

# *Karla Fallas*

INTERVIEW

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DIFFERENTLY THAN I USED TO



**ROBERT VANO**

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## *I TRY TO DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY THAN I USED TO*

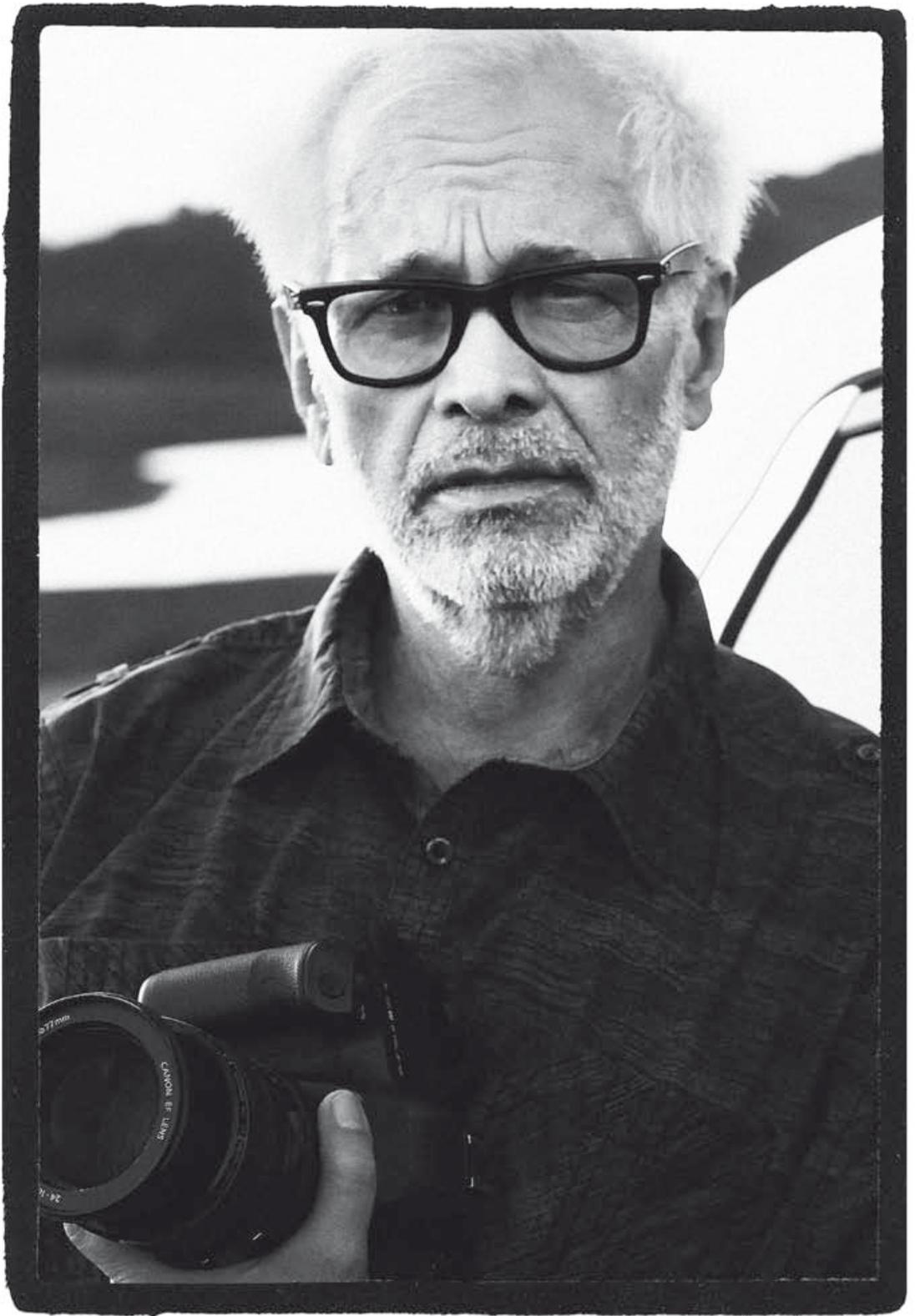
Robert Vano was born in Slovakia in the city of Nove Zamky to Hungarian parents. He spent his childhood and adolescence in Slovakia. In November 1967, an occupational order came, which was the impetus for Robert Vano and two of his closest friends to emigrate. There was not much time to plan. Impulsively, they decided to escape through Yugoslavia and Italy, which for several months became a refuge for them in one of the refugee camps. Getting there required great courage and determination. It was only possible to get out of the train through the toilet window that was pulled half-way down, the other windows were barred. Then they had to lie under the train and wait until it left. The next day it was necessary to overcome the most difficult obstacle that separated the three youngsters from their desired freedom. Walk through the mined forest, where death lurked literally at every step, and finally crawl a half-meter barbed wire fence. The traumatic experience has been so deeply rooted in his mind that Robert Vano has been unable to go to the forest ever since. After spending eight months in a refugee camp, Robert was adopted by a family from Philadelphia, so he finally got to the United States.

The first years were very difficult for Robert Vano. At first, he had to get used to hard work. He went through works in the glassworks, belt

production, dish washing and food import. It was also necessary to learn English. Gradually, he developed into one of the most famous hairdressers and make-up artists in the world of fashion. He wanted to become a photographer. In this regard, fate smiled on him and opened the door to the greatest professionals. He would not meet better teachers even at the most prestigious photography school in the world. He learned from renowned photographers such as Horst P. Horst and Marco Glaviano, for whom he worked as an assistant. And it was he who directed Robert Vano to photograph male portraits and nudes. Thanks to this, he was significantly different from all other photographers, who mostly focused on women, but mainly models. After the revolution, he returned to visit his parents, whom he had not seen since his emigration. Unfortunately, he never saw his father again. Later, he accepted the job offer of creative director of the Czech version of ELLE magazine and settled in Prague. He never returned to America. He stopped traveling and flying, so he even renounced the possibility of taking a pension in the US.

The immensely engaging life story of Robert Vano is full of ups and downs. He worked alongside the world's most famous personalities. His clients included Rod Stewart, Michael

Douglas and many others. For years, he met them every day from morning to evening. However, he never made deep friendships with any of the celebrities, for he had never coveted it and had never become a celebrity himself. Yet he managed to rank among the world's top fashion photographers. As a hairdresser, he made big money that he had never dreamed of before. He enjoyed it to the fullest, so he never managed to become rich. Nor did he avoid the wild parties and drug orgies so typical of life in America in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, in the famous Studio 54 in New York, where famous personalities of the fashion, political and music world gathered, his legendary photograph was taken in the toilet by the king of pop art, Andy Warhol. He managed the drug addiction period mainly thanks to his best friend Richard Zoli,



*Robert Vano (2019)*

who emigrated to the United States a year after Robert Vano. Together with his wife Bethea, they offered him facilities and literally saved his life. Now Robert Vano, as he himself says, is in the third act of his life, in which he publishes books, holds exhibitions and, through workshops and discussions, passes on his rich life experience.

