

Fundamental Editing Case Study #8

POOR LIGHTING, EXCESSIVE CONTRAST, AND AN UNUSUAL ASPECT RATIO

By Kent DuFault

A few years ago, while visiting Northern California, I had the opportunity to see and photograph some of the famously large redwood trees.

Unfortunately, it was raining the entire time we were there. But I am not easily intimidated when it comes to photography.

This is one image from that moment, as it came out of the camera.



Image 001 – Photograph by Kent DuFault



Image 002 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

My intent for this shot is pretty simple. I wanted to show how large this tree was.

I took a few shots before asking my wife to step up next to the tree. You honestly couldn't tell how tall the tree was without her standing there as a reference point.

For my intent, I want her centered within the frame to act as a focal point for the tree.

It was so gloomy and dark that day that I decided this was an excellent tree to work with because it

stood out against the sky. I could at least use the shape of the tree as a composition tool.

The road to the right is an eye snag. I think that I will use an unusually vertical panoramic aspect ratio to accentuate the height of the tree as well as to eliminate some, if not all, of the roadway.

The purple box indicates my thinking for the final image area.

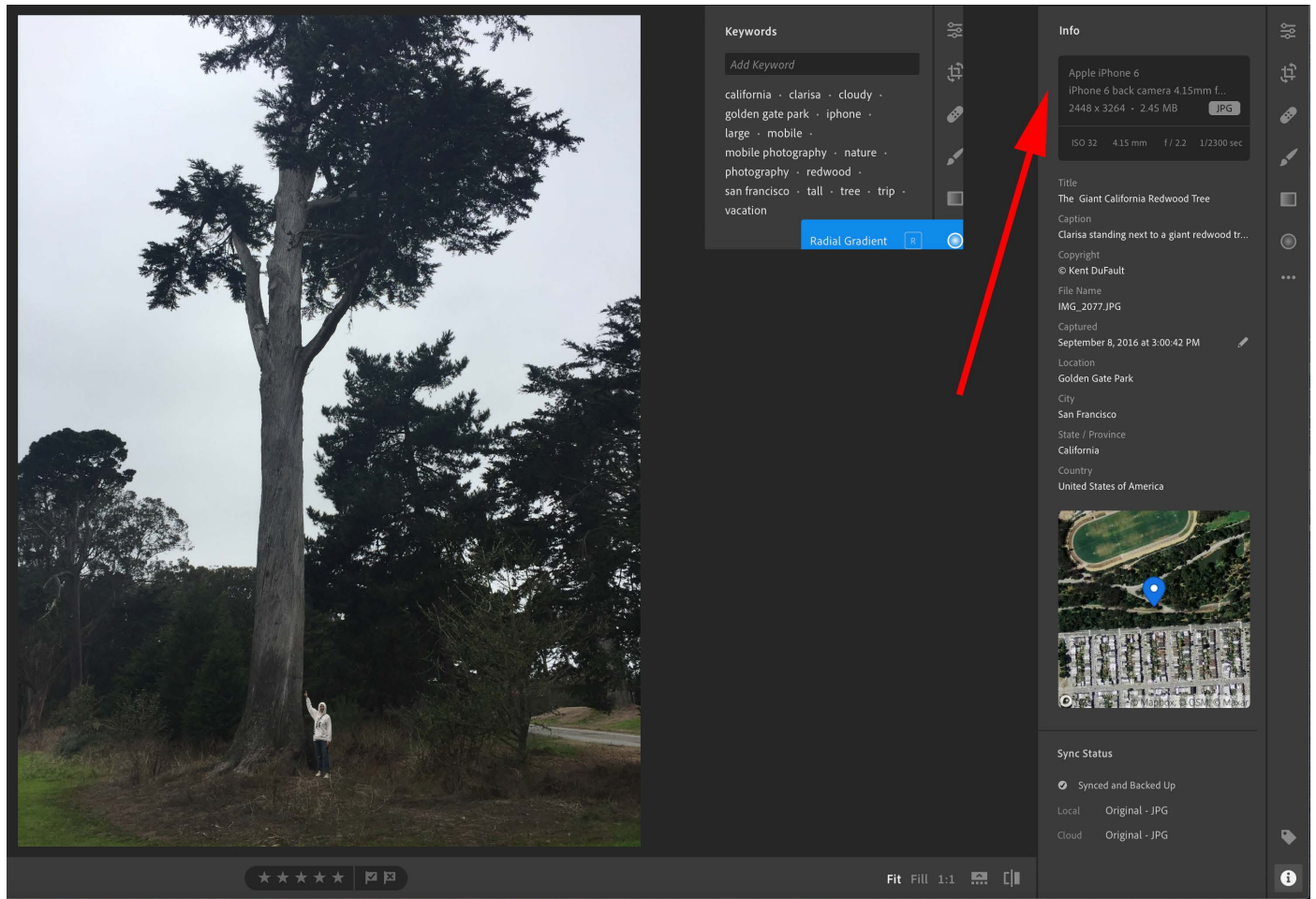


Image 003 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I'm adding my metadata and keywords. It is a good thing that I do this religiously, as I already forgot that this was taken in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco!



Image 004 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

When working with an unusual aspect ratio, the Rule of Thirds is generally not your best tool for determining the use of space.

Although, I did reference it here for a couple of reasons.

I wanted my wife to be centered, as I stated earlier. I also wanted to eliminate all of the roadways, if possible. And finally, I wanted the tree to feel balanced within the frame.



Image 005 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

When the crop was tight enough to eliminate the road, the tree felt unbalanced to me. I opted to go with a broader crop, and I will subdue the road in another FE step later on.

This was my final crop. It is still a strong vertical, although not quite panoramic. My wife is still centered within the frame, which I believe will be crucial to my original intent for the photo. Plus, the tree now feels balanced within the space of the frame.

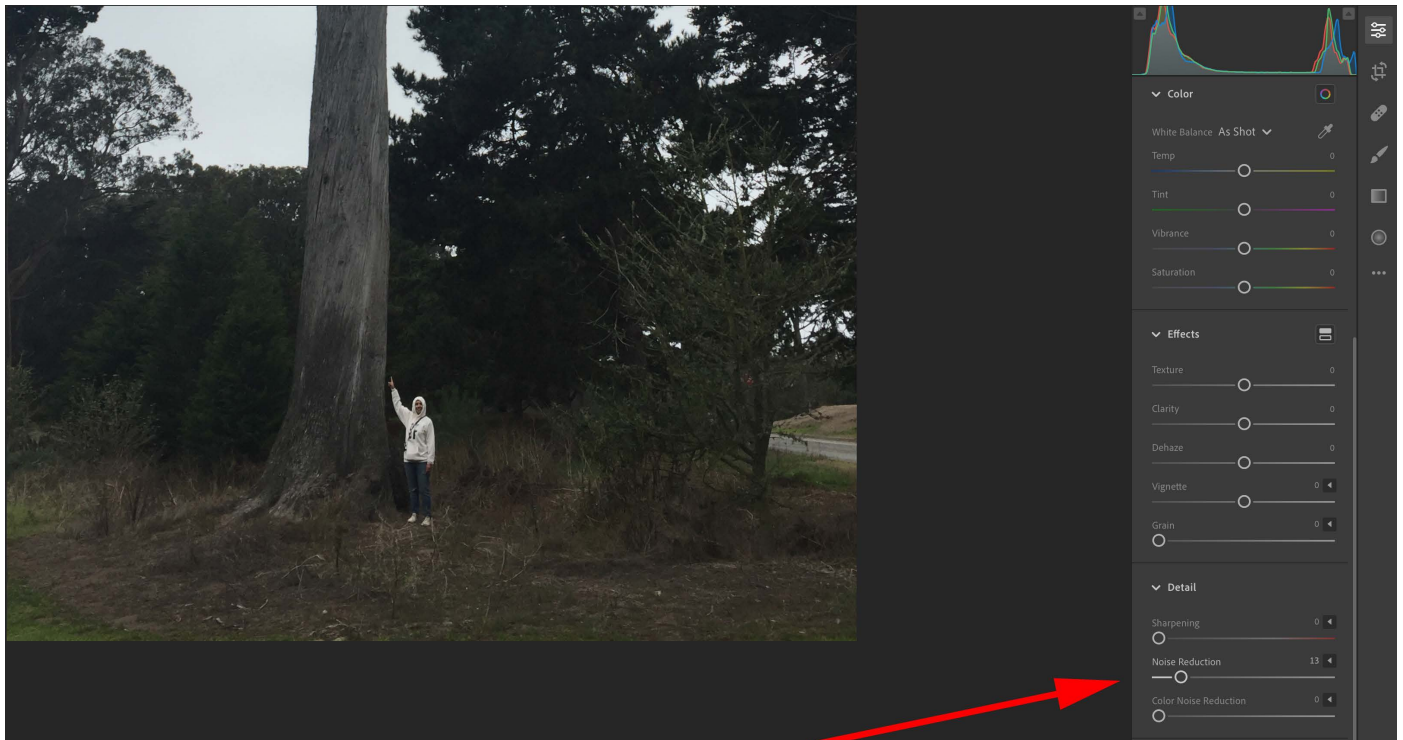


Image 006 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Given the lighting conditions, I was not surprised there was some evident digital noise. I will begin the FE list by applying a Noise Reduction setting of 13.

