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"It's your New York!"

The Rondout Reader



Cézanne

A Letter to My Muse

by Kevin Ahearn (PG-13)



Dear Erica,

Thank you.

And I apologize.

I don't know your full name, where you live or what you're doing. Yet if I never see you again, you will always be magical to me.

The Sunday New York Times had long been a family tradition. The High Falls coffee shop was the closest, and lately there'd been quite a turnover. The week before a stunning blond was behind the counter. Her country smile and voluptuous body were still dancing in my mind seven days later as I drove in for this Sunday's edition.

The blond was gone and there you were, tall and slim with long brown hair. Pretty, but in a mannequin sort of way, as if life as I like to think I know it, was somehow missing.

"I'm having the Rondout time of my life and I'm sure you are too," I said when you asked and almost got a smile. As I walked to my car, I found myself trying to re-picture last week's waitress.

That didn't happen. On the short drive home, I got something else. Was it your long hair and lithe frame or the seeming lifelessness in your eyes that projected a completely unexpected image...from a 50-year old comic book!

BLACKHAWK, Issue #120 from January, 1958. I had the book in my collection. In the cover story, 'The Perils of Ulysses', my hero and his valiant team faced Homer's alluring sirens. But in this spin of the classic tale, they weren't real women in G-rated bathing suits, but androids.

A sci-fi siren? Whoa! What's going on here?

Work came first. My first novel was going to be published. Line by line I hit the galleys, after so long, this would be my 'coming out' as a science fiction writer.

Soon it was Sunday again and I couldn't help seeing your comic book image as I drove into town.

After I paid for my Times, I had to ask, "Where do you want to go from here?"

I've asked that question often--bank tellers, retail clerks, folks at the library, guys doing community service at the landfill. Too often, people didn't know where they wanted to go or had already gotten there, their lives at an end where they were.

"I'm going to be a Mental Health professional," you said and in an instant the android became a person, a woman on a quest with a fire in her eyes!

The energy you projected--I got this visual rush! Fresh from my art school days, the paint still wet, Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Though the artist's mythical ideal had a more Victorian shape, it was her flowing hair and the spirit in her eyes that blew me away.

From comic book siren to Renaissance goddess! Who is she?

A "mental health professional"—maybe I needed one myself.

I'd been alone since my marriage ended two years before. Lonely and horny...or was there something else happening? One image had led to another. "It is what it is," was not 'writer thinking'. Where is this going?

Home for a couple of minutes, I drove back to your store.

"Uh-oh," you said when you saw me again.

*"As a future mental health professional, you might find these interesting," I said, showing you back issues of **Inner Circular**. "It's about how clients feel."*

Your name was Erica and you had a degree in psychology. Looking back, If you had been 'Nancy with a business major', none of this would have happened.

On my computer, my novel was in its final draft. Once I awoke at four in the morning, and couldn't wait to get to work.

The next Sunday, I went for the Times with a plan.

*You had read the magazine and remarked "a lot of angry people." Your minor had been English Lit and you'd tried **Twilight** and were 'not impressed'.*

To paraphrase a Star Trek episode, 'Behold, a goddess who reads!'

"I'm a writer and full of BS," I said, and how true was that. "My first novel's about to be published, would you like to read it?"

"Okay," you said and I ran out to my car and gave you a hard copy.

Back to work. The cover and 'blurb' were done and I was closing in on the final corrections. With every finished page, I was getting closer and closer to the beginning of a new life.

I'd go to the library every day, bringing home books for Mom who was having trouble reading the way she used to. On the way, I'd stop in at the local drug store and pick up a few things.

I was waiting on line and suddenly, in front of the holiday decorations, in a full winter coat and a long scarf, there you were

"I started your novel and I'm hooked," you said.

I was stunned. Maybe it was the time of day. To limit the morning glare, the front windows were covered with wax paper. Could I believe my own eyes? An aura shimmered around you!

A new image flashed, that of a fashion model in a glossy New Yorker spread. Mom had been reading that magazine every week for more than half a century. Have I been imagining you all my life?

You were 'hooked' by my novel!

Halfway home my raging id jumped to the fore.

"God, I wanna fuck her!" I cried out.

