Chapter 9

Exercise 6: The Portrait A Picture *About,* Not *Of,* Someone

Whenever it happened I'd know ... the heart, there in the face. It was as though I'd leaned in to whisper something and found I suddenly couldn't speak. There I'd be, drowning in their face while they looked back into a circle of dark glass. It felt like kissing a stranger, beautiful and frightening, both at once.

A portrait is the outcome of a wordless connection to another person made into an image. From that image a viewer can share the encounter.

I approach making a photograph of a person with compulsion and some anxiety. I've learned that when those two states combine, something powerful can happen, something that takes me beyond control to an unexpected outcome. I've traveled to Cuba, Italy, Egypt, and Uganda just to abandon myself to people, to gaze into the human face. I've also stayed home to do it. It is an endless project.

And it is your next assignment.

Notice I am circling around the word "portrait" here. I think it evokes a head-and-shoulders, right-hand-over-left kind of photo that aims to please. I want to get at something much fuller in my own work and in this exercise.

I also want you to work consciously with some of the things we explored in previous exercises—composition as an experience, light as energy, a space in which something is drawn. We can also draw on the kind of psychological insight we used when we looked at strangers and wrote their stories.

But this time there is a hugely important addition to the brief: to make this exercise work, you have to see the person in front of you *and you have to let them see you too.* That means that you simply have to be as present for them as you want them to be for you. No hiding behind the machine.

If this seems like a lot to keep track of, don't try. Set your thoughts aside and just begin. That's the best way past obstacles that I've ever found. Go at the task with the same kind of thoughtless awareness that you used when you taped down your focus for the exercise in composition in Chapter Four. Just move and shoot, and keep doing it.

We are after a picture that leaves a person's wholeness and complexity intact. Everyone has layers and even contradictions, and you don't try to simplify and resolve them, a viewer can get a fuller sense of the person than they might get while standing in the room with them.

Why do portraits at all?

There are all kinds of reasons that the portrait has been one of the great themes of art and particularly of photography. One is that humans are really quite fascinated with their kind. In his book *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect,* Matthew D. Lieberman says that for most human beings the activity that nearly everyone's brain defaults to when it is not overtly engaged in some other activity is thinking about other people and our relationship to them.

I'm sure this is true of other animals too. Go to a dog park some time, then to a cocktail party or a gallery opening. It will seem like a park where the dogs drink white wine.

The way we view ourselves… or would like to.

Nancy Etcoff, an assistant clinical professor at Harvard Medical School and director of the Program in Aesthetics and Well Being at Massachusetts General Hospital, has studied how beauty affects the brain. Recent studies indicate that most people view themselves as "slightly more attractive" than the average photograph of themselves, she said.

"If you take a photograph of a person and you morph it with a more attractive person, and then with our who is less attractive, and show the subject all three, they are more likely to pick out their face morphed with the more attractive person as looking most like them."

New York Times, April 15, 2011

Now a few concrete considerations:

1. Who will you photograph?

2. Where will you photograph them?

3. What about the light?

Should you photograph someone you know or should it be a stranger? I'd say, do the stranger.

It may seem easier to ask people you know. Don't do it. Friends will, after a short protest, say yes, but the thing is that they will want to look better than they really do…as do we all. And you will not want to risk friendship by failing to do that. But when you cover up the texture and contradictions, you'll resolve and smooth over the very stuff that makes them interesting. Of course that stuff will probably show anyway, and your friends might be disillusioned with themselves and annoyed with you.

It sounds odd to put it this way, but most people would rather be illusioned.

If you're in the portrait business softening reality is acceptable, but if you're after the stuff of art, the full-spectrum evocation of another human being, you are really after an unexpurgated view. Such a view can even be kind, but if you prettify everything, the result is simply not interesting.

For example, the photograph of the confined prisoner in the portfolio that follows would undoubtedly not please his mother, but it really represents the man and gives a sense of where he is, with hints in his attitude of why he might be there. I didn't try to relax him, I just jumped into doing it, and it is one of the strongest portraits I've ever done.

All of this is why I suggest that you approach and work with someone you don't know at all, someone you don't need to protect. You'll avoid doing bland work and of risking the wrath of a friend. The intensity will put you in a state of much greater alertness, and your subject too. Don't be cruel, just honest.

Whomever you photograph, you will likely find that doing it makes for some tension. Good! Leave it there. It brings both of you a kind of heightened alertness and presence. Don't dissipate it, use it.