Take a look at the histogram.

We have a high peak to the far left and another high peak to the far right, and a flat line in between them.

What does that tell us?

This is a high-contrast picture. In fact, this is a very high-contrast photo.

The contrast here is so high that the better plan will be to opt **not to try and fix it** but instead use it to the advantage for my intent.

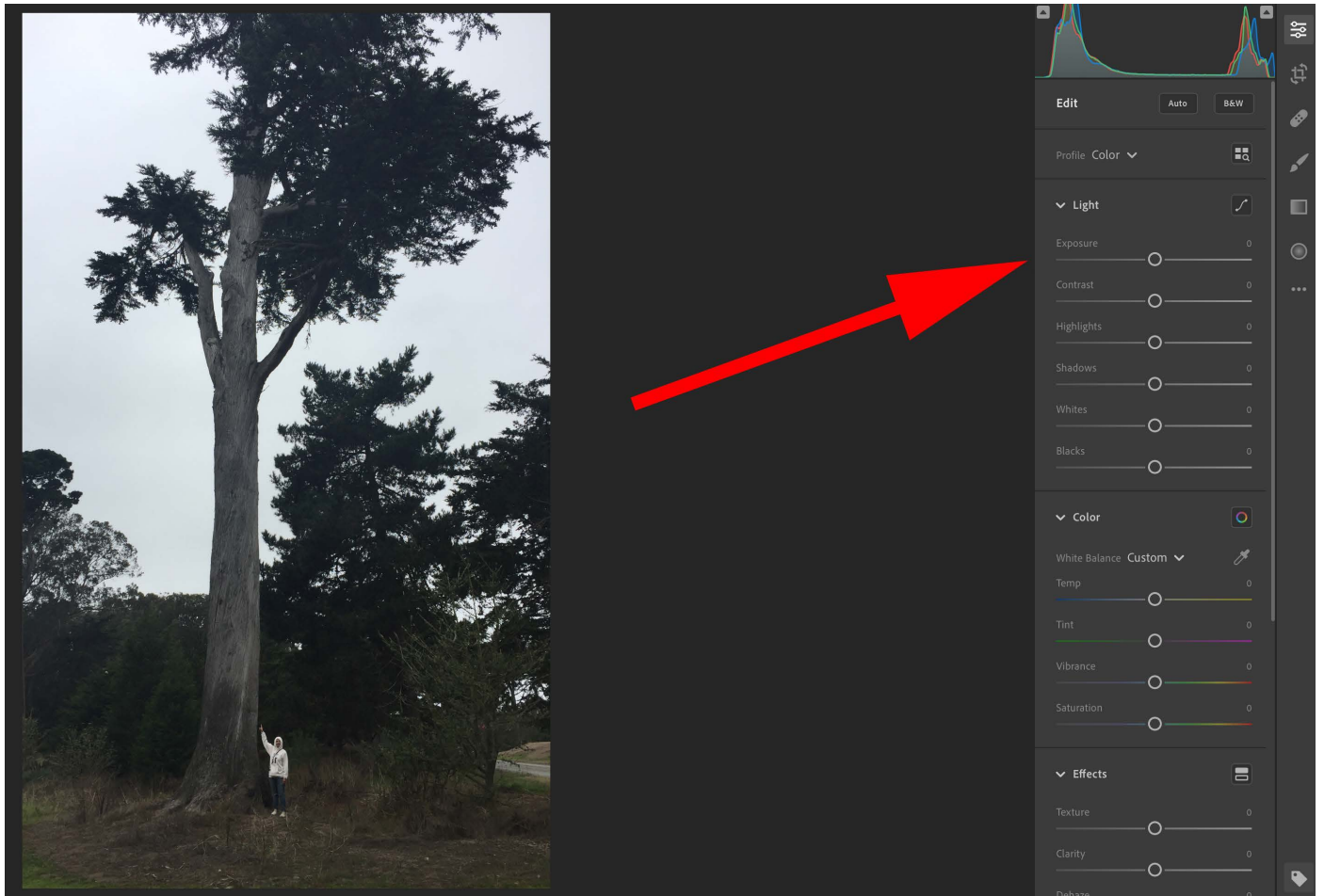


Image 007 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The global Exposure adjustment step typically **only works well** when you're beginning with a well-balanced histogram that shows a wide range of tones.

I will leave the Exposure slider at 0.



Image 008 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Contrast is a step that was not included in the original Fundamental Editing eBook. The reason that I didn't include it is because it is a very subjective edit. In other words, it is hard to define 'accurate' contrast.

I decided to add it to the updated FE list provided with these case studies because the edit does add value to some pictures. I now believe that it should be considered, especially when you are starting with a picture file that has problems.

My image for this case study is already at the end of high contrast. I stated earlier that I'm going to make use of that.

To start that process, I am going to globally apply an increase in the Contrast of +42.