*'To Die in Erica's Arms' - What a letdown heaven's gonna be!
Or if Hell, not nearly as hot.*

Then I caught myself. Was I going out of my mind?

Psychological studies have been done on the 'vulnerability of women' following ugly divorces or bad relationships, the effects of sudden low self-esteem. Throw in some booze or dope and the result is unpredictable, often hazardous behavior.

But 'real men'? Mom had decided she couldn't take winter at home and moved to a senior residence until spring. That left me alone with myself. Then I got the call. My son Tom had become addicted to heroin. He and his girlfriend were shooting up. She ODe and died in his arms. He was 'under observation' at the local psych ward. I had been dreading something like this for quite a while. Full of parental guilt, I went to see him.

Had I been a better father, Tom wouldn't be on a 'suicide watch'. Reality was driving me crazy--my only child's crisis as an excuse for my own selfish fantasy? Sunday came again and I couldn't wait to see you, but you hadn't read much more.

"Don't rush me," you said.

Things went downhill from there.

"It's science fiction," you said.

What could I say?

We were outside on the shop porch. A chill was in the air. Couldn't you understand what my novel was about?

"Life is a quest," I said emphatically. "You are not an object or a trophy, but an individual unique in the universe!"

Whatta line! You must have thought I had completely lost it, and maybe I had.

My novel bored you. 'The Milky Way Writer' had been rejected yet again. The next Sunday you left my manuscript at work. I picked it up. The drive home was longer than I thought.

The last time I saw you was for Tuesday morning coffee. Right off, I knew something was amiss. You retreated to the rear of the shop and projected yet another image: that of a bird on an airport tarmac, anxious and frustrated, but unable to take flight. Pretty plumage, but in full flight, I bet you'd be breathtaking.

Your shop closed for the winter and opened in the spring under new management, but I couldn't stop thinking about you. Not as a woman or a person, but as a story.

'The End of an Erica' was the worst and most important short story I ever wrote. Worst because it was all about Me, Me, Me, 'The Milky Way Wannabe' who sees a coffee waitress as his unobtainable dreamgirl and realizes he's experienced 'coming of old age'.

Depressing as hell. That's me? That's whom I've become? I thought it was the greatest story, went back to your coffee shop, and asked your former boss to mail it to you.

As ill-conceived and poorly executed as it was, the story was my first attempt to break away from science fiction and fantasy.

That could have ended everything. With one phone call: "Tell your dirty old friend he's a loser who can't write!"

And you'd have been right. Thank you for not doing that.

Had I come to this - Dirty old Don Juan stalks coffee waitress in her twenties? Not about you, personally. I knew nothing about you and never asked. It was your affect: What the sight of you generated within me.

A "Sherlockian" mystery for a psychology grad or a mental health professional?

*Observation + Deductive reasoning...TOP SECRET Dinar! "This looks like a job for **Super Analyst!**"*

Did I still have my USAF Security Service 'cypher brains'?

I took a long, hard look back at my life, searching for 'Erica' moments. Teaching special education in Brazil...

'Two-Oh-Two-ing the situation' led to...

'The Erica Equation'

Indelibility becomes Metaphor = TRUTH
(What storytelling is about!)

"Define 'Indelibility,'" a fellow wannabe asked me.

"Erica," I said.

'Ainda!' said the story.

For me it was a breakthrough. Proudly I took it to your former boss and he mailed it. You did not reply.

Not that I blamed you. I rewrote the story about you as 'The Power of Erica'. But I was still unable to break free of 'The Milky Way Wannabe,' injecting sci-fi scenarios throughout. And at the end... Sleeping with you had to be anti-climactic. I'd open my eyes, and lying next to me is the most beautiful woman in the world wearing only a sweet smile, still fresh from the middle of the night

And when you awoke, I would feel love, glorious, blissful love. Or at least, lucky, right?

I felt neither. Instead the strongest emotion of all: fear.

I was afraid that you'd open your eyes and see...me! This pompous, pretentious jerk I had become and the frightened little boy I had been all my life.

You had become 'Every Woman' who's most telling power is to make a man examine himself.

I took it to you former boss. You did not reply.

My VISTA experience came with an 'Erica moment' and I opened with it. Not about me or the Civil Rights Movement or baseball, but a 'rite of passage' following the 'Greatest Generation'.