Then there is the question of where to work.

This is important: never simply photograph a person where they are when they said, *Yes*. Look around, in advance if possible, and find a "good" place, i.e., one that has graphic possibilities, some nice light and perhaps some clues about your subject. That might mean a room, it might mean outdoors, it might mean a circus tent or a theater dressing room or it might be just a few steps away, but you have to choose a place deliberately and then you have to ask your subject to move.

(There are exceptions: the photo of the prisoner on page 94 was taken just where I first saw him, but it was still a conscious choice.)

There could be some element in the frame that is associated with the person, such as the great black hulk of the piano in Arnold Newman's famous photo of Stravinsky. But don't rely on the shorthand of props or place to do your work. Everything in the frame — object and energy — has to be actively playing a part.

Intrude!

People are often reluctant to ask a subject to move or change their shirt or take off their glasses or almost anything at all. They feel they are intruding...and indeed they are. When you ask to photograph someone, you are moving into their life *but with their permission*. When they say yes, that permission is granted, and now you are responsible for the whole outcome and all its elements. And that may mean moving the person into some good light, or away from a distracting background.

Richard Avedon once said: "A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion. There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth."

Avedon once told Truman Capote: "Sometimes I think all my pictures are just pictures of me."

From "Stilled By Life," *Jim Hughes's 1996 piece on Richard Avedon in Photo Techniques magazine.*

Look, if you go the dentist he'll ask you to lie in the chair, and open your mouth. You don't feel put-upon. It's what he needs to do his work. People actually appreciate being managed when someone is making their portrait.

See the light

Light is a main player in any photograph. We did some exercises that were entirely about light, and from that you can understand that you may need to manage someone into a light that will do what you want. (As with the question of place, you may not necessarily have to move. The quality of the light on someone may be a part of what draws you. The prisoner, again, is an example. There was a window opposite the man that threw a cross light on his face, perfect as it was.)

I'm talking about light here, not lighting. By that I mean seeing light, as opposed to turning on lights. If the quality of light is not active where you are, find where it is. You can begin by looking near a window.

None of this means that you shouldn't move a light or set up a strobe. But the best lighting comes from an understanding of how light works in the wild, so to speak, with its complexity and richness. Imperfect light can be wonderful. You want to use the character of the light, not necessarily correct it.

And that's all I'll say about light at this point, except to point out that in the portfolio that follows, much of the light is natural...though it is often managed with reflectors, blockers, etc. These questions of subject, place, and light are preceded by that larger question we raised earlier: why do we make photographs of people at all?

Well, for one thing, we are endlessly enthralled by our own kind, as we saw. But I also think it is because doing a portrait gives us the power to create a being. Seriously. My picture of someone is my version of them, one that the subject and I create together.

Being with another person and making a portrait of them is intense, and we should leave it that way. If you want to look deeply at someone, understand that they will be looking into you too. This doesn't necessarily mean gazing into each other's eyes or having a long talk before you photograph. It can happen in an instant.

We don't run all this through our minds when we photograph someone, but I think we do enter a complex resonance with them, a sense of some harmony we want to grasp ... or some disharmony.

No writer ever writes about people who are harmonious and balanced, without issues. Writers want life in full, not a denatured version. Same with the portrait. The contradictions hint at the full complexity of someone who draws us. It offers the photographer the chance to take the person in and create a version that expresses the attractions that the

he or she might not openly express. The connection can be made in a sixtieth of a second, but the image we get suggests the fullness that is there before and after that moment.

So we've looked at some of the considerations that let you make an image of a whole person. To sum up, when you go at it:

1. Find someone who is interesting to you, for any reason at all.

2. Commit to seeing them as deeply as you can, just as they are. You may heighten what you see, but otherwise leave things alone.

3. Take charge of the setting and light, clothing, props.

4. To these I'd add one more: don't be polite, be honest.

The Big Secret

Once you have settled these things, then let them go. *Allow* photographs to emerge, to go beyond set your expectations aside and go through what you've done. Look for what surprises you. Look for the thing that happens. I don't know how to describe it, how to say what it is. Perhaps it is a moment of connection, or perhaps it is a moment in which your subjects goes to a state where they admit no one but they'll allow you a sense of their full presence there.

You'll know it when you see it.

Looking at your portraits

Time for the critique, no less daunting if you're critiquing yourself. A few things to remember:

The purpose is not to nail things down, fit them in, or pull them apart. It is to open them up and see what you've done, to understand what you saw, not what you thought.