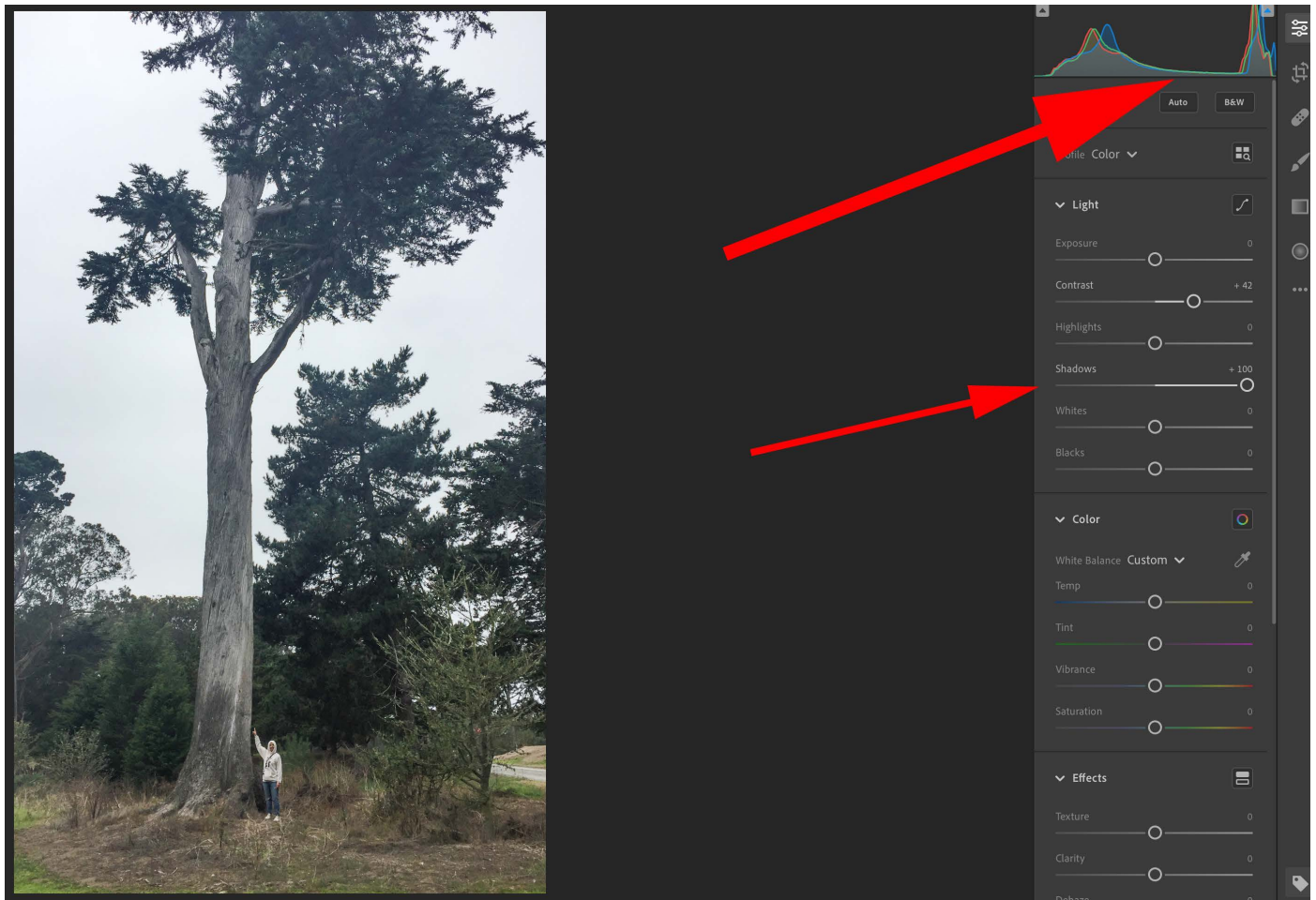


Image 009 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

My shadow areas are all very dark and murky.

Look what happens when I substantially raise the Shadows slider to +100.

That most certainly opened up the dark areas. However, now the photo looks rather anemic in tone and color.

I want to create a version of this shot that has more drama than this.

I will find a middle ground and raise the Shadows to +29.

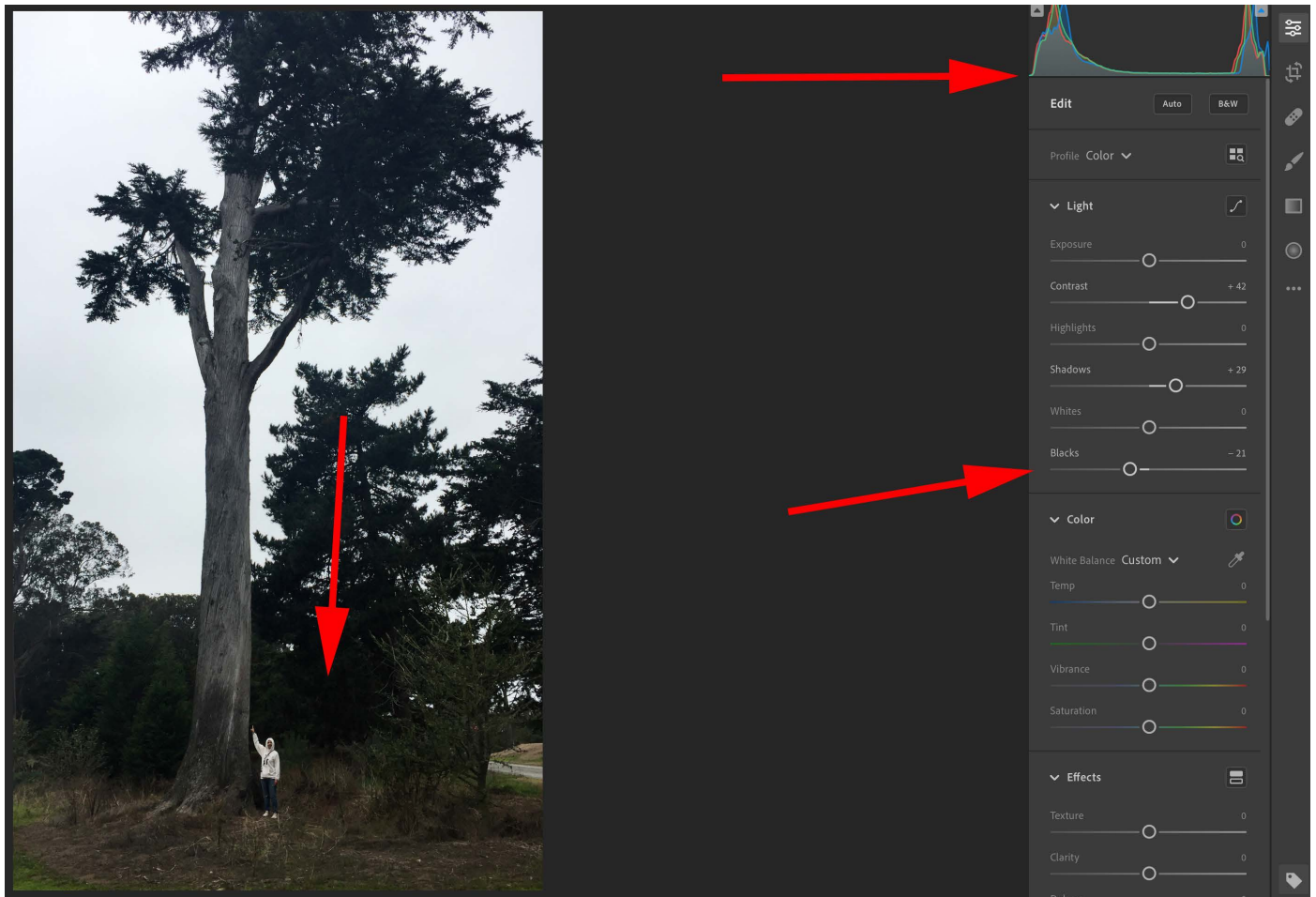


Image 010 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Setting a Black Point for this photo is going to be tricky as there are so many shadow areas.

I decided that I wanted to set my Black Point in the deepest shadows behind my tree (where the red arrow is pointing).

I turned on the Clipping Indicators and lowered the Blacks slider until some clipping began to show up in that area.

My Blacks setting was -21.

