

Statement

Nelli Palomäki

I almost never carry my camera with me. Sometimes its presence even haunts me. It's more fun to view the environment without the pressure of photographing it. Running children with an angry mother after them, a big cockroach crossing the ship's deck, a lonely man with a sleeping bag under his arm and a family playing cards together. Do they notice me? I imagine where people are going and how they live. An old woman must be lonely and that's why she's carrying a big bag of doughnuts, only to lie about coming visitors. A man walks to his hangout bar every day to sit and watch people without saying a word to anyone. It would be romantic to think that he must be a writer, but probably he's just a lonely man. A child dangles a cat from its tail without anyone telling the child not to. A fashionable woman in the perfume department looks at me with contempt, I feel like laughing.

My pictures force me to go close to people. I'm curious. A photograph is born out of life and exploring it. Everything around me is simply interesting enough, I don't need complicating. Light gushing out from the window, a sad face, a suffering hedgehog by the side of the road and a party with friends going on till morning. One morning I wake up to the sound of a drill, after a week to the sound of a cockcrow. The music around me changes and each oncoming person seems weirder than the last. A long man on the street has wrapped himself in a blanket and collects cigarette ends in his pockets, people around him are ordering beef tenderloin for lunch. A small child is dressed up in a woman's dress; a lonely dog is going through a garbage bag looking for food. I don't take pictures of them, but I'm absorbing life from around me.

I sit on the trolley and follow two little girls. They look remarkably alike. Although the girls are playing together, they have sad looks on their faces. Even the greatest laugh will not change the seriousness of the faces. The girls stay in my thoughts for a long time. After a few months, I see the same girls again, this time with their mother. I end up taking a portrait of Elsa and Viola in their home. I stuff the girls in one big tulle dress to keep them as close to each other as possible for a longer time. The girls sit seriously next to each other and look the same as they did months before. I'm amused by their seriousness, at the same time there is something sad about it.

I don't experience a feeling of power when I take pictures, more like weakness. I try to speak slower and appear more assured. I dig out a handkerchief and wipe my face. I move nervously back and forth and study the face of the one I'm shooting. I

don't want to break the tension already in the air. I wonder if she notices that I'm nervous? A person changes all the time when shooting: at times the nostrils are more open, at times the mouth clams up. The air between us seems small, but still I'm far away. I fix her hair; she shies away from my touch. My laughter breaks the silence. I should have stayed quiet.

In a portrait a person changes into someone else. I don't know who's in the picture, but I recognize the face. Is there a part of me in the picture? I try to imagine what the people will look like after ten years. Can I still recognize them? I browse through my pictures and study the faces of the people. They're always different, almost like there's a different person in each screen. I collect pieces of them and, in the end, portray them as my own. Each piece is a memory. I have a whole bunch of other people's memories, which will slowly be forgotten. I imagine knowing the people in the pictures, although I will probably never see them again.

I search for the perfect picture, but it escapes. In the end, a portrait is always different from what I expected. Other pictures surprise me with their strength, others merely disappoint me. Disappointment, however, motivates me to continue. Excitement after each shoot is always as great, the fear of failure always as fascinating. I sit on the trolley and study new negatives. Against the window they look successful. But I know the pictures will end up different than I expect. Something has changed. Perhaps the person's eyes are just about to close, a child has moved or there is a trace of an irritating artificial smile. A picture planned beforehand changes through coincidence and surprises and escapes from the photographer. If I succeeded in taking the perfect picture, I would hardly continue shooting.

I sleep on an easy chair on a ferry from Germany. Next to me sleeps a short man, who can fit his whole body into the chair. For a moment I'm jealous of him. I crawl to the floor and wrap myself in the sleeping bag to rest. Some of the people have brought pyjamas, as if I'm visiting their house. In the dim light I can only make out the bone structure on people's faces, someone lying in the corner smiles at me. I concentrate on listening to people's breathing and the tossing and turning of sleeping people on the floor. How large is the spectrum of the noises of people snoring. With some it's dry and hard, with others a soft fracturing, with one almost like a child's. Just like the portraits I've taken: in the beginning alike, but in the end completely different.

Nelli Palomäki, July 2009