

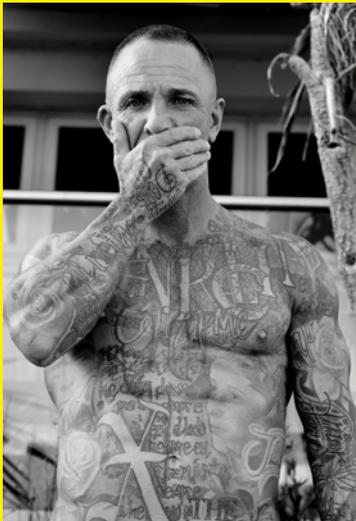
CAMERA OBSCURA

It took me a while to gain the courage to approach a stranger and ask if I could take their photograph. 'Take' is the operative word here, for in the act of photography there exists a subtle, second-by-second power play between subject and photographer in which defining who the real maker of the image becomes blurred.

My attraction to photography lies in the ability the camera has to lure me to places I shouldn't be, to walk down certain darkened paths with an illusory sense of immunity to whatever emerges from its shadows. I love the camera as a kind of dream device that lets me penetrate people's lives for a moment, then walk away with something indelible—a candid representation whose human minutiae I can examine and return to at will. Indeed, when photographing someone I have just met, there is a dreamlike sheen that descends and holds us in a bubble of intense lucidity. The immediate surroundings turn muffled and vague and it is just two strangers performing a dance of tacit trust. We're left locked in an apertured intimacy that separates us, if only for a few seconds, from our foreseen realities.

I have approached lots of strangers over the years, and their willingness to let me photograph them always surprises and excites me. I reckon out of every ten people I approach, eight will usually say yes.

I think it helps that I give them a card with my website and details on it and offer to send them a copy of the image, but even so I always expect the opposite—few takers and plenty of firm rejection. However, the reasons for this—why most strangers are willing to be photographed—have become poignantly apparent to me. The realisation is that the subject's



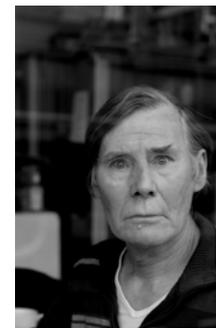
acquiescence is often less about the photograph and more—much more—about an opportunity to talk to with someone they probably won't see again.

Standing on a busy high street or gloomy pier, or along the quiet, empty road where they live, at least half the individuals I photograph will, with little to no prompting, unveil their most delicate, saddest selves to me. A girl with green hair, a tattooed guy with muscles, a young woman with a muzzled pit bull and a man with remarkable eyebrows sitting alone in a rainy café—these are among the strangers who have asked me if they look okay because they've just been

crying; these are the strangers who tell me they're not as happy as they seem; these are the strangers who ask me if I really think they have an interesting face and then email me later to tell them I made their day; these are the strangers who tell me they haven't been out of the house in three years because they're looking after their mother who has dementia and they've also just found out their partner has cancer.



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These are the strangers you and I pass by every day. And these strangers are you and I also, bearing all our myriad guarded sorrows and complexities; we're the strangers who sometimes feel we're disappearing in the daily swathe of necessity and routine and need to be shown that we are seen, that we do indeed live.

In this way, the people and things I choose to photograph become a reflection of me. I can look at a photograph I took a few years ago and with some accuracy assess what state of mind I was in when I shot it. I have always been naturally melancholic and a little aloof, but the images born from my specific looking are often indicative of just how deeply within these traits I am swimming (or drowning) at the time.

Of course, it is this solemnity and inwardness that drew me to photography in the first place. It lets me indulge in my fascination with the human condition while holding up a shield—the camera itself—that separates and protects me from the particular condition I am observing. At times, the subject becomes a conduit for my own emotional state. The ground glass of the lens allows for a distortion of the feelings' ownership, a mysterious manipulation of angles of light and darkness that temporarily relinquishes me from myself. I am there but also somehow not; now here and yet nowhere. I'm one person but also another, and the other is me also, all facets alert to the flicker of silence between stillness and capture. No wonder it often feels like a dream.

Another kind of magic the camera can conjure is the rendering of the photographer's intention. It often seems that by some psychic alchemy my reason for taking the photograph, the way I want to represent the subject and the way the subject wants to be represented, move back and forth between viewfinder, lens and image sensor in a pixelated agreement that results in an instant and contented truth. It's this—the thrill of believing you have managed to uncover something in someone that is usually concealed by their socialised

particles—that makes this form of photography so compelling and, at its peak, inexplicable in its mechanisms.

And what of the courage of the subject to let a stranger take their photograph? I have often wondered whether I would be one of the eight that say yes or of the two that say no. At first I think it would depend on the kind of day I was having, how I felt at the moment of approach. If I was reasonably happy, then yes; if I was floundering in a black hole, then probably no. Why would I give someone I've just met the power to suspend me forever in this state of being?

But I remind myself of all those people who said yes, and how many of them exposed their loneliness and confusion to me and my camera. It occurs to me then that the term is not 'to take a photograph' but rather 'to give a photograph'. For the exchange between photographer and stranger becomes one in which both provide something to the other, a nameless affirmation that what you're doing—taking photographs or simply being an entity that exists and carries a vast and unfathomable history within its atoms—fleetingly means something to someone else. Even if you never know their name.

Oliver Roberts is a multi award-winning journalist and photographer born in Johannesburg, South Africa and now living in Hampshire. You can see more of his work at oliverrobertswriter.com

