

Body of Work



Humanizing the Homeless
by Leah den Bok
(2015 - present)

Introduction

Leah den Bok is a Canadian photographer and social advocate best known for her powerful project, *Humanizing the Homeless*. Beginning at just fifteen years old, Leah set out to challenge the stereotypes and stigma surrounding homelessness through capturing portrait photographs of homeless people. Inspired by British photographer Lee Jeffries and mentored by National Geographic's Joel Sartore, she developed a style that combines raw honesty with deep respect for her subjects.

Her portraits are intimate and unflinching, often accompanied by personal stories that reveal the humanity behind the hardship. Rather than portraying individuals as faceless victims, Leah's work emphasizes dignity, resilience, and individuality. This approach reframes homelessness from an abstract social problem into a deeply personal reality, encouraging empathy rather than pity. Her images have been featured in exhibitions worldwide and compiled into the *Nowhere to Call Home* book series, with all proceeds donated to homeless shelters.

Leah's advocacy extends beyond photography. She speaks at major events, including WE Day, sharing the stage with global figures like Prince Harry and Kofi Annan. In recognition of her impact, she and her father received Canada's Governor General's Meritorious Service Decoration. Through her photography, Leah den Bok proves how visual storytelling can shift perceptions, inspire action, and restore dignity to those often overlooked.



How to study Humanizing the Homeless

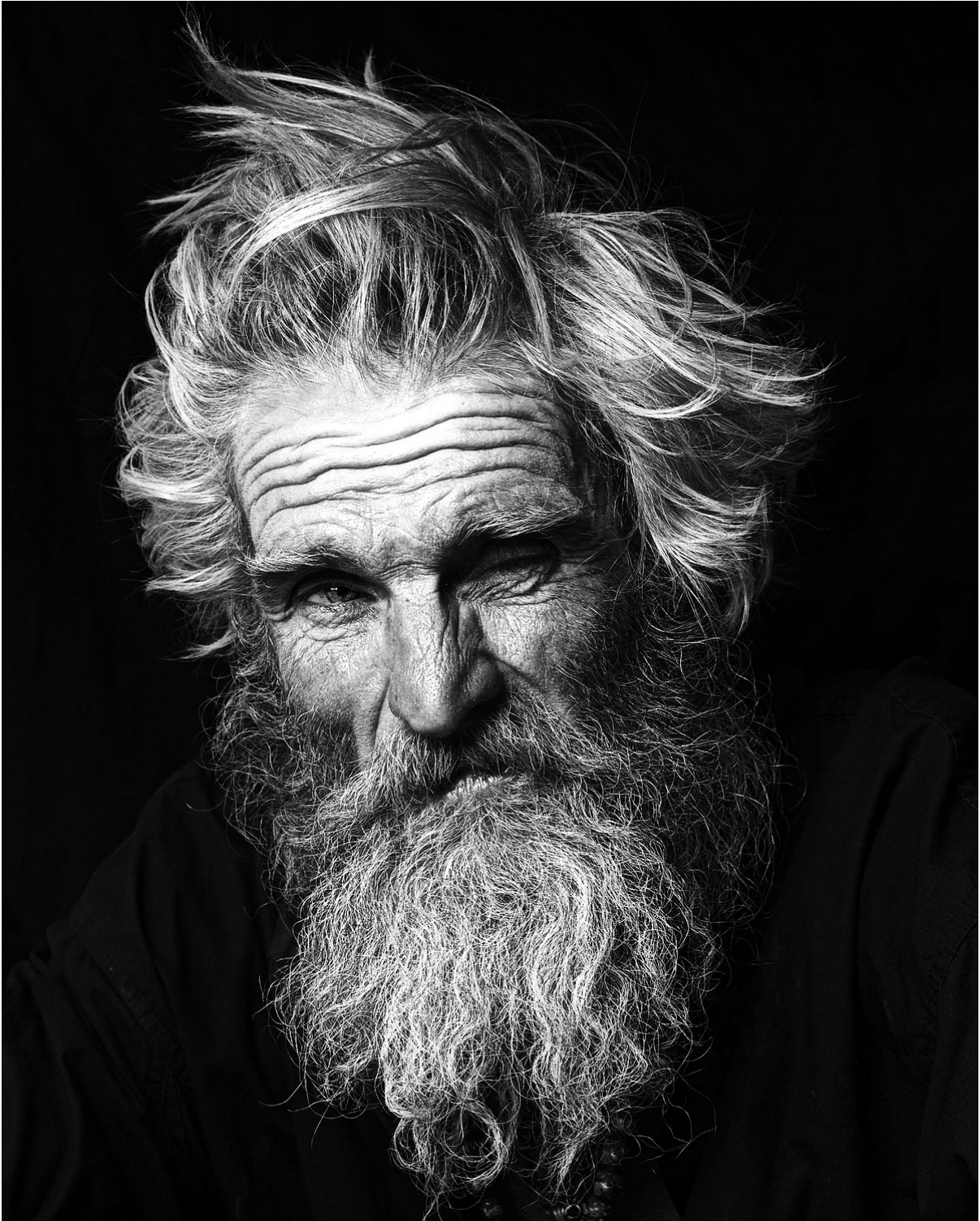
Leah den Bok's *Humanizing the Homeless* project offers a compelling alternative to the way poverty and homelessness have traditionally been portrayed. For decades, charity campaigns often relied on stark, emotive images (faces marked by suffering, bodies weakened by hunger) to provoke urgency and donations. While these visuals can be powerful, they risk overwhelming audiences and reducing individuals to symbols of despair. Leah's work takes a different approach. Her portraits of people experiencing homelessness emphasize dignity and individuality. Each image is paired with a personal story, inviting viewers to see the person rather than the stereotype. This reframing encourages empathy without pity and fosters a sense of shared humanity.

