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## FINDING THE INVISIBLE MAN— THE MISSING MILLIONAIRE

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**I**N THE PSYCHIC AND CON-ARTIST CASES, I am investigating an adversary who has stolen thousands, even millions of dollars. But in other cases, I am tracking down people who stand to inherit millions.

This story begins with me walking up to a house on a case. An elfin, bearded man in blue pajamas clutching a black and white cat came out and walked up to the cyclone fence. “Want to buy my bicycle?” he asked.

“No, not really. Can I talk to your landlord? And who are you?”

“I’m Bucky. Do you have any money so I can buy cat food?” It was one of those breezy, sunny summer days in the East Bay, a comfortable 65 degrees. I told him that I only had \$5 on me, reached into my pocket and handed it to him.

Such was my introduction to the man known as Bucky. The case had come to me from an East Coast private investigator working for a trust attorney. Bucky, then in his 60s, had not been seen by any of his family members in more than 25 years. In fact, the only proof he was alive were a few letters and emails—that is, if they were truly from him. Bucky’s mother had a sizeable estate and was sending him monthly checks for \$3,000 or \$4,000 to an address in Oakland or to a PO Box in Berkeley. The checks were being cashed at the same bank. Bucky’s brother killed himself and left him more than \$100,000. The attorney sent email and letters to Bucky that he would have to come forward with identification if he wanted to collect on the brother’s estate. Bucky did not come forward but sent a couple emails, originating out of Texas, to the attorney, stating he did not want to come forward. So, he presumably was alive. Then, Bucky’s mother died and left him more than \$7 million. The

attorney sent more letters and emails and hired the East Coast private eye who in turn hired me.

We had a genuine mystery. Was Bucky alive? Was he the one cashing the checks? Why would he not want to come forward and claim all the money?

The East Coast P.I. had already got underway with the hard work. The digital divide looms large: people over a certain age don't live on the Internet. There were a couple of possible hits from Bucky on web sites and blogs, but those were from over a decade ago. Bucky had grown up attending the finest prep schools and a private college, but subsequently he had cut all ties from the stuffy East. He flew free and, based on the evidence on the blogs, embraced a nomadic lifestyle of traveling around the country in a van. We did all the basics to try to locate Bucky, including:

- Running his Social Security number. Nothing showed that he used it in the last 20 years. A couple of names came back under his SSN, and I interviewed them; they knew nothing. Credit bureaus make mistakes.
- Checking whether he had a driver's license. He had one in California more than 20 years ago but surrendered it in New Mexico. He also had vehicles registered to him in Alaska more than 20 years ago. We learned from the licenses that he would be about six-foot-two.
- Checking criminal, civil, and traffic courts in all the states where he had lived. Nothing. Also checking the federal Pacer index for criminal, civil, and bankruptcy records. Zip.
- Searching for surviving relatives with whom to check. There were none.
- Looking for cell phones, utilities, or cable registered under his name. Again, nothing.
- Contacting the alumni office from his college. No updates.
- Searching all the main social media and online resources. No hits other than the old blog posts.
- Searching online death indexes. Nothing there.
- I even checked with a law enforcement source. Nothing in the computers ever, nationwide for Bucky, not even a traffic stop or jaywalking citation.

A number of bizarre scenarios presented themselves. Maybe Bucky had got a hold of someone else's SSN and date of birth and had created a whole new identify for himself? Or perhaps someone else had gained Bucky's confidence and gleaned enough information to write those letters and the emails to the attorney? What if poor Bucky had died in a ditch in the high desert and his bleached white bones were all that was left of him?

The search turned to Oakland and the East Bay, my stomping grounds. I contracted for some surveillance down at the place where the checks had been sent to him, a spooky area next to a freeway, bordering on a recycling plant. We ran license plates parked near the house: nothing relevant. No signs of present occupation. Weeds and plants obscured a view of the house, a chain and lock prevented access. I interviewed past residents of that address; they had never heard of Bucky. Focus shifted to the landlord, and although nothing sinister came up on him in a public records check, we held off approaching him out of concern that perhaps the landlord was the one cashing the checks. I dropped by the house a couple times in person to poke around for clues: nothing. I even had one of my former high school rugby players, a Mexican kid, do a pretext looking for yard work, but he couldn't get anyone to answer.

