



# LEICA MANUAL

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# IF I HAD A LEICA, ALL OF MY LIFE'S PROBLEMS WOULD BE SOLVED



When I first started street photography, I used a bulky DSLR (Canon 5D). I always thought that buying a Leica, I would become a much better street photographer. I fantasized about the look of the camera, the lightness and compactness of the camera, and the ease of use. I imagined myself shooting with a Leica on the romantic streets of Paris, in the footsteps of [Henri Cartier-Bresson](#).

One of my dreams in life was to own a Leica. And when I finally got one (a Leica M9) — I thought I would be happy for the rest of my life.

Wrong.

After about a month of owning it, the appeal and novelty wore off— and it started to collect (as much dust) as my Canon 5D did on the shelf.

I thought that buying the Leica would make me a more confident photographer, because it was

less obtrusive, and the camera shutter was more silent. It didn't.

I thought that buying the Leica would help me make better images, because it was quicker and more discrete. It didn't.

I thought that buying the Leica would make me satisfied for the rest of my life, because it was the “best” gear that money could buy. It didn't.

Soon after buying the Leica M9, I got the film bug. My good friend Todd gave me his film Leica M6. I fell in love. I never touched the M9 after that.

I eventually ended up selling the M9, and trading it for a film Leica MP.

But nowadays most of my photography is shooting with a small compact camera for street photography ([Ricoh GR II](#)). I prefer the smaller size — it is easier to carry with me everywhere I go, it is cheaper (so less anxiety about losing it), and even less obtrusive.

I still think the Leica is a fantastic camera for street photography, and don't discourage anyone from investing in one. My suggestion is to just be realistic with yourself.

Buying a Leica won't change your life. It won't make you a better photographer, nor a more confident photographer.

But shooting with a Leica is certainly a different experience than using a DSLR or a traditional camera.

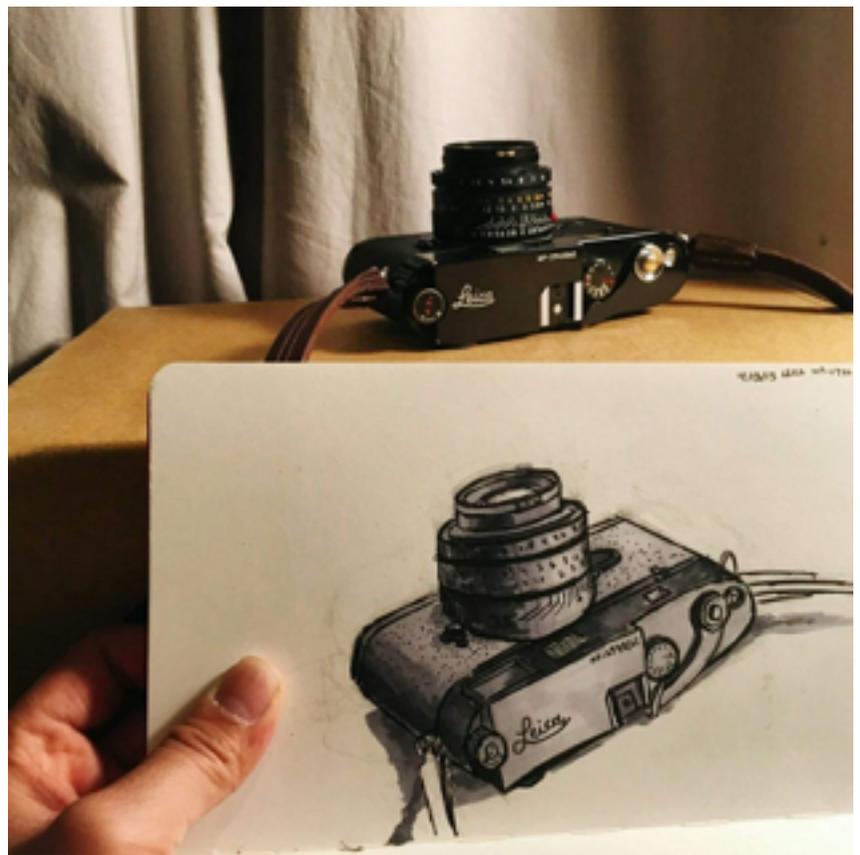
A Leica (or rangefinder) has fewer functions, fewer menus to deal with, and therefore is more minimalist and less complicated (in that sense).

