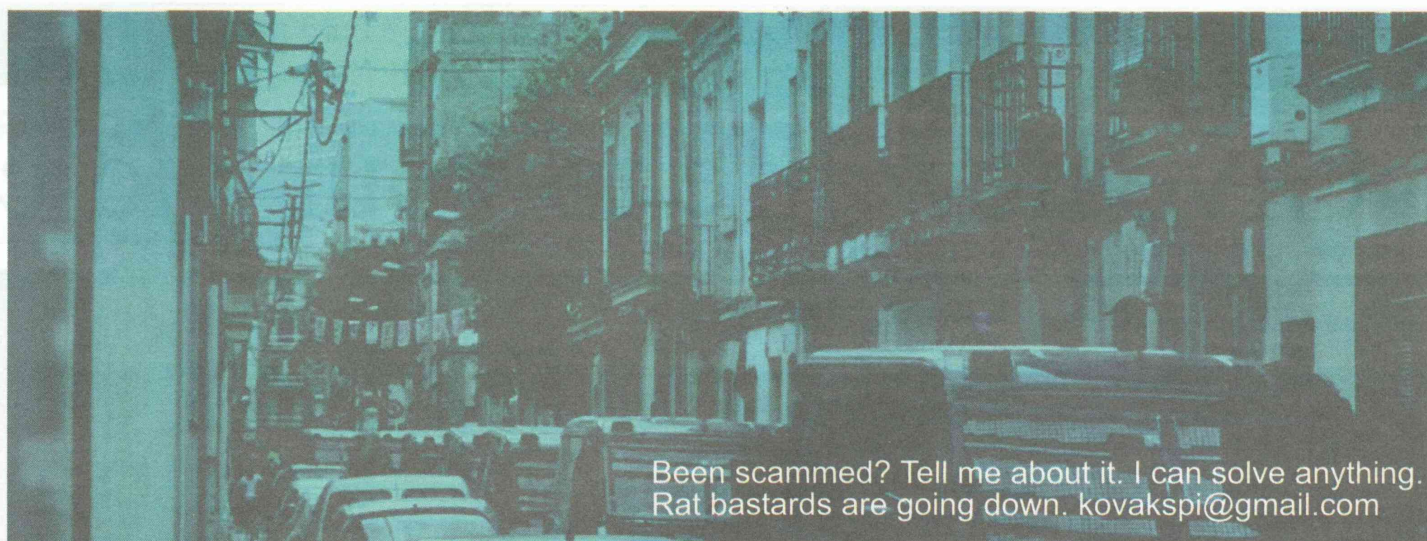




By Larry Kovaks



Been scammed? Tell me about it. I can solve anything. Rat bastards are going down. kovakspi@gmail.com

## The Cloaking Con

**S**ome of the most nefarious flimflammers in our midst are the Cloaking Gypmeisters.

Even the most jaded travellers have tumbled to their wiles. What they do is disguise themselves in order to dupe weary tourists. They win confidence. Then, before the sucker tourist can blink, they're practically giving the scammer their dough. Sound incredible? Here's a recent case of sharp-dressed gypmeisters fronting as cops.

No spoofing. These unscrupulous muckers

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ought to be ashamed. Posing as bulls, then fleecing their victims for all their hard-earned scratch. Last Christmas Day I ran into them near the Sagrada Familia. I was deep cover. Had my gabardine coat open, casual style, my Stetson pulled low. I was on the lookout for JDLRs, or folks that Just Don't Look Right.

I was across the street from the cathedral, sitting at this patterned aluminium table, eating a hot dog. The food vendor nearby was listening to José Feliciano on a small transistor radio turned up to distorting levels. Brats and their parents milled around the zone. I had a copy of Sport and made like I was poring over it when a big tour bus pulled up. Tourists filed out and regrouped in front of the bus where a tour guide gave

them instructions. They had approximately one hour and a half to enjoy the delightful cathedral and get some grub. They splintered off in little packs.

An elderly Jap couple sporting urban safari gear stayed behind. The Jap gent had his camera out. His wife made cutesy poses for him while he strategically snapped pics of her with the cathedral in the background. It was routine. Rote for a tourist. A sweet opportunity for a slick gypmeister.

