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Tuesday, 01 December 2015

What A Long Strange Trip

Written by **Ctein**, TOP Technical Editor

Last Saturday, as you might know, was [TOP's 10th birthday](#). This site has been putting my life through changes for almost as long as it has Mike's. Okay, not quite 10 years, more like 9.3. Close enough.

It started in the summer of 2006, about nine months after Mike started TOP (which I had no idea he was doing; we were not in regular contact). I was having a conversation with a friend of mine about where to take my writing career. I was looking at the future of photography magazines, and the number of magazines that wanted in-depth and honest product tests and advanced how-tos had been steadily declining for 15 years. It wasn't going to be too much longer before I wasn't writing for anybody. I needed to do something to keep my name in the public eye. It wasn't just about earning money as a writer; an invisible artist is a broke artist.

My friend suggested I start a blog, which she'd enjoyed doing for a year or so. I said that was a non-starter for me. I don't write for the public for free. It's too much like real work. I'm a professional and I get paid for my words. I'd blog when hell froze over (exact quote).

That very same evening I got a call from Mike. He wondered if I might write a column for his hitherto-unknown-to-me blog. He couldn't pay me a lot; in fact he was worried I'd be insulted by the amount he could afford to pay me. But it was important to him that professionals be paid for their work, even if it's a token. It was the principle of the thing. No argument from me! I said I'd give it a try, although I wasn't sure how many column ideas I could come up with. Whatever, I'd run with it until I ran out of ideas.

As soon as I got off the phone with Mike, I called my friend. "You are not going to believe this. Hell just froze over."

True story; I couldn't make up stuff this improbable.

Shortly thereafter, [this first column appeared](#).

As for running out of ideas? 300+ columns later, when I stopped doing my regular column, I still had a massive topic backlog.

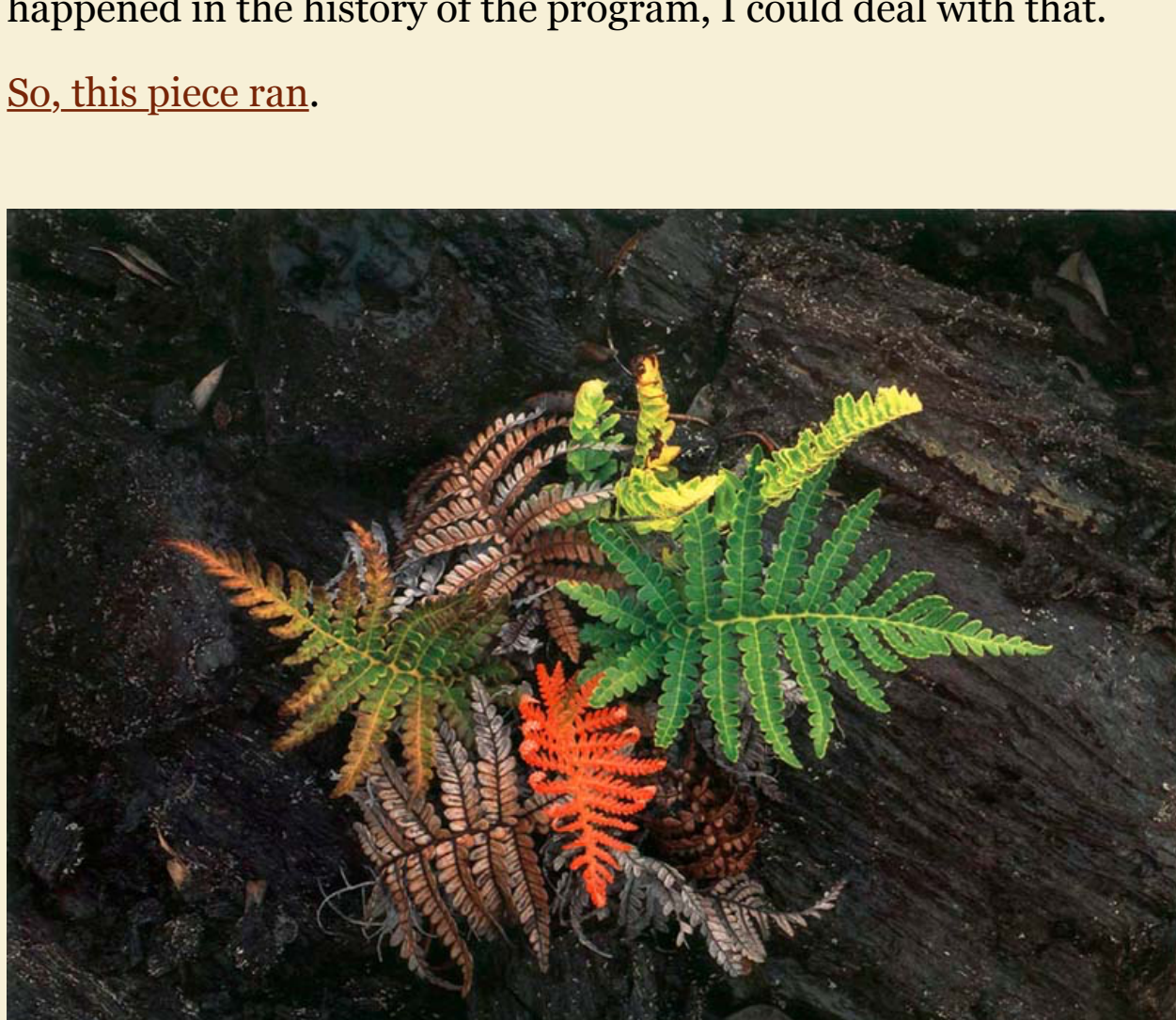
The first TOP dye transfer print sale happened a little more than two years later, a bit over seven years ago. This was something Mike had started back at *Photo Techniques* magazine—offer readers master-quality prints at a ridiculously low price, so they could see for themselves what really good prints looked like. By taking all the orders and money in advance, the photographer could print in volume to meet a known demand, allowing them to charge a low price. I did on a couple of sales for *PT*, and each earned me a few thousand dollars. Mike was figuring TOP ought to do as well or better. With hundred-buck prints, we might hope for as much as \$10,000 in sales!

