Developing. Parts I, II and III

By Oberon

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Thanks

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Part I: Developing.

I dreamt I was back in the suck, deafened by the scream of jets, blinded by the smoke from oil fires and the flash of daisy clusters bursting all around. I woke with a start to see the flash was from a camera firing in my face. “Fuck off,” I muttered, squeezed my eyes shut and covered my face. I heard the click of the shutter followed by the motor’s whir and curiosity erased the soldier’s face that hovered in my mind. It sounded like a Nikon F3 with a motor drive, the camera I had used for twenty years throughout two Middle-Eastern wars.

I pried open an eye and peeked from under my right arm at what appeared to be a searchlight, but was, behind the camera flash, a woman, twenty-five or -six, with the clearest eyes and purest face I’d ever seen. She turned those penetrating eyes on me and said, “I want to photograph you."

“We’re closed,” I said. “Go photograph your boyfriend." I pulled the tattered remnants of my raincoat 'round myself and fastened the lone button at my chest.

My bedroom was behind a dumpster in an alleyway off Heenan Place, three blocks from Toronto’s Union Station. I’d stepped off a train from New York August 10th, two years ago, and this was as far as I had gotten. You take a picture of a soldier’s head exploding and they give you a Pulitzer Prize. Only we could call it friendly fire. After I resigned, I dropped the prize coins in a beggar’s cup and gave my camera to a bum inside Penn Station. Then I got on a train. I didn’t want to see a plane or take a photograph again.

“I don’t have a boyfriend,” Searchlight said. “It’s you I want to photograph.”

“Are you still here?” I sat up and propped my back against the wall. “I don’t waltz into your house uninvited. You could at least bring coffee if you're moving in.” I fumbled for the change I had been saving in the coin purse in my pocket.

“I’ll get it,” she said, leapt up and darted down the alley to the street. I had to admit, she was cute. Perky butt in a plaid skirt, black turtleneck, brown hair in a ponytail and a pair of sneakers from the

sixties, Keds or something like that, in red. She'd left her camera, flash and bag. They would have fetched a hundred dollars at McTamny's, maybe two.

I lifted the Nikon and put my left palm underneath the lens, my right thumb on the film advance. It felt heavy, familiar. No one used film anymore. I had been the last at *The New York Times*. Now everything was digital – pixels flying through the ethernet. What the hell was this girl doing with an antique camera, taking photographs of me? When she returned, two paper cups in hand, I asked her.

"It belonged to my father," she said, removing her coffee lid. "He died. He left it and his army watch to me. He taught me how to shoot and to develop film. He was a journalist."

"Are you a journalist?" I looked through the viewfinder and focused on her eyes.

"I write travel articles for *Conde Nast*. My father sold a lot of work to them."

"What was his name?" I put the camera down, next to her knee.

"William Wender." She set down her coffee cup and lifted the camera to her face. "Now can I photograph you?"

She brought me chicken, chocolate milk and cigarettes throughout the afternoon, as well as a coat that, for all I knew, she'd found in another alley up the street. She photographed me eating, smoking and — god help me — I even let her pose me naked, pants around my ankles, propped against a wall beneath a fire escape. She said she had to see someone at four o'clock and asked if I'd be there at six. "I'll clear my calendar," I said.

"Will you watch my camera?" I told her that I would.

She found me later, in the station, using her camera to shoot passengers alighting from the trains. I had been thinking of her father, Wild Bill Wender we called him, a legendary journalist. He'd lost an arm in Pakistan, an eye in Desert Storm. That hadn't stopped him. He'd traded in his Nikons and gone digital, screwed the camera to a ball and socket head and soldered it to tubing that he rigged around his chest. He could aim and focus, zoom and shoot with just one hand. He went freelance and produced amazing work. Now I had his Nikon in my hands. I guess he hadn't traded all his cameras after all. I gave it back to her reluctantly.