But...

"And if I haven't any talent for writing books or newspaper articles," wrote my Ideal Writer. "Well, then I can always write for myself."

She was writing for Anne Frank. Me, for a born-in-the-blood fanboy! How was that working out?

"God, I want her to read me!" raged The American Writer I was determined to be.

With each story, I started with a fresh 'indelibility'.

The RED GLOW was a burning childhood memory, and became a metaphor for too much of my life. Easy compared to the next story.

"The D in Dorothy stands for 'determination'," said Mom as she fought cancer. "I am determined!"

Another 'motherism': "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Mom died peacefully at home. Her firstborn was with her to the last. A poor husband, worse father and failed writer, it was the least I could do.

She left her five children equal shares of more than \$600,000 plus her house. Wow! Plus Social Security, enough to keep me storytelling for the rest of my life.

Cancer would have other plans. Twice.

High Falls had to be a story. Its 'indelibility' was The Aqueduct as seen by a nine- year old. I couldn't have written it while Mom was alive, but I think she would have liked it. Many of the locals did, but you, Dear Muse, had no reaction.

Local history intrigued me, but standard anecdotal texts were without 'transcendent indelibility.' I pushed the envelope and wrote stories about Stone Ridge, Rosendale and Kingston.

With every completed story, I'd put a hard copy in a stamped envelope and take it to your former boss's office.

"You ever get any feedback?" the secretary asked me.

"Are you kidding?" I said.

The secretary wrote your name and address on the envelope and pushed it at me.

"No," I said, turning it over. "That's not what this is about."

With a degree in Psychology (Hope you've gotten your Masters!), you probably believe I'm certifiably nuts. Always have been! If not for the insanity in my life, what would I have to write about?

My Air Force experience was a story I had to tell, but I couldn't find the definitive 'indelibility'. Again and again I'd go back to Word One. Finally I understood that there were multiple 'indelibilities' and it became a three-chapter story.

*Written in my 'high school voice', CATCH-202 would take a couple of months. I'd been mailing you a story every two or three weeks. Couldn't have you believing that I'd quit, so I put some of my old short stories through 'The Erica Equation' and mailed them one by one. I just might have an anthology: **'Stories for a Coffee Waitress'**.*

Back to my life: that 'tribe' of boys in Jackson Heights, then exploring America on a bike 'My Home, Sweet Home.'.

*Finally, my 'Baby Boomer memoir' was done - **'I was a TOP SECRET Superhero!'** and I had your former boss send it to you.*

But by that time, our connection had been permanently severed. And no literary agent or publisher wanted anything to do with it.

I kept going. And going back, revising constantly and feeling like Penelope, unraveling and then reweaving her tapestry. When's Odysseus finally coming home?

My four local stories needed a push from my fingertips. I'd started with computers in 1964, and still there was so many capabilities unexplored. I began injecting photos via cut-and-paste giving the work a 'scrapbook' flavor.

A year went by.

*I encountered an "Indelibility" in nearby Kerhonkson and created a 'scrapbook' novel which took a mythical point of view at state history: **The New York Gnome.***

Another year passed.

I stuck to local history, finding a cute 'dog story' in nearby Napanoch. But Ellenville had been stumping me for years. I had to tell a tale that could take place only in Ellenville yet be a metaphor for the rest of the country.

*My **RONDOUT READER** was finally done and I really liked it because it gave the area what it needed most: heroes in exciting and enlightening stories rippling with history, magic and my twisted sense of humor.*

The local Cultural Powers blew me off. Every library, civic association, historical society and museum either ignored or rejected my RONDOUT 'scrapbook'. Not that I was trying to sell them anything; I just wanted to be read.

What was left? I'd gone from sci-fi to autobio and then came home to tell fanciful local stories only to fail again and again.

Not for a moment did I consider just quitting. The 'Official Quarterback' of the Jackson Height JOCKS, the coach of the Champion West End Bluehawks giving up?

'Ainda!'

Yet another year went by.

Maybe I should be relieved that you won't be getting any more of my stories. I never found out if you had read any of them or not. But that's the way it should be, really. Because I'm not THERE yet.