**KT**

# ROBERT VANO

## INTERVIEW

***You don't seem to be the typical type of person born under the sign of Taurus. They are usually very materialistic, which is not the case with you. In the book "The Photo doesn't have to be sharp," you say, "I have nothing but a camera and memories." Thinking about your life experience and all you have achieved, are you not being too humble?***

I don't have a family, a wife, a dog, a Porsche, a Basil, a cottage ... All those things people usually have. I've never had a car in my life. I don't own anything. I only have my few square meters where I live. My mom had a house, I don't even have a house. I just wanted to be a photographer. Maybe it is related to the photo. If I worked as a reportage or war photographer, maybe it would have been different, I don't know. In the modeling industry and abroad, we have always been told that fashion photography is about dreams. A common person will never look like a model in a dress that no one will ever buy. Because it costs around 15,000 US dollars. In the background or in a location where she cannot afford to go in her life. In a car they never buy. They are actually in it from dawn to evening. Therefore, when you meet models, they usually wear jeans and a cap. And ordinary people walk on the street with a GUCCI logo. Maybe that's why it affected me. It may also be the fact that when I emigrated, I had no money. Maybe people have dreams, even if they don't have money. I never had those dreams. Being born in Taurus, I knew exactly what I couldn't afford, so I wouldn't dream it up. Perhaps it is good for Taurus to be more realistic. It's always been said that the profession of photographer is not the way

to make money. If someone wants to do business, they have to be in real estate or make money on the stock market. We were told that a photographer would only earn after his or her 60s. Meanwhile, one has to go on if one wants to live and also depending on what one wants. Someone feels good with doing reportage. He/she goes out on the street, takes photo of two homeless people and one junkie, then has an exhibition. You have to go for fashion. Fashion means Milan, Paris, London, New York or Tokyo. It is not in Helsinki, Warsaw or Prague. In the Czech Republic, beer is made, fashion is made in Paris or vodka is made in Russia.

***You say fashion photography sells dreams. Isn't it more about illusions than dreams?***

It may be illusion as well. My boss has always said fashion is not reportage and that the fashion industry is about dreams. It is also about big money, and few people have it. I can hire a girl who will cost 20 USD but try to hire Claudia Schiffer. She may ask for 300,000 EUR, wants to sit in a Bentley and take pictures at Niagara Falls. That is why it is about dreams.

***All your life you have been involved in the world of modeling, and you take pictures mainly to order, where the customer usually gives you their idea in advance. What is the space for your own creativity in such a background?***

It depends on whom you are working for. The higher it goes, the more creativity it requires, but what is creative, doesn't always sell. If someone brings their



*Florida flip flops, Miami (1988)*

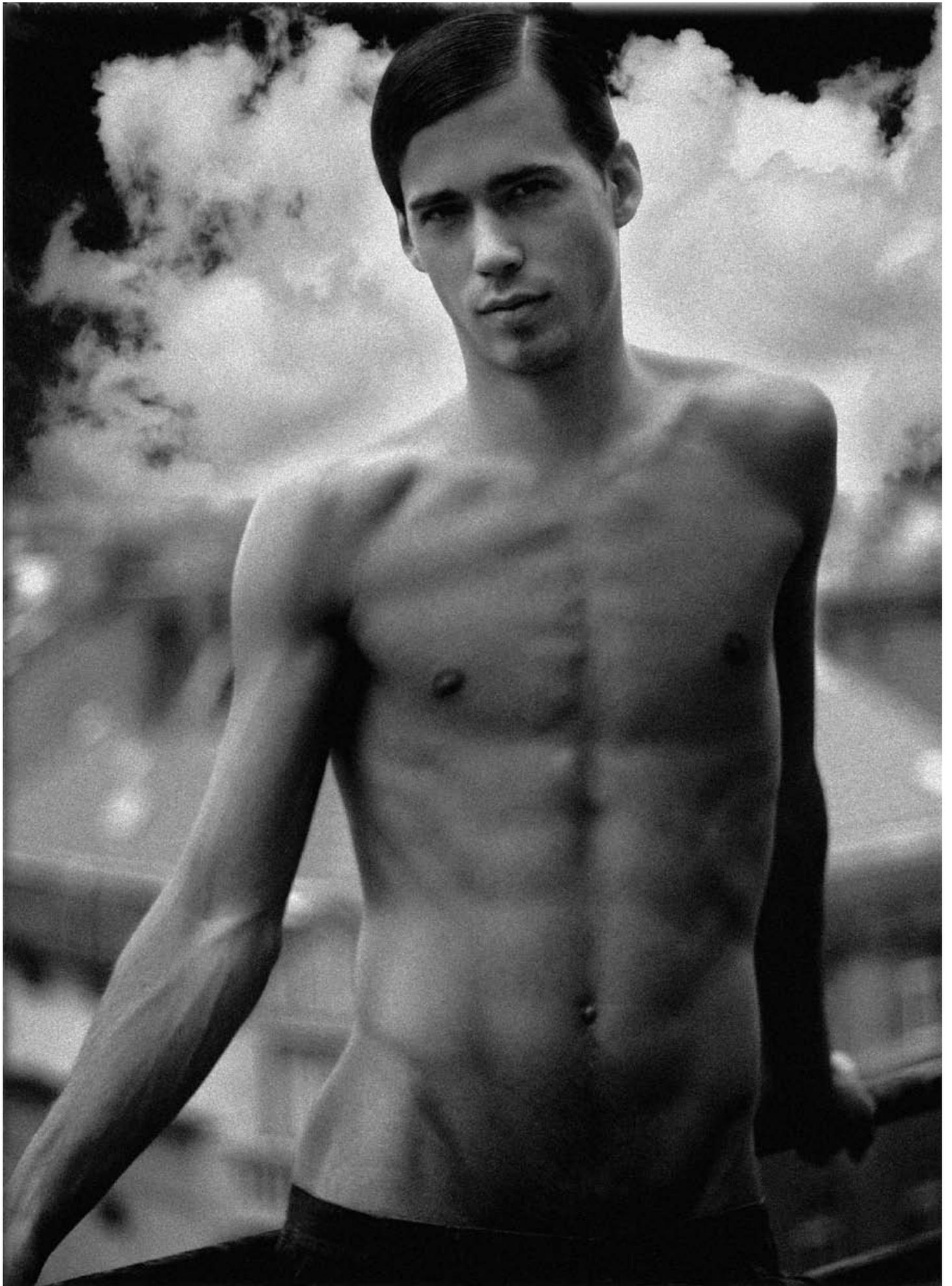
own idea, it is not about a creative photo shoot. But when you are hired for example by a magazine such as VOGUE, they usually hire you because of what you do. Then nobody dictates what you do. In the magazine, they for example decide that the next issue will have 300 pages. This will include a certain number of color photos, a certain number of black and white pages, or some of the photos blurred and so on. Then they hire a photographer who fits their ideas on the subject. And it also depends where the photo shoot takes place. When you see Romeo and Juliet on Broadway, Juliet is represented by a girl who is 14 years old and Romeo by a boy who is 16 years old. Juliet is not there as a 60-year-old lady as she is at the National Theater in Prague. Because she was already dead when she was 15 years old. And there I can afford it, because surely there is a 14-year-old girl in the 300 million population who can play the role. Then there are also magazines that are not based on their own creativity, but they download photos from the Internet. Before the internet existed, they had cartoonists who drew what the story would look like. But it is always a deal. Either you do it or not. If you take the job, then you have to do things the way the client wants. The client is right because they pay. Although the client is sometimes stupid and does not know the difference between form from cut. But that is how they want it, as it is their product. And it is up to me to decide whether I take it or not.

