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Marital espionage: Private eyes who spy on cheating spouses

by SHAWN ALFF

In a waterfront hotel in Tampa, a Miami businessman sits gulping \$14 martinis in a dim corner of the lobby bar. A young woman with dark hair and a red dress enters. The businessman approaches her, tries to shake her hand, then accepts an awkward hug. They return to the corner of the bar and chat for about 10 minutes before he drains his cocktail, straightens his Tommy Bahama shirt over his gut, and exits with the woman to his room. She is a recently married USF student moonlighting as a \$250-an-hour escort and the man is married — or so I'm told by the two men showing me video of the encounter on a Smartphone.

Alan Payton and Tim Scheuermann look like the kind of nondescript guys you might see drinking at the table next to you or driving in the car behind you. Their job depends on them being forgettable. They are private investigators for the Investigative Support Group (ISG), and every year around Valentine's Day business booms.

"If they have a mistress, they're going to see her around Valentine's Day," Payton says. "Maybe a couple days before or a few days after, but it's going to happen."

Which makes V-Day high season for marital espionage.

Knowing when and where a spouse will likely cheat is important in the time-intensive surveillance game.

"The gym is one of the greatest places to see infidelity happen," Payton says. "Cheaters go there at 6:30 or 7 to meet up when their spouse is at work. I can't tell you how many times I've caught a partner coming out of the gym kissing their lover or getting into the same car together."

ISG sends out a two-man surveillance team to reduce the chance of detection, so the hours add up fast. Accordingly, its clients are usually well off, people with household incomes in the low six figures who are often going through, or preparing for, a high-dollar divorce.

But catching a cheater can be an easier task for investigators than, say, collecting evidence on a personal injury lawsuit. Because they're working with a client who is married to the subject under investigation, and who consequently has joint property rights, the PIs can do things like install recording devices in a home or put a GPS unit on the subject's car. In the case of the Miami businessman, the wife called the Tampa hotel where her husband was staying to request his call history. Payton then ran the numbers and discovered they all belonged to escort services.

While the PIs do have some standard surveillance equipment — black SUVs with tinted windows, high definition cameras, recording devices hidden in key chains

— Payton's favorite piece of spy gear is his smartphone. A cheater may never suspect that the man texting a few tables away is actually filming him flirting with an escort. Similarly, while technologies like Facebook have made it easier for spouses to cheat, they also make it easier to get caught.

"It's amazing what people will put on their Facebooks," Payton says. "We go on there all the time."

The team has established a fake female persona on Facebook, but they deny requests from clients to entrap a spouse. They refuse to set up meetings or send attractive confederates into a bar to proposition a subject. They leave this kind of sexual espionage to their competitors.

More women contact ISG than men, but the company does get a high number of husbands and even some mothers-in-law as clients. A spouse's suspicions are often very telling, usually provoked by some minor change in a partner's behavior.

"He's staying out more, he's going to the gym, he's changed his appearance," Scheuermann says. "Those can all be indicators."

In a recent case, a husband grew suspicious when, doing the laundry for the first time, he discovered thongs. This struck him as odd, considering his wife never wore thongs for him.

But proof of infidelity doesn't necessarily lead to divorce.

"The way the economy is now, some of them stay because they have to," Payton says. "I've had one or two clients who will have an affair with the other person's spouse to get back at their cheating partners."

If evidence that a spouse is cheating doesn't end in a divorce, then why would someone pay thousands of dollars for this information?

"Sometimes we'll follow someone and they'll be fine," Payton explains. "That gives the spouse the peace of mind that now they can go on with their life... But sometimes women will get upset if their husband is just having contact with another woman. I have a case where there's some texting, like 'How you doing?' It could be innocent. We don't know. But the wife isn't happy."

Even though Florida is a no-fault state and infidelity doesn't necessarily impact a divorce settlement, it may suggest even deeper levels of deceit.

"If a guy is cheating and he knows there may be a divorce on the horizon, he may be hiding money," Payton says. "We'll follow him and all of a sudden he stops at a bank that she doesn't know about. Then you have the child custody issues. Is the person capable of raising their children? What kind of people is he associating with?"

Both investigators have been married for over 20 years. When asked how their job has impacted their relationships, they laugh.

"We know what *not* to do," Scheuermann says, joking.

"So why do these cheaters make it so easy to get caught?" I ask.

"A lot of it is arrogance," Payton says. "This guy we're following now is involved with some money and is probably feeling pretty good about himself and is just ready to break out. What we've witnessed from day one is that a lot of it has just been out in the open."

Studies have shown that people in the throes of sexual intercourse experience a severe reduction in peripheral vision; likewise, the excitement of a new affair can erase all sense of rational judgment.

"Ninety-eight percent of the people we follow are just oblivious to everything they do in life," Payton says. "Like the case we're working now. This guy traveled to The Todd to get some toys, then went back to the hotel room to wait for her. It was just total tunnel vision because that's all he wanted in life. He just focused on that one thing. When you're following someone, they have no clue because they aren't looking for it."

Payton has only been "made" once, and only then because the client couldn't help boasting to his unfaithful wife that he knew exactly where she was and who she was with — while Payton still had her under surveillance. The first rule of hiring a PI is not to talk about it, as this information will inevitably make it back to the subject.

Both men make it a point not to glamorize their profession, saying that it's nothing like the movies. But the pair does occasionally get exciting cases, like the time Payton was hired to spy on a celebrity client in South Beach during fashion week.

"I'm sitting in a trailer park on some boring insurance fraud case and Alan keeps texting me pictures of him with models in South Beach," Scheuermann says.

"He had to blend in," I say. "Did your wife get to see those pictures?"

"Probably not," Payton says, grinning. "I know better."

While everyone at the fashion shows was taking pictures of the new looks, Payton was snapping photos of the female celebrity with her suspected lover. No hard evidence of infidelity materialized until the last hour of the investigation. Of course, to get the evidence Payton had to resort to some less than glamorous tactics. He laid on the sidewalk beside a homeless man named Marvin to discreetly videotape the celebrity walking by with her lover.

"We were working 16 hours a day, then all of a sudden within that last hour, boom, I get the money shot of them kissing," Payton says. "That was a fun one. But there are the other ones."

Their typical cheating-spouse case is in the suburbs, which makes surveillance trickier.

"The infidelity cases are fun at times," Payton says, "but I mean, we've gone through people's garbage. Legally we can if it's at the curb. It's disgusting, but it's amazing what people throw away. We'll find out what other bank accounts they have or if they're heavy drinkers."

While it may be easy to think of these PIs as the un-matchmakers — tearing apart relationships instead of bringing lovers together — they are rarely called in to spy on happy marriages. In many cases, one partner is trying to work things out through counseling while the other partner just doesn't care. Other times the pair is already separated but has yet to divorce. However, there is the rare occasion when a spouse believes everything is going great until she reads something like the story Payton penned last V-Day in a trade magazine detailing signs of an unfaithful partner.

"The story went live online before it went to print," Payton says. "The next morning we get a call at 7 in the morning with a woman saying, 'You just described my husband. He does all these things.'"

"Was he cheating?" I ask.

"He was," Payton says. "Most of the time if you have a feeling your partner is cheating, it's happening."

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Check out more about Investigative Support Group, Alan Payton, or Tim Scheuermann at [IMarriedaCheater.com](#)

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