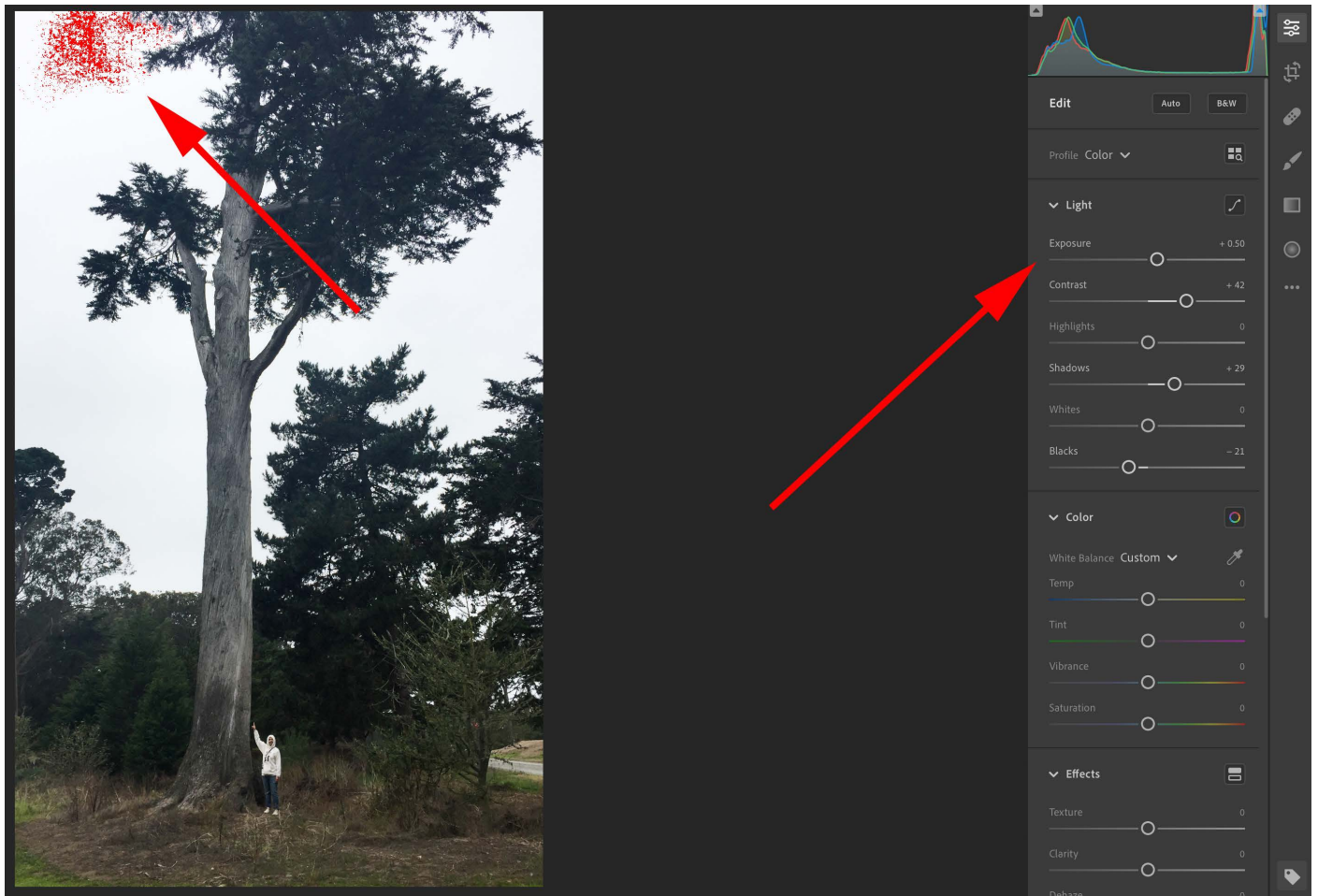


Image 011 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Equally tricky for this shot will be setting the White Point.

Note: If you turn on the Highlights Clipping Indicator and none is present, you can locate where the organic White Point might fall by

slowly raising the Exposure slider. In this case, the natural White Point was found in the upper-left portion of the sky. That's not a good place for it in this composition. I don't want a viewer's eyes being drawn to that corner.

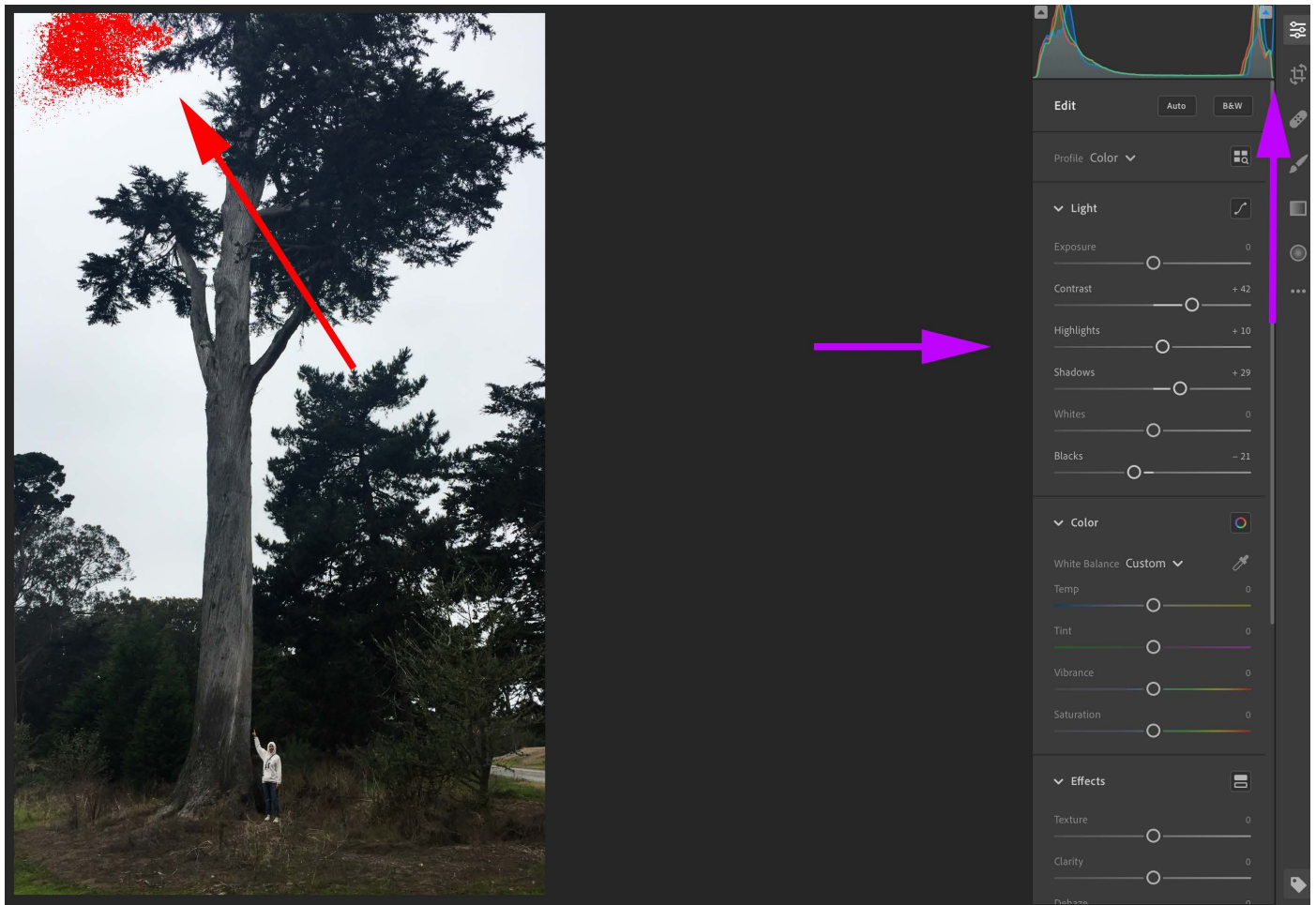


Image 012 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

Side Note: I've noticed that many photographers seem to be confused about the labeling of the histogram in Lightroom. They will refer to the far-right side as the Whites. That's not the case. This is why the Clipping Indicator for that end of the scale is called the 'Highlights Clipping Indicator.'

I'll show you how to test this.

I returned the Exposure slider to 0. The Clipping Indicator turned off.

I then raised the Highlights slider to +10. Look at the amount of Clipping that has reappeared in the sky.

