

A black and white photograph of a man, Vivian Maier, standing in a city street. He is wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt and is holding a Rolleiflex camera. The background shows a blurred cityscape with buildings and a person in the foreground.

Vivian  
Maier

Street Photographer

EDITED BY JOHN MALOOF  
FOREWORD BY GEOFF DYER







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 powerHouse Books    Brooklyn, NY





In 2007, while working on a definitive history of my neighborhood of Portage Park on the Northwest Side of Chicago, I accidentally stumbled upon the photographic cache of Vivian Maier. The chain of events that this discovery set in motion has since turned the world of street photography, as well as my life, upside down. What began as my personal passion has caught the public eye, and I have now spent the last three years preserving and archiving Maier's vast body of work, which she had kept secret for over fifty years.

Vivian Maier was deeply interested in the world around her. Having picked up photography around 1950, she continued to take snapshots into the late 1990s, ultimately leaving behind a body of work comprising over one hundred thousand negatives. Elderly folk congregating in Chicago's Old Polish Downtown, garishly dressed dowagers, and the urban African-American experience were all fair game for Maier's lens. Additionally Maier's vision extended to a series of homemade films and audio recordings. Bits of Americana, the demolition of historic landmarks for new development, the unseen lives of the downtrodden and the destitute, as well as scenes from some of Chicago's most cherished sites were all subjects Maier continuously revisited.

Yet the combination of Maier's intense privacy and lack of confidence in her own photographic prowess nearly resulted in her collection being consigned to oblivion. If not for an improbable set of circumstances, Maier's iconic images would have been scattered across storage lockers stuffed to the brim with found items, art books, newspaper clippings, home films, political tchotchkes, and knickknacks.

I have always been fond of a quote by Maier from an audio recording she made where we can hear her philosophize about the meaning of life and death: "We have to make room for other people. It's a wheel—you get on, you go to the end, and someone else has the same opportunity to go to the end, and so on, and somebody else takes their place. There's nothing new under the sun."

As hunger for her images has grown, I have been pushed into the role of custodian of Vivian Maier's photographic legacy. Thanks to this, and the popular demand for insight into Maier's life and art, I have had the privilege of sharing the stage with some of the world's top photographers. It's simultaneously a very humbling and extremely surreal experience.

From the very beginning I have set out to preserve Maier's artistic legacy the "right" way. It is my sincere hope that this book captures the essence of her contribution to street photography.

—John Maloof  
Chicago, 2011











It occasionally happens that a writer who was unable to find a publisher is discovered, after his or her death, to have written a masterpiece. John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* is an example of this—and of the way that the term “masterpiece” gets applied almost as compensation for the regrettable delay. In the world of photography there are numerous different versions of this story. Photographers can amass a body of work and then disappear from sight. Sometimes they enjoy a degree of fame and celebrity (E. O. Hoppé, Ida Kar) before succumbing to an obscurity that is only lifted posthumously. Sometimes they were appreciated in photography circles (William Gedney) and then faded even from the view of their peers. Occasionally the work is discovered in time for the photographer to enjoy belated recognition in his or her own lifetime. If Lartigue was the great example of this, then Miroslav Tichý was an instance of the weirder syndrome whereby discovery came so belatedly that acclaim felt posthumous even while he was alive. Then there is someone like E. J. Bellocq about whose work and life almost nothing was known until after his death.

Vivian Maier represents an extreme instance of posthumous discovery: of someone who exists entirely in terms of what she saw. Not only was she entirely unknown to the photographic world, hardly anyone seemed to know that she even took photographs. While this seems unfortunate, perhaps even cruel—a symptom or side effect of the fact that she never married or had children, and apparently had no close friends—it also says something about the unknowable potential of all human beings. As Wisława Szymborska writes of Homer in her poem “Census”: “No one knows what he does in his spare time.”

