

## **Pursuing Isadora**

Isadora Devonshire. I couldn't stop thinking about her. But it wasn't love. It wasn't even lust. It was entirely literary.

Isadora Devonshire, President of the boutique Devonshire Literary Agency, was Canada's most successful literary agent. Her name alone seemed to embody the world of literature in all its tantalizing possibilities. Isadora Devonshire: its syllables and their cadence were a kind of poem, emotion crystallized in words. They were sophistication, brilliance, success.

Her authors won prestigious prizes. They dominated best seller lists for months at a time, as if Canadian literature were a kind of personal Devonshire franchise. Praise of her judgment and proclamations of gratitude from the authors had made her a celebrity in her own right while also, of course, elevating the authors by association. Isadora was endlessly interviewed on serious television. At Canadian literary events, she had become the equivalent of a resident panelist.

In audiences, gaunt attentive faces regarded her wistfully. They radiated the distinctive hunger that only authors have. Especially authors who do not have literary agents and need them.

For two years, I had been pursuing her. Her announcement, at the most recent Giller Award ceremony banquet, that she would again be making a special effort to encourage new authors with a once-per-month first-come-first-serve manuscript presentation day had seemed almost as if it were addressed to me personally. After all, I am what is called, in the trade, a "debut author." This is a category of author whose newness is immaculate, entirely untainted by the involvement of any publisher. The title

made me imagine myself as a kind of trembling ingenue, decked out in something frilly, descending a long curving staircase into an assembly of jaded icons of the Canadian literary establishment. I am, however, a middle-aged man and the title gives me continuing discomfort. Nevertheless, being two years retired and the creator of a burgeoning collection of unpublished works, I cannot deny the accuracy of its substance.

I had been courting Isadora with query letters long before her announcement. It had been a courtship reflecting meticulous attention to advice for would-be authors in books and seminars. The resulting letters had been crafted and obsessively re-crafted to query perfection. I had also sought, in every possible way, admittance to the gatherings where authors pitched their work to Isadora in person. I had worked hard to establish contacts with authors on her list who might provide me with the referral that, according to her website, was extremely advantageous. I had even ventured, once, to what was described as an author's retreat. It had not taken me long to conclude that retreat was the appropriate direction for the would-be writers in the group, infecting one another with toxic writing and reinforcing it with flowery complements that were either hypocritical or further evidence of an absence of talent.

Increasingly, my quest has been displacing attempts to actually write something. I need a letter that will distinguish me from the moiling crowd of would-be authors who buy the how-to books and writers' magazines, populate the seminars, go to the retreats and conferences, lurk in the audiences and who often appear to be disturbingly similar to myself. Of course, none of them has likely produced the equal of my work. *The Prominent Man*, my debut novel, is a story in epistolary form about a man retiring early from his career as an office manager and going on to become a nationally known author. However, in a cutthroat literary marketplace obsessed with sexual identity and

marginalization, this story is probably fated to remain unread. Unless, that is, I find the agent that I need. Unless Isadora takes it on.

My most recent query letter disrupts both the form and content of the traditional query letter, being formatted as a mini-short story. Creativity blazes forth even in the opening line: “‘Authors,’ the literary agent muttered. ‘They are shameless. They send me queries that are an incitement to narcolepsy and now this one thinks I can sell a Canadian publisher his 77,000 word debut novel about an office manager!’”

This opening gives me a kind of happiness I did not feel in twenty-five years of office management. Not personal pride exactly but a kind of love, an almost parental love for words that are now alive on paper, disconnected from me and, as it were, starting off in the world on their own. I do not see how Isadora, or any other literary agent, could resist this opening line or the seamless transition to a description of my novel that immediately follows.

For weeks I have been waiting for a response. However, my telephone remains silent. The mail brings only bills.

The problem here is that even the most creative query letter is doomed to remain invisible in the deluge of competing queries, unless an agent actually reads it. Responding to this reality, I decided to take advantage of Isadora’s Giller ceremony offer and go directly to her office. Her website advises authors to proceed, on the first Friday of each month, to the entrance of her office at 331 Chatsworth Road, Suite 201, and follow instructions. Accordingly, on the first qualifying Friday, I pointed my aging Honda in the direction of the office.

After narrowly beating out a sagging yellow hatchback for what seemed to be the only remaining parking place on a very congested street, I succumbed to the temptation

to reread, once again, *A Prominent Man*. I needed to make sure the pages were ordered correctly. I also had a nagging anxiety that the manuscript I had with me might not be the latest of the many versions I had produced.

My concentration was interrupted by a gentle tapping on my car window. An emaciated man, about my age, was smiling tentatively at me. His arm, emerging from a thread-bare lumberman's jacket, motioned for me to lower the window.

I have sympathy for street people. They are becoming steadily more numerous in our downtown areas. I always treat them with courtesy and respect, although there won't be donations until I start earning money from my writing.

"Yes?" I said, as the window descended.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," he said. "But can I ask you something?"

"Yes," I said. "Please go ahead."

"It's just that I noticed you staring over at the DLA office and I think I recognize you from the Giller audience last month," he said. "You wouldn't be here for Isadora would you?"

"Well yes," I said. "I heard her announcement for new writers and that's what I am, so I'm hoping that she might have a moment to meet with me."

"Henry Wong," he said warmly, extending a hand. "I'm here for the same reason and pleased to meet you. I thought you had that look. There are actually quite a few of us parked here already and at least two of us were here last month as well. You need to go to the doorway and take a ticket from the machine. You can see the number that's being called in the office window there, that red number nine that's showing. I'm number 27 today, so I'm not sure I'll get in. You need to get your number quickly because quite a few people have been taking them. Good luck and I'll leave you to it. I just thought I

might save you some parking money because last Friday she only got to 15 and the numbers start fresh each month.”