She took me to her room at The Royal York Hotel. It overlooked downtown and she turned off the overhead and pulled open the drapes. I stood by the window, watching, as she went to the bed, removed her watch and laid it on the nightstand, then pulled the elastic from her hair. She shook her head and turned, walked up to me and stopped a foot away. Red neon was reflected in her eyes. When I bent my head to kiss her she put both hands on my chest and pushed against me, hard.

"What the hell?" I said from the floor.

“You asshole! Jack Devon, prize-winning photographer - "

"You know who I am?"

"I wasn't certain till I saw the scar above your hip. What’s wrong with you? Sleeping in an alley..."

“What’s it to you? I thought –”

“You thought! You haven’t thought for years. What do you use for thinking, bourbon? Wine? Whatever you can beg?”

“Look,” I started.

“No, you look,” she said, “the way I’ve looked at you.” She pulled her turtleneck over her head and dropped it on the floor. “I’ve wanted you for years, ever since I saw a picture of yours in *The New York Times*. The magazine.”

“What picture?” I asked, looking at her breasts.

“That’s right,” she said, “look at me. Why don’t you take a photograph?” She put both hands on her hips. “It was a boy in uniform, in Iraq, after the troop increase.”

I remembered. How could I forget? I'd won the prize months later for the photograph of his head hit by tracer from a jet. I got up and went to her. I bent again to kiss her and she slapped my face.

“It was the most sensitive picture I ever saw. His eyes – "

I grabbed her breasts. I almost tore them from her chest. I mashed my face against hers, tried to find her mouth with mine. She wrenched her face aside and tried pushing me away. My arms went round her waist and pulled her tight, as much as anything to stop her kicking me with those ridiculous red shoes. Her skin was slippery, warm against my chest. I grabbed her ass with both hands, squeezed and pulled her into me, forcing my hips against hers. I was hard, harder than I’d ever been. I felt I would explode.

Tears streamed down her face and, at the sight, welled up in mine. Her hands were pulling at my coat. I tore it off, still pressing my erection to her groin. She tugged my shirt out of my pants and I pulled it off my head without undoing it. She plucked at my belt, calling me ‘asshole’ again. I fumbled at her skirt, tugging it down, bunching it in my fists, trying to pull it off. My hips kept thrusting at her, pushing my cock into her waist. Finally I grabbed her panties from behind, feeling the curve of her bottom on my thumbs and pulled them down and off. She had pried my belt apart and tugged my zipper down.

I felt cool air on my cock asI lifted her, bending my knees, then rammed myself inside, crying out as we fell back against the window. She cried out as well and pushed her hips against me, pulling me

inside her as I fucked and fucked her, banging her head against the window frame so hard it cracked the glass.

She washed me in the shower the next morning as I let the water spray over my head. She cut my hair over the sink, then sat on the toilet, watching, as I shaved. I looked in the mirror, in her eyes. “That kid,” I said, “the one I photographed. He saved my life.”

“I know,” she said, “my father told me.”

“I could have stopped him. I could have knocked him down. Instead I took a photograph.”

“You’re a journalist,” she said. Her eyes burned into mine. “That’s what you do.”

She ordered breakfast from room service, coffee, eggs with sausages and toast. She photographed me with her father's camera as I ate. And then she left. She had said she traveled to Toronto once a month to see her editor and arranged to meet me in the alleyway off Heenan Place in thirty days.

I found a paper in the coffee shop downstairs and read the classifieds. A waiter lent me a pen. Before I stepped through the revolving doors into what appeared to be a perfect autumn day, I stopped in the hotel stationery shop. With the coins I had been saving I bought a little calendar and tucked it into my shirt pocket. The salesgirl said she hoped I’d have a nice day.

Part II: Agitation.

"I want to photograph you."

A smile creased my face. I hadn’t heard those words for thirty days, a month spent looking for a job and finding one, renting a room and saving money from my pay. I’d counted down the days, marking them off my calendar.

