

STUDIO ANYWHERE

A Photographer's Guide to Shooting in Unconventional Locations



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NICK FANCHER



STUDIO ANYWHERE: A PHOTOGRAPHER'S GUIDE TO SHOOTING IN UNCONVENTIONAL LOCATIONS Nick Fancher

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This book is dedicated to anyone starting with nothing. Let no one tell you that you can't create your own path or that you need to follow a certain formula to achieve success. Rules are constantly being broken, rewritten, and broken again. Enjoy your journey.

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1 INTRODUCTION

What's your definition of a photo studio? Is it having a white seamless backdrop or a cyc wall? Maybe it's anyplace where you have total control of all light. Perhaps it's a place where you can create dynamic product shots. In a perfect world, where every day is a breezy 72 degrees with partial cloud coverage, we would all have a 5,000-square-foot studio in New York or Los Angeles. We'd also have the entire catalog of B&H in our equipment lockups. But that isn't reality.

Reality is that you have an outdated DSLR with two decent lenses (which took you several years to save up for), and you managed to sneak out of your office job an hour early to shoot an underpaying client in a public park on a gray, 45-degree rainy day. Or maybe all you have at your disposal is an unfinished basement. Or a garage. Or the empty conference room at your office day job. That's the point of *Studio Anywhere*: to show you how to achieve the shot of your dreams while working in some of the most problematic scenarios imaginable.

NO STUDIO? NO PROBLEM

Over the years, I've slowly discovered that a traditional photo studio isn't necessary to get studio-like results. If you are shooting a portrait of someone, for example, you need only a few feet of blank wall (especially if it's a cropped shot, such as a head shot). Recently, I was in New York City on a shoot, and I decided to take an extra day to do a few test shoots with models. Because I didn't know the city well, nor did I have a permit to shoot on the street or the budget to rent a studio, I thought it would be easiest to just meet the models at their homes, shooting both in their apartments and around their buildings. I liked the element of unpredictability. When I punched the addresses into my GPS, I didn't know whether I was walking into a penthouse suite with an amazing view of the city (it happened) or an unpolished art living space, occupied by seven artists in Williamsburg (also happened). I knew that I had the tools to overcome any lighting issues, however, so I welcomed the challenge and was excited to see what kind of scenarios I'd encounter.



The shoot that started it all. I took this shot at one of my first shoots in New York City and realized that I was better off meeting my subject at his place rather than renting a studio.

This book is a diary of sorts, of my experiences in working without the use of a traditional photography studio. Whether shooting a corporate portrait, a test shoot with a model, a promo shoot with a band, or a wedding, I always seem to be on location—even back when I *had* a studio. Staring at those rent bills each month, I came to realize the time I did spend in that expensive space was spent sitting in front of my computer, editing, or meeting with clients, which could just as easily be done at coffee shops. So, I ditched the traditional studio. Now when I need to shoot a portrait on a blank backdrop or I need a place to shoot production shots, I get creative, as you'll see in the chapters ahead.

My goal in writing this book is not to teach you how to replicate one of my photos. My goal is to get you to think outside the box, or studio, in our case. This book is a place where I share the techniques, tips, and shortcuts that I've learned along the way. Remember the end of *The Last Crusade*, when Indiana Jones tossed the fistful of dirt across the invisible bridge to make it visible? This book is my fistful of dirt. I see this book as a resource where photographers can glean technical info from behind-the-scenes photos and lighting diagrams from my photo shoots. However, I don't stop there. Because picture taking is only half of the process, I also lay out what my Lightroom and Photoshop workflow looks like. Finally, I let you in on the aesthetic decisions I made; directing a photo shoot is more than simply knowing how to wield a camera or process a raw file. This book takes a holistic view of the photographic process, starting at conceptualization through the execution and post-production to completion.

TAKE CONTROL: GEAR

Whether you are working with a harsh, sunny day, a gray rainy day, a small hallway with a white drop ceiling, or a large, dark room with a black ceiling, you must be able to overcome less-than-ideal scenarios. Once the shoot is over, you need to know how to take the raw images and polish them, using editing software such as Lightroom and Photoshop. This means that you need to have the right gear to accomplish these things, and you need to know how to properly use it. Thankfully, there's far less gear required to accomplish this than you may think.