With a Leica (or rangefinder) — the operation is very simple. All you have to do is change the focusing distance, the aperture, shutter-speed, and ISO. And all of these settings are easily accessible, without having to dig through menus.

Also a Leica is far smaller and more compact than bulky DSLR's (although not necessarily lighter).

If you want the ultimate speed and responsiveness in a camera, honestly you can't beat a Leica or rangefinder. Why? Because if you employ "zone focusing" (pre-focusing to a certain distance, and using a small aperture like f/8-f-16) you will never miss the "decisive moment."

Whenever I miss a shot on a Leica or rangefinder, I never blame my camera — I can only blame myself.



Sketch of my Leica MP by [Phillip Kim](#)



# 1

## 3 COMMON LEICA MISTAKES

Everything I will share in this manual is based on my personal experiences. This is the information I wish I knew if I started shooting with a Leica or rangefinder all over again.

To start off, common mistakes that I made, or things to avoid.

### 1. DON'T SHOOT WIDE-OPEN

If you see on the internet, almost everyone talks about how amazing it is to shoot wide-open on a Leica (with Leica lenses). They lust after f/1.4 lenses, and even the legendary f/.95 “Noctilux” lens.

But that isn't what the Leica or rangefinders were designed to do.



In the early days of photography, the “fastest” lenses were limited to  $f/3.5$ . The concept of shooting “wide-open” at  $f/1.4$ ,  $f/1.8$ , or  $f/2$  was unheard of.

Rather, what most photographers did with the Leica (most of them being street, documentary, or photojournalists) was to shoot at  $f/8-16$ . This allowed them to have more depth-of-field, so that they were more likely to have an in-focus image.

Furthermore, early practitioners in street photography (like Garry Winogrand and Joel Meyerowitz) would shoot black and white film (pushing the ASA/ISO to 1000+). This would allow them to max-out their shutter-speeds on their film Leicas (to 1/1000th of a second, while shooting between

$f/8-f/16$ ). Therefore whenever they clicked and hit the shutter (with their 28mm or 35mm lenses), they would capture “the decisive moment” in images that were both sharp and in-focus.

The downside of shooting wide-open (at least in street photography) is your likelihood of getting an in-focus image is very slim. There are some people who can do it— but why risk it?

Furthermore, I think a truly great street photograph needs both an interesting subject and background. By shooting wide-open (at  $f/1.4-2$ ) means your background gets totally blurred out. And then you lose context, interest, or depth in your street photograph.



If you look at the best street photographs in history, almost all of them have a relatively deep depth-of-field. You can see the foreground, middle ground, and background.

Shooting wide-open (f/1.4-2) is necessary if you're shooting at night, in dark situations, without a flash. Or it might be good if you're trying to make some nice portraits of models, or of a fancy wine glass.

But if your interest is in shooting street photography, keep your aperture to a default of f/8. The good thing about f/8 is that it allows enough light to enter your camera, and gives you a good balance of depth-of-field.

f/16 works well on really bright days, but if you're shooting in the shade, I recommend sticking at f/8.

## 2. DON'T SHOOT WITH A 50MM LENS

This point might be a bit more controversial: many people who first get a Leica buy a 50mm lens because that is the lens that Henri Cartier-Bresson shot with.

I don't want to poo-poo the 50mm lens too much. It is good for flattening your perspective, it is nice for portraits, and easier to frame and compose with.



However I think in today's modern world, where the streets are much more crowded, a 50mm is just too tight. There isn't enough space in most cities to shoot with a 50mm lens.

I recommend a 35mm lens for most street photographers starting off shooting with a Leica or rangefinder.

Why?

A 35mm lens is the best "good enough" lens on the streets. It isn't too wide (like a 28mm lens) nor is it too close (like a 50mm lens). Apparently I also read that the human eye sees the world from roughly a 38-40mm perspective. And I feel

that having a 35mm affords you a little more flexibility.

If your back is against the wall, you cannot take a step backwards. But you can always take a step forward.

If you become more advanced in street photography, a 28mm is also a good lens. Yet the problem with a 28mm lens for street photography is that you need to get really close. And most beginners aren't that comfortable shooting that close. Furthermore, if you wear glasses (like I do) you cannot fully see the edges of the frame lines on a 28mm lens (assuming your Leica has the default magnification of .72).



A random tip, if you want to shoot with a 28mm lens (and you have glasses) try to get a Leica with a .58 magnification (allows you to see more of the frame lines). Unfortunately Leicas with a .58 magnification are only film ones— not digital ones.