Worse than being rejected or ignored is being between stories, searching for the 'Erica moment' that scene or quote that lifted the story off the runway?

I'd look everywhere, and sometimes stumbled upon undiscovered treasures, but it's the stuff that has stayed with my most of my life...from 'King Kong' to Roswell to the 'Red Baron', from 'The Father of the Air Force' to 'Columbus of the Cosmos' that I wanted to give a fresh perspective.

Not as straight history, but telling their stories in first person in 'scrapbook' format. The process was wondrous, putting the reader THERE, in the heroes' hearts as their stories unfolded, pushing their impact into the 21st Century.

'The MACHO of HISTORY' ran 475 pages. Not a 'real' book, but the longest computer file I had ever compiled. Of course, no agent or publisher wanted to read it.

My son kicked heroin, met a new girl. Now she's pregnant. By October I'm going to be a grandfather!

I've come full circle. From my first 'Erica' story more than four years ago, to these very words.

*Once again I sent out queries to literary agents and publishers. This time had to be the charm. Could it be America is finally ready to believe in a **TOP SECRET Superhero?***

Every year, superheroes gross more than \$10 billion. Surely my true life experience had to be marketable.

Not so, of course.

'Rewriting always begins at Word One'. I've given this 'Baby Boomer memoir' a new title and tightened up the prose a bit.

Yet another round of queries to agents. No one interested.

*It's going on five years. My publisher E-mailed to cancel my contract. **The Milky Way Man**, the sole creation of half my life, will be forever unread.*

I'm off to challenge yet another 'windmill' - the vindication of my boyhood comic book hero!

*Six months and countless revisions later, my quest was complete. I was overjoyed. I sent **BLACKHAWK** to an agent and a publisher I had known for years. Not that they both rejected me; neither bothered to open the file.*

"Curiosity won't kill you," penned the poet Blake. "But lack of it will."

My sister has worked for years for the largest publisher in the country. Again and again I begged her to give someone, anyone in the company, her older brother's memoir.

"No," she said every time. "I don't like the writing."

That English as a Second Language school and the Mental Health facility that fired me both closed down and left town, the failing capital of the county.

'It is not about the AGONY of the quest.'

In 2022, New York State Department of Corrections finally made a "correction" - that "supermax" prison that had fired me was suddenly closed. "Soft-on-crime" politics, blared the media. No one even hinted that this "step above maximum security" facility had been poorly designed and incompetently staffed thirty years before.

After an initial failure, I rediscovered WordPress and posted four files:

- 1. RONDOUT READER**
- 2. MACHO OF HISTORY**
- 3. The Milky Way Man**
- 4. I was a TOP SECRET Superhero!**

*And I got read! Especially the **Reader**. I made it a monthly magazine and after fourteen issues more than 10,000 downloads. But my memoir continues to be a personal disappointment.*

Roger Wilco, I had been a "Superhero" for about 20+ pages. As for the rest of my life, an idealistic adventure for what? Sixty years of storytelling and never made a dime. I just might be the most rejected writer in all of literature!

As for the publisher who had fired me for refusing to follow his illegals orders: he was indicted in federal court for "willfully failing to turn over payroll taxes and corruptly endeavoring to obstruct and impede the Internal Revenue Service."

My quest goes on! From Word One, I've redone my soon-to-be "world famous" memoir. This has got to my time!

My 'Impossible dream': You and I, Erica, alone together...on the page. Before your eyes, my words take flight and you can hear my voice. I'm touching you as indelibly as you touched me.

Oh, 'the rapture of the revelation!'

Life is a quest, Dear Muse, for humanity, beginning with our own. You helped me find mine and I will not consider myself a Rondout writer until I hear the sound of your voice.

I want you to tell me that I made you imagine.

And if not, well, 'There's always the Aqueduct!'

Besides, it's not that I'll never see you again; I always will. In a full winter coat and a long scarf, by the holiday decorations...magical!

Maybe that's the best ending of all.

*"Go on again with fresh courage,"
Kevin*

The Rondout Reader  PRESENTS

Stories for a Coffee Waitress



by Kevin Ahearn

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therondoutinternationallibrary.blog/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/stories-for-a-coffee-waitress-2.pdf