And if you can, look at your pictures as if they were someone else's.

I edit by going through my files quite quickly, as though I were skimming a magazine. I rank any-

thing that catches my eye as a #2. Next, I make a further pass to refine my choices, promoting those that seem more complex and resonant to a ranking of #3.

Now I put the whole take aside for a while, and return later, looking for anything that leaps out. Only then do I work with some files to really refine them (trying not to overdo the refinements). If you work this way consciously you'll find that you can read very subtle clues about your subject's being. All this might take time.

Do your pictures look the way you thought they might? Does that matter? Not a bit. If it is simply the topography of someone's face, that's fine for a driver's license, but your intention was to make an image that breathes, that looks back.

Is an intense picture of a person a portrait?

If you photograph a person cheering at a game, strongly engaged, and the head fills the frame and their mouth is open and their eyes are wide, is that a good portrait? I think not. It might be lively and energetic, but it falls short of portraiture.

Why? My thought is that a portrait (usually) requires a connection that goes both ways, a dynamic and mutual revelation. That connection is passed on to the viewer. It can happen quickly, it can happen without speaking, and there doesn't need to be eye contact. But there does need to be awareness. It's a silent agreement, sometimes even a hostile one, that has to happen.

The picture at the game? It's a picture of someone excited by a game. It's lively, energetic, can even be artful, but it's just not a portrait. The need for that connection, that agreement between you and your subject intensifies things and deepens them. And intense and deep are always good in a portrait.

Your next portraits

As with any photo, the best place to start when looking at what you've done is with the question, "Is it alive?" That is *the* thing that a portrait must be. It is possible to provoke expression, dazzle with

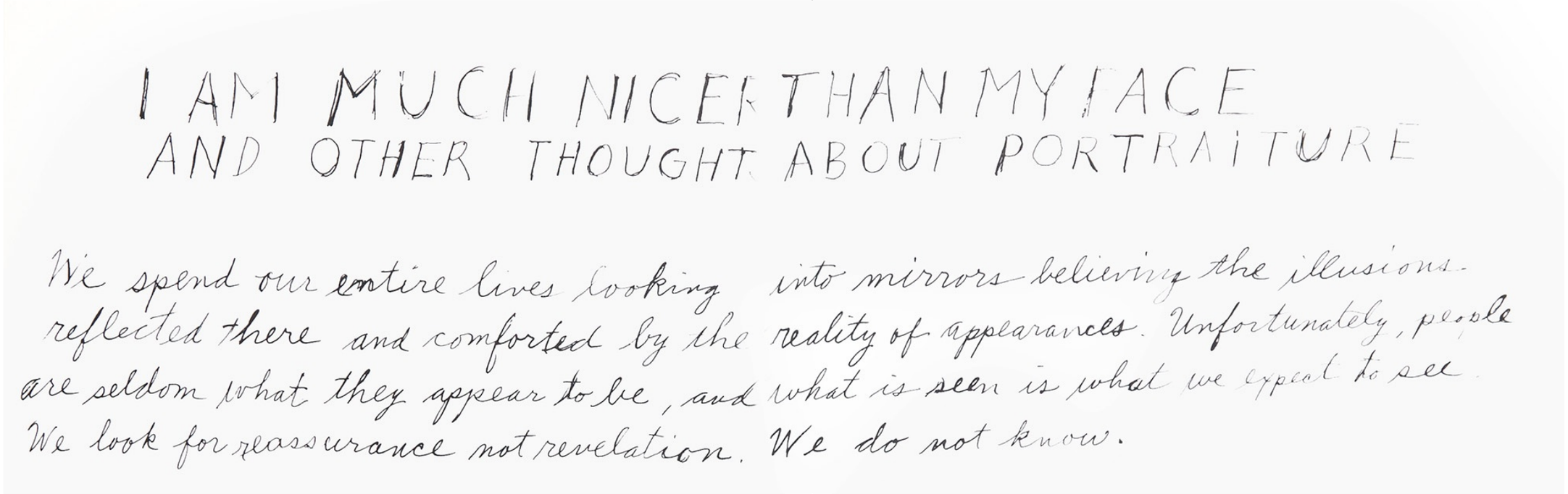
lighting, and make an impression while still missing the life and humanity in the sitter. People do this all the time and make successful careers of it. Just look around.