### 3. DON'T JUMP HEAD-FIRST INTO A DIGITAL LEICA

Digital Leicas are far more expensive than their more affordable film counter-parts.

Therefore if you are unsure whether shooting with a Leica or rangefinder is right for you, I'd recommend starting off with a cheap film rangefinder, or a film Leica.

A good cheap rangefinders to start off with is a Yashica Electro 35.

The best “bang for the buck” film Leica to start off with is a Leica M6 (which has a meter-built in). Cheaper film Leica's you can start off with include the Leica M4 (built like the M6, but doesn't have a meter) and Leica M5 (body styling is different, but still a good camera).

If you don't want to bother with film, want a Leica, and might be more on a budget— I'd recommend a second-hand Leica M8 or Leica M9 (for the rangefinder 'experience').

The Leica M8 is great for shooting black and whites (but horrible for color). The Leica M9 is great for shooting both black and white and color, but if you want nice colors you can't shoot



above ISO 400 (black and white I shot with it all the time at ISO 2,500).

What is the difference between the Leica M8 and Leica M9 from the more modern “Leica M” (240) variant? The main difference is the sensor—the older M8 and M9 have a “CCD” sensor (people say the colors and black and white files look more like film, but the high-iso performance is worse). The new Leica M240 has a “CMOS” sensor (same as DSLR’s, which have better high-iso performance, but people say the colors and black and whites look ‘flatter’ in contrast compared to the CCD sensors).

Also, the Leica M8 and Leica M9 are a bit frustrating to shoot with. They have slower “buffers” (which means, after taking 5-10 photos, your camera freezes, and it ‘writes’ the files to your memory card). Also the LCD screens on these

cameras really suck. And the ISO performance is quite poor.

Personally, I prefer the Leica M8/M9 over the modern digital Leica. Why? They are slightly smaller in size, which feels better in the hand. I also think the files from the CCD have a more unique “look” or colors to them. This is definitely personal preference, but I find the new Leica CMOS sensor to not have as much vibrancy in the color files.

But the new digital Leica has many benefits. It is much faster to shoot with, more responsive, and has a quieter shutter sound.

Whatever you decide to invest in, I recommend renting one or just trying it out. A lot of people fantasize about buying a Leica or rangefinder, only to find out they prefer autofocus.



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## HOW TO SHOOT ON A LEICA

Okay, so let's say you get either a film or digital Leica, with let's say a 35mm lens.

Now the tricky part— how do you shoot with it?

If you have a film Leica or rangefinder, I recommend reading my book: “The Film Photography Manual” where I have covered technical settings on shooting street photography on film in detail.

If you have a digital Leica or rangefinder, let's move on:

### STEP 1: SET YOUR CAMERA TO APERTURE-PRIORITY (OR A) MODE

If you have a digital Leica, I recommend shooting in Aperture-priority or “A” mode.



Why? It means you have one less thing to worry about.

By putting your camera in aperture-priority mode, your camera will automatically choose the shutter-speed.

Then choose your aperture to f/8 as a default.

## STEP 2: SET YOUR ISO TO 1600-3200

Secondly, you want to not use automatic-ISO. Because that will default your shutter-speed to something slower.

If you're shooting street photography and have moving subjects, you want your shutter-speed to

be at least 1/250th of a second. Preferably, if you want really sharp street photos, you want your shutter speed to be at least 1/1000th of a second.

By putting your ISO to 1600 (or above), you will achieve a shutter speed of at least 1/250th of a second during the day (assuming you're shooting at f/8).

At ISO 1600 (during the day), your shutter speed will be around 1/250th of a second if you're shooting in the shade. It might also drop to 1/125th of a second (if you're in really dark shade).

Whenever you notice your shutter speed dropping below 1/250th of a second, I recommend



increasing your ISO. This might mean going up to ISO 3200 (or even 6400).

Generally I find the Leica M8 and M9 to be acceptable in color up to ISO 800. When shooting with these cameras at ISO 1600 and above I'd recommend sticking to black and white. With the modern Leica M240, ISO 1600 and above is fine.

### STEP 3: HOW TO FOCUS

Generally when shooting street photography on a Leica or rangefinder, you want to use “zone focusing”. The concept is that you pre-focus to a certain distance (1.2 meters is a good default distance, which is around 2-arm lengths away) and shoot at an aperture with deep depth-of-field

(around f/8-f16), and everything you capture within a “zone” (a little closer or further than 1.2 meters) will be in focus.