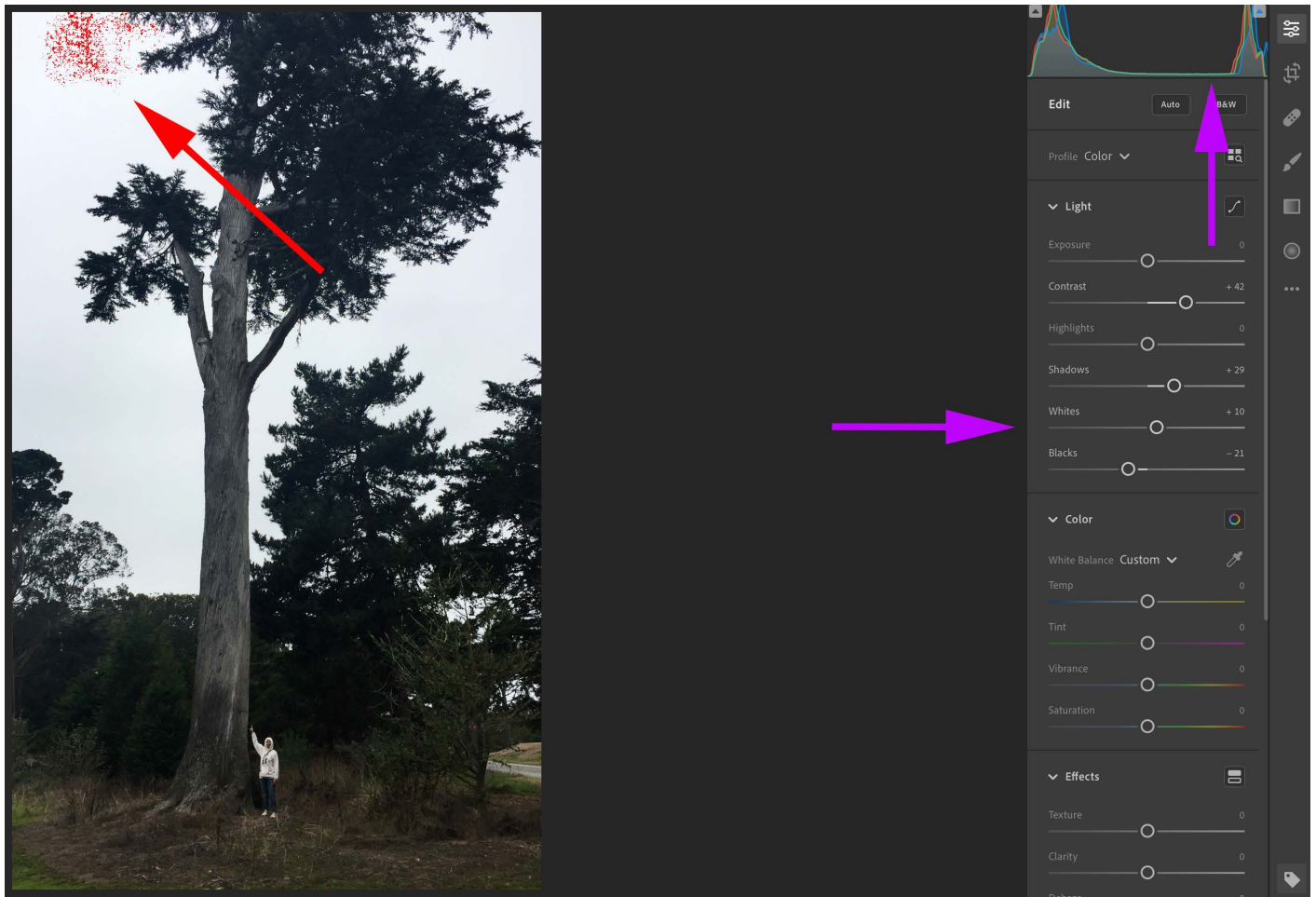


Image 013 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I then returned the Highlights slider to 0 and raised the Whites slider to +10.

Look at the amount of Clipping that has returned to the sky now. It is substantially less!

Remember: The Highlights slider is biased to affect the far-right side of the histogram. The Whites slider is biased to change the upper third of the histogram.

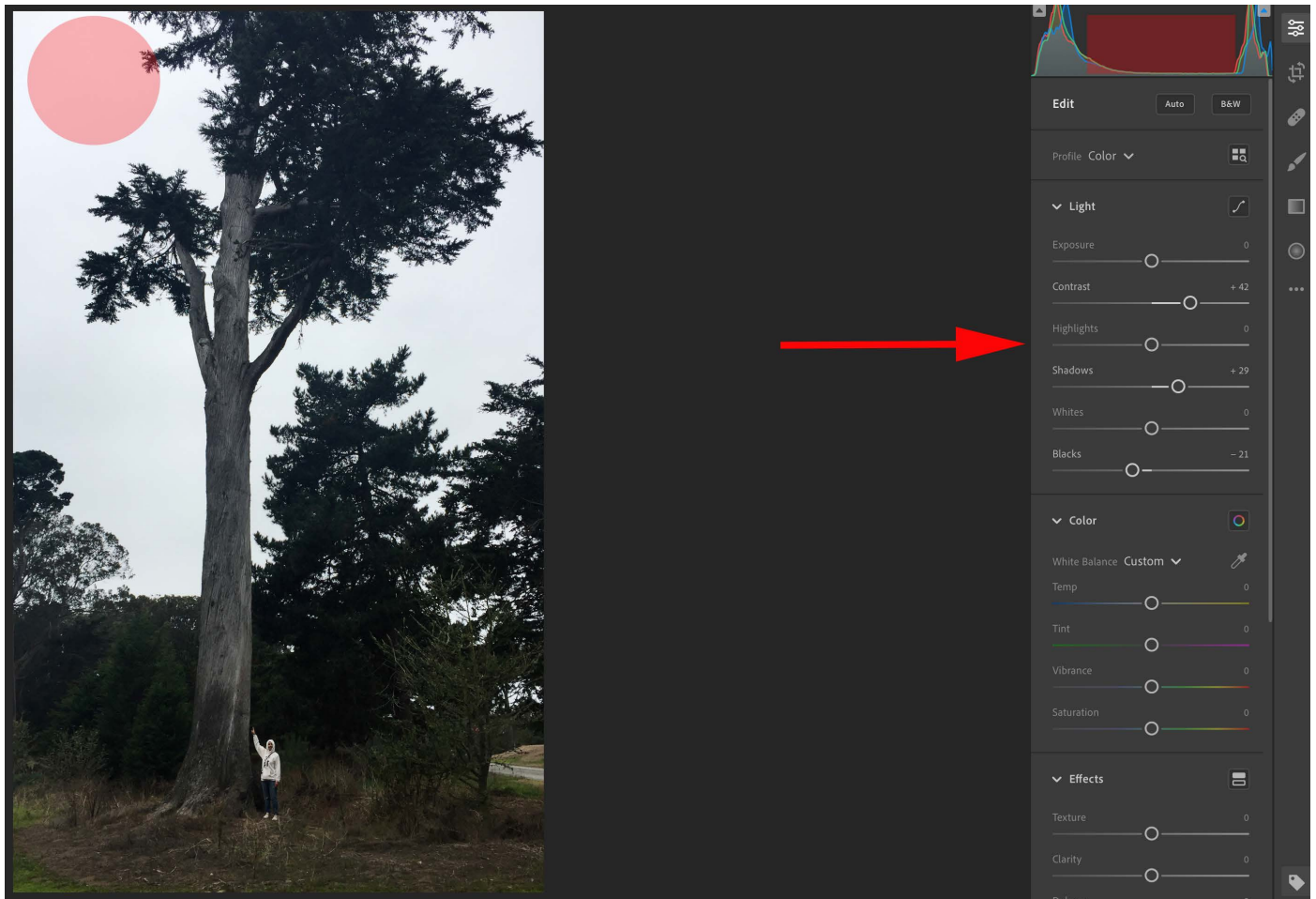


Image 014 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I don't want the White Point to be located in that upper-right corner. Where do you think I would like the White Point to be located? I want it to be on my wife. She is serving as a focal point to the tree.

I want the brightest white in this picture to be on her. It's lucky for me that she is wearing a white hoodie!

This is one of the rare pictures where I will not be setting a White Point using a global adjustment slider. I want the sky to stay off-white in tone.

Take a look at the red rectangle on the histogram of Image 014. This is an area where I need to try and 'create' some tone.

Let's continue on and see how to get that done.



Image 015 – Screenshots by Kent DuFault

The next step on the FE list is White Balance.

This is also a tricky step as there isn't much variation in colored hues across the picture. Most of the color variation appears in the grassy area at the base of the tree.

I tried adding +15 to the Temp setting. You can see what that did to the Preview on the left side of Image 015. It looks completely fake.

I then dialed the Temp back to +3. This brought some warmth to the color hues at the base of the tree without looking fake. You can see what that did to the Preview on the right side of Image 015.

