

If Looks Could Kill



- when strangers notice you taking their picture -



john hayes

streetstpete.wordpress.com

Foreword



I take pictures of people I don't know.

Sometimes they smile, sometimes they frown. Sometimes they reach inside their waistband, like the man above, for a concealed object that could be a gun. I can try to make educated guesses but in truth I never really know how they are going to respond.

I have been prowling streets for only slightly more than half a year now, but have accumulated some encounters you may find interesting.

Enjoy...

- john hayes

Strategies

Taking a stranger's picture without permission is a well-documented fear among photographers, at least initially.



And there is a predictable litany of ways that many try to deal with that fear:

1. rationalize to yourself that taking a picture from behind a person or over their shoulder is just as effective
2. after taking a shot keep the camera at eye level pretending that you haven't pressed the shutter button yet and rotate your body away from the person as if still deciding what to include in the frame
3. smile and say 'thank you' and either keep walking, or - if they look amenable - stop and chat and offer to email their picture to them
4. use a small (non-DSLR, usually mirrorless) camera with a tilting display screen so you can shoot "from the hip" with less chance of being detected



If you're tempted to attach a long lens and shoot from across the street or behind a tree, don't. "Creepiness increases with focal length" is a well-known photographer's adage suggesting that adopting such a strategy will catapult you into the role of pervert.



I am too far away to hear what this guy is saying and I'm probably better off not knowing. He no doubt is not the most stellar of citizens but my sneakiness with a zoom lens - a technique I quickly abandoned - is a bit unsavory too.

"Creepiness increases with focal length"

Posed vs. Candid Portraits

It should be obvious that you can, of course, simply ask for permission and then a "candid portrait" becomes a "posed portrait". But are they equally effective?

Would I have gotten an expression as charming as this if I had asked first?



Here are two ladies who did kindly stop what they were doing and pose for me.



Not bad, I suppose, the above two posed portraits, considering I didn't have much control over lighting or background. But again, by contrast, in the context of the "depresso" sign could I have coaxed this stranger into looking so dour by sweet-talking him into posing?



Admittedly still new to street photography, of the perhaps half dozen times I have politely requested permission all but one said 'yes.'

Stranger Danger

Responses from pedestrians who have just had their picture taken also fall on a continuum:

1. they are so preoccupied they don't notice you
2. they reflexively turn to look behind them to see what you find so interesting
3. they politely duck so as not to "spoil" your picture
4. they smile and exude a friendly curiosity
5. they ask/demand to know why you just took their picture

It seems self-evident, as a prerequisite, that you should always be totally aware of your surroundings. Front, back, sides – all 360 degrees around you. Not just not to miss a good shot but for your own safety as well.

Which one of these individuals is most at risk?



Obviously, the kid in black is not paying attention.

The other three are homeless or at least have nothing much to do all day as I see them frequently in the downtown area. I call them the three dingoes – notice in the above image that they are actively on the prowl, exhibiting ruthless efficiency, each intensely engaged with different sectors of their surroundings, looking for an opportunity.

The leader is quite deliberately giving me a challenging stare. In fact, a couple of days later one of these bozos, the one below on the left, picked something up off the street – not sure what it was – and threw it at me.



As far as I could tell it was unprovoked aggression because my camera was unobtrusively cradled in my hand, swinging normally alongside my leg as I walked. His two companions on the right are exhibiting mock outrage at their “crazy” friend.

I don't mean to imply that I felt like I was in any real danger. I wasn't, and never really have been. In this case I just raised my camera and started documenting the scene.

But the trick is to stay alert. In my experience street people are incredibly observant. The wallet bulging in your pocket is as easy for them to spot as the camera around your neck with “Pawnshop” written all over it.

Close Encounters

- hostile looks -

It is difficult to forget that first intimidating stare one gets as a street photographer.



No words were spoken but the message was loud and clear. That, by the way, is a hockey stick in his hands.

Other looks, not so physically threatening, are nevertheless clearly disapproving.





“Did you just take my picture?” the young lady below asked in no uncertain terms.

“What...! Did you jump into the frame? I was taking a picture of the building and if you ruined it I’m gonna have to charge you, ya know.”



She didn't laugh.



This man told me adamantly that I “didn’t have the right to take his picture.”

