

THE GIFTED PHOTOGRAPHER

By
Ian J. Courter

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ian.j.courter@gmail.com

FADE IN:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY (1900) - DAY

Sunny Spring day with budding trees. People in period clothes walk past brownstone row houses lining a cobblestoned street. A horse and carriage stops in front of one.

MICHAEL HOUTMAN (30), neatly dressed, dismounts and grabs a wooden tripod and a large case off the carriage.

INT. HOUSE - ENTRYWAY - CONTINUOUS

A frosted glass door with a shadowy figure on the other side. An old-fashioned doorbell RINGS.

HERBERT JAFFE (40s), well-groomed and dressed in a late Victorian era suit minus top-coat and hat, hurriedly opens the door. Houtman stands on the step, equipment in-hand.

MR. JAFFE

(somber)

Mr. Houtman. Please come in.

HOUTMAN

Thank you, Mr. Jaffe.

Houtman steps inside and Mr. Jaffe closes the door, pointing to an interior doorway.

MR. JAFFE

She is in the parlor.

HOUTMAN

I must prepare the room. In the meantime, I need to remain undisturbed. I shall call for you when we are ready.

Mr. Jaffe nods solemnly and leaves, his eyes red.

INT. PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Houtman sets down his equipment. He quietly closes the door and turns to face...

LINDA JAFFE (21), pretty, but thin and pale, sits on an ornate couch. Her head rests on the back, staring into space. An old-fashioned wheelchair sits parked to one side.

HOUTMAN

Hello, Linda. I am Michael... are you ready?

Linda's eyes roll slightly in his direction.

LINDA
 (puzzled)
 For a picture? No... not like this.

Houtman shakes his head slowly as he sets up the tripod.

HOUTMAN
 Your parents simply want something
 to remember you by before you leave.

Linda stares off into space for a moment before replying.

LINDA
 Leave? I should have already left
 for school.

Houtman mounts the camera on the tripod as he talks.

HOUTMAN
 Don't fret about that now. Focus on
 the time you have left with them.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

MARGARET JAFFE (40s), formally dressed and pretty, but teary-eyed, sits at a small table drinking from a cup. Another cup sits opposite hers, wisps of steam waft from it. Mr. Jaffe enters and sits down opposite her.

MR. JAFFE
 (awkwardly)
 The photographer has arrived.

Mrs. Jaffe's lower lip quivers ever so slightly.

MRS. JAFFE
 It is so soon. It seems only a short
 time since you rang for him.

MR. JAFFE
 We cannot hold onto her forever. We
 must let her go.

Mrs. Jaffe idly takes a sip from her cup.

MRS. JAFFE
 I know... the house already seems so
 empty.

INT. PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

The camera stands ready, fixed on Linda. Houtman moves the wheelchair to the other side of the room.

LINDA
I detest that thing.

He gently picks up one of her arms and carefully places it on her lap, positioning her thin fingers "just so".

HOUTMAN
How long have you had to use it?

LINDA
Nearly six months. I fell on some ice and injured my neck. I have been unable to walk ever since... or do anything else for that matter.
(sobs slightly)
I was supposed to graduate next Spring, however they decided to send me to a "home" where nurses can take care of me... more like a prison.

HOUTMAN
Your intention was to attend school in spite of your injury. That is admirable.

He positions her other arm next to her.

LINDA
To what end? I have been ill almost constantly since my fall. I only just recovered from my latest spell.

Houtman gently positions her head to fully face the camera.

HOUTMAN
What did you have?

He makes minor adjustments to her.

LINDA
The doctor said it was lung fever. It hurt to breathe and I frequently coughed... then I awoke this morning and I feel fine.

Houtman stands back and looks her over.

HOUTMAN
We are ready. I shall be back momentarily with your parents.

LINDA
Wait... please.

Houtman kneels in front of her.

HOUTMAN

Yes, Miss?

LINDA

There is so much I try to say to them, but they do not listen like you do. Why is that?

Houtman sighs and looks down for a moment.

HOUTMAN

I... relate to people differently than everybody else.

Linda stays silent and stares off into space.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Mr. and Mrs. Jaffe sit quietly -- she stares vacantly into space as he sits holding his head in his hands, elbows on the table. Houtman enters quietly, almost hesitantly.

