured that, if she was indeed stepping out on Kemper, this was her first affair. Serial philanderers, in my experience, drive like assholes.

She parked in an upscale strip mall and went into a salon. Manicures, pedicures, bikini waxing—that sort of place. I sat in the car imagining her getting waxed. It helped with the tedium.

I'd forgotten how dull my line of work can be. This was my first gig in a while. Two months earlier I was following a man named Chandler Tate, suspected by his wife of sleeping with their real estate agent. For three days I tailed this guy all over tarnation—he was a sales rep for a shoe manufacturer—and never saw him do anything but work, eat, and take a leak. Then, on day four, Tate wakes up next to his suspicious wife, climbs into his minivan filled with shoeboxes, drives out onto I-94, parks on the shoulder, and steps out into traffic. I damn near ran him over myself before pulling off. Looking back I watched as he placed himself in front of an eighteen-wheeler. When the driver jerked left into another lane, Tate moved with him. In that moment I wished I was truly blind. It would blow your mind, what a 10,000-ton object traveling at 65 miles per hour can do to the human body. I decided then and there to take a leave of absence. But I was now short on funds, which is why I answered the phone when Burt Kemper called.

The guitarist and bassist started tuning up, silently, using modern tuning equipment. No one knows how to do anything without a machine anymore. Meanwhile, Mrs. Kemper and Asher kept up their conversation, leaning in toward each another. He reached out to touch her cheek. She flinched a bit, but didn't pull away. She scanned the room, worried that someone might see this display of affection. Again she looked right at me. I sipped my Guinness and stared back.

Onstage, the guitarist stepped up to the microphone. "Check. Check. One, two. *Check.*" Tina walked past and unplugged the jukebox in the middle of a song. In the brief lull between the recorded music and the band's opening number, the room filled with the sound of chatter. Somewhere in there I could make out Mrs. Kemper's voice:

"I don't know if I'm ready for this."

Asher said something that I couldn't hear, but his tone was pleading as he leaned forward and squeezed her hand. Then the drummer clicked his sticks four times and the band started playing a sensitive pop song with vague lyrics. Asher leaned in farther, pleaded some more. Mrs. Kemper wiped an eye with her knuckles. Then they stood up, rather quickly. I wasn't ready for that. After they left, I got up and followed. As I passed the three college girls they watched me poke my white cane at the floor and giggled. I stopped, leaned down to the blonde, and said, "You have a stain on your blouse." She looked down at her blouse, then up at me. She smiled, as if to say, *I knew it.*

The front room had grown even more crowded. I couldn't see Asher and Mrs. Kemper anywhere. I should not have stopped to speak to that blonde; sometimes my pride gets the best of me. I pushed my way toward the door, "Excuse me, excuse me," banging at people's ankles with my cane. Out on the sidewalk I ran to the curb, looked up and down the block. No sign of them. I cursed, then turned to see the girl at the door staring at me.

"What the fuck?" she said.

I shrugged. "I once was blind. But now I can see."

*

I ran to Mrs. Kemper's car, but it was gone. Did they leave together or separately? I walked back to the bar.

"Ten bucks," the girl at the door said.

"I paid already. And it was only five."

"That was a blind guy. Ten bucks for the sighted."

"So I owe you five," I said, handing over a Lincoln.

She took it and waved me in. I pushed my way through the front room, not bothering with the cane. I found Tina and waved her over. As she approached I removed my dark glasses.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I know, I know. I'm a private investigator, I was on a case."

"So you're not . . .?"

"Nope."

She looked a tad disappointed in me, but less than I'd expected.

"The couple that was sitting at the table over there," I said, pointing. "Have you seen them here before?"

"Once or twice, I guess."

"What is it? Once, or twice? Or more?"

"Maybe three times."

"Occasionally, or has it been three times in a short span of time?"

A man at a nearby table called for her. She waved and held up a finger: one minute.

"Three times in the past couple weeks, maybe. What's this about, anyway?"

"I'll tell you later," I said.

She cocked her head. "Is that right?"

"When are you off, Tina?"

The customer called for her again, and she threw him a dirty look.

"Two, two-thirty."

"See you then," I said.

She looked me up and down. "I think I liked you better when you *couldn't* see."

"I'll wear my dark glasses, just for you."

*

I swung by the Kemper house, though I suspected there'd be nothing there for me to see. The two lovebirds weren't stupid enough to go to her place. The house was dark except for a lonely light in the front hall. I pictured Burt Kemper in his 25th floor office, adding up numbers and fantasizing about me informing him that his wife's relationship with her professor was innocent. Sorry, Burt.

Still, I didn't have definitive proof. An intense chat at a downtown club did not necessarily translate into a torrid affair. I'd have to get more evidence.

Earlier, I had dug up Asher's address from the university website, and I drove over there now. He lived near the campus in an old Craftsman-style house that sat dark and quiet mid-block. Maybe they went to a motel, I thought. I'd have called it a day if I hadn't spotted a red Range Rover parked toward the end of the block, woefully out of place among Subarus and Hondas. I found a spot around the corner and headed back on foot. Streetlights cast yellow cones of light on alternate sides of the street, but Asher's house sat in shadow. I slowed a bit as I

walked past, listening for any sounds coming from inside. No lights shone in the front of the house, and I heard nothing but crickets. I walked on, making sure no one in the neighborhood was out on their porch taking in the lovely spring evening, then at the end of the block I turned back. When I reached the house I ducked up the driveway. Peering into the detached one-car garage I saw a dark sedan. From there I crept toward the back of the house, pausing to peek through a side door into a darkened kitchen. I quietly swung open the off-kilter white picket fence door and entered Asher's back yard. It was small, with a deck table and chairs, a brief stretch of scraggly grass, and a few shrubs around the perimeter. Clearly the professor was not the gardening type. I stepped toward the rear of the yard, and from there I could see that the back bedroom, on the second floor above the kitchen, was dimly lit, perhaps by candles. It figured. These English professors. I wondered how a physics or accounting teacher would woo a student.