I informed him that I did have the right and kept walking.

From the outset I promised myself I would not “exploit” the homeless. They deserve to be documented in a way that will galvanize the attention of the public but I confess that I may not have learned yet where the boundary line is, when to leave them alone

The law is pretty clear. If you are in a public place you have no reasonable expectation of privacy.

And if you object too strenuously to having your picture taken you can be guilty of threatening, intimidation, or harassment. Try to grab my camera and that's a felony. And if you detain me and prevent me from leaving, that's the equivalent of kidnapping.

On occasion I have recited the law to a concerned individual, and I make a point of ostentatiously pulling out my cell phone and video recording our encounter.

But most of the time there are better ways to defuse the situation. When appropriate:

1. flatter the person by telling them how unique & photogenic they are
2. play the befuddled old man, the harmless retiree, the former resident astonished at all the changes in the city
3. explain street photography and give them your business card with a link to your website
4. show them their picture and offer to send them a copy



By far the most challenging hostile street encounter in my short career involved a woman breast-feeding her child.

I was strolling through the local Saturday Arts & Crafts show at Williams Park in downtown St. Pete when out of the corner of my eye I saw a woman plop down on a bench, reach inside her blouse and fumble with her breast. Instinctively I whirled and fired off a shot. I continued on my way. I don't use a big DSLR on the streets but a small mirrorless camera (like the kind pictured on the first page) with a tilting LED screen that lets me shoot surreptitiously "from the hip." I didn't think I had been noticed.



Ten minutes later on the other side of the park I was approached by the woman, infant asleep but still cradled in her arms, and two men. They said I was a pervert for taking a picture of a woman breast-feeding her child and demanded that I delete it.

This was a delicate situation and I knew I needed to stay calm while cycling through all my strategic responses. I politely recited the law, tried to dispel the notion that I was unbalanced, and even invited them to call the cops.

Mostly, however, I sought to raise the discussion to the level of art.

"I understand that you are upset that I took your picture. Feelings are not right or wrong, they just are, and I would not argue with them. But I would like to suggest that calling me a "creep" who can't wait to get home and jerk-off looking at an image of your naked breast is ill-considered and quite a bit off the mark. And if you will calm down enough to listen for a moment, here's why..."

When you decided to sit down on a bench and expose yourself to the entire world to breastfeed your child - which you have every legal right to do in a public place - you were undoubtedly acting from the purest of motives stemming from a mother's instinct. A natural life-giving offering of yourself is nothing to be ashamed of.

And when I simultaneously clicked the shutter button - which I have every legal right to do in a public place - I, too, was acting from within a time-honored tradition. Street photography is committed to capturing unique moments that document life in urban environments, at the least, and the larger human condition itself, if we're lucky. And luck it so often is, given that we can't stop the flow of time to manipulate actors and props on a stage. Out of the corner of an eye we sense a movement about to occur and if instinct and our knowledge of human behavior suggest that it might be significant, we whirl and shoot.

In short order you and these two no-nonsense-looking guys caught up with me and demanded that I delete your photo. I politely refused - and not, as you suggest, from any prurient interest.

Why, then? The goal of any artist is to take a "subject" and transform it into a "content." That is, to capture a moment and render it timeless. Given the right mix of elements - line, color, space, texture, composition - a two-dimensional image of a mother and child might transcend itself and become suggestive of Motherhood, Love, Nurturance. Will my picture of you rise to that level? Probably not, chances are slim. But most certainly I won't know until I download the image to a larger monitor."

They stood their ground, I stood mine - and we parted in a somewhat civilized manner, agreeing to disagree.

- ambiguous looks -

When I snapped this image of a couple embracing in a bar I didn't realize he was suddenly going to turn and notice me.



His look was ambiguous and with alcohol involved I figured this situation could go either way. So I quickly gave him a thumbs-up and walked over to chat.