My perspective has always been one of using what you have. If you are just starting out, you have nothing or next to it. I bought my first DSLR at Best Buy, back in 2005: a Canon 20D with a kit 18–55 f/3.5–5.6 lens and a 1GB memory card. It's a joke of a setup now, but I made it work. I used that setup exclusively for three years, until I could afford to get a Sigma 70–200 and a 430EX strobe. I still couldn't afford a decent wide-angle lens or even triggers for my flash (this was before the market was saturated with cheap wireless triggers). Still, I used what I had. Occasionally, I would book a gig where I needed better gear, so I would rent the additional gear from a fellow photographer, billing the client for the expense.

I often receive an email from someone asking me to recommend what gear a beginner photographer should purchase. My response is always the same: It depends. What's your budget? \$500? Save up your money. If you manage to book a paying gig and need gear for it, use your \$500 to rent the gear for the shoot and bill the client for the expenses. You need at least \$1,000 to get a halfway decent startup rig, in my opinion. Buy a used, full-frame sensor DSLR, if possible, such as a Canon 5D Mark I, and buy a decent lens, like a Canon 85 1.8. Your next goal should be to purchase a decent wide-angle lens, such as a Canon 35 1.4L or a nice zoom lens, like a 24–70

f/2.8L. After you have a decent body and a couple of reliable lenses, you can start to consider purchasing a flash setup. That may be odd to hear, since I am a strobe guy, but honestly, you can accomplish quite a bit with a reflector and some sunlight.

I don't have a ton of gear, but I have all the tools that I need to get the job done. Like David against Goliath, I forgo larger weapons and opt instead to use something simpler with which I am familiar and accurate. Almost every piece of gear I own can fit in my Pelican 1510 case, which at 22x14x9 inches can fit into most airplane overhead compartments (**Figures I.1** and **I.2**).

Figure I.1 My gear. It may not look like much, but I've got it where it counts.



- A Powerex AA batteries and backup batteries
- B Backup battery and charger
- C Backup camera (Canon Rebel XS)
- D Memory cards (86GB)
- E Canon 70–200 F/4L IS
- F Sustenance
- G Gel kit

- H Butterfly clips for styling
- 1/8 to 1/4 sync adaptor
- J Sync cords and flash stands
- K LumoPro LP180s
- L PocketWizard Plus X Transceivers
- M Canon 35 F/1.4L
- N Card reader

- O Canon 5DII
- P Rocket Blaster air blower
- Q Polarizing filter
- R Honl grid
- S Tripod mount
- T Variable ND filters



Figure I.2 Almost all of my gear fits in my Pelican 1510 case.

As you can see, I have two good lenses: one wide prime and one long zoom. I have a full-frame, DSLR camera body and a cheaper backup DSLR. For lighting, I have three LumoPro LP180 strobes, which are durable, manual flashes (*no E-TTL*). I also have two neutral-density filters

Tip Although I prefer Powerex rechargeable batteries, I also keep a backup stash of disposable batteries in my case. Better to have them and not need them than the alternative.

(one for each lens size), a colored gel pack, a strobe grid, a polarizing filter, an air blower to remove sensor dust, and a ton of AA batteries. Besides what you see in the case, I also have a couple 15-foot light stands, an umbrella, a 5-in-1 reflector, and a tripod that I rarely use.

Whether you're a seasoned pro or just beginning, as a photographer, one of your main priorities should be to get past the novelty of your gear. Whether you don't know how to properly use your gear or you are more focused on getting the image technically immaculate, you will likely miss out on the whole purpose of the shoot: to connect with your subject and capture their essence as you perceive it.

To illustrate my point, consider **Figures I.3** and **I.4**, which feature the same subject photographed with two different camera bodies. For Figure I.3, I used my semi-pro body: a Canon 5DII. I shot Figure I.4 with a Canon Rebel XSi (which currently goes for just under \$200 on eBay) that I keep in my case as an "Oh, shit" body. The 5D has a full-frame sensor and 21 megapixels; it's an all-around badass piece of equipment. Weighing in at just over 10 megapixels, the Rebel is a starter camera with a cropped sensor. If I were to pull that out of my case at a commercial shoot, the art director

would laugh at me. When used to capture good light at a low ISO, and in combination with a decent lens, however, the camera bodies provide comparable results. Even when viewing the images at 100%, it's hard to tell the difference between the two files, other than the 5D's larger file size.