This alerts us to a remote possibility—or rather to two versions of a similar possibility. First, that one of the people photographed on the street by Maier might also have been a closet photographer who pursued the same hobby with a shared obsessiveness. Second, that if we searched long and hard we might find Maier in images taken on the street by one of the famous photographers whose work her own occasionally resembles.

The numerous glimpses in this book of scenes reminiscent of Lisette Model, Helen Levitt (in both black-and-white and color), Diane Arbus, André Kertész, Walker Evans, and



others raises questions about the extent of Maier's knowledge of these photographers and of the larger history of the medium. Did she take certain pictures because, consciously or not, they resembled work she had seen in exhibitions or magazines? Or is it just coincidence (which, as one of Don DeLillo's characters observes in *Libra*, "is a science waiting to be discovered")? Perhaps this point, too, can be usefully reversed: do we respond to these pictures so readily because we know the work of Model et al and see their ghosts in Maier's work?

Either way, it is important to retain a sense of critical perspective. After the inevitable shout from the rooftops to attract the attention a discovery like this deserves, it is not necessary to exaggerate the value of the work in order to bestow on it the quality of a miracle. Maier is an important addition to the canon of street photography: some of her images are outstanding. But even leaving aside the question of quality—and the quantity of quality—the discovery-lag means that Maier's work has not played its part in shaping how we see the world in the way that Arbus' has (even if she seems occasionally to have chanced on Arbusian subjects before Arbus). It necessarily has the quality of visual echo, a series of echoes that serve the useful purpose of questioning the ways in which photographic identity and style—more closely bound up with content than any other medium—are established and defined.

One aspect of Maier's content exists in particularly telling relation to her style and situation. Many of her pictures of women show them squeezed historically—their clothes are the expression of this—between the narrowly confining roles of the 1950s and the often frustrated freedoms of the 1960s and beyond. Maier earned her living in the same way as that quintessential figure of Victorian fiction, the nanny (or governess): an outsider whose privileged access to domestic life permits the development of no gift other than observation. In Maier's case it is as if a sensibility exquisitely adapted to, and the robust product of, these long prescribed circumstances—of which her clothes, the habitual floppy hat and coat, are the perfect expression—has been set free to discreetly prowl the streets of Chicago and New York. There is, inevitably, a poignancy about the way Maier was drawn to old ladies who serve as prophetic representations of her own destiny: solitary, kooky-looking, wrapped up in overcoats, harboring some lifelong secret intuited by the camera's gift of momentary scrutiny.

















