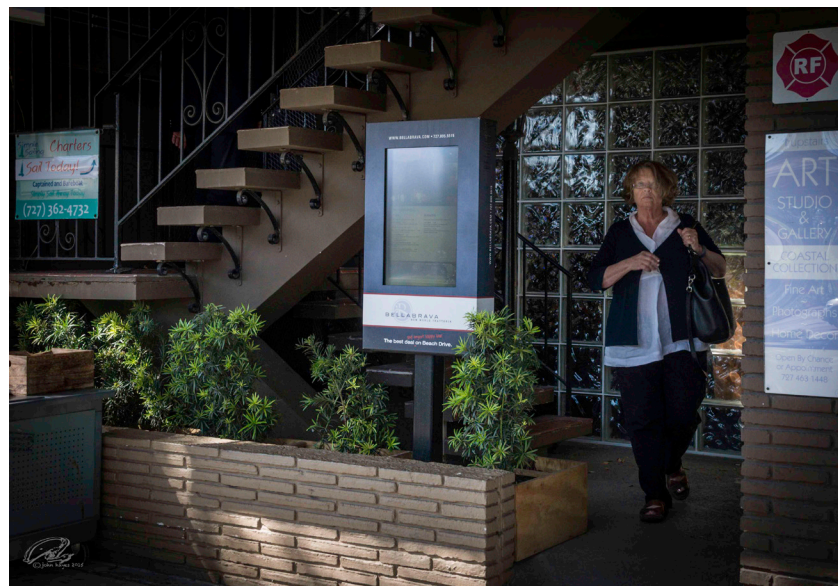
Fortunately, they had a pleasant buzz-on and were in the mood to clown around for some more pictures which I later emailed to them.



Surprised is perhaps the word that best describes this lady's reaction.

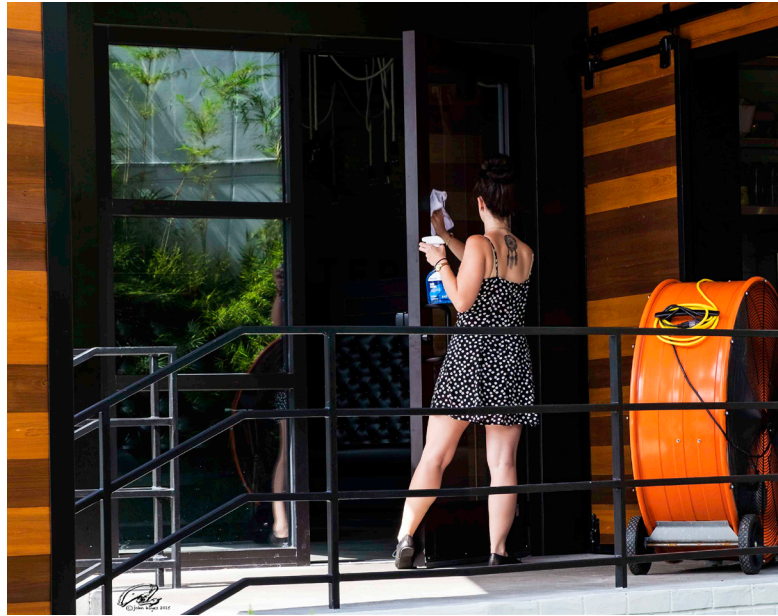


She was taking a cell phone picture of her own and when she saw me, we both laughed.