***And it does not suppress your own creativity when you are taking pictures this way since your youth?***

No, because it really depends on who you are learning from. I was lucky enough to start in New York because I emigrated. There you mostly worked with old masters. Martin Munkacsi, Brassai, Shagal, Salvador Dali, Andy Warhol, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, they were all there. And they gave you great advice. As a grandmother says, when baking bread, do not slam the door because it will collapse. Even Pohlreich (famous Czech cook, known thanks to his TV show) does not say that. And they give you all this advice. They would say, you have to split your time. The week has seven days, of which you will work three or four days for the client, and you would do what the client wants. Then you have another three or four days to do your stuff. And there is nobody telling you how to do your job. And by doing it this way, one does not kill one's own creativity. Maybe if I was working from Monday to Saturday for ten, twenty years, I would throw the camera out the window. By then you couldn't stand it when someone tells you what to do all the time.

***How much has the fashion world changed in the last few decades, and also the approach to photography in terms of the involvement of modern technologies?***

Again, it depends on who you work for. What changed from my perspective in the fashion world is that seventy years ago there were two magazines on the market. You go to the store today and there are thousands of magazines. Most of them are for girls. They are also called: Katka, Eva, Marta, Linda, Bety, Vlasta, Jana, Zebra... What has not changed is that there is no magazine for boys called Milan, Vojtech or Honza. There



*Matyas, Prague (2005)*

*“When I work with a company, I always ask if they want digital or analog photos. There are magazines that do not change, such as BAZAAR or VOGUE. There is always going to be the manual work in the end. And if you don’t do the creative work, you won’t show up, but you can still work for everyone else.”*

is still one magazine about fishing for the men. There is still the photo of the same guy with a catfish. So, there are not many opportunities for taking photos there. I think that in order to get a photographer into the public arena, it is important that he or she is being published. But where? So, you can be published in women’s magazines, lifestyle, cooking or decoration magazines. And now it depends on which one you decide to take photos for, their budget and where they are located.

When I work with a company, I always ask if they want digital or analog photos. There are magazines that do not change, such as BAZAAR or VOGUE. There is always going to be the manual work in the end. And if you don’t do the creative work, you won’t show up, but you can still work for everyone else. Magazines like BAZAAR or VOGUE have been published since 1860. They cannot afford to compromise. They always take pictures on film. At first, I thought they were boasting they had money. Once I was taking pictures for a German company and the lady told me she was taking pictures on film because she did not know what the new media would do with the photo. But when you find a picture of your great-grandmother in the attic, a picture that has been through two world wars, Nazism, Communism, or her house burning down, or it was a flood, a stock market crash and so on, the photo still looks the same. But photographs taken with the new technology will fade in five years. Maybe it will change someday and there will be technology for it. I won’t take the same photo anymore because of archiving and also

the lesson when I shoot a model, the photo may fade in five years, or because the model gets older. It would be stupid if I take pictures of family, their grandmother and children and they would all fade away in five years. In the meantime, the grandmother may die, and I might be dead as well, and you have no photos in your hands. When we started taking photos with digital cameras, all the photos were saved on CD. After two years, they said it would fade away, so everything had to be saved on a gold CD. Then again in the next two years, they said that even the gold CD is not enough anymore, and you need to have a memory box. So, we put it in boxes next to the computer. Then someone wise came and said we would send photos to the satellites. In 2019, the Chinese satellite fell, so if you had stored photos there, then you no longer have them. It is good to use technology, but you still need to be vigilant. What in case of blackout? You somehow have to be prepared for three, four days in advance. People do not have to have any money at home because they are used to pay by credit cards. In case of blackout, it would be hard to go to the bank. People won’t run out of towns because gas stations won’t work. You will buy a mask unnecessarily because there is a virus if you do not have food at home. So, you will sit at home in a mask and will die of hunger. It is important to be able to combine things in a smart way. For example, the Japanese work like this. They go with the times and use technology, while not forgetting traditions. The Americans make a huge television, the Japanese take it and make it small and put it in the watch. They won’t invent a new thing, but they do it practically



*Boy in White Shirt, Prague (2006)*



*With Milan in Bed, Prague (1999)*



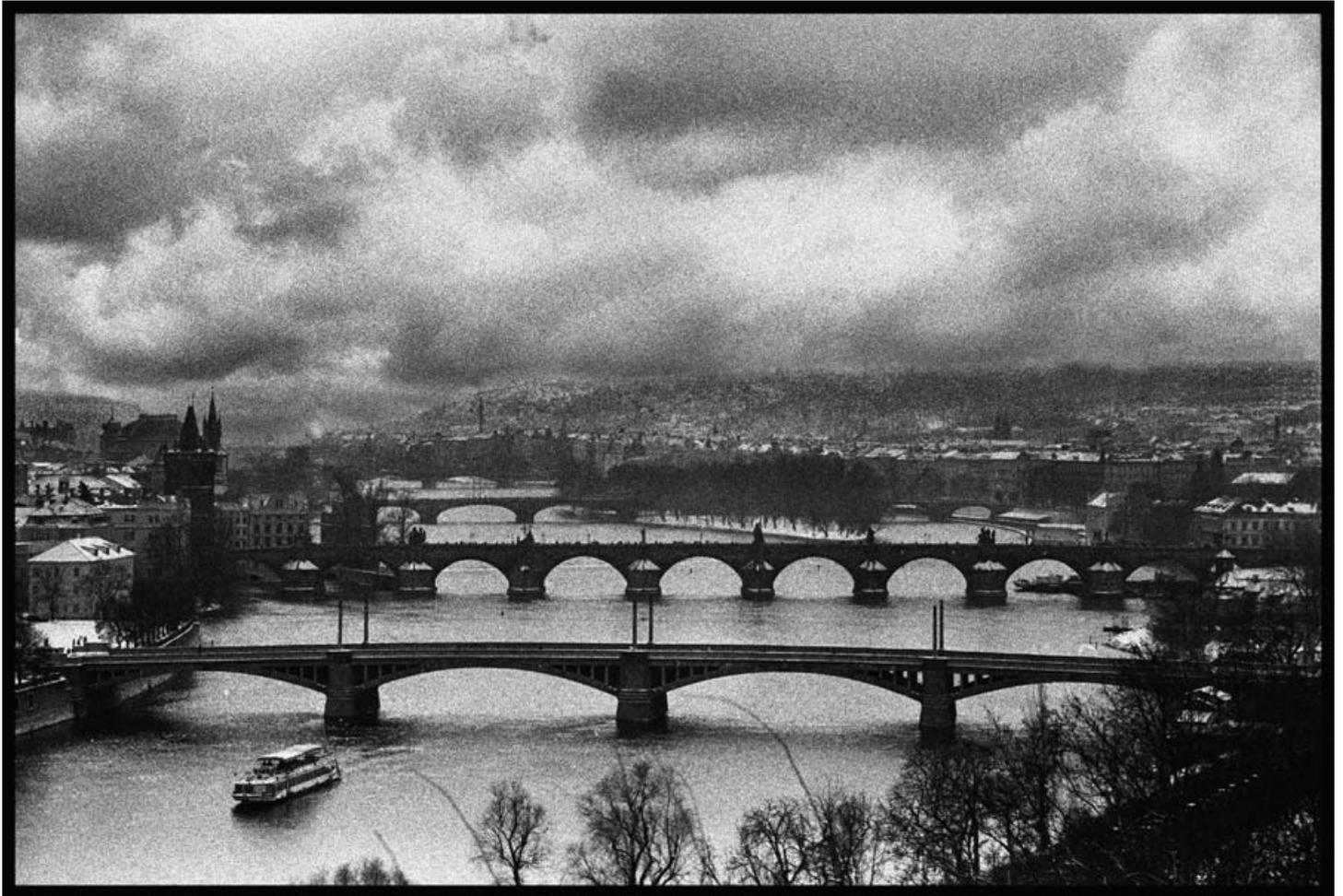
*Bohemia, Adrspach (1992)*

for them. Here, for example, the lady wears old clogs and has the same hairstyle. Some people can keep their tradition. We are not like that anymore. I remember that when they invented a new kind of furniture back in the 1960s, everyone in Nove Zamky had the same furniture. My mother threw away all the hundred-year-old furniture from her grandmother. Somewhere in the yard, they split it and burned it. Then suddenly they had triangular tables back then. Then, years ago, while still alive, Mum was still running around, looking for antiques and looking for a chair that would have a soul.