Figure I.3 Shot with a Canon 5DII. Take a close look at it, and then compare this image to Figure I.4, which was shot with the Rebel XSi.

Figure 1.4 Shot with a Canon Rebel XSi. Although the XSi is a far inferior camera body to the 5DII, you'll have a hard time telling the results apart when you use a good lens in good light.

DECONSTRUCT THE LIGHTING

When it comes to lighting, a small flash is typically more than sufficient to get the job done well. The lighting diagrams included in this book will let you in on how I light a variety of situations with nothing more than small flashes. Unfortunately, a lighting diagram or behind-the-scenes photo won't be available for most images that you come across. For this reason, knowing how to properly deconstruct the lighting in an image, sometimes referred to as reverse engineering, is an invaluable skill. If you know how to read the quality of light in a photograph, you'll be able to tell quite a bit about how it was created, such as how many lights were used, whether the light source was soft or hard, and whether it was large or small.

Some photos can be rather easy to deconstruct, especially when you can discern the light modifier in the *catchlight* (the specular highlights) in a subject's eyes or on the shiny surface of a product. The task gets trickier if multiple light sources are involved or if the subject is in a scene with mixed lighting—not to mention photos that are composites, which open a whole other can of pixels. But pay attention to a few of these constants:

- Height and direction of the light source
- Hardness or presence of any shadows
- Number of apparent light sources

Once you've sharpened your skills at reading light, you'll be able to glance at a photo and know, for example, that it was lit with an umbrella overhead and a reflector underneath, or with two softboxes sandwiched together in front of the subject. Then, if you or your client wants similar results to a photo you see, you have a head start on ideas, knowing at least where to begin with the lighting.

Consider **Figure I.5**. This is a one-light portrait with a hard light source: just a barebulb strobe on a light stand. The flash head is zoomed out to 24mm, which allows for a wider, more even light spread. Note the tiny catchlight, the hard quality to the light, and the defined shadows on the subject's face. The similar shadows on the background mean that the subject is also close to the background, as well. In **Figure I.6**, the distance of light to subject and from the subject to the background as well as strobe output level are all the same, but the zoom is now set to 70mm. As you can see, the spread is not as wide, leaving the center of the flash hotter, or brighter, than the edges of the light. This technique of zooming the flash head in can be useful if you are shooting a subject outside or in a setting without a backdrop, where light falloff is not apparent. In other words, it allows you to get the most out of your flash, because it's focused into the area where your subject is standing, rather than off into no-man's land.





Figure 1.5 The subject is standing in front of a white background, while the light source is a bare-bulb flash, zoomed out to 24mm. Note the tiny catchlight, the hard shadows below his jaw, and how defined and close his shadow is to him.





Figure 1.6 The subject is standing in front of a white background, while the light source is a bare-bulb flash, zoomed in to 70mm. There are still hard shadows on the subject, and his shadow is still close and defined. The light spread is starting to fall off in the corners of the image, however, leaving a slight hotspot in the middle of the frame.

Figure I.7 shows the flash zoomed to 105mm, while **Figure I.8** zooms to 105mm with a grid added. The quality of light is still hard, but with the focus all the way to the middle, so there is almost no light spread, and the center of the light is now two to three stops brighter. Again, this is helpful to keep in mind when you are outside, trying to overpower the sun and your flash needs all the juice it can get. Not to mention, if your subject is outside and not against a backdrop, using a wide flash zoom is just a waste of power. Instead, focus the zoom in and just worry about properly lighting the subject.





Figure 1.7 The subject is standing in front of a white background, while the light source is a bare-bulb flash, zoomed in to 105mm. The light falloff in this image is much more apparent.





Figure I.8 The subject is standing in front of a white background, while the light source is a flash zoomed in to 105mm with an added grid. The light is now almost like a spotlight.

When it comes to softening your light source, you have several options. Figure I.9 was lit with a strobe zoomed to 24mm, just like in Figure I.5, but with a white umbrella added to the light. When deconstructing the photo, look for a circular shape in the subject's eyes (the umbrella) and also note the quality of any present shadows. When the light is diffused by an umbrella or another modifier, the shadows will appear softer, with the edges feathered rather than defined. Figure I.10 was lit the same as Figure I.9, except that the subject's shadow is no longer visible in the background, which means that he's no longer standing right in front of the backdrop.