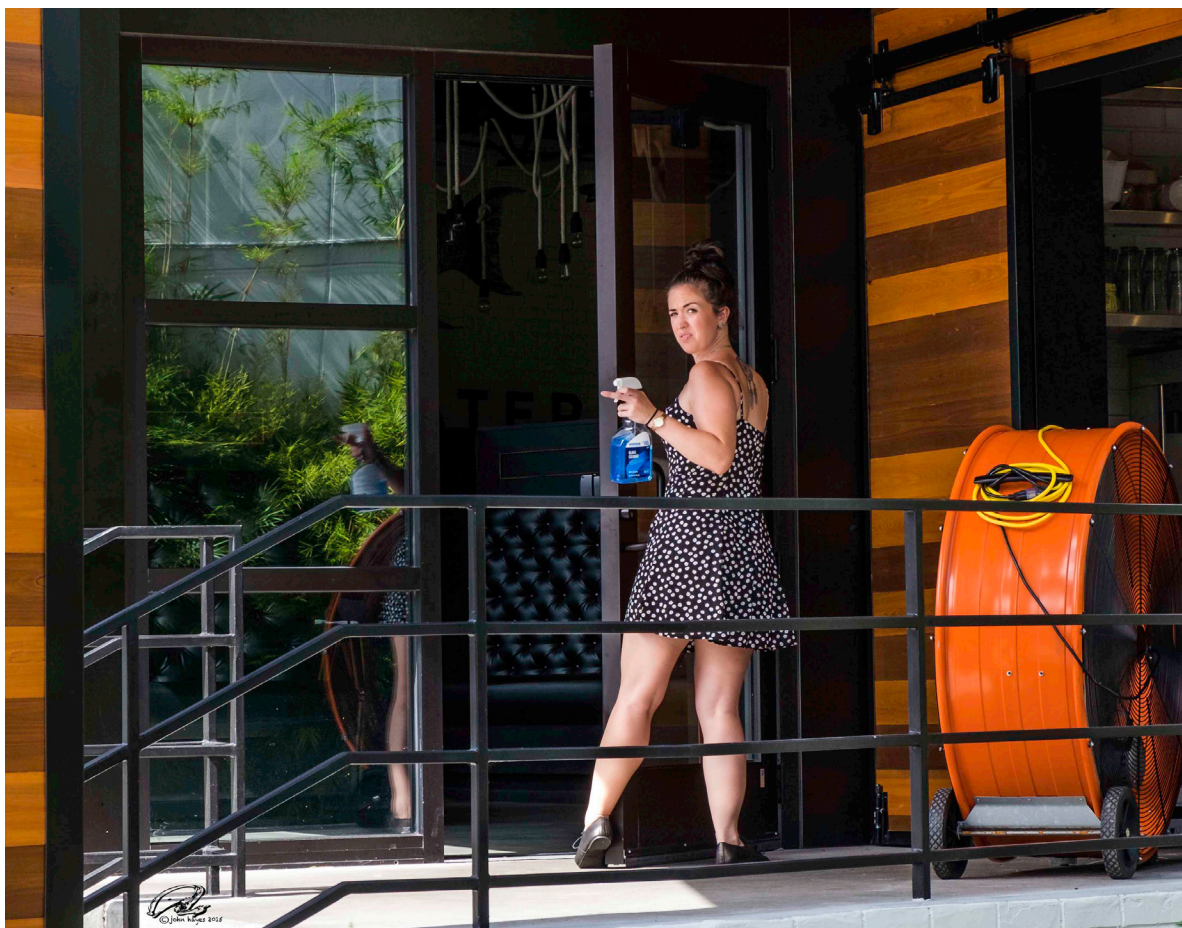


On a sliding scale I would guess this woman's look is somewhere between curious and suspicious.

It was initially the architectural composition that drew my attention, but when she appeared I just had to capture her too.



I was also drawn to the architecture in the above image, to the color and texture of the building. Then a girl walked out to clean the windows and apparently spotted me in the reflection.



I subsequently cropped out most of the vibrant building to hone in on her reaction, which I take to be curious.

Some looks are difficult to interpret, like the man with one eye.



Who knows what thoughts are lurking behind that patch.

And what a treat when you get three looks in one picture!



- friendly looks -

I initially noticed this man's beautiful hair while walking behind them and rushed around front to get a picture.



When I raised the camera they both stopped and graciously emanated what I can only describe as pure radiance.



The guy above with the tattoos smiled when he noticed me and implicitly invited me to go ahead and take the shot.

And below, why if I didn't know better I might think she was flirting with me. What an impish look, like she and her cigar were letting me in on one of their little secrets!





