



## Secret Agent

Ride along with a private eye  
who nabs cheating spouses.

BY ARIANNE COHEN

August 3, 2006

We are sitting in Michael McKeever's silver S.U.V. in front of an enormous three-story colonial in central Long Island. The street is wide and tree-lined; kids zigzag over the double-yellow lines on their bikes. Across from us, two ponytailed mothers laugh in a driveway.

We are here to see a woman who, with any luck, won't see us. She is the driver of a white BMW that's parked 150 yards ahead on the opposite side of the street. This morning, the woman's husband called the man sitting next to me and explained his wife's plans to teach an 8:30 p.m. fitness class. He thinks she is lying. In a previous argument, the wife had announced that he should date other people. Tonight, he would like to know where she's going. They've been married for fourteen years. The husband says that he is desperately in love with her. They have two children, ten and twelve.

Of all the work that McKeever takes on, spousal spying is the most unsavory. It's also his bread and butter. Over half of the roughly two thousand cases he has pursued in his thirty years as a P.I. have been at the behest of a suspicious spouse. Most fit tonight's profile: a husband or wife aged thirty-five to fifty-five, married five to twenty years, kids, a mortgage and marital malaise.

Around eighty percent of McKeever's spousal clients are women. "Often they already know," he says in his gruff mumble, "but they're looking to answer that five percent uncertainty. They want confirmation." He considers his female clients "astute." Nine times out of ten, he says, their suspicions pan out. Usually, they've noticed a specific behavioral change in their husbands: *He's suddenly going to the gym. He's started wearing cologne.* Some female clients already know that their

husband is cheating, and even with whom. They give McKeever her name and phone number. *I just need to know what she looks like. Is that strange?*

Men are a different story. "They're wrong maybe seventy-five or eighty percent of the time," says McKeever. Their suspicions are typically based on flimsy evidence: *I don't know what she's doing while I'm at work. I've got a bad feeling.* McKeever spends endless weeks following wives from their homes to the gym to Starbucks and back home again.

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Tonight, we've been hired by a husband to tail his wife, which means that, statistically speaking, we'll most likely follow the white BMW to a Curves or a Barnes & Noble where nothing at all unseemly will occur. But the number-

one rule of private investigation, McKeever tells me, is to never assume. He relates the story of a client who thought his wife was having an affair because her post-work arrival time had shifted from 5:45 to six, a fifteen-minute difference. McKeever thought the man must be delusional, but he took the job and followed the wife. Sure enough, she jumped into a male coworker's car at five p.m. and was home an hour later. The husband was right.

Now it is 7:09 p.m. McKeever palms his digital camcorder, as he will do every few minutes for the rest of the night, and records five seconds of time-stamped footage of the BMW. He will later email the digital file to the client as proof of both his work and the wife's activities. Then we sit. He pulls out binoculars, peering at a woman in the distance. I pull out my Jackie O. sunglasses, who, incidentally, McKeever tailed decades earlier when a tabloid hired him to confirm her engagement to Aristotle Onassis. (Tabloids commonly hire P.I.s as insurance against future lawsuits.)

A couple walking a dog gawks at the binoculars. Had they asked, McKeever would either come clean and say that he's an investigator or that he's "waiting to give an estimate." They can decide what sort of estimate for themselves. Bystanders make surveillance in the suburbs difficult, but not as tricky as in rural areas, where every passing driver stops to talk ("Y'all good in there? Can I getcha a tow?"). Sometimes McKeever sticks a hard hat on the dashboard so that people think he's waiting for his construction crew. Today, I am the hard hat. A man with binoculars is a pervert. A man and a woman with binoculars are birdwatching.

It's surprisingly exhausting to stare at a car 150 yards away for more than an hour. I'm itching to take a stroll, or take a nap, or take dinner. The dashboard clock ticks past eight.

