

What the F--K Does It Take?

By Eric L. Marsh

A full year had passed, the floor of their shared writing den was litter filled with balled up and tossed aside rejection slips and letters. They had done everything in full accordance with their writing professors' guidelines and mentoring. The story they co-authored had received rave reviews from college small presses nationwide, local and regional news outlets had done feature articles on them, response from readers --- radio listeners and television viewers had been nearly a hundred percent positive. The story is timeless; also it is unlike anything written before, hence the approval from all sources; ... except for the major publishing houses in New York City. Literary Agents returned their pleas for representation. A major quandary if ever there were one for writers. They had constantly asked aloud of each other when a rejection reached them; ... 'What the F--k?' The refrain of it eventually became so commonplace that one would start the question and the other finish it. Well with the passing of a year and no satisfactory outcome in their quest for a major publisher or Agent, they decided to take their show on the road and let the world speak for them in hopes of giving the big boys and girls in the publishing industry the message that unknown writers were not to be ignored and treated as if they were grub worms to be crushed under the heels of big wigs.

The time to quit their day jobs had arrived, though sadly for them not quit over the success of launching a major best seller as is the only time it is recommended. Pooling all of their hard earned savings from toiling in meaningless and dead end employment they figured there was enough money to sustain them for six months. That of course factored in the kindness and generosity of family-- friends and hopefully newfound fans. The plan was to hip hop across country, plugging the book in any venue that could be had. They'd do cold door knockings at media outlets, even offer to pay for segments on radio talk shows. The major expense split between traveling and having thousands of copies of the book printed and available for distribution on a moment's notice. Flyers, banners, a decent van, sets of clothing suitable for photo ops and hopefully television interviews. A major credit card with a high spending limit caused some concern among them because neither had ever had a card that exceeded two thousand dollars in credit; now they sought five times that.

The course of action was to not let the credit applications reflect they would very soon be without employment. The shock of being granted not just one, but three cards in a matter of two weeks darned

near brought them to their knees in tears and jubilation. The tears were in a mix of gratitude and fear, fear they may become hostage to an ever high piling mountain of debt.

No time to back out, a year filled with tears of frustration and of hopes being dashed by some very unkind cutting and biting replies from editors and Agents had forced this charge into the untried waters of self-reliance. They were to be there for each other every step of the way, an agreement had been reached within the first moments of the plan being tossed up in the air of their tiny work space; no matter what the outcome, not one word would be spoken badly about each other, just as the musketeers were 'All for one, and one for all' so would they be in their quest for vindication of their book.

What more of a fitting place to start the self-promoting tour than the Big Apple itself. With not but a twinge of trepidation amongst them they set out. The van was a second hand three year old Chevrolet Astro model. It had the way back rear bench seat removed and placed in s storage shed. The space made by its removal could be used for storage of as many books as they dared take along with them. A dear friend had agreed to ship books to them that she'd willingly stored in her back closed in porch. Not to waste an opportunity along the route to New York city, because there were many states to cross; a plan was made to place press releases in major and minor newspapers that they were on the way on a promotional tour with a new controversial novel.

Realizing that most press releases had to be cleared for publication, they actually didn't expect much from doing it, but they kept fingers and toes crossed that some good would come of the effort. Having a cell phone was the only way they could be contacted and how many news outlets would be willing to make a call to it didn't give them much hope for the effectiveness of mailing out the releases either.

In the rearview mirror the house that kept them from the evils of the outside world for nearly two full years fast became a blur in the distance. As they rounded the first corner it became but a distant memory also. A three hour drive north would take them to the first new state and major city. The cell phone hadn't made as much as a peep to brighten up their day. Did the press release even get published they asked each other; no way of knowing until they came close enough to the city to buy newspapers.

Noontime fast approached, and the gas tank needed topping off, so they stopped for lunch at a highway truck stop area. There were piles of newspapers from surrounding states as well as the major seller, USA today. In their haste to grab a city paper they bypassed picking up a copy of; USA today. They hadn't until that point given thought to placing a press release in it.

Sitting in a small booth munching away on a sub- sandwich and drowning it with a plastic cup of

cola they tore through the pages of four papers. Not a line, not a mention of them. They passed each paper back and forth to be certain they'd not missed it; so each paper had a double reading. Dejected they down-turned their eyes and concentrated on finishing up what was left of the lunches. Looking back up at each other they smiled sheepishly each embarrassed at feeling the dejection so deeply. "Let's not do that again." They said in unison. A handshake across the table sealed it, they would roll with the punches thrown at them just as they had all the reject slips and letters.

In a cheap motel just outside the city they poured through the local telephone book and wrote down numbers of local radio and television stations. To make a game of it, they closed their eyes and poked at the slip of paper with the cheap motel pen, the closest it came to a number that would be the one called first.

"I'll make the first call and you critique me afterwards."; Nicole said. Thus it was done then and with more to follow.

