



The Man

Vincent LaForet By Abigail Ronck

The next 72 hours will be nothing short of crazy for Vincent LaForet. And that's to say nothing about the 72 hours prior: He just finished editing 140 videos he's currently producing and an interview with Twitter extraordinaire Scott Bourne. Now, he lends an hour of his time before hopping a plane to Italy on assignment.

When he learns he will be featured as one

of the "photographers you should know" this year, he says, "I'm one of them? Wow, that's cool. Thanks for telling me."

Here's why he shouldn't be surprised: In 2000, at age 25, LaForet was hired as the youngest-ever staff photographer at *The New York Times*, where he worked for six years. In his time there he won a Pulitzer Prize for his work capturing the visual

response of Pakistanis directly after the 9/11 attacks. Thereafter, he was on-site shooting the Hurricane Katrina disaster as it unfolded, landing many of his images on the front page of America's most-read newspaper. He's been embedded during wartime in the Second Gulf War, and featured on CNN, NPR and *NBC Nightly News*. He was also the very first photog-





rapher to shoot video with the Canon 5D Mark II, capturing and cutting his video “Reverie” in a single weekend. After he posted it to his blog the video went viral and was seen two million times within just one week. To boot, he’s a great teacher and fairly wise man for his young age—so those who seek to follow in his footsteps, read on as we backtrack.

“My father did everything he could to dissuade me from becoming a photographer,” LaForet says. “He is one as well. He wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer, but I did not heed his advice. I just caught the bug and I couldn’t stop.” Lesson number one? Follow what your mentors’ do, not necessarily what they say. “I did drawing

and painting as a youngster and wanted to be an architect,” he continues. “I was always a very visual person. I learned the basics of the rule of thirds, geometry and light and dark, so when I jumped into photography I think I had a primer there already. According to my dad, I did have a knack for it. Someone saw my contact sheets at the press agency where he worked and asked how many years his son had been shooting. It was my first roll of film.”

According to LaForet, he’s been a photojournalist for most of his life. “I started when I was 15 years old, faking a French press card that I photocopied on one of the first color photocopiers at dad’s magazine, *Premier*. Basically, I started my

career as a street photographer in New York and kind of walked my way into Keith Richards’ concert at the Beacon Theater. I made it to the front row by using mental Jedi tricks,” he says.

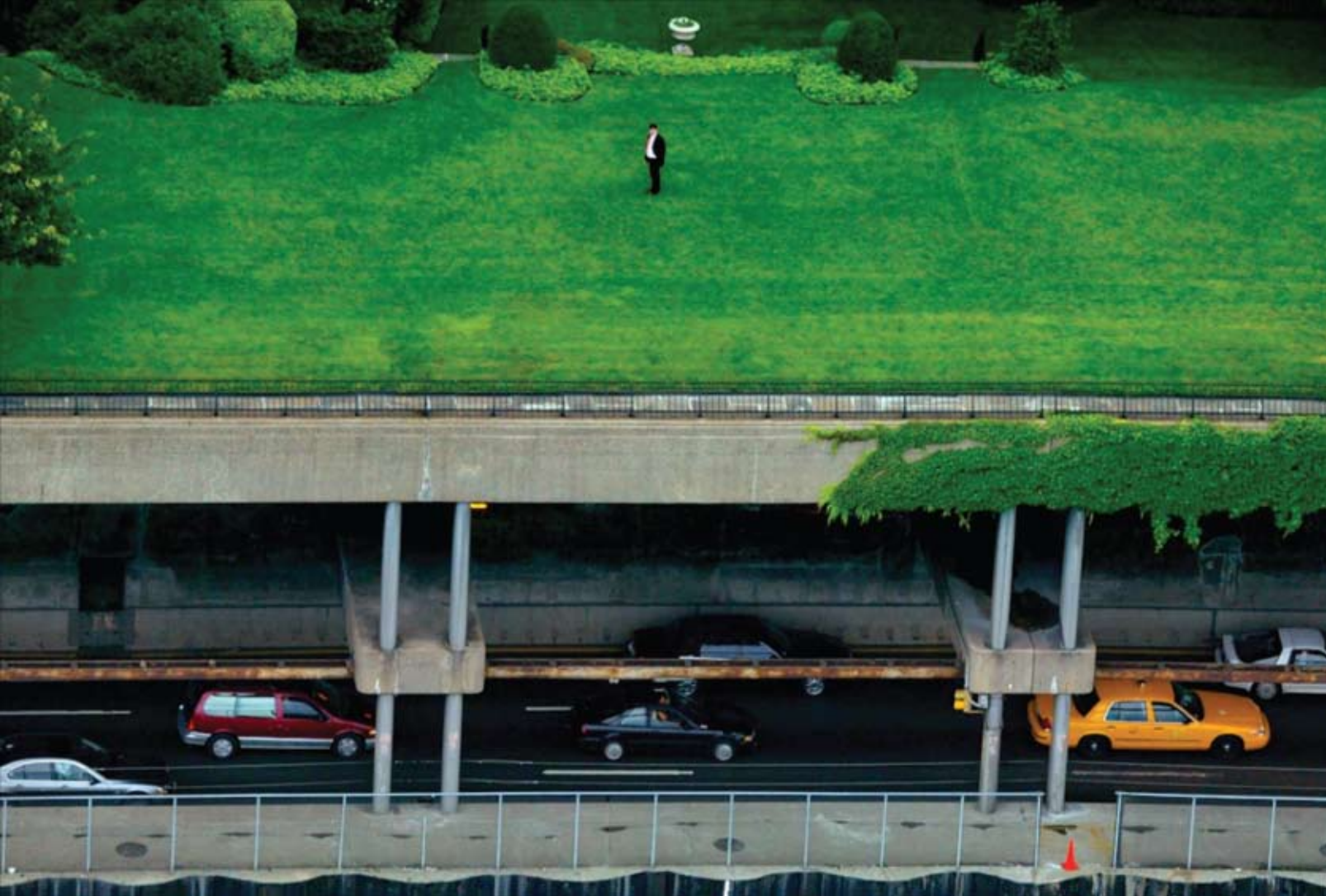
What do mental Jedi tricks involve exactly, beyond pure confidence? “My father taught me how to get inside without the right credentials,” he shares. “Basically when you’re trying to get in somewhere you’re not supposed to be there’s a certain way to comport yourself. If you have any sort of doubt, if you look someone straight in the eyes for too long, they’re going to get too engaged with you. If you look away from them, they’ll want to find out something about you. Give them a quick dash, and move quickly as in, ‘I’m in the middle of my job, don’t bother me,’ and that tends to work. It’s basic psychology.” Lesson two? Give it a go.

LaForet attended Medill at Northwestern University, studying journalism, and graduated in 1997. “I chose journalism because my saying at the time was that I’d rather learn about the truth in the world than go into making a reality. I don’t regret what I did. I think I had a fantastic life experience.”

During college he says he got his internships just like everyone else. “I applied and got rejected by 13 my freshman year, all in a row. I finally applied a 14th time after a placement counselor suggested I try the *Reuters* internship.” Securing this one afforded him the opportunity to cover the White House and Capitol Hill. The next year, he interned at the *Los Angeles Times* and thereafter, *The Miami Herald*. Lesson three: It takes one big break and the rest will follow.

By the time he graduated, already having had a wide range of experience and jobs of high clout, LaForet was hired by All Sports, now Getty Images, to cover athletic events. At his young age, he traveled 300 days a year for two years, covering Super Bowls, Fiesta Bowls, Rose Bowls, the World Series, the U.S. Open Tennis and Golf tournaments and the Olympics. “You name it, I was there,” he says.

It was this schedule that caused LaForet to work himself all the way into mononucleosis. “I was working like an animal,” he says. “After working some 72 days straight without a day off, I was so tired that I went to the hospital.” LaForet thought he was depressed; it turns out he was virally im-



paired. He took a three-month break from shooting, all before the sports editor from *The New York Times*, whom he had met at the Super Bowl, offered him an open position at their Web site. “Basically, I took the *Times* job as an editor for the Web and worked three days a week for the paper. Six months into it, an opening came up for a staff photographer, which never happens. I was no stranger, though. I was there every day, so they hired me.”

LaForet captured an amazing shot of a man walking on the greenest of grass just above a busy FDR freeway. Was it a setup? “No setup whatsoever,” he says. “I was on assignment for the paper, photographing the site for the Brooklyn basketball stadium.” At \$2000 an hour, paid for by the *Times*, LaForet was up in a helicopter over the city for an hour. He had become the paper’s aerial specialist. “I would carve out five or 10 minutes at the end of the flight to try to find a beautiful image,” he says. The *Times* never signed him up to take pretty pictures, he says. “There were always seven desks saying, ‘We need this and this and this.’ We had to make sure a



lot of departments were satisfied with that one hour of photography,” LaForet says, who would do 45–50 minutes of real estate, news shots and sports coverage before carving out time at the end “to shoot for the front page.”

As a staff photographer, LaForet had two nicknames at the *Times*. First, he was “Mr.

Versatile”—because he could do everything—and he always loved that. “I thought it was what any newspaper photographer should do,” he says. “Be able to shoot anything, whether it’s a beauty picture or a news picture.” His other nickname? “Spider-Man,” he says laughing—based on his climbing the needle of the Empire State building.



When he heard that a reporter was writing a story about a light being out atop the building, LaForet phoned, asking if he could come along. Not a single insurance form was signed; there were no releases—and LaForet dangled from the top of New York’s tallest building, at some 1475 feet. Was he in a harness? “Nope,” he laughs.

One of the hardest pictures he’s ever had to take, though, was during Katrina. “I photographed a really difficult scene at the airport a few days after the hurricane during the evacuation,” he says. “The photograph is of a woman on a luggage conveyer belt.” The picture of the woman, who was alone, destitute and left without medical

attention, showed up on the front page of the *Times*. “The next day there were three times the amount of personnel helping,” he says, “because someone in Washington got a very rude wakeup call when that picture showed up on the front page. I felt like I was actually there helping people, that I had as much of a duty there as some law enforcement or government agency. The media can be very powerful in focusing the world’s attention onto a certain problem. If you don’t see photos coming out of Katrina or Haiti, no one knows about it. That’s why journalism, good stories, great writing, video and photography are important.”

On his life as a photojournalist before moving to video director, LaForet says, “You know, most of what we do as journalists is cover daily news. You might get a letter here or there. People might tell you that your photograph is beautiful or your article is well written, but even then it feels a little bit selfish because they’re telling you that they like your work, but when you photograph a larger event like Katrina or 9/11, you realize that the press is really doing a public service.”

Years earlier, days after 9/11, was the first time LaForet really understood the job of a photojournalist. He was in Pakistan with his father on hiatus and took pictures of a community undocumented at the time—the Muslims of Pakistan responding to the terrorist attack. “That was my first job I ever did as a photojournalist where I thought that I was making a difference or impact,” he says. “We were putting

After he was refused a number of times, his seventh request garnered consent. LaForet says, “I didn’t know it existed.” He didn’t even know it had video capability. “I just saw a white box coming into the office. I knew that’s what prototypes came in, so I said, ‘Ooh, what’s that?’” Lesson four: Always remain curious.

LaForet shot “Reverie” in one weekend with three friends, two models and

for \$2700, to the average person. This camera started a revolution overnight.”

It changed his career, LaForet says. After posting the video to his blog he got invites to meet George Lucas, to Dreamworks and to Disney to meet the head of production. Thereafter, he stood before the Academy of Motion Pictures (the Oscar people) to speak about the future of the still/moving photography.

LaForet encapsulates the last lesson succinctly. When asked what to say to people who have been trained shooting still photos and are now completely intimidated by the video concept, he says “A, you should not be intimidated. And B, you should not be intimidated.” He’s assuming that most of you have developed a strong eye for still photography, which he says translates.

Still, directing is an entirely new set of skills to learn, he says. Despite an entire television industry that may have the market covered, LaForet’s advice is to pick up a camera and tinker with it. “There is no formula for becoming a good filmmaker, as there is no formula for becoming a good photographer. Read a book, take a class, get involved,” he says. “It’s not as hard as it seems.”

Given his video aspirations, LaForet now lives in Los Angeles with his wife Amber. He is most well known for his tilt-shift photography, which makes subjects look miniature and fake.

Tilt-shift lenses have the capability to tilt the front lens element so that it’s no longer parallel with the film. “Things get gradually out of focus from that point, and it makes a dollhouse effect that’s very interesting.” LaForet says when he started shooting this way it wasn’t common. “It’s been around since the 1970s. It kind of died off, and then I did a story for *New York Magazine*. I borrowed one from Canon, who said they were gathering dust. After I did the story they said they couldn’t lend me them anymore because they were always out.” He continues, “I’m not gonna take any credit for reviving tilt-shift photography. I just know that I was part of the movement.”

Last lesson: Be part of the movement—whatever that movement is. This is what Vincent LaForet did and continues to do.



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up a photo journal on the Web site, which was pretty new at the time, and I was getting thousands of e-mails from that. From World War II veterans, Muslims and young people saying, ‘Thank you for showing us that these people are not all terrorists.’ We were all very lost as a world and society in those weeks and months after 9/11. It was the first time in my life that I felt I was really contributing something as a journalist that was worthwhile to society and the greater good.”

While LaForet no longer works for the *Times* and has forayed his career into video, he says, “Once a photojournalist, always a photojournalist.” He still gets asked to do assignments and takes them when he’s interested. His new reality, though, is commercial work and film or video—much thanks to the economy and the status of print these days. “A big part of the reason I’ve gone toward film has to do with making sure that I can make a living,” he says.

“Reverie” was LaForet’s first exploration into directing. It was a Friday afternoon and he was visiting a colleague at Canon. It just so happened that a prototype of the 5D Mark II was coming into the office. LaForet asked to borrow it over the weekend.

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a makeup artist—on his own dime—two nights in a row, from 4 p.m. to 4 a.m. What was he interested in accomplishing? “Nothing,” he says. “Frankly we were just shooting a bad cologne commercial. There was no plot line. We never got to a storyboard. We just got to a shot list. It’s a dream about a guy meeting a girl. I don’t think anyone remembers it for the fantastic storytelling. They remember it because of the visuals and because this camera could do this. It just kind of hit people on the side of the head like a sledgehammer, like ‘holy moly!’ And now it’s accessible,