



CHARACTER OF LIGHT

When learning how to look at light, remain open to lessons coming at any moment. You will see light that strikes you in a way that you can't explain. When those moments arrive, snap a photo—as I did for the images on these two pages.

Along the way, you'll also need to develop a vocabulary so that you can catalog what you see and then communicate it to others. Don't worry that the reasons behind many of the concepts listed below are not explained here. For now, we're just concerned with learning how to see them. Throughout the rest of the *Handbook*, we'll explore how you can craft many different styles of light.

Intensity

Look at how much light is falling on the various objects or people on your set. Is the intensity bright or dim? A long exposure with dim light can make the scene look bright, or it can capture light in a way that you can't even see. Likewise, a very fast exposure under bright light can accentuate the intensity of the shadows.

Direction

Consider where the light is coming from and the angle at which it hits your subject. Does it come from the right or left, front or back, above or below? Is its angle of approach steep or shallow?

Path

Does the light hit the subject directly, or is it reflected? Reflected light is usually less intense and softer than direct light. Often, a Speedlighter will bounce light off a card or reflector as fill light to reveal details that would otherwise drop to black in the shadows.

Figures 1.6–1.12 I'm fond of taking snapshots of light when it stirs something inside me. Here is a small collection of some of my favorites.

Temperature

We know that sunlight looks different at sunrise and sunset than it does during the middle of the day. We say that yellowish light is warm and bluish light is cool.

Shadowline

Look at the edges of the shadows. Are they sharply defined or blurry? Hard light hits the subject from a single direction and creates shadows with defined edges. Soft light hits the subject from multiple directions and creates shadows with blurry edges.

Contrast

Look at the range of light between the brightest brights and the darkest darks. In a high-contrast scene—such as a white car parked on black asphalt at high noon—there is a huge difference between the two. In a low-contrast scene, there is a narrow difference between the brights and the darks.

Consistency

Is the range of light on your subject even? Sunlight streaming through an open window is even. Sunlight streaming through a lace curtain will appear dappled. Also consider whether the range of light is steady or changing.

Highlights

Look at the brightest parts of the scene. Specular highlights are seen as small dots and lines of light that help define details—such as a glint of light from a diamond. Glare occurs when the highlights are broad and detail is blocked—such as an unwanted reflection in eyeglasses.

Chiaroscuro

The drama of light is often determined by how it transitions into darkness. In a scene with a high degree of chiaroscuro, the light transitions from bright to dark quickly. A portrait of a woman sitting by a window where the hair and clothing quickly merge into the shadows is filled with chiaroscuro.