A fellow that looked like an American tourist approached them. He was sporting white sneakers, a

an old sea chantey, had my mitts behind my back and stared up at nothing, tourist style – taking special care not to miss the transaction.

The sharp-dressed birds flipped open their wallets. Cop badges. At first I wasn't sure if these guys were gypmeisters or cops pulling a sting.

But bulls don't stop tourists like that. At random. So I moved into hearing range. One of the sharp-dressers spit at the American:

"You. You look the suspect! Show me the ID!"

The American opened his fanny pack and took out his wallet. The sharp-dresser rifled through it and took out an ID. He shouted something that sounded neither Spanish nor English and his partner seized the yank and pushed him up against a tree. He frisked him while his pal gave the Jap couple the third degree:

"He is dangerous criminal! You must now to show the ID for make the talk!"

The Jap gent looked at his wife, she nodded. He pulled out his wallet and handed it over. The sharp-dressed bird rifled through and – in a blink – palmed a credit card and some euros.

I tell you brother, I was ready to put a sock to these low life scammers. But I had a better plan.

I closed in. I whipped out my buzzer. Kovaks PI. It's a name that strikes terror into the hearts of any gypmeister within a 200 mile radius of this burg. The gypmeister next to me quaked with mortal fear. His pupils tightened, the white around them webbed over with tiny veins. His threads up close had that cheap bought-ten-minutes-

ago-in-a-Chinese-shop look. I parlayed in Spanglish:

"¿Que pasa aquí? You boys with the squad?"

He blubbered his bunco lingo. I couldn't understand a word. They were getting ready to bounce. I knew I had to snap into action. I yelled at my yankee compatriot:

"Nab the heel! They're trying to fleece you and the Japs!"

He was big, a bruiser. If only he really was a yank, my operation would have been smoother.

He got shifty as a rat on the muelles. Then he jawed some Eastern European gibberish with the sharp-dressed gypmeisters! He was a fake yank working as a shill for the fake cops!

He was the bait to lure the tourists into their dirty scam! Pure savage instinct.

I gritted my teeth and grabbed the gypmeister with the Jap's wallet by the lapels, taking some skin. His hands reached up, the wallet dropped. I could have crushed this dilly, but the fake yank body checked me. I rolled with it, and due to his momentum he wiped out in the dust. I still had my mitts on the sharp-dressed scum. His Sadie Hawkins date bolted. The fake yank pushed himself up and scrambled after him.

The Jap tourist picked up his wallet. His wifey screamed and wailed in Japanese.

I had the punk face down in the dirt, in a wristlock, when the prowler cars pulled up. Four of them. Eight boys in blue came charging out. Six of them went after the fake yank and his sharp-dressed pal. The other two came pounding up the stretch of dirt path towards

us. Tourists on the surrounding benches were snapping pics. Women and children were screaming. They must have thought this was "typically Spanish" drama. A wiry mosso lad tackled me and his partner got the sharp-dressed gypmeister in a half nelson. I offered no resistance to the cop, even though I could have momicked him up like 1-2-3. The overeager young sprout! It was a matter of minutes before they managed to get the fake yank and the third cloaking perp.

They slammed us in the prowler cars and took us downtown for booking.

I got thrown in the cooler, but not with the three cloaking gypmeisters. They charged me separately. On counts of vigilantism and obstructing justice. It seems I got the drop on the cloaking gypmeisters when the bulls were surveilling them for something called Operación TIP OO. You see, they were just getting wise to the cloaking con. Operación TIP OO gave them powers to lock the muckers up for a good long stretch. It turns out the birds I helped them nab were old school scammers with records as long as my arm.

But the bulls don't like being bested at their own game. They know all about me. Some of them resent me. Call me a nuisance, guiri de mierda. Others think I'm the best thing since pa amb tomàquet. Anyway, after 18 hours with the barred-room boys they let me out.

It was cold. Fat raindrops fell like drunken sailors in a Chinatown whorehouse. There were JDLRs and odd tricks around every corner. I kept walking.