“Thanks very much Henry,” I said. “Good to meet you and I really appreciate your coming over.”

As he turned to leave, his eyes strayed to the manuscript I had been going over. He did a double take.

“Jeez, now there’s a coincidence,” he said. “The title of my novel is *A Permanent Man*, so we’re only a couple of syllables apart here. Shit, do you ever get the feeling you’re trapped in a crowd or something?”

“I haven’t,” I said. “At least, not yet.”

“You wouldn’t believe this,” he continued. “But last week I had a chat with Mike Verano and you can see him over there in that grey Hyundai. He’s got a novel called *A Pastoral Man* about a guy who retires early and takes up farming. At least we’re different on plot. My guy volunteers in a trans-person advocacy group but he stays a man, so he’s kind of bridging the cultures, you know? And this is topical, according to a seminar I went to, so I’m really looking forward to what Isadora has to say.

“So, what’s yours about, if you don’t mind my asking?”

I needed to get my number and I felt my plot was a trade secret. But Henry had gone to the trouble of coming over and I didn’t want to be rude.

“Well, at least we have different plots,” I said. “Mine is about an office manager who retires early and goes on, after some setbacks to become a nationally known politician.” It was a discarded version of my plot, but close enough to avoid fraud.

“Shit,” he said. “I don’t believe this. My guy is an office manager too, and that’s what Mike’s guy was before he took up farming. I’m writing about what I know because

that's what I was. Mike was an office manager too. This is starting to get very weird."

"Yes," I said. "Weird. We should talk more but let me get my number first, OK?"

There is always a social butterfly in every crowd, someone who seems to know everything that is going on. Henry seemed to be it for Chatsworth Road and he was certainly a talker. However, I was grateful to him for coming to my car. Writing can be a lonely business and solidarity is a good feeling. There is no denying that authors are fundamentally in competition, which makes moments of solidarity especially welcome.

Henry headed off, shaking his head. He seemed to be heading for a grey Mazda. It looked to be the same vintage as my Honda and even more dilapidated. Rust was beginning to devour it around the rear wheel wells.

Crossing the street, I repressed Henry's thoughts about weirdness. I didn't need them, especially right before a meeting with Isadora. At her office doorway, I took my ticket from the machine. My number was 43. If what Henry had been telling me was accurate, it was clear that I wouldn't be meeting Isadora today. But, then again, maybe Henry had been exaggerating. Authors have been known to do that. Or maybe Isadora would be speeding up as she got into the rhythm of things. I decided to retreat to my car and monitor the pace of the interviews.

I had skipped breakfast and my stomach was saying it was time for food. There was a food truck positioned further along the street. Enroute to my car, I headed to the truck. "Dudley's Dog Shoppe" was emblazoned on its side, above two food windows.

Six people were waiting, three carrying envelopes.

Dudley turned out to be a small, fast-moving and very extroverted man who was conducting simultaneous conversations at his two windows while also producing a steady stream of hot dogs. I opted for two Chicagos and a bratwurst on a bun. Practically before

I had given the order found myself explaining that, yes, I was one of the authors who were hoping to see Isadora.

“She’s gold for us,” Dudley said. “Ever since that announcement, we have line-ups here every Friday because people don’t keep track. And there’s traffic for her office too on the other days. Mostly people hoping I guess. A lot of them just come to look, you know. Like they think just being here is going to do something for them...”

He slapped four dogs on a plate and handed them out the other window.

“Tourists, you know,” he continued. “A lot of literary types. It’s like we’re a destination now or something. People come and stand in her doorway for selfies. Look at that guy in the red shirt over there, deep breathing at the building vent. As if breathing her air is going to do something for him. But that’s tourists, right? At museums they think a chair that had a dead person’s bum in it a hundred years ago is magic or whatever. They don’t have nothing better to do I guess.”

My dogs were ready. Dudley pivoted back to his grill, returning with my plate.

“Think about the gold rush,” he said. “That will be twelve dollars.

“ Thanks. Mostly they didn’t find nothing and went through hell getting up there. But the hotel owners, the guys selling equipment and all that, they made the money. There’s no money in what Isadora’s doing over there, my friend. Not even for her. Confidentially, her secretary wouldn’t be coming over here every day with orders for my dogs if being an agent made the big bucks. And the writers, forget it! I’m the one who’s doing good. It’s the Klondike all over again here, thanks to that announcement and you guys who want to write stuff. And not just for me.”

He was pivoting away before I could say anything, but paused to add:

“Don’t forget to take a look at Manfred’s Zines over there, he’s got mags and

books for writers up the ying-yang and tell him I sent you, OK? Good luck to you my friend. There's mustard and relish right there on your left."

A woman with an angry frown wedged herself past my shoulder to get to the window and almost spilled my dogs. Her hand was clutching what looked like a manuscript. Stepping aside, I caught a glimpse of her title: "A Prohibited...".

At the mustard station, I took my time and tried to read the rest of it. Her expression made me imagine a furious novel about betrayal, or perhaps something about terrorism. But who knew? That was the thing about writing; the possibilities were endless.

I retreated to my car and took my first bite of a Dudley's dog. It was delicious. Sunlight bathed the street, slowing the strollers on the sidewalks to a tropical languor. It reflected even from the tired chrome of the authors' cars stationed into the distance along the curb.

The "9" in Isadora's office window changed to a "10." Time seemed to slow. The food, the street and the warmth of the car was making me drowsy.

I had found a place to be. Maybe I would be the permanent man there, if not the prominent one. I had found people to be there with me. Some day even an agent too, maybe. The world contained a lot of authors but, then again, Isadora had a lot of numbers.