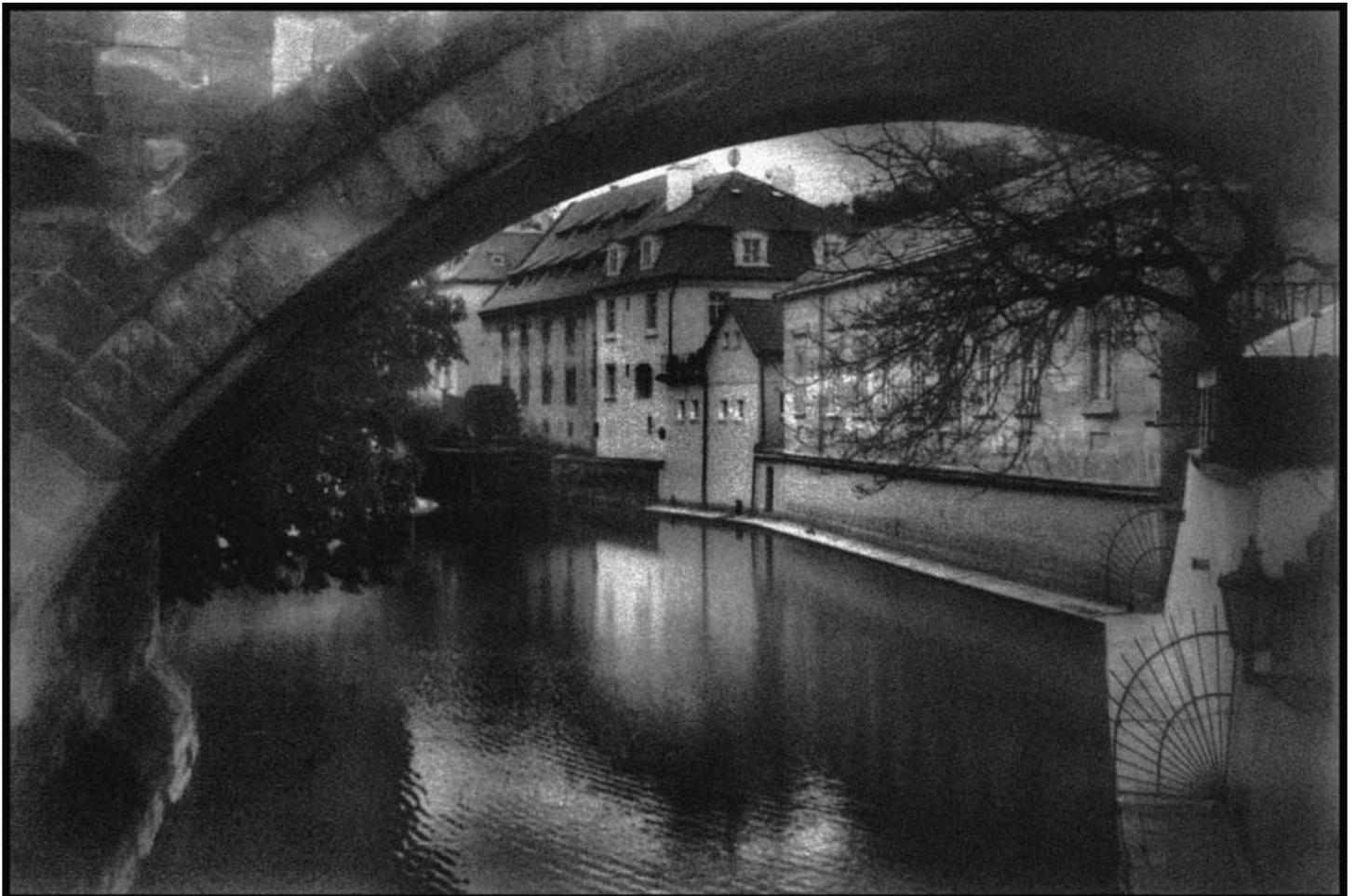
Before the creation of digital cameras, it did not matter whether you were shooting for a fashion magazine or another client, for yourself or for your mother. There was only one way. Now it is divided, and it depends on the person's choice. If someone prefers electronic pictures, they will be unable to exhibit in a gallery, because they want a manual photo there. There are magazines that only want digital photography, and if you provide a manual photo, they would have to scan it, and that would take much longer. If you are sending photos to Germany, they require photos at 400 dpi, 300 dpi in the Czech Republic, 350 dpi in USA and 200 dpi in Italy. Now it is personal in the way that I need to know who I work for and what they require. You wonder what is right, and why it is not working the same way everywhere. Somewhere they will tell you that 200 dpi is wrong. Then, in Italy, they might print a photo at 200 dpi, and it looks beautiful, better than 350 dpi or 400 dpi.

***How can we make sure that the younger generation, in particular, do not totally forget their roots and traditions in a time most of them prefer cell phones and YouTube?***

I think there is a mess in the school curriculum. Because the technique is faster than printing a book. And it is not just about photography. They start with Leonardo da Vinci and his Mona Lisa, in the year 1503. For those children, it is the same as when they taught us about the creation of the world. They should start with what they take photos of and then incorporate history into what is given and not given. Children are smarter than teachers today. They know where to click and where to download. When they invite me, I do workshops for them and I also learn from them. I would tell them they need a lens and a light meter. And I ask them, do you have a light meter? Because the light meter measures the light falling on a surface, and the camera measures the light that is reflected. This is a huge difference, and no one has a light meter. One student has a new iPhone for 1,500 USD and I ask why he does not have a light meter. And he tells me it is too expensive. And I say, expensive? It costs 500 USD, and here is your iPhone for 1,500. So, what will you become when you finish school? Will you be an operator for Vodafone, or do you want to be a photographer? And he tells me that he downloaded the exposure meter application for free. And I did not know there was such a thing. So that's great, I learn from them. Then I go to another class and ask the kids if they have a light meter. They do not because it is expensive. And I would tell them it is not expensive and let them



*Prague Bridges, Prague (2005)*



*Certovka (Devil's Canal), Prague (2005)*

*“The only guarantee for the photo is 150 years of its existence. The fact is that the photo of my grandmother which was rolling in the attic looks the same all the time. Only those that were printed are left. Nobody will invest 5,000 USD to have it faded it on the wall.”*

download a free app to their iPhone. And then they look at me and wonder how I know such things. It does not matter whether it is a mobile phone or what equipment you use for taking pics. This is evolving. What does not develop is what to do with photos. You cannot send a cell phone to an exhibition in Paris to be exhibited. There have to be physical photos for the exhibition. The result must be handmade. When Ennio Morricone was in Prague last time and filmed the film “Musica” he said that he does not feel emotions in current music, but he hears the technique. It is the same cooking. Who gets a Michelin award? Whoever makes handmade noodles or kneads bread by hand like grandma. Even digital was great for the first week. When CNN reported that American photographer David LaChapelle had printed 1,000 yards of photos in just one day, we were looking at that because a normal person wouldn't take more than one photo a day. I couldn't wait to see the printer. But today, even a 3-year-old child prints a photo at 300 dpi at 16kb on Epson. Now what? The photographer will be different from his little grandchild. So, you have to do it manually because he cannot do it. The only guarantee for the photo is 150 years of its existence. The fact is that the photo of my grandmother which was rolling in the attic looks the same all the time. Only those that were printed are left. Nobody will invest 5,000 USD to have it faded it on the wall.