When studying Leah den Bok's portraits, look how her images convey hardship, but they also emphasize dignity and individuality. She avoids reducing her subjects to symbols of suffering; instead, she presents them as people with depth and humanity. Resilience, vulnerability, and quiet strength can coexist in the same frames. When exhibited in galleries (or published in her book series *Nowhere to Call Home*) each photographic portrait is paired with a personal story, which shifts the anonymity of a stranger's face to the connection knowing somebody's story can bring. The idea is not simply to raise awareness of homelessness, but that every homeless person has a name, a history, and a voice. Leah wants viewers to see homelessness as a human experience rather than an abstract social problem.

Composition and lighting are used deliberately, drawing attention to facial expressions and textures and sometimes suffering too. Many subjects make direct eye contact with the camera, creating a sense of connection and equality rather than distance with the viewer. The backgrounds are dark ensuring the focus remains on the individual.

When studying this Body of Work, come to an understanding of how Leah's approach differs from traditional poverty imagery. Her work demonstrates that photography can evoke empathy without pity, and that visual storytelling can restore dignity while still raising important issues. This is the balance to look for: images that acknowledge hardship but also affirm humanity. After you've spent some time with these images and read some of the accompanying stories, think about the following questions:

1. How does Leah den Bok's portrayal of people experiencing homelessness differ from traditional charity or poverty imagery?
2. What themes and ideas emerge from her photographs and stories?
3. How do stylistic choices (composition, lighting, framing) both create an emotional response and influence the message of these pictures?