Mike diffidently asked, if I wouldn't mind, would I consider giving him a 10% commission on sales? I told him hell no. Absolutely not. He was going to take 20% and not a point less, or I wouldn't do it.

He carved. I'm a tough negotiator.

We thought about putting a cap on the sales, but it seemed really tacky and faux-egotistical, like those ads you see for "limited edition collectibles." I could deal with 100 prints. Hell, if a miracle occurred and we doubled down on that, which had never, ever happened in the history of the program, I could deal with that.

[So, this piece ran](#).



So began the madness...

When the sale ended after ten days, I'd sold 750 prints. *AUGH!* I felt like Mickey Mouse and those blasted marching broomsticks. Damn near killed me.

But, suddenly, print sales were big money for me and Mike. We've both been riding that pony ever since. It's carried me through several tight periods.

[The final blowout dye transfer sale](#) paid for (most of) the remodeling on my house when I shut down the darkroom two years ago. As for Mike, these ongoing print sales with multiple photographers were what enabled him to get out of his shoebox of a house into something where he could stretch out both arms and not bruise his knuckles.

Oh yeah, changes.

Then came the big one.

I (virtually) met John Camp through TOP about 6 1/2 years ago, through our respective posts and comments on TOP. I mentioned in a column that I'd be going to the Twin Cities for vacation. John dropped me a note suggesting that since he lived on the Eau Claire river, not far from the Twin Cities, it might be a chance for the two of us to meet face-to-face. We did. We hit it off.

Almost from the beginning he nagged me about writing fiction. I would having none of it. Nonfiction is easy; fiction is *HARD!* You have to make up all those lies and keep them straight. Not for me, nuh uh. I was adamant. John knew enough not to push it.

Until, about 3 1/2 years ago, when the science fiction novel he'd been noodling around with came to a dead stop for him. He rang me up on the phone with a proposition. There is a (fairly) faithful summary of that conversation in [this column I wrote for John Scalzi's blog, Whatever](#).