At 8:09, a woman in a tiny white dress appears. She hops into the BMW and tears out of the development. "He told me she drives like a maniac," McKeever mutters as we pull out behind her — and nearly lose her on the first turn. Though McKeever's Honda Pilot is nebbish, he's clearly juiced up the engine. He grabs a video shot of her passing a street sign. The phone rings: It's the husband, at home with the kids. *She's leaving*, he informs McKeever over the phone. "We got her, thanks."

We roar fifty yards behind the BMW as it makes a high-speed turn and loops back into the development. She puts on a turn signal, changes her mind, then flies onto a side street. We fly in behind her. "Oh shit." McKeever slams on the brakes and pulls behind a parked car. She's making a U-turn, and stops in front of a blue ranch house, facing us.



She's moving around in the car. McKeever stares at her, relaxed. I'm worried she'll notice us, just twenty feet

ahead, but McKeever isn't. Clients always tell him, "My wife's really sharp, she notices everything." They don't. If McKeever is spotted, it's usually because the client tipped off the spouse. Some fighting spouses have a habit of shrieking, "I'm sick of this crap, I'm gonna hire someone!" and a week later, the spouse spots McKeever in the rearview mirror.

McKeever drums his fingers on the steering wheel and tells me about working for a wealthy Frenchwoman who hinted daily to her husband that she was having him tailed. "The guy would come out of his office like James Bond, looking for me," he laughs. "One time I'm sitting in front of his girlfriend's house, and I see something behind a tree. It's the guy. There's a truck going by, and the guy is like Steve McQueen, crossing the street behind the truck. I got it on video."

The BMW lurches toward us. It's 8:15. McKeever instructs me to look at him and pretend to talk. I talk. Our woman is now wearing pink, having changed in the car. She guns it onto the main road, and we execute a white-knuckled U-turn and follow her out, just in time to glimpse her making a right at the intersection under a changing light.

The BMW merges onto a highway and spends the next twenty minutes tailgating people. This woman clearly fits a risk-taker profile. Three towns later, she veers off the highway and zags through a quaint main street, sliding into a parking lot behind a supermarket. We pause on the road. She's sitting in the car. We pull in diagonally from her, facing away. The

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lot is filled with acne-covered teens blasting music from Porsches. It's 8:30 p.m.

I crane my neck to see what she's doing. Is she on her cellphone? Redoing her makeup? Snorting a line? Crying? McKeever keeps one eye on his rearview mirror. His only job is to follow the BMW. He could care less what she's doing.

He pulls out the photograph from the husband. "What do you think?" It's a poorly focused headshot of a copper-skinned woman with disheveled reddish hair, bright pink lipstick and a suit jacket pulled over a low-cut blouse. McKeever studies client photos. "Sometimes you look at the photo and think, 'I don't think so.' And sometimes you think, 'Yeah, probably.' You can't always tell though. As my mother says, there's a lid for every pot." I ask him why his clients seem to lid multiple pots. "Is it a self-esteem thing?" he asks rhetorically. "I really don't know. It's impossible to figure people out."

Tomorrow, from his office, he can find out who the wife has called lately, and her driving record, using services like IQData.com, Accurint.com and LocatePlus.com, along with well-placed contacts in various agencies and companies. But McKeever will never speak to her. He will learn who, what, when and where. Never why. "I'm a businessman with the job of providing information," he says. "If someone hires me to follow their husband, I don't say 'Why?' I say, 'Okay, where does he work. I need a photograph.' I don't pry."

What McKeever does know a lot about is how people gather information about their partners. "A lot of times, there's this process people go through where first they believe someone blindly. Then they start to wonder. Then they start to scrutinize. And then they really pay attention. Maybe they hire a private investigator. They make a decision."

This process is essential. McKeever was recently hired by a father who had McKeever follow his daughter's husband. The daughter had not yet begun to wonder, and disbelieved McKeever's photo evidence of her husband's double life. Partners handle information on their own schedule. Most are ready to address the situation by the time they call McKeever. "You don't hire a private investigator to get information that you're not ready to absorb," he says.