Duffy

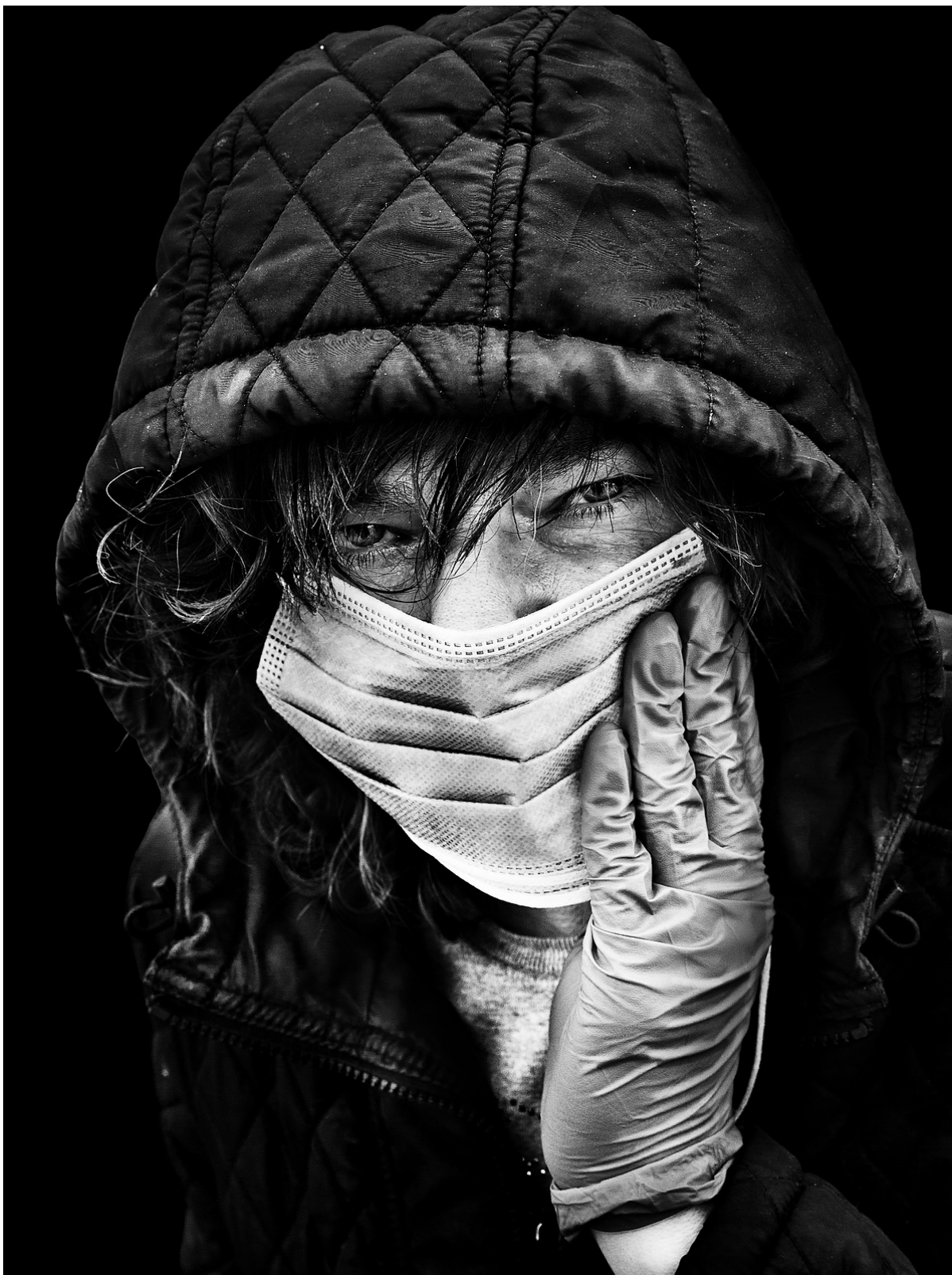
Story that accompanies Duffy

"My old man's passed away," Duffy declared to us. "Everyone's passed away. My grandmother's passed away. She outlived her kids. I wouldn't like that! ... But she still had her mind." But despite the fact that Duffy, seemingly, has fond memories of his family, it seems that all was not well with his relationship with them. "I was a ward of the court at four," he told us sadly. "I've been on my own since four."

Duffy, who is 58-years-old, was born and raised in the GTA (Greater Toronto Area). "I was born in York, the first capital of Canada," he told us with a note of pride in his voice. However, he grew up in Brampton. "It was 30,000 when I moved there in '64!" he said excitedly. "Thirty thousand people!" Duffy has travelled the country from coast to coast. When asked what his least favourite place to visit was, he replied, "I'd say the toughest city is Winnipeg, Canada ... This is a tough city here. Hamilton's a tough city." When asked what his favourite place to visit was, he said, "Actually, it was the Rocky Mountains."

"You've got a nice Philadelphia Flyer's ring on your finger there!" my dad said to Duffy. "Yeah, 1974", he said as he held it up proudly. "Is that the Stanley Cup ring?", my dad asked him. "Yeah, it's got some time on it too," he replied. When my dad mentioned to Duffy that it probably had some value to it and that there were, likely, some people who would want to get their hands on it, Duffy replied, "They wouldn't get it off my finger. They'd have to take my finger off."