But if you want to work as an artist you have to look for life and allow it to manifest. The life can be inward, the eyes can be closed, they can be looking at you or away, but if the picture is alive, the photographer and subject have engaged and made something together. Look first for life in your portrait. You'll know it when you see it.

Making portraits is a way to be others and ourselves, and it is a great ongoing practice. You will likely do it again and again, just in the course of your photographic exploration. Each time you'll know more about how the best ones happen.

So whatever you have done during this exercise, go out and do it again. And remember to let every portrait be a conversation.

Now for...Duane Michals. Whatever ideas you may have about photographing people, this introduction to *Album: The Portraits of Duane Michals, 1958-1988,* will



challenge them.

I knew my mother and father my entire lifetime and not once did they ever reveal themselves to me. To whom have you revealed yourself? Who shares your secrets? What do you know about yourself to tell? Who is reading this now?

For those being photographed, portraiture is essentially about vanity. We want to be told that we are in some way attractive, almost desirable, still young and of value. Anything less is disturbing. We hope for flattery. And all the time we are looking for the wrong thing. We should want clues to our own truth.

High style photographers tend to take the same portrait over and over again. It is essentially the same picture, only the face has been changed to protect the innocent. The photographer should approach each sitting as if he had never taken a portrait before. He should be surprised by what he has done.

Some photographers can be very presumptuous in their self-delusions about "capturing" another person with their cameras. I know of one who actually believes that he reveals the soul of his sitters with his photographs of them. What you see is what there is. It is also nonsense to reduce people to just their costumes, mere social, racial, and sexual clichés. That is looking at people with the pretensions of looking into them. We never see anyone at all.

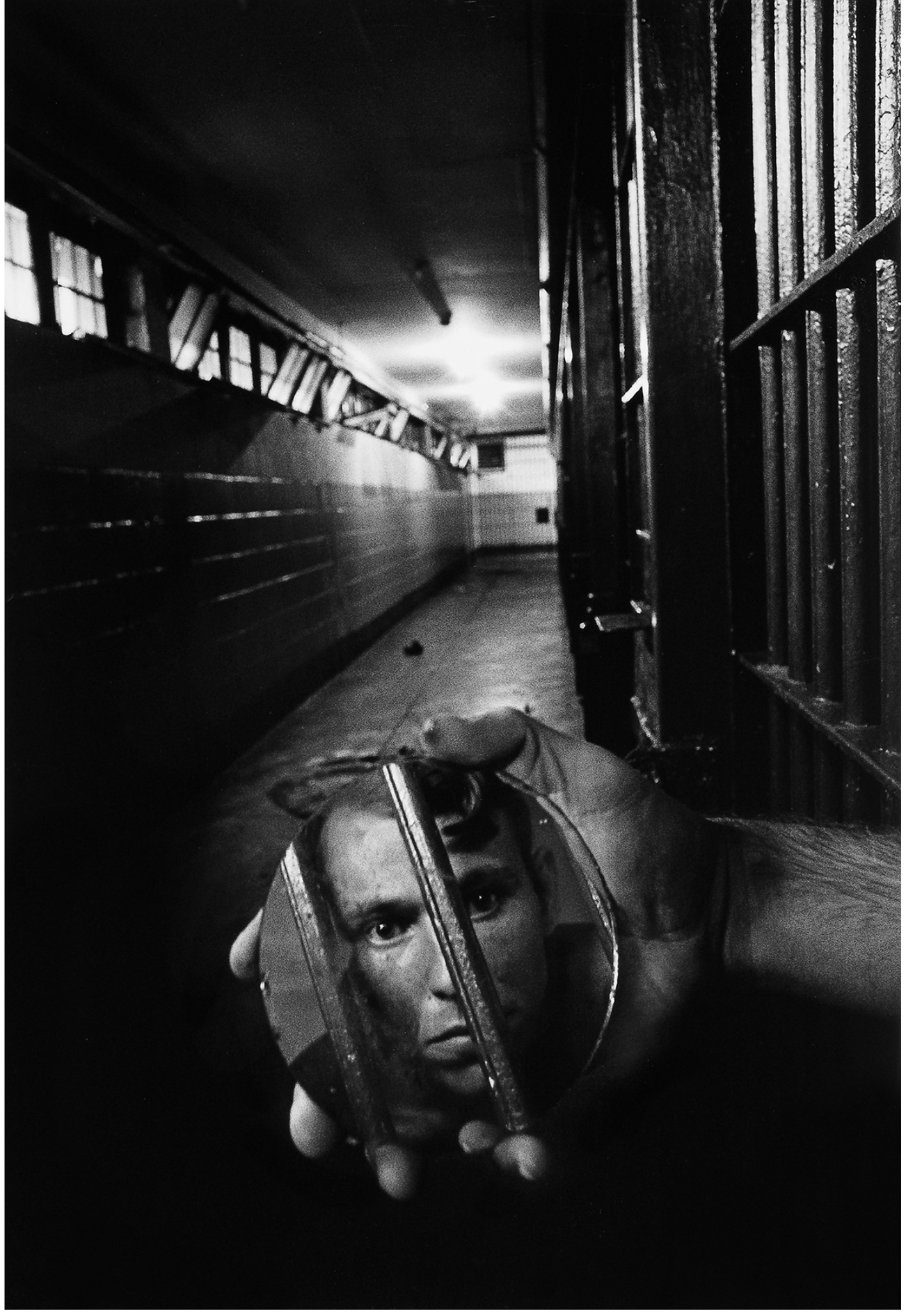
My portraits in this book have revealed nothing profound about the subjects or captured anything. They were almost all strangers to me. How could I say anything about them when I never knew them? What I did was to share a moment with them, and now I share that moment with you, no more, no less.