"Hello, who am I speaking to? Oh, wonderful, hello again Mabel, nice to talk with you. My name is Nicole, my co-author and I are traveling to New York City to confront major publishing houses and literary Agents on behalf of those writers that have been ignored for years. Yes, of course we are aware of the futility in it Mabel. Our take on it is simply stated, 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained.' We are calling you to request a short segment on your show either tomorrow or the day after. Yes, you are the first station we've contacted, we have only been in town an hour, we're staying off of the interstate in a cheap motel. If we can get airtime we'd be happy to stay over an extra night. What do you say; is it possible? We could be there at least half an hour before the show goes on, if that is suitable. I can give you a short while to get an answer and we'll call you back, is that alright? We can't wait to long because we're doing all we can to get on air someplace in the city, and the morning drive time radio spots we believe will be our best exposure. There are three stations that have that format, but we wanted to give you folks first shot. Good, then I'll call back in five minutes. Thank you very much Mabel for your help.

"Wow Nicole, that was great, I couldn't have done a whit better; you covered all the bases, except what our book is about, and if they ask, and we have to tell it will change us from downtrodden writers to publicity seekers at best, and church bashers at worst."

Damn it Eric, I didn't want to blow it by mentioning the book right off the bat. Do you think I should have at least said we had published a book that's being blackballed?"

No Nicole, as I said, you did exactly what was the right thing to do. Now all we can do is cross our fingers and hope we'll get a shot at tomorrow's show."

They hugged and smiled an uncertain smile. They waited seven minutes and made the call back to Mabel. Nicole greeted her with what she hoped sounded like an upbeat; hello again Mabel.

“Nicole, I’m so sorry to have to tell you this, but our producer doesn’t think writers on air during drive time shows are workable. He’s told me it is his final decision and there is no need to further discuss it. I am so sorry, because I too write and have had a small share of rejections for my stories. I wish there were something I could do to help you, but my hands are tied here, and the producer makes this job difficult enough as is without me making another plea on your behalf. Good luck though, try the next station and feel free to use my name, I’ve worked at all of them over the years. Tell them what Bob had me tell you; that may help some. He is not universally admired in these circles. Bye; and once again my best wishes Nicole.”

“Well Eric, that broke the ice so to speak, but she did give me permission to use her name, I guess she’s in good standing with her former employers; we’ll see how it works out. Your turn; you up to it?” “As ready as I’ll ever be Nicole, here I go.”

The phone was answered on the first ring, catching Eric by surprise. With barely a quick catching of his breath he spoke. Hello, to whom am I speaking please? Great Mr. Alphonse, my name is Eric, my co-author and I are traveling to NYC in hopes of putting major publishing houses and Agents on the spot for ignoring new writers. We are documenting our travels and experiences along the way. We’d like very much to be able to be featured on talk shows such as yours along our route. We are able to stay in any area for up to two days to assist in the scheduling of shows that accept us.”

Nodding to Nicole, Eric whispered, ‘He is the producer.’ Oh, yes I’m sorry as well Mr. Alphonse; yes-yes, of course I’m aware this is on short notice, and you’d require more time than what we have to give. But I was told by Mabel over at your competitor’s station that you would be far more approachable than Bob. Oh, yes, we tried them first because they were first in the alphabet. It seems that this Bob, has a thing about writers not being good fare for the morning drive time audience. Now that I think on it Sir, we need not limit ourselves to that airtime; afternoons or an evening spot is more than acceptable to us. What say to that Sir, any possibility at your station in the next two days?”

Nicole saw right off that this was to be another no go by the look on Eric’s face.

“Well I give you my sincere thanks for your time Sir; good bye to you too.”

Nicole stood over Eric and gently massaged his neck hoping to ease the frustration he was showing and she was sharing inside.

“One more to go Nicole, want me to take it too?” “No need Eric, I’ll do it, I think I have an idea that

may work, listen and watch, if it works I'm a star, if it doesn't I'll buy drinks instead of dinner, we can drown our sorrow."

There'll be none of that talk Nicole, hahaha: ... we have a deal remember, no negativity or blaming."

With that said, Nicole broke into a sheepish grin and reached out to touch Eric's arm, he was almost always right and this time it hit home, she'd bury any negative thoughts from then on she promised herself. She dialed the next number.

"Hello, could you please connect me to the producer of your morning drive show, or somebody that books guests on it. Mabel from your competing station suggested I call you folks. Hello, is this Mister Walker? Are you the producer or show guest booker? Wonderful, Mister Walker, I'd hoped I'd reach the producer, thank your receptionist please. Oh, now that's very nice of her to put me through to you right off then. I suppose it makes good sense to have the receptionist multitask. I still thank her though.

After going through the spiel Nicole could sense a deep reluctance on the producer's part to book them. Then she played what she hoped would be an ace card.

"Sir, your station would be the first with the balls to have Eric and I as guests, but I assure you not by far the last station to have us. There will be a first, why not let it be you that showed gumption and helped chip away at book banning in these times?

The very worst could happen is you'd be getting calls from displeased listeners, and the best as I have a take on it is, you'll be swamped with calls applauding you and your station for being the forum for the stifled voices of literary and song writers. What say you?"

Nicole looked over at Eric, he couldn't read her expression, his heart was pounding, if he was the man she was talking to he told himself he'd have given her the entire program schedule to do with as she pleased. Not many men want to be called out as lacking in balls.