Tonight's husband became ready to absorb this morning. McKeever thinks the wife is a serial philanderer, based on his time-proven theory that people who marry partners whose primary virtue is sexiness are more likely to fool around. "If you marry someone that's not so attractive, obviously you see a lot of things other than the superficial," he says. "If the relationship is like an onion — there are so many layers of intimacy, plus the bird watching and intellectual conversation — then you don't need to worry. If you marry Charo, you need to worry." Tonight we are following Charo.

At 8:55, a decade-old gray Cadillac pulls up behind the BMW in the supermarket parking lot. A moment later, it starts moving again and rolls past us. McKeever eases onto Main Street behind it. I hadn't seen Charo enter the Cadillac. "I sort of saw her silhouette when they pulled by," he says. "Hopefully we're not tailing

some old bastards who just came from the buffet."

The Cadillac bumper is six inches off the road. If I were to deal drugs on Long Island, I would do so out of this Cadillac. McKeever suspects that the Cadillac driver is married (he was twenty-five minutes late) and that this is an extra family car. McKeever thinks they're headed toward a local budget motel, but they cruise past one and pull into a restaurant.

McKeever brakes in the center of the main road, not wanting to enter the restaurant parking lot directly behind the Cadillac. Cars honk. He makes a K-turn into oncoming traffic and pulls up against the curb across from the restaurant. This man is a profoundly skilled driver. I'm still unconvinced we're not following an old couple.

McKeever hops out to "look at the menu." He is utterly unremarkable looking, particularly in tonight's outfit of khakis and a neutral-green button-down. The two times I'd met him before this — once at a diner and once at the train station — I couldn't find him. His backseat is filled with an array of other forgettable uniforms: a sweatshirt, a t-shirt and a formal suit, as well as a stash of peanut butter, saltine crackers and bottles of Poland Spring water.

He returns. "Found 'em. They're at the bar."

We park facing the bar entrance and sit. It's 9:07. The phone rings. It's the husband again, anxious to find out how chasing his wife is going. McKeever summarizes: "She went a few blocks, changed clothes, drove to a municipal parking lot, got picked up by a guy in a Cadillac and now they're at this bar."

There's a pause. I feel the stab. The husband babbles a disjointed series of questions. *What does the guy look like? What's the license number of the car? Can we get video footage? Where are they?* McKeever repeats the name of the place and says he'll call later. He hangs up.

"He's flippin' out. He didn't even know what to ask."

McKeever seems nonplussed. He opens a can of nuts while he calls his brother. "You're what? Playin' bingo? Some of those old dolls are like rocket scientists with the six cards." I am thinking about the husband, probably pacing back and forth, gripping his cell phone, unable to breathe.

After four hours with McKeever, I'm confused. Frankly, I like him. He's

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forthcoming, perceptive and clearly bananas about his four children and his wife of twenty years. Professionally, he's markedly competent — I would've lost the BMW an hour ago — and he avoids his profession's sleazier pursuits, including bedroom spying and set-ups. He won't take stalker clients. When he mentions

a job he once declined, where someone tried to hire him to "shut up a dog," he

adds that he would have taken the dog and given it to a family in Michigan. I would eventually like to track down my own AWOL father. If I ever do, I'll hire McKeever to do it.

But is this ethical work? McKeever has no qualms. He says he would hypothetically hire a private investigator to follow his own wife. Like a comforting mantra, he repeats his line about being in the business of providing information. "The problem is, there's no way to get the information people want otherwise," he says. "What can they do? Plead? Cajole? Say 'Come on, tell me?' I'm like a reporter. I only find out what's there."

His clients often express concerns similar to mine, to which he replies, "Look, if your husband is just meeting this person for coffee and it's completely innocent, that would be good to know. And if something more physical is going on, I guess you need to know that too." His response gives the sense that the information is theirs to access. Is it? I'm not sure.