***Do you think that physical photography will be of interest in the future, when people can now have photos saved on their mobile or computer?***

Some things return after some time, albeit in a different form. I think companies do this so they can continue to exist. Polaroid disappeared a few years ago, everyone was going crazy. They wanted Polaroid, but there was already a cellphone and an iPhone. Then Polaroid came out of the children's cameras and began offering green or pink boxes to make it look like toys. It costs twice as much as before, but the children have already been born by the time of mobile. And now they go to the party, pull the trigger and the photo is immediately developed. This is currently the biggest sensation. The photo is as small as a credit card, but it can instantly be given to a friend. I think it always stays, but I don't know how to grab it. It is the same with everything. My grandmother got angry when she kneaded bread because it took two hours. She still repeated how her hands hurt and that no one would help her. Then sometime in the 1960s, they came up with the first food processor, and Grandma said that until we will live under her roof there would be no robots in the house. Because the bread should be kneaded, and this way only actresses and bitches bake and not a normal mom. And she was right. Grandma was not a new age, but she said it was not just kneading, but by doing that, one gave the love of what she did to her children. And I believe it is like that. It is now coming back. For 20-30 years, people were buying bread in the shops. Then they went to the markets and now a lot of people knead bread again. They do not put it into the bakery anymore, because they figured out it was not the way it should be. It did not even look like a loaf of bread, but more like a radio with two holes. I think the



*Golden Lane, Prague (2005)*



*Château de Christian Dior, France (1973)*



Winter, Prague (1997)



Winter, Prague (1997)

good things will come back and what was not so good will perish.

***You originally wanted to become an actor. When did the moment for change come and you decided to become a photographer?***

I was tempted to become a photographer because I thought it was something I could do myself and no one would talk me into it. All we did in school was teamwork. Whether it was ball games or civil defense. The trouble was that under the totalitarian regime you couldn't become what you wanted. I don't know if it was the same everywhere or if there were any different curricula at our school. The boys had to go to a mining school, or they became electricians or hairdressers. Better to say, barbers, because the men then went to the barber and women to the hairdresser. It didn't mix, it was like in Albania. The girls could not become pilots again, but they could be flight air hostesses. The stewardess could only be the one who won the miss because there was only one line between Prague and Bratislava. It wasn't possible to fly anywhere else back then. People didn't even have passports. They didn't let me go to the photo school because they told me they had no idea what I'd take photos of in Nove Zamky. There they could just take pictures of funerals or something like that, and they also said this is not a job for a guy. It was in the 1950s. At that time the tracks were electrified. Stretching cords from As (the city located on the west side of Bohemia right on the borders with Germany) to Kosice (the city located on the east side of the Slovak Republic). They

needed a lot of electricians. I thought that I would not sit somewhere on the pillar in Kosice until I die. So, I didn't go there. Those who did not choose any of the options went to the grammar school, saying that by 18 they would decide what they wanted to become. At that time, I wanted to be everything. For a while, I wanted to become a priest because we went to church, and I liked it there. Then I wanted to be an ice cream seller. As children usually do, they want to be everything they see. Then they didn't take me to college. I checked in at DAMU (The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague) and they said I had a Hungarian accent. It was an excuse because I don't have a Hungarian accent. In the last year of high school, it was decided who would go to the military. Those who went on to college did not have to go, and the others did. The last nine months at school, when you were 18 years old, lasted forever. And now I was faced with the idea of standing alone with a dog in the field for two years. I said I would never do that. And that's why we emigrated. The desire to become a photographer came back after a long time. Today, I think that if you really want something, it will stay with you. And angels or I don't know who will take you there.

***You divide your life into three acts, childhood – the period before emigration, life abroad and return. How do you remember the first act, the period when you lived with your parents in Slovakia?***

It was a beautiful time. Of course, I think of my grandmother, mom, dad, cinema, church... When the first TV arrived, I was about ten years old. Before

*“I just want to be a photographer,  
and I want to be healthy  
and stay here as long as possible.”*

that, it was great that we did everything all together. We played games or raced. We planned that one half would run on one street, the other on the other, and we were competing who will get there first. In the house, many diverse things were done in the evenings. Maybe somebody said Anka was getting married, so all the ladies were feathering. All the neighbors gathered to talk about ghosts or maize crumbled. When the TV came, it started to change. Someone bought a TV, and suddenly half of the people didn't come. Because, for example, those who lived in the street on odd numbers went to watch TV at someone else's house, and the next day the others went again. Then they all bought TV, and nobody went anywhere. Back then, television was only broadcasting twice a week. They also stopped going to the promenade. Before that, the corsair was on Sundays. Everybody dressed well and mothers took children in prams. The guys went to football and then they all met. Suddenly it all ended. People stopped visiting each other and did not communicate. There it started for me. For some, it may have started long before when the first train appeared. And then it went on and on. And now, not only were we not communicating with our neighbors, now even the mother did not talk to the child. Mum cooks in the kitchen, the child is closed in his room, and she then calls him to come for a lunch.

***What was your relationship with your parents like before you emigrated?***

I remember more of my grandmother and grandpa because my parents were still working. My mom was

18 and my dad was 19 when they got married. They were almost never at home, but Grandma and Grandpa were home. They raised us. We all lived together. I don't remember it anymore, but when my parents were coming home, I might have slept. My mom and I did not get close until after I returned from emigration. Meanwhile, Dad died. When I emigrated, my mother was 37 years old and my dad was 38 years old. When I returned, my mom was almost 70 years old and my dad wasn't alive.

***Do you know what caused your dad's death?***

Mum said he had diabetes. I don't know how it works, but she said it first came out in his toes. So, they first amputated his toes, then at his ankle and in the end at his knee. Then he died.

***Did you have any contact with your parents at the time of your emigration?***

I wrote to my parents, and my mother also wrote to me. I kind of knew that it wasn't possible to write about everything. She had never written the way she answered my letters. Letters were sent to me because they didn't write about what they were not allowed to write about. They were already brought up that way. They only wrote about things like something was nice or being visited by somebody. And I certainly wrote about how cool it was in America. They didn't get my letters at all, and I didn't know it. I did not know until I was filming a documentary about my life. I was approached by a lady who wanted me to appear in the



*Linda, Czech version of Elle (1998)*



*Ballerina, Prague (2005)*

Memories of the Nation. I said I didn't want to because I didn't remember anything. She said it wasn't about that, but that if someone had left illegally, files were kept on the person by Communist Investigators. I didn't know about that and I didn't care what they had written about me. She said it might be interesting for the documentary. When the republic was divided, so the files including mine should be in Slovakia. I said that I would not go anywhere, that I would not go to the houses and look for some papers. I gave them a power of attorney and they finally found it. The television is great. One day I wrote to them and the next day it was there. And there were all my letters and postcards that I sent to my parents, and they didn't get them. I had nothing to do with communism. I lived at home in the village and then I ran away and that was the end of it for me. I knew what they were doing to others, but I thought there was nothing they could do to me. When I got home for a visit, we talked, and mum said she was glad it all went well, but the only thing that she can never forgive me for was not letting them know where I was for the first two years. And they thought I was dead. I told her that I always wrote to them and Mummy said, okay, so we won't talk about it anymore. I didn't want to shock her into having a heart attack at that age. I thought she already had Alzheimer's disease, or she didn't remember it. The documentary was filming fifteen years after my mother's death, and now they suddenly brought me all the letters. And the only thing that bothered me was that I couldn't go and show her the letters I really wrote.