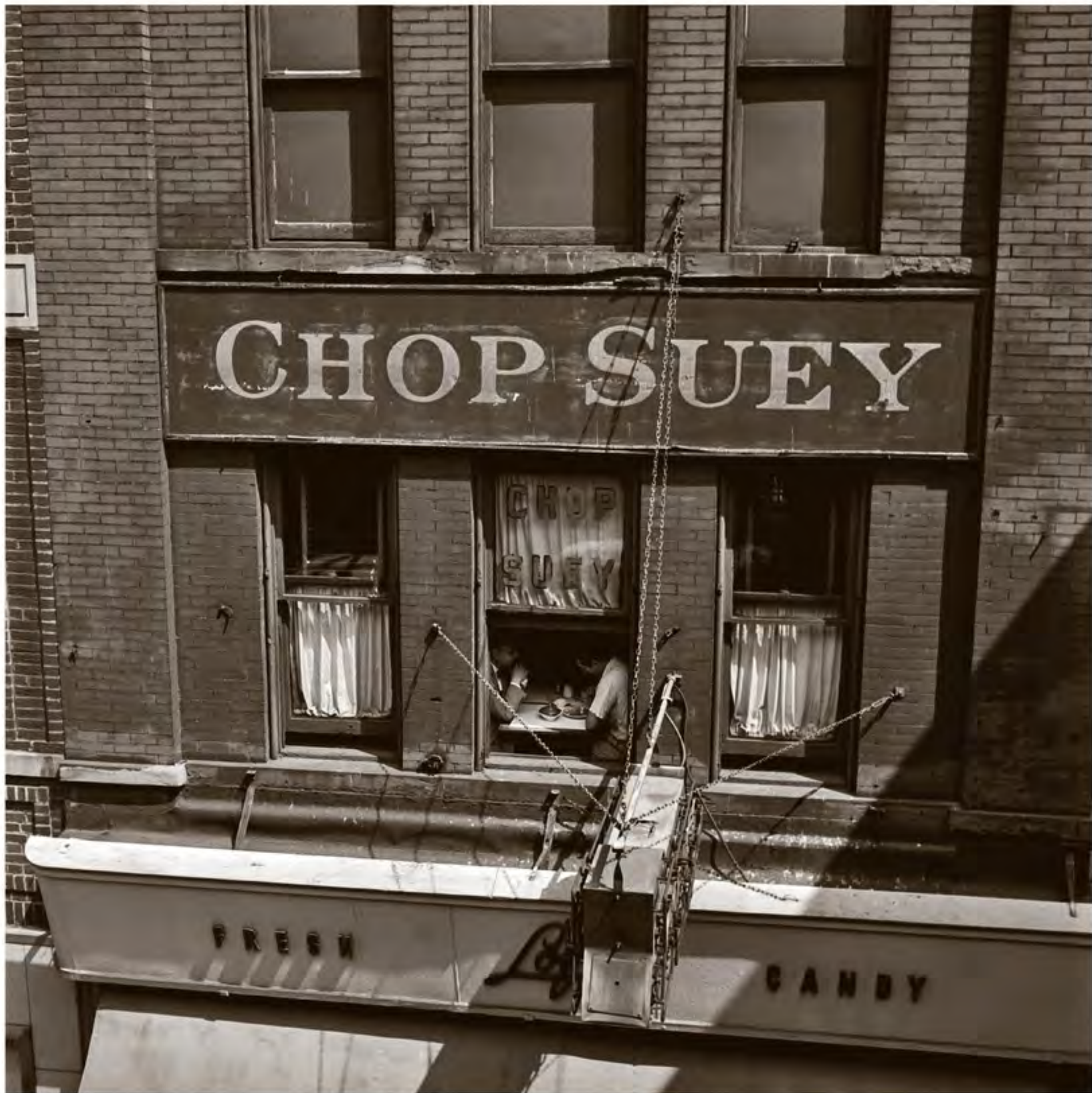




























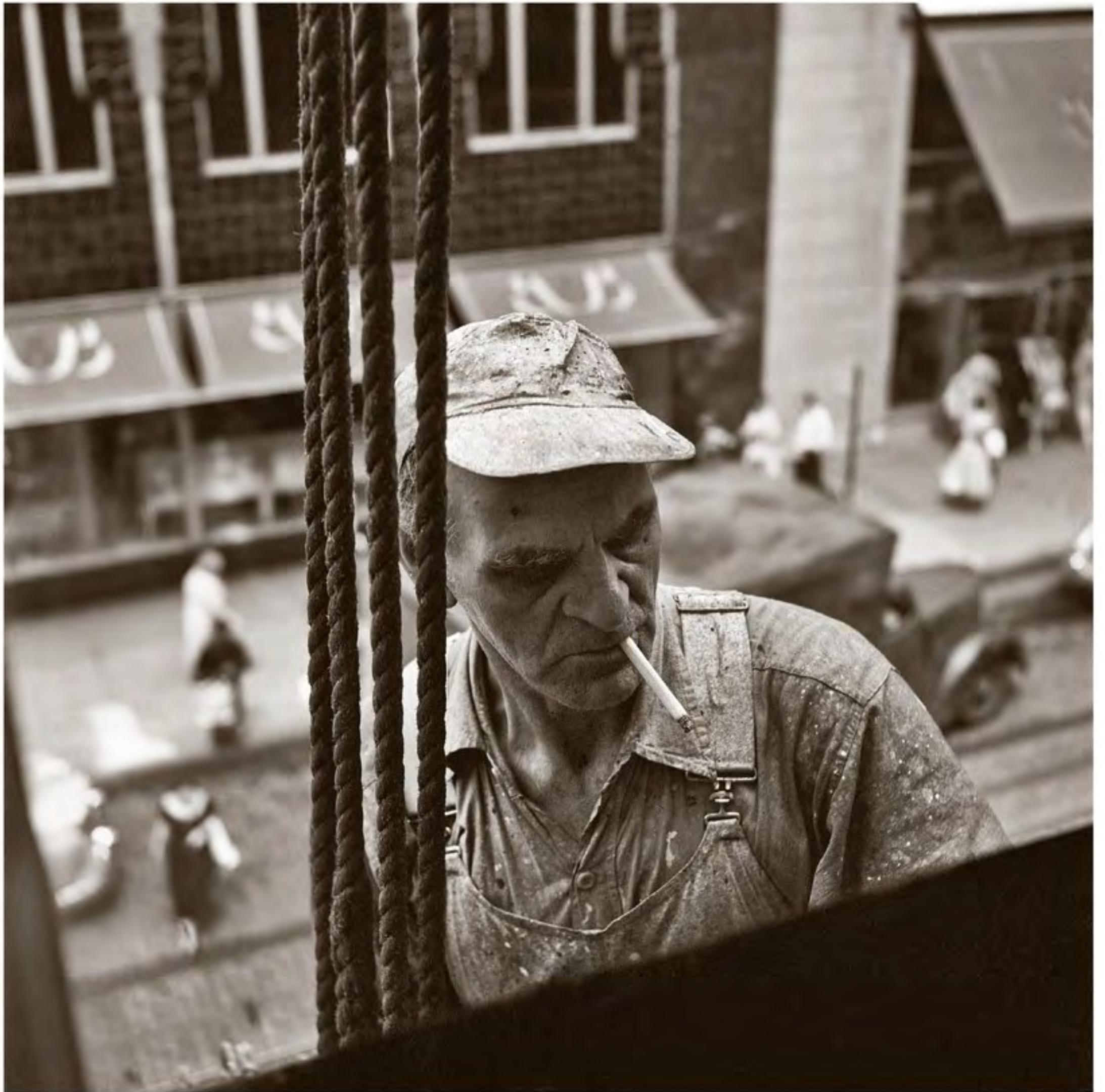
