Some of McKeever's clients also seem troublingly unstable. He takes a call from a client who regularly has her ex-husband tailed out of curiosity. Now she wants her new boyfriend tailed as well. "Can you follow him Friday night, and maybe Saturday?" she asks. McKeever hedges. He suggests they begin with a court-record search and hangs up. "Some people get hooked on surveillance," he says. "They become obsessed. They're relentless." Relentless at \$95 an hour, five-hour minimum.

McKeever tells me about the only time he's questioned his job. Years ago, his wife called him to report that someone was following her while she shopped. McKeever drove up and spotted the man. Overtaken by rage, he beat the guy up. McKeever didn't expect to do that. "I couldn't sleep for a couple of nights after that," he says. "I had misgivings, because the guy was doing what I do to other people's wives."

It's 10:00. We're eating Yoplait (mine cherry, his strawbanana), watching the shadows in the bar. It's like being at a drive-in. McKeever grabs his camera to catch footage of the couple exiting, holding hands as they walk to the parking lot behind the restaurant. The man is in his forties, and as unremarkable as McKeever: Thinnish and brunette, with glasses. We sit for another minute. The Cadillac doesn't drive by. "Shit." McKeever guns the car across the main road and down a side street, pulling into the oncoming lane to glimpse the cars ahead. The Cadillac apparently exited onto a back road. They're gone. We do our umpteenth K-turn, and return to the main road.

McKeever is gripping the steering wheel, leaning forward, flying back the way we came. "It's a tough call. We could look for them, or we could go back to the car. If the



photo: Paul Watson

car's gone, that's it." At 10:09, he spots a Cadillac six cars ahead and lets out a whoop. "Arianne, you're good luck honey! Yee-haw!"

The Cadillac weaves leisurely toward the motel. "Eeeee . . . no sale," says McKeever as they pass it. The Cadillac winds slowly through the side streets. "They're going parking." The Cadillac pulls up under a dark tree and turns off its lights. "Yep." I find this juvenile. We pull in a half-block behind. McKeever doesn't really care about this part. According to him (and the state of New York), proof of a relationship is two people, alone together for a reasonable period of time, showing signs of romantic involvement such as hand holding. As far as he's concerned, his work was done an hour ago.

McKeever calls the husband and reports the current parking expedition. The husband's voice is shrill. He comes up with a relevant question: *Are they in the front seat or the back?* We have no idea.

A posse of teens walks by, jolting the Cadillac kissers. The Cadillac pulls onto the road and loops through side streets, cutting

**McKeever calls the husband. His voice is eerily controlled. *Can you run a plate check tomorrow?***

across two parking lots. We're far behind and we lose them. It's hard to tail a car making figure-eights without being spotted. We circle around and find the empty car parked on Main Street. No bars or restaurants are around. McKeever doesn't blink. His job is to follow the car, not comment on the weirdness of this date. We park behind them. It's 10:45 p.m.

McKeever talks a bit about his father, a police detective. His wife calls to organize tomorrow's carpool. The husband calls again. He calms slightly when he hears that his wife is no longer making out with Cadillac Man. He wants to know where they are. McKeever gives him the cross streets and hangs up. "Sometimes I'll say, 'I'll tell you the address, but I don't want you to come down here and get crazy, okay?' But the clients hire you to get the information. You can't withhold it."

The couple appears from behind a commercial building. Charo is in her original white outfit. It's 11:30. The Cadillac heads to the parking lot, then makes two strange high-speed turns. Two minutes later, the woman speeds by in her BMW. I wonder if the Cadillac driver saw us, though it doesn't really matter. Few associate McKeever's Honda with a private investigator.

McKeever calls the husband. His voice is eerily controlled. *Can you run a plate check tomorrow?* McKeever can. We swing back onto the highway. McKeever doubts he'll work for the man again. He will probably never learn what happens to the relationship. "Sometimes they reconcile. And then, sometimes down the line, they want the spouse tailed again. You know — that desirable repeat business."

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