***So, the last time you saw your father was before emigrating, and then there was no contact between you at all. How did they even find out where you were?***

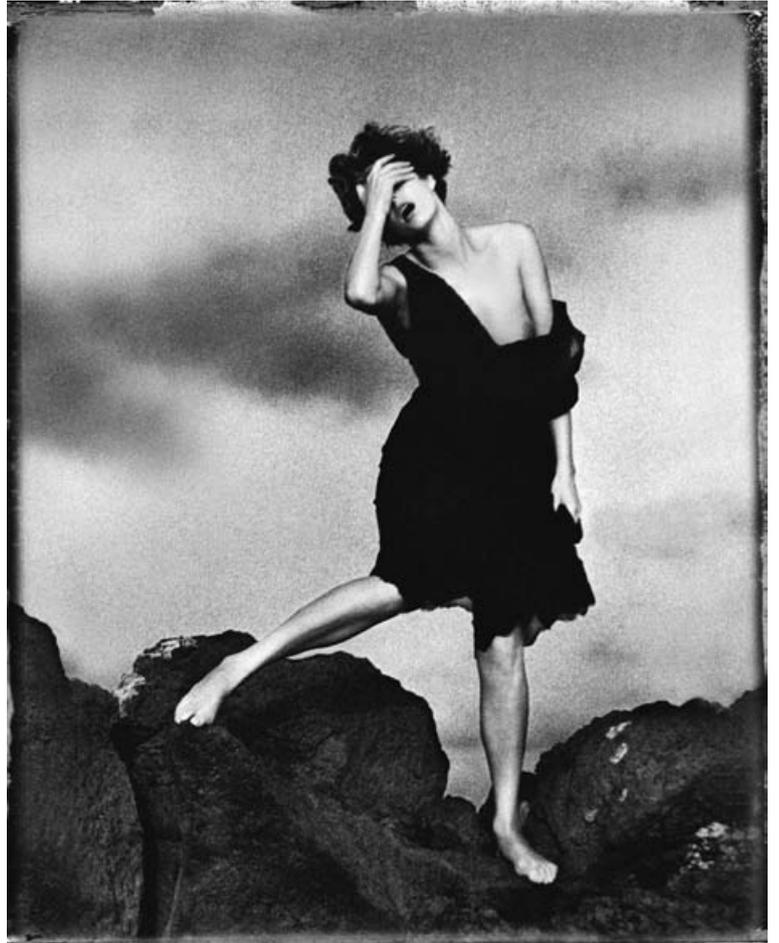
No, I was never in touch with him again. I don't even know how they found out where I was. They didn't know about me for two years. Then the officials must have told them. Mum told me my dad had been arrested for three months because of my emigration. She didn't even want to talk much about it. Once, when I came home after the revolution, the mail car stopped in front of the house. A gentleman, wearing a uniform, got out of the car. Mom saw him from the window and fainted. She probably still felt the fear from that time. She said the cops were here again, and I told her he was a postman. She then said that when Dad was arrested, cops had occasionally arrived at night and had her interrogated and that they also put the light on her.

***You have siblings, who also emigrated, are you in contact?***

I have a sister who lives in Toronto and my brother lives in Austria. We were born ten years in a row. I am the eldest, then the sister, and the brother is the youngest. The sister emigrated about a year before the Velvet Revolution happened. My brother left after the revolution. He did not emigrate; he lives in Austria because he went there to work. He's a truck driver and got married there. We're in contact, but I'm not going anywhere anymore. I'm not traveling anywhere where Pendolino's not going.



*Julie, Lanzarote (1985)*



*Julie, Lanzarote (1985)*



*Linda, Czech version of Elle (1998)*



*Avion, Prague (1992)*

***You often say you are not going anywhere anymore because you are afraid to fly. How can you be afraid to fly when you have been flying your whole life?***

That's why. I try to do things differently than I used to. My work has always been by the sea or in the deserts. It was all arranged in restaurants, and you took showers at hotels and drank coffee. To make me feel that I'm not working, I'm not going anywhere. Most people go where they work. I'm trying to be home, baking buns. I'm not taking a shower, but I have a bath. I don't make coffee, but I drink tea. I try to do completely different things to make me feel like I'm not working. To go somewhere to Thailand to dine on some ants that I may enjoy the taste of, does not make sense for me. I never even planned any photo shoot of any particular place. Like for example going to Lapland to take pictures of the Northern Lights, or how people usually do it. My work has always been in Paris, London, Milan, Rome, Los Angeles, Idaho, the Canary Islands, Amsterdam or New York. It was enough for me. I didn't want to take pictures in China or elsewhere that I would go alone. I went where I had to.

***When you emigrated, you spent several months in a refugee camp. How did you get to the United States?***

I got to a refugee camp in Trieste, Italy. It was funded by Americans' money and US laws were in place. We were under-age by law. So, they told us that we would either return home or they would give us up for family adoption until we reached maturity. I got into a family in Philadelphia. I probably got there through the church.

So, I got to Philadelphia and there I had to go to the emigration office every month. I had no job. I had to go to school and learn English. The lady I lived with said that it is best to become a hairdresser because the hair grows even after death. They're growing for another two weeks, that's proven. So, I went to the hairdresser. In the 60s, there lived a super hairdresser. His name was Vidal Sassoon. He opened a salon in New York. They needed ten boys and ten girls who didn't know much, so they could teach us the way they wanted us to be. The school lasted a year and then they took us to a salon. He was also a great businessman. He said he would also send hairdressers to photographers for whom they would adjust the model or the man they were photographing. To comb the hair and apply makeup, because nobody was doing it. And that's how I got to meet the photographers. There I saw for the first time that most photographers were men. In my home country, they told me a guy cannot do that because it is not a job for a guy. Again, the desire to become a photographer awoke in me. Since then, it took another fifteen years to get my first job as a photographer. Then I learned from experienced photographers who were mostly pretty old at the time. They said that the first twenty years should be about learning. Then you should work for the next twenty years. And for the last twenty years, you should exhibit and write books or teach at school, to return home and pass on what you have learned. Just the way it used to be in the past, when they went for example to Vienna to learn the skills. There they learned something, then they returned home to the village and taught the others.