We reached the end of our rope, and it came time to try to interview the landlord. In this business you don't call to schedule appointments for an interview, because that leads to blow-offs. The best technique is a "hot show"—surprise them at the door and hope to get them talking.

That summer day, rather than approaching the house from the street again, I got the idea of walking through the recycling plant parking lot, where a corner of the back yard was accessible. To my delight, I found a bicycle with a "for sale" sign resting against the fence. This part of the yard and house was invisible to surveillance from the street. Had I not approached from the hidden angle, I would not have found Bucky—and Bucky might not have become a millionaire.

I told him the reason for my visit. He explained that all along he had been receiving and cashing the checks, until the attorney stopped sending them during our attempts to verify his whereabouts and identity. Bucky had also been receiving all the correspondence from the attorney, but explained that he had not come forward because he did not have a valid driver's license, which was required by a notary in order to sign

the papers to start collecting the inheritances. The East Coast P.I. had located college yearbook photos and sent them to me; it was definitely Bucky. He is a sound, pleasant guy who does a lot of bike riding.

We had found our man, and all that remained were some minor procedural hoops to jump through before he could collect his fortune. The Bucky matter took a bit more time to resolve, however, due to his reluctance to obtain proper identification. The lawyers and court back East want him to get an official California identification card. Bucky just says he will “go back east” when he gets around to it and bristles at the prospects of applying for an official ID. After annoying Bucky on a few further occasions by dropping by unannounced, he finally agreed to answer a series of questions from the attorney to prove his identity. He will live out his remaining years wealthy, perhaps content to stay in his back yard home near the freeway and the recycling plant.

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Bucky’s case was easy in terms of ethics; to find him, all I had to do was make use of publicly available information, put in some legwork, and draw from my past experience. But not every case is so easy in determining right from wrong. I have a sliding scale of ethics, like many people in my profession (and probably yours). Any private eye worth his salt has tricks up his or her sleeve, resources cultivated and hoarded for years. What amuses me is the holier-than-thou private eye who purports to speak for the industry, claiming we are all Boy Scouts pledged to do no wrong. If they aren’t hypocrites, these self-appointed spokespeople are not very effective investigators. The public has never quite trusted private investigators, but the modern private dick is much more clever, educated, and resourceful than his predecessors. A good private investigator is like a good defensive back or linebacker who knows exactly what the rules and penalties are and will go right up to that line to test the referee and his opposition. He is careful to get back on the right side of the ball or remove his hands just in time to avoid being caught offside or committing a penalty.

When a case is going to play out in court, I avoid using any tactics that might be perceived as shady or underhanded or unethical. If I am expected to testify honestly about my methods, I won’t partake in questionable activities. When you are dealing with a criminal defense or a

civil matter, there is no room for lying or shading the truth. You will be found out and embarrassed. I have nothing but contempt for any cop or expert or investigator who lies under oath. You either have professional integrity, or you don't. Needless to say, I have experienced my share of friction with attorneys who didn't like my honest testimony or my refusal to shade or quibble.

For this reason, I find that I have more freedom to unleash resources in cases in which I am hired to locate a missing loved one or find a missing heir who might have money coming their way.

My trick? Information brokers. They have access to information on employment histories, credit accounts, utilities, bank accounts, phone records, and so on. About the only things they can't get are medical records and tax returns; obtaining those would be a felony. Still, I only use information brokers for good causes. Many private investigators and lawyers have been hung out to dry because they used information brokers in an attempt to win at all costs. For example, there was the infamous Hewlett Packard scandal, in which HP hired a law firm who used Action Research of Florida in order to identify the source of a leak to the press. The problem was that Action Research used pretexts to illicitly obtain phone records of reporters and others involved in the case. Confession: before all this hit the fan, Action was commonly used by private investigators, myself included, to get phone records. But the times and laws were changing. I stopped using Action because I could see that it was only a matter of time before the legality of what they were doing would come into question. Inevitably, the HP case made all the national papers and resulted in new laws. The father and son from Florida pleaded to aggravated identity theft and got three years' probation, and the fallout left a wide wake. While I could still get someone's phone records without a court order (illegally) through information brokers—everything is for sale—I choose not to because a few thousand bucks is not worth a felony.