This morning I had dressed in new clothes, called in sick from a pay phone, then headed to the alleyway off Heenan Place where I’d met Iris thirty days before. I had saved the tattered raincoat I’d been wearing when we met and pulled it on now, as a joke, over my thrift shop clothes. Lying down behind the dumpster I had lived beside for years, I fell asleep. Her words awakened me.

“I want to photograph you. Naked," I told her, opening my eyes. Her face appeared above me, upside down. Her eyes, clear as the sky, peered into me as she bent down to kiss my mouth. Her hair brushed over my cheeks, then her lips brushed mine. Our mouths opened, our tongues met, teeth clicked against teeth as saliva intermingled in our mouths. A line of spit clung to her lower lip when she lifted her head.

“Photograph me, then,” she told me and stood up, straddling my face.

“What happened to your panties?” I asked, looking at her crotch.

“I threw them in the dumpster,” she said. "They were soaking wet."

She undid her skirt and let it fall, to pool at her ankles. She stepped out of it and left it lying on my face. I watched, through the waistband, as she stepped - naked from the waist down - to her knapsack, and removed the camera she had used to photograph me thirty days before. She dangled it above me by the strap. I sat up and took it in my hands, letting her skirt fall from my face. I looked through the lens at her, standing over my feet now, and focused on her face. Her eyes and mouth sprang sharply into view.

Staring at me, unsmiling, she pulled her turtleneck over her head and dropped it on the ground. All she wore now was her army watch and those red running shoes. I pressed the shutter and the motor drive whirred loudly in my ear. She dropped her head and looked, from underneath her eyebrows, through the lens at me. I pressed the shutter once again and felt my penis throb.

Looking, unswerving, into the lens, she shook her shoulders back and forth, making her breasts sway. She cupped them in her hands, pointing her nipples toward me. I shot a burst of images as her tongue licked her lips. Then she ran her hands, slowly, down her front, as I followed in the view-finder. I snapped another picture as she rubbed her pussy, slid a finger, and then two, in her vagina and then brought her fingers to her mouth and sucked them in.

She turned around, put her hands on her ass cheeks, spread them apart and bent over. My hands were shaking as I zoomed in, steadying the lens as best I could. I found it hard to breath. Her face - upside down - appeared between her legs. Her breasts and hair hung down and framed her face. I focused on her eyes and mouth - I let them fill the screen. Her pussy, slightly out of focus, was above her mouth and in that moment sunlight glinted off a drop of moisture on a pubic hair and on the cornea of her left eye. The light flared in the lens.

I ejaculated. Iris smiled. I watched the wet spot spread over the crotch of my white pants as she retrieved her clothes and dressed. "New clothes?" she asked.

"They were," I said. The pants and shirt were scuffed.

"Let's see what we can do." She pulled me to my feet and wrapped my coat around my waist.

She took me to her room, a suite this time, at the Royal York Hotel. In the bathroom she stripped off my clothes then pushed me in the shower. When I emerged my clothes were gone and I put on a robe, one of a pair that hung behind the door. I padded to the living room, looked for her, but she wasn’t there.

There was coffee on a table on the balcony. I sat and poured a cup, ignoring *The New York Times* next to the coffee pot. I looked over the buildings to the trees and rooftops of the neighborhood I thought of, now, as home. I’d planned on taking Iris to the rooming house I lived in and to Allan Gardens at the foot of Pembroke Street. I liked to go there after work and walk in the Conservatory. I

liked the orchid house. It was humid and I'd sit next to the waterwheel and close my eyes. I found it peaceful and I felt like sharing it with her.

"I've been shopping," Iris told me from the doorway, boxes in her arms. "Have a look. I'm going to shower, then I'll join you. Is there coffee left?"

I opened a box. Clothes. For me. Eddie Bauer, from the shop downstairs. I tried on a khaki shirt with epaulets. It fit perfectly. "I got your measurements from your old clothes before I threw them away," she said, returning in a robe. "I hope you don't mind. That shirt looks great on you." She rubbed her hair with a white towel, then sat on a bistro chair.