Figure 1.9 The subject is standing in front of a white background, while the light source is a flash zoomed out to 24mm with an added umbrella. The catchlight is a bit larger, and the shadows are much softer.





Figure I.10 The subject is 3 feet away from a white background, while the light source is a flash zoomed out to 24mm with an added umbrella. His shadow is no longer visible because of the increased distance between him and the backdrop.

If the catchlight is a square or a narrow rectangle (Figure I.11), you can deduce that the light source was a softbox or a strip light, respectively. Add a second light on the other side of the subject, leaving a small gap between them, and you have a lighting effect similar to the one Martin Schoeller has made famous, as seen in Figure I.12.





Figure I.11 The subject is 3 feet away from a white background, while the light source is a flash zoomed out to 24mm and bounced into a 40x60-inch white board to create a large light bank. The catchlight is a bit larger and is shaped like a square.





Figure I.12 This setup is similar to the one that Martin Schoeller made famous: two softboxes placed in front of the subject, about 2 feet apart. It's a soft, flattering light that leaves a cool catchlight in the subject's eyes.

Sometimes there may be two catchlights, one brighter than the other, as is the case in **Figure I.13**. The brighter catchlight is the light, and the less vivid shape is just a reflector. If you move the subject several feet off of a white background, the main light won't spill onto it as much, turning the white to a medium gray tone, as seen in **Figure I.14**. Also, note the addition of the hair light in the shot, which helps to separate the subject from the darker background. If I aim the second (hair) light at the background, powering up the output so that it's higher than my main light, I now have a pure white background, as seen in **Figure I.15**.

Of course, all this deconstructive advice is not to say that you can only achieve certain results by replicating the lighting or techniques that another photographer used, or by replicating what you see in the pages of *Studio Anywhere*. Rather, once you understand how light works and how to manipulate the light that's available to you (be it natural or manufactured), it's your prerogative to use that information in fresh and creative ways. Just remember to always check the directional and quality of the light, and especially the eyes, because the eyes don't lie. Only Photoshop does.





Figure I.13 The subject is 3 feet away from a white background, while the main light is zoomed out to 24mm and shot into an umbrella, with a fill reflector below the subject's chin. There are now two catchlights: one circular and bright, and one wider and less vivid.





Figure I.14 While similar to the previous setup in Figure I.13, this has an added hair light, which separates the subject from darker backgrounds.





Figure I.15 Here you see a large main light and an illuminated, white background.



KIDDIE POOLS. WHO'D A THUNK IT?

Ohio is not an island. We don't have access to exotic beaches. Hell, a good number of Ohioans probably don't even know what the word exotic *means*. So when I want to construct a dreamy water scene for a portrait here, I need to get creative (**Figure 8.1**).

For creativity, I can think of no better source of inspiration than the fashion industry. Although I hardly consider myself a fashion photographer, I regularly study the photography in fashion magazines, which contain some of the best lighting and storytelling techniques. I have always found it useful to look at those who are doing better work than me, so that I may glean from their work and apply it to my own. A word of warning, however: Studying photographers further along than you can also be discouraging. When you topple from the heights of inspiration down the slippery slope of "I'll never be that good," catch yourself by comparing your work to what it was one year prior. As long as you're growing, you are doing more than okay!



Figure 8.1

The setup. By blacking out a kiddie pool, you can get the most out of the ripples and colors of reflections. Which brings me to this next scenario. Awhile back I came across the dreamy fashion work of French photographer Bruno Dayan. In particular, he had done a beauty shoot featuring jewelry on a model partially submerged in water. I had never seen colors and tones quite like his. They were simultaneously some of the most beautiful and also the most discouraging images I had ever seen. I was determined to figure out how he had done it—so that I could do it.

BLACKOUT

Ideally, I would have liked to see a behind-the-scenes photo of the tools and location that Dayan used. Alas, I could find none. So, I tried to read the light in the photo and make up the rest as I went along. Clearly, I needed water, so I started there. Lacking a beach and exotic body of water to experiment with, I turned to the next best thing: an inflatable kiddie pool. I set up the pool in the shadow of my house, making sure to keep it out of direct sunlight, because it was a cloudless summer day. I set up my lights and began shooting a few frames to check the light, before the model even entered the water. The first issue that I encountered was that no matter how I angled the light or set the exposure, the water wasn't appearing black like in the inspiration pictures. So I added a bunch of black towels and sheets to the bottom of the pool. Now I was on the right track.

