

Dear Chuck.

The one time we met in person, you were busy making people faint. That night, two people dropped bringing your total to eight. I was a face in the sea of people during your reading of Guts at Cody's Books in Berkeley. Though "met" is probably too strong a word.

The fan letter criteria posted at TheCult interested me. It's too easy *not* to take a step back and take a look at what has been accomplished in life, stressing over "to do lists", looking at what hasn't been done. Plus, the act of giving something back to someone whose work you admire is therapeutic. So here I am, writing this letter.

My name is Mike Kitchen and I've been a fan of your work since Fight Club and Survivor.

The year I moved to Hawaii was the year I decided to make a comic book. It was the year after I got married and the year before I had my first daughter.

There is nothing like being stranded in the middle of the Pacific, released from old baggage, and free from seasonal changes, to get some perspective on your place in this world. Gazing past the surf, off into the horizon, a wave of realization hits. There is nothing out there but 6959 miles of ocean, until you hit Antarctica. An insignificant speck in a vast sea of blue.

Living in paradise, and animating in big Hollywood movies, all I really wanted to do was make a comic. It is something that was always planned, an item on the "to do list". The lure of comics is that they are a visual story telling medium that can be done solo, which do not need a huge budget, and do not require *too* many drawings. Using a mix of words and pictures to tell a story through sequential art appealed to me. But most of all, there was always a desire to create something. Something to own, and to control. Something through which I can express what's on my mind. To take my best shot at describing the world in the way that I see it.

It's an insurmountable task, starting a project like this. With a Hunt 102 crow quill in hand, approaching a mountain, single steps at a time. Could this could be doable? Equipped with a five year plan, there was only one way to find out.

In the predawn hours of the morning, working before my family wakes, applying one line of Higgins Black Magic ink at a time. Each drop of ink, a step closer to the summit. Drip, drip, drip.

I think of Qing Dynasty monks in the Shaolin Temple, where long years of repetitive training movements left foot prints in the brick floor.

Through discipline. Persistence.

For \$2243.00 you can print your own comic.
That's what it costs to get 13 boxes full of comics in your basement.

Seasons were changing again. Time passed.

By the time my second comic was printed, we had become a family of five, and moved from Honolulu, to Montreal, to Berkeley, to Toronto.
The total number of boxes was up to 37.

With all those boxes laying about, something had to be done with them.

It was the month before writing this letter, I attended my first ComicCon: The 12th Annual Fan Expo at the Metro Toronto Convention Center South Building, located at 222 Bremner Boulevard. The Special Celebrity guest list included:

William Shatner - Captain Kirk of Star Trek
Leonard Nimoy - Mr. Spock of Star Trek
Jim Lee - All Star Batman & Robin
Mike Mignola - creator of Hellboy
Verne Troyer - Mini-Me of Austin Powers
Carrie Fisher - Princess Leia of Star Wars.
Rowdy Roddy Piper - Professional Wrestling icon
and Shock-Rocker Alice Cooper (among others).

Some other Not-so-special Non-celebrity Guests include:

Mike Kitchen - animator on Hellboy, creator of Spy Guy
Blair Kitchen - animator on Curious George, creator of The Possum

My brother booked our table in artist alley after completing his own comic.

It was interesting to be a "starving" artist at the Industry Night dinner, eating in the same room as a multimillionaire Wizard Top 10 blockbuster artist. Knowing you're not anywhere near the same league. Another wave of realization hits.
William Shatner earned more with one signature than we earned all weekend. Like being stranded on an island in the middle of the Pacific, that puts things into perspective.

With each comic sold, we drew a sketch. Our booth generated a decent amount of interest. We didn't lose money and broke even by the second day. When it was all said and done, the convention was a success. The biggest thrill of the entire Expo was talking to people. Watching people flip through our books, and seeing their immediate reaction. There is nothing like seeing people laugh out loud, and hear that they are going to put your comic strip on their fridge.