For example, with a 35mm lens, at f/8, pre-focused at 1.2 meters, everything between .9 meters-1.5 meters will be in focus. Depending on what lens, aperture, and distance you focus — your “zone of focus” will be different.

Generally, the more you increase your f-stop (for example, changing your aperture from f/8 to f/11 or f/16), you get more depth-of-field, or your zone in focus. So when shooting at f/16, you will have more of your scene in-focus than shooting at f/8.

Also the wider your lens, the more of your scene will be in focus, and the more depth you will



have. For example, you will have more depth-of-field with a 28mm lens (when compared to a 35mm lens).

Lastly, the further you focus, the more of your scene will be in focus. For example, when you pre-focus to 5 meters, you will have more depth-of-field when compared to 1.2 meters.

## STEP 4: FOCUS BY FEEL

Another tip: you want to learn how to focus based on feel.

For example, if your lens has a “focusing tab” (the little plastic grip in the middle of your lens) — this is a benefit.

You can “feel” when focusing by the following:

- When you’re focusing your lens to the dead-center in the middle, that is usually 1.2 meters (at least on most modern Leica lenses).
- If you focus your lens to 45 degrees to the right, that is around 3 meters.
- If you focus your lens to 45 degrees to the left, that is usually .9 meters.

An easy way to also remember this:

- Focus to dead-center: “Middle” distance
- Focus 45 degrees to right: “Far” distance
- Focus 45 degrees to left: “Close” distance



By default, I recommend pre-focusing to dead-center. If you're shooting street photography on a 35mm lens, that is a good default distance to "fill the frame" with your street photographs, and capture a good scene.

Also another way to learn how to better judge your distances intuitively: sit on the couch, and look at objects in your room. Look at your lamp across the room, ask yourself: "How many meters or feet do I think that is?"

Make a guess in your mind, then pre-focus your lens to that distance, then bring your camera to your eye. Then see how far it actually is, then learn how much you need to adjust your focusing tab (either to the left, center, or the right).

Then with enough of this practice, you will learn how to intuitively focus without even thinking.

## STEP 5: DON'T MISS THE MOMENT

A classic mistake in street photography: street photographers will see an interesting scene, then bring up their camera to their eye, then try to focus. But by then, they've missed the moment.

What you want to do is to see an interesting moment, then pre-focus your lens to the rough distance, and then bring up your camera to your eye and just click. This will help you save valuable time, and capture "the decisive moment" without wasting time focusing.



Essentially you want to turn your Leica or rangefinder into a glorified point-and-shoot camera. The ultimate goal in street photography is for your camera to become invisible — and to take photos without even thinking about the technical settings. The camera becomes an extension of your body, and you just click intuitively.

## STEP 6: MEMORIZE YOUR DISTANCES

Another tip: when you're out shooting on the streets, and walking on the sidewalk, learn the distances of the sidewalk.

Stand on the far end of the curb, and see how long the distance is to a storefront on the other side. Usually it is around 2 meters.

Then you know that half the distance of a sidewalk is 1 meter. So you can pre-focus when you see certain subjects walking towards you at certain distances.



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# LEICA LENS RECOMMENDATIONS



I generally recommend a 35mm lens for most street photographers.

I don't recommend the Summilux f/1.4 lens— as it is too big and heavy. And for street photography, you will almost never shoot at f/1.4.

Rather, I am a big fan of the Leica 35mm f/2 Summicron lens, which is much lighter, more compact, and more “affordable.” Also f/2 is nice to use if you're shooting in darker situations, or photographing a pretty portrait of a friend (shot at f/2).

Also another great option is the 35mm f/2.5 Voigtlander lens. It is even smaller, lighter, and (way) cheaper than the Leica 35mm f/2. Most of the time in street photography you're going to be shooting at f/8 — so don't see the f/2.5 as a disadvantage. Also the lens is very sharp (apparently it is modeled after an older 35mm Leica lens design). The biggest benefit of this lens is

that it also has a focusing-tab, which is more ergonomic to shoot with on the streets.

If you want a wider lens, a 28mm lens is also solid. The best “bang for the buck” Leica lens is probably the Leica 28mm f/2.8 Elmarit lens. You can also find other 28mm Voigtlander lenses on the market which I heard are also very good.

