

Anything at 1 PM

When I photograph someone and they turn on a table lamp, they always ask, “This should be enough light, right?” The apartment’s only window faces a brick wall, and the lamp illuminates nothing but a faint yellow cast on the armchair. Their light is not a tool, it’s a peace offering. I recognize their courtesy and return my own. “This is great!” I say, as I set up my own strobes. I am nothing if not destructively kind.

People are always suggesting we shoot at 1 p.m. They send me a mood board of ten images shot at 6:30 p.m. and say, “We’re available from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m.” Photography is a mystery to all of us but for different reasons. I often type out, “Your funeral!” but quickly replace it with “Sounds good!” What I’m saying is if you see me taking an editorial portrait in a New York City park, that wasn’t me.

I googled “Pictures at 1 pm” to research writing this. All the results were images of clocks. Pretty good joke.

One time I was at a nudist festival and I overheard two men discussing the perfect white balance for vagina color. This is what men mean when they say they’re feminists. One guy’s wife thought he was on his annual camping trip. I asked him what he does with all the photos he takes at these events, and he said he puts them in a folder called TURBOTAX2011. It reminded me that two of my former boyfriends hid naked photos of their ex-girlfriends in TurboTax folders. Art helps you recognize what you already know.

The problem with taking pictures at 1 p.m. is that it makes me feel weak, as if someone with less trauma would know what light modifier to use. Or: The correct modifier is awarded to the person with the healthiest family group chat. I stick the subject in the shade and call it a day. Tree beats sun. You can’t turn a photograph into a picture by calling it so.

I have a tab open titled “How to Shoot Beautiful Portraits in Harsh Sunlight.” It’s a listicle-style blog post by two wedding photographers in San Diego. Number four on their list: “GO INSIDE.”

Even though I should know by now, I still give 1 p.m. a chance. I trust that my eyes and my camera are seeing the same things until I look down at my screen and think, *how could you do this to me*. If the secret is how a photograph is made, then the photograph itself is not that important. At least that’s what I tell myself. Just when I think I’m done with taking pictures, I wait until 5 p.m. and it all seems okay again.

–Caroline Tompkins



Photo No-Nos

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aperture