Fast-forward to the present. Now I'm a New York Times best-selling novelist who does photography. Talk about weird...

And none of this weirdness would've happened if it hadn't been for TOP.

I'd say the next 10 years couldn't possibly be more peculiar than the last.

I know better.

Ctein

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Mike adds: *My non-knuckle-damaging new new house, built A.D. 1880, has 600 sq. feet more than the shoebox. It's cheaper in every way but one than the old new house back in Waukesha. (The one: propane is expensive.) I love this house. It's lovely inside, and the back yard is wonderful, protected on three sides by that high ridge you see behind the house. That's the family room on the right, in what used to be the one-car garage. So far, a handful of TOP readers have visited! Stop by if you're ever in the Finger Lakes.*



(To see all the comments, click on the "Comments" link below.)

Featured Comments from:

No featured comments yet—please check back soon!

Posted on Tuesday, 01 December 2015 at 06:00 PM in [Blog Notes](#), [Ctein](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

I have those two first Hawaii prints. I bought them for my daughter who was doing her Masters in Geology (rejuvenated volcanism around Kauai) at UH at the time. (a little girl who came home from school in grade 1 saying Mt. Baker was going to explode that night and we'd all be killed - her teacher told her). It didn't and from that day volcanoes held her interest.

I see that those two pictures every day - they're where I have breakfast. The colours still glow in the morning light.

I must be a bad dad. I liked them so much, I kept them.

Very glad hell froze over.

Posted by: David Swinmard | [Tuesday, 01 December 2015 at 06:04 PM](#)

I got stuck on "Saturn Run" somewhere between page 100 and 200 from all that copious scientific detail. (It was like the infamous book report on penguins.)

I pre-ordered it when Mike featured it and really looked forward to reading it -- maybe someday I'll go back and finish it.

Posted by: Bill Mitchell | [Tuesday, 01 December 2015 at 07:02 PM](#)

Life turns on a dime, and clichés sometimes contain a germ of truth.

Posted by: Robert Roudil | [Tuesday, 01 December 2015 at 08:19 PM](#)

I wish I had known about TOP then. I feel like I've missed a lot.

[Ctein replies: *Well, there's no one stopping you from going all the way back to the beginning and reading forward[s].*]

Posted by: MikeR | [Tuesday, 01 December 2015 at 08:44 PM](#)

I've been along for the ride, as a mainly silent observer, for all of it (having transcribed, somewhat grumpily at the time, from the 37th Frame). This blog introduced me to Ctein, other talented writers, and a remarkably congenial readership. Heck, it's the only blog that I bother to read the comments on. I, too, am very glad that hell froze over - for Ctein and for all of us.

Posted by: Jon | [Tuesday, 01 December 2015 at 11:29 PM](#)

Just bought the audiobook of "Saturn Run", and it will get queued up just as soon as I'm done with the latest Kim Stanley Robinson. Hell, I hear this Sanford guy who wrote the book with my favorite technical photography writer may written a few other books; maybe I'll give him a chance if I like this one...

Posted by: Nicholas Condon | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 12:30 AM](#)

Just finished "Saturn Run" (Audible). I liked it alot. The prolog about the science was very intriguing, I'm glad for that addition at the end.

Posted by: ShadZee | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 03:22 AM](#)

BTW, I have one of those prints on my wall ... love it.

Posted by: ShadZee | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 03:24 AM](#)

Really delighted for both of you to read this. Very heart-warming tale.

Posted by: Martin Palling | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 05:18 AM](#)

I pre-ordered "Saturn Run" the day Mike posted about it and read it in two days when it came out. Great story, great ideas and fun, fun science. I loved it. When's the sequel come out?

Posted by: Ed Kikkawrick | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 06:26 AM](#)

A wonderful ride for this reader too, having followed both of you since the magazine days & Post Exposure. A lot of great writing by both of you, and a lot of great reading for me,—along with the ability to occasionally contribute to the community you have created here.