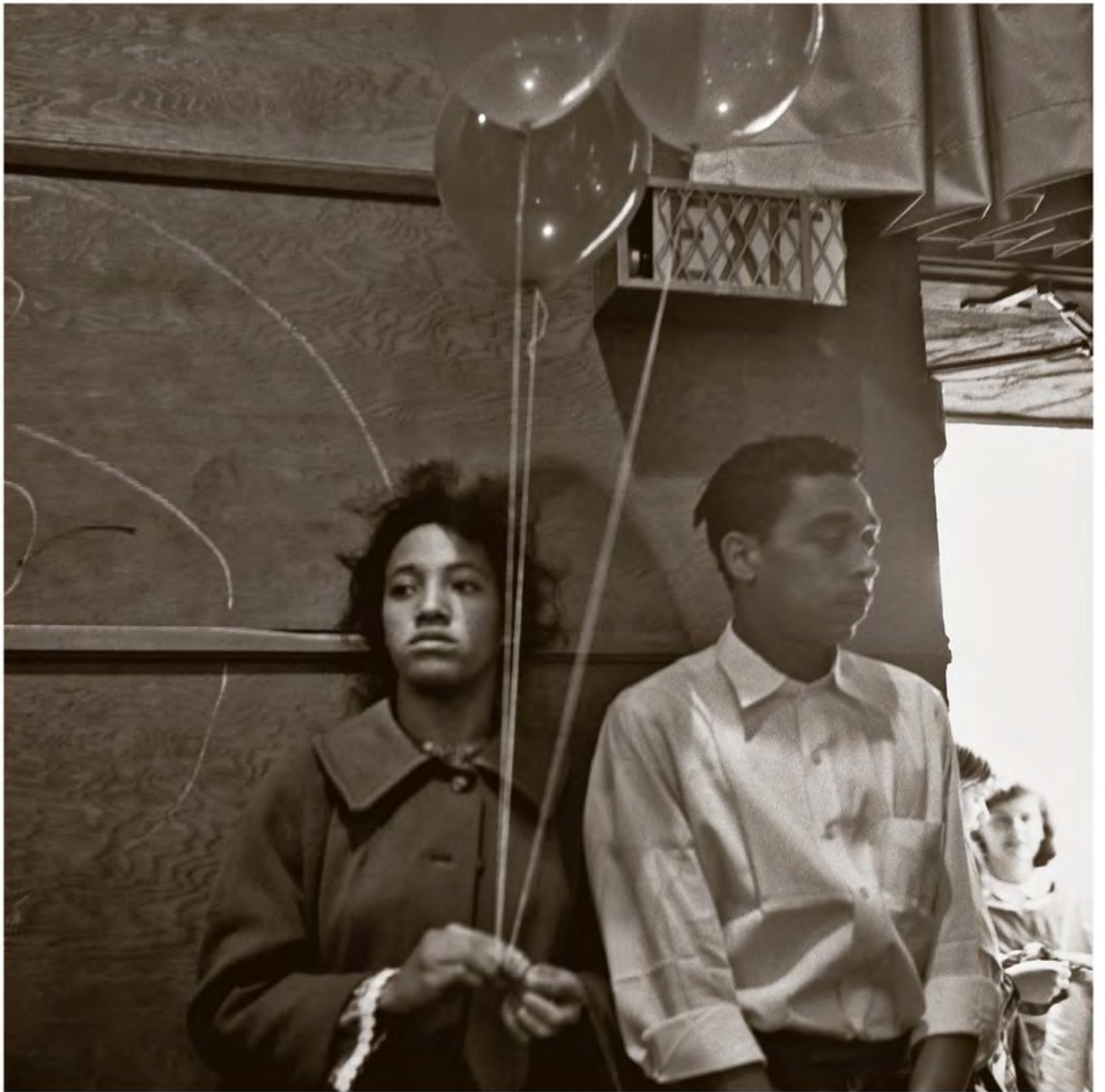












































































































































