In most cases, information brokers are not licensed as private investigators. They tend to be located in states such as Colorado, Texas, Missouri, and Florida with minimal oversight of private investigators and affiliated professions. My assumption is that they get their information through "inside sources" at utility companies, credit agencies, banks, and the like, as well as from "social engineering"—a euphemism

for tricking employees into breaking security procedures and providing sensitive information.

I am currently on about my seventh information broker, though I use a total of three of them concurrently depending on what I need. Of those I used formerly, one failed me three times. After charging me for no results for the third time, they sent me a pre-printed apology card and a couple chocolate chip cookies. Did they really have cards and cookies ready to send upon failing to deliver?

Another information broker, this one located in Missouri, whom I worked with for a short time was producing great results. On one case where I was having difficulty serving papers to an elusive subject, the broker was able to tell me the precise shop where the subject regularly bought her wine. We served her, wine in hand. I had to break off relations with the broker when I ran my own background on him and uncovered his history of meth arrests, larceny, and child abuse.

I went to Florida last year to meet with my latest information broker, a former collections executive for a major Las Vegas casino. A fellow P.I. had referred me to him. We met at a Cheesecake Factory near the Tampa Airport. Remember, all shady—as well as good—meetings occur near airports; better yet, at bars near airports. This broker is a short, balding guy in his late 60s, likes cigarettes and tennis, and wears gold jewelry. He has been in the information business for more than 15 years. I can give him a hotel room number, and he can give me the name of the person who paid for the room. He can also tell me what prescription medicine someone takes. He confided to me that the federal justice department and other federal agencies use his services.

My big gripe with information brokers, though, is that they are the flakiest mothers under the sun. They pull the rabbit out of the hat by telling you where a certain someone buys their liquor but then on the next case they won't return your call for two weeks rather than admit they have failed. They are brokers because they have their sources. But sources dry up; it's a constant exercise to find a good broker.

I do not mess with hacking email or with obtaining banking, financial, or medical records without a judgment, or with any avenues of research prohibited by federal and other laws. I suppose there are information brokers and private investigators who do such things, but it's just not worth it to me. On the other hand, if a client does have a court judgment

against someone, then I might contract out to a private eye who specializes in asset searches. Phone records are another area I steer clear of. In the old days many an unscrupulous P.I. or broker would simply pretext the phone company that their bill got rained on in the mailbox and request a new one. All of these avenues—banking records, phone records, emails—are powerful investigative tools, but due to their sensitivity most courts require subpoenas for such information.

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The caller from San Mateo told me she wanted to find her missing brother because their father was on his deathbed. She had hired a local private investigator before, but he had failed, and time was running out. I took the case not exactly knowing whether I could produce. She explained that the siblings of her Japanese-American family used to be close but how hurt they were by his absence; they had not heard from him in seven years and dad was about to die, and mom likely wouldn't be long in following him. For me to take a case I have to like the potential client. I come from a large family and could sympathize. She sounded serious and normal. She passed all my sniff tests.

I did all the regular steps: checking public records, commercial databases, free people-search web sites, in-person visits to the courts. Nothing. I called a broker I had used since my Nazarian days. I will refer to the broker as Martin.

Within a day or two Martin reported that the subject was possibly working at a restaurant in San Diego. With the client's permission I flew down to San Diego. I love it when clients pay me to travel. That's when I feel like I'm living the real private eye lifestyle, however bizarre the case may be. This time I'd be there for just a couple days working on obtaining video that would prove he was our missing subject.

I am good at spotting in person people whose faces I have seen only in a photo. For example, ears are unique, like fingerprints. An old San Francisco P.I., Paul Kangas, once told me to pay attention to ears when trying to identify someone. Following his method, I've found that he was right. I once found a runaway teenager in Berkeley by watching a crowd of hundreds of kids, specifically their ears, as they emerged from a high school until I saw the right pair. Harder to explain are "gut feelings"; I put my trust in them and often enough they turn out to be right. After a

week of searching unsuccessfully for a woman, I coincidentally saw her as I was exiting my gym. I did not have the photo handy, but I just knew it was her. I followed her on foot to her car, then followed her to where she lived. It's almost as if, when I need to win, I find a way.

Back to the missing brother in San Diego. I found him working in a sushi joint in a downscale part of town, north of the airport. I staked out the parking lot. I knew I had him. I followed him back to his apartment, noted the laundry hanging on the back porch, then beat it back to the hotel. Despite my trust in my gut, I had to be patient and keep watching him to be 100-percent I had the right man.