Watching the candlelight flicker across a patch of bedroom ceiling, I couldn't help but imagine what was going on up there. Sure, this job can be monotonous sometimes, but I have to admit it can also be titillating. Errant wives and husbands, in the throes of a passion that drives them to this sort of treason—there's something about it that makes my heart pump faster. To feel that deeply! To abandon loyalty and the holy pledge of marriage! Think of the excitement coursing through Mrs. Kemper at that moment. Was she weeping quietly as Asher kissed her bare shoulders, or was she laughing as she felt, perhaps for the first time, the kind of lust that can make you thrillingly stupid? I'll fess up: I got an erection thinking of these two. Whatever was to happen later on between me and Tina paled next to this kind of intensity. I felt bad that I had to tell Kemper about it, that he would initiate divorce proceedings, that his wife and her lover would then have to abandon this exhilarating game and come out into the open. Of course, it wouldn't last. Half the excitement comes from meeting at dingy bars and looking around the

room to see if anyone is watching. At first they'll feel relief, sure, but with that comes a void. When your lover can call any time he pleases, when you can meet anywhere at any time, something is lost. The relationship starts to rot from the inside. But for now, tonight, these two were on fire.

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Kemper had told his wife that he'd be home around ten, and sure enough, at 9:30 a light went on in Asher's house, and Mrs. Kemper emerged onto the front porch. Asher, in a terrycloth robe, stood in the open door as they spoke for a moment. Mrs. Kemper combed her hair, laughed, then kissed Asher, a long, lingering kiss meant to last them both for a while. From across the street, behind a minivan, I snapped a few photographs.

Mrs. Kemper finally pulled away, turned, and headed down the porch steps. Asher watched her go. She looked back and waved. He waved back, but there was something about his manner that confused me. He didn't have that look I've seen so often, a combination of loss, longing, and satisfaction. His look showed something else. Relief?

I didn't follow Mrs. Kemper—I knew exactly where she was going. I stayed and watched Asher as he shut the door. I crossed the street and headed up the driveway. The kitchen light switched on. I edged close to the side door, my back against the clapboards. I heard Asher talking to someone on the phone:

“. . . headed home . . . I'm sure he saw us . . .” Then a bitter sounding laughter. He was talking to Burt Kemper.

I stood for a while with my back against the house, long after the kitchen light went out and Asher headed upstairs. I looked at my watch: 10:30. More than three hours until Tina got off work.

I headed back to my car. I sat inside and brought up the photos on my camera. Mrs. Kemper kissing Asher. I felt foolish. Ridiculous, geeky Burt Kemper had pulled one over on me. He probably knew all along that I'd painted his car way back when. He was home by now, waiting for the photos to appear in his inbox. Maybe *he* had something going on the side, someone young and fertile and greedy enough to overlook the hair transplant. Or maybe he just wanted to be on his own. I pictured him lying in bed next to his wife, in the dark. Smiling.

Then I deleted the photos.

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The next day I drove downtown to Kemper's office. On the elevator ride up I was feeling a little wobbly. Tina, it turned out, had a taste for bourbon. What could I do? I had to keep up with her. Remind me to tell you about it sometime.

Kemper's assistant showed me right into his office.

"Whatcha find out, Lucas?" he asked.

I looked at his face for a moment. Even hung over I have a pretty sensitive bullshit detector, but I have to admit the pin did not go into the red. If I was right about him, this guy was a great liar. But then so am I.

"I got nothing," I said.

His face crumpled a bit, and I was pretty sure I had him pegged correctly.

"Nothing? Well, did you follow her?"

"Yup."

"And did she meet Asher?"

"Yup."

"And?"

"All innocent stuff, as far as I could tell. They met at a student hangout, talked about literature and that sort of thing."

"Literature?"

"*Gatsby*, I think it was."

Kemper spun his chair around and gazed out the window. He had a view of the whole town, and it was making me a little queasy, to tell the truth. I started to sweat, certain that an anxiety attack was coming on.

From behind the high-backed chair Kemper asked, "And after?"

"They went their separate ways," I said, glad for the distraction.

He spun back around and eyed me. He probably did this to business partners when they told him profits were sagging.

I smiled. "Good news, right, Burt?"

"Mm."

"I could try again," I said. "Tonight. Of course I'll have to charge you for another day."

He waved me off. "No, no. Never mind." He stood and escorted me quickly to the door.

"Well, it was great to see you, Lucas."

"Glad to be of help, Burt."

Next thing I knew, I was in the outer office looking at his assistant.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, eyeing my pasty anxiety face.

I noticed then a little bump beneath her blouse. She was pregnant. And no wedding band. Was Kemper sleeping with *her*? She was about thirty, pretty, with the morally flexible look of a supplicant.

"Everything's great," I said.

The elevator ride down to the underground parking garage took forever. Men and women in suits got on and off with their briefcases and grim game faces. As I stood at the rear of the car watching the well-barbered backs of their heads I wondered, how many of these people are up to something? How many are sleeping with an assistant or embezzling from petty cash? How many are desperate enough to step out in front of an eighteen-wheeler?

In the parking garage I searched and found Kemper's blue Audi, taking up two spaces. From my inside coat pocket I removed a small spray can. In a moment the car's windshield was painted entirely pink.

Sometimes I love my work.