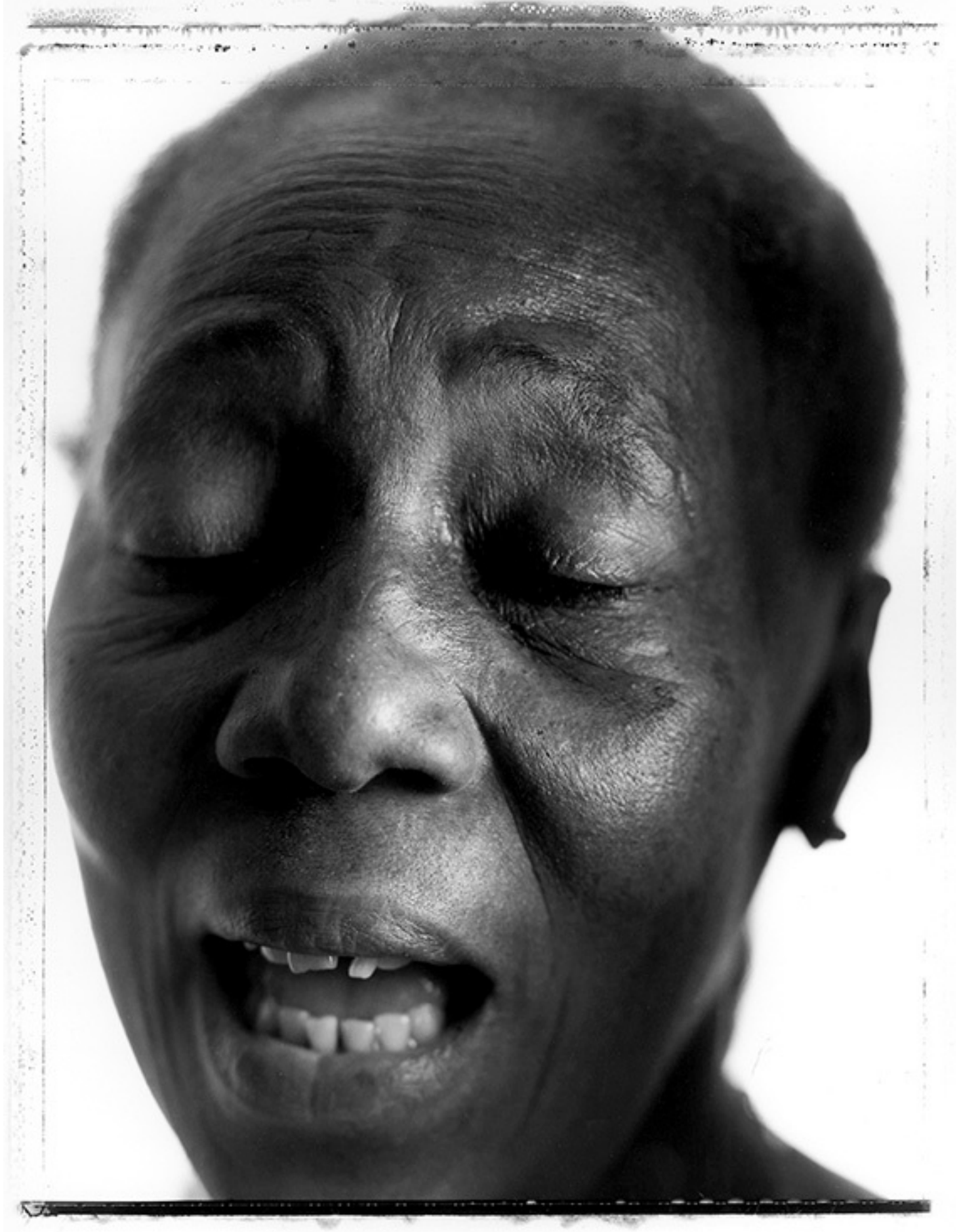
I always look mean when photographed, and yet I am much nicer than my face. I am not just this chin, this wrinkle, this nose. Do not be deceived by my face.

