

# 1.19

## An Essay on Success in the USA, 1962

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In the early 1960s, roughly five years after he joined *LIFE* magazine, prizewinning photographer Grey Villet introduced a new style of pictorial journalism to the shiny pages of the big picture magazines. His work delivered broad emotional power and an almost unthinkable proximity to his subjects, surpassing the intensely intimate portraits achieved by his colleagues W. Eugene Smith and Leonard McCombe in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Like them, Villet's method depended upon the Leica and available light. But Villet often relied on a long lens (180mm, f/2.8 Sonnar was a favorite), and used cropping to refine his compositions. As a result, Villet's images achieved distinct formal properties that differed from work by Smith and McCombe: grainy texture, large areas in soft focus, bold blocks of light and shade. His images bring viewers uncomfortably near his subjects and respect no conventional social boundaries. We come so close that we can see the nicotine stains on a fingertip, the dark pricks of a man's afternoon beard on a cheek that was smooth that morning. Villet called these portraits "psychographs"—as if his photographs could capture the thoughts and feelings of his sitters and get inside their minds.

"The Lash of Success" began when *LIFE* editors assigned Villet to work with veteran writer and researcher Barbara Cummiskey on a series she conceived exploring myths associated with the American Dream—Fame, Success, and Wealth. Though five decades later the premise seems mild, in 1961, this critical approach to accepted national ideals was something new to *LIFE*, widely known for its relentlessly upbeat approach to modern American culture. Through a friend in public relations, Cummiskey found Victor Sabatino, owner of a national chain of foam rubber furniture stores, whose lust for success was palpable to everyone who met him. Happy to appear in the nation's most widely read magazine, Sabatino allowed Villet and Cummiskey to accompany him everywhere. Cummiskey did the talking and listening, while Villet silently made pictures.<sup>1</sup>

As veteran reporters, Cummiskey and Villet knew how to melt into the woodwork; after weeks on the assignment, Sabatino ignored them, as did his colleagues and family. The picture story shows Sabatino bully his employees, manipulate his wife, visit his tailor, talk to an old friend, and kiss his young daughter good night. We see portraits of his grandfather, his best friend, and his customers. One affecting portrait showed Sabatino alone, logically impossible if the cameraman and writer had come along with him. But we accept the fiction. The "fly on the wall" style of photojournalism was nothing very new. Villet and Cummiskey broke new ground because they openly showed Sabatino as a flawed person, without patronizing him or passing judgment. Every aspect of his personality added depth to the portrait, and



**Figure 1.19** “Shrewd inquisition leads him along the trail. Talking to Herman Horowitz, a manager on the administrative side in Chicago, Vic was a butterfly collector wielding a pin . . .” Grey Villet, “The Lash of Success,” from *LIFE* 16 November 1962, pp. 88–97.

brought the reader closer to him. What might have put us off in real life, becomes the source of fascination when experienced through the medium of the printed page.

Cummiskey’s pitch-perfect text matched the almost unnatural proximity provided by Villet’s lens. As Sabatino’s business began to fail, and his marriage crumbled, he talked to the reporters about his life. “I know what Lillian wanted . . . She wanted me to see her—look at her . . . But I had to do what I had to do.” Divorce was a relief. But he could not give up the business. “‘Everybody told me, ‘Walk away Victor. Take what you can and walk away.’ But I wouldn’t. I fought and I talked and I fought.’”

The story ran eleven pages, with a bold layout sometimes three images to a full spread, all close-ups, just fragments of faces, along with more conventional images of Sabatino in conversation with wife, friends and employees, or alone. Images, text, and layout combined to eliminate the comfortable distance readers might expect a magazine story to offer. Instead we share his space, and as a result we see the world from his point of view.

Grey Villet considered “The Lash of Success” his most successful story. But in dozens of essays he demonstrated the same talent for crossing personal and social boundaries, and the same ability to bring readers close to subjects they might otherwise resist. Working with the *LIFE* team, Villet covered the race

beat during the Montgomery Alabama bus boycott, the contested integration of Little Rock Central High School, and Martin Luther King's lead up to the March on Washington, also photographing the white citizens and politicians who supported segregation. By working all sides of the story, his images made events suspenseful and interesting even to distant or disengaged readers. One notable story appeared in 1965 when he and Barbara (Cummiskey) Villet produced a story on Richard and Mildred Loving, the couple whose Supreme Court Case challenged the Virginia miscegenation laws which made their marriage a crime. The Villets placed the focus on the Loving's warm and modest home, challenging viewers to forget, for a moment, that Richard was white and Mildred was black. (Two years later, the Lovings won their case, changing the laws in eighteen states.)

The Villets went on to produce stories on homosexual rights, drug addiction, Castro's Cuba, and other risky topics. In hindsight, their once surprising stories can seem almost ordinary, in part because their too-close-up style was soon copied by photographers and New Journalists, and also because society has grown more tolerant. More poignant is the loss of the big picture magazines, the medium that Grey and Barbara Villet mastered, creating emotional, informative stories that opened their readers' eyes to a newly complex world, where nothing was ever purely black or white.

## Note

- 1 "The Lash of Success. A Modern Parable: Vic Sabatino's Fierce Vision of Money and Power." Photographed for *LIFE* by Grey Villet, *LIFE* Magazine, 16 November 1962.