

The Birthday Present
By Arthur Shapiro

This Picture.



When I was at the Seagram Spirits and Wine Company, many of the offices, including mine, had photographs from the company's museum-quality photo collection. They were terrific pictures, all in B&W from the original photos. You would get one, and then sometime later, the Curator and her crew would come by, take the current one away, and replace it with another.

This photo was the last one I received. I loved it. It spoke to me. I'm not sure why. Perhaps the old man reminded me of my grandfather or some distant relative. I also loved the story behind it. I couldn't stop thinking about it and looking at it.

It was shot by a famous photographer named Weegee. That was his pseudonym; his real name was Arthur Fellig. He was a press photographer during the 1930s and 1940s, known for his stark black-and-white street photography in New York City. He developed his style by following the city's emergency services and documenting their activity. His specialty was gangland killings and raging fires.

They called him Weegee, as in Ouija Board, because of his uncanny ability to be in the right place at the right time. He often arrived just before the authorities and first responders.

The [Art Story](#), summed him up as follows:

Weegee used his lurid tabloid style to create voyeuristic images of people at their most vulnerable.

This photo has a few names — the “Vegetable Peddler” and “Incident in the Snow.” What happened was that the horse slipped in the snow, and the peddler, assisted by bystanders, got him upright and secured. (*Note the hand on the right side of the picture.*) Just then, Weegee shot the picture.

When I learned they were taking it away — just around the time the company was sold — I offered to buy it. No... I begged the curator to sell it to me. No way.

When I came home, I told Marlene the story and expressed my disappointment that they wouldn't sell it to me. Unbeknownst to me, she set out to buy it as a surprise birthday present. The internet was in its nascent stage, so finding the photo required both an online search and a lot of phone calls. Somehow, she found a studio in London that had made some prints from the original negative.

Imagine my joy when I received this as a gift. Best birthday present ever.

As I looked over the photo, I turned it around, and the date of when it was taken was on the back.

Weegee shot this on the exact day I was born. And, yes, there was a snowstorm in NYC that day.