# ROBERT VANO

## INTERVIEW

***In the United States, you have met and worked with many famous personalities. Most people want to get close to them, and you say you've never grown close to them. Was there really no one to make a deeper friendship with?***

No. You are in it all your life from morning to evening every day, and you can still see Gucci, Pucci, Armani, Versace, Dior, Chanel, Calvin Klein and more everywhere. And now, which one do you choose? You go there from morning to evening and then you just want to go home. But there were people who didn't like going home. For ten years, I worked with a guy who was on the same team from morning to night. He still wanted to go somewhere for a happy hour. I say no happy hour. Happy hour to me means when I do not have to see you. I have seen you from morning to night for ten years, I want to meet with other people. And I don't want to talk about fashion. I want to talk to a fireman or a roof tiler, because those people are always in it. I saw it at lunch. When we all went for a lunch, they were still talking about work. And you want to talk about something else. When we were working in Germany, there was the rule there that no one was allowed to talk about their work during lunch time. And whoever said something had to put Mark 5 in cash. At the end of the month, they had a party because they collected a lot of money. So, maybe because of that, but they don't want to get closer either. One needs to make a record and needs photos for a magazine. The manager of a singer calls the photographer's manager and they talk. My manager sends photos to her manager, she

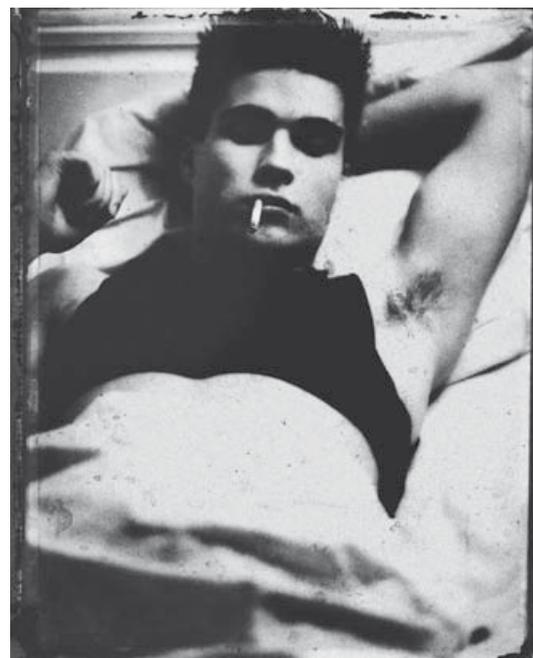
looks to see if she likes the photos. People often ask and how was that person or the other one? You don't know because you focus on the photoshoot. And the faster you work together, the faster you go home. But she needs a photo and the magazine also needs it, and it's also good for me that they decided for me. So, everyone comes in, you have two hours, you say hi to each other and how are you, someone cares about hair styling and make up, then you take a photo, say goodbye, they go home and that's it. And you don't know how they are and maybe you even don't want to.

***And how was the meeting with Andy Warhol?***

It was a tragedy. He may have been different before too. I met him in the early 1970s. It was after the assassination attempt committed by his friend, Valerie Solanas. She was a model or an actress. He still promised her to cast her in a movie. He didn't do that, and she came to the studio one day and shot him. Since then, he has always had people around him and has not talked to anyone. He talked to people through another person, like tell her to smile. The assistant then said Andy tells you to smile. They said he had closed himself off since the assassination attempt. That must have been terrible. I would have hanged myself if someone shot me, particularly a friend. Either they were on drugs, or I don't know, but it must have been terrible. In his life he would not admit his Slovak origin. He was ashamed that he was born in Pittsburgh. He still wanted to be as American as the Statue of Liberty. That's why he suffered. He was hiding his mother. She

*“I take pictures of girls because I like girls. You like boys, so you should take pictures of boys.”*

(Marco Glaviano)



Robert, Prague (1992)

was still wearing a traditional folk costume. She had an apartment on Madison Avenue, and no one knew about it until he died. She lived in a small apartment, and he brought everything he collected there. Then they said that the topics he chose in his work actually helped him. He was still suffering from being from Pittsburgh. He still wanted to be the American he was not. That's why he photographed those typically American things like hamburgers, American armchairs, Marilyn Monroe and Elvis. He never took photos of common things. We met so close twice. Once it was when we were taking pictures in his studio where he had an interview. He published a magazine. He was there with his assistants. And because I had a different accent, they asked where I came from. So, I said that I was from Czechoslovakia, and they said that Andy also comes from Czechoslovakia. His assistant told him to say something to me in our language. He was looking as though he was searching for some words and then he said "piatnica" (Friday in Russian). He meant it was Friday, but it wasn't even in Slovak. Maybe he remembered the language, but he didn't want to talk, I don't know.

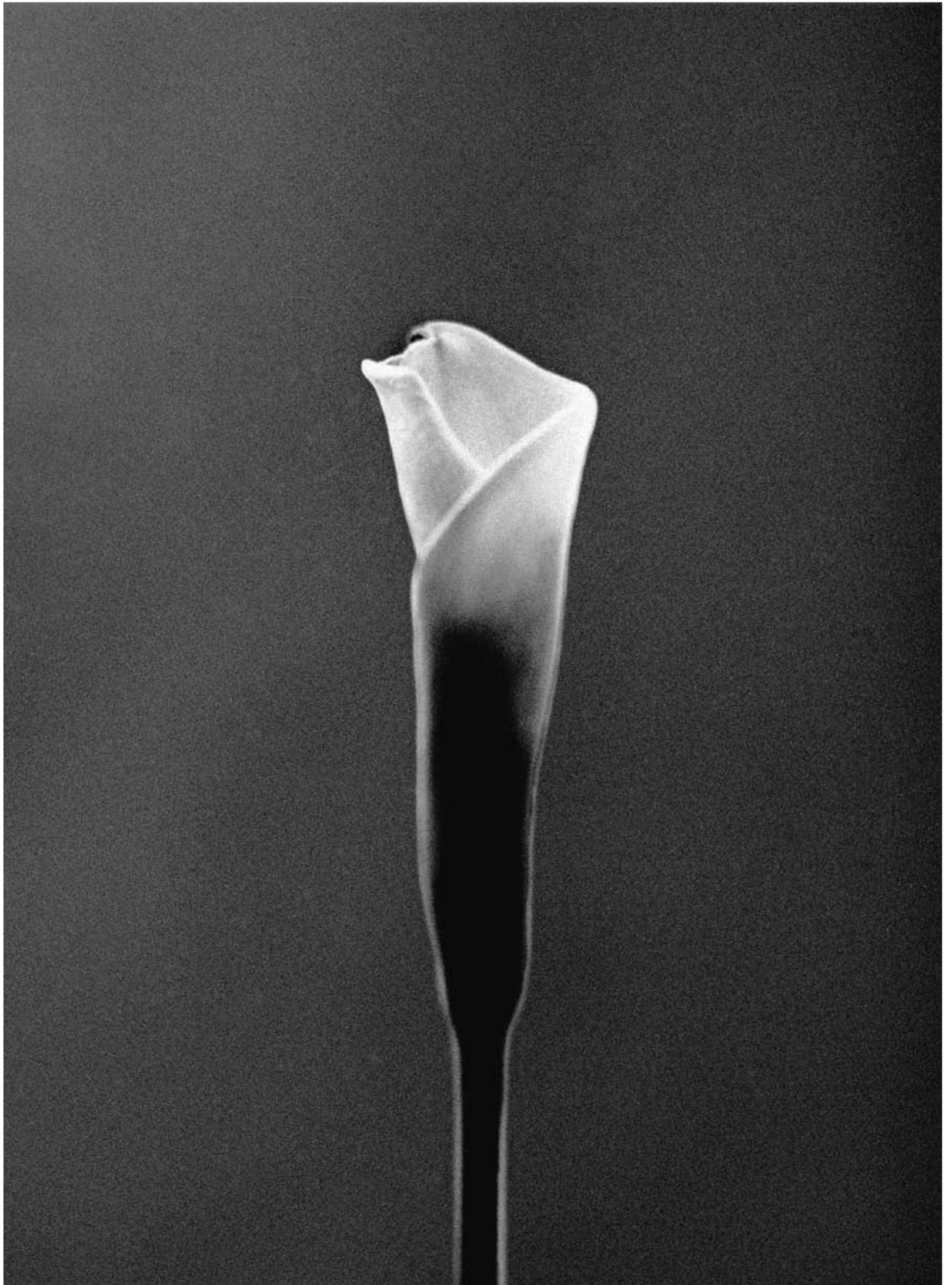
***As a rocker, I have to ask. Some media say you hung out with Mick Jagger. Did it happen or is it a canard?***

No, I didn't. We were often going to Studio 54 in New York, where all the famous personalities went. It is something like the club Radost in Prague, where everyone known as Vaclav Havel or Karel Gott went. Everybody went there from Henry Kissinger to Bianca Jagger, Mick Jagger or David Bowie and everyone else.