I bought that first Dye Transfer offering as well as other offerings through the years (including one of Mike's, so perhaps I should display them together for a Top Birthday Celebration.....

For any person who finds satisfaction in attempting to make pictures that are more than records of time and place, the process begins with how you think, then moves to how you see.

The two of you, along with many in the community you have nurtured, contributed greatly to the 'thinking part' for me and ,I'm sure, others.

Please know that I and many others are Grateful

Happy Birthday

Michael

PS the new place looks lovely, and speaking of Science Fiction, was that a space age fridge with ice & water without even opening the thing.....

Great Good Luck

Posted by: Michael Perini | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 10:46 AM](#)

@ Mike: "My non-knuckle-damaging new new house, built A.D. 1880, has 600 sq. feet more than the shoebox."

My entire single story place has 600 sq. feet in total! There's just me here. A second bedroom would be nice, though at the moment plans are afoot to increase the garden shed space by 20%, or by 70% counting the open fronted firewood/building wood/garden things store/back porch.

I did consider propane for heating and cooking, but the arrangement of my rear windows and back door don't allow enough room for the gas bottles under UK legislation. My dad moved into a house with propane heating and he too found it to be expensive.

I would love to stop by, if I ever get to your side of the pond.

Posted by: Rose Bradbury | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 11:04 PM](#)

I loved Saturn Run. Those ribbon radiators just blew my mind. To have John Camp's story telling and Ctein's science (and, I'm sure, additions to the writing) made it a fun read.

I own the poster print of the bridge that was offered a few years ago. It hangs on the back of the door of the room where I print to show me I shouldn't be satisfied...ever.

Posted by: James Weekes | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 01:34 PM](#)

Every few months, it seems, I have to relearn the fact that all the interesting things in life happen in the most unexpected and unpredictable ways. That seems to have been the case with the story of Ctein's appearance on TOP. (And the appearance of TOP itself, to some extent.) I'm really glad that Ctein got to write for the site – good for Ctein, TOP and readers.

Ctein: your writing and prints have been very important for me – thank you! As well as the excellent prints I own and the countless articles I've read, enjoyed and learned from, I am looking forward to reading a science fiction book for the first time in a few decades.

There's no space in this apartment so I no longer allow myself physical books that aren't photo books (your 'Photo Restoration' slipped in before the ban) so I eagerly await an electronic edition. (If you're not planning one, I'll happily get the audio version.)

Thanks so much to you both for everything so far.

[Ctein replies: *Bah! SATURN RUN was published by Putnams as an ebook the same day it came out in hardcover.]*

Posted by: Bah! | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 02:17 PM](#)

Thanks, Ctein—probably international differences causing the difficulty. I'm in London and Saturn Run is not available from Amazon UK in anything other than hardback or audio CD. It's not on the Amazon UK eBooks store or on the Google Play store in the UK. I hadn't thought to look on Putnam's own site till now: there's a 'Buy from' option but none of the sources are available to me in the UK, except B&N, which has a Nook version that's not very useful for me.

It's probably just a question of timing—if there's a paperback release, perhaps the eBook might become available at the same time here. I knew that this sort of thing happened with films but am surprised it applies to electronic books—I've clicked the UK Amazon button that says 'I'd like to read this book in Kindle format' and which supposedly triggers a message to the publisher from Amazon. I'm sure it'll appear eventually. (I'll email you to let you know if it happens.)

Posted by: Bah! | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 02:17 PM](#)

I bought that print ! I wanted to see what Dye Transfer" looked like ; I also have your hair.

[Ctein replies: *Kenneth- Not so! I just checked in the mirror, and it's all still here!]*

Posted by: kennethvoigt | [Wednesday, 02 December 2015 at 02:20 PM](#)

No greater praise for this blog than that it helped to put a (bigger) roof over your head, and deservedly so. Congrats on reaching 10.

[Ctein replies: *Ade-- In my case, more like under my feet (g), but we both appreciate the sentiment. Thanks!]*

Posted by: Ade | [Thursday, 03 December 2015 at 05:54 AM](#)

The comments to this entry are closed.

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