When I'm on surveillance as I was in San Diego, I see the minute, pedestrian rhythms of life. There is something comforting about watching life play out from my car's front seat. The bond between private investigator and his vehicle cannot be overestimated. As one veteran P.I. once said at a conference, "Your car is your little duck blind." He also spoke about the bond between the P.I. and his coffee machine: "I'm a Swede so I go through coffee machines like other people change shirts."

After doing some surveillance day and night in San Diego I would go back to my hotel and have a drink or two, watch ESPN or a movie, and call my wife. Repeated trips to the restaurant parking lot and his apartment established his daily routine: he lived a quiet life, alone and hard-working. After a few days I could confirm that I had the right man. Mission accomplished!

Normally, the industry's "best practices" would be to notify the subject and ask whether they wanted to be contacted by their relative or whoever was the client. But this case was different. I took the client at her word that her family needed this information as soon as possible. I gave her the skinny on her brother. A few weeks later she told me that she and her sister had made the trip to San Diego and had a great reunion with their brother. They brought him back in touch with their elderly parents, just in time. (I generally don't do what is known in the trade as "nostalgia locates" for people trying to find lost loves or old friends. Relationships end for a reason: if the estranged ones wanted to get in touch with you, they would do so on their own initiative!)

Another memorable missing-persons matter involved a client who had not been in touch with her brother in about a decade. Same scenario: the parents were about to die. I contacted an information broker

who passed me a tip that the subject might be paying utilities at a place in Palmdale in rural northern Los Angeles County. The local sheriff had looked for him on a welfare check but couldn't locate him. To find him I would have to drive down myself to the scrub and desert.

Oakland has a temperate climate, but on the July day I set off on my drive it was 90. As I went east through Pleasanton and Modesto and then headed south it was about 100. I drove my Infiniti I-30 six-cylinder sedan at about 75 miles per hour. In Fresno it hit 105. By the time I reached Bakersfield it was 110. I drove over the Grapevine, the connector of Interstate 5 to Southern California, at 117 degrees. I prayed my car engine would not quit. I turned off the air conditioning on the steepest part of the climb. I could feel the swamp-butt effect on the leather seats. I hung a left and drove another hour or so to a hotel.

It seems as if whatever address I'm looking for will never be clearly marked or easy to find. All next day I drove around in the heat looking for the house. Finally that evening, after the heat broke and went under 100, I found it, basically a shack, on a farm property. He was there, living with a partner. He was in bad physical condition, he possibly had AIDS. I put him back in touch with his sister. Another case where I was able to use a broker to get good information for a good cause.

Potential clients always want to know how much an investigation will cost and how long it will take. I tell them that every case is different and suggest a retainer to try to see how far I will get within an initial budget. There are just too many variables to give them a solid estimate. It's not like I am replacing a clutch or a water pump or a leaky faucet.

In the Internet age, where all kinds of personal information is just a Google search away, why should anybody hire a private investigator in the first place? John and Jane Square who have jobs and a mortgage are easy to locate using the free or cheap searches, such as Spokeo, Radaris, Zaba, even easier if you're looking for someone with an uncommon name. But the more unstable a person is, the harder they are to find. As I'm writing this, I just tested Spokeo on myself; it reported my "current" address as a place on Martin Luther King Jr. Way in Oakland where I lived 20 years ago. As P.I.s, however, we have access to more robust databases that are drawn from a wider range of relevant sources, such as cable and other utilities, and are updated more frequently. If the cheap stuff fails, contact a local private eye and put him or her on a strict budget.

As with society as a whole, we private investigators are more dependent than ever on databases, computers, and technology. While the volume of digital information has swelled exponentially, the Internet is not always the final answer. Any piece of information will always have to be confirmed by the senses, as in the example of spotting a man and his cat in an unlisted back yard near an Oakland freeway. Shoe leather and “eyes on” intelligence are still perhaps the most important forms of gathering information. Think of it this way: A GPS device tells you where a particular vehicle or cell phone might be, but it provides no context. Who is the person in the vehicle or with the phone, and what are they doing? You will not have any idea unless you observe the situation with your own eyes. As any good reporter will tell you, scoops don’t come from hanging out in the newsroom—you have to go out and look for them! Decades after switching careers, I still do an awful lot of that on the job.