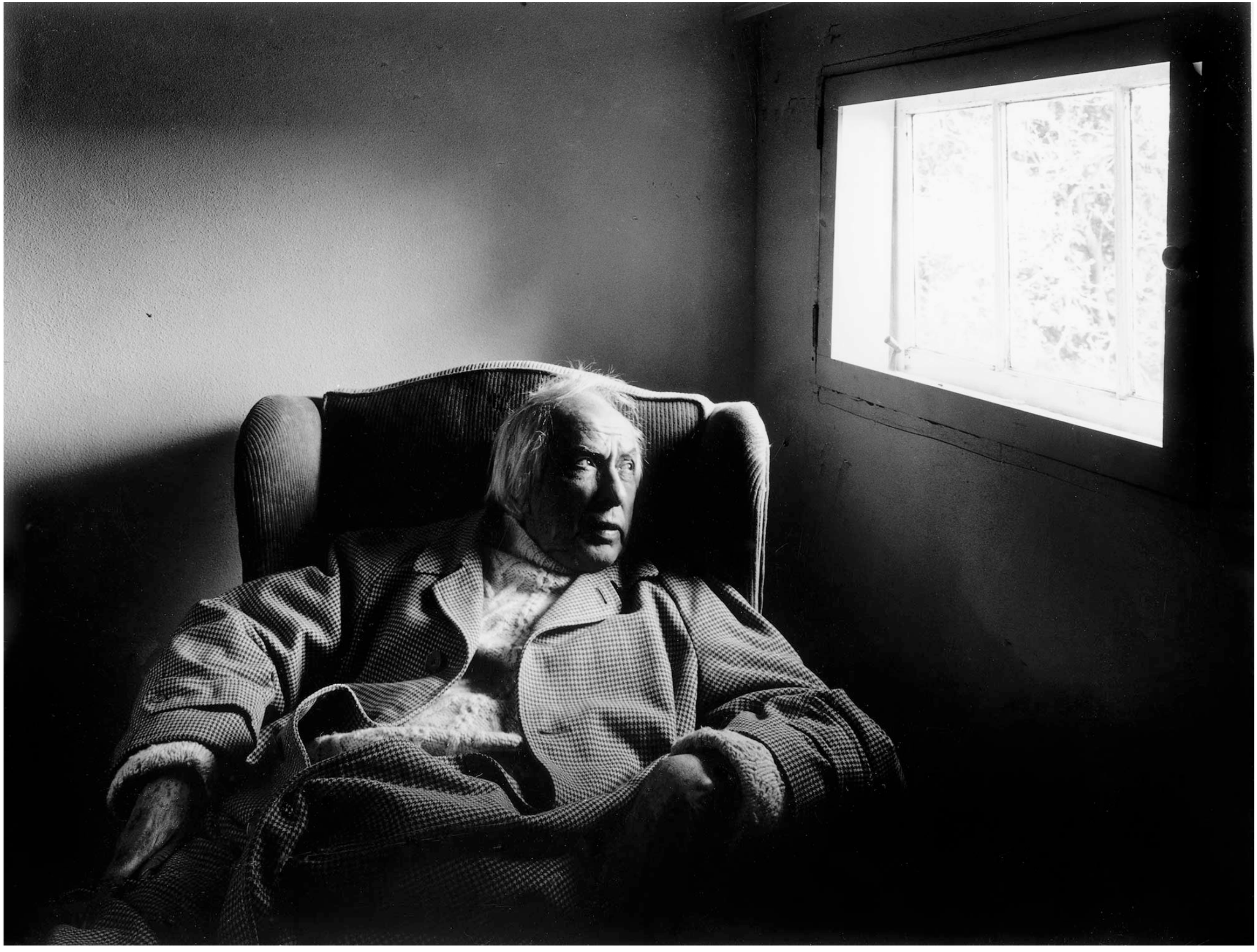
Bizarre! looking people are very easy to photograph. All the photographer has to do is simply record what they bring to him. The more peculiar looking they are, the easier the job is. We all love to slow down and look at accidents on the freeway.