If you can afford it, I highly recommend the Leica 35mm f/2 Summicron ASPH lens (apparently the sharpest Leica 35mm lens). This is the lens that I currently use.

Also know that there are a plethora of Leica M-Mount lenses that you can use from other brands like Zeiss (and many others). For “bang for the buck” the Voigtlanders can't be beat. For the best “quality” you can't beat the Leica lenses.



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## NON-LEICA RANGEFINDERS

I didn't mention this earlier— but I have used “Leica” and “rangefinder” interchangeably in this guide. Technically, I should be referring to “rangefinders” — not Leica's (because not all Leica's are rangefinders).

However I feel that out of all the cameras out there, the two cameras which have the best design, heritage, and simplicity include the Leica rangefinder, and the Ricoh GR camera. Both cameras have existed for several decades without significant changes— because they just work. Both cameras have distilled simplicity,

minimalism, and elegance into a perfect form — that can't be improved upon.

Of course there are tons of other great rangefinders out there — especially film ones. I have friends who have the Bessa, who love it. But honestly, a Leica rangefinder will last for ages, have lots of places that repair them, and you will probably (eventually) want to ‘upgrade’ to a Leica (if you don't already own one). So I think it is just easier to get the most affordable Leica within your budget.



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## HOW TO SHOOT WITH A LEICA AND FLASH

I am a huge fan of shooting with a Leica and flash — my flash of choice is the Leica SF 20 (fully-manual). It is simple, minimalist, and the controls are easy to use.

If you shoot with a digital Leica (or a film Leica with TTL), I recommend just using the Leica SF 24D (and using the TTL, automatic metering mode). One less thing to worry about.

When I shoot with a flash and the Leica, I generally put my ISO to 400, my aperture to f/8, and distance to 1.2 meters. In terms of the power of the flash, I adjust it so the flash distance is 1.7 meters (which means the flash slightly overexposes, which I find generally makes better photos).



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DON'T GO INTO DEBT FOR A LEICA



You can purchase a second-hand film Leica, which is somewhat affordable at sub-\$2000 prices (depending on the condition). You should be able to find a good-working condition Leica M6 for ~\$1500-\$1800 (about the same price as most modern digital cameras).

If you're on a budget, get the Voigtlander 35mm f/2.5 lens which is around \$450. Or you can pick up a second-hand Leica 35mm f/2 Summicron lens (\$1500-3000) depending on if you get the older versions, or the newest version. Or just use any 35mm M-mount lens that you find which is affordable.

Digital Leicas are obviously much more expensive. You can find a second-hand Leica M240 for around \$5000, a second-hand Leica M9 for around \$3000, and a second-hand Leica M8 for around \$1800. A brand-new Leica M is around

\$7000, and even more for the Monochrom (black and white only) variant.

My suggestion: if you cannot buy a film Leica or digital Leica (used or new) in cash — don't buy one. Don't buy one on credit. As a rule of thumb, you should be able to buy two Leica's in cash (if you know if you can really 'afford' it).

Don't make my mistake— barely being able to afford one. The Leica won't make you a better photographer, and is a huge financial investment. If you're a photographer on a budget, just buy a digital Ricoh GR camera — and use the rest of money on travel, photography books, and workshops.