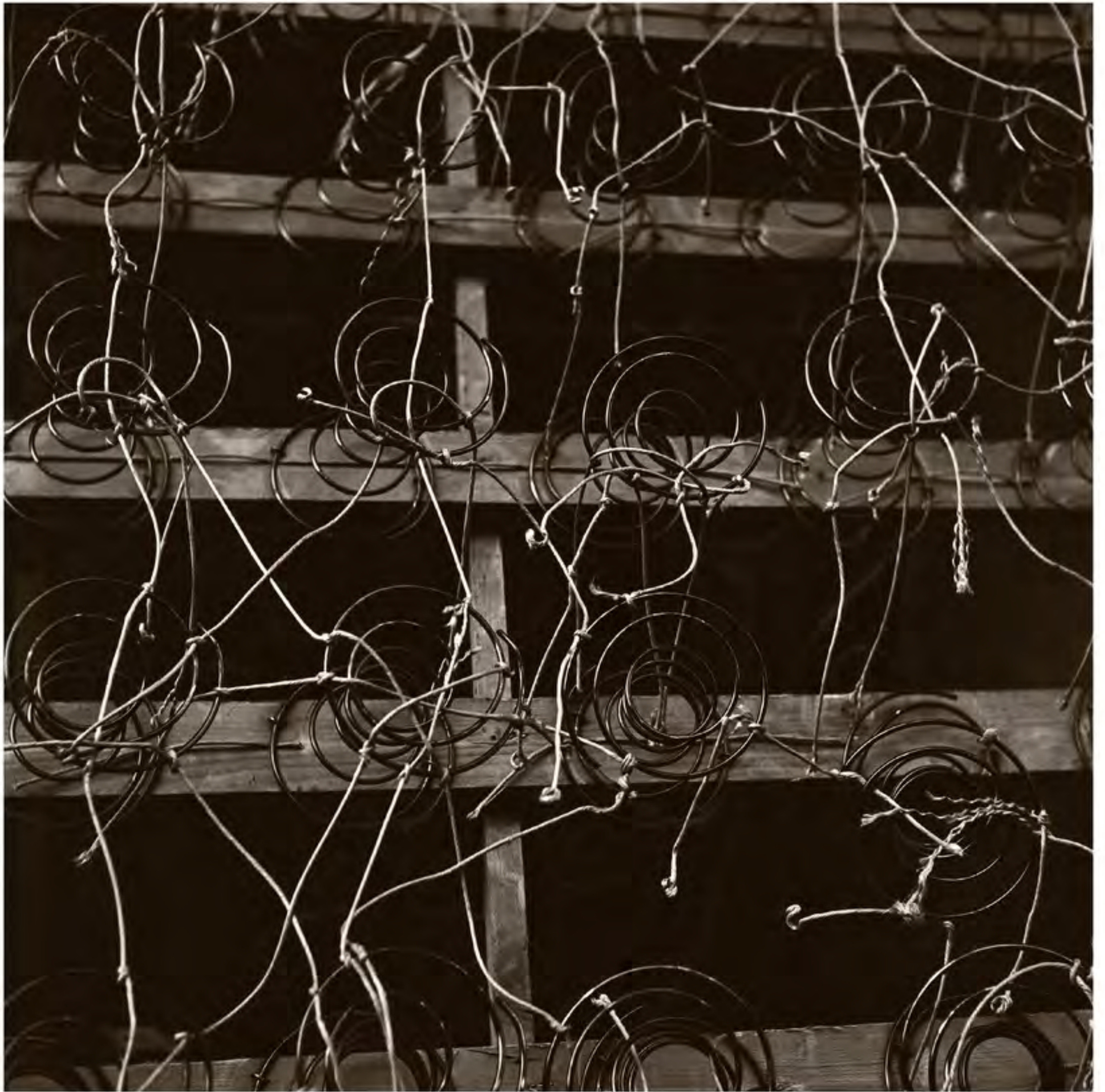




































