"Yes sir, certainly, we'll be there within the hour, I can't thank you enough. Bye, for now."

Eric!--- Eric, he's agreed to take us to dinner in the city and talk about giving us a shot. I'm sooo excited I could pee." They both laughed hard at that.

Eric took Nicole into his manly arms and nearly squeezed the breath out of her. "Nicole, Oh my dear Nicole, what an inspiration, calling him out on his manhood, where did that come from?"

Hahaha, Eric, you know how we look at people in our travels and make comment on some with their wives or gal pals and call them wimps. Well when we were calling the stations that came back to me, the women were more than willing to give us a shot right?"

“Yea, Nicole, that’s right by God. So you took it to the extreme and made men out of the wimps. What a ball buster you are, I never knew you had it in you. I adore you.”

With that he’ kissed her full on the lips and didn’t let loose until she gently pulled her face away. She stood still locked in his arms and loving the manly feel of them.

“My heavens Eric, what brought that on, we haven’t done that for years now. What happened to our vow to not mix business with pleasure?”

“Nicole, my dearest Nicole, doing business with you is a pleasure; I could not have stopped that from happening if I’d have had to fight a giant to get to you.”

Dinner proved to be an all-around treat, the producer was transfixed with Nicole, he had expected a frail whimpering slight of build girl that had just had it with men and called him out on his masculinity. Never did he expect to find the beautiful young lady he now sat across from, and finding her as every bit articulate as she was gutsy captivated him even more so. He had allowed them five minutes to get a pitch to him that would convince him to say yay or nay on air time. He’d not told them that decision prior to meeting them, and after seeing their sincerity he chucked any time allowance and sat back as they made their case. He could have stopped them at any time, but their story was so compelling he had to absorb every word and nuance. He had made up his mind within merely a minute to give them an hour of their own with his talk show host, and to put them up at a hotel in the city closer to the station.

When they had finished dinner, neither Nicole nor Eric had an inkling as to what he’d decided, but they both enjoyed his company and felt the drive into the city at night hadn’t been a complete waste if he’d rejected them.

“Well you two, you’ve done nearly all the talking, and I’ve soaked up every word of your plea. I congratulate both of you on many counts, eloquence, knowledge of your subject matter, and the ability to hold inside, what I feel is your angst at being ignored as you’ve been. I agree strongly that there has been an outright conspiracy among all involved in your quest to get your book into the hands of the reading public. No matter what the topic, if it is played out in the national media and you were the first to write about it, even as you have in fictional format censoring your efforts is unconscionable. In conclusion I offer you an hour tomorrow morning and a repeat live tomorrow evening. Will that be okay?” Eric swept Nicole from her chair, not paying any mind to those around them, he swirled her around in a half crazed dance. The producer looked on with a knowing smile spread across his aged face; they’d never know from him that he too had been banned and censored way back when he was their age. He beckoned them to stop the waltzing and bade them to return to their seats. They did, and apologized for the frenzy of excitement.

Eric spoke for him and Nicole.

“Will that be okay?!!!!!-- Will that be okay? Oh my gawd, do you know Sir, that we have not heard nor read them words in over two long years.” Nicole sat looking directly into the mans eyes, she reached across the table and placed her hand on his with ever so gentle a touch, no words had to come from her to express her gratitude. His smile told her he understood but did not reveal the reason why.

“Then I can take that as a yes, you’ll be available to do both shows?” To Nicole and Eric he instantly became a father figure, a man no matter how things turned out would remain forever thought kindly of in their hearts and minds. Eric spoke once again for both of them.

“Yes, we’ll be there, and you’ll never have to regret giving us this chance to get our story out.”

The producer held up a finger to get both their attention, it worked, they looked at it and sat silent. He told them the following, bringing smiles and grins all around. “One thing I must insist upon though, and that is, you will not use the title of what prompted you to go on the road with your story. There is to be no; ‘What the F--k said over my microphones, go it?’”

They’d never know that he had indeed uttered them very words many years ago on a major networks radio. And he hasn’t worked in any but the smallest stations from that day to this. They heartily agreed.

And so it was, the world first heard of the plight of writers with a story to share.

Epilogue

Word spread swiftly because an alert Associated Press person happened to be stuck in traffic for nearly the full length of the morning rush hour and caught the story. She was so taken by the sincerity of it all that her cell phone became the instrument that propelled Eric and Nicole straight into New York City and into more studios than they knew existed. Before long they were hob-knobbing with celebrities and doing morning and afternoon television talk shows and major network news segments. An investigation into a conspiracy between Publishers and Agents sadly was thwarted by the boys and gals in the back rooms of publishing houses, proving yet again that money talks. Eric and Nicole’s book was sold to a cinema syndicate and went on to become the year’s biggest gross box office smash. Even the highest members of the Clergy didn’t have the power left to stop its production and showings. Score one major victory for the little guys. The producer was at first offered a show of his own with a major network after

having news bytes done on him and his career because he stood tall for Nicole and Eric. He turned them all down even after having more money waved in his face than he could have made in a lifetime at the station he worked now. Through Eric and Nicole he had his own vindication.

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