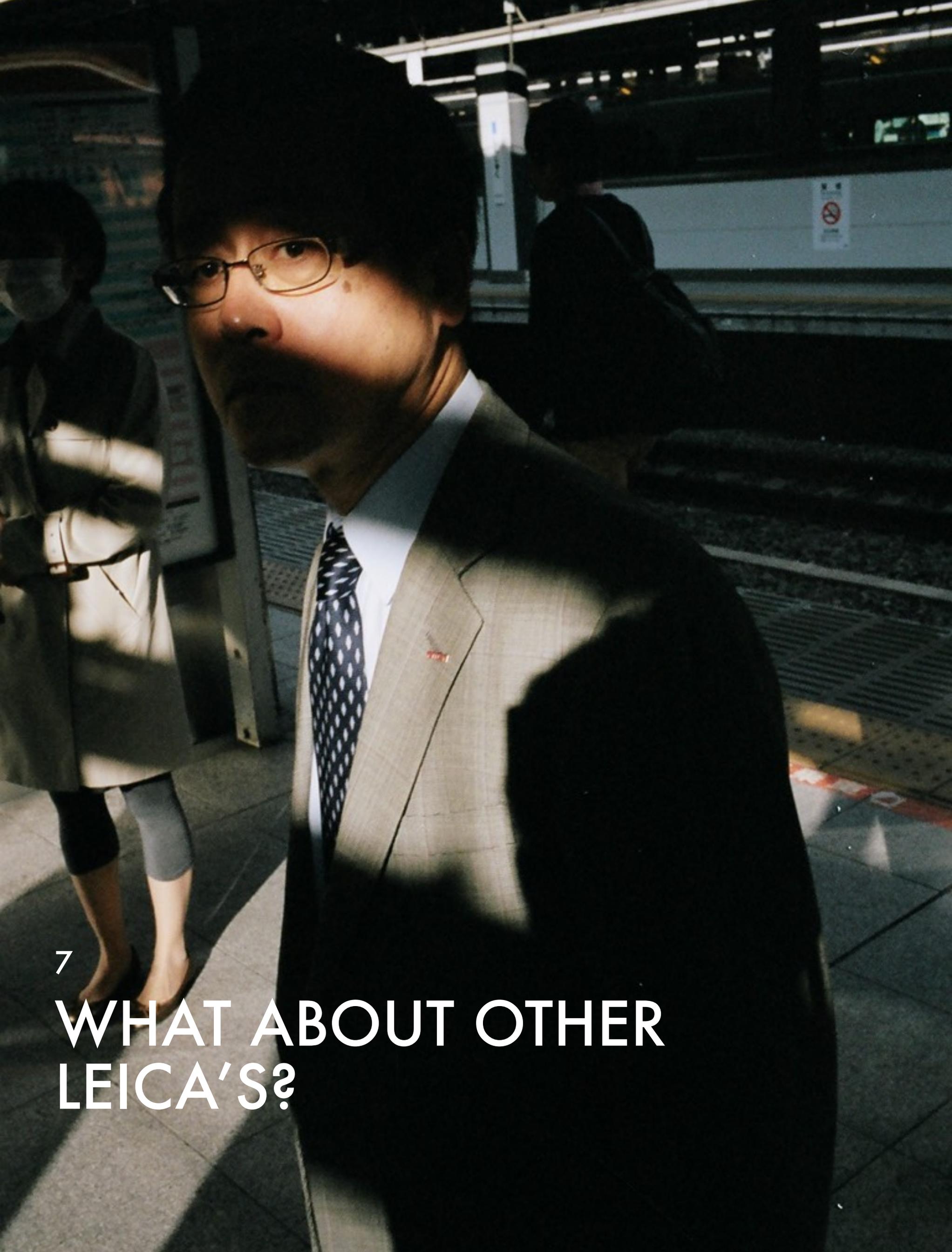
But if you do have some cash in the bank, and are comfortable financially— invest in a Leica. It is the camera which holds its value the best (compared with other brands), and the camera



you can probably use for the longest time (before it gets ‘outdated’).

Beware, all digital Leica’s will get outdated (just like iPhones). Know that once you buy a brand-new digital Leica M, you will probably lose \$1000-\$2000 of value in the next few years (just like buying a new car). I recommend if you want the best “bang for the buck” — get a good-condition second-hand digital Leica (that has already depreciated a bit). This way you can probably re-sell it for almost as much as you bought it for.

If you’re on a budget, I recommend picking up a [Ricoh GR](#) (around \$600 USD)



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WHAT ABOUT OTHER  
LEICA'S?