The club was huge and had three floors. So, you saw all these people there, but everyone was overdosed, so nobody talked to anyone.

***When you returned to the Czech Republic after the revolution, did you plan your trip as a visit to your parents and going back to America?***

Yes, I thought I'd come home to my mom and I thought I'd be back all the time. I worked there for the first three years. The Americans then founded ELLE magazine in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and needed the first editorial office for two years. The team consisted of people who worked for them differently around the world. They were published in 120 countries. They needed people who were able to speak Czech and Slovak to speak with the editors. The graphic artist was from Australia, the one who took care of dresses was German and a Frenchman was handling the business. For every foreigner, they found a Czech man to be their assistant. After two years when the contract ended, people who were assistants before took over your job. And then they asked everyone if they wanted to stay. Mostly they did not want to, because they returned to America. There they had brewed the coffee before; now they were editors and then they became bosses. That was the reward for being in exile two years before, or I don't know. We stayed three. Me, Frenchman Fabrice and Englishman Simon. I liked it here because I felt at home, so I stayed here. That's how it worked for ten years, and then the Germans bought the magazine. Then I left the magazine.



*Lily, Prague (1997)*



*Tulips, Prague (2004)*

***Didn't you have a cultural shock after coming back from a completely different world after such a long time?***

I didn't, I liked it here because it looked like it was in a spell in Disneyland. Prague was all black with plaster falling. You were afraid to go down the street because a brick could fall on your head. It was all so enchanted. Then someone came and painted a house yellow, and another green. Then came the first McDonalds in Vodickova Street in Prague. It was all red and stood out. I liked it.

***What are you doing now?***

I hold exhibitions, publish books and take pictures all the time. I'm still doing the same thing.

***You also organize workshops; what topics do you offer?***

I offer portraits and nudes. And it also depends on what people are interested in. They even choose cooking sometimes. So, I'm going to do what I know and I'm not ashamed of. I certainly wouldn't choose harvesters because I never did it. So, I would be nervous there. I also do discussions. People invite me to do different things.

***Do you perceive any differences in approach to photography between female photographers and male photographers?***

It also depends on the subject to be photographed. In my view, more women photographers would be

needed, especially in women's magazines. I think women have a greater sense of detail. They have something men don't have. Guys could take more war pictures, but they still take photos of girls.

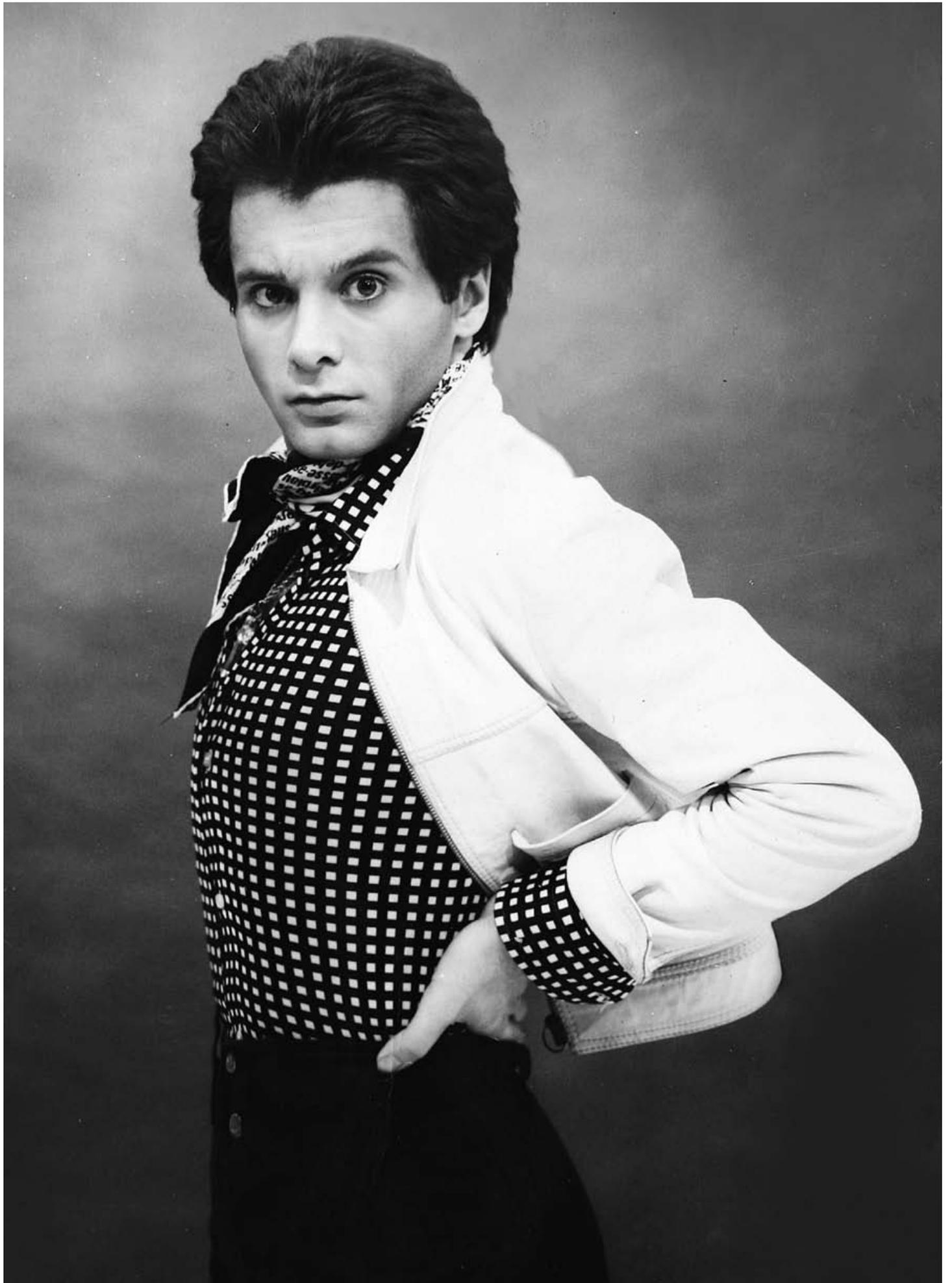
***Your topic is boys, how did you come up with it?***

I worked as an assistant for the well known photographer Marco Glaviani, and he asked me why I was shooting girls. And I didn't know why I was doing it. I told him he was taking pictures of girls too and I am his assistant, so I learned it too or what am I supposed to take pictures of – cows? And he said, I take pictures of girls because I like girls. You like boys, so you should take pictures of boys. He said, nobody is doing it, so I would have no competition. Maybe I would have thought of it if I was 50 years old. But the good thing is he told me when I was 20 years old. And he says no one is taking pictures of the boys so you won't have competition. And since I was 20 years old, I thought I was so good that I was competing with him, and he wanted to get rid of me.

***You say you don't have any dreams, but you certainly have a wish; which one?***

No, I have not. I just want to be a photographer, and I want to be healthy and stay here as long as possible. Because they are scared all the time, people around here are always leaving. And my mother always said death walks in our streets. So that's the only thing I want to be healthy and still be able to do what I love.

**KT**



*Robert Vano (1972)*



*Robert Vano (1990)*

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