SHORT STORY

# Camera Man

by Richard Risemberg



"Wire and Pipe" by Maroula Blades

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The old camera lay heavy as a gun in his hand. The dull sheen of its metal top contrasted with the worn leather that covered the body. There was a lens attached, but dust smeared its curved glass. The numbers imprinted in white around its circumference were still visible, and what's more, he still knew what they meant.

"This camera belonged to my dad," he told his wife, "and I used one just like it for years. Back in the days before digital, before automatic everything. It should still work. You can still get film for it. Developing it costs a lot more than it used to, but it would be worth it. I took great pictures with mine. Better pictures than my dad ever took with this one."

His wife answered, "I'm surprised he didn't know how to use it. That doesn't sound like him." They had buried the old man a month before, and the material remnants of his life had flowed into theirs.

"What I mean is, he knew how to use it too damn well. He was an engineer after all. He probably knew more about how it worked — the lenses, everything — than I ever will. That was the problem. He was paying more attention to the camera than to the pictures he took. Used to drive us crazy, back when we were young."

He told her the story of the old man and his camera, which he had never told her before, since it was a minor memory of a minor trauma in a life filled with his parents' eternal *Sturm und Drang*. The vacation trips, having to line up in front of some natural wonder; his father had made a list of natural wonders and historical monuments that they should all see, he loved lists, and he went through it methodically year by year: the Sequoias, the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls. Although the old man was parsimonious, he spared little expense on the family vacations: plane tickets, rental cars, motels. Nothing ever first-class; engineers don't pay for first class, ever. No greasy spoon diners; there was a health issue there. But no white tablecloths either. When the son traveled on his own later, he developed a taste for old classic hotels. He never told the old man, who would have disapproved.

"I remember him lining us up in front of whatever: the Lincoln Memorial, some dank platform with a view of Niagara Falls, an overlook at the Grand Canyon. Did I ever tell you? I once saw a 'manual' for wedding photographers. That's what it called itself, but it was really just a pamphlet. It gave precise instructions on how to line up the wedding party for the grand photo, how to place everyone's hands — to within half an inch, seriously. How to set up the lights. The idea seemed to be that every wedding party photo should look as much like every other as possible. Well, my dad could have written the family vacation version of that pamphlet. He'd end up yelling at us, of course, because we were fidgeting or because my mom would end up scowling instead of smiling. This was after he'd brought out the light meter and waved it around for a while, then fussed with the exposure, then fussed with the



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focus, then moved the camera up or down on the tripod an inch or two… anyway, you get it, right? A pain in the ass. My brother and I, we were kids, we'd been stuck in the car forever, my mom was cranky, my dad was off in his own world, lecturing us about this or that and then bringing out the camera. It could take him up to fifteen minutes to set up the shot, especially if there were moving clouds and the light kept changing. Then setting the timer on the shutter so he could run back and be in it. Taking each shot three times just to make sure. In the end, at the Grand Canyon, we spent more time setting up the Happy Family shot than actually looking at the canyon from the overlook. On that trip, I was old enough that I'd started hiking, and I wanted to walk the trail into the canyon for just a bit — just a little bit! But there was always somewhere else on the list we had to get to, so we jammed ourselves back into the car for another long drive…"

There was always something else on the list. Of course the engineer in the old man had arranged the various wonders by geographic proximity, strung together on a cord of long, dreary hours on the Interstates. The old man loved the Interstates, loved the chain diners with their big picture windows and their clean formica tabletops and the predictable menus. The windows never revealed much beyond the cars crowded into the parking slots immediately in front of them, and a glimpse of the wide gray highway beyond. Waitresses with strange accents brought them plates of eggs and potatoes that were always the same, slices of ham glowing pink next to the unnatural yellow of the egg yolks, the french fries sweating grease under a glare of fluorescent lighting. Pale beige pancakes as big as the plates they came on, and viscous sugar syrup colored brown to drip across them. His mother looking weary across the table from him, the old man next to her eating diligently while his children fidgeted between boredom and a quiet despair. The cold blank headlights of their car stared at them from outside like a hungry dog; the old man always tried to get a booth where he could watch the car, though nothing ever happened. He was happiest when he could park next to a highway patrol cruiser. As if one of the line cooks would sneak out to steal their lumbering Ford.

