

MISCONCEPTIONS

Story and Photography by JESSE CRAFT

SHORT
Stories

I've never been very comfortable asking strangers to take their picture. It feels uncomfortable to approach someone I don't know and take a little piece of them home with me. If I take a picture without asking it feels like a violation; so, even when I do ask, isn't it still a subtly invasive act?

Most people, of course, don't really have a problem having their picture taken. This is when the second problem happens. They smile for the camera. If I ask for your picture, it is because there is something about the way you look, naturally, that I want to capture. Typically, this isn't smiling. Certainly it isn't smiling directly into the camera. So it's not something I love to do. Sometimes, though, I just have to. This is how it was with the chess players.

Central and Washington Avenues come together in a V near the trendy part of downtown, right around the corner from where I lived. At the base of this V there is a small park. Walking home from a night out I was often accosted for change by homeless people in that part of town. That's why, when I saw a group of guys hanging around the park, I thought they were homeless too. They were there every day on my way home from work, sitting on all the park benches. It wasn't until I started commuting by bike that I slowed down enough to realize they were playing chess. I wanted to join them; it looked like fun. At the same time, it would have felt strange to say that some homeless people handed me my ass in a game of chess. It was a beautiful May day when I finally got up the nerve to ask them for some photographs.

Washington Avenue runs due west, so the setting sun in early summer came down unobstructed on the benches. Beautiful lighting. They would be out well into the night, but it wouldn't be great for picture taking, so I had to approach them while the light was still good. "Would you gentlemen mind if I take some pictures of you while you play?" I'm not sure if Charles was the ringleader, but he was certainly the most talkative.

"Yeah, man, that's cool, but you gotta play with us first," said Charles.

"Yeah, I guess, I mean, I'm not very good at chess," I told him. It's true. I've known the rules of chess since I was very young. I once got a lesson from a Russian friend in high school who claimed he learned the game with a well-known 17-year old chess prodigy back home, but it failed to rub off on me. The game requires too much advanced planning and strategy. I'm much too 'in the moment' to be a good chess player.

I was never really a match for my dad or my Russian friend. I wasn't much of a match for Charles, either. He dismantled my "attack" in about 7 minutes and he really seemed to relish it; otherwise, it might have been over even faster. "Your game needs work, man. You wanna play me again for a dollar?"

"Charles, you got the hustle wrong, you are supposed to let me win before you play me for money."

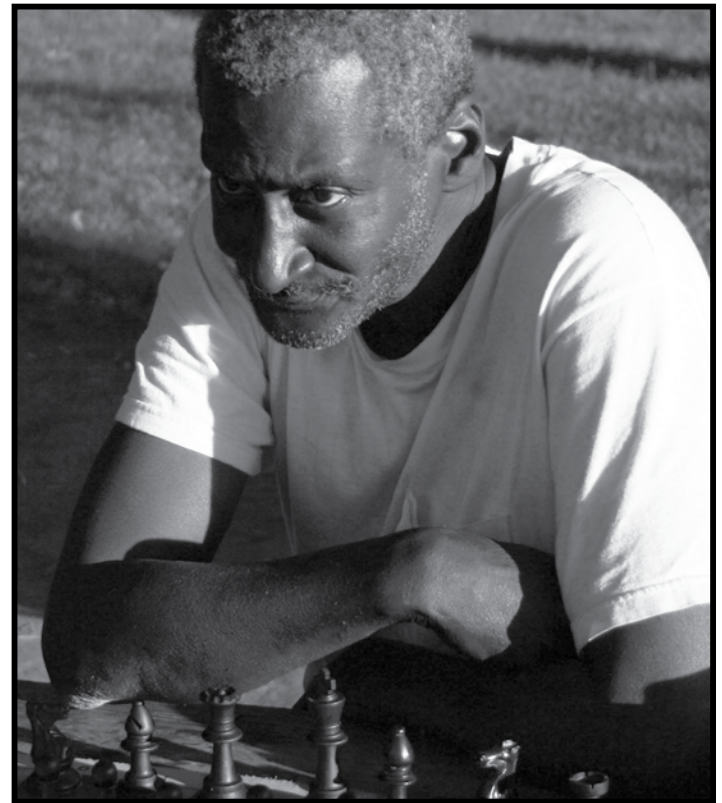
"I tried, man, but you really stink," Charles told me. He was really rubbing it in.

So Charles let me take pictures of him during his next game. Charles was one of the better players. The best player, though, was a guy named Jack. He did not want his picture taken, and I wasn't inclined to argue with him. This is another reason I get nervous asking strangers for their pictures; some get downright hostile at the prospect of being photo-

graphed. He and Charles settled in for a match which they let me shoot, as long as I kept Jack out of frame. He made me show him the pictures afterwards to make sure I wasn't trying to get away with anything.

Charles deployed his queen-side knight to open the match, and gave Jack one of the most amazing evil-eyes I've ever seen. I don't know if there was money on the match, but I think there was a bit of pride. The other games that had been going on sort of ground to a halt, and everyone stood around and watched the two of them in their match. I asked Sid, the Yankee fan, about it. "This is every night with these two; they end up going at it. Charlie's been doing some studying, trying to catch our man here. Jack says he was a ranked player in college, but he don't look like no college guy to me." Since my initial impression was that of a homeless guy I had to agree with him.

"So you guys don't know each other outside of chess?" I asked.



"No, I mean, not all of us play all the time, you know? Charlie's always out here, and sometimes he's got his little nephew with him. That little man can play too. But I just know 'em from here." It was true, Charles was always out there; sometimes I saw him at the park in the morning, hanging out by himself.

I guess that's why I took him for homeless, but he was really just retired. And this, really, is the only part I like about taking pictures of strangers, and why sometimes I get over my reservations and make the leap. I used to think that the guy I saw loitering around the park in the mornings was a homeless guy begging the residents of Lark Street for change on their way to work. Turns out he's a retired chess enthusiast who's teaching his nephew the game with the hopes of encouraging him to make something of himself. I went back another time, without the camera, to play. I found Charles and his nephew, Aaron, there. Aaron kicked my ass too. I didn't get my ass handed to me by a homeless guy, but by a 10 year old instead.