HOUTMAN

Ma'am? Sir? We are ready.

They nod and stand.

INT. PARLOR - CONTINUOUS

Houtman enters and rechecks his camera. He smiles at Linda, who continues looking into the distance.

HOUTMAN

You look beautiful... we are nearly finished, Miss.

The Jaffes enter. Mr. Jaffe puts on his jacket as Mrs. Jaffe dabs at teary eyes with a silk handkerchief. He gently touches her hand.

MR. JAFFE

Be strong, Mother. We are almost done.

She sniffs and straightens his tie, then looks at Linda. Mr. Jaffe nods to Houtman.

MR. JAFFE (CONT'D)

We are ready, Mr. Houtman.

Houtman motions them towards Linda. They sit down on each side of her. Houtman positions them precisely and poses them, then points towards the camera lens.

HOUTMAN

Look there. I will be quick about it.

Houtman quickly moves behind the camera. He reaches into his case and pulls out an old time t-shaped camera flash, sprinkles it with powder, and holds it high.

HOUTMAN (CONT'D)

Stay very still. Now, steady...

FLASH. A small mushroom cloud of SMOKE wafts to the ceiling and spreads out. He quickly swaps out film plates, repowders the flash, and retakes the picture, then twice more.

HOUTMAN (CONT'D)

There. I just wanted to make sure to get extra photographs in case one of them fails to develop, but we are done. They will be ready by tomorrow morning.

Houtman begins disassembling his equipment. Mr. Jaffe stands, but Mrs. Jaffe remains beside Linda, sobbing quietly. She gently strokes Linda's cheek.

MRS. JAFFE

My beautiful girl. I will miss you so... I love you, my precious angel.

Mrs. Jaffe leans over and gently kisses Linda's forehead. Suddenly, she rushes out of the room, sobbing.

Mr. Jaffe bends down and kisses Linda's forehead, then touches his forehead to hers. He sniffs a little as he straightens.

MR. JAFFE

(to Houtman)

Thank you... I shall return shortly. She is just overcome by it all.

HOUTMAN

I understand, Sir. I will just finish up and be on my way.

Mr. Jaffe nods with tears in his eyes and leaves. Houtman closes the parlor door, leaving it slightly cracked.

LINDA

(softly)

The pain is gone... Am I dead?

Houtman latches his case, then kneels to look into her eyes, taking her hands in his.

HOUTMAN

Yes, Miss.

LINDA

How can I be talking to you?

HOUTMAN

It is my gift. I ease people from this life to the next... It is nearly time. Are you ready?

LINDA

What do I do?

HOUTMAN

Nothing. All is taken care of.

Linda stares ahead as the light slowly fades from her eyes.

LINDA

(with effort)

Will I ever see them again?

He tenderly rubs her cheek and smiles.

HOUTMAN

Fear not, child. You shall. I promise.

She smiles ever so slightly as he gently closes her eyes.

INT. ENTRYWAY - CONTINUOUS

Two shadowy figures rise up in the front door window as the doorbell rings. Houtman opens it to reveal UNDERTAKER (early 50s) and his APPRENTICE (late 20s). Houtman motions towards the parlor.

HOUTMAN

Good day, gentlemen. The man of the house is attending to the wife, but I can show you in.

The men reach down and pick up a wooden CASKET. They carry it through the front door and into the parlor.

Houtman closes the door and walks down the hall as sobbing ECHOES softly from the kitchen.

EXT. STREET - LATER

The men gently ease the casket into a horse-drawn hearse and close the door. Houtman drives his carriage around the hearse and away. Undertaker tips his hat to Houtman.

Undertaker follows apprentice up to the driver's bench. The apprentice takes the reins, but only grasps the brake lever.

APPRENTICE

Death portraits. Damn ghoulish, if you ask me.

UNDERTAKER

(Irish accent)

Some folks say undertaking is ghoulish, me lad.

APPRENTICE

It is strange just the same. Even after being ill for so long and dying, she looked almost alive.

UNDERTAKER

People say he has a special connection with the recently departed. It gives him the ability to take the best memorial portraits around. He is truly a gifted photographer.

The apprentice releases the brake lever and snaps the reins. The horses' harnesses CLINK and iron-rimmed wheels CLATTER over the cobblestones as the hearse moves down the street.

FADE OUT:

THE END