Multiple times, we had fans walk away with their sketches and comics saying: This is the best money I've spent all weekend. Moments like that validate everything. That somehow, through words and pictures, and that brief social interaction, there was a connection with another person. Like finding your place in the world.

Looking off into the horizon, the goal is to lose the fulltime day job and make comic books full time. That would be living the dream.

8000 readers is what I need to make it happen. The next objective is to start the bimonthly unlimited series, and get distribution in Diamond's Previews catalogue, which is really the only option for survival in the Direct Market. Momentum is slowly starting to build. The constant repetition is beginning to leave a mark. The drips of ink continue to be applied on the page. Drip, drip, drip. But there is still such a long way to go. There is all new baggage to carry. The amount of time it's taken to get this far is unbearable. We're not getting any younger. Each step, takes so long. The progress that has been made, still just an insignificant spec.

My five year plan is running two years behind.

I think of Chinese Water Torture. Wikipedia says:

Supposedly the torture in dripping water is the slow rate at which the water flows. The victim can almost predict when the next drop will fall and a sense of tension builds up. When the drop finally does fall, a sense of shock and relief follows, only to be replaced with more tension about the next drop. The release of tension (no matter how small it is) prevents the victim from withdrawing inside himself. As this does not require interaction on the part of the torturer it can be done continuously.

That pretty much sums it up.

I look at stuff by artist at the top of their game and get a reality check on just how far I am from the watermark I artistically aspire to, causing a surge of energy to just try to get better. It's hard work, but it's work worth doing.

Your writing workshop was something I enjoyed. Each essay was like a kick in the nuts but in a good way.

I've got a lot to learn. This writing stuff is hard. And then there's drawing, inking, and layout, and design, and marketing, and publicity, and... what the heck was I thinking, trying to do comics!? I guess I am still looking for my own little piece of paradise. My way to connect. Living the dream. All I can really do is keep drawing. Keep pushing. Keep learning. This is something that should have done years ago. But life has a way of getting you caught up in its undertow; setting up distractions, veering things off course.

There have been accomplishments to be proud of, yet there's still a lot left on that "to do list". Money for printing is lacking (but there is line of credit), and time to draw doesn't exist (save for those precious pre-dawn hours of the morning). In the end, it becomes a

constant struggle, balancing the day job, fatherhood, and making my comic; The Hard-Boiled Funny Pages of SPY GUY.

My goal is to kick off the ongoing series before my son learns to talk in coherent sentences. And to become successful enough to lose my “Clark Kent” day job before my daughters stop playing with Bratz and start getting interested in boys.

Just need to keep banging my head against that brick wall until it leaves a mark. Through discipline. Persistence. The wall doesn't stand a chance.

Before I sign off, I have a tangential story.

Last year my grandfather died. This is the grandfather that said to me “you know what my father told me? He said, if you stare at the stars too long, you'll go crazy”. Funny thing is, I had always looked at the stars and thought the same thing; the vastness of it all, all that space, enough to drive you mad. Yeah, I get it. After his wake I found something out, something I had never known. There was a brown folder, thick with dust that was full with my grandfathers writing. Stories and essays, articles and outlines. Along with it was a stack of rejection letters. All preserved perfectly in a neat little stack. I didn't know that my grandfather did any writing. Now here I was after his death, exposed to a whole nother side of him I didn't know existed. I spent days sifting through those old yellow typed papers, full of dust, old smoke and mildew that when I was a child would have sent me into an allergic reaction. And in those moments sitting in my basement, I had a revelation. With my little self-publishing comic studio, I could publish his work. Where all those others publishers rejected him, I could get his words into print. A way for me to connect with that part of him I didn't even know existed. Even if only as print-on-demand. I could have a collection of my grandfather's stories on my bookshelf.

That is a future project I am looking forward to.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.
Maybe next time we meet, if you are not too busy, I can give you my comic.

Mike Kitchen