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Open Letter by Shawn Kerivan

If Only I Could Have Told You This



Dear Prince:

I was always going to go to Paisley Park. It was a bucket list sort of thing, a pilgrimage to try to see the artist who'd given me creative spark and whom I thought was behind the loss of that spark. I had made the trip to Minnesota in my mind a thousand times. I'd even imagined creating phony press credentials from that magazine we all want to get our picture on the cover of, talking my way in. Just to see you: The Artist, Love Symbol #2, His Royal Badness. Prince. You, my heeled friend.

Then you died, and I'm screwed, and it's your fault.

Now what am I going to do?

I lost my creativity in "this thing called life," going from novelist to columnist to blogger, which isn't really a thing to someone like you. Then I clawed my way through an MFA program, published my creative thesis...for nothing. No prestigious faculty position was offered, no agents called, no book deals poured in. I sold about 300 copies of my short story collection, and now I teach at a community college.

And I daydreamed of you, how your music fused my creativity, pumping through me like one of your proto-funk base lines. I daydreamed of how I could get to you, to ask you why—why all the distractions from your art? Why the mystery?

I knew how our meeting would go down, if only you'd lived. After misrepresenting myself at Paisley Park Studios, one of your henchmen—or henchwomen, I could never tell with the gender-flailing makeup of your posse—would greet me silently. In lieu of conversation, I'd be led inside, where things get decidedly more Paisley.

First is Love Symbol #2, the one that replaced your name, emblazoned on the lobby floor. It sucks me in whenever I see it, filling my head with questions of race and sexuality. The symbol and the lyrics are proof of your prophetic genius.

Yet, I'm here on a different mission. I have to find out why one of my biggest artistic influences seemed content to simply toss off so much of his energy in service to piddle-twiddling. How could someone who produced the mind-changing album *Sign o' the Times* show up naked on the cover of his next album, which was one single track of indecipherable squealing? And how do you explain "Batdance," your music video for the 1989 *Batman* movie, except as a total abdication of creative authority?

Hench(wo)man leads me to an elevator at the far end of the lobby. The doors open, and s/he bows slightly, gesturing for me to enter, and I try to cop a glance down her/his open blouse for clarification, but the low light of the place dupes me. The doors close. No music plays. The elevator is still. The inside of the car looks like the inside of every other elevator car.

The doors open again, and you walk in, small cane punctuating your stride.

"Oh," I say. Nice opening.

You purse your lips, not quite smiling, and flutter your eyelashes. Are you flirting with me? The elevator begins to move, but I can't tell if it's going up or down.

"I—"

You hold up a hand and stop me. I look down to see you look up; dude, you are really tiny. Flutter, flutter.

"Tell me," you say.

Oh, I'll tell you, I think. I'll tell you about your *Dirty Mind* and my dirty mind, when I was living in a Somerville basement and swinging a hammer by day and crawling the clubs at night while trying to break into the music journalism scene in Boston. And by "break in," I mean humping spec stories around the city on foot, getting doors slammed in my face, stalking secretaries who worked at the indie music rags found lying all over the seats of the Green Line trains, getting them drunk, getting them into bed—or on a couch or in a doorway or whatever was nearby—and trying to follow up with them the next day, waving this 1,200-word piece on the new kid Prince's album and having some 29-year-old prick at the *Phoenix* say, "Are you fucked? What's this guy? A pedophile?" You didn't make it easy, dude, writing about virgins giving head on their wedding day or watching your girlfriend have sex with another guy or showing affection by admitting you're a pervert. What was I supposed to do?

"You tell me," you say.

Wait, did I say that out loud? I don't remember speaking.

You cross your arms, cock your head to one side, move closer.

How could you be so creative, so powerful, so prolific? Do you know what you did to me? To my writing? To my stories? Your sexuality was smothering, dammit, and it changed...everything. When I finally started writing for money, I was writing for you, counting the number of orgasms on every record, trying to figure out how to get that energy into my work. You just teased me, coughing up shit like *Purple Rain*, following up with *Around the World in a Day*, and knocking us out with *Sign o' the Times*.

Then: that fucking symbol. Really?

"Really," you say.

You smug little twit, surrounding yourself with long-legged white chicks, while I was getting married, which effectively ended my efforts at surrounding myself with long-legged white chicks, not that I was any good at that. But still. The symbol?

"Love Symbol #2," you say, almost singing it.

I slip a little. There I was, with a little kid and a resume built on your creative inspiration, and suddenly we had to call you "TAFKAP" or "The Artist." Your mocking was my mocking. I looked back longingly, even at songs like "Darling Nikki"—which, by the way, didn't even work in the movie, never mind the album.

"X, L, I," you say.

The 2007 Super Bowl show? No, that's not enough. Twelve minutes in the rain—even if it was purplish—is not enough to make up for all the creative teasing you put us through—you put *me* through. The reclusiveness, the *Black Album* pulled back at the last minute, the "I know what you're thinking" thing you're doing right now.

I needed more. I needed you to be Springsteen. I needed you to be Sinatra. You were my guy. You were my creative impulse, and you just pulled it away and stuffed it in a box somewhere in this mausoleum to yourself.

"Your creativity should be your own." Flutter, flutter. "It should come from within."

The interview is over.

"Why don't you try writing for yourself instead of somebody else?"

You glide out of the elevator, the cane clicking with your heels, across the Love Symbol #2 lobby, out into the Minnesota night.

Even in my imagination you leave me longing.

Sincerely going crazy, sincerely going nuts,

Shawn

Publishing Information and Video Highlights

- "[Sign o' the Times](#) [5]" by Prince, 1987.
- "[Batman Dance Video](#) [6]" by Prince, for Batman, 1989.
- [Prince at Super Bowl XLI Half-time Show](#) [7], February 4, 2007.

Dear Prince

Published on Talking Writing (<https://mail.talkingwriting.com>)

- “[Pop Life](#) [8]” by Prince, circa 1985.
- “[Cream](#) [9]” by Prince (performance date unspecified).
- “[Dirty Mind](#) [10]” by Prince, January 1, 1982.

Art Information

- [Photo of Prince](#) [11]; stock photo/public domain.



Shawn Kerivan is the author of many short stories and nonfiction features. His work has appeared in *Backpacker Magazine*, *The Longneck*, *Lexicon*, and more. He has authored several books, including *A Brief History of Innkeeping in the 21st Century*, the thriller *Iago's Fool*, the handbook *Creative Writing in the Real World: A Reader for Writers*, and the short story collection *Name the Boy*.

He teaches writing at the Community College of Vermont and owns and operates a small inn with his wife. You can reach him through [Shawn Kerivan's website](#). [12]

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