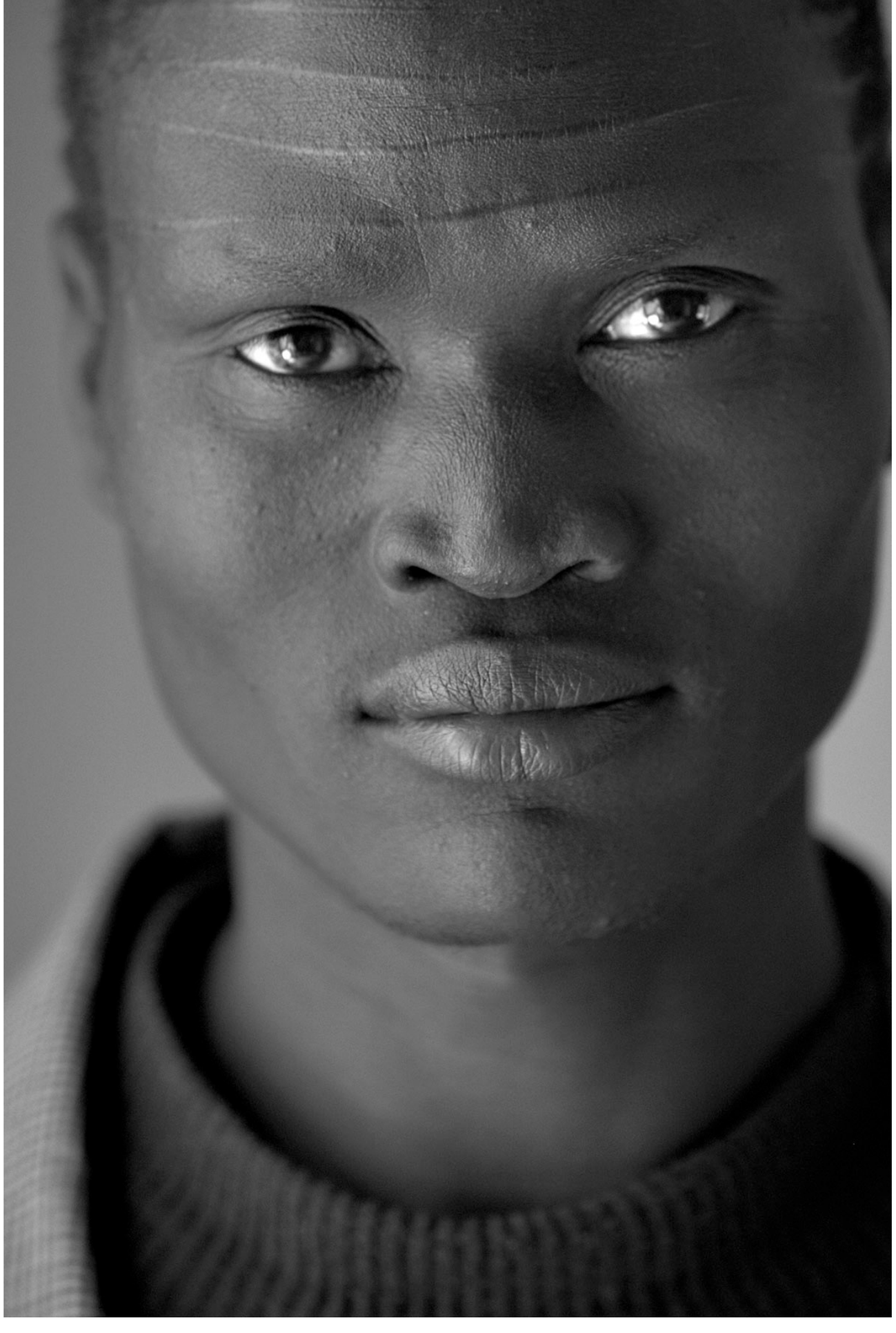
Celebrities are the easiest of all to photograph. There is no such thing as a bad celebrity portrait. Even a bad picture is a good one. Essentially these portraits