I did this shoot back when I was still using High Speed Sync (HSS) to kill my ambient outdoor light. Because of the light output that is lost in HSS mode, I had to gang all four of my Canon 430EX flashes on one light stand to get sufficient output. (I've since converted to using variable neutral-density, or ND, filters instead, as you'll learn in Chapter 21.) Using a FourSquare bracket from Lightware Direct, I attached the four flashes to the pole and set them all to half power, allowing for a decent output without killing the refresh time. I was shooting through a white umbrella, so a bit of the output was lost, but I was still at a shutter speed of 1/3200 with an aperture of f/1.4. This exposure allowed me to squash the ambient light and sufficiently light the model. **Figure 8.2** shows the lighting diagram. I had my exposure, but I needed movement in the water. I've since deduced that Mr. Dayan must have been shooting in a lake or pond, where the water is naturally dark with naturally occurring ripples and water movement. At the time, however, I was halfway into the shoot and all the way committed to getting a good shot. I began kicking the edge of pool, which sent ripples across the surface of the water. Now I was getting somewhere, as you can see in **Figure 8.3**. Note that the patches of soft blue light in the waves are reflections of the sky.



Figure 8.2 The lighting diagram. For this shot, I used High Speed Sync (HSS) to kill the ambient light. Because of the light output that is lost in HSS mode, I needed to gang four flashes on one stand to get a sufficient output.



Figure 8.3 The raw file. To get ripples in the water, I had to kick the sides of the kiddie pool. The patches of soft blue light in the waves were reflections of the sky.

I made sure to snap several frames with good ripples before I called it a wrap (which I never say out loud at a shoot). When I imported my files and started to compare them with Bruno's (not recommended), I was feeling pretty down that the experiment had failed. But the truth of the matter was I shouldn't have been so hard on myself. The shoot was not only my first attempt at blindly emulating his work, I was also working solo using a minimal setup in my backyard, while a whole team of creatives with much better resources had been at his disposal. After all, it was just a fun experiment, and I still had Lightroom up my sleeve.

Once I began playing with the Levels and Curves controls in Lightroom, the images really started to come alive. Dayan's images looked like he had essentially pulled up the shadows in Tone Curve, which created a nice texture in the water ripples. So, I spent most of the editing time in these areas. I also wanted to push an overall blue tone on the image, so I added a +64 blue tone in the Split Toning panel and a +58 warm tone to the highlights, to retain a warmth in the skin tones (Figure 8.4). Finally, I decided that I liked the image better with a vertical orientation. I cropped, making sure to retain the original canvas dimensions, and my experiment was complete (Figure 8.5).

Figure 8.4 The Lightroom settings. I did most of my color grading in the Tone Curve panel, while also imparting an overall cool feel by adding a Split Tone overlay.





Figure 8.5 The final image. Although it's a bit different than Dayan's, I am still happy with the result. Plus, now I have more knowledge about working with lighting and water, so the next time around will be smoother sailing.

APPLYING THE EXPERIMENT

Now that I was more familiar with shooting water and making it appear black, I decided to apply the skills to my product photography. (These are the types of things that I do for fun, by the way.)

I was in the middle of a series of experiments for which I shot the same bottle of cologne in as many ways as I could come up with, in order to sharpen my product photography skills. This shoot ended up being my third experiment and began much like the pool shoot, but on a smaller scale. This time, I used a shallow glass dish, one black towel, and less water. I first tried placing the towel below the glass dish, but the glass created an awful glare. Moving the towel into the dish helped with the glare, but changed the water level.

I wanted just enough to cover the towel and the bottom portion of the cologne bottle, without fully submerging it.

I dialed in the lighting (and the water), then agitated the dish to create water ripples around the bottle. In the process, I also produced air bubbles. Tiny, little air bubbles. Like thousands of them. They were all over the inside the dish, including inside the cologne bottle lid (**Figure 8.6**). I tried removing them, one at a time, using the Spot Removal tool in Lightroom but gave up after 10 minutes, with another hour or two of work ahead of me. Now what?

My bubble solution may be the most important lesson of the shoot: Know when to outsource your work. We've all been there, with several jobs shot and waiting to be edited, when a painstaking, time-sucking moment like the removal of thousands of air bubbles comes along, and you have to make a decision. Fall behind on other work or speed up the process by outsourcing portions of a job?