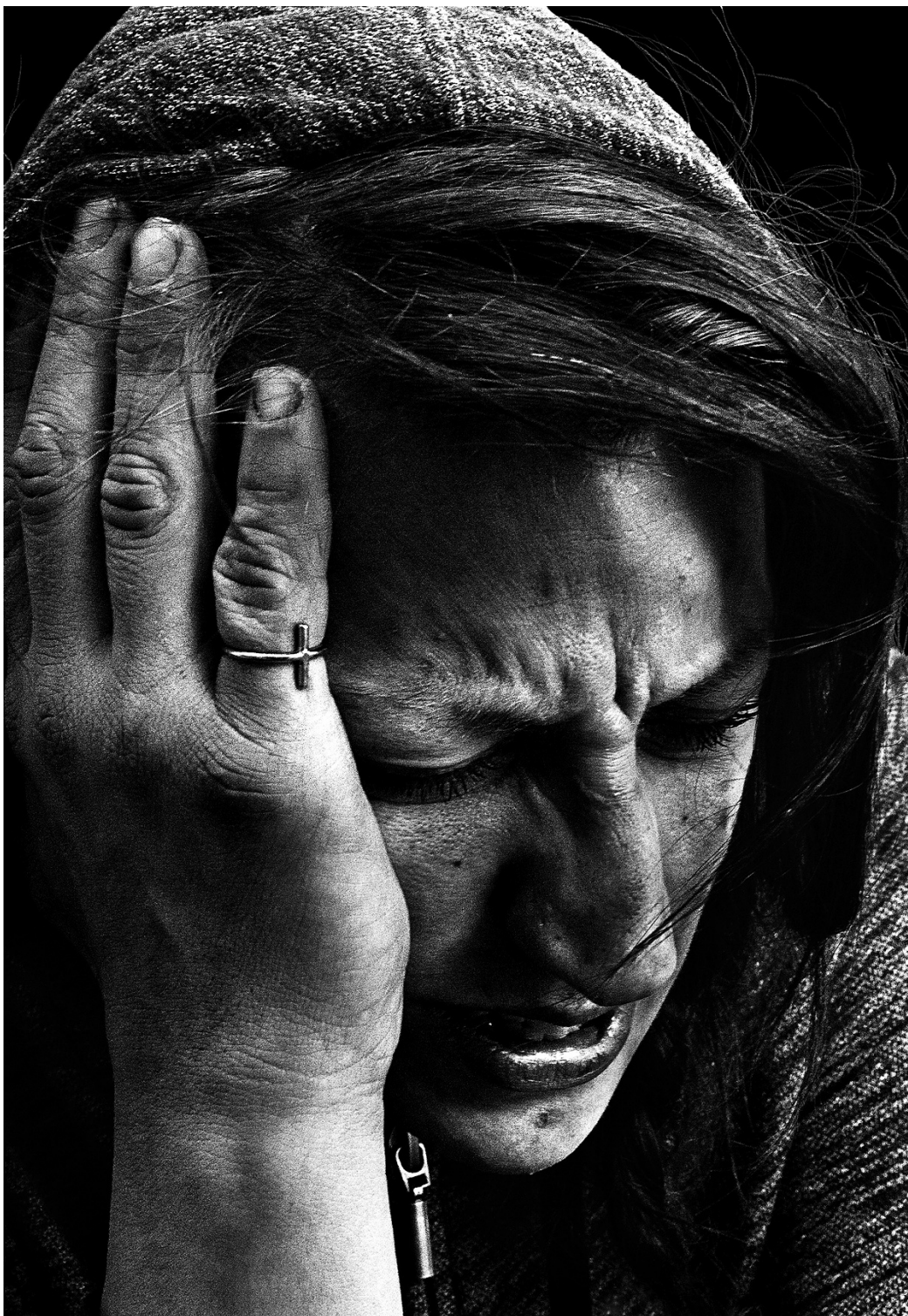
When we met Duffy he was sitting on a bench, just down the road from the Booth Centre, chatting with his friend Mike. Later Mike said of his friend, "He's the nicest guy. He'd give you the shirt off his back!"



