

## *The Pain of Near Misses*

One of the most painful yet educational experiences about photography is the near miss. It's a shot that's *almost* exactly what you wanted, but doesn't quite cut the mustard. You might've gotten the composition just right, but the model closed her eyes just when you hit the shutter. Or maybe you got the exposure ever so slightly wrong and totally blew the highlights or lost the shadows. Or got the exposure, shutter speed, panning, and moment just right... but blew the focus:



I still hate myself for blowing this one -- I haven't gotten quite as good a motion capture of my dog since.

There are a lot of near misses on Photosig. It's hard to let them go, but you have to do it, if you want to progress as a photographer.

### *What are they?*

Near misses are obviously mostly about technical considerations, but occasionally also about composition. Few pictures come out of the camera perfect, and some out-of-camera correction is a matter of course -- whether in the chemical or the digital darkroom. Some things you can improve a lot, like color or shadow/highlight balance, or even accutance, with unsharp masking. However, there's only so much you can do before hitting the limitations of the shot. So what, then, counts as a near miss?

The tricky bit is that the demands of technical quality depend on the shot. Even slight softness or motion blur in studio portrait shot in medium format is clearly unacceptable -- while on the other hand it may actually add to the picture in a situational photo. It's also largely subjective, and a function of the photographer's skill: the better the photographer, the more demanding he is of his own work.

The question I ask myself when looking at a doubtful shot is: are the technical deficiencies bad enough to distract attention from the strong qualities in the picture? If I find myself noticing the deficiencies in the picture before the picture itself, I count it as a near miss. Otherwise... usually not.

### *How to deal with them?*

One of the most painful and tedious duties of the amateur photographer is editing. Letting go of those near-misses is especially hard. A missed shot is gone forever, and sometimes you have to admit that no amount of unsharp masking will bring it back.

However, studying the near misses can be one of the most educational things in photography. They mercilessly show up deficiencies in technique (or lacks in equipment), and indicate directions to improve. Anyone can get a lucky shot every once in a while, but it's the near misses that show where you need to do the work.

Here is where peer review, such as at a site like Photosig [<http://www.photosig.com/>] can help a lot. Sometimes it's so hard to let go of those near misses that you tell yourself "it isn't *that* bad" so many times you end up believing it yourself. Subjecting the picture to outside criticism can be sobering, but it's especially necessary when it comes to the near misses. Of course, not all good pictures rack up a lot of points at Photosig (in fact, the kinds of pictures that do are not always the best or at least most original ones), but such a site does show up the near misses rather well.

That's why I think that one of the best things a critic can do for a photographer is tell them that they *almost* got that perfect shot.

I wish someone had told me this about the picture in the beginning of the article. I so wanted the picture to succeed that it took me a long time to give it up. But I'll get a better shot of her. Some day. I promise.

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