For the bubbles, I outsourced the cleanup work to my retoucher friend. I know some photographers who hand off all of their editing and color grading to employees, interns, or coworkers, while they stick to shooting. There isn't anything wrong with this, but I prefer to have my hand in **Note** If you're curious about the rest of the experimental product shots, my eBook, Run and Gun Lighting Resource (Peachpit), details the entire series.



Figure 8.6 The shot looked good or would, minus a few (thousand) air bubbles.

the whole process. I find that my photo shoots are done almost equally in the camera and the editing. I let the mood of the images influence how I color grade them; I'm not comfortable leaving those decisions up to another person. After I've already put my signature color grading on the image, however, I have no problem sending the file off to a retoucher to have them remove all the air bubbles (**Figure 8.7**). Decide how much of your hand needs to be involved and how much you're comfortable handing off to someone else, so you're not left buried in bubbles.



Figure 8.7 | applied what | learned in the previous water experiment to my product photography. Same principles, just on a smaller scale.

MOODY LIGHT 11

Moody light is my absolute favorite type of light. It can be so cinematic and theatrical. It's like placing my subjects on a stage and letting them become a character, someone else. The term moody light encompasses a number of different techniques —colored gels, flash grids, blacking out the scene except for the subject—and I'll cover all of these scenarios in this chapter.

THE FIRST RULE OF MOODY LIGHTING...

... is you don't talk about moody lighting. Okay, I'm kidding, but I was seriously aiming to invoke Tyler Durden from Fight Club in this shoot I did with model Alex Prange. Although we weren't re-creating a particular scene from the film, we wanted to capture the character's badass presence. Alex has the body of Brad Pitt in the movie as well as the swagger, so all I needed to do was get the light nailed down.

As you can see in **Figure 11.1**, Alex was about 5 feet in front of a white vinyl backdrop. The nice thing about a vinyl or fabric backdrop as opposed to a paper sweep is that it has a nice, wavy texture. Although the texture can be played down or outright eliminated depending on the direction and intensity of light on it, I decided to highlight the texture in this shot.



Figure 11.1 The setup. Alex is pumped up and ready to get his *Fight Club* on. It's kind of fitting that we were shooting in a creepy basement. I placed my background light low and close to the backdrop, aiming upward (it's hidden behind the small, black V-flat). I also made sure that the background light output matched the output of the main light, in order to retain some detail in the white backdrop. (Usually, I make the background light 2 to 3 stops brighter than the main light to blow out the background to pure white.)

After setting up my background and background light (**Figure 11.2**), I asked Alex to step into the scene. I placed him about 4 feet in front of the backdrop—close enough to get a little bit of kickback light falling onto the edges of his arms and profile. One of the perks of having small quarters to shoot in is that light can bounce around, accenting the subject. (Bouncing light can quickly become more curse than blessing when you want to contain your light, however, as you'll learn in a bit.)



Figure 11.2 The lighting diagram. My background light had the same output as my main light, in order to retain detail in the white sweep.

For my main light, I opted to use my trusty Honl grid to get contrasty, hard light. Hard light, which creates hard shadow and bright highlights, was just what Alex's many muscles needed to really stand out (Figure 11.3). One thing to keep in mind when lighting a subject with a grid is that if he moves much at all, the small area of light will quickly fall off of him. Sometimes this can make for cool, unintentional shots where the subject's face goes to shadow while his torso is lit, and so on. But if you want his face to be lit, as most portraits require, you need to instruct the subject to stay within the confined area of the flash output.

My post work on this image was pretty similar to my normal colorgrading routine, except for this shot I wanted to outline the hard lines of his muscles. To do so, I slid the Clarity to +63. I also wanted the shot to have



Figure 11.3 The raw file. The hard main light helped to define his muscles.

a warmer look, so I desaturated the Blue and Cyan channels (**Figure 11.4**). After making a slight crop, the image was finished (**Figure 11.5**).



Figure 11.4 The Lightroom settings are much like those for my normal color grading, save for the extra Clarity, which highlights the hard light and muscles of the model.