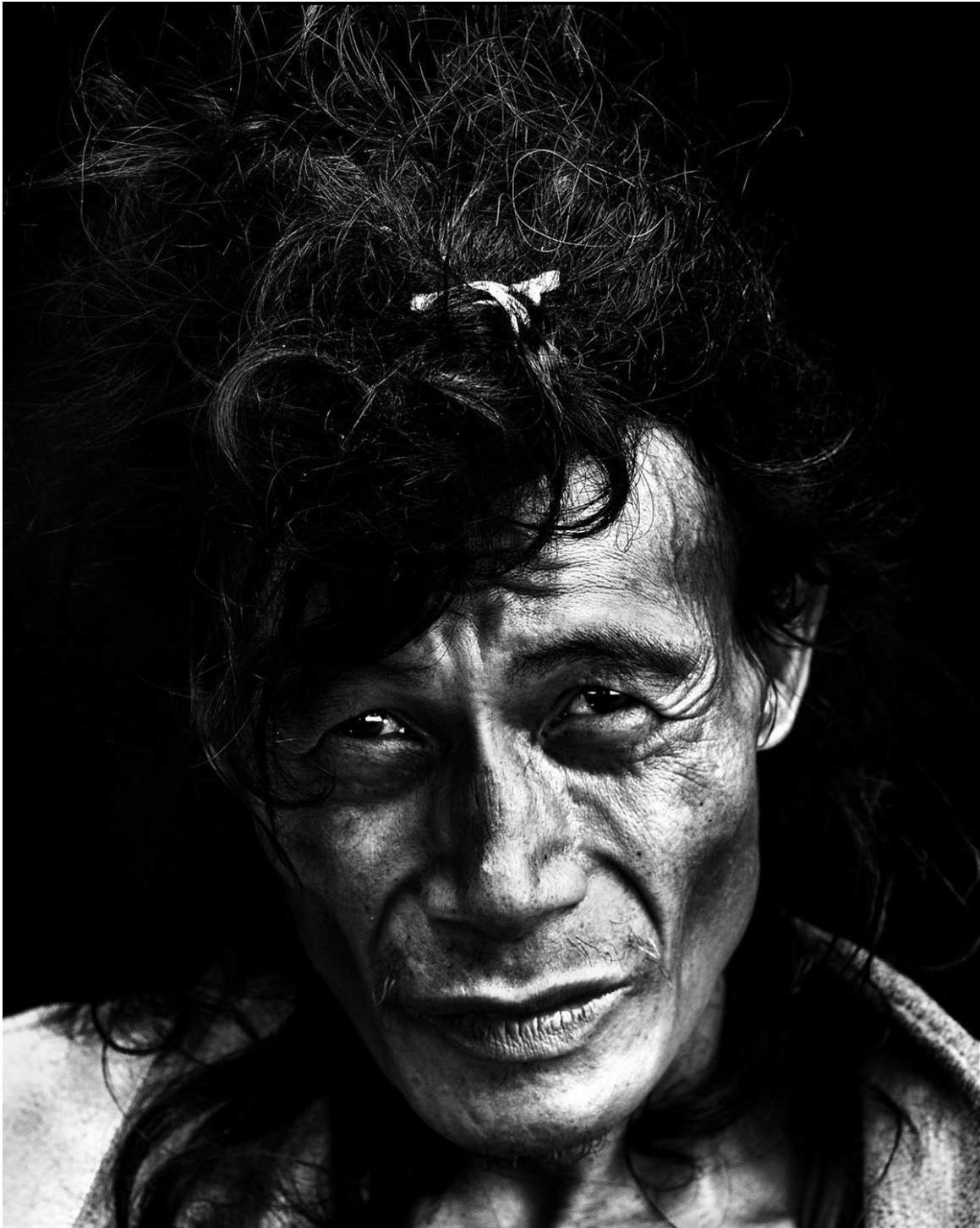
Amy



Dana



Dimond



Dungha



Gisell

Story that accompanies Gisell

My dad first spotted Gisell when we were doing a photo shoot with another individual outside Fred Victor Housing in Toronto. She was just about to enter the shelter. Because of her striking eyes, he immediately stopped what he was doing and asked her if she would be willing to have her photograph taken afterwards. "Can I put my make-up on first?" she asked my dad. He told her that it wasn't necessary since I prefer photographing people experiencing homelessness just the way they are. Just before disappearing into the building, she smiled and said, "Maybe." About 20 minutes later as we were walking through a tent city across the road from the shelter, my dad again spotted Gisell, this time walking with a friend. "Have you decided if you would like to have your photograph taken?" my dad asked Gisell. This time she happily obliged.

*Gisell told us that she has three children aged, 7, 11, and 12, whom she hasn't seen in 7 years. "That's got to be hard," my dad said sympathetically. "It is," she replied sadly. "It's probably a lot harder on them. I mean ... time flies when you get caught up in drugs and stupid **** *. And it does hurt a lot. But I **** *. Sorry! I fear for what they're going through. But I know they're spoiled rotten, because I know they've got the best." Gisell told us that her children are with their dad. "Are you allowed to visit them?" my dad asked Gisell. "I think he would be open to me visiting," she replied. "But I'd have to definitely clean up my appearance a lot. I'd have to clean up my life a lot." "It gives you something to work towards," my dad said. "Absolutely!" she replied. But try as she might to put on a brave face, her voice was full of fear and uncertainty.*