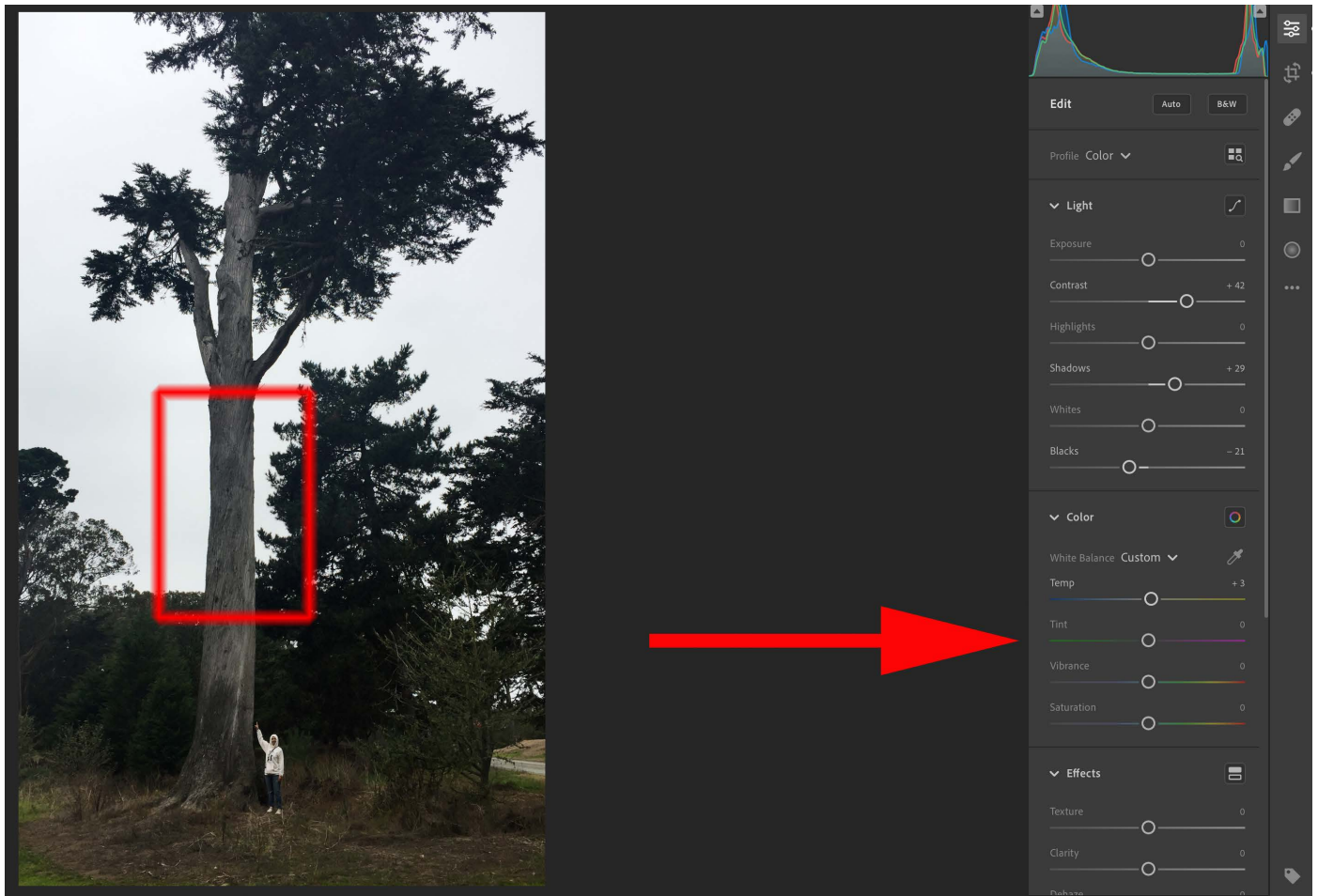


Image 016 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I tried some different Tint settings. However, any variation of the Tint left the tree bark looking odd. So, I'm leaving the Tint set at 0.

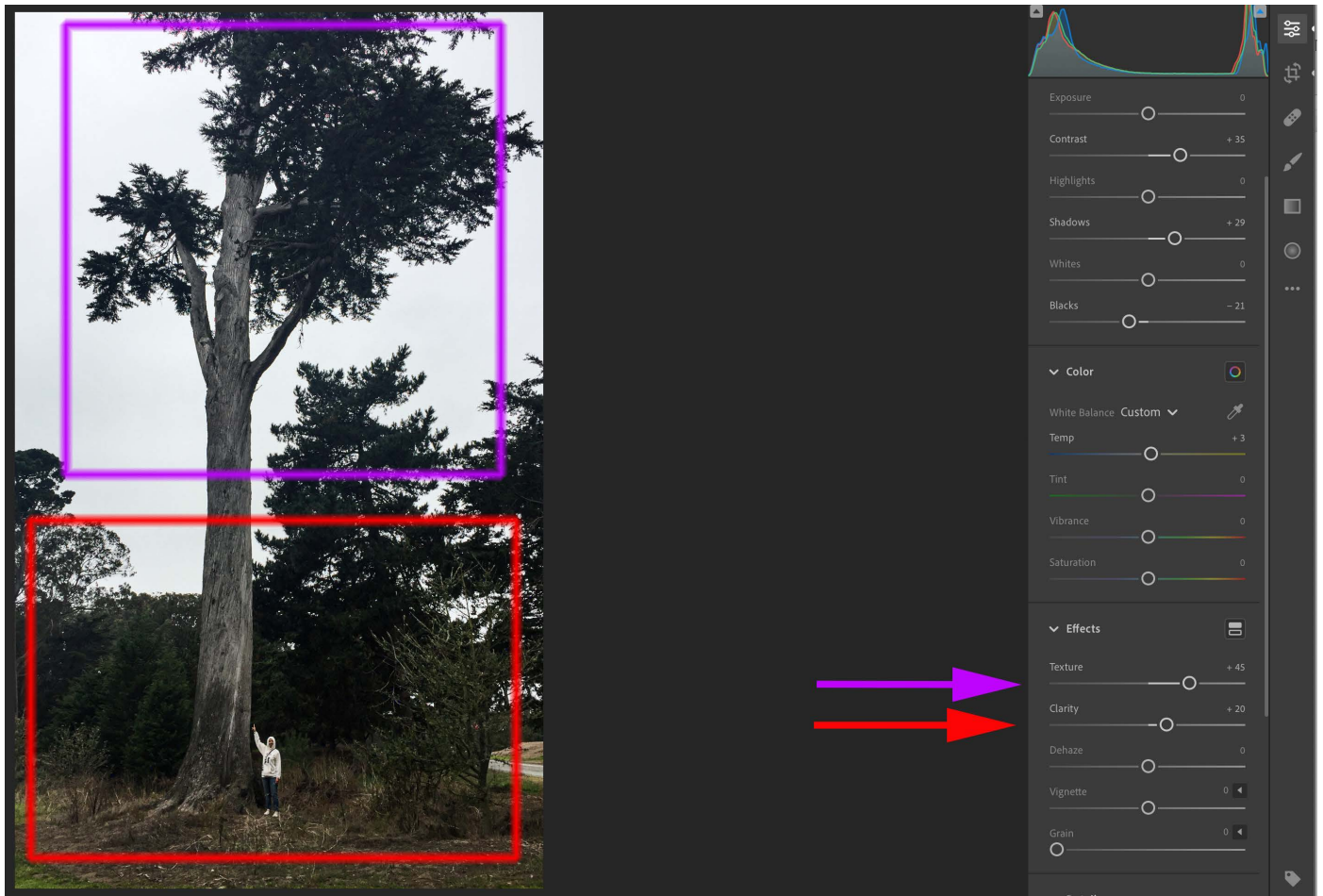


Image 017 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I found something interesting with the Clarity and Texture steps on this picture. Clarity primarily affected the area within the red box, and Texture mainly affected the area within the purple box!

I played with both settings until they blended well.

My settings were Texture +45 and Clarity +20.

At this point, I also decided to lower the global Contrast slider from +45 to +35.

