

E. J. Myers
Camera Obscura

What intrigues me most about the old camera: there's film inside. The circular red window at the back, transparent and slightly smaller than a dime, shows the number 3. Someone many years ago—decades, even—had loaded the Brownie and may have taken at least two snapshots. Will any resulting images have lasted after all that time?

With a black bellows protruding like a dog's snout, the Brownie resembles a miniature of the big portrait cameras that I had watched my uncle Alex, a professional photographer, use many years ago. Everything about this device speaks of a bygone era. Even its odor, dusty and musty, reveals the passage of time. I had purchased it while visiting a rural antique store in Maine. How old is it? Unclear. No. 2 Folding Autographic Brownie reads the gold lettering underneath the lens assembly. My curiosity intensifies. I punch the name into a search engine and learn that Eastman Kodak manufactured this line of products between 1917 and 1926. If this one dates from the early years of that span, the camera is over a hundred years old. If from the later range, then just eight years shy of a century.

My curiosity intensifies. Can I get the film successfully developed? I can't help but wonder who or what might appear. A family at a picnic, perhaps?—the men in linen suits and boater hats, the women in flapper outfits, the girls in frocked dresses, the boys in sailor suits. Or maybe two teenage sisters posing in an orchard? Or some ballplayers lined up for a team portrait? Or a newlywed couple standing nervously with their parents? These possibilities—any possibilities—entice me and draw me forth.

A dark thought occurs to me: whoever took the pictures, as well as the people "captured" on film, must now be either ancient or dead. Even a baby photographed in, say, 1920, will now be a man or a woman almost a hundred years old—assuming, of course, that he or she is still alive at all. The odds of such a long life are slim; even the subject of a baby photo has probably been dead for decades. Same for the older members of the picnic party, the sisters, the baseball players, the newlyweds. Anyone whose images I might find among the photos will most likely be long gone.

I visit a local camera store to inquire about getting the film developed. By raising this issue almost two full decades into the twenty-first century, I realize that my request is the equivalent of asking the personnel at an audio specialty store if they can repair the wax cylinders for a Victrola. I explain the situation to Bob, the owner: "Do you guys offer this kind of service for old film?"

Bob, gruff and busy, sounds skeptical about the likelihood of finding images on the old film. "Not very often," he tells me. "Almost nobody bothers to develop black-and-white film these days. Also, if there's anything present on really old film, the images will be of very poor quality."

Since he seems hesitant to proceed—more than hesitant: uninterested—I hold off. I leave with the camera. I take it home. I put it away.

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In English we say “develop the film” or “get the film developed,” and the equivalent phrase in other languages often relies on the same verb. The idiom in French is *développer une pellicule*—almost the same as in English. In Italian? *Svippulare il film*, once using again a verb that means “to develop.” Similarly, the German phrase is *entwickle den film*, with an equivalent verb. Russian? *развить фильм* (*razvit’ film*). Mandarin: 開發—*Kāifā diànyǐng*—developing a film.

In Spanish, however, the relevant phrase is *revelar la película*—“to reveal the film.” Spanish somehow describes the process most accurately, most vividly, the process that anyone witnesses when observing the alchemy of darkroom chemistry. This is what I want: not just development but revelation.

In many ways the lexical differences between languages don’t matter much anymore. Few people nowadays take photos using film. Digital photography is the twenty-first-century norm. Development—revelation—is instantaneous. Where, then, does this leave me, with the antique camera sitting idle on my dresser, the film inside having been exposed at least sixty or seventy years ago, perhaps eighty or ninety, possibly a hundred?

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I contact a specialty photo service in Kansas I’ve located online, I explain my situation, and I ask if the company might help me out. “I realize that the odds aren’t great for a positive outcome,” I write in my initial e-mail, “and perhaps for any outcome at all. Even so, I’m curious to see what’s there. Would your company be able to develop the negatives and see if there’s anything worth printing? Are you willing to give it a try?”

The response just a few hours later: “Yes, we process black and white 120 film. I’ve attached an order form for you to use. A lot of people send film that turns out. It just depends on where the film has been stored.”

Without further delay I rewind the film inside the camera, remove the roll, wrap it in foil, package it, and mail it to Kansas.

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I receive an e-mail from the photo service eight days later, not a message as such but a refund for credit-card charges and a terse explanation for the refund: “Roll has no images.” Despite this bad outcome, I’m still curious about the film. When I sent the roll to the photo service, I requested that they return it to me even if the darkroom process revealed nothing. A little package arrives a few days later. Inside the envelope are the company’s receipt and paperwork, the film’s metal spool with a roll of paper still wound around it, plus a white paper packet containing six five-inch-long strips of the film itself. All six appear to be completely blank. Holding them up to the light, all I can see is a delicate, nearly invisible pattern of striations on the outer surface, not entirely a crazing of the acetate but something similar—micro-wrinkles, perhaps, resulting from degraded chemicals on the acetate. Otherwise nothing.

I’m disappointed, of course. No picnickers gaze back at me. No sisters smile serenely in the orchard. No baseball players pose together, all lined up and earnest, bats and mitts ready for action. No newlyweds glance

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nervously at each other in their parents' presence. Even a shadowy image would have been at least one fish in the net I've cast. Instead, I've hauled it up altogether empty.

Or have I? Looking more closely at the strips of film, I see one of them showing more than just the almost imperceptible striations evident on the acetate. There's an oval smudge present on the left-hand third of the strip. What am I seeing? Perhaps nothing but some aberrations in the silver halide crystals coating the film? Or maybe a thumbprint left there by a lab technician at the Kansas photo service? I examine the smudge more closely. With a jolt I realize that what I'm seeing may not be a smudge after all. What, then? An image. Of what? It's possible that despite the faintness of what I'm viewing—its attributes bleached almost to non-existence—this oval may be what remains of a human face.

Then I pull back not just from the film but from the notion I've started to entertain. This is ridiculous. I am literally imagining the face. What I tell myself I'm seeing doesn't actually exist. My perception is the equivalent of fervent Christians seeing Jesus stare back at them from a piece of toast. Hungry and suggestible, the mind wants what it wants. I crave an image somewhere in this roll of almost transparent acetate; hence an image will arise. Like a child gazing at summer clouds in hopes of spotting a unicorn or a whale, I will see what I want to see.

I put the strip away and ignore it for several days. Then, still curious, I take it out again, hold it up to the window and the overcast sky beyond, peer at it toward the desk lamp and its beige shade, angle it this way and that, examine it in every way possible. It's not clear to me that something's there. It's not clear to me that nothing is there. Am I seeing the last vestiges of a toddler propped up in her crib, of an elderly woman sitting in her parlor, of a father posing in his frock coat, of a young woman gazing toward the photographer with a come-hither smile? Is this strip of plastic somehow haunted by a barely perceptible ghost? Is the image the ghost of a ghost? Or is it my own mind that's haunted, full of wishes for connection with someone who has never even existed?