

Photo Op

by Peggy Ehrhart

The girl looked like she was from some flyover state. Perky face, sunburned nose. She was eyeing the Unisphere through her camera.

Tourist obviously, with the old World's Fair grounds on her travel agenda. Like the Japanese guy that asked me to take his picture the other day. Handed over his camera, trusting as hell. Camera looked real expensive too.

I could've split, made a run for it, but why? I've got better ways to make a buck.

The girl's scoping out the scene, and sure enough, it comes to her: a picture of her *and* the fair grounds would be cool.

She catches sight of me and bounces over. "Would you take my picture with the Unisphere?" She hands me the camera, one of those digital jobs.

She poses and I snap it. Some guy is wandering past, so he ends up in it too, nice-looking, maybe in his thirties.

She thanks me, and that's that.

Except it's not.

She heads toward the ferris wheel, and I settle back onto my bench.

Next thing I know the guy's easing himself down next to me. "I'd like the camera," he says.

I edge away from him. "I don't have any camera," I say.

He nods toward the Unisphere. "You got a nice shot of the Unisphere before. Nice shot of me too."

“The camera was that girl’s camera. She asked me to take her picture.”

“Good cover,” he says. “You private dicks are clever, but I’ve seen it all.” He’s holding his hand out.

Then the light bulb goes off in my head. That’s how I get along. I see a need and I meet it.

“Spill it,” I say.

He does. His wife’s got a restraining order against him. He’s not supposed to be anywhere in Queens because that’s where she lives. He roughed her up and she went to the cops. He’s gonna go to jail unless he stays away, so the last thing he wants is a picture of him with the Unisphere in it too.

“What if I get you the camera?” I say.

He scratches his chin. “If you don’t know her, how’re you gonna get the camera?”

“She’s over there.” I jerk a thumb toward the ferris wheel. “You don’t need the whole camera, just the memory card, that little chip thing. And we can take it any place where they develop pictures and check to make sure the picture of you is on it.”

“OK,” he says. “How’s a hundred bucks sound?”

“Nope,” I say. “I’m gonna have to give *her* something.”

“What do those chips cost?” he says. “Twenty bucks?”

“What if *she*’s a dick?” I say. “Your wife’s gonna pay her for that picture. A lot. And what if she isn’t a dick? She’s got her vacation snaps on there.” I touch his arm. “A thousand bucks.”

“You’re crazy.”

I stand up. “Let me know what jail they put you in. I’ll visit.”

“Wait,” he says. “I’ll do it. You go after her and I’ll hit a cash machine. See you in twenty minutes at that pizza place by the El station.”

I track her down and lay the story out. She keeps up the tourist front. “The guy’s just paranoid,” I say, “but I told him I’d help him. Hand over the card and I’ll make it worth your while.”

“My vacation pictures are on it,” she says. Her face puckers like she’s going to cry.

“A hundred?”

“No way.”

We settle on five hundred. I’ve got to hit the cash machine too, so we stroll up to Roosevelt. Taking out five hundred puts me seriously into overdraft mode, but I’ll be sticking twice as much back in.

I trade her the cash for the card and head for the pizza place, sit where I can watch the street.

Pretty soon the twenty minutes is up and there’s no sign of the guy.

Finally I see him, across the street. He gets to the corner, but he doesn’t try to cross.

Then I see her. She walks up to him and grabs his arm.

He says something to her and they start to laugh. Pretty soon they’re laughing so hard I don’t see how they can even walk straight.

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