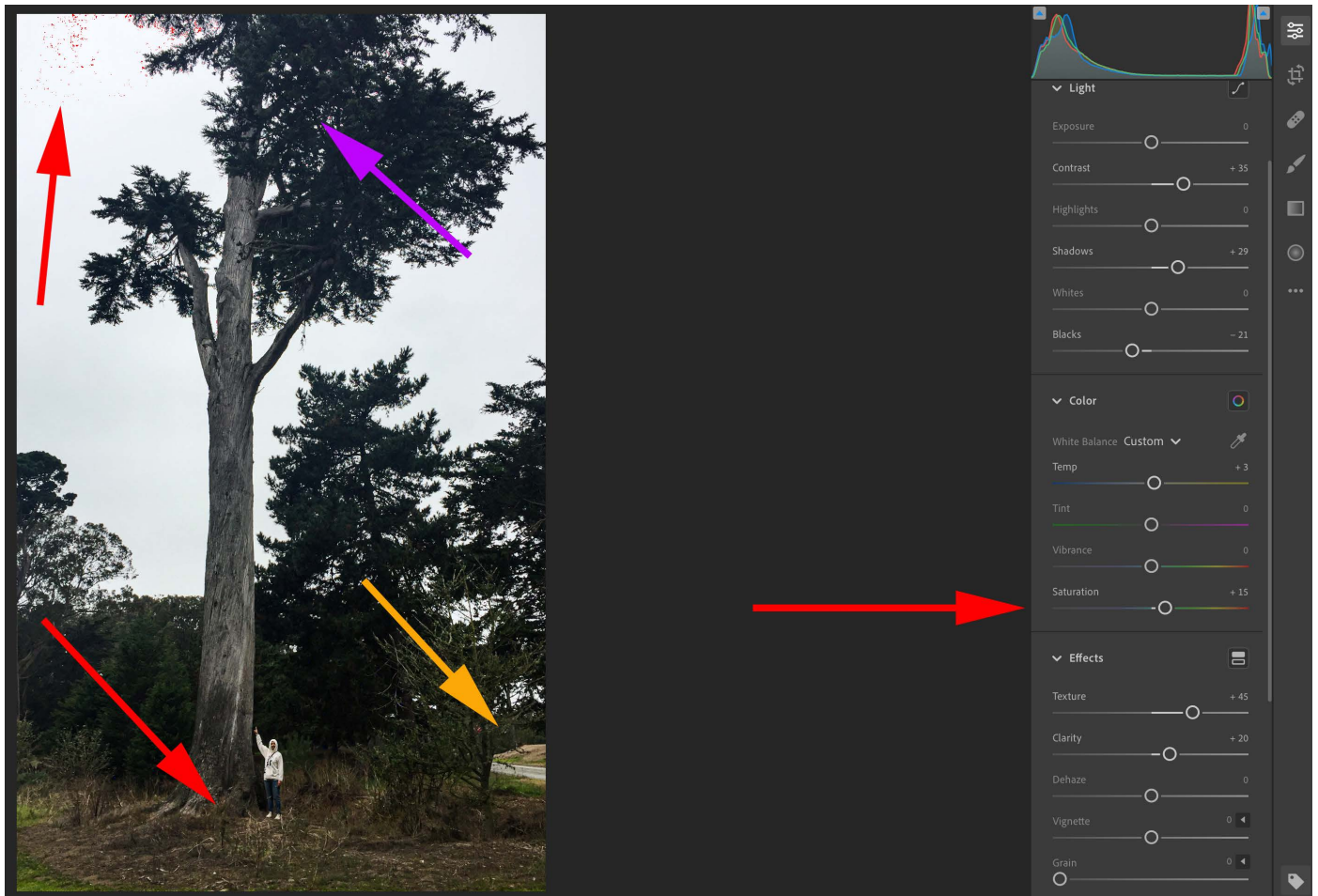


Image 018 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The next two steps on the Fundamental Editing list are Vibrance and Saturation.

Again, with this photo lacking much organic color, the Vibrance slider did virtually nothing. I'm leaving that set at 0.

The Saturation slider had an impact in several places, and not all of them were positive.

Increasing saturation did bring up some color around my wife at the base of the tree. That was positive.

One negative was that the saturated color primarily showed up by the road. I don't want that area to be visible at all!

Secondly, increasing the saturation very quickly started adding Highlights Clipping back into the sky.

And finally, increasing the saturation too much gave the upper portion of the tree a strange and unrealistic hue of color.

I ultimately settled on a global Saturation increase of +15.

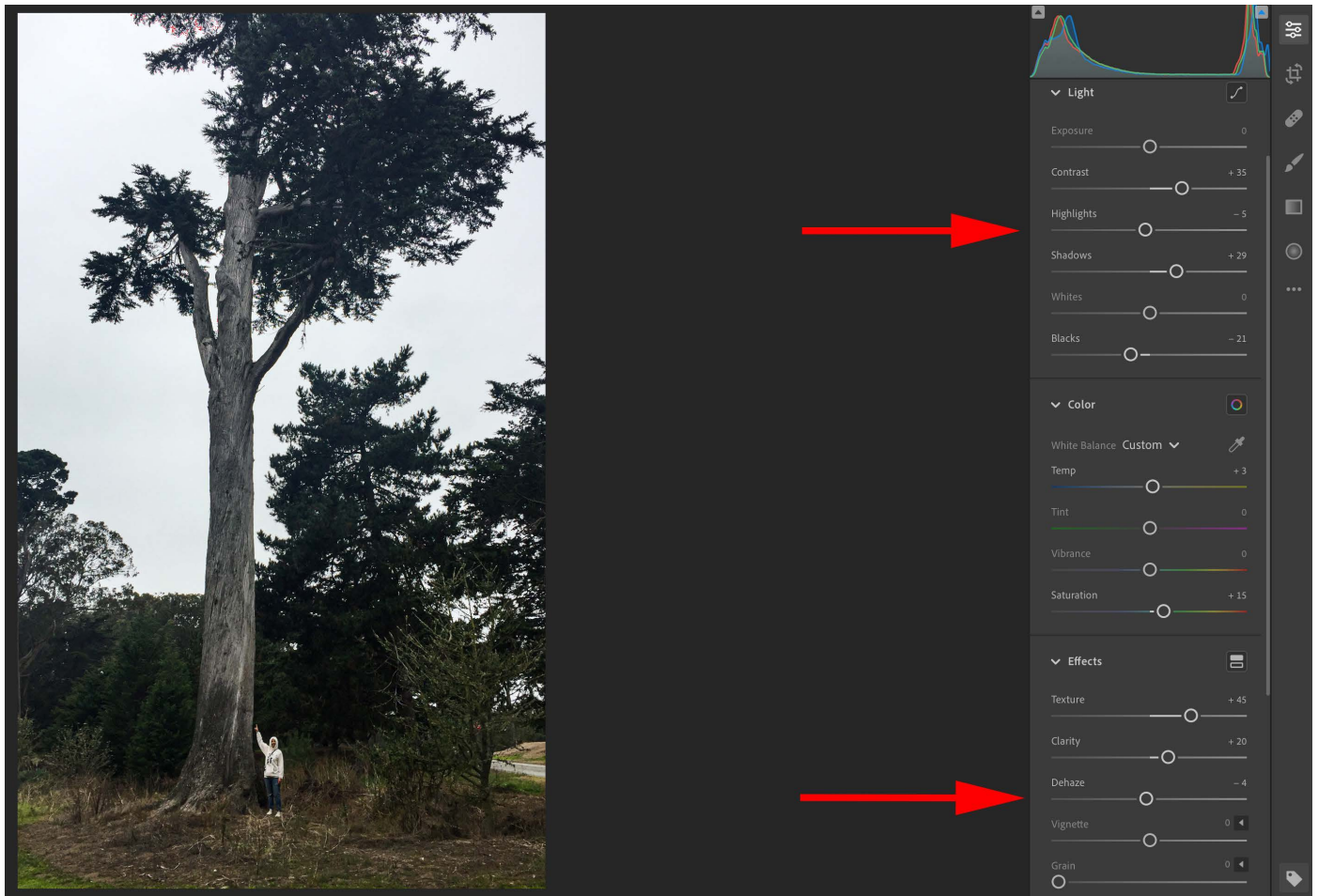


Image 019 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

At this point in the FE process, I had more Highlight and Shadows Clipping than I wanted.

I reduced the Highlights Clipping by dropping the Highlights slider to -5.

The next step in the FE list is Dehaze.

Any increase with the Dehaze slider exacerbated the Shadows Clipping problem. I decided to experiment with a reduction in the Dehaze, and sure enough, it reduced the Shadow Clipping to a perfect level.

My Dehaze setting was -4.