At the end of the meal, the old man would send everyone to the bathrooms, and then they would be back in the dim interior of the car for another few hours on the road. The old man hated country music so he never played the radio on the Interstates. He also hated to pull off the road to the rest stops if someone had to pee, but to the boy who inherited the camera it was a chance to see the country they were passing through on the walk to the restrooms: the dry hills of the west, the eastern forests, the Great Plains just beyond the edge of the rest stop where the asphalt crumbled away and the Earth began. The boy could hear the silence beneath the traffic sounds and the crunching of his shoes in gravel. He always drank extra water at lunch time so he could force a stop in the middle of nowhere later. The old man


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would grumble but he would never say no. He remembered his father looking at him with a grim expression while he desperately gulped down the water. The old man had him figured out but kept his mouth shut. Had that been a sign of complicity? It was not the sort of thing that you could ask him back then, and now he was dead.

The old man was an engineer to the end. He'd had a pacemaker installed in his late seventies, and used to brag about the technology involved. "So I'm kind of a cyborg now," he'd said. It thrilled the old engineer to be part machine at last, even though the microwave became his enemy and he had to learn how to cook. He and the mother had not been able to stay together. Then his eyes began to fail, and then his legs. When the pacemaker was due for a battery change, he refused to let the doctor operate and died peacefully as his heart slowed and slowed and finally stopped. His books went to the engineering school of a local university. He willed the house to his ex-wife. Some cash and the dusty camera came to the son. "He made a big deal out of leaving me this camera," the son said, "I'm not sure why. Maybe he thought it'll turn me into him, into a techno-fussbudget. It won't work. I mean, the camera works; all his machines always worked. But it won't change me."

"He must have had an influence. You ended up a photographer…"

"Not like him, though: a street photographer, get the shot and get out. It won me a scholarship back when I needed one, so I can thank my dad for that. Now everybody does it, and all the shots look the same. Controlled by algorithms designed by engineers like him. I should sell my cameras. Except for this one."

His wife raised an eyebrow. "For the old man's sake?"

"No. Because it makes me think about the pictures. If I ever bother taking them again."

"You still take pictures. On your phone, mostly."

"Not like I used to. Not pictures that mean something. They're just…visual chatter. Gossip of a sort. Like everyone else's."

"Oh, it's not that bad." She rolled her eyes.

The next day she brought him a roll of film. "I went to the camera store you used to like. They still sell film. I remember you liked this one." She handed him the small yellow carton. "Black and white, like you used to take them."

He laughed quietly. "My dad too. He used to shoot in black and white. I've shown you the pics."

"Here's what I think you should do: take his old camera, and just walk around the neighborhood. Count your steps. Every hundred steps, you stop and take a picture of



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something you see that hooks you in. Doesn't matter what. Then we'll see what comes out in the prints." She smiled.

"Sounds more like therapy than photography to me."

"Well, maybe it is. Maybe it'll wake up that part of you that used to love pictures. I'll tell you what," she said. She put her hand on his shoulder. "If they come out good — and they will — I'll let you take a portrait of me. And you know I'm camera-shy. So it'll be therapy for us both."

He didn't think it over for too long. "I'll do it. I'll have to clean up the camera a bit, but I still have my kit stowed away somewhere. You won't mind if I fuss over the portrait, do you? I want it to be as good as you deserve."

"I'll give you fifteen minutes of my precious time. If your dad could do it in fifteen minutes, so can you. Deal?"

"Deal!" he said. "I'll hit the street tomorrow at first light."

"The mighty hunter." They both laughed. "I can't wait to see what you bring back."

"I suppose it won't be what either of us might expect."

"So don't expect anything. That's the secret, isn't it? To let the world reveal itself on its own terms."

He hefted the old camera in his hand and nodded. Of course he agreed.



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