BLACK ON BLACK ON BLACK

To paraphrase Samuel L. Jackson in *Jackie Brown*, "Grids: When you absolutely, positively got to kill every lumen in the room, accept no substitutes." Have a room that you want to make black? You don't even need a black backdrop or the dark cover of night. All you need is a flash, a grid, and a room. As long as your subject isn't standing within 5 feet of a wall, you will have no problem killing all of the ambient light.

Case in point. I was doing a shoot with Dani, who was in black body paint, wearing all black above the waist. I wanted the whole scene to be black, save for Dani and the textures of her outfit. It was a conceptual fashion shoot, this portion being the Hell portion of a Heaven/Hell-themed shoot. (The as-yet-to-be-shot Heaven scenario will, fittingly, be all white.)

I met Dani at the makeup artist's house, about an hour after they got started on the makeup, to give them a head start with the lengthy application. I knew that the basement was going to be an optimal shooting space because it was windowless but wide open and barren (**Figure 11.6**). I quickly set up the sole flash (**Figure 11.7**), and then waited another hour while they put the finishing touches on the makeup and hair (so much for the head start).



Figure 11.6 The setup. This time we were shooting in the basement of my makeup artist's home. Even though it lacked a black backdrop, I had no problem creating a black environment with the use of my flash settings.
Figure 11.7 The diagram. A moderate flash output of 1/8 was enough to knock out the ambient light in the basement. The added grid on the flash contained the light from spilling onto the nearby walls, helping to create a black environment.

GRIDDED FLASH Zoomed to 105mm at 1/8 power

The shoot actually went rather quickly (15 minutes). As you can see in **Figure 11.8**, Dani was wearing a crop top. Although her unpainted abdomen and sweatpants are visible in the shot, this wasn't a big issue. Because the light falloff was so dramatic from her bust to her torso, a quick adjustment in Lightroom would have the image looking right as rain (**Figure 11.9**).



Figure 11.8 The raw file. Dani's midriff and sweatpants are visible but can easily be removed in post.

LENS 70–200 F/4L IS

EXIF DATA

160 sec. f/4 ISO 50



Figure 11.9 The Lightroom settings. Because the image was, for all intents and purposes, black and white, I toggled over into Black & White mode to allow for a quicker editing process.

When I got the file into Lightroom, I thought that the editing would go a certain way (easily), but it turned out to go a totally different route (hard). The hard light and the too-good camera sensor captured far more orangey skin tones than I expected. I was fortunate that the image was relatively colorless, so I toggled over to Black & White mode. The nice thing about editing a file as black and white is that the color channels only control luminance. This way I could lower the Orange, Yellow, and Red channels (her skin color) and control the way the highlights, shadows, and midtones appeared. This method of tweaking specific color channels is a bit more focused adjustment than just sliding the global Highlights or Shadows sliders. Now I had details in both the shadows and the highlights, and Dani was looking perfect in purgatory (Figure 11.10).



Figure 11.10 The final image. Once I brought down the highlights and brought up the shadows, Dani looked exactly how I had envisioned she would look in a hopeless, black void.

ARE YOU GELLIN'?

Gels and moody lighting go together like a wink and a smile. Even better, flash gels are one of the cheapest, yet most powerful and valuable items that you'll put in your camera case. Nowadays, you can get a pocket-sized pack of over 50 different-colored gels to accompany your flash for under \$20. At 1.5 by 3 inches, these tiny pieces of nylon sure pack a wallop. That's because gels can do more than just colorize an accent light. If used on a main light, they allow you to change the white balance in your camera, thus allowing you to control your entire scene (more on that in Chapter 20).

The more light you pump through a gel, the more washed out the color will be, so keep your output lower for a nice rich hue. **Figure 11.11** is a fashion shot I did with Sebastian. I liked his tailored suit and wanted to capture it in a number of different ways, to see which I preferred. I shot it with direct light on a white background, subtle lighting on a black background, and as you can see here, with an accent color on a white background. Figure 11.11 ended up being my favorite take on the subject. Although the background was lit, I positioned Sebastian about 6 feet away from it, which was far enough in front of it that his body went into shadow. I lit him with a red-gelled flash with a grid on it to constrain the light. The red face, paired with a silhouetted body, gave him a nice ominous mystique.