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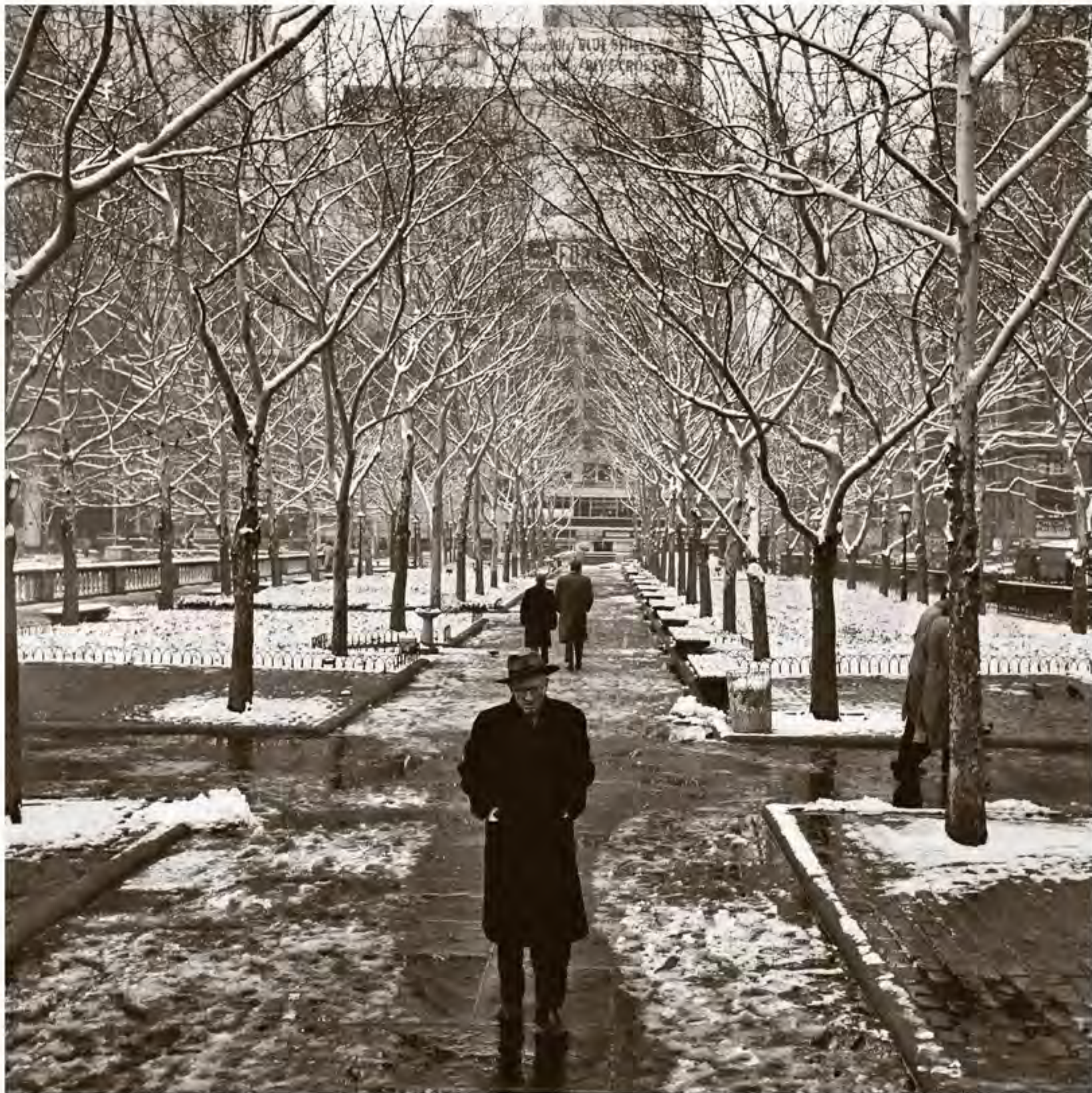
