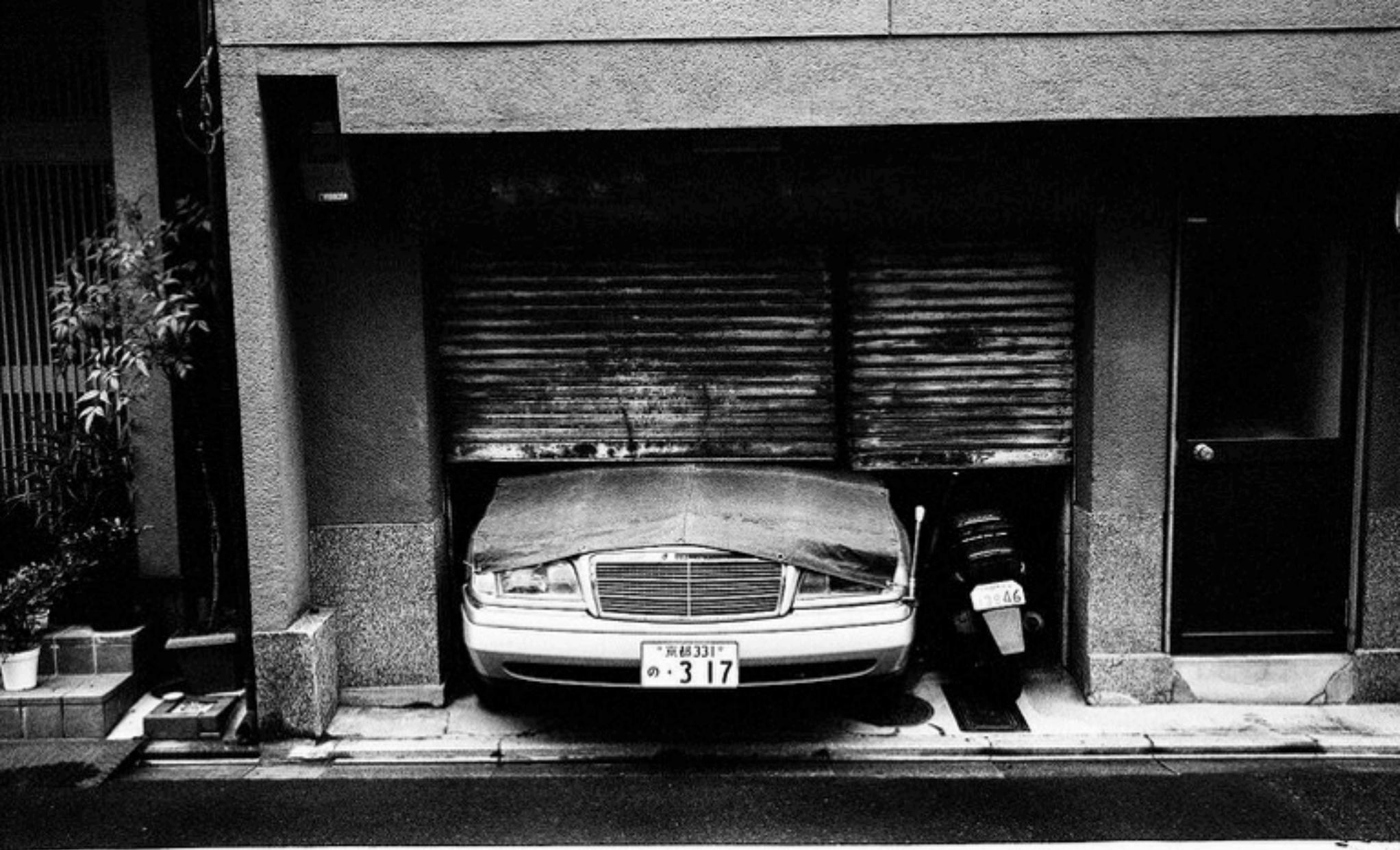


What about the Leica Q, SL, T, X, or other Leica cameras?

Personally, I wouldn't buy anything besides a Leica M body. Why? Because they are all relatively new cameras, and any new body style will get outdated or made redundant pretty soon.

For example, the Leica Q (because the body and lens are connected) will probably be outdated in about 3 years of use. With the Leica M, you can at least salvage the lens (which you can use for your entire life), and upgrade the body. But with the Leica Q, you are essentially stuck with a non-upgradeable camera, which will lose massive amounts of value into the future. It is like having a really expensive iPhone — and who owns an iPhone longer than 3-4 years?

So as a general rule (at least for myself) — I would only buy a Leica M, and no other Leica.



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## THE BEST “BANG FOR THE BUCK” LEICA SETUPS

If you shoot film, the best bang-for-the-buck Leica setup is the Leica M6 (~\$1500) + Voigtlander 35mm f/2.5 lens (~\$450) = ~\$2000.

If you shoot digital, the best second-hand bang-for-the-buck Leica setup is the Leica M9 (\$~3000) + Voigtlander 35mm f/2.5 lens (\$450) = ~\$3500.

If you want a brand-new digital Leica setup, and have some more cash — I would recommend: Leica M 262 (~\$5400) + Leica 35mm f/2.4 Summarit (\$2000) = \$7400.