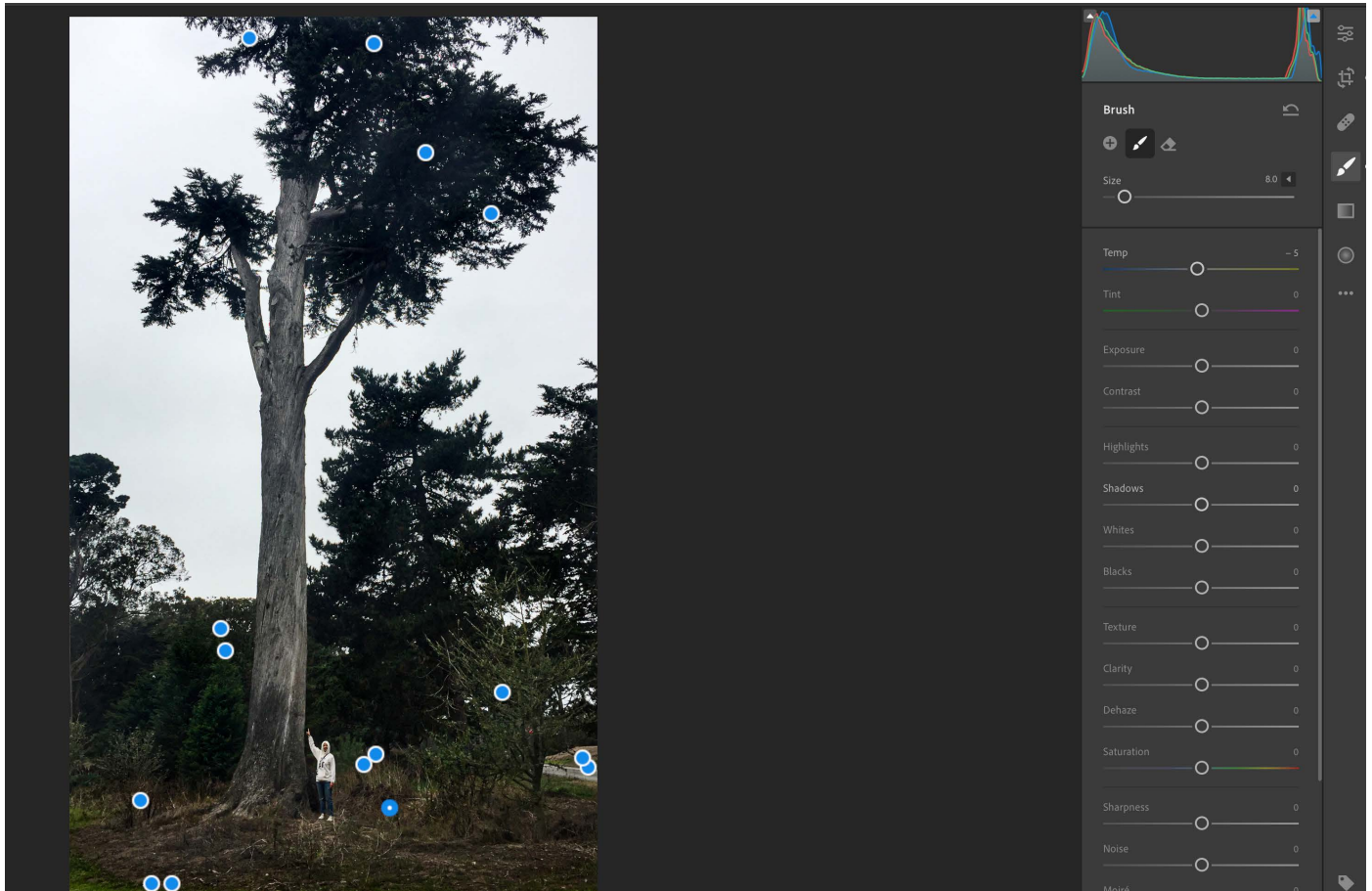


Image 020 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I spent quite a bit of time creating Adjustment Brush masks (a total of 15) and dialing in different tone changes and color saturation levels.

If you look at the histogram, you can see how my changes have dragged some of the left and right peaks towards the center area.

- I raised the shadow tones and color saturation of the brush behind the hero tree.
- I significantly lowered the tone value and color saturation of the road and its surrounding area.

- I darkened the foliage at the top of the tree to increase the contrast between it and the sky. This made the unusual shape of it pop out within the composition as well.
- I lightened the bark of the tree.
- I lightened and slightly added some warmer color temperature to my wife.
- I darkened the grassy areas in the lower corners.

All of those edits were designed to push a viewer's eyes directly towards my wife, and then to follow the trunk of the tree up towards the top.

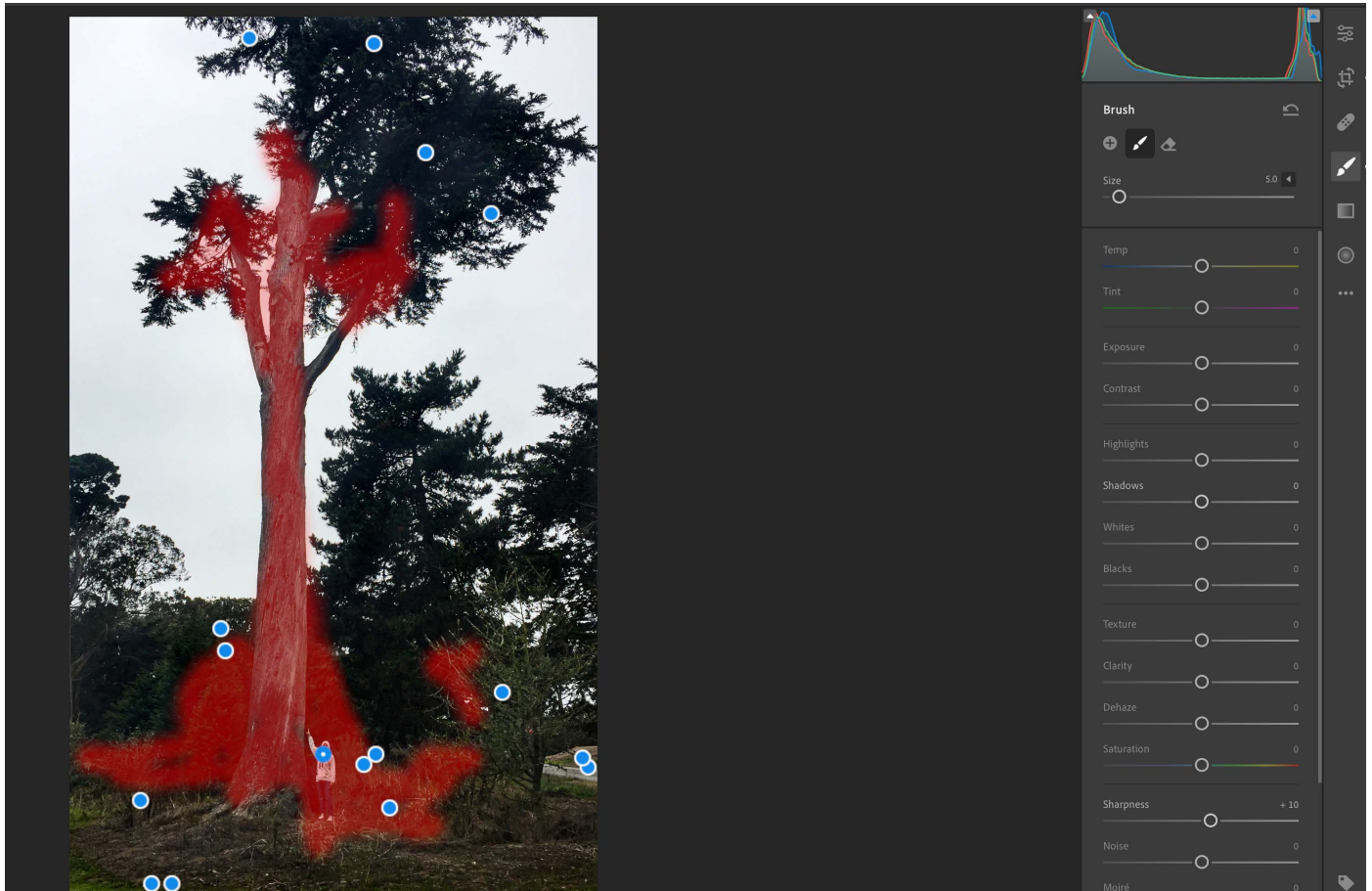


Image 021 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

The post-processing trick that I've discussed several times in these case studies is to locally sharpen my subject with the Adjustment Brush.

Remember, a viewer's eyes will generally always travel towards the sharpest part of an image first.

I applied a local Sharpening of +10.



Image 022 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

There was a stop sign peeking through the trees back by the road that was bothering me. I took it out with the Healing Brush.



Image 023 – Screenshot by Kent DuFault

I applied a very minor global Sharpening of 10, which improved this picture.



Image 024 – Photograph and Fundamental Editing by Kent DuFault

On the left is my original camera file, and on the right is my Fundamentally Edited photograph.



Image 025 – Photograph by Kent DuFault

Here is my final photograph. Not bad, considering it was a pretty lousy day for photography!