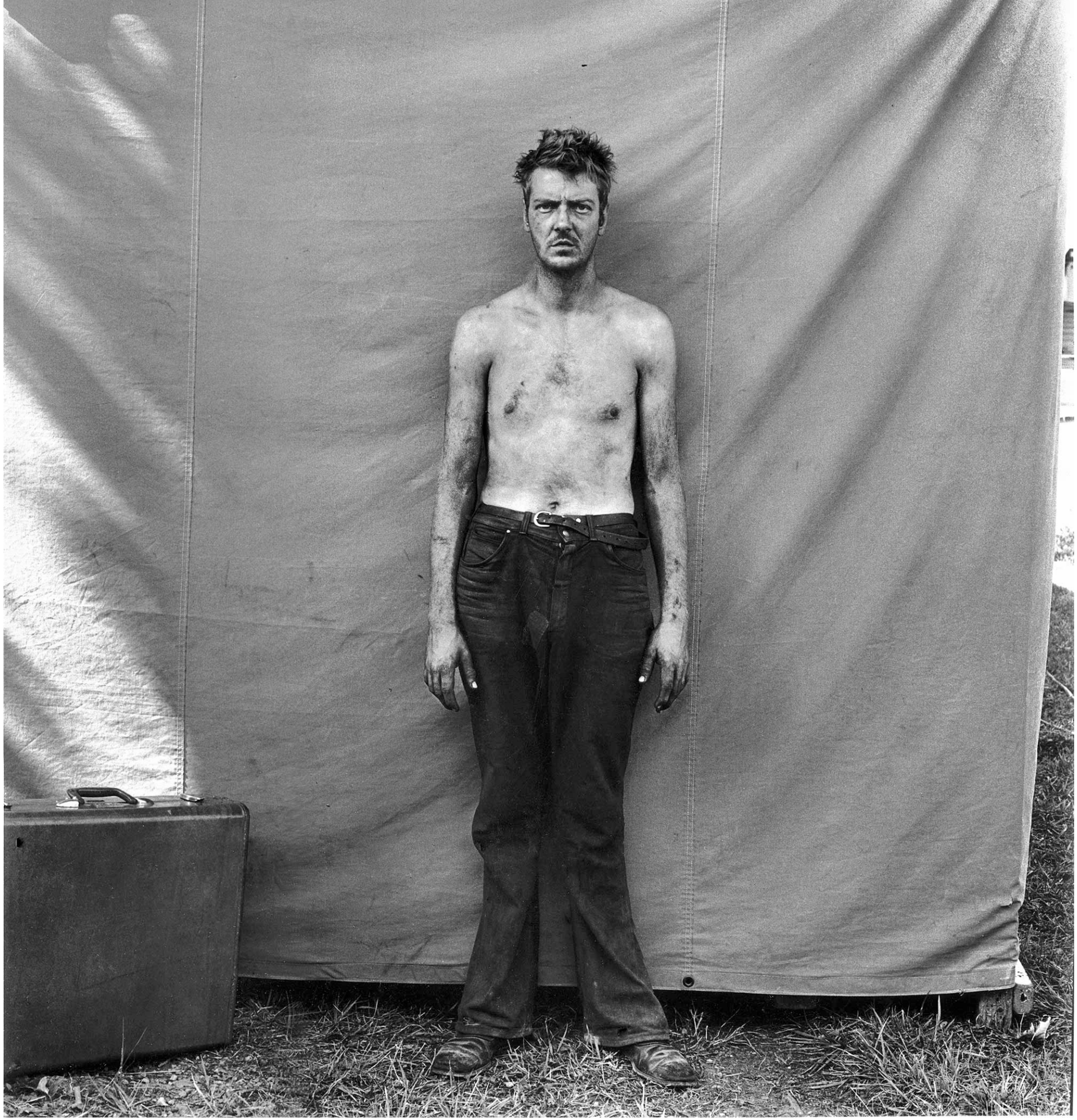
What follows here is a small group of portraits. I am showing my own partly because I have access to them. But you should also do image searches for August Sander, Arnold Newman, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin, and of course Duane Michals. Also look at the work of the painters Agnolo Bronzino, Hermenegildo Bustos, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, and on and on.











Here is a portrait I did of my wife when I first met her. You can see very clearly the story I was thinking up, and it turned out to be true.