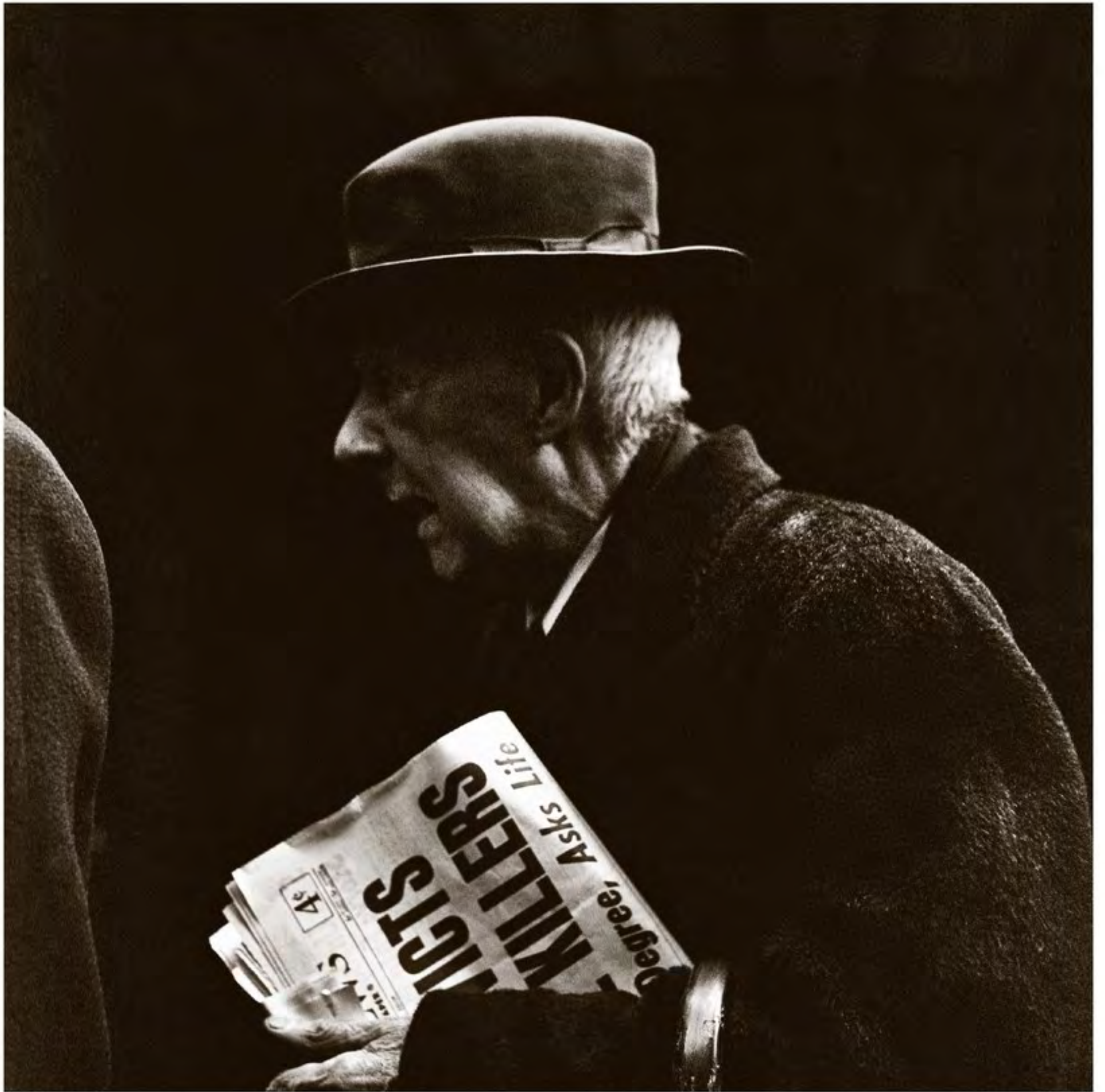






























































I am thankful and touched by the countless signs of support I have received in my efforts to ensure Vivian a distinguished place in the history of street photography. While there are many who have aided me throughout this project, I would like to acknowledge those people without whom completion of this book would not have been possible: My wife Drew for her solid love and support, Anthony Rydzon and Dan Pogorzelski for their help with scanning photos and research assistance, as well as Martin Fuchs whose advice and assistance with numerous edits and the overall design has been crucial. I would also like to thank Allan Sekula whose initial counsel was a priceless guide in preserving Vivian's work, and to Stanley Wlodkowski for his assistance with her countless negatives. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to Cindy O'Connor, who early on convinced me to see this through to the end, as well as to Joel Meyerowitz for his guidance and mentoring when it was needed. This book is a better testament to Vivian's artistic ability thanks to your efforts, and I appreciate you all for it.







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# Vivian Maier Street Photographer

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Published in the United States by powerHouse Books,  
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First edition, 2011

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011933925

EBOOK ISBN 978-1-57686-633-6

Produced by: Craig Cohen  
Digital post production of the photographs: Martin Fuchs & Megan Parker  
Jacket design: Martin Fuchs & Krzysztof Poluchowicz  
Book design: Krzysztof Poluchowicz







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