I poured coffee for us both and sat down opposite to her. "I've been so hot for you," she told me, opening her robe. "I had to touch myself, my nipples and clitoris, constantly." She spread her legs and put her fingers on each side of her vagina, pulling her lips apart. "God! Lick me, Jack. Please?"

"I won't need a camera?" I got down on my knees.

"Not any more," she laughed, and pushed her groin into my face. "My god, I'm burning up." She pulled me by the hair.

We went out to dinner, to a small Italian place just east of the hotel. It was dark and we sat in a booth, under a Tiffany-style lamp. Over red wine and risotto she asked how I had been. I told her about staying in a hostel for a week after she left and working at the food warehouse. She laughed when I described my boss, Bartolo, looked sad when I told her of the mouse that died my first night in the rented room.

"What happened to it?" Iris asked.

"Poison," I said. "Powder in small plastic trays. In the bathroom and along the baseboard in the hall."

"No," Iris set her knife and fork down on her plate. "I mean, what did you do with it?"

"I buried it, in Allan Gardens. In a cottage cheese container, in the orchid house."

She drank her wine and pushed her glass away. Her cheeks were flushed a little and the multi-colored light reflected in her eyes. She reached into her bag and took her fathers camera out.

"Whatever happens, I want you to have this, Jack." She slid it across the table toward me. "My father would be proud to know I'd given it to you."

The camera blurred a little in my vision. "I'm overwhelmed," I said, then held it, underneath the lens, in my left hand. "Can I pay you for it?"

"Now you're insulting me. How much money do you make?"

“Four hundred a week,” I said. “Three hundred, clear.”

“My hotel room costs more than that a night.”

“You make more money than I do.” I put the camera down. “Congratulations.”

“I don’t pay for it. The magazine does. You know that. I charged it for your clothes. And mine, when I travel.” Her eyes burned into mine. “They’d buy you a digital camera.”

"What for?” I felt a little light-headed.

“I told them about you. They know your work. They want to give you an assignment.”

“What assignment?” I heard a plane fly overhead.

"Tourism in Iraq. When the occupation ends."

“Iraq?” I said loudly. Heads from other tables looked at me. “Jesus, Iris,” I said, softer, “go back – to Iraq?”

“That’s right,” she said. “With me.”

“What do you mean?” I reached for the wine bottle but it was empty.

“Your pictures, my story.” She sounded excited. “You know your way around, you have connections I don’t have. We’d be a team.”

“But, god – Iraq?” I drained my water glass. My heart was pounding, my mouth dry. There was a ringing in my ears.

“Not to the war zone.”

“It’s all a fucking war zone!” I had shouted it.

“How would you know?” She stood up, putting her bag on her shoulders. “You’ve been asleep the last two years.”

I sat there, stupefied, and let her leave. The waitress came and said, “The lady pay for dinner. She say, give this to you.” It was a photograph, in black and white, of me, eating chicken in the alleyway off Heenan Place. I remembered Iris taking it, a month ago. I looked haggard, crazy, with an unkempt beard. There was a cornered look in my eyes, like the rats I'd shared the alley with.

I caught up with her a block from the hotel. I put my hand upon her shoulder and stopped her. “Iris,

look – " I said.

She wheeled around. “You’re always telling me to look,” she said, “when you’re the one who doesn’t see.” There were tears of anger in her eyes.

I took her by the arm and pulled her in an alley, away from the lights and people in the street. Behind a van, next to a garbage bin, I held her by the shoulders at arms length. I was shaking. I shook her. “What don’t I see?” I asked her, angrily.

Calm now, she said softly, “We could be together. You can go back to your room, deliver groceries, or you can be with me.”

“But, you don’t understand…”

“I’ll help you,” she said, and took my hands. She pulled them underneath her sweater and placed them on her breasts. Her skin was warm, her nipples hard and I could feel her heart beat in her chest. She pulled her sweater off and dropped it on the garbage bin. Suddenly I squeezed her breasts with both my hands. I leant and sucked a nipple in my mouth. I gasped.