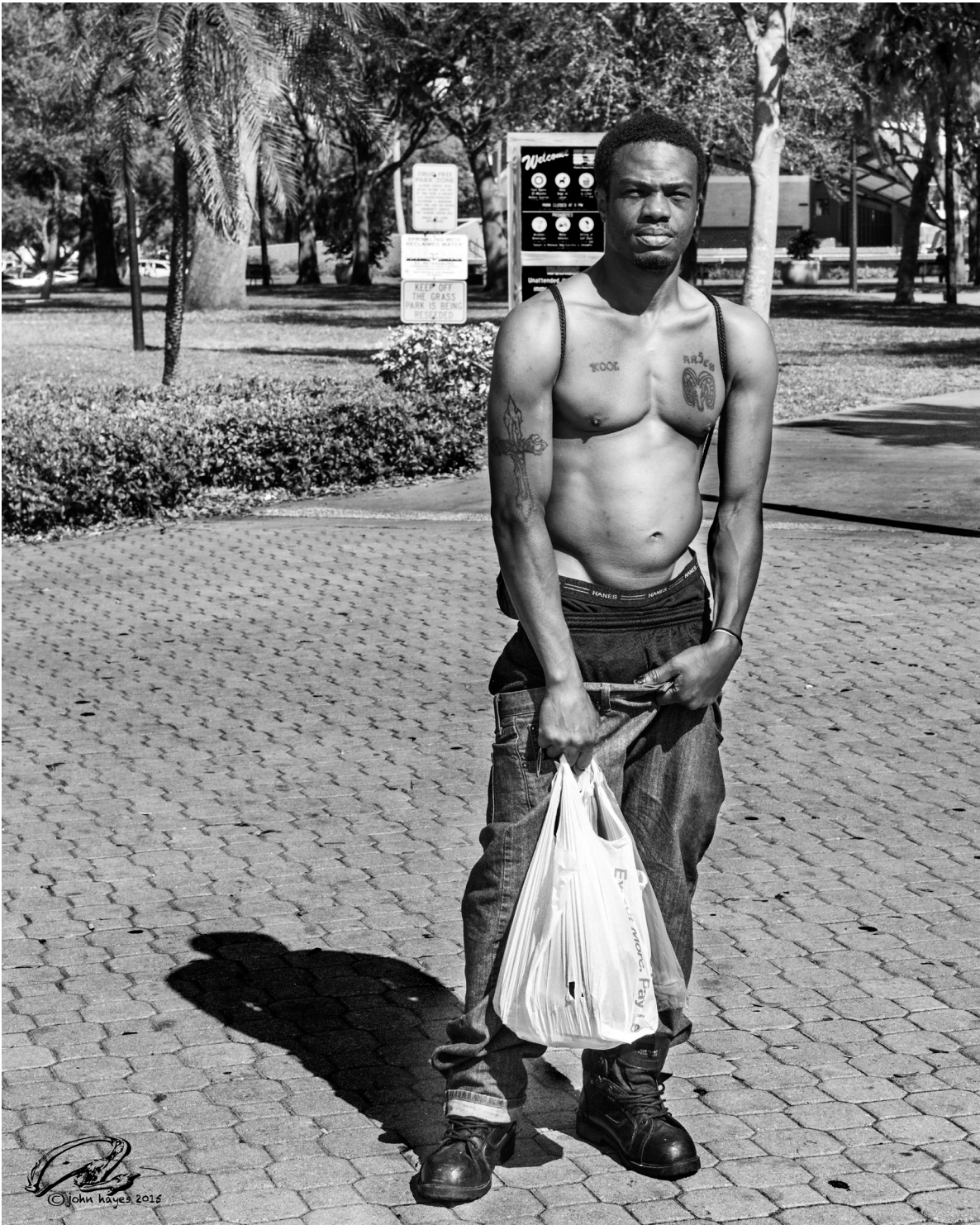
Interestingly, this homeless lady perked up and smiled when I pointed my camera at her. I had not said anything, and I get the impression that being “invisible” as she so often is, she desperately wanted to be noticed.

Which brings up one final category of street encounters...

- "take my picture"-

Other than those demanding money, a handful of strangers noticing my camera have actually come up to me and asked to have their picture taken.

Asked? No, this "kool dude" demanded, and you can probably guess from looking at him that I wasn't about to refuse.



This gentleman – not sure if he was an “outdoor citizen” or not – was proud of who he was and voluntarily stopped in the middle of an intersection with traffic whizzing by to pose for me.



Judging from his t-shirt I assume he had God on his side to protect him from reckless drivers.

Yours truly, reprobate that I am, wasn't quite so confident and kept a close lookout for speeding cars.

The Bottom Line

1. if you've a hankering to try street photography, do it
2. the risk of an adverse reaction from strangers is minimal
3. be polite, smile, stay calm - practice your speeches for all occasions and be prepared
4. good things happen when you press the shutter button



Oh, I almost forgot!

The best look I can possibly get as a street photographer is when a friendly dog turns and wags her tail at me.