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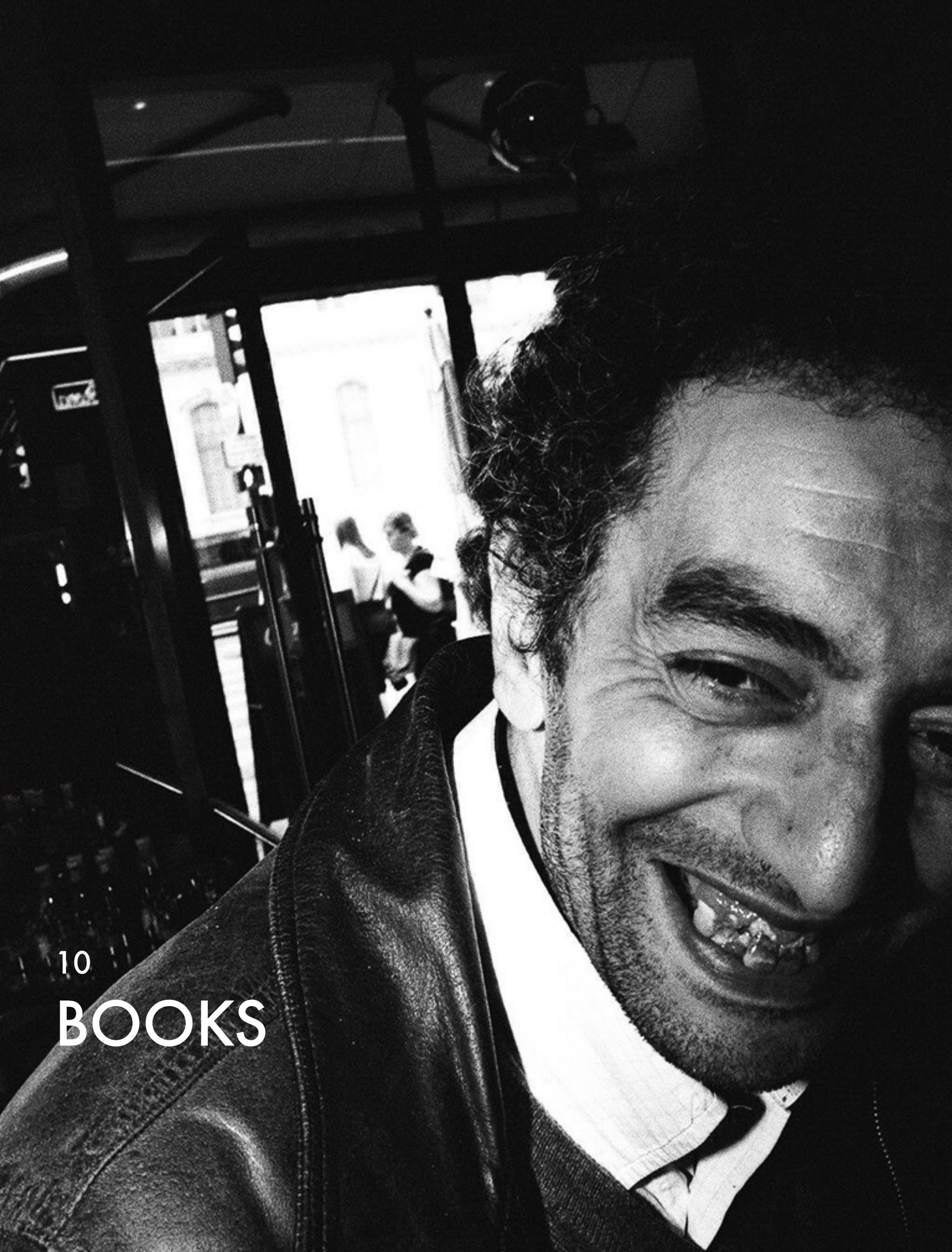
## LEICA LUST

My purpose in writing this is to share some of my personal experiences showing with a Leica. This is all information I wish that I knew, before I started to shoot with a Leica/rangefinder.

My hope is that this guide didn't excite some lust for you to buy a Leica. Know the camera you have is already more than sufficient for street photography. If anything, the best camera for street photography is probably an iPhone/smartphone. Or something even smaller — a compact camera like a Ricoh GR.

No matter how expensive your camera is, you will never be satisfied. The only real way to find satisfaction with your camera is to be grateful for what you have, to spend more time shooting (than looking at gear-related websites online), and to make photos that bring you personal satisfaction.

Always, Eric



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# BOOKS

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