“I want you,” I said, as if the thought had just occurred to me, and pushed her back against the van. I crashed my head into hers, searching for her mouth with mine. Her head banged against paneling, the fender bent her knees.

My heart was pounding, my cock strained against my pants. I pulled her skirt above her hips and grabbed her ass. My right hand squeezed her buttock while my left hand squeezed her breast.

“I’m real,” she told me. “I won't disappear."

“I want you,” was all I could reply. The words repeated like a mantra in my head. I let go long enough to undo my pants and let them fall. I pushed my underwear toward my knees. Iris held her skirt with one hand while she slid her panties from her crotch.

I entered her and almost fainted as the blood rushed to my head. I could hardly breathe. I clung to her and fucked her, fiercely, while I kissed her, frantically. I came and, in that moment, caught a glimpse of Iris in the oil fires, hand extended through the smoke.

We spent the night together in her room.

Part III: Fixing The Print.

Jack was in the pool when I got back to the hotel. It was a struggle, since we had arrived, to coax him out and I was loathe to do it, scouting photo ops and destinations on my own. He had to take the photos, though. It was what he'd signed on for and he excelled at it. No-one else's pictures conveyed mood and meaning like Jack Devon's did. That's why the magazine had wanted him. It's what first

attracted me to him.

We'd found this place, The Hotel Eden, three days after landing in Basra. It was the only place in Al-Qurnah with running water. A nearby road sign gave directions to the Tree of Life, although the sign, and the hotel, like the tree itself, was riddled, now, with bullet holes. It was the only hotel east of the Tigris with an outdoor pool.

Jack had changed into his bathing suit within five minutes of our checking in, dived in and surfaced with a grin pinned to his face. I'd never seen him happier. He'd filled out tremendously since we'd first met. His skin was tanned, his hair was bleached the color of the sand. His resemblance to my father was uncanny.

Ours was the first flight into Basra from Baghdad, where we had flown to from New York. A sheep was sacrificed after our 727 landed, to celebrate the airport's opening. An international airport before the war, Iraqi Airlines had applied for slots at London's Heathrow Airport, out of which it could launch service once again. That and the increase of religious tourists - a million and a half from Iran every year - had been the impetus behind the feature by the magazine.

Jack had clung to me, our last night in Toronto, in bed at the Royal York Hotel, and shook, as if he had a fever or was freezing cold. Haltingly, tears streaming down his face, he'd told me that the boy who'd saved his life - the soldier he had been embedded with, whose photograph I'd seen in the New York Times - was, in fact, his son, from a liaison with a nurse in Germany some twenty years ago. It was no coincidence that Jack had been embedded with those troops. He'd pulled every string he knew of, cashed in every favour owed him to arrange it. He'd wanted to protect his son. He felt he'd got him killed.

In the morning, with the sky outside the window pink and yellow in the dawn, he made love to me. He was slow and gentle, touching me as if for the first time. We lay side by side, his penis deep inside me, our legs intertwined. We kissed and looked into each others' eyes.

He never went back to his rented room. He called his boss, informed him he'd resigned, and arranged to have his final cheque sent to the magazine. We flew to New York in the afternoon and on to Iraq the next day. The magazine made the arrangements. They even had a camera waiting for him in their offices, a Nikon D3 with a range of lenses, in a sand-proof camera bag. He learned how to use it on the plane.

He insisted we fly on to Basra instead of driving from Baghdad. It was a safer city and Jack had connections from the Expeditionary Air Wing, successor to the Combined Joint Task Force which had occupied the airport until now. They leant us a Land Rover and military maps. Jack knew the grid coordinates of where his son was killed and we drove to Jalibah and then across the desert till we found it, passing burnt out hulks of tanks and half-tracks on the way.

Jack was shaking as we got out of the truck and we trudged, hand in hand, across the desert to the spot that he remembered, near a lone Ghaf tree. It was why the unit had encamped there for the

night. They'd hung their rations, canteens, and their sweat-soaked tunics on its limbs.