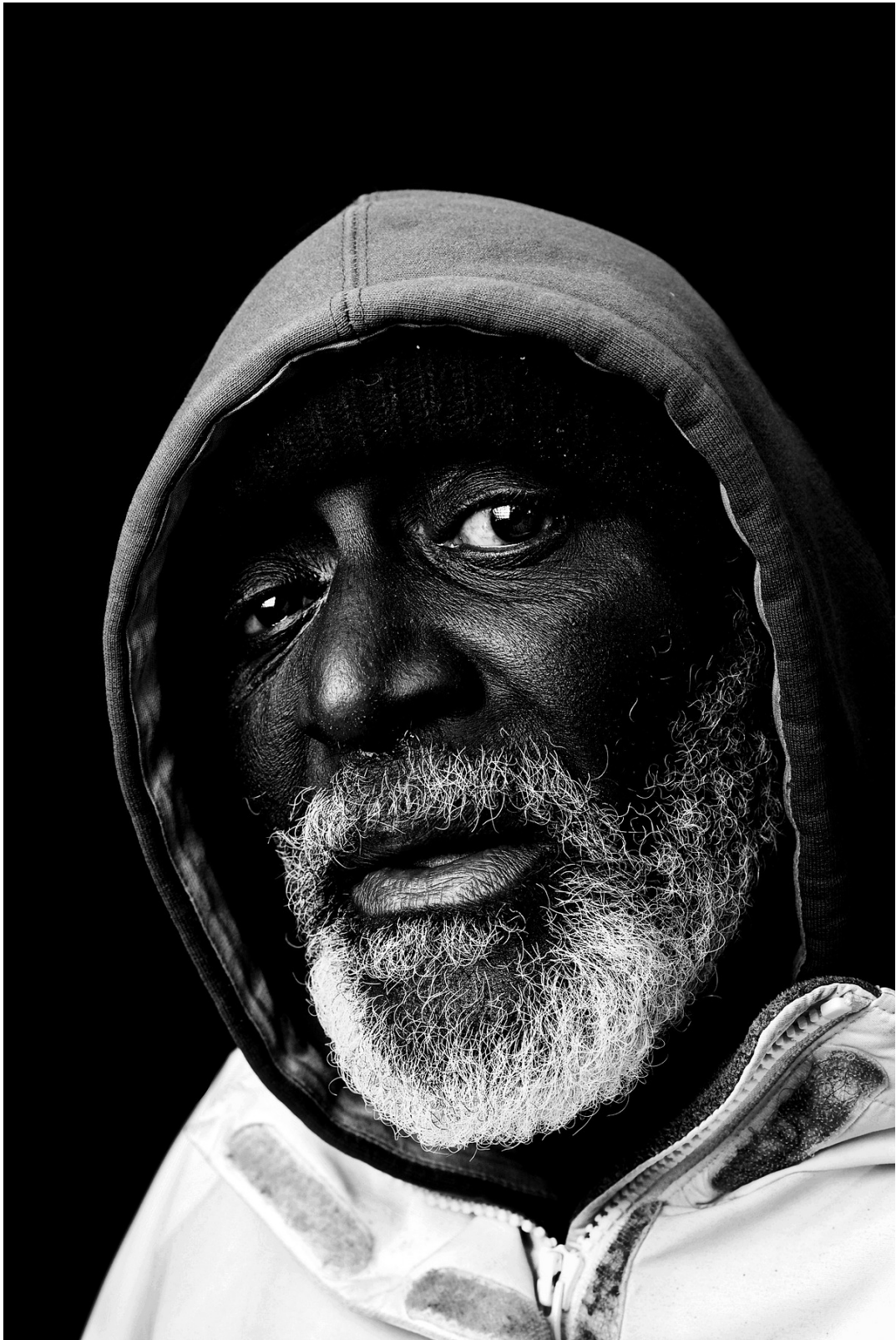
Homeless man and dog



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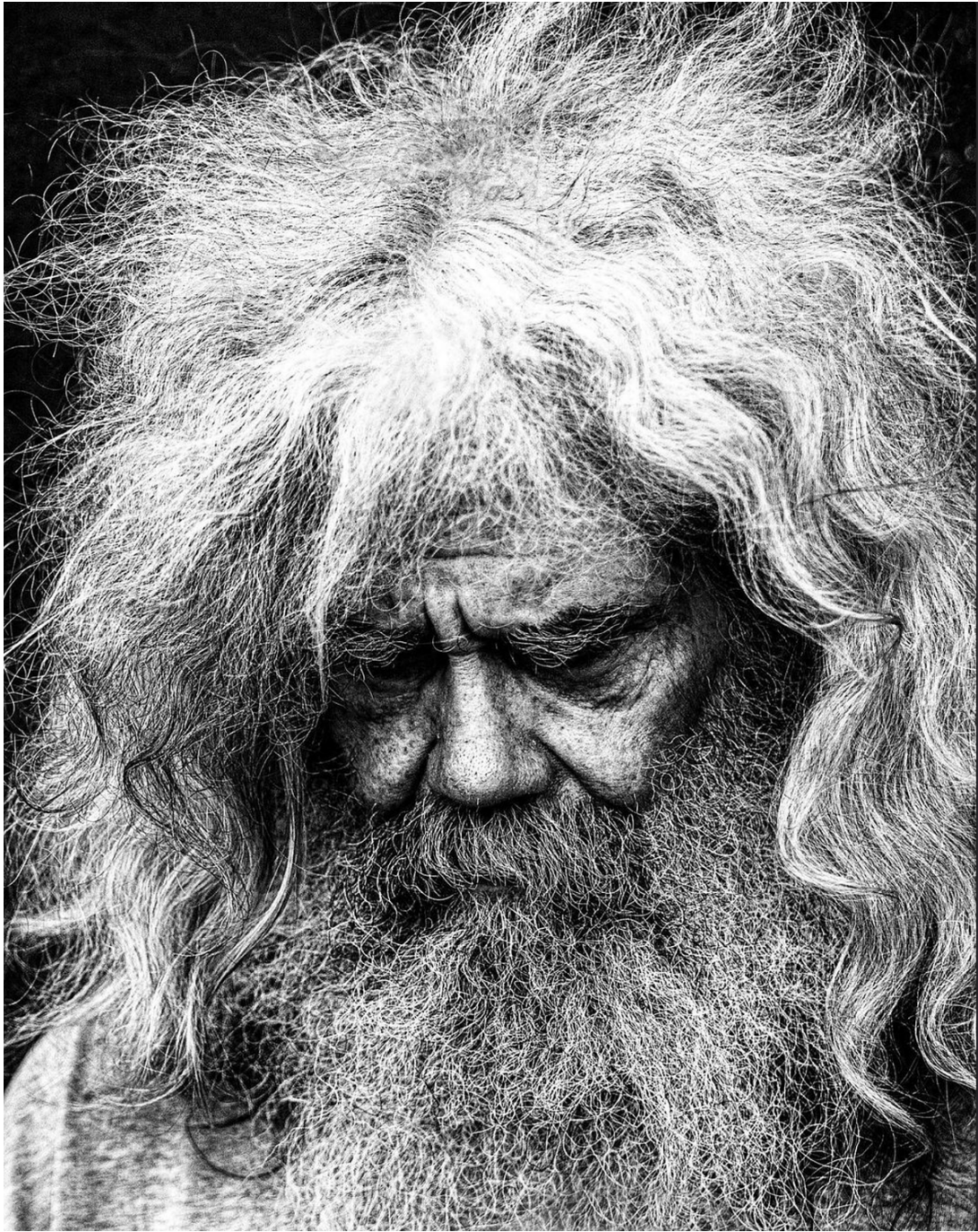