Gels are also effective at changing silhouetted color. I own a variety of colored backdrop rolls, but my options are much greater when paired with the use of a gel. Combine a red gel with a yellow background, for example, and you get a beautiful, rich tangerine color. Pair a red gel with a blue background and you get purple. A red gel on a white or gray background can vary from red to pink, depending on how high the output is on the flash (lower output is more red, higher output is more pink). **Figure 11.12** is a red gel on a white background. The main light was a gridded flash to the right of the model, which created the spotlight on the model and backdrop. The red-gelled background light was on the floor to the left of the model, aimed at the backdrop, with a piece of cardboard next to it to flag the light off of the model. The crisscrossed lights along with the gel created the trippy double shadow, giving the image a '60s vibe, which was the direction for the shoot.

You can also shift a colored backdrop to a totally different color. If you aren't familiar with color theory, do a quick Internet search for *subtractive color mixing* to see what will happen when you mix one colored gel with a different colored background. In **Figure 11.13**, you can see what happens when you use a red-gelled flash on a blue background: You get a beautiful shade of fuschia. Now go out and get crazy with it!



Figure 11.11 Gels are small but extremely effective. For instance, the red gel in this image provides an accent color and adds an ominous mood to the fashion shot.



Figure 11.12 Gels are great for changing your background. The red gel in this shot changed the backdrop to a bright pink color.



Figure 11.13 A red gel on a blue background creates a beautiful fuschia.

PRO-TIP: HOW TO PURSUE EDITORIAL WORK

I have always wanted to shoot editorial work—assignments for magazines and newspapers. To me, seeing your own work in print is the mark of having "made it" as a photographer. The problem is, how do you get your work in front of the right people to even be considered for an assignment? You've no doubt read articles in industry photo magazines about how to make brilliant and eye-catching marketing materials to nab that client you are after. But that doesn't help you very much if you don't know which person you should be sending it to, let alone how to get his or her contact info.

Wonder no more. Yodelist.com is a service for photographers who want to buy email and mailing addresses for industry contacts, such as the photo and art directors at your target publications. Once you become a member, which isn't free, you have access to an enormous directory of industry contacts. In my case, I was interested in magazine and newspaper publishers, specifically on the East Coast, because I live closer to it than to the West Coast. Once you narrow down the list of publications that you want to contact, you can purchase the emails of the contacts at each publication for 10 cents apiece.

Next, go through your list of addresses, and send a short email to each publication; simply introduce yourself and provide a link to your portfolio site. Note I didn't suggest linking to your Flickr or 500PX page. Get a website, or at least a clean-looking Tumblr blog, that shows a few of your best, most diverse images, rather than a smattering of all the work you've ever done. I have several galleries on my portfolio website, with less than 30 images per gallery. Less is more. Save the rest for your blog.

The important thing to keep in mind is whether or not your photography fits well with the style of the publication that you are contacting. I recently read an interview on aPhotoEditor.com (another amazing resource you should check out) with Jodi Peckman, the director of photography for Rolling Stone magazine. In the interview, she mentioned that she receives hundreds of emails per day and that the vast majority were from food or lifestyle photographers (not the kind of photographer that Rolling Stone needs). Hundreds a day! When you reach out to photo editors, make sure to show them work that fits with their publications.

After you send out your emails, all you can do is wait and understand that you won't hear back from the vast majority of them. Be patient. If they respond at all, it won't be immediately. I once personally emailed over 900 people; about a dozen responded. Although I didn't hear back from most of the magazines, I did see huge spikes in my website analytics on the days that I sent emails, so I knew that people were reading them. I didn't lose heart, and you shouldn't either.

About a week after I had sent out the emails, I received an offer from *ESPN Magazine*: Would I be interested photographing an athlete's family that lived on the east side of my city? Yes! I was ecstatic. More than that, I was validated. Not only had my emails been reaching the right people, but I now had a photo shoot for a huge client.

Even though I wasn't sending out pretty little marketing pieces to these publications, I was still getting my work in front of them. The right people were seeing my images. And convenience is a powerful thing. If you can save these photo editors and directors some time and make their lives easier by being their go-to source in your region, then it's a win-win for them and for you. Since then I have added *The New York Times* (Figure 11.14) and *Forbes Japan* (Figure 11.15) to my client list.



Figure 11.14 I shot the Ohio State Reformatory for an article on the 20th anniversary of The Shawshank Redemption for The New York Times.

Figure 11.15 This shot of the founders of Nottingham Spirk is from a job for Forbes Japan.



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