In the morning, as Jack photographed them making tea, a Phantom jet had crested the horizon, strafed their bivouac, then streaked away across the sky. His son had pushed Jack down, then taken tracer to the head. Jack had photographed him as it hit. They found him, hours later, wandering the oil fires with his sons dog-tags clenched tight in his right hand. His left hand held his camera strap, the lens and body dragged over the sand.

He had brought a cross he'd fashioned with a picture of his son - the photo I'd seen in the New York Times - tacked to it, and he pressed it deep into the sand. He stood, head bowed, said words I couldn't hear, then knelt and scooped sand from the grave into a glass jar with a lid that he screwed tightly to it, then stepped back and took my hand. A desert mouse crawled from the sand next to Jack's boot and stood on its hind legs, then cleaned its whiskers with its paws. It dropped again to all fours and then scampered off across the dune.

Back at the Land Rover Jack kissed me, hard, then turned me 'round and pressed my face into the hood. He undid the buttons of my shirt, then pushed my long skirt up over my hips and pulled my panties down. I felt him fumble with the zipper of his shorts. His hands slid underneath my breasts and squeezed as his cock entered my vagina from behind. The hood was hot against my face and I heard metal from the engine tick as Jack fucked me, slapping his hips against my ass, grinding his groin into my tail-bone and ramming his cock into me, repeatedly. He came, calling out my name, and then collapsed to the sand, pulling me on top of him. I pinned his arms and legs with mine and kissed him, till our laughter bubbled up and burst out of our mouths. We slept a few hours in the shadow of the vehicle, then drove to Al-Qurnah, me wearing an Hijab, he with an erection the entire trip.

It was best to drive at night because the highways became clogged soon after dawn. Aside from check-points and still present roadside bombs, there were half again as many cars as there had been before the war. The roads were in a sorry state of disrepair.

"Infrastructure is a problem, but we're building new, five star hotels," the Minister of Tourism had told me on the phone. "Religious tourism is Iraq's secret weapon. It's spiritual, like visiting the Vatican."

"What destinations are most visited?" I had asked him.

"The Shiites visit Karbalah and Najaf in the north," he said, "and Basra in the south. They aren't concerned about car bombs or shootings."

"Why not?" I asked.

"They're looking for martyrdom," he said.

When I asked him the significance of Karbalah, he told me, "Birthpalce of Imam Hussein…"

"And of Najaf?"

"…of Imam Ali..."

"And Basra?" I inquired.

"…Sinbad the Sailor," he replied.

We drove all night and slept in the Land Rover the next morning, but by ten o'clock it was so hot we pulled onto the highway once again. Jack turned the air conditioning on full, but still the sweat poured off us like rain. We were driving through the marshlands, drained by Saddam Hussein's forces after the first gulf war, in an attempt to drive the rebels out. They had succeeded, starving water buffalo, gazelles, and birds close to extinction. Close to half a million Marsh Arabs, or Mad'an, died.

In the last two years, irrigation projects re-flooded the land. So far, they'd re-claimed almost half the marsh lands from the desert. Reeds grew where there had been sand, birds and buffalo returned. The few surviving Mad'an filtered back, fashioning their boats and huts, even islands, made from reeds, as they had done for centuries.

We stopped at the Tree of Life and Jack got out to photograph it, in the glaring light of noon. I walked across the highway and stepped on the bank next to the murky waters of the marsh. I could see Jack squat, compose a picture of the tree and the hotel nearby, when I kicked off my shoes and walked in the marsh. The water was warm, but cooler than the air.

I swam along a channel, flanked by reeds, until I came upon a little hut on a small island and I pulled myself out of the water onto it. I stripped off my sopping clothes and lay them on the ground, then entered the hut and lay down on its floor. A gentle breeze blew from the south and cooled my skin. I fell asleep.

Jack woke me with a kiss. "I've been thinking," he said, dripping water on my face.

"What?" I asked, a bit distractedly.

"Marry me," he said, then, on an island in the marsh between the Tigris and Euphrates - where the Mad'an say the world began - Jack made love to me.