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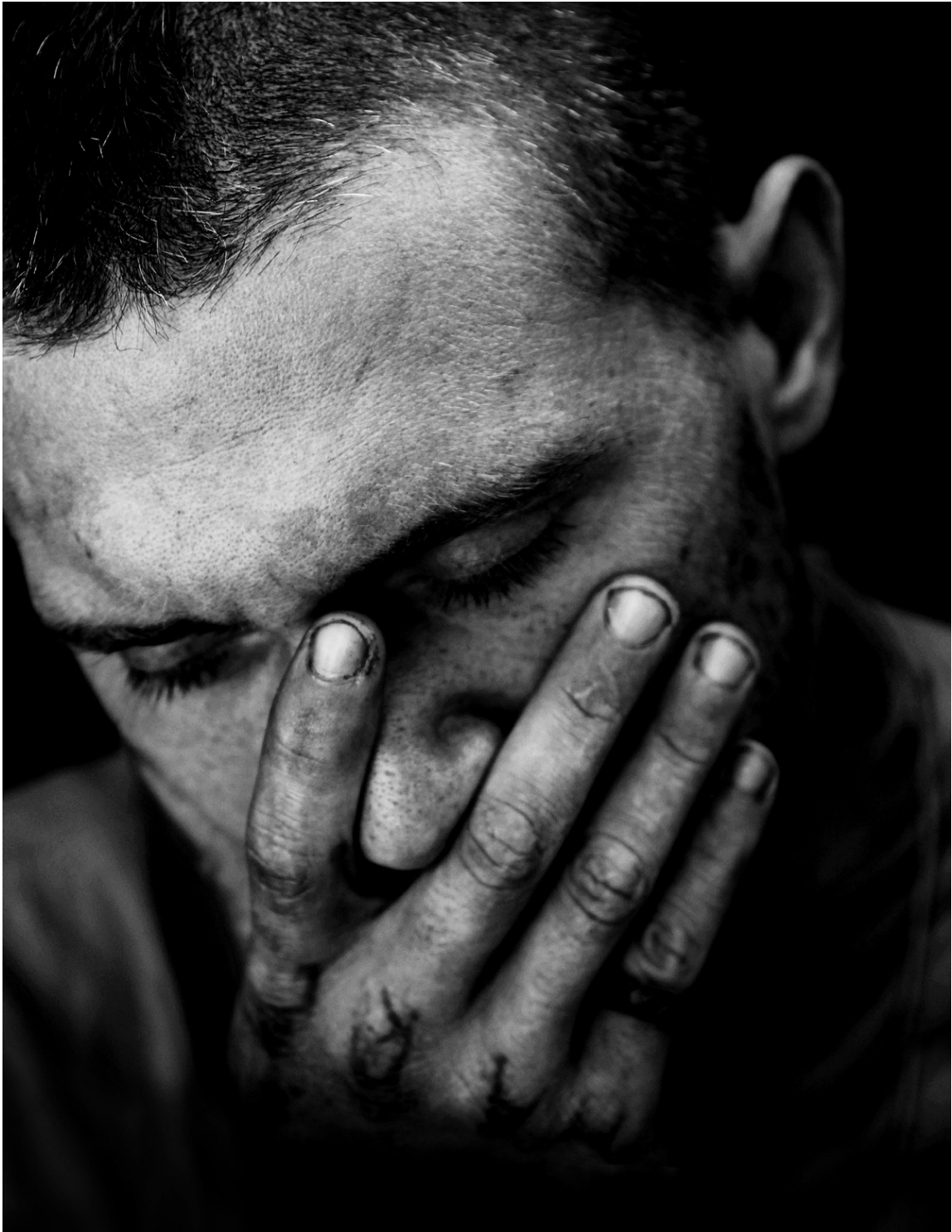
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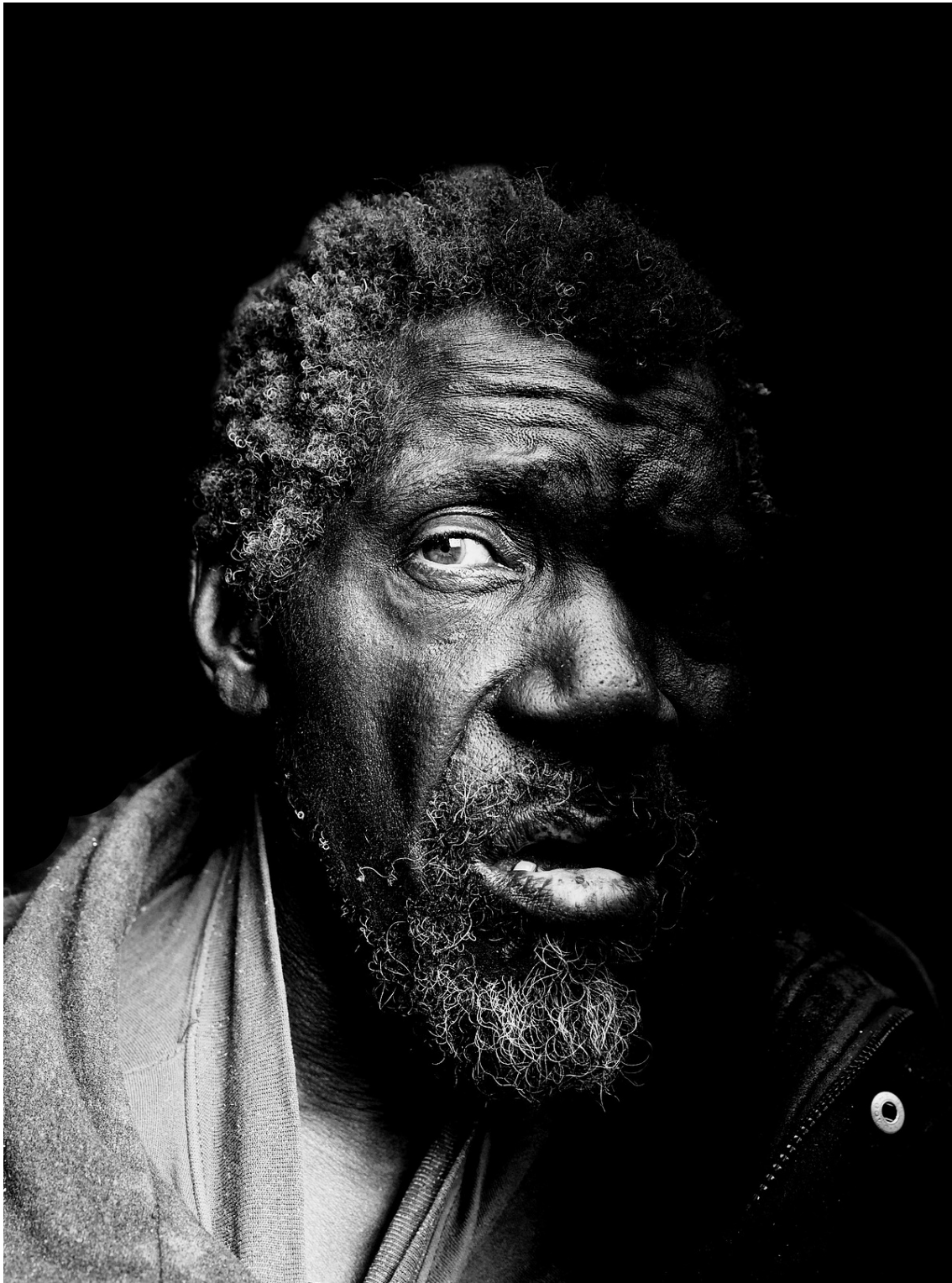
Jordan



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Peter



Nathan



Kathryn