

In Good Hands

From Bulgaria to San Marino, Valery Poshtarov has been asking fathers and sons to simply hold hands. The result: bracingly emotional portraits of love, masculinity and time's strange passage.

by Pete Whelan

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AGARAK, ARMENIA, 2023



POSHTAROV'S FATHER AND GRANDFATHER IN BULGARIA, 2021



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Imagine a stranger approaching you in your home town and asking you to hold hands with your father or son for a photograph. It's a simple request, but one that can carry an unexpected weight – one that Bulgarian photographer Valery Poshtarov has spent the last four years unpacking. In his ongoing series *Father and Son*, Poshtarov has travelled across 11 countries, capturing hundreds of these moments between adult men: sometimes tender, sometimes awkward, and often revealing.

Poshtarov steps into strangers' lives – in wheat factories, garages or even priests' homes – and asks them to hold hands. "I'm just a facilitator, I try to preserve the authenticity of the moment," he says. The results can be unpredictable, but they are always real. "You never know how it will develop because this is something that may not happen again in their lifetime. Sometimes, this is the first time that it's happening."

Father and Son is a heartwarming tribute to the frequently unspoken, patriarchal bond, but there is another side to that coin. "There are instances where one of the participants just refused to hold the hand of the other," he says. "Sometimes I felt guilty about it, because I had initiated it. But on the other hand, I realised that although the experience was painful, it was also something thought-provoking that could lead to a re-evaluation of their connection."

These moments of discomfort reflect the deeper emotional currents that *Father and Son* gently confronts. The unease some men feel when asked to hold hands stems not just from personal discomfort, but also from the weight of cultural norms that discourage such intimacy. "Society has built taboos around men's emotional expression," Poshtarov explains. "When I ask them to hold hands, I'm overriding those expectations, asking them to show their togetherness. Even if there's frustration, it's important to keep it. It's authentic."

The catalyst for *Father and Son* was Poshtarov's relationship with his own sons. "I have two sons, and I used to walk them to school holding their hands," he says. "I wanted to prove myself wrong – that this connection wouldn't fade away." He wanted to apply the same simple, meaningful gesture he shared with his sons to his father and grandfather, but the pandemic delayed that plan. Poshtarov's grandfather was 96 and frail, so he began with others instead, finally getting the shot a few months before the older man's passing.

"This is the only photo they have together, just the two of them," Poshtarov says. "It was very special to me, because my grandfather at that point was an elderly man. To see the way my father held his hand, there were so many different things in there. Recognition, support, willingness to help him – all in one image. You can see a whole life brought